**Khol Do**

The special train left Amritsar at two in the afternoon and reached Mughalpura eight hours later. Many of the passengers were killed on the way, many were injured and a few were missing.

When Sirajuddin opened his eyes the next morning, he found himself lying on the cold ground of a refugee camp. There was a seething crowd of men, women and children all around him. Bewildered by it all, he lay staring at the dusty sky for a long time. There was a lot of noise in the camp, but old Sirajuddin was deaf to it. He didn’t hear anything. Anyone who saw him, would have assumed that he was in deep and agonised thought about something. His mind, however, was blank.

Sirajuddin lay gazing absent-mindedly at the dusty sky, till he suddenly caught sight of the sun. The warmth of the sun’s rays penetrated every nerve of his body. He woke up with a start. A nightmarish vision rose before his eyes – flames, loot… people running… a station… firing… darkness and Sakina.

Overcome by fear and anxiety, he began searching for Sakina in the crowd like a demented person.

For three long hours he called out “Sakina… Sakina.” He looked for her in every corner of the camp, but found no trace of his young and only daughter. There was an uproar all around – some of the refugees were searching for their children, others for their mothers; some for their wives and others for their daughters.

Dejected and tired, Sirajuddin sat down, and tried to recall exactly where and how he had lost Sakina. Suddenly, the nightmarish vision of his wife’s body flashed before his eyes – he saw her lying on the ground with her entrails hanging out. After that his mind went blank.

Sakina’s mother was dead. She had been killed before his very eyes – but where was Sakina? Before closing her eyes for ever, Sakina’s mother had urged him, “Don’t worry about me – run, take Sakina away at once…”

Sakina was with him – both of them had run barefoot. Sakina’s dupatta had slipped to the ground. She had screamed at him when he had tried to pick it up, “Let it be, Abba!” But he had picked it up. As soon as he remembered that, he put his hand in his coat pocket and pulled it out. He still had Sakina’s dupatta… but where was Sakina?

Sirajuddin tried to think, but he couldn’t. Had Sakina managed to reach the station with him? Had she boarded the train with him? Had he fainted when the rioters had attacked the train? Had they abducted her?

He could find no answers to any of his questions.

Sirajuddin needed help and sympathy, but then everyone around him needed help and sympathy. He wanted to cry, but he could shed no tears. He had lost the capacity to moan.

A few days later, Sirajuddin pulled himself together and talked to some people who were willing to help him. They were eight young men who owned a truck and were armed with guns.

He showered them with his blessings, and described what Sakina looked like. “She is fair and very beautiful – takes after her mother, not me – She has large eyes, black hair and a big mole on her right cheek. She is my only daughter. If you bring her back, God will bless you.”

Those self-appointed social workers reassured Sirajuddin, with a great deal of confidence and sincerity, that if his daughter was alive they would find her and bring her back in a few days.

The young men tried their best to find her. At the risk of their lives, they went to Amritsar. They managed to rescue many men, women and children and helped them locate their families. But even after ten days of searching, they couldn’t find Sakina.

One day, as they were returning to Amritsar to help a few more refugees, they saw a girl standing by the roadside. The moment she heard the truck, she began to run.

The social workers stopped the truck and ran after her.

They caught her in a field – she was beautiful and had a large mole on her right cheek.

One of the young men said to her, “Don’t be frightened. Is your name Sakina?”

Her face became even paler. She didn’t reply. The other young men reassured her, only then did she admit that she was indeed Sirajuddin’s daughter

The eight young men were very kind to Sakina. They fed her, offered her milk, helped her into the truck – she didn’t have a dupatta and felt rather awkward. She tried to cover her breasts again and again with her hands.

Many days passed – Sirajuddin received no news about Sakina.

Each morning, he visited different camps and offices looking for Sakina. He failed to get any information about her. Each night, he prayed for the success of those young social workers, who had promised him that if his daughter was alive, they would bring her back to him in a few days.

One day, he saw the social workers in the camp. They were sitting in their truck. The truck was about to leave. He ran up to them and asked one of them, “Son… Have you found my Sakina?”

“We’ll find her, we’ll find her,” they said simultaneously, and drove off.

Sirajuddin again prayed for the success of the young men, and felt a little relieved.

That evening there was some commotion in the camp very near the place where Sirajuddin was sitting. Four people, walked past him, carrying someone.

When he inquired, he learnt that they had found a girl lying unconscious near the railway tracks and had brought her to the camp.

He followed them.

They handed the girl over to the hospital. Sirajuddin stood leaning against a pole outside the hospital for some time. Then he slowly walked into the hospital.

There was no one in the room. Only the body of a girl lay on the stretcher.

He walked up closer to the girl.

Someone suddenly switched on the lights.

He saw a big mole on the girl’s face and screamed, “Sakina!”

The doctor, who had switched on the lights, asked, “What’s the matter?”

He could barely whisper, “I am… I am her father.”

The doctor turned towards the girl and took her pulse. Then he said, “Open the window.”

The girl on the stretcher stirred a little.

She moved her hand painfully towards the cord holding up her salwar.

Slowly, she pulled her salwar down.

Her old father shouted with joy, “She is alive. My daughter is alive.”

The doctor broke into a cold sweat.