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Qissa: The Tale of a Lonely Ghost

By Anup Singh

Neeli...
Neeli, open your eyes and look at me.
Grief ages even a creature like me.
Tell me...
What am I?
Who am I?
What curse
have I brought down upon myself?
Neeli...
How many times
must I tell you this tale again?
Neeli...
A long time ago,
this was my home.
And once, this was my country.
Did we beat them back, Umber?
Yes, but they'll be back.
Well done!
You killed one of them.
Why are you bringing this dead Muslim
into our village?
What are you doing, my son?
Don't do it.
Don't poison our waters.
You'll bring down a curse on our village.
It's not our village anymore.
I'll leave them their own ghosts
to haunt them.
A true Sikh would never do this.
- We are nothing now.
Shall we get the women
back to the village?
It'll be safer in the morning.
Congratulations!
Here Mehar, take your daughter.
A daughter is also a blessing.
It's safe now!
The women can return to the village!
We can go back!
It's safe to go back to the village now!
Will you be all right?
- Yes. You go.
Tell my husband I'm here.
-Yes, I'll tell Umber.

Mehar! Mehar!
She's still back there.
Papaji!
Papaji!
Don't you want to see your daughter?
I've seen enough girls.
I'll get the cart for you.
Take care of yourself.
We managed
to hold off their attack last night.
But how long can we survive?
What will we do now?
The elders say the whole village
has to leave by this evening.
Are you ready to leave?
By evening we'll have to leave.
Listen, we cannot take much with us.
Are you sure you want to take me?
You are my wife.
Leave it open.
I don't want them
to break into our house.
You take care of the children.
I'll be back. Go!
Now, poison your own people.
The Partition had scattered us
like birds in a storm.
It took me four years
to get back on my feet.
They've brought you what they looted
from those who fled to Pakistan.
Have a look...
These will look good in your new home!
Papaji, is this for me?
Tomorrow we'll go to the jeweller
and get earrings for all of you.
We'll soon get back all your gold
that went into this house.
The house still needs a lot of work.
We'll worry about the gold later.
Let me worry about that.
What do you want to do
with your parents' house?
You are never going to go there.

It's so far away.
You know Uncle Keerath wants it.
He'll never pay what it's worth.
I'd love
to take the children there one day.
Show them
what their mother's home was like!
It could help us
with the girls' dowry later.
Oh, their younger brother is on his way.
He will take care of that.
I'm not going back to the forest.
Until he is born
I will stay here with you.
It will be a girl again.
You'll see, this time it will be a boy.
Why have you come in?
You'll kill me if it isn't a boy?
Once more like a true lioness!
Be brave like a true Sikh!
You've already had three children!
She doesn't want to come into this world.
With more force.
Good.
Good.
Good.
Good.
Good.
Oh! Very good!
Congratulations!
Look, Mehar!
A son's come to our home!
You've had a boy!
Here, look!
Look!
After three daughters, we've had a son.
What are you doing?
You need to rest.
You need to rest.
Don't do this.
It's better to kill her.
What are you saying?
We finally have a son.
She's so beautiful.

My son!
My son!
Kanwar, come down!
Come down.
Come and bathe!
Papaji!
Come, come!
My moon!
Papaji!
Pull it up!
Pull.
Give it back!
Give me back my spool!
Pull.
Papaji!
Hold this...
- Papaji!
Kulbir and Sohni!
They ran off with my kite-spool!
I don't ever want to see you
crying like a girl!
Be a man and get it back!
Go!
Tall as a tree and still peeing in bed!
All of you old enough to be married
and have your own children!
Will you be doing the same
at your in-laws?
You'll bring nothing but shame on us!
Worthless girls!
Straighten it!
Mother, mother.
- Yes.
Shall we go?
- Get going!
Let's go
We'll sing Lohri
Today is our day
And every home waits for us.
We'll get sweets and money!
Kulbir look!
-That's Kanwar.
How did he get here?
Brother Kanwar?

Kanwar!
How did you get here?
Come down!
Come down.
Let's go!
You're such a rat!
Hurry up!
You always get us in trouble.
Tell me, why did you pee on my bed?
Why did you steal my spool?
- What's so special about you?
Let me see!
- Let me go!
Let me see!
-I want to see.
Kanwar!
He'll be fine. Don't worry.
Bye.
Kulbir, come here.
Come here!
Come here!
Come here!
Come here!
Get up!
Mother.
- Mother.
Come here.
Come here.
Come here!
Mother.
Come here!
Come here!
Mehtar! Stop!
Stay out of this!
Leave! Get out!
If anything happens to my son,
I'll cut them to pieces!
Greetings, child!
Our village's champion wrestler.
He's going to make you strong as iron.
- Hello, Sir.
God bless you, son.
Turn this way
Let him take a look

just to check there are no twisted bones.
After your turban ceremony,
I'll take you hunting.
Hunting?
We're going to shoot bears.
Look what I've got for you.
Hold it.
He's fine.
I'm going to make you
as strong as a lion.
What a brave boy my son has become!
I'm so proud of you.
Come here.
Pull this up.
Always keep this cloth tightly tied.
Never forget it.
Once again.
Papaji!
Papaji!
Yes, son?
Blood.
Blood?
Did you hurt yourself when you fell?
How old are you now?
Twelve.
You've grown so quickly, my son.
So quickly you've grown.
Now you've become a real man.
Don't worry.
Kanwar,
don't tell your mother about it.
The room of mangoes, O Mother!
Bring the child to the room of mangoes!
All pain will be assuaged, O Mother!
Teach your son to walk like a fragrance!
Your son!
Teach him to walk like a fragrance!
The room of mangoes, O Mother!
Bring the child to the room of mangoes!
I walk the path of clouds
A son is born into my home! O, I fly!
A son in my home!
A moon glimmers in my home!
My son, my moon!

I fly! I fly!
A boy has come to my home, I fly!
Kanwar!
Neeli, wait!
-No, I have to go.
Neeli!
Your favourite dessert tonight!
I've been singing for you
since you were born.
I also sang at your turban ceremony.
Neeli, look!
What have you found to rob?
Your own people will kill you!
- You think I've come to rob your palace?
Let's see.
What a great hunter!
Show it to me.
The daughter of a gypsy
has come to whore herself?
Don't even try.
You'll never be able to catch me.
Run and we'll see.
Do you always talk like this?
Like what?
- Like you smell shit all around you.
I wanted to say sorry for slapping you.
Now, I feel like slapping you again.
So ask me to forgive you.
Have you ever sat in a truck before?
Or are you just a know-all?
Yes, many times.
Fine.
But I always sat in the back.
Never in the front!
Come on.
Today you sit in the front.
I also want to drive a truck.
Will you teach me?
No.
Have you ever gone hunting?
When do girls ever go hunting?
What nonsense you talk!
My father killed a deer once.
And the whole village feasted on it!

I've killed bears.
The first time I was so scared.
It was father who had to shoot the bear.
He was very upset with me.
But my second bear
I killed with one shot.
One night, it came to my cabin door.
And kept scratching
my door with its claws.
It made no other sound.
I stood here with my rifle.
Then I heard something.
It felt like the bear was going away.
I opened the door.
But there it was.
It jumped up on its two feet
and rushed at me.
I shot into the dark of its mouth.
Are you afraid of the dark?
Not at all.
Let's see, my brave one...
I am off, then.
Stay and cry here all night.
I'm going.
What's happening there?
A gypsy girl has been missing
since last night.
I'll send some of my men into the forest.
You come with me.
Don't worry.
I'm with you.
We'll find your daughter.
I hope the night wasn't too scary.
If you misbehave again,
I'll leave you locked up here forever.
Now, get lost!
I told you to go.
Your father is searching for you.
Come, let's go.
You have to marry me now.
- What?
You have to marry me now.
Or my family will kill me.
And you, too.

It's the only way
they can redeem their honour.
I didn't do anything.
They won't believe that.
You tell them.
They won't believe me.
-Look...
My father will fix everything.
If this had happened to your sisters,
what would your Papaji do then?
I was born under an inauspicious star.
It's not my destiny to marry.
A wife like me
could change your destiny.
That really scared you, didn't it?
So you think you scared me?
-Of course, I did!
Let go of me!
You dog! You bully!
Get off me!
Let go of me!
You dog! You bully!
Get off me!
Get off me!
Kanwar!
Tarlok, wait! Please wait.
I request
your daughter's hand for my son.
My daughter?
My Neeli?
-Yes.
You are a great, honourable man.
Oh, we are relatives now!
My son has become a man.
A man?
Papaji!
My brave son!
Serve some milk to Kanwar.
Child, you come with me.
Eat!
Why don't you dance?
You should have told me the truth
before the wedding.
Now you're the queen of this mansion.

Whatever you want you will get.
Clothes, jewellery...
Everything in this house is yours.
We have no tradition of the veil
in this house.
You should have kept the tradition
for your son.
You... shut up!
What are you saying?
Take off your veil.
Do you hear me?
You don't look stupid to me.
I told you, Kanwar had an accident
when he was a boy.
Nothing can be done about it now.
Mehar.
You speak to her.
Let me go back to my home.
- Don't say that.
You think any married woman
can live like this?
Can you not live here as my daughter?
Mehar...
This girl will do
whatever we ask her to do.
She'll accept everything as her destiny.
And Kanwar?
Tell me about his destiny.
How's this one?
Beautiful?
Look at this one.
How does this look?
- Very beautiful.
Very beautiful, isn't it?
Let's buy this one.
Are you happy?
When you have a son,
I'll buy you the whole shop.
And how's our new bride?
You know,
I was uprooted from my country and home.
All the dreams of my ancestors
turned to ash.
It is only a wife...

who can give you that which
no one can ever take away from you.
Everything comes to an end.
Nothing lasts.
If you manage to stay happy,
Kanwar will be happy too.
Without your mother,
you would never have been mine.
By giving you to me, your mother
rooted me to this earth again.
And who could be a better son
to any father than you.
Come and eat.
Neeli?
Where are you going?
You are a part of my family.
Where are you going?
Our future is in your hands.
You cannot leave us and go.
Listen to me.
Kanwar!
What are you doing here?
Go away.
Go.
Kanwar!
Go away from here!
Go!
Go away from here, Kanwar!
Understand... You...
Listen to me.
There is no other way.
Try to understand, son.
There is no other way.
There will be a son in your home...
in our home.
Go! Go!
You're my son.
You're a good son.
But you're a woman.
You are a girl.
Papaji!
We'll have a son.
A real son.
Papaji!

You should leave now.
There's gold and cash in the trunk.
And I've given the keys
of my father's house to Neeli.
Why didn't you protect me
as you did my sisters?
I was also your child.
You should go.
Go!
Go. You have a long journey.
I have wanted so much
to sit and talk to you.
And now look,
you're sending me so far away from you.
I will come to you.
Now go!
Go!
Stop here.
Here are my clothes.
For you.
While on the train coming here,
I was thinking...
You are free now.
You can do whatever you want.
Forget your old life.
Start anew here.
Here, with me.
You can be what you are.
It was all there.
I just never saw it.
Your face...
Your eyes...
Neeli!
Come here...
Let me look at you.
I fell in love with a woman!
I, too, fell in love with a woman.
Come with me.
Look...
Look at this beautiful woman.
You should have come
to Uncle Keerath first.
You should have informed us.
Kanwar hasn't been too well.

What happened to him? Let's go see him.

Should we call a doctor?

- He doesn't really need a doctor.

Let him rest then. We'll come later.

- Okay.

All right.

We'll come back later.

Bye.

- Bye.

How long can you hide like this?

It would be best...

if I leave...

No, don't say that.

What do we do then?

How are we to live together?

You've locked yourself in this house
and me too.

Let Ma come,

then everything will be all right.

Nothing will be all right, Kanwar.

You can't leave me alone.

I'll go and get Ma.

We'll celebrate Lohri together.

If we are to live together,

you have to accept...

that you're a woman like me.

We are two women.

Friends.

Sisters.

I put on women's clothes...

it feels like

I've got scorpions all over me.

I no longer know who I am,

what I am.

I will help you, Kanwar.

I am with you.

The night flows into us

A serpent of passion

The blood-red star ascends

Soaked in love, it beckons

Hold me back, someone

Hold me!

The threshold pulses

Red and red

Ma?
Ma?
Baali?
Baali?
Brother.
Where did you go to?
What happened here, Baali?
Fire.
- Where is Ma?
Ma died in the fire.
Brother.
Brother Kanwar!
Get up.
Get up.
Baali.
Baali, come with me.
No, I don't.
My house.
I'm cleaning Papaji's room.
You come with me, Baali.
No. No... I have to clean.
So much to do!
- Baali!
If you ever loved my mother,
never set foot in this house.
I'm going to take you and Neeli
back with me.
Never.
Is this the first Lohri since you wed?
- Yes.
It would have been so good
if Kanwar were here, too!
Wasn't Kanwar supposed to be back today?
You have to look at me.
Look at your daughter.
You could never see me as I am,
could you?
Now, you have to look at me.
Look at your daughter.
Your shameless daughter.
Your worthless daughter.
Standing naked in front of her father.
What should I do
with this disgusting woman?

I can't hide her anymore.
She doesn't want to hide anymore.
She doesn't listen to me anymore.
She doesn't listen to anything.
What do I do with this shameless girl?
Where should I hide her away?
She should just die.
She deserves to die.
What do I do now, Papaji?
You always told me what to do.
Why not now?
Why don't you speak?
Why don't you look at me?
Look at me!
Look at me!
Look at me!
He's come to take you away from me.
Who?
-I can't do anything.
There's nobody there.
He is here.
He's not going to leave us.
He's come.
You stay here. I'll go see.
Call Kanwar.
- You know he's not here.
I told you he's gone for his mother.
- Move away.
I should have guessed.
But it never occurred to me
that this boy is not a boy.
You are disgusting!
Shameless...
- I don't know what you are talking about!
He'll be back with his mother
very soon.
Come back then.
Open the door!
Break the door down!
Someone saw you at the window.
They're breaking down the door.
Run away!
No! Let it all be over!
- You have to go.

They'll kill us if they find you here.
- I'm not leaving you.
I told Uncle Keerath
you'd gone for your mother.
They'll calm down
if they don't find you here. Go!
Kanwar, you can't leave her there alone.
They will kill her.
You go back
and they'll kill both of you.
You are a part of me.
You will always be part of me.
We must save Neeli.
Kanwar,
there is only one way to save her.
She's going to die, Kanwar.
And you alone can't save her.
But together we can.
There is only one way to save her.
Her and our family.
My son!
My moon.
My son, you'll become a real man now.
Papaji!
She will not escape from us,
this Kanwar of yours.
We'll find her.
Even if we have to go
to her father's house.
We have seen what he really is, Neeli.
What is he doing? Let's go!
I am Umber Singh's son.
Do I look like a girl?
What have you got us involved in,
Keerath?
We are going home now, Neeli.
Whom are you hitting?
Neeli...
Kanwar?
He is here.
I was so alone.
Sister-in-law!
Neeli...
Don't worry.

Don't worry.
Everything will be all right.
We'll tear this house down.
We'll keep nothing from the past.
We'll forget everything.
I'll make for us
a better house than this one.
I've cheated destiny before.
I was a refugee once.
And I made a new life.
Built a new home.
We'll defeat destiny again.
Neeli...
How many times
must I live this tale again?
Neither a man nor a woman...
Neither human nor a ghost...
Look at me, Neeli!
Forgive me, Neeli.
Free me.
Free me now.
The room of mangoes, O Mother!
Bring the child to the room of mangoes!
All pain will be assuaged, O Mother!
Teach your son to walk like a fragrance!
Teach your son
Teach your son to walk like a fragrance!
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A boy has come to my home, I fly!