

Terror

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Translation by
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The two boarded the bus at Paraur, a place between Malan and Palampur. They were both turbaned Sikhs, robust and tall. Both were wrapped in blankets. They cast their eyes all around as they climbed on the bus and sat down on the seat right behind the driver. There were about twenty people in the bus. Two or three women and the rest men. None of them Sikhs. Only these two were Sardars.

The interior of the bus was dimly lit but it was pitch dark outside. The passengers sat bent over with the cold. One of the Sardars turned his neck to look back, as if to inspect the passengers. Then he put his hand inside his blanket and began to move it back and forth. At this, the plump lady sitting behind him trembled with fear. She looked at her neighbours with terrified eyes. The horror on her face curdled their blood.

‘It was in the papers today that extremists have begun to infiltrate Himachal,’ a passenger at the back whispered in another’s ear, his voice quivering. The person sitting behind him saw him whisper. He prodded him with his finger and leaned his ear close to the man’s lips. By the time the bus reached Arla, every traveller, but the driver, conductor, and the passenger sitting to the left of the Sardars, had come to know that two extremists were travelling in the bus. At any time now they would push the driver aside and take control of the steering wheel, or stop the bus someplace and kill all of them.

The wary eyes of the passengers were fixed on every movement of the Sardars. They saw one of them begin to cover his face with a white handkerchief, even as his eyes ranged this way and that. He covered his nose and mouth and knotted the kerchief. Only his two eyes were visible now.

‘He is hiding his identity,’ one old man surmised.

‘Now he will order the driver to stop,’ a well-built passenger warned another with his eyes.

Completely oblivious of all this, the driver was busy driving and the conductor, sitting on the front seat, had his eyes trained on the road ahead. Both were unaware of the potential danger. The person sitting next to the Sardars lolled to one side in his sleep. Then the Sardars began to speak with each other. Their voices were drowned by the noise of the bus. The masked Sardar nodded his head in agreement with the other. The bus was now passing through a stretch bordered by thick trees on either side.

‘They seem to be ready,’ a woman murmured clutching her child to her chest.

Just then the other Sardar bent down and began to remove something from his bag.

‘I’m sure there is an AK-47 in it. Extremists carry their AK-47s in bags slung on their shoulders, don’t they, and conceal them under their blankets. There’s no need to load the guns again and again. You just have to pull the trigger and turn the barrel around. He too will do this now,’ said a young man who had read about the workings of an AK-47 in the newspapers. He choked with the fear of impending death.

‘Why are they bent on killing us? How have we wronged them? Sardars were made to fight against injustice. What kind of Sardars are they who are preparing to kill innocent people,’ a woman passenger was about to break into sobs.

‘There’s not one man in this bus who can face them boldly,’ another woman passenger glanced timorously at all the men. They were pale with fear; as if their blood had frozen in their veins.

Suddenly, a crackling sound was heard and the two Sardars drew close to each other. Then some chewing sounds began to emanate from them. One of them nudged the other; and both exchanged smiles. Still smiling, they turned around and looked carefully at all the passengers. The passengers could only see their eyes. Four intense imposing eyes. Then they both straightened their necks and seemed ready to get up from their seats.

Everyone, except the driver and conductor, was petrified.

‘Please stop here, brother. We have to get down here,’ one Sardar said politely. The driver applied the brakes instantly.

‘Rabb tuhada bhala kare,’ the second Sardar turned the door handle, ‘May God bless you.’

‘When will you be available in the canteen?’ the driver asked with some hesitation.

‘Come whenever you want. We’re always at your service.’

Laughing, the two Sardars stepped off the bus.

Taken aback, the passengers exchanged glances; each one trying to hide their embarrassment.

***Author**

A prolific writer, Gurmit Bedi has written novels, short stories, poetry and feature articles. Known for his satire, Bedi has been honoured variously, including the Himachal Sahitya Academy Award and Punjab Kala Sahitya Award.

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Abstract

“Terror” is a short short story that provides an insight into human behaviour. It suggests the play of deep-rooted prejudice in everyday experiences and interrogates our inclination to judge people stereotypically. The story provokes introspection in the readers to explore their own preconceptions.