

UVic Diversity Writing Contest 2013, Second-Place Fiction Winner (tied)

By Sonia Manak

Grandmother: The Forgotten Voice

This is dedicated to my grandmother, Rajinder Kaur Manak. Thank you for your stories, wisdom, courage but most of all your love.

My husband left our village of Bhangra in northern India on a cold day in February 1906. I still remember the day he started talking about this new land with opportunities. He had heard from some of the men from the nearby villages of Droli and Jallandar about a land called Canada where work was abundant in sawmills. There was money to be made to help with our land debt in India.

Where this new land was I did not know. The furthest I had travelled was from my own village to my husband's village after marriage.

I was told that my husband would travel with the others by train to Calcutta. The journey would take over 3 days. From Calcutta they would board a ship bound for places I had not heard of. Penang, Hong Kong and finally a place called Vancouver. It would take 2 months by ship.

I wondered how my husband would survive? Who would cook for him and make his rotis? I was scared. But he reassured me that he would not be alone. He was travelling with friends and that they would stop at the Gudawaras along the way. This gave me some comfort. Knowing they would have a safe place to sleep with dahl and roti being provided. They would also obtain blessings by staying in the Guru's house.

My husband also said he would be back...back within a year. If only I had known that would be the last cup of chai I would make him for 18 years.

Once in awhile we would hear that a villager had returned from Canada. News would spread quickly throughout the surrounding villages. Excitement would fill my soul like a child receiving a sweet. Would there be news of my husband? Would I receive a letter?

In one letter my husband told me he wanted to bring me to Canada. But that it was difficult because the government did not want the wives of the Sikh men to join them. They were afraid of having too many hindoos, as they called us, in Canada. He said there were very few of our women, only a handful. It was lonely for him but the men supported each other and lived in bunkhouses. They took turns with the cooking. He told me how the men had come together and built a Gudawara in Vancouver and in a town called Victoria.

I found it strange to keep families separated. What kind of people would not want the men to be with their families? What kind of country was this Canada, to keep families separated?

I raised my children alone with the help of my husband's family. My focus became my children and taking care of my husband's family. I wanted to honour his name while he was away. I wanted to be strong. But it was hard. It was hard doing everything on my own. It was lonely but caring for my children and my in-laws kept me busy.

I faced a lot of pain in my life. My spirit and faith in God has been challenged. I thought my biggest challenge was saying goodbye to my husband but that did not compare to a mother trying to care for a very sick child. My beautiful daughter, Bachini developed an illness. I tried to help her. I called for the doctor. He said it was her heart. There was nothing he could do. She was only 8 years old. My insides screamed with anger but I could not leave her side. She was so frail and limp. I did the only thing I knew I could do; comfort my sweet child. I held her hand and told her stories of the father she barely remembered. She slipped away from me...

I often wonder had we been in Canada would things have been different? Would Bachini have lived? Could she have gotten better care? Only God knows. Maybe it was meant to be.

My husband was true to his word. He did send money home. We were able to improve our conditions in the village. Have a better home. Pay off our debts. But at what cost? My children went without a father for much of their life. And I was without a husband.

I waited 18 years for the laws in Canada to change. Finally, in 1924 they allowed some of the wives of the men that had settled in Canada to go over. I sailed on the Mont Eagle for 2 months, just as my husband had done 18 years before me.

During my time in Canada, I looked after many of my husband's friends that were bachelors. They spent time in our home, became part of our family. These poor men were all alone with no one to care and cook for them. It was lonely for them. It was lonely for me too. There were very few Indian women. I was fortunate to have a British woman take me under her wing and teach me English. She even taught me how to make apple pie!

It was a struggle for us, to be accepted and welcomed in Canada. We were not allowed to swim at the Crystal pool in Victoria, nor could we sit in the lower levels of the movie theatres. Our community remained quite small in Canada because of the governmental restrictions. Yet, we were able to make Canada our home.

If you had asked me in those early days if I would one day leave my small village in India to live in Canada, I would have said no. But life has a way of taking you on a journey. Just like mother Ganga, we as humans must move and flow with the river of life. As our community worked hard to become recognized as Canadians, I began to accept Canada as my new home. But my heart never left India.