

Contemporary Short Stories of the SAARC Region

2013



SAARC CULTURAL CENTRE - SRI LANKA



South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

**Contemporary Short Stories of
the SAARC Region
2013**

Published by

SAARC Cultural Centre
No. 224, Baudhaloka Mawatha
Colombo 7, Sri Lanka
Tel: 0094 11 2584451 Fax: 0094 11 2584452
Email: saarc-scc@sltnet.lk
Web: www.saarcculture.org

© SAARC Cultural Centre, Sri Lanka

ISBN 978- 955-0567-14-0

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission from the publisher.

Contemporary Short Stories of the SAARC Region-2013 is an anthology of short stories from the SAARC region. The anthology showcases short stories from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It provides a regional platform for writers from South Asia.

Disclaimer:

The views expressed and the information contained in the stories included in this anthology are the sole responsibility of the author/s and do not bear any liability on the SAARC Cultural Centre, Colombo.

First Edition September 2014

Printed by Neo Graphics, Nugegoda

**Contemporary Short Stories of
the SAARC Region
2013**



**SAARC Cultural Centre
Sri Lanka**

General Editor

G.L.W. Samarasinghe, Director, SAARC Cultural Centre

Editorial Team

Soundarie David Rodrigo, Deputy Director (Programme)
SAARC Cultural Centre

Apsara Karunaratne, Research Assistant, SAARC Cultural
Centre

Nipunika O. Lecamwasam, Research Coordination
Assistant, SAARC Cultural Centre

Design, Cover Photo and Layout

Ishan Amaraweera, Computer Operations Officer, SAARC
Cultural Centre

Content

Preface	vii
 Bangladesh	
Forty Steps - K. Anis Ahmed	9
Another Night - Anis Choudhury	44
Hate - Hasan Azizul Haque	56
Fugitive Colours - Selina Hossain	65
A Little Love - Shaheedul Zahir	79
 Bhutan	
The Solace Seeker - Pema Choidar	86
The Troubled Heart - Pema Choidar	89
My Surrealistic Dream - Sherab Tenzin	92
An Undying Allegiance - Namgyal Tshering	95
The Deer's Tale - Namgyal Tshering	102
 India	
Village Well - Kolakaluri Inoch	115
Stopping at Nothing - Jose Lourenco	152
The Foot Track - Harish Mangalam	164
Alif Laila - K.R. Meera	178
The Lover - Rajanikanta Mohanty	188
The Other Jew - Kapil Krishna Thakur	197
Democracy Held in Bondage - Omprakash Valmiki	215
A Purchased Woman - Veena Verma	229
U Cut - L.C. Sumithra	250
 Nepal	
Biplavī, The Rebel - Illya Bhattarai	259

Aghoris-The Filthy Eaters – Bhaupanthi	267
The Colonel's Horse - Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala	274
A Hammer-Headed Baby - Sanat Regmi	280
The Sky was Still Overcast - Sirjana Sharma	288

Pakistan

The Mughal Inn - Mirza Hamid Baig	300
The Black-Out Child - Asif Farrukhi	307
She Went in Search of Butterflies - Zaheda Hina	316
History - Amar Jaleel	327
A Poor Man's Home - Abdullah Jan Jamaldini	338
The Jackal - Dur Muhammad Kasi	341
Identity - Masud Mufti	348
A Short Distance - Afzal Ahsan Randhawa	379
Brick - Suhayl Saadi	386
The Garden of Delights - Enver Sajjad	393

Sri Lanka

Kinfolk - Liyanage Amarakeerthi	398
Under the Lighthouse - Ranjit Dharmakirti	406
The Fifth Scene - Jayatilaka Kammallaweera	419
The High Chair - Sita Kulathunga	429
The Day My Son Comes Home - Karuna Perera	436
Life - Thaamaraichchelvi	444
Coarse Cloth and Silk Shawls - Nissanka Wijemanna	452
Nonachchi - Piyaseeli Wijemanna	467
That Deep Silence - Punyakanthe Wijenaike	483

Bio Notes

Editors	488
Contributors	492

Preface

Short stories are an important form of story-telling. Despite the brevity, they are powerful agents of narrative prose capable of exposing fascinating aspects of life as well as an author's circumstances. Similarly, South Asian short stories are representations of the South Asian understanding of life and also the authors whose backgrounds largely inform the concoction of such stories. From a sprightly bazaar in Lahore to impressive skyscrapers in Mumbai, from a rural hamlet in Bhutan to the bustling streets of Dhaka, from the snowy Himalayas to the tropical beaches, though diverse, South Asia is connected by a thread of common culture that is reflected in the region's understanding and interpretation of life. These common yet essentially diverse South Asian experiences invite the reader into a world of colour, drama, wisdom, and epiphany.

Contemporary Short Stories of the SAARC Region- 2013 includes 43 short stories from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka bringing together both established and new voices in South Asian fiction in one volume. Since its inception in 2009, the SAARC Cultural Centre has been engaged in promoting various aspects of South Asian culture, and the publication of this volume constitutes one such attempt aimed at promoting regional culture through the wide dissemination of its literature.

My sincere appreciation goes to the editors of this collection, Syed Manzur-ul Islam (Bangladesh), Gengop Karchung (Bhutan), Prof. E.V. Ramakrishnan (India), Prof. Govinda Raj Bhattarai (Nepal), Dr. Rashid Hameed (Pakistan) and Prof. Piyaseeli Wijemanna (Sri Lanka) for their unstinting support in bringing forth this volume. I also thank all the authors, translators and staff at the SAARC Cultural Centre for their support given to make this publication a success.

I hope that this publication will be warmly received by all those who are interested in South Asian literature in general and short stories in particular.

G.L.W. Samarasinghe

Director, SAARC Cultural Centre, Sri Lanka.

Bangladesh

Forty Steps

K. Anis Ahmed

Mr. Shikdar, having died the previous evening, was now lying six feet below ground. He was not sure of his death, but those who had buried him were absolutely certain of it. As he lay there swathed in a white shroud there was little left for him to do except wait for the angels Munkar and Nakir.

He recalled having set out for Molla's, but his memories of the time and incidents after that were unclear. And though he could not remember his burial this was the progression he imagined for the events leading to his current predicament: When he lost consciousness he was standing on a mud aisle in the middle of the rice fields (but this picture could have been retained in his mind from one of his many earlier visits to Molla). Whoever found him – a harried clerk returning home for the weekend or maybe a band of pan-chewing farmers on their way to see the village opera – must have thought he was dead. Evidently they hadn't bothered to consult a doctor, otherwise would he be lying here now?

The rituals of the last ablutions and special prayers were performed under the careful ministrations of Molla. They dug a hole with rusty shovels, while he lay there exuding the sweetly nauseating smell of camphor. Some of them sized bamboo branches to the width of the hole, while others prepared to lower him. Had his eyes been open he would have seen the rectangular slice of sky overhead blocked off bit

by bit by the bamboo branches that were placed across the opening of his grave to slowly form a slanting roof. Had his eyes been open he would have been able to prevent this terrible mistake. He wasn't entirely sure if his interment had happened prematurely. Was this a dream perhaps? Maybe his wife would wake him up any minute and tell him that he was having a nightmare. Did one have such vividness of sensation or lucidity of thought in one's dreams?

If he had actually died, there was only one way of verifying it now - by counting the steps. Forty steps. Or so he had been told by Yaqub Molla, who had read all seven versions of the Qu'ran that were known to exist. He had also read all the Hadiths and even some of the less respectable religious literature. Contradictory information garnered from his readings had convinced Yaqub Molla of the following fact: All Muslims are visited in their grave by the two interrogating angels Munkar and Nakir. One chronicles all the good deeds that the deceased might have performed. And the other all the bad ones.

Yaqub Molla had also discovered, mostly from evidence culled from medieval texts, that Munkar and Nakir arrived as soon as the last of the mourners went as far as forty steps from the grave. Mr. Shikdar had been much intrigued by the alleged behavior of the angels. Why was the number forty so significant? Didn't the arrival of the angels ever coincide with the thirty-ninth step? How could they manage to be so precise with so many people dying all the time?

From the muted collision of rubber soles against damp earth, Mr. Shikdar could tell that his mourners were walking away from his grave. The reverberation caused by a procession of rubber-soled feet was followed by the clattering of a solitary pair of *khadams*. Mr. Shikdar concentrated on that lonesome pair of wooden footwear for it presumably

belonged to the last of his mourners. He counted the steps taken by the khadams: nine, ten, eleven ...

On the day he died Mr. Shikdar was awakened by a fluttering in his chest. These days waking up was not necessarily a pleasant experience for him. He rubbed his chest with the side of his palm in steady circular motions. He did not sit up until he was able to breathe regularly.

He shaved standing in front of his bedroom window. It overlooked the Bararasta, which was the only concrete road in Jamshedpur. The rest were gravel or mud paths. It was a Tuesday and on Tuesdays the grocers were permitted to open shop on the Bararasta, rather than in the bazaar at the periphery of the town. The spot of Bararasta right in front of Mr. Shikdar's house was monopolized by the fish sellers. Warm haggling voices and the rank smell of dead fish floated in through Mr. Shikdar's window.

"First hilsa of the season, take it for your son-in-law," yelled Abdullah, the fish-monger.

"How much for the hilsa?"

"Five-hundred."

"Pah, for five-hundred I could buy the whole river; this is just a hilsa."

"Yes, but try cooking the river and try cooking my hilsa," said Abdullah, who was usually more interested in the bargaining than in the selling. People would stand around and quibble with him endlessly, even if they had no intention of buying fish.

Towards one end of the Bararasta sat the meatsellers. Headless, skinned goats were tied by the ankles and hung upside down from iron hooks. Closer to Mr. Shikdar's residence, the neutral area between the fish and meatsellers,

was occupied by the poultry, vegetable and fruit stalls. Mr. Shikdar noticed Yaqub Molla, standing next to a cart piled high with ripe, red mangos. Molla, wearing a long green kurta that reached down to his knees, was waving his arms violently. He was evidently outraged by the price of mangos. Watching the crowded, hustling street took Mr. Shikdar's mind off his ailment and he felt lighter.

The monsoons are late this year, thought Mr. Shikdar. For the past few weeks, tattered white clouds had been racing across the sky without stopping over Jamshedpur. Mr. Shikdar looked at the clouds gathering in the northwest corner of the sky. The laziness with which they piled on top of each other promised the first shower of the season.

Mr. Shikdar erased the white lather on his face with the meticulous application of his razor. He used a folding razor with a black-ivory handle; it had belonged to his father. He stropped it every morning with swift strokes against a black leather belt, which was hung on the wall next to his window. The belt too he had inherited from his father.

He was so well practiced in this early morning ritual that he did not need to look into a mirror; instead he looked out of the window. He brought to his shaving the same precision and diligence with which he practiced his art: obstetrics. And an art it must be called, since Mr. Shikdar had no formal training in the scientific methods of delivery. He had become an obstetrician by default, for that was never his ambition.

In his youth Mr. Shikdar had been to the City with explicit instructions from his father to learn something practical. He had enrolled himself in the medical college with the intention of becoming a dentist. The people of Jamshedpur had such bad teeth that as the only dentist of the town he imagined he should be able to have a thriving

practice. He spent all day learning not only the basics of modern medicine but also the principles of Ayurvedic treatment. His own studies did not, however, attract him as much as the occupations of his peers in the neighbouring art college. He was befriended by one of the art students, an English boy named Dawson, who had once come in for first aid. Shikdar started spending his evenings with Dawson in the hostel room that Dawson had turned into a studio, because he didn't live there. Dawson's father, a retired civil servant, hadn't left the country even after it became independent. Dawson lived with his parents, but spent most of his time with his friends in the art college. He had, according to his friends as well as himself, "gone native." And his complexion was so exceptionally tanned that were it not for his blonde hair even in appearance he could have easily passed for a "native."

Shikdar was always amazed at Dawson's capacity to replicate some real object or person on his canvas. Dawson did not always rely on direct observation for his art; sometimes he would draw from memory or imagination. Often his drawings and paintings appeared to have little correspondence to any real object or setting; these he called "abstract." Not all the abstracts were incomprehensible; from a jumble of colours the shape of a broken table, a sliced watermelon or a naked torso could sometimes be identified. At first Shikdar did not particularly care for these abstract paintings, but he was nevertheless intrigued by them. It was not only the art works themselves that mystified him, but even the very nature of this profession aroused his curiosity. To think that a bright young man his age could actually take drawing or painting – considered to be amusements for children back in Jamshedpur – to be not only a matter of serious concern but also a career possibility was vaguely disconcerting. He did not, however, hold the student artists

in contempt. If anything he regarded them with a mixture of awe and wariness. Slowly as Dawson gained his trust as a friend Shikdar learned to relax in the company of these artists; he was new to the City and knew no one else. Dawson and he drank tea late into the nights while Dawson worked and the floor of the dingy room became spattered with paint drops.

Dawson was not only a friend to Shikdar but also his mentor. There were at least two things that Dawson took upon himself to teach Shikdar: the City and the arts. Shikdar accompanied Dawson on his outdoor trips. They stood on street-corners, while Dawson hurriedly sketched obese ladies being tugged in rickshaws. He rendered portraits, usually in red pencil, of old men sitting on their haunches in tea-stalls. But these city-drawings did not have the same attraction for Shikdar as did Dawson's landscapes. The country was small enough that the natural scenery did not change much from one part to another. Dawson's landscapes reminded him of Jamshedpur. Landscapes of the summer: cracked earth in burnt sienna and cloudless blue skies. The winter: dense grey fogs pierced by yellow lantern lights. And the various stages of monsoon: dark clouds gathering in the distance, sheets of rain blurring the view, naked children huddling in the mango-grove, bamboo bushes bending under cyclonic winds, and in the end, broken branches, unripe fruits and dead crows lying in puddles of mud-water. Anything on Dawson's canvas that even remotely resembled Shikdar's memories of Jamshedpur made him nostalgic.

Dawson not only showed Shikdar his own paintings and those of his friends but also taught him to appreciate the works of the Great Masters. The works of the Masters were unfortunately not directly accessible, because they were by Westerners, mostly dead, and the works themselves were

preserved in museums and galleries in very distant lands. They had to content themselves with reproductions in whatever form they became available. Dawson had by a lucky stroke managed to buy up the book collection of a compatriot art aficionado when the man was leaving the country and had come in possession of several large volumes that had names such as Titian and Constable, Goya and Gauguin printed on the covers. At first Shikdar felt very uncomfortable about the way women were depicted in these books. He thought it inappropriate and even unnecessary. Once he told Dawson, "I know this is great art, but this art is not for us. Also, you must know that portraits are prohibited in Islam." Dawson replied gently, "I'm glad then that I am not a muslim." His religious misgivings notwithstanding, Shikdar did not lose interest in art. He would often go to galleries and eagerly try to understand why the woman's hair was blue or why the faces were featureless. Dawson, who never failed to be amused by his friend's earnestness, would always agree with whatever meaning Shikdar made of a particular piece and to leave no doubt about the soundness of Shikdar's judgment, would say things like, "Also notice how the red is so richly textured here."

Mr. Shikdar was not able to entertain his bohemian dalliances for too long for the same reason that prevented him from finishing his medical studies. His father's sudden death brought him back to Jamshedpur. He minded the dispensary his father used to keep and in his memory the days of his student life gradually came to acquire a luminous quality. Although he had been rather critical about the ways people had in the city, once he had left the place those very ways and manners came to seem glamorous, even natural. He would tell people about boys who smoked in public and drank, though this they did in private. And he told them about girls from respectable families who joined the boys in

these activities. Some of the Hindu girls danced on the stage; classical though the dances might have been, it was still dancing. He told the envious or disapproving Jamshedpuris about boys and girls who went together to the botanical garden on Sundays and how nobody cared. It was understood that the peripatetic affairs of these young couples were not restricted to walking in the botanical garden. The more his audience seemed to be shocked by his stories, the more colorful they became. He even insinuated his participation in some of these urban social customs, adding – “When in Rome. . .” – but left the nature of his involvements unspecified. He regretted the lack of culture in Jamshedpur, but gradually fell into the routines of the locality.

“Salam Shikdar Sahib, I brought a hilsa for you,” said Abdullah, standing on the street outside Mr. Shikdar’s window. This was his way of selling things to Mr. Shikdar. He would appear unbeckoned with the catch of the day (if he had failed to find a customer for it) and wave it in front of Mr. Shikdar’s window. The sun gleamed on the silvery scales of the hilsa. “Salam Abdul, take the fish to Begum Sahib,” said Mr. Shikdar. His wife’s name was Noor Jahan, but like all married women of a somewhat advanced age she was referred to as Begum Sahib. Abdullah walked away, nodding happily.

By the time Mr. Shikdar went to his dispensary the waiting line had already spilled out of his verandah onto the street. Mr. Shikdar lived in a one storied L-shaped house. Only one leg of the L had existed during his father’s time. But over the years Mr. Shikdar had made little additions. He had paved the whole courtyard with concrete except for a rectangular patch of green in the middle where he had planted a few palm trees. He had also erected a boundary wall around the house to protect his personal territory from

the encroachments of his less affluent neighbours. These little signs of prosperity could not, however, be explained by the income from Mr. Shikdar's dispensary alone. But the impoverished residents of Jamshedpur were so awe-struck by Mr. Shikdar's relative affluence that it had never occurred to them that Mr. Shikdar might be enjoying some secret source of income.

Jamshedpur had supposedly not always been so impoverished. Legendary tales describing the once prosperous condition of Jamshedpur were still told by the old men of the village. Not all the stories were untrue. Jamshedpur had actually been a splendid town even before the Mughal era and had started declining only during the British period. The situation of Jamshedpur did not improve even after the British left the country. But the British never left the country completely. There were always some who wanted to help and some who wanted to study, and yet others who claimed they were trying to promote understanding. Six of these British gentlemen came specifically to study Jamshedpur. Layers of civilization, they believed, were waiting to be exhumed. All of them, but one, the youngest member of the group, were archaeologists. Mr. Shikdar was delighted to discover that the young companion of these archaeologists was none other than his friend Dawson. After leaving art college Dawson had had a hard time of it in the city. The local critics berated him for being too European and the galleries did not exhibit his work as prominently as they did those of his peers. Dawson had gone off to England, where he had been met with just as much hostility. But there he was able to get a job with these archaeologists, who were only too happy to find in him not only an artist but also a compatriot capable of performing the duties of a local guide. Dawson had already toured many parts of the country with the archeologists and said that he

was hoping to gain an intimate knowledge of the country through his travels. He hoped that a deeper acquaintance with the country would help him mitigate the much criticized European element of his art.

The archeologists went around in a gray Land Rover to various parts of Jamshedpur. They dug in places that corresponded to the black crosses on their maps. After their initial survey was over, they fixed the sites for the principal excavation and started employing a good number of local people. When Mr. Shikdar asked them what they expected to find they said anything was possible. They claimed to have unearthed the ruins of an ancient public bathhouse and the remnants of a sewage system in the neighbouring district of Vijaynagar. Both the discoveries were dated to the time of Emperor Aurangzeb.

Mr. Shikdar was very excited about the prospect of a major archaeological discovery in Jamshedpur. But before any major discovery could be made a minor one created such a havoc that the possibility of any great exploration seemed to be precluded permanently. On a holiday, with the special permission of Molla, the archaeologists went to visit the mosque situated on one end of the Bararasta (not the end where meat-sellers sat on Tuesdays). True to their inquisitive profession, they were unable to content themselves with admiring, as most people did, the imposing white dome of the mosque, adorned with stars and crescents engraved in deep blue lapis-lazuli. Their gaze refused to remain stuck in that upward direction. They scrutinized the beautiful edifice more closely, even if surreptitiously, than anybody had dared or felt compelled to ever before. When their visit was over they went back to their camp muttering among themselves that the mosque must have been a Hindu temple at one time. The bottom of the five oldest pillars in the western section of

the mosque had fallen further into disrepair than was the case with the rest of that holy mansion. The archaeologists had noticed, from the corner of their eyes, the fragments of dancing figurines carved on the red sandstone of the pillars. This evidence, though not gathered through the formal application of the methods and tools of their profession, was sufficient to bolster their casual speculations. They had little doubt that the mosque had once been a temple.

They decided to keep this discovery to themselves, but word got out. It caused tremendous uproar in the local community. Two low-caste Hindus were killed in Jamshedpur in the ensuing riots. Their beheaded bodies, tied upside down from bamboo poles, were paraded on the Bararasta. Moti, the Muslim shoemaker, was killed by retaliating Hindus from the neighbouring district of Vijaynagar. Similar incidents began to occur in other parts of the country. Several Muslim girls were allegedly raped in a Hindu village. The next day a Hindu holy man was forced to eat beef by a gang of young Muslim boys in another village. The more widespread the news of such atrocities became, the longer they helped sustain the anger of the indignant masses. The excavators abandoned their project and fled in their Land Rover. Dawson, however, was unable to leave because he was suffering from a severe case of diarrhoea. So his compatriots left him behind promising to come back later with a British doctor from the Capital. This promise was not fulfilled probably because foreigners were not allowed to go to the riot-stricken area of Jamshedpur. However, even after the affair of the mosque had subsided, Dawson's colleagues did not reappear. Mr. Shikdar, in the meanwhile, took Dawson under his care.

Dawson never left Jamshedpur. He opened a furniture shop on the Bararasta and gave up the practice of art in

favour of craft. On Tuesdays, merchants from the city would come in their engine-cars to take the delicately carved wooden lamps that Dawson made. He endeared himself with the townsfolk by wearing the local costume, knee-length kurtas. He even started wearing the wooden clogs, a local specialty, that the Jamshedpuris themselves had abandoned in favor of imported rubber shoes. When Mr. Shikdar had first returned to Jamshedpur he did nothing more than offer first aid and contraceptives, though the poverty-hardened Jamshedpuris had little interest in such services. But then the only doctor of Jamshedpur died, and patients started coming to Mr. Shikdar. At first Mr. Shikdar refused to offer treatments he was not qualified to administer. But the desperation and the persistence of his patients forced him to address some emergencies: pulling out teeth, lancing festering boils, adjusting displaced bones. He also rigorously studied the medical books Dawson had given him by way of acknowledging his friend's hospitality. One of them, *Gray's Anatomy*, he had learned by heart. Late nights when he used to pace, muttering passages of the book to himself, his wife would ask, "Do you have to memorize the whole book? Why are you doing this?"

"I am doing this because I can," was his reply.

Armed with his newly acquired knowledge and gradually increasing experience, Mr. Shikdar soon had the confidence to treat all ailments, even ones that were seemingly unknown to the medical profession. And then when the octogenarian midwife of Jamshedpur became blind, her patients too turned to Mr. Shikdar. He stopped promoting the use of contraceptives soon after he assumed the responsibilities of the midwife. In his first few deliveries he was assisted by a chaste manual in the vernacular that had the requisite instructions but no diagrams.

Mr. Shikdar, slender and timid in his youth, had by then become a balding, beefy man of some authority. Now in his fifty-ninth year, he was completely bald and had a white mustache. His appearance could be considered grandfatherly, though he did not have any legitimate claims even to the position of a father. Mr. Shikdar, dressed in all white, sauntered down the veranda towards his chamber. His clients stood up one by one as he passed them and touched their foreheads with the right hand to show their respect. Mr. Shikdar held his chin up with the deliberation of a man who knew his worth.

"I have that pain again, Shikdar Sahib," said Yaqub Molla pressing his abdomen with both hands.

"Do you want me to forge the property deeds for the seven acres next to the pond?" asked Mr. Shikdar. He did not take Molla's complaint seriously. He knew that whenever Molla wanted to collaborate with him on some new scheme, he usually came in pretending to be in the throes of colic. Such displays were meant for the other patients waiting outside, so that they would suspect nothing. But Molla, totally taken up with this play-acting, often carried it into the privacy of Mr. Shikdar's chamber.

Molla had drawn Mr. Shikdar into his schemes out of very particular reasons. To begin with there were few literate people in Jamshedpur and Molla needed someone who was conversant in the vernacular for his purposes. Yaqub Molla himself, like a true Muslim, had never deigned to learn anything but Arabic; if he conversed in the vernacular at all it was simply out of necessity. Mr. Shikdar also had the added advantage of enjoying immense popularity with the townspeople. Because to them he was not only a healer of pain but also someone they could call on for any purpose even remotely literary: reading the paper; writing letters,

affidavits, or money orders; deciphering legal notices, public announcements; copying Qu'ranic verses for wedding invitations and tombstones; fabricating genealogies, and under the influence of Molla, forging documents. Mr. Shikdar had initially resisted the idea of tampering with legal papers, but Molla argued that the two of them would be able to take better care of the lands than the actual proprietors. Moreover, they needed the forgery only to get started; after that it would be legal business and Molla promised that he would take care of it all. Eventually, Mr. Shikdar relented. Besides, his patients did not pay him enough for his services. Fewer and fewer people came to Mr. Shikdar nowadays for the various literary services that he once used to dispense, because mass education had infiltrated even the dark recesses of Jamshedpur. Electricity, some said, would also come to Jamshedpur very soon. But the early association that he had formed with Molla had not waned over the years.

"No, Shikdar Sahib, I am really in pain. I am not here to talk any business today."

"So you don't want the seven acres?"

Molla shook his head vehemently and spoke through groans, "Please relieve me of my pain first and then talk business."

Mr. Shikdar asked Molla to lie down on the bed in the corner of the room and pressed various parts of his torso with a pensive frown on his face. He relied on the touch of his fingers to diagnose most ills and even to cure some of them. Mr. Shikdar realized that Molla's pain was not the usual stomach ache he suffered or feigned. So he gave Molla one of his more potent pain relievers. Molla sat on the edge of the bed gasping, his hollowed cheeks puffing out every time he breathed out.

“What did you have last night, Molla?”

“Nothing, Shikdar Sahib, it’s not my fault I tell you. There’s something in the air. I will come and talk to you tonight, if I feel better.”

After Molla, came the other patients and most of them with unusual complaints. Mr. Shikdar was kept unusually busy in his chamber all morning. He had to enter repeatedly the windowless room adjacent to his chamber that had “laboratory” painted in red on its white door. He came back from that room with small glass vials, labeled and corked, with blue, red or golden liquids inside. The mixes were color-coded according to the strength of the concentration. The blue bottles were the cheapest. They were for the poorest of his clients. They contained distilled water and artificial colouring. The more expensive brands contained some aspirin. Today the condition of the patients compelled Mr. Shikdar to offer the aspirin doses even to those who had money enough only for the distilled water.

Mr. Shikdar usually left his dispensary at one o’clock for lunch. But the deluge of patients detained him till two thirty today. When he walked towards the interior of his house, many were still waiting in the verandah.

When Mr. Shikdar entered the dining room, his wife was still sitting at the table.

“Really Begum, why do you wait for me when I am late? You should go ahead and have your lunch,” said Mr. Shikdar.

“I did. I am just sitting here,” said Begum Shikdar.

She removed the cane covers that kept the flies from sitting on the food. His favourite preparations of hilsa were served for lunch: hilsa with mustard seed and hilsa in coconut milk. There was also khichri, a delectable mix of rice

and lentils, with fried onions sprinkled on top. The khichri, Mr. Shikdar guessed, had been prepared in anticipation of the season's first rain.

"This looks really delicious. I could smell something in the kitchen this morning. Terrific."

Begum Shikdar seemed untouched by the compliment. She was ten years younger than her husband, but looked younger than that. Her hair was still all black and her skin taut. In fact, nothing but an incipient double chin and slightly creased forehead indicated her true age. In her youth she had been the most ravishing beauty of Jamshedpur. Her father was not a local, but he came from the north; that made her all the more attractive to the Jamshedpuris. Her father, Mr. Zahir, had taught English in a girls' school in a nearby city. He had moved to the obscure town of Jamshedpur because people in the city had been spreading malicious lies about his daughter. True, he was a liberal man, who allowed his daughter to mix freely, without the pain of a chaperone, with the boys in her college and even in the neighbourhoods. She went with them to the museum or ice-cream parlours, the park or the movies, or wherever it was that young people went. Perhaps Noor Jahan was a flirt – weren't most girls her age? – but the things they said about his daughter! And probably all because she didn't have time for any odd boy who wanted to become her friend. It pained him that people could be so jealous, so mean-minded. When the situation got too nasty for his taste – obscene and threatening letters were sent to his house and many of the neighbourhood doors were closed to his daughter – he decided to leave. Once he came to Jamshedpur Mr. Zahir decided to play it safe. He tutored Noor Jahan at home, forbade her to go out and allowed her to receive only female visitors.

Mr. Shikdar had ingratiated himself with his future father-in-law by participating in informed discourses on English literature. Under the tutelage of Dawson, Mr. Shikdar had had some lessons in literature too when he was in the Capital. "I never thought I'd find someone in Jamshedpur who wanted to discuss literature," Mr. Zahir had said to Mr. Shikdar the first time they had met. He was genuinely interested in the subject. But Mr. Shikdar's enthusiasm was induced in not a small part by his interest in the enchanting Miss Noor Jahan. The women talked endlessly about the beauty of Noor Jahan. She had such enchanting manners, they said. Mr. Shikdar hoped that he would be able to glimpse that much talked about beauty if he could become a regular guest in that house.

Mr. Zahir decorated his drawing room with inauthentic pieces of European furniture. Shabby rattan chairs were displayed in the garden, where the two men sometimes took tea. They discussed Gibbon. They also listened to Beethoven on a broken gramophone that Mr. Zahir had received from the English principal of his last school. The sessions with Mr. Zahir were extremely edifying, but they did not serve their intended purpose for Mr. Shikdar, because Noor Jahan was always conspicuously absent. This puzzled him at first, for he didn't think that the daughter of a progressive thinker like Mr. Zahir would be observing *pardah*.. Mr. Shikdar had imagined that Noor Jahan would be somehow like the girls he had known in the Capital, if the distance from which he had known them could be called "knowing." Mr. Shikdar's visits started decreasing in frequency and his enthusiasm for literature too would have been severely diminished had it not been for the annual fair.

The fair took place on the Bararasta and everyone, even the legendary beauty Noor Jahan, came to it. All of Bararasta

was decorated with bright red banners for the fair, and blue and yellow festoons were tied to the stall gates. Vendors and craftsmen came from Jamshedpur and all the neighbouring districts. Earthenware and brassware captured the attention of housewives. Young boys tugged at their mothers' sarees to lead them to where the bamboo and clay toys were being sold. One year the toy-seller from Vijaynagar came to the fair with plastic dolls, which blinked both eyes when tilted at a certain angle; they blinked only one eye after the first week. And another year a man in a red tailcoat sold mouth organs. No one had seen them before, but they became an instant hit with the children. Molla did not trust their cacophonic tunes and confiscated them saying - "These toys aren't proper for muslim boys!" The same man appeared the following year with an accordion, which too was confiscated even though he played harmoniously. The red tail-coated man was never seen again, but the fair was never lacking in attractions. There were snake-charmers, monkey-trainers and fortune-tellers, who excelled in their familiar tricks. Remnants of a once prosperous circus were also a regular feature of the fair: acrobats somersaulted and children rode a rib-showing horse. But every year, invariably, the biggest attraction turned out to be the makeshift Ferris wheel.

Four box chairs were mounted on a wooden structure of uncertain footing. The whole thing was painted red, although the paint had chipped in many places. It was manually rotated by two strong-armed men; one pushing the chairs away from himself while the other, standing opposite him, pushed the chairs upwards. A third man who collected money screamed hoarsely, "Come ride the Ferris wheel, boys and girls, we'll spin you to the moon." The youngsters who waited in line shrieked as loudly as those who were being spun around.

Mr. Shikdar saw Noor Jahan, for the first time, at the annual fair. He could not see her very well, because she was riding on the Ferris wheel. Moreover, he was standing forty feet away, a distance often accepted by suitors for seeing the girl. Her hair had come loose from the bun and flowed behind her as she kept rotating in the same circular path. There were many pairs of bedazzled eyes, forty feet in every direction from Noor Jahan, that followed the figure in a blue silk dress. All the young men who gazed at the gyrating beauty from the prescribed distance were smitten with love. The sight of Noor Jahan redoubled Mr. Shikdar's enthusiasm for Gibbon.

Suitors began to throng the Zahir household soon after the annual fair. There were prodigal sons of wealthy land barons and old merchants who wanted a second wife, there were bearded religious men who promised salvation in the afterlife, and idiots from the cities who had to find their wives in the provinces. Most of the admirers managed to horrify the father no less than the daughter. Mr. Zahir, unsure of the young Shikdar's feelings for his daughter, started making suggestive yet cautious remarks in his presence. Mr. Shikdar facilitated matters for Mr. Zahir by introducing the anxious father to a distant uncle of his. The two elder men came to the decision that Mr. Shikdar and Noor Jahan would make a perfect match. Mr. Zahir had some reservations because Mr. Shikdar was not at the time quite as affluent as many of the other suitors. "But," he reasoned, "that boy has culture." Mr. Shikdar, by virtue of being a cultured man, had the good fortune of marrying Noor Jahan the following spring.

On their wedding night Mr. Shikdar was very nervous. He had never talked extensively with a girl who was not related to him and definitely never at such close quarters. He had also never been alone in a room with a girl. He was

keenly aware of the significance of this moment and the urge to say something appropriate made him tongue-tied. After many minutes of embarrassing silence, he lifted her red veil and asked her gravely – “Have you heard of Beethoven?”

Yes. She nodded her head.

“And Gauguin? Have you heard of Gauguin?”

No. She shook her head sideways.

“That’s all right,” said Mr. Shikdar. “I’ll tell you about Gauguin.”

He told her about Gauguin and also about Gibbon. He mentioned the Governor General, who had once come to their college. Did she know how fond he was of painting? When he was in the Capital he had spent so much of his time in the company of painters. They always appreciated his comments and suggestions. He drowned himself in a blissful nuptial garrulity, while his young bride fell asleep.

In a week’s time they kissed for the first time and made love soon after. And it was in bed that Noor Jahan turned out to be not the shy and docile sixteen year old that Mr. Shikdar thought he had married. Some of her nocturnal movements took Mr. Shikdar by surprise. He recalled having seen an English copy of the *Kamasutra* in her father’s bookshelf.

“Can you read English?” asked Mr. Shikdar one night.

“With a dictionary I can get the gist of things,” said Noor Jahan.

“Would you like me to teach you English?”

“Yes. Why not?”

But Mr. Shikdar never had to take the trouble of teaching his wife English. The task was taken out of his hands by

Dawson. The controversy surrounding the mosque had erupted soon after Mr. Shikdar's wedding. He had brought a critically ill Dawson into his house for treatment. Dawson was not the only one suffering from this diarrhoeal disease. It had become an epidemic and, when the first of Mr. Shikdar's patients died after a night of violent retching and vomiting, he became afraid that his distilled water might not do the trick this time. He decided to go to the city to consult the big doctors and bring back medicine that would be more potent than the things available in his stock.

When Mr. Shikdar was leaving for the city, Dawson clutched his hand and asked, "Shikdar, am I going to die?"

"Sure," said Mr. Shikdar, "but I couldn't tell you exactly when." He placed a reassuring hand on Dawson's fevered forehead and told him that his temperature was already going down. He told the languishing Dawson, "Don't worry, by the time I come back from the city, you will probably have recovered."

Noor Jahan was left on her own to take care of Dawson. At first she felt piqued at her husband's thoughtlessness. She called in the blind midwife to help her with the nursing. Her decision was partly influenced by an inclination to preempt possible innuendoes. She couldn't very well be left alone in a house for a week with an Angrez; the Shikdars had no servants at the time.

Dawson's pale white complexion had turned greenish-yellow in his sickness. But at times when he felt slightly better he was at his humorous best. He did not lecture Noor Jahan on Gauguin or the Governor General. Instead he told her about himself: childhood in the Capital, Oriental Studies at the University, expulsion after a year for unruliness, entry into art college, civilizing Shikdar, a tour of England and now

in Jamshedpur. He asked Noor Jahan about herself: why had they moved from the city – when had her mother died – was there any truth to the scandals – did she really want to learn English – what did she think of Shikdar – did he really snore so loudly – and was she happy?

They taught each other the languages they knew best. But very quickly the language lessons became subsidiary to their amorous exchanges. By the time Mr. Shikdar came back with the remedy for the diarrhoeal disease, Noor Jahan's vocabulary of unutterable English words already far exceeded that of her husband's. Dawson did not leave even after he was cured of his illness; he stayed on at the Shikdars'. Initially, Mr. Shikdar was quite happy with his house guest, with whom he could talk endlessly about the glorious times they had had in the city. Noor Jahan would sit in on these sessions at times and listen smilingly.

Mr. Shikdar was also pleased to see his wife making real progress with her English. But eventually he couldn't help noticing that the teacher and the pupil looked at each other a little too tenderly. Mr. Shikdar, of course, could not ask Dawson to leave; the man was his friend. And what if his suspicions turned out to be false? Also now that he was getting to know his wife better, he realized that she was not the purdah type. She had had a different upbringing in the city. And what with his progressive ideas, was he going to get jealous about the first man who spoke to his wife? No, it would not do to ask Dawson to leave abruptly, it might even suggest scandal when there was perhaps none. Maybe he should observe them more closely, maybe sudden visits to the house from the dispensary. He started leaving his stethoscope behind. When Noor Jahan asked him why was he being so forgetful lately, he stared at her silently.

Dawson was finally removed by Yaqub Molla, who appeared suddenly one morning with the declaration that he had found a house and a manservant for Dawson. So Dawson no longer needed to suffer the inconveniences of living at somebody else's house. "Dawson Sahib, follow me kindly, if you please," said Molla and walked out with Dawson's belongings. Mr. Shikdar was most grateful to Molla for his diplomatic, and he hoped, timely intervention. So when a week later Molla turned up with some documents that he said needed minor adjustments, Mr. Shikdar could not refuse his services. He agreed to Molla's suggestions, and asked only that he be allowed to retain a vestige of moral propriety. They had lengthy conversations about the ineptitude of the people to use their land properly. Shouldn't the rice fields really be turned into brick factories? And they talked about the good things they would do with the proceeds from their ventures.

Mr. Shikdar prospered in a manner that did not seem to be in keeping with the earnings from his tiny dispensary. But his contentment was incomplete because his wife did not forget Molla's speedy removal of Dawson. "What kind of a man gets an outsider to remove his guest?" she would say not directly to him.

"I didn't ask Molla to do anything. He took Dawson away on his own."

"Did it on his own? And who let him? Shame, what shame!"

"As if there wasn't any shame in staying alone with the Angrez."

"We weren't alone, the midwife was here."

"Blind midwife, fine chaperone you have there."

"Don't taunt me. You are the one who asked the stupid Angrez to stay with us in the first place!"

"But I didn't ask him to push you on the swings, did I?"

"You are so jealous; you can't even tolerate me having some innocent fun, can you?"

"Have all the fun you want, but please see to it that things are done in good form."

"Good form? And who decides what's in good form? I suppose shooing your guest out was in good form."

"Dawson had to go. We could not have him stay on with us forever."

"Of course not. But you gave him such a goodbye, he doesn't even come to visit anymore. And what will people say when they hear about this?"

"Yes, what will people say?"

Mr. Shikdar could not match his wife's diatribe; although he felt that Dawson's removal had become necessary, he could not find the right words to convince his wife of this fact. When she realized that she was pregnant, she dropped the subject completely. The two of them conspired towards a reconciliation; they would not carry the bitterness of the first months to cloud the happiest occasion of their life. Mr. Shikdar decided to celebrate the news by inviting Dawson, Molla, and the few other venerable members of their small society. The party was held in his courtyard, which he had recently paved with concrete. There was a fenced in area of green and four palm trees in the middle of the courtyard. Mr. Shikdar and his guests sat under the palm trees. A table was laid out and covered with a red and white checkered cloth. Mr. Shikdar brought out his father-in-law's gramophone which he had received as part of

his dowry. Dawson had brought over some records that had been popular in their college days. Everybody had tea and Dawson got up and demonstrated some European dances. He taught Mr. Shikdar the jitterbug. They danced together while the other men clapped. Dawson's clogs clattered on the pavement.

Begum Shikdar refused to come out of her kitchen, but she served the most delicious samosas, chatpati, luchi, and halwa that her guests had ever tasted. Later in the evening, when the guests had left, she still stayed in her kitchen. Mr. Shikdar could not persuade her to learn the jitterbug. From then on Begum Shikdar's preference for the kitchen over the veranda gradually became more pronounced.

In the later stages of his wife's pregnancy, Mr. Shikdar started spending more and more time with her and in the last one month he did not make any night calls. He was worried by his wife's persistent gloom and did everything in his capacity to cheer her up. His endeavors were unrewarded and he feared for the health of both mother and child. When the birth became imminent the blind midwife moved into the Shikdar household of her own accord. Even though Mr. Shikdar had taken up her job, she did not stop visiting the houses where a child was expected.

Normally neighborhood women and close female relatives were present on such occasions. But it was already well into the monsoon season. Those who lived closeby were prevented by rain, and those who lived far away by the flood from coming to attend on Begum Shikdar. Besides, Mr. Shikdar being the only person of his gender in obstetrics, he did not have the usual array of assistants that the midwife used to have. He was usually attended by only one or two of the closest female relatives of the patient. On the night that his wife went into labor, there was no one besides himself

and the blind midwife to facilitate the arrival of his child. After several agonizing hours in labor, very early in the morning, Mrs. Shikdar delivered a blonde baby girl.

The next morning contradictory reports were circulating in Jamshedpur. The men talked under their breath in the bazaar, "Have you heard?"

"Yes so sad, she is such a nice woman and he is so generous, that such a thing should happen to them."

"They don't deserve such misfortunes."

"No, surely not."

"So was the baby stillborn? Or did it die after birth?"

"How could it be stillborn? The midwife says that she heard a baby crying." "What baby crying, she probably heard the mother crying."

"You think she can't tell a baby crying when she hears it; she's been delivering them for sixty years."

"The old hag's already lost her sight and now she must be losing her hearing as well."

"And, what about the baby's grave, haven't you seen the little mound of earth under the palm trees, in their courtyard?"

"Sure they could have buried the child, but the question is did they bury it before or after it died?"

"Don't even think of such horrible things, why would they want to do such a thing?"

"Why do you think? Remember exactly how long ago the diahorrea epidemic was and remember where Dawson was at the time?"

"Yes, now that you say so, I also wonder why they were in such a hurry to bury the child. Besides, everyone went to pay their condolences, but Dawson wasn't there."

"I went to his house, he wasn't there either." The men quarrelled and speculated, but no one was able to establish a satisfactory story about what had happened.

Most stories in Jamshedpur had two versions. Those carried by mouth and those carried by the chimney-fumes. By late morning the chimneys of Jamshedpur started belching essential details and embellishments to the story that had been reported by mouth. Women who worked in the kitchen were aware of facts that eluded their otherwise knowledgeable husbands. Whispers, innuendos, speculations, as well as slander and vituperation, and in some kitchens, even gallows humour were added to the usual ingredients that went into the pots simmering on the earthen stoves. The fumes, usually grey, were a sickly green today; or perhaps the monsoon clouds were refracting the daylight into the strangest colours. The fumes did not seem to rise to the sky, instead they hung low over the houses and mingled with fumes from other chimneys before insinuating themselves into some other kitchen.

Chimney-fume reports: Yes, the midwife had heard a baby cry. She was blind but not deaf. Dead babies don't cry. Who could tell if there really was something under that mound of earth? Was the grave just a distraction? A cover-up, so that no one would ever again ask anything about the Shikdar baby? And what business did Dawson have in the city? He never needed to go to the city ever before for his wood-carvings. And didn't someone see him going with a small bundle in his arms? Why were Shikdar and Molla in such a hurry to bury the child? In Jamshedpur, everybody could be called on at all hours if a misfortune were to befall

any family. Why then did Molla and Shikdar not call anyone else for help? Why the hush-hush?

By mouth it was reported that Begum Shikdar had gone into labor the previous night. It was also reported that a child had been born, but it was dead at birth. Before dawn Mr. Shikdar had reportedly buried the child with Molla's assistance. They thought the longer it was kept in the house the worse the mother would feel. No, they hadn't had the time to inform many people before the burial. It was after all quite late at night. Dawson had been informed; he had paid his condolences but he had had to go off to the city on urgent business.

In a few years time everyone in Jamshedpur would come to know that Dawson had had a child by a woman he kept in the city. Men would sit around the Bararasta on the bazar days and see Dawson taking the engine-car to the city, evidently to visit his putative offspring.

"Leave it to an Angrez to do something like that."

"I tell you, city women have no morals."

"Thank god, there aren't any women like that in Jamshedpur."

"Dawson isn't a bad sort after all," some would say. "He provides well for the woman and the child."

Dawson's frequent city visits had resulted in an expansion of his business and he always claimed that it was his business that took him to the city. Those who had been to the city would agree unanimously that Dawson had a beautiful daughter.

The chilling of the relationship Between Mr. Shikdar and his Begum would be widely ascribed to their childlessness. Marriages, fat elbowed women would claim, are bound to go

sour if you don't have children. That Mr. and Begum Shikdar slept in different rooms became common knowledge because of gossiping servants. And the chimney-fumes would add that Mr. Shikdar refused to share his room with his wife, because she had given birth to a stillborn baby.

The Shikdars, however, like all affluent couples, managed to keep up appearances. They greeted each other in the mornings, and asked about each other's health. They confessed to each other new signs of advancing age and suggested remedies. Whenever there was a wedding they went together and they never quarrelled in front of guests. He gave her new sarees on her birthdays. She wove him a pair of sandals for their last marriage anniversary (twenty-fourth). They even remained on cordial terms with Dawson; otherwise people might suspect something. Dawson did not visit them anymore, but there was no sign of overt hostility. They fell into the conventional routines of town life. Mr. Shikdar kept himself busy in the dispensary. But also he invested a lot of time at the religious school that Molla and he had jointly established. Mr. Shikdar was widely recognized for his various charitable efforts. Begum Shikdar took to the kitchen and waited for her husband at meals.

"How many patients did you see today?"

"Everybody's sick. They complain of stomach aches."

"I hope it's not another epidemic."

"I don't know. It very well might be. I haven't been feeling very well myself. I can't fall sick at a time like this."

"Yes, you do look tired. Take a nap after lunch." Begum Shikdar ladled some more khichri on her husband's plate. It was one of his favourite dishes. They wondered if it would rain today. The clouds had moved closer to Jamshedpur.

And Begum thought she could smell the earthy vapours that always came before a storm. They said rain was badly needed for the crops. The drought last year had hit the farmers very hard. Poor fellows possibly couldn't survive two consecutive years of drought.

Begum Shikdar rambled absent-mindedly, but Mr. Shikdar seemed not to notice. He was feeling very drowsy. He no longer had the energy of his youth. After lunch naps had become a necessity for him. The thought of the people waiting in the verandah made him feel guilty about napping. He promised himself, as he lay down on the bed, that he would nap for only an hour.

The patients waited in the veranda. They gave Shikdar Sahib an hour for lunch. When he didn't show up for lunch they gave him another hour for the nap. When he still didn't return to his dispensary, they asked the servant to see if Mr. Shikdar would be coming out to his dispensary again. The servant went and called his master timidly from the door. After a few calls, when Mr. Shikdar still did not awaken, the servant went and told Begum about the poor patients and about Mr. Shikdar's sleep. Begum Shikdar told the servant to take a cup of tea to Mr. Shikdar and nudge him gently. The cup of tea turned cold on Mr. Shikdar's bedside table. It rested on a leather bound copy of the verses of Omar Khayaam, which his grandfather had given him as a wedding present. He did not stir to the servant's intrepid nudgings. The dejected patients left one by one, when Mr. Shikdar didn't wake up even after three hours. The servant, feeling guilty on his master's behalf, served tea to the few persistent patients who still lingered on the veranda. They finished their tea, while second, third and fourth cups turned cold on Mr. Shikdar's bedside table. Begum Shikdar had to come in herself to her husband's room, which she hardly ever did

nowadays. She shook her husband violently by the shoulders, "How much longer are you going to sleep? The poor patients are still sitting on the veranda. Are you really feeling ill?"

All the commotion finally woke up Mr. Shikdar. He looked at his wife with glazed eyes. Begum Shikdar had to slap some water on his face, before he came to his senses. He sat on the edge of his bed looking glum. He told his servant, "Tell the patients I am not feeling well. I'll sit in the dispensary early tomorrow. Tell them to come then." The fluttering in his chest had started again. When his breathing regularized he drank a cup of tea.

He looked out of the window. It was already almost dusk and a faint rosy shaft of light illuminated a side of the wall. He stared at the light on the wall as it slowly receded into a corner and vanished. He felt very removed from his surroundings. Waking up so late in the afternoon always did this to him. It ushered strange, sad, silly thoughts into his head. It reminded him of things and places that had become irretrievably distant. He remembered the girl whom he had once wanted to draw; he had even taken a few lessons in drawing from Dawson at the time. He remembered the first time he had seen her white foot, looking whiter because it was encased in a black leather shoe, stepping out of a car. He had not looked at her. He did not remember what she had looked like that day or what she had been wearing. He was no longer even sure if he had seen her outside the girl's college or if it was outside the tea shop that all the students went to in those days.

But he remembered the white foot that had gently stepped out of a car. Why should he remember that foot or that shoe or that girl? He remembered, looking at the foot, he had thought at the time, if the owner of that foot were to walk

through a desert, not a speck of dust would cling to her heels. Silly, silly, can you really remember a foot for so long, when you have forgotten more important things (he did not remember the name of the boy with whom he had shared a room for a year; it was probably an 'A' name: Asgar, Asmat ... ?). But he remembered the foot with such vividness that it made him want to cry.

He had spoken to the girl only once. They happened to be sitting at the same table because of common friends. When they were introduced he had smiled, thinking how shocked she might be if he were to say, "I have already made a careful note of your left foot. Have you ever walked through a desert?" But that wouldn't do at all. "Do you really draw? Will you do a portrait of me?" she had asked animatedly. "I've always wanted to have a picture of me, drawn not photographed," she had said. He had thought she was serious. He had imagined all the different angles from which her head could be immortalized on paper. He had finally settled on 'the side of the face looking from behind' angle for drawing her. But he no longer recalled what the side-of-the-face looked from the chosen angle. And even if he did, could he actually have drawn it? He had immortalized nothing on paper. Only a silly foot stuck in his head. There was so much he was incapable of doing. What had happened to the owner of that foot? Had she married? Had she ever had her portrait done?

The only way he could shake off the urgent sentimentality of his nostalgia was by grasping something immediate: a thought (Molla and his seven acres), a real physical feeling (the aching in his chest), an object (the open pages of the *Rubayiaat*) or a person (his wife sitting in the cane chair). He turned his eye from the corner of the wall, which was warmed even a little while ago by a faint pink

light, to his wife. The servant came in with an oil lamp and placed it on Mr. Shikdar's side-table. Begum Shikdar's shadow loomed largely behind her on the wall. The gentlest breeze disturbed the lamp-light and the shadow wavered ever so slightly. Mr. Shikdar suddenly felt glad that the woman who was sitting on that nearby cane chair was his wife and that she had been nearby for twenty-four years. He said, "Have all the patients gone already?" Yes, she nodded her head. "How are you feeling now? Is it that chest pain again?"

"Much better. I think I'll go out for some fresh air."

Mr. Shikdar stepped out on the Bararasta. He walked down the street, leaving the mosque behind him. Two consecutive left turns brought him to a gravel path on one side of which was a large red brick building; Dawson's house. The house was dark. Dawson wasn't home. Mr. Shikdar remembered that today was Tuesday; today the engine-car went to the city. Dawson, he guessed, must have gone to visit the girl. Mr. Shikdar decided to go to Molla's instead. They had the seven acres to talk about anyway. In the evenings Molla often sat on the patio of the mosque reciting the Qu'ran. But today he wasn't there. Mr. Shikdar remembered that Molla hadn't been well today. Molla's house was a little far. He would actually have to get off the mud paths and walk through one of those narrow aisles through the paddy fields to reach Molla's house.

Walking through the rice fields Mr. Shikdar wished he had brought a lantern with him. He also wished he had brought an umbrella, as a warm and large drop of water fell on his shoulder. He remembered that white foot again and he laughed now thinking of how sorrowful it had made him feel just a little while ago. Sure he couldn't draw, but there was so much else he had done. He had, in fact, done more for

Jamshedpur than any other single person. The people of Jamshedpur revered him. He had made something of his life, in spite of some of the terrible unpleasantness of it. But those were very faraway, forgotten issues. He had surely amounted to more than Dawson, who for all his talent and erudition had been nothing more than a furniture-maker. This thought seemed to satisfy him. There was suddenly a void in his stomach and the faint smile of satisfaction turned into an expression of first bewilderment and then pain. He felt wild thumpings against his rib-cage. He sat down on the muddy ridge dividing the land, looking around to see if anybody saw him. His white kurta became smeared with mud and he started to sweat profusely. Molla's servant found him the next morning lying on the mud aisle, his mouth slightly parted.

It had rained all night in Jamshedpur and the whole village had kept vigil at the Shikdar household. In the morning, when the sky had cleared, they took Mr. Shikdar's body to the graveyard. Dawson had returned just that morning from the city. As soon as he heard the news he rushed to Mr. Shikdar's house. But the mourning procession had already left for the graveyard. Begum Shikdar was in her room, surrounded by the village women, some of whom had stayed the night with her. Dawson paid his respects from the door. It would not have been proper for a man, if he weren't related to the bereaved, to enter the widow's room. He said in English, "You can never tell when some things will happen." Begum Shikdar didn't say anything; she nodded in agreement.

When Dawson reached the cemetery they were already lowering Mr. Shikdar's body into the grave. He saw the body of his friend wrapped in an unstitched white piece of cloth, a tuft of white hair showing on his chest, where the cloth had

been ruffled out of place. Cotton balls had been stuffed into his nostrils to prevent any bleeding, but they too had become slightly displaced. For a second Dawson thought he saw the fluffy strands of cotton flutter as though Mr. Shikdar were breathing. But he knew that those who are close to the deceased will see the most impossible things; it was probably the breeze. They can see their dear one's chest rising and falling many hours after death. Mr. Shikdar's mouth was found open at death and had to be closed shut with a white ribbon that went under his jaw and ended in a bow on the pate of his head. His eyes too had been found open at death, but Molla had shut them himself.

But what if Mr. Shikdar's eyes were still open? Wouldn't they then have realized that he had only fallen into a deep, but not the deepest, slumber? The townsfolk, whom Mr. Shikdar had treated so diligently for so many years, had learned nothing from him. They could not correctly diagnose any illness with the touch of their fingers. A comatose Shikdar had been buried by his heavy-hearted, reverent fellow Jamshedpuris. Their mistake would never be known to them. But Mr. Shikdar, coming back to consciousness, for a few seconds, would suspect that a terrible error had been committed.

He had serious doubts that the angels would show up. The only thing he could know with certainty was the number of steps taken by the wooden clogs. He could hear the sound of the clogs slowly receding into the distance, but that didn't prevent him from keeping count: thirty-six, thirty-seven ...

Another Night

Anis Choudhury

Prince has invited me to be a houseguest at his place. It's winter, so travelling shouldn't be a problem. Besides, he will as a matter of course send someone to the station. The address he has sent is: a yard from the Palashpur Magistrate's Court – or it might be a little farther. He mentioned the reason for the inexactitude in his letter: "I have never measured my life down to the last decimal fraction. Consequently I am not good at estimating distances. But do come. You might have to walk a little more that's all."

I was twelve, when I first met him. The place was a railway station – Kalimpong.

I saw a boy perched on stacked luggage, playing on a harmonica. The tune was familiar, though the rendition was not flawless.

"Do you think you play well?" Of all questions I had to ask him this – it slipped out inadvertently. That was the beginning of our acquaintance.

I didn't get a reply. Instead, the music grew louder. To show that I was master of the situation, I resorted to the ridiculous ploy of hailing a cigarette vendor. I don't remember the brand I bought. In the half-forgotten story of those years, the ignominy of not being able to light up smartly stands out in my memory. That was my first smoke. I coughed till I almost choked.

"You've started smoking at this age!" Such was his concern for my future that the boy had put down the harmonica.

I wound my scarf more tightly and said in a deep voice, "Yeah!"

"A very bad habit. Do you know, an uncle of mine . . ."

I do not remember the rest. The benign effect of cigarettes had no doubt done something to his uncle, but the train had arrived.

Seeing him climb aboard suitcase in hand, I ran up and asked, "Going home?"

"Yeah."

Just before that decisive moment when the train started moving, Prince shouted out, "Will you really write? Do you remember? Palashpur, Post Office . . ."

For the twelve years since then we've been exchanging letters. World history, social theory, the mysteries of our physical self – everything has been shuttling back and forth between us like a tennis ball. During this time Prince fell in love twice, and once attempted suicide. Their Persian cat died last year.

I've had a bout of typhoid, and two stories written during convalescence await publication in monthly magazines. I've won third prize in a small-town literary contest.

The passing days have brought many unexpected questions.

Roads have fallen into disrepair before my eyes and have been repaired, society has fractured and the cracks plastered over. I have seen our local schoolteacher resign from his

primary school and, joining politics, start pulling strings from behind the scenes. The story of how I took up a humble job and lived in the shared accommodation of a common “mess” is better left unsaid. The letter-writing pads with fine green and blue sheets became things of my prehistoric past. To avoid spending money on safety blades, I bought a cut-throat razor. I’ve long since ceased to buy shaving soap.

There was a holiday coming up when I could take up Prince’s invitation. I could afford an Inter class ticket. For the return journey I could borrow ten rupees from Prince. It wouldn’t hurt him; he was rich.

Palashpur station was like any other railway station – not like Kalimpong, though. A beggar boy with a game leg played a harmonica. A kerosene lamp burned with a feeble red glow in the booking office, and porters huddled timidly together.

I stood on the platform and looked around. Hadn’t anyone come for me?

I sat down and watched passengers leaving and coming in. Heavy bundles of luggage were being set down or picked up, always attended by haggling over money – but the wrangle would be quickly resolved.

“Are you also . . .?”

I said with a smile of relief, ‘I have to go, well, a yard from the magistrate’s court.’

“Please come with me.”

The man’s behaviour was quite strange, his speech harsh. He was tall, light-complexioned and stooped.

As we walked together I asked, “Are you related to Prince?”

He didn't reply. After a while he said, "Come on, walk faster. The place seems to be quite far. No chance of getting a phaeton – quite a backward place, it seems. We don't have time for small talk."

"I hope no one has fallen ill."

The man unexpectedly looked at me again. "Really, you are – what shall I say – a bearer of bad luck. Here, have this."

He took out a crumpled cigarette from his pocket and offered it to me.

"No, thanks."

Though our conversation didn't progress much after that, we covered quite a long distance. Prince hadn't only miscalculated the fractions, the total estimate was wide of the mark. His house was at the town's edge, not less than a good mile away.

It was an old house. There was a musty smell about the place. Two empty-looking structures stood on either side. The area might have been marshland at one time. At places the walls were penetrated by grotesque roots.

I sat down on an old sofa in a dimly lit room. The sofa springs were hideously exposed in places. One of the two oil paintings hanging precariously on the wall was faded; the other one could not be deciphered through the pale cobwebs covering it.

An old wall clock inexplicably swung from one side to the other. It belonged to a bygone era. Everything from the day of the week to the month was indicated – but incorrectly.

Sitting alone in a stuffy room produced an eerie feeling. Suddenly something seemed to slither from under my foot. I jumped up.

Someone placed a hand on my shoulder from behind and said, "Sit down, sit down. Are you scared? It's only a field mouse. They scamper around all day. By the way, Prince will be a little late."

I discovered it was that man, rough, rude, tall, light-complexioned, stooped.

I sat for a long time. Two or three hours must have gone by. Intoxicating slumber descended on my weary eyes. From the courtyard came the sound of a washerman beating clothes. I was plunged in fathomless thought. It seemed as if I were connected to that lonely, silent room in Palashpur by an old intimacy.

Parting the curtains, a young woman stepped into the room on timid feet. But she withdrew at once. "Who is it?"

I was humming a difficult tune. I put the brakes on the melodic lien and said, "It's me - I've come to see Prince."

"Oh, really?" The girl slowly disappeared into the next room.

I tried to speak to her again. "Could you send a message to Prince?"

The girl came back a little later. "So, you are looking for Prince? Do you know him?"

With a helplessness consistent with the disagreeable situation, I replied, "We are old acquaintances."

"Do you know him longer than me?" She laughed out.

"How can I say - maybe."

"Please wait a little."

She went back into the next room and came back with a glass of sherbet on a tray.

"Please have it – you must be tired."

I was in no mood to bandy words. Without another word I drained the glass.

More time passed. I grew impatient. "Won't I be able to meet Prince, then?"

"Why not? Of course you will. Please wait."

I wasn't enjoying this mysterious conversation with a strange girl.

Another long pause. I paced up and down the sitting room. The moon lay tilted above a tall Palmyra palm tree. The evening deepened. There were just the girl and me there. Black hair like rain clouds tumbled down her neck. The girl suddenly turned a startled face towards me. "Would you like to sleep?"

I answered curtly, "No."

"Prince will be late. He has gone to the graveyard."

"Where? Suddenly – why?" Disconnected questions tumbled out of my mouth.

"There's no answer to Why," the girl said with a smile. "Have you come on some urgent business?"

"Well, no, besides seeing Prince I have no other business with him. I'm not an insurance agent – nor a detective from Special Branch."

"Do you know that a girl has died?"

"Who?" I asked in surprise.

"That girl – for whom Prince has gone to the graveyard. She is going to be buried today."

"What are you saying?" I asked again.

“Why, what’s there to be surprised?”

The puppetlike slim moon was still leaning above the palm tree, like a useless lantern in the heart of profound darkness. The girl was silent. A thousand stories from the past crowded onto the mind’s canvas. An episode from the gloomy past raised a blinding storm of mystery in the mind’s alleyways. Far, far away, a forlorn cry – the lament of a wounded life – came alive in my imagination.

The girl’s drowsy eyes were nearly shut. The bittersweet scent of neem borne on the breast of an uninvited breeze brought a feather from a nearly forgotten age.

“Do you want to hear a story?” I asked the girl suddenly.

“Very well, let’s hear it.” Her closed eyes with their petal-like lids seemed to have spoken.

“It happened nine years ago,” I began.

“How many years?” she asked.

“Nine, maybe nine and a half years ago. I fell in love with a girl. I was intoxicated with the hope of setting up a home of my own for the first time. Her two soft hands, delicate lips, blue eyes set off an extraordinary excitement in my blood.

“I clasped her two hands to my breast and, gazing at the cloudless blue sky of early autumn, said, “I swear I’ll marry you – my witness is today’s limitless stretch of . . .”

“And then?” the girl asked.

“That beautiful, innocent girl’s father was a nationalist. British rifles and bayonets were hunting patriots throughout the land. From lofty lord to plain Mister, every one of the British was engaged in making the bruised natives bleed. At that time of countrywide popular resistance Yamin was an

expert at hurling bombs; he could throw them with hands. One day I became acquainted with him. He was the father of my beloved.

“One day Yamin vanished – he had gone into hiding. The Police went after him, but only I knew his whereabouts.

“I had gone to a British company to look for a job. I was desperate to find an anchor in life. I would marry that girl, start a family.

“The Police Chief was a man called Harold. Slapping me on the back as he freshened my drink, he said, ‘Find Yamin for us and I’ll make sure the job is yours.’

“‘I’m in love with Yamin’s daughter – I will marry her – what if she gets to know this?’

“‘She won’t,’ Harold reassured me.

“I engineered Yamin’s arrest. I told him his hideout was no longer safe. The Police had got to know about it. He should come with me.

“That night the Police picked him up.

“The following night I married his daughter.

“The excitement of the wedding night promised to spread an exquisite satisfaction to the horizon of my life.

“In the dimly lit bridal chamber I sat down by the bed and, taking her soft hands in mine, said, ‘Come.’ The girl responded with a roar. She was no longer my immaculately beautiful beloved. Her blue eyes were bloodshot and flaming. The muscles of her tender arms had become firm. Throwing off the sari edge covering her head she hissed, ‘Traitor!’ She covered her face again and sat immobile for a while. Then she raised her face again. ‘Couldn’t you tell me even a moment before the wedding what a great traitor you are?’

"Without another word the girl left the room. Nine years have gone by. She never came back. End of story."

"So that's your story." The girl shifted in her seat. "Very well, I'll also tell you a story. Listen."

Girl began: "Three years back Prince married a girl.

"Yes, Prince. Don't be so surprised, for the real story is yet to begin.

"Prince loved the girl. And how could he not? Such a lovely face, such youth, hair cascading down to the knees, eyes like a doe's. After a couple of years she gave birth to a son.

"Yesterday, something unexpected happened. The girl came to know that you and Prince are good friends."

"Why, what's so surprising about it?" I interrupted the girl.

"Perhaps not to you, but the girl no doubt had a good reason to be surprised. The reason is that when she married Prince she believed that you were no longer living."

"Why?"

"Because she thought that a man who had been rejected by his wife on his wedding night, and had been cursed as a traitor, would at least have enough self-respect to take his own life."

In a choking voice I asked, "Who are you talking about, Akhtari – the girl I married?"

"Your guess is correct." The girl laughed.

"But, tell me why she died."

“Very well, if you must hear.” A strange smile played over the girl’s lips. “A rift might have opened over this between you and Prince. Or so Akhtari thought. And only she could prevent that, so just before your arrival she swallowed poison.”

“But you – who are you?”

“Haven’t I told you? Well, you don’t have to know.”

“But, do tell me. I’m dying of curiosity. Besides, how did you get to know our story?”

“Me – I do not know what role I’ll play in Prince’s future, but in the past my only identity was as his friend. I don’t have any other personal identity.”

The clock kept marking the passage of time. Inside my heart there was a strange pressure. My mind was inert in the grip of a mysterious feeling. Thousands of questions caught in the net of thought reared up in my breast.

I came out of Prince’s house and started walking towards the station. On my way here every step had revealed to me life’s palpable vibration – the way back was to the same degree a terrible experience. There wasn’t a part of my consciousness where a prickly bush hadn’t sprouted.

“Excuse me!” It was loudly shouted. I turned around. That girl. A pale face amidst which the eyeballs glittered. “Please don’t tell anyone, under no circumstances, but I too loved Prince.”

I was stunned. The entire known world was undergoing dramatic changes.

The girl had long disappeared.

It was two o’clock in the morning. I was weary. It would take me another fifteen minutes to reach the station.

But wasn't that Prince? Yes, it was Prince, returning on slow feet. He was accompanied by that tall, light-complexioned, thin and stooped man with a harsh voice.

Shaking me by the shoulder, Prince asked, "Where are you off to?"

I said, "To the station."

"Why? Aren't you coming to my place?"

"That's where I'm coming from. Can't stay today, perhaps another day." I invented a lie. "There was an urgent telegram from the office."

Prince bowed his head and said, "You've heard."

"Yes. I have."

"Nova must have told you."

"Who's Nova?"

"That girl, who gave you the news. She is completely mad."

"Really?" I looked steadily at Prince.

"Come, let's walk you to the station."

I had to overcome a lot of qualms to say, "Prince, can you spare seven rupees. As soon as I get back . . ."

He took out a ten-rupee note and thrust it into my hand. "I don't have exactly seven rupees, but you can have this."

I took a seat on the train. Two minutes to start.

Suddenly Prince indicated the tall man. "You are acquainted with him."

I said, "No, I don't think so."

That tall, light-complexioned, stooped man stepped forward and said softly, "You are not likely to recognize me, but I know you. I've been released from jail today. I'm Yamin."

The train started. In the distance, the green lantern swung from the guard's hand.

Yamin and Prince vanished from sight.

Translated by Kaiser Haq

Hate

Hasan Azizul Haque

For an hour or so the girl has been squatting on the pavement in the shadow of a tree. It had happened twice that evening, the first time just after the sun had gone down. It began as a slight throbbing, then the pain rose in waves through the arteries and veins, reaching the brain, where it lodged fast. The brain joined with it in alliance and despatched tiny venomous asps to her breasts. Then she had to squeeze it out. She tilted, just as a snake does to squirt venom into its prey, and squeezed out her milk.

The thin white liquid flowed down her belly – a little dribbled into the dirt. It's seven days since her last child quietly died.

I've eaten only once today, and it has come out as milk. I won't live very long if it goes on – the girl was worried. She had already rummaged three dust-bins and dredged a drain, and found nothing.

No reason to consider her utterly destitute, though. One always has some resources. If one survives the delivery and manages to keep going they accumulate, somehow. If you could draw out the girl and talk to her as one of her own kind she might have much to tell you. She has had a taste of domestic life and the male of the species: a thick-boned, unsightly fellow reeking of sweat, raw onions and garlic. This is what her experience of him was like: a choking sensation, as

if it was the moment before death; ribs crackling; heart pounding; fiery currents coursing through the whole body. Alongside, a different memory. A tightness in the breasts, the infant suckling. The feeling that if she kept looking she might be able to see the baby grow. Strength flowed out of the mother's body, the baby threw its limbs about and grew. With a purr of joy she squeezed it against her breasts. She knew too that a hovel of straw and twigs could be a home to live in with husband and kids. From it she had looked out on a dry lifeless landscape over which the moon rose casting weird shadows. Here people were born, grew up and died like flies.

As these thoughts racked her mind the girl suddenly realized that the shadow of the tree had disappeared. But where? The tree wasn't a ghost that it would have no shadow! Her skin prickled with an eerie sensation. Then she saw that light coming from the front had driven the shadow behind. More light came, chasing it farther back.

Actually she was quite feverish. When she squatted by the road with legs splayed out in front and sunk her long nails into her scraggly hair and scratched wildly it might seem she didn't remember she had a husband, not to mention mourning him. And when she had to squeeze out the milk from her breasts a couple of times in a day, she didn't remember anything at all. There was only a sense of loss – food raked from dustbins and fished out of drains passed out according to the horrid laws of physiology.

She came out into the street again. It was bright, as on a night of full moon. It seemed as if creamy milk had been spread over the black tar of the streets. But there was no moon; the sky couldn't be seen. A hint of a breeze. At a turning she heard the resulting conversation of trees. There was nothing unusual in their appearance, so she wasn't frightened. She was about to cross over at the turning when a

man emerged from the trunk of an ancient tree and blocked her path. She had been absent-minded – suddenly this fellow exhaled a lungful of breath on her face. She saw a thick-set flabby dwarf before her. He was breathing on her like one who had just surfaced after a long time under water. A streak of light on his head showed a gleaming bald pate and a forehead depressed the middle. The two spoke out simultaneously: a monosyllable that might be a query or a greeting. The girl's voice was louder. The trees hushed at the exchange.

“What do you want?” the girl spoke again, her voice rising.

The dwarf quickly ran his fingers over his bald head, then thrust small hands with stubby fingers one after the other into all his pockets, looking for God-knows-what. His heavy breathing continued, his eyes popped out like peeled litchis. The sockets of both were brimful with liquid in which the eyeballs seemed to flounder.

The man found what he had been looking for but seemed unable to take it out of his pocket. Finally his left hand produced a sheaf of banknotes and waved them in front of the girl's eyes as the other hand touched her shoulder. Something came over him – he pulled off the flimsy covering over her breasts. His hand shook involuntarily, then came to rest on them.

The man shut his mouth, at last. His nostrils closed too. His breath caught in his throat. The girl could hear his heart pounding. She snarled like a cat with its back arched in rage. Two thin rays of bluish light shot out of her eyes. Her breasts felt numb. She rasped out. Not here, not here. The dwarf said nothing. He was like a groom silently scrutinising his bride on their wedding night. The girl didn't remove his hand from her

breasts. She merely repeated. Not here, not here, in a breathy voice, with a hint of venom.

The man exhaled slowly. It was a long expiration that didn't seem to end, like an endless ribbon unwinding from its spool.

Where? Which way? he asked finally.

With lowered eyes the girl gathered up the tattered end of her sari to cover her breasts. Let's go, I know a place, she said, clasping the dwarf's hand tightly, and started walking rapidly.

The pudgy dwarf followed like a sacrificial ram. The streets snaked bewilderingly – dark streets with creamy milk spread all over. Once when the girl looked back the dwarf implored. Just a little cover will do.

It wasn't difficult to find. A waist-high screen of thick bushes and wild creepers, right beside the street, the pavement and the sagging barbed-wire fence. Crossing over rusty tin, broken earthenware pots and dented cans made some noise.

The banknotes were in the dwarf's hand, crumpled. "Will you pay first?" the girl asked.

"Of course. Why not? But where will you keep it?" he asked, his voice not devoid of pity. The girl had got out of her rags.

"Where will you keep it?" she rejoined. The dwarf realized he was in the same state.

The girl reached out saying, Here, I'll keep it in my hand. The dwarf gave her the money, but was reluctant to let go of her hand. The city had begun whirling round him. He was like someone who had bought a ticket and entered a maze: in the countless pitch-dark ever-narrowing lanes his soul turned

cold with fear. The girl called sharply. Come on where are you?

She saw a herd of donkeys on a barren field braying at the moon. Milk from her breasts flooded the field. And her baby, seven days' dead, floated in it like a piece of cork. It had one eye open, one leg raised skyward.

Naked, with hair blowing loose, the girl looked like a witch. She reached out and called several times, where are you? Suddenly a high voice came from the shrubbery less than three yards away. Take me Sahib, take me. Look at me. Will you have me Sahib?

A woman stood up from the bushes. The dwarf looked as if he had been struck deaf by thunder. Then with a cry of fear he clasped the girl he had just paid. The woman emerged from the bush. "Look at me, Sahib!" she pleaded. "I am nicer than that witch. You can have me for one taka. Have a look..."

Is that so? You wretch? Another woman came, no one could say from where.

Then there were several more. They came from the direction of the street, from the front and from behind, pushing aside the enveloping darkness. They surrounded the dwarf. They shot arrow sharp words at each other, hurled vile abuse, shuffled and moved about. Light and darkness played alternately on them. Light dappling the dark skin gave them a half-burnt appearance. They moved about and salaamed the silent dwarf. Listen, Sahib, give me just one taka, that'll be enough. They positioned themselves all round him – Joytoon, Tosiroon, Tepi, Golapi, Pushpa.

Listen Sahib, please have mercy, said Joytoon. I've come all the way from Satkhira. I haven't eaten for three days. I don't want much.

Shut up, you bitch – I asked the Sahib before you. Listen Sahib – . . .

Babu. O Babu, meekly put in Pushpa, won't you have mercy, Babu? . . .

Shadows fell from the trees and field, chased by the white grimace of moonlight. Motor-cars whizzed by in the distance. An icy numbness in the head and the knees, face pale, an arm hanging loose, thick tongue protruding between parted lips, the dwarf stood dumbly.

"Why doesn't the Sahib speak?" asked Golapi.

"Why isn't there a single word on his lips?" asked Tepi. "The Sahib has no mercy," said Joytoon.

Tosiroon said nothing. The girl with the money went to a distance and sat crouched on the ground. Her fist was closed tight on the money. She couldn't open it even if she tried.

Joytoon pleaded again; Sahib, the Police won't come this way. I've lost three kids in a month, now there's only one left.

Pushpa repeated in her meek tone, won't you have mercy, Babu? I have no kids, but my husband is dying. Come with me and if I can't show you I'm a lousy bitch . . .

At this the others broke into giggles. Pushpa repeated without raising her voice. Then I'm a lousy bitch. Golapi stopped her giggles and cooed, "Sahib, I haven't got a husband."

The girls rolled with laughter. "Wait, we'll get you a husband tonight," Tosiroon said. Then addressing the man: "Sahib, she is a very nice girl, no man has yet touched her. I beg of you. please give me a taka, and then marry her." Their laughter made the sand grate under their feet. Their words falling on it became honed. The terrible verbal spears pierced the dwarf right through. You could almost hear a

spinetingling whistle as they went through ribs and lungs. The Sahib has no mercy. Joytoon said.

Finally Tosiroon proposed. Let's teach him a lesson.

She went round and stood facing the dwarf. Sahib, I've been begging for so long, don't you find me to your taste? Then have a good look at my body, here – so saying she flung off her skimpy rags in one swift movement and stood stark naked. She was big, like a pedigree milch cow, with heavy haunches, full breasts, broad shoulders, a powerful neck.

Then look at me too, said Joytoon, and wasting no time she was beside Tosiroon, naked.

She looked desiccated. The stomach had sunk towards the back. Look, she said, I've had four kids, so it's not my fault. Take a good look, Sahib, I was nice in my time. Now my youngest kid is dying.

Let me keep my kid, I'll also show him, said Tepi, who all this while had a baby cradled in her arms. She hurried to the pavement and deposited it. The baby set up a wail like the buzz of crickets, in which, if one paid attention, the syllable Ma might be detected. By now everyone had stripped and stood round the dwarf, a carefree, indifferent gang of naked women. The girl with the money got up slowly and joined the ring. She had no need of cover any more.

Why have you come, you wicked witch?

The girl's eyes flamed up. The Sahib gave me money, she said.

O Sahib, we are all before you – take whoever you wish. Choose!

The dwarf was silent; an unceasing wail came from the pavement. The women gazed at him steadily. The city seemed like a huge weight hanging by a thin thread.

Still quiet? Tell us who you want!

Some among the women yawned, some dusted their hair, some stood still with hands on the hip and a foot tentatively put forward.

The tension snapped at last. Pushpa took hold of one of his hands and yanked hard. Why is the Babu quiet? Has he lost his tongue? The dwarf stumbled forward and fell on Pushpa. "For God's sake let me go!" he begged.

What are you saying, Sahib? Joytoon sniggered. We don't want your kindness, we're not beggars. Take what you want and pay the price.

For God's sake, let me go, the dwarf repeated. That won't do, Tosiroon replied. You'll have to choose one of us. Why not choose me? She suggested and tugged on his arm.

No, no, take me, said Joytoon and took the other arm. And then it began. There was the harmony among the women, a wonderful sense of balance and rhythm. Some grabbed the dwarfs arms, some his legs, some his hair and yet others his waist. The man wanted to get to his discarded kurta and trousers. He wasn't thinking of the money in the kurta pocket. He wanted cover. Tosiroon leapt like a tigress and in a moment ripped the kurta into ribbons. She gathered the banknotes that scattered from the pocket and holding them before the dwarf said; Look! See what happens to your money! Suppressed anger that had long been refused an outlet now distorted her features. Her eyes shot fire, she tore the notes into bits and threw them to the winds. Then she jumped on the man again. You'll have to choose one of us, she declared.

The girl with the banknotes still clutched in her hand moved off a little and cried noiselessly – like a lost orphan child on a barren field. What did she see? An early moon rapidly gliding to the middle of the sky. Kanchenjunga rising. A flame in a corner of the eastern horizon, and the white smoke from it filling the entire field. She saw all this and quietly wept. Behind her Joytoon, Tepi. Tosiroom. Golapi and their partners played with the dwarf. Pushpa dug her nails into his neck. Why isn't there a word in your mouth, are you deaf Babu? She gave a violent push, flinging the dwarf to the ground. Almost instantaneously,

Tosiroom caught him by the neck. She had no time to waste.

She straddled his back and pounded away with both fists. Finally Joytoon pulled her off, screaming. Move off, the bugger hasn't chosen you alone. Everyone together helped turn him over on his back. The dwarf gave up resisting. He lay spread-eagled, and a circle of light falling on his face revealed terrible agony behind the whites of the eyes. A dot of red blood – sign of love or hate? – was there in the corner of one eye. Joytoon bent over the face, exulting in feeling its slow breath, and lashed at him with doubled fists. The others couldn't budge her. They attacked wherever they could, kicking, digging nails into flesh – but no one spoke.

The man's breathing went on at the same slow pace. When it finally became impossible to tell if any feeling lurked behind the eyes Tosiroom shoved everyone aside and stood up with both feet on his face. She began to beat her own chest and turning her face towards the city burst into loud metallic laughter.

Translated by Kaiser Haq and Kashinath Roy

Fugitive Colours

Selina Hossain

Shudip's head began to spin like a top. He could not walk. He had to stop in his tracks. Again that familiar face in all its vibrant beauty floated before his eyes, bringing with it heartbreaking pain, heartrending memories. His heart began to beat fast. The face followed him relentlessly, haunted him by night and by day, never left him in peace. It was stubborn. that face. He began to roll the scorched piece of rubber in his hands, the piece discarded by the rubber collectors. He had picked it up because it reminded him of his own scorched heart! At times he would throw it in the air and catch it again, a kind of self-inflicting pain. He had decided to place it on his study table; it would serve as a constant reminder. But nothing he did seemed to help. The more he tried to push that face away, the more it continued to haunt him.

Away, far away from the ruthless cruelty of civilisation, the jungle seemed like a warm blanket, ready to enfold him in her embrace. Nature, in all her glory, was spread out before him. An occasional glimpse of wild elephants grazing in peace, the cry of an unseen *uluk*, echoing over the hills and dales-it was a veritable paradise. He would find comfort here.

Exerting the utmost effort he managed to bring his emotions under control.

Slowly he resumed his trek uphill. It was not tiring, it was exhilarating. Somewhere along the way, unknown to

him, the precious piece of rubber, the symbol of his pain, fell away from his pocket and rolled downhill. Where did it stop? At Aparajeo Bangia. near the university?

Shubhopriyo had invited him to stay with his family in his ancestral home, in the hills. Shubhopriyo had been more than a friend, much, much more. His family had welcomed him as their own. Theirs was a large family: there were two married elder sisters, who stayed in another village. Kajolika, the third sister, was visiting for the holidays. She studied in college, and lived in a hostel in the city. Of the two brothers, the youngest, just ten, had attached himself to Shudip almost permanently. He had not only become a close friend, but also a valuable guide! He revealed all the wondrous marvels and secrets of the forest known only to him, even his own secret hideout hidden deep in the jungles. The forest was his own territory; he knew every nook and corner of the place. He could point out the haunt of the forest elephants, the watering hole where wild deer quenched their thirst, the hidden branches where the rarest of birds, in exotic colours and with magnificent tails, perched. Shudip was overwhelmed with emotion at so much splendour.

Shudip had once asked, "Who gave you this beautiful name? Purnachandra-full moon?"

The sudden change in Purnachandra's face, the raw rage in the boy's eyes, had alarmed him. "Thakurda," Purnachandra had replied. "They killed him. I will kill them too, one day."

How could he have forgotten? Shubhopriyo had narrated the whole incident to him. How the hundred or so rifle-bearing soldiers had raided their village on the pretext of protecting them. It was just a year ago. The family had fled to the jungles for shelter, save for the old man, too weak to run.

They had witnessed the gruesome killing of the old man from their hiding place. Purnachandra had never been the same again. He would wander deep in the jungles all day and avoid returning home as much as he could. Shudip could understand the deep grief of the child.

A great struggle was taking place here, a struggle which destroyed the balance and harmony of their lives. This battle of the hill people versus the Bengali settlers who were forcibly grabbing their land, inch by inch. The battle was gathering momentum and fanning hatred. Alas, how puny was his own suffering, Shudip sighed, compared to this bloody struggle for survival of an entire people. His own suffering paled in comparison. Oh, to be a part of this cause, to fight this far nobler battle, to fight for freedom, for emancipation. In the depth of his scorched heart, Shudip could feel the stirrings of fresh new tendrils, trying to push forth, watered by the mountain springs. He could feel the germination of another emotion, ennobling the soul. And, what of that other pain? Was it then beginning to fade?

Shubhopriyo was not only his roommate, his classmate, but also his best friend. Seeing Shudip on the verge of a breakdown, he decided to invite him to his home in the hills. Some time there with his family would help divert his mind.

"Once there," he had assured Shudip, "you will get over it, mark my words."

"Is it possible to get over it?"

"Try!" Shubhopriyo had insisted firmly. "Didn't you see how Bidhita could wipe you off from her mind-and with such ease?"

"With such ease," repeated Shudip with a heavy sigh, "with such ease."

She had spoken with such finality. Her words still rang in his ears. "You and I could never make it. I have to go. I want to live my life as I have always longed to. This is my only chance." She had been utterly honest, brutally frank. No, Bidhita had not deceived him. Seeing the devastating effect on him, she had tried to comfort him. "If you can't forget me, remember me as a torch which once fleetingly touched your heart."

Was it that easy? His heart still continued to bum, to break out into flames. It was a stubborn fire. It was not that easy, not as she had predicted. It left deep scars, it left scorch marks.

Shubhopriyo had explained, "We are in the midst of a battle. A very bloody battle. War rages by night and day. We do not trust the Bengalis. We set fire to their settlements. We too burn. We burn when we see the hateful rifle-bearing soldiers who come to enforce calm. We burn in hatred and rage when we see jeeps passing through our sacred soil, destroying its sanctity. They have destroyed our way of life, our culture and tradition. Hell has descended upon us, on our doorsteps, on our people. But we live, we are still alive, and we will continue to live."

Shudip looked sorrowfully around him. There was so much beauty in this virgin jungle, so much peace and calm. But underneath it all raged a grim battle. So much bitterness, hatred, bloodshed, destruction. With a deep sigh, Shudip decided to sit for a while and reflect upon the conflicting emotions arising within him. His nerves were taut, his body tired. On the one side was his own tragedy and Bidhita's personal struggle to survive in her own way, on the other, an entire people's struggle for a place under the sun. Two battles for survival, each merciless in its own way. He stretched out under a giant tree and experienced a lulling of the senses.

A squirrel leaped off a branch and began to cautiously creep up to him. For a few seconds the creature stared at this alien in their territory with unblinking eyes-curiosity uncontrolled! Shudip held his breath, hoping desperately that the wild creature would perch on his broken heart and heal it. After examining him for a long while, the squirrel however decided, no, it was not easy to trust the human race. The creature darted back to the wilds, as swiftly as it had come. Shudip laughed. Even the squirrel had rejected him; such was the fate of a jilted lover.

The place was not without its hazards. A stray bullet could pierce him any time. Hill people versus Bengali settlers, turbulence underneath the seeming calm. Another emotion, Bidhita's tender face unsuspectingly swept through his consciousness, leaving him weak and faint. Here a way of life was disappearing, colours on a canvas slowly fading-but why did memories take so long?

It was then that he became uneasily aware of another sound. Something-or someone-was approaching. Sensing impending danger nearby, he peered cautiously around him. It was unnerving. A bird was singing throatfully on a branch above. Soft breezes wafted through the leaves, caressing his body. He left calm again, reassured. All was well. All of a sudden, without any warning, and roaring like a tiger, Purnachandra leaped in front of him from nowhere and stood there, smiling mischievously. Shudip's terrified screams seemed to amuse him.

"Sacred you, didn't I?" He asked shyly.

"You certainly did!" replied Shudip, "You are terrible."

Pumachandra was carrying what looked like a wooden cowbell in his hand. He dangled it in front of Shudip's face. The cowbell was fashioned out of bamboo and wood, and had

a muted, woody, musical sound. It was usually fastened around a cow's neck in case it strayed.

"Shall I hang it around your neck?"

"Why? Am I a cow?"

"You may not be a cow, but you should wear it. You don't know this place well. If you lose your way, this bell will help us find you." Purnachandra looked serious as he explained. But the telltale glint of mischief in his eyes gave him away.

Shudip was thinking of something else. "Puma, tell me, do you trust me?" he asked.

"No, I don't," Purnachandra replied instantly.

"No?" Shudip was surprised. "Why not?"

Why should I trust you? Your people killed my Thakurda."

Purnachandra explained, without a trace of emotion, "Your people are grabbing our lands by force. Dada loves you. He told us that you had a terrible mishap, that you are suffering. That is why Ma and Baba agreed to let you stay here with us. Otherwise, they would not have agreed."

Purnachandra's answer hit Shudip like a slap on his face. However, he absorbed it without protest. So much hatred, so much distrust! It pained him to the core of his heart. He averted his eyes from the boy's direct gaze. Could he blame the child? No, he couldn't. Purnachandra was being honest; he was too innocent for any kind of hypocrisy. An old man, his dearly beloved Thakurda, too weak to escape-the young child had witnessed his killing. He had been a witness to too many gruesome atrocities, and, somewhere, in the process, he had lost his natural innocence. What a terrible pity! Surely

this child would join the Shanti Bahini some day. It was inevitable. What a terrible crime his people had committed, and what a shame for his entire race!

"You cannot stay with us for long, you know," Purnachandra continued, swinging the cowbell as he spoke. "Already people have started to talk. They are very angry; some are planning to push you down the hill."

"But why? What have I done?"

"You are not one of us. You belong to the race of the enemy."

Shudip grasped Purnachandra's hand. "You know, Puma, I am not your enemy. I am nobody's enemy. I just want to lose myself, here in the hills. I don't want to harm anybody."

"I don't know all that. I am just telling you what they are saying. Come, let's walk that way."

What could Shudip say? What was there to say, anyway?

"Where shall we walk, Puma? By the *shailapropath*, the waterfall?"

"It is truly beautiful," Puma chandra nodded eagerly. "I spend hours there, by myself. Dada says you are going through a very bad time. Why are you sad? Can't you tell me?"

"I will, Puma, but another day."

"Has our jungle lessened your sorrow? You should leave, you know. Don't stay too long."

Shudip was struck by the sudden vehemence in Purnachandra's voice. The boy could skip from one subject to another. He was like that. He was also outspoken and frank, in contrast to Shubhopriyo who was diplomatic. Was Puma

just a child then, or far maturer than them all? Shudip studied Purnachandra's face, searching for an answer. What cruel circumstances had robbed the innocence of a boy of ten! Shudip decided to get up from his resting place under the tree. He stretched out his hand. Purnachandra helped him up.

"Baba grumbles all the time," Purnachandra continued in the same tone. "He says if you stay here too long the military will get suspicious, they may even bum up the whole village.

"Another blow! How could he, a sufferer himself, trying to escape from his own hell, inflict hell upon others? It was beyond endurance. Shudip could not bear it any longer. He grabbed the tree trunk and began to knock his head against it, hard, very hard, till his head began to spin." "Ooh Ooh ," he moaned in pain and frustration. Where could he run, where could he go? Bidhita's betrayal on one side, the hill people's sufferings on the other.

The vagaries of Providence robbed a man of his inborn right to peace, to his very existence! There was no solace anywhere! A decision had to be made straightaway. The biggest challenge thrust upon men was the challenge to survive. He had allowed himself to wallow in self-pity. Purnachandra had opened his eyes to a far greater reality.

"Here, hang this around your neck," Purnachandra's matter-of-fact voice broke his reverie, "before someone finds you."

Purnachandra continued to chatter as they walked up the hill. "Why, even Didi, Kajolika, hates you."

"I understood that."

Purnachandra laughed and dangled the cowbell in front of Shudip's nose.

"Really, you understood?" Purnachandra laughed.

"Does your Didi love someone?"

"Yes, she does." Pumachandra sounded mysterious.

"Whom?"

"His name is Reboti. He has joined the Shanti Bahini. We don't know where he is. Didi is always sad. She too has decided to join the war."

"The war?"

"Yes, the war. Don't we have to drive your military out of our lands?"

What could Shudip say? Instead of forgetting his own tragedy, he was faced with another load to carry on his shoulders, a far heavier load! Back in the city, they had only heard vaguely about some kind of unrest raging in the hills. Here he saw it with his naked eyes. It was beyond his capacity, this load. All kinds of emotions began to play havoc in his mind; he began to tremble. His legs gave way, his feet got entangled in the giant roots, and he collapsed on the ground.

From a distance floated the rumble of an approaching jeep, an army jeep. With the speed of lightning, Purnachandra fell to the ground beside Shudip.

"Good you fell," he whispered. "That is a military jeep."

Each minute seemed like eternity as they lay inert on the ground. The giant tree had camouflaged them in its fold. The jeep came quite near and then sped away.

After lying still for a long time, Shudip stirred. He had hurt a knee; it was throbbing with pain now. He looked at Purnachandra to say something, but stopped short at the raw hatred in the child's face.

Purnachandra grasped a fistful of grass. "I swear by the sacred blade of grass of my forest, I will kill them one day! I hate them. They drive me crazy. I will take revenge one day, mark my words."

"I will leave, Puma, I give you my word. As soon as your Dada returns."

"Dada will not study any more. He too has taken the decision."

"What decision? To join the Shanti Bahini?"

"Yes. Come, let us go. Didi is waiting by the bamboo grove. We will return home together."

"The bamboo grove? Why there?"

They continued to chat, quite amiably, as they walked side by side.

"She meets Reboti there. When he comes."

"Why? Doesn't your Didi know if he will come or not?"

"No. That is why she has to wait." Purnachandra smiled and added, "She too wears a cow bell. So that we can find her. That is our secret. I love my Didi. She is so nice."

Shudip's mind began to wander. He forgot the pain in his feet. The pain in his heart receded to the background.

They entered the deep forest. The canopy of trees blocked out all daylight. These were ancient trees, standing there for centuries, long before they themselves had come to this earth. These trees had witnessed history. The darkness veiled reality, creating a surreal atmosphere. All traces of the mundane, everyday world vanished. The atmosphere was almost magical, like a night when a Reboti and a Kajolika could meet in secret, like a night when a Kajolika could wait

for her Reboti by the mango grove. On such a night his own Bidhita should have come to him. Silently, Shudip thanked Shubhopriyo for giving him this night. The muffled music of the cowbell in Purnachandra's hands cast a spell on his senses. It was mesmerising.

"I hope Kajolika will meet her Reboti. Perhaps there is an operation on somewhere-otherwise why should a military jeep move around the area?" Shudip placed his hands gently on Purnachandra's shoulders.

"Maybe What if they find Didi?" Purnachandra's voice became hoarse with fear. His tender, ten-year-old heart began to flutter in apprehension. The cow bell stopped ringing as his hands froze. He turned a pale, blood-drained face towards Shudip. "I warned Didi, so many many times Not to move around alone, like this."

Shudip pulled Purnachandra close to him to allay the child's terror. "Don't worry. I am here with you. Nothing will happen to your Didi. On a night like this, one can see the moon shining above the trees. Even the animals are sleeping peacefully. In this silence we can hear Kajolika's bell."

"Dhyat! What are you saying? It is not night. It is daytime! It is the trees. They make everything dark! I know this place very well. You are new, that is why it looks like night to you!" In a sudden mood swing, Purnachandra started to laugh.

Flabbergasted and somewhat bewildered, Shudip kept silent. On a night like this his Bidhita would never have left him, she too would have waited.

"You are mad." Purnachandra could not stop laughing. "I can't understand how Dada could be a friend of such a crazy man!" Then suddenly Purnachandra stopped laughing

and began to scream. He pushed Shudip away and started to run wildly. "Didi ... Didi " His screams echoed through the forest.

Shudip was bewildered. He started to run behind Purnachandra, who now had started to cry loudly.

They found Kajolika. Her clothes were strewn all around, her body was motionless. There was blood flowing between her legs.

Purnachandra threw himself beside her, wringing his hands helplessly.

"Is Didi dead? She doesn't talk! Why is she not moving? Is she dead? Didi! Oh my Didi!"

The tire marks embedded on the soft earth told the harsh story. What could he tell this child? This child who had already seen so much? And now he too had become an unwilling witness to a gruesome tragedy. It would haunt his memory as long as he lived.

"What has happened to Didi? Why don't you say anything? Is my Didi dead?" Purnachandra's distorted face begged for some reassurance.

Kajolika lay motionless, face down. What were they to do? Shudip knelt beside Kajolika's body and pressed his palm on her back. Some relief! She was breathing. No, she was not dead, but injured grievously. The wound was both physical and psychological. Providence had destined that he would handle the situation, take charge. "Puma, your Didi needs medical care. She is alive. We have to save her."

Hastily Purnachandra gathered Kajolika's scattered clothes and handed them to Shudip. "Dress her. Call me when you have finished."

"What will you do?"

"I will devise some way to kill those beasts."

"Oh Puma May God help you!"

Shudip's fingers trembled as he covered Kajolika's body. She was in a stupor. There were marks of violence all over her body. Tufts of grass and mud stuck to the raw wounds, like hills into which path had been hewn. Nature violated. He lifted Kajolika on his shoulders, called Pumachandra, and together they made their painful journey back. He had to deliver her to her people. It was his burden. The wages of the sins of his people had to be paid.

Suddenly, Reboti, with his rifle-bearing comrades appeared before them, blocking their way.

"Rebotida!" sobbed Pumachandra. "You are too late. They have killed Didi."

"Who ... ? Who did this? Who were they?"

"Those men, in the jeep,"

"Oh, I now understand." Reboti pointed his rifle at Shudip's chest.

"No, no. Don't kill him." Pumachandra shouted. "He didn't do it. He is Dada's friend!"

Shudip was calm and prepared. "I will answer all your questions," he said in a resigned voice, "but first we have to take care of Kajolika."

Reboti broke down and started to weep helplessly. His comrades lowered their guns and wept with him. Together, they lifted their guns, fired into the air, then, solemnly, took an oath of vengeance.

Shudip carried Kajolika up the hill, towards her home. Pumachandra followed sorrowfully behind.

An outpouring of shock and rage mingled with horror greeted them when they arrived. Shubhopriyo had returned. His eyes were fiery embers. He turned on Shudip, venom spewing out of him.

"You ... you!" he exploded "You, Shudip! Yes ... you will have to pay for the wrongs committed by your people!"

Shudip accepted it all in complete silence. He lowered his eyes in shame, a deep shame for his entire race. Shubhopriyo's father brought the rope. Shudip did not protest. He continued to remain silent as they bound him to the tree. He understood their anger. They were doing what they had to do.

Shubhopriyo was merciless. "It is not enough to forget your own pain. Know and experience real pain. Learn from us!"

Shudip remained silent. He accepted and understood.

Slowly the white night gave way to a grimmer darkness.

Translated by Shuhruk Rahman

A Little Love

Shaheedul Zahir

The moment Hafizuddi crossed the entrance to the Babupura slum, Maola saw him. "Hey, Hafizuddi. where did you get that from eh ... 't" he shouted.

Maola was Hafizuddi's neighbour. He was a bit skinny and had a rather long face. He would sit under the colossal *debdaru* tree all day long with his betel-leaf and cigarette business. Hafizuddi did not even bother to look at Maola or answer him.

Hafizuddi found Abeda near the common tap. She had just returned from her workplace after her daylong toil as housemaid. Someone else was bending over the tap washing her face. Karam Ali's little daughter was washing something sitting on one side. Abeda sat beside her, rubbing her back. These scenes were all too familiar to Hafizuddi. He remained where he was and called her from some distance, "Abeda, come here."

Hurriedly Abeda looked up and saw Hafizuddi enter the hut. Just a glimpse, but she saw the thing in his hand. She was somewhat surprised. Has he lost his mind, she wondered, otherwise why would he come home with a flower in his hand! And why on earth was he calling her? Was he going to put it in her hair like a film hero? She hastily knotted her wet hair. She felt a little sad thinking about the jutelike dry hair that she had. Would a flower suit such hair?

"Isn't there a bottle in the house?" Hafizuddi asked as soon as Abeda entered the room.

"What for?" Abeda brought out a bottle from a dark corner of the room. She quietly untied her hair.

"I want to keep the flower here. Can you get some water in it?"

Abeda went out and filled the bottle from the tap. Hafizuddi cut the long stem of the flower and then placed it in the bottle. The yellow of the massive dahlia looked slightly dull in the dark room.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Hafizuddi asked in admiration.

Abeda felt the ecstasy of Hafizuddi. "Yes, it is. Where did you get it from?"

"Everybody was collecting flowers in the college ground for Shaheed Dibosh tomorrow. I got one for myself."

"That's nice." The softness in her own voice amazed Abeda. "Are you going out again?" she asked.

"Hmrn ... " Hafizuddi moved towards the bucket near the door.

"At least eat something before you leave," Abeda said.

"Eat what?" Hafizuddi stopped.

"There's some rice."

"Rice? Where did you get it? Have you eaten yourself?"

"I don't have to. I ate at Bibisaheb's place," Abeda lied. It was not the first time that she had lied to her husband.

Hafizuddi sat down to eat. He asked, "I don't see Tahura around. Where's she?"

"Don't know. Maybe she's playing out there somewhere."

"Do keep an eye on her. She might get lost."

"Don't think so," said Abeda. "I'm going out. Please shut the door when you leave."

There was very little rice and Hafizuddi finished it quickly.

Abeda returned with a dented aluminum pot in her hand.

"Couldn't even have a wash. The water's finished!"

Abeda dropped her half-wet sari and put on a dry one. She twisted her wet sari into a rope and thrashed her wet hair to dry it. Droplets of water flew off angering Hafizuddi.

"What are you doing? Slapping my face with your hair?"

Abeda did not answer. She spread her hair over her shoulder. She looked at the flower in a corner of the room and asked, "What are you going to do with that?"

"With what ... ?" Hafizuddi washed his hand, and then wiped his mouth with his wet hand.

"With this ... the flower."

"What should I do with it?"

"That's what I'm asking." Abeda sat near the bottle and gently caressed the soft petals of the flower.

"Nothing. Let it be as it is." Hafizuddi wiped his face with his lungi and got up.

"It will dry up," Abeda said.

Hafizuddi did not reply as he picked up the huge bucket from the door. "Do watch out. Someone might steal it!" he warned before going out.

"Yes. People have other things to do than stealing your flower." Abeda smiled.

Once Hafizuddi left, she picked up the flower from the bottle and caressed it for a long time. She tried to put it in her bun. The heavy flower fell every time she tried. Eventually she held it up alongside her bun and watched herself in the little mirror. Even that did not satisfy her. She felt like going out in the broad daylight. But she could not, she knew, there were too many people outside.

Tahura entered, covered in dust.

"What's that, Ma? Who brought it?"

"Your father. Don't even touch it. He'll kill you!"

By the time Abeda returned home after her afternoon stint at the *sahib's* place, it was late in the evening. While coming back, she saw Hafizuddi chatting with Maola sitting under the *debdaru* tree. Sitting in her father's lap, Tahura was watching the cars. She ran to her mother when she saw her coming back.

Abeda arranged their meal quickly. She was feeling very hungry. The menu for the night was *daal* and *rooti*. Darkness fell as she brought down the *daal* and started making the *rootis*. After she was done, she turned on a *kupi*, a small oil lamp, and sent Tahura to call Hafizuddi. After Hafizuddi came, she served the *daal* in a tin pot. There was a separate pot for Tahura. They started eating, with Abeda tearing the *rooti* and dipping the pieces in the *daal*.

Sitting on a block of wood, Hafizuddi ate silently with his head down. Tahura was spilling a lot of her food. Abeda

scolded her. "Such a big girl, but you haven't yet learned how to eat properly!"

Hafizuddi looked at his daughter. "Why did you touch the flower?"

It took Abeda a little time to realise who he was talking to.

"Who? Me?" she asked.

"Who else? Yes!"

"Why should I touch the flower!" Abeda got a bit upset. "Why is it such a big deal anyway?"

"Don't lie to me. Didn't you put the flower in your hair?"

Now Abeda understood. "Who told you that? Tell me."

"Nobody. I myself found strands of hair in the flower!"

Abeda realised that there was no use pretending any further. But she didn't want to admit it. "Perhaps the hair fell on it when I was drying my hair in the afternoon," she smiled.

Hafizuddi did not see the smile on her face as he shouted, "You old bitch, don't lie to me! You piss me off!"

Abeda controlled her rage somehow. She felt like giving Tahura a good beating. Little bitch! She couldn't even keep one small secret inside!

"I give you the flower. Are you happy now?" Hafizuddi asked.

It was so sudden that Abeda did not even get a chance to be surprised. "What'll I do with the flower?"

"Do whatever you wish."

There was no tenderness in Hafizuddi's voice. Neither did Abeda have time to think about it. Yet some unknown ecstasy stirred deep inside her. It touched her like the soothing drops of rain on dry earth.

After finishing his meal, Hafizuddi went out for a walk. Tahura feared her mother would beat her. She had little idea of the spell her father had cast on her mother before going out.

Abeda tidied up silently. "Do up your bed and go to sleep," she told Tahura. Tahura had not quite learnt yet how to do up her bed properly. So Abeda went to her and helped her get into bed. Tahura pulled the quilt over her throat and pleaded, "Ma, I want the flower."

Abeda busied herself again with her work. She saw Tahura looking at her, the dim light of the *kupi* reflecting in her eyes. Finishing her work, Abeda went to Tahura. She blew out the light. Then she bent and softly kissed Tahura's forehead.

Translated by Mohammad Simon Rahman

Bhutan

The Solace Seeker

Pema Choidar

“Tong...tong....tong!” the gong resounded through Lamai Gonpa Buddhist monastery. Its sonorous tones carried through forests, over valleys, up cliffs, down gorges, blending with the serenity of the place.

The young novice monks, tonsured and maroon-robed rushed towards the entrance from all directions.

An elderly monk, *Gelong* Mindu stood still, with a blank gaze towards the western horizon, drinking in the resonance of the gong until it dwindled and died in the distance. ‘Ah! To retire for repose after a long day’s service in toil,’ he sighed, staring after the golden trail of the setting sun.

Mindu was in wonderland.

Down to earth, back in his office, he sat in an armchair, fixed his eyes on the computer console while his adept fingers typed out the alphabet. He must finish the work, yet his very thought of haste impeded the pace of its execution.

Soon he was to be with Tshoki.

Almost time. Before shutting down, Mindu checked his e-mail. There! Tshoki had given the time and place of their rendezvous. His spine tingled with anticipation. Time up! Shut down. Mindu left.

They drove to Tshoki's place, watched their favourite soap on TV, and made light talk over dinner as usual. Having gone together for the last ten years, they had finally decided to settle down. Their wedding had been fixed to be in a fortnight.

Mindu returned to work the next day in a cheerful frame of mind.

Then the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Is it you Mindu?"

"Yes, something wrong?"

"Um... I'm..." Tshoki's voice sounded strange.

"Is there anything the matter?"

"I'm sorry," she hung up abruptly. He stared at the phone, and then noticed he had e-mail on his computer screen. It was a note from Tshoki which read:

Dear Mindu,

I'm already engaged to somebody and I'll be marrying him soon. I couldn't bear to tell you before but now I must. I know how hard it is for you. It hurts me too. Please forgive me. Goodbye.

Tshoki

The very next day, Mindu tendered his resignation. He was called several times for an explanation. Exactly one week later, his phone rang. It was his boss; his resignation had been accepted.

"Excuse me!" his young friend nudged him.

Mindu stood there dazed for a while.

Pema Choidar

"It's late," said his friend, "you are miles away."

As he approached the hall, he could hear the melodic sound of the prayer in progress. He entered with burgeoning faith and beatific smile. The other monks seeing his asinine smile wondered if Gelong Mindu was going senile.

*Written in Loving memory of my late Grandpa, Meymey
Mindu.*

The Troubled Heart

Pema Choidar

“That will do! Take what you’re given or lose the lot,” **T** commanded the voice from above. Pema Dorji trembled with fear and consented in a faltering voice, *“Thank you.”*

His appeal had been dismissed and the decision made final. *“It is the verdict of this Court that the said wife shall go with her new husband. However, you are entitled to keep the property and the children.”* The Judge made a stiff bow to acknowledge Pema Dorji’s obeisance and bustled out. His marriage was history!

A tiny bar that could barely sustain body and soul was the “property”. Running it single-handedly with children in school was the weight of his responsibility, which progressively grew harder and heavier with time. He desperately yearned for someone to share and ease his lot. It was too much for him to survive this way.

Three years later, for his children’s sake and his own sake- for better or worse! -Pema Dorji opted to take another plunge again.

Lhaden brought in all she could; the love, care and support they’d all been craving for.

Their home returned to its usual unhindered routine: Children to school, Lhaden to the domestic chores and he to his meager business. Home glowed brighter and warmer. Yet, in the minds of his two daughters and a son, they never liked their father's replacement of their mother with a stepmother. For no particular reason but a vague sense of defiance, they felt subtly subjugated. The little brother even gravitated towards crime!

As the children gained their youthful passion and strength, they found Lhaden (stepmom) ruder and surlier. On her part, she couldn't stand their clumsy manners and unruly behaviour. Pema Dorji felt mashed like a potato between two rocks. He was never happy; in fact, nobody was happy.

Pema Dorji admitted his kids to a high school far from home notwithstanding his missing them. It was the only way to keep his home from tearing apart.

A few months later, he lost Lhaden too. She died giving birth to a son. His children didn't attend the cremation. He felt awfully abandoned and left the village with his new born child.

He began a new life scratching the soil for living. He toiled thus till his boy came of age. He felt that his only youngest son understood what was true filial love and devotion.

Pema Dorji lived with unspoken misery and undiluted pain, which he hid in his heart. People found him happy, but in sooth, no one could be sadder than him. He grieved alone and often blamed his stars for the cruel fate he had to endure.

Having had to stagger for ages, father and son had reached another milestone. The son will soon graduate and make his father glad. Pema Dorji also got a message from his

older children that they'd be coming to take him to a newer and better place. This brought him true happiness to his troubled heart. All his sacrifices are finally coming to a close, he thought.

The candle by his bedside is lit. He blows out its flickering flame, gropes in the dark for his bed, and burrows under the blanket. In the still of the night, with a last prayer on his lips and the last hope in his heart, he closes his eyes forever.

*Written in loving memory of my Paternal Grandpa, Meymey
Pema Dorji*

My Surrealistic Dream

Sherab Tenzin

It was chilly winter in Thimphu. The night was damn silent. There was no honk of cars, howling of hounds, chirping of crickets, except throbbing sound of my heart. I felt as if I was among ruins of ancient civilizations. It was almost 12:00p.m. I was on my way to Centenary Park- the only place where I resort to whenever I am emotionally down.

I didn't find sweet rhythm beats in her voice as usual. She talked me in very different tone that night. My heart missed few beats. I couldn't believe initially and took as a whole lot of joke. We've been together for almost four years; it won't be possible. With much stress from her, I felt what she says was what she meant. "You deserve a girl much better than me. I can't be with you. I pray for your success ahead", were all I heard before my sight got blurred with my carbonated tears and cell phone fell off my hand with numbness developed all over.

I couldn't tell how much I love her at that instant. She couldn't convince me with her reasons either. She must have got someone better than me was all I could think. But then she shouldn't have told me that way. I don't deserve to be treated like that. I love her too much. I can't forget everything at once. I also need time. How could I be so unlucky to be left? In every step of my walk, I was remembering how we used to

walk through the same route hand-in-hand sharing our experiences and dreams, her giggling sound and fluttering hair with round face that had never failed to give captivating smiles.

I trod among glasses of my fragmented past and bleak future. All my plans and dreams were brought to an end. The names of our unborn children started fading. I was crying. The park was also not welcoming in absence of her. I sat at a corner gazing into river as if my feelings can be diluted with such long look into the river water. I tried to forget all the moments spent with her. But I was helpless. The more I tried to forget, the more memories to be forgotten popped up. So I landed up forgetting nothing.

The park started becoming dark with the moon getting behind the cloud. I was down tearfully. There was no one. My mobile was the only friend. The more I thought of past, the more I became emotional. My heart started bleeding. At that I overheard a weak sound of whimper nearby. I didn't concern of it first time. I didn't go there in second time hear either. I was thinking that there might not be anyone other than myself in the park at that time of night.

When the sob became more consistent, I stood up and went around just to see a girl few meters away with her head down with golden hair dangling and crying profusely. She was wearing blue skirt and pink bikini coat. I could also see a packet of cigarettes beside her. At first I hesitated to go near her and ask her problems. I was also choking due to my own pain but then since she appeared like a damsel in distress, I flinchingly went to her to ask if I can help her.

I was shocked after listening to her stories and knowing existence of someone in Bhutan who still dare physically abuse and assault one who has been living in his family. Though I had been thinking of my betrayal, her problem was

far beyond to be bore. Her father has left them long before she completed her school. Her mother with no choice then married with another who treats her like a stranger. Her mother can't do anything as the stepfather is the main bread winner of the family. She has reached the park just to escape physical assault from her stepfather and consequent traumas.

It was very painful listening to her stories. I was soaked in her emotions to the extent I forgot my own. She dropped her studies just to give cushion for the family to sponsor schooling of her younger sisters. She has got compassionate strong heart but has fallen prey to rudeness of her stepfather. I was thinking why such beautiful girl with good heart should be treated that way?

Looking in her stories, I consoled her with my trembling hand over her back. I told her how we could be so unlucky sometimes. 'But there will be light at the end of every dark tunnel' I assured her. I even revealed unfortunate phases of my life if that can add at least few specks of aspiration for her crying heart. I told her how I have been with her, how we walked together, how we dated and lastly how she has changed her mind finally.

It was almost dawn by then. I got up, patted her and walked along the lintels of the park when I suddenly thought of asking her name. I walked back towards her when someone shouted, "Sherab, Sherab, wai Sherab" from behind. It was my roommate. I was lying on my bed not in park. "Don't you have class today?" "Of course" I glanced at the watch. It was almost 9:20a.m. I quickly got up, splashed my face, hurriedly wore my *gho* and went to class. On the way I was laughing over this surrealistic dream wondering why such dream come to me and would there be any relation with my life.

An Undying Allegiance

Namgyal Tshering

Tsheten stared at the rickety fan whirling in a dreamy motion that was succumbed by some technically unknown errors. Her attention turned towards *lopen* Treko's *doma* stained lips as he narrated the legend of Drowa Zangmo. She craved for the last bell to strike and then to return to the solace of her cozy bedroom at home. Phuentsholing has never been hotter the other year. Tsheten yearned to go to her old school in Gaselo where the air was cooler even in the midst of the summer months.

Presently, her fingers were busy fiddling the gift box that rested precariously on her lap hidden under the study table. It was given to her by a stranger friend she had met two months ago. The stranger had told her that it was a prize for securing second position in class seven at Gaselo. At that meeting she was too perplexed to enquire either the stranger's identity or how he knew about her class results. An overwhelming shyness numbed her tender lips into a stammer of inaudible gratitude. That had been a second encounter with the stranger in two months and it had been her only mysterious secret.

The first encounter had happened at the supermarket in Jaigoan where the stranger helped bargain for the jersey she was buying on a Sunday afternoon. He had paid for the auto rickshaw on their return to Phuentsholing in spite of her

reluctance. The only person she confided to was her desk mate and best friend Neelam Rai. Tsheten did not tell her mother for fear of being reprimanded for befriending a stranger and receiving a gift. She knew her mother like any parent would not accept such discreet relationship in young girls.

On her way home that afternoon, she opened the box to find two pairs of Milky Bar candies and a pilot pen. She shared the candy with Neelam. She had never received surprise gifts before and so it made her life more fairy tales like with little surprises.

That night, with reluctance and shame glistening in her eyes Tsheten told her mother about the man she encountered at the Supermarket. She knew that hiding the matter and playing cat and mouse could put her into deep trouble. “*Ama*, he gave me this today,” Tsheten confessed brandishing a silver coloured pilot pen in her fingers.

‘Do you know him well?’ Mother questioned, her ageing eyes squinting more in apprehension than in wonder.

‘No, not everything *Ama*, we didn’t talk in detail.’ Tsheten sighed innocently.

‘Has he been seeing you frequently?’ Mother asked, holding Tsheten’s hands to her bosom, as if to coax more truth from her daughter.

Tsheten flicked her eyes in guilt, ‘*Ama*, the first time I met him was in Jaigoan; but it was a casual and coincidental encounter.’

‘What did he ask you? Did he touch you?’ Anxiety beats in her heart. Lemo had always believed that Tsheten was a responsible girl but the hopes began to crumple thereafter.

“He asked about father and mother, and what I was doing.’ Tsheten narrated.

Lemo had read in the recent Bhutan Times paper about the murder of a school girl in Paro by a man who gave her a ride to home. The Kuensel had a story few weeks before about a boy who was kidnapped and sold to a landlord in Sikkim. Gruesome stories flooded her memories. Lemo regretted for having brought her only daughter to Phuentsholing despite knowing the vulnerability of peer influence and its insecurity. Lemo had never felt herself secure since her husband’s transfer from Gaselo to the metropolitan city.

Suspicious to the bone, she asked, ‘Can you describe this man, Tsheten?’

‘He is tall and wears dark spectacles. I saw a bluish birthmark across his left brow,’ Tsheten described with a wave of her hand. Lemo’s heart almost skipped a beat, throttling her in the windpipe. Thoughts went blank and lips turned numb.

‘And there was an inch long scar on his chin.’ Tsheten continued as her mother watched with an owl’s gaze at her. Lemo was exasperated at how unscrupulous observant her daughter was.

‘Do...do...you know his name Tsheten?’ Lemo was almost yelling, ‘and his number.’

‘No, I don’t. But he knows my name. He said he does not carry a phone.’ She replied innocently. She did not even doubt her friends who could have told her name to that man. Lemo held her by her shoulders and pulled Tsheten closer to her as if to comfort her only daughter from the rain of questions she had asked.

‘Tsheten, don’t tell this to father. He will be mad at you for making friends with a stranger.’ Lemo said reassuringly. Tsheten nodded affirmatively. It was the first time Tsheten saw her mother so pale and dumbfounded.

Lemo spoke with a whisper in Tsheten’s ears, ‘see, next time if you meet him invite him for a tea.’ The silence that followed was interrupted by the water that gurgled from the kitchen proclaiming its arrival for the evening. Lemo stood promptly and left to the kitchen. Tsheten was confused. She wondered if her mother was plotting to call police to apprehend the stranger if he came home for a tea.

‘Ama! I thought you were unhappy about this...?’ Tsheten asked. Lemo replied from the kitchen, ‘if he is a good man he will come, otherwise not at all.’

The rain showered as if angry against the night which came stealthily over the bustling town. When Lezang, her husband reached home; Lemo and her daughter were already in deep slumber. The door was not latched but the lights were on. That night Lezang saw the two sleeping together on their master bedroom. He resigned to the altar-room for the night for a change.

On a drizzling Saturday afternoon in October, few months later, when Tsheten and Neelam were returning home after school, a taxi halted with a screech near them. They jolted upon their feet like two kittens frightened by the bark of a dog.

‘Oye! Tsheten! Going home?’ Behind the wheel was a stranger, the man with the birthmark on the brow. Tsheten smiled timidly from under the rim of her pink umbrella.

‘Come on, I will give you two a ride, get in. I am going that way too.’ He insisted with a provocative gaze. A Land

cruiser from behind honked for a pass. Without a second thought they jumped to the rear seat of the car. It was better than walking in the splashing puddles.

‘Is your father home?’ He inquired curiously.

‘No. He went to Bangkok for two weeks now. Mom says he may return anytime this week.’ She replied casually.

‘Tsheten, It is your birthday today, isn’t so? The 15th year!’ It was a surprise for Tsheten.

‘How did you know that?’ She asked, feeling nostalgic about her toddler days.

‘Your friend at Gaselo told me, a daughter of my business partner.’ It was unbelievable that the man she assumed to be a stranger was becoming stranger every time they met. Even as she was brooding on her last birthday celebration at Gaselo the stranger proffered her a glistening red package adorned with a yellow sparkling ribbon. ‘Here, this is for you, a gift from a friend.’

Like a three year old girl receiving a Barbie doll, Tsheten took the captivating gift without a word of gratitude. She was flabbergasted to thank him. Neelam blinked at them, bewildered at what was happening before her.

‘Auo....if you don’t mind, my mother told me to invite you for a tea this time. She will be pleased if you come home for a while.’ Tsheten invited as they reached near the colony gate.

‘Not today, Tsheten,’ he replied with almost a stutter in his voice, ‘I have some important family business at the Zangdopelri this evening.’ He handed her a brown envelope to be given to her mother as a token of gratitude for befriending her daughter.

‘See you next time. Study well and be good to your parents all the time.’ He said as he slowed the car to a halt by the NPPF colony gate. The girls alighted and watched him drive away leaving plumes of exhaust fumes behind over the road.

‘You know what? You resemble him, especially when you smile.’ Neelam suggested with a note of humour in her tone.

‘Do I?’ Tsheten laughed, ‘maybe that is why he is after me. May be he lost a daughter who looks like me.’ She said more to herself than to Neelam who was already walking away towards her residence. Tsheten waved goodbye and ran home in the showering rain with the yellow ribbon flailing under her armpit. She had a story to tell her mother again.

Tsheten sat on the sofa and called her mother. She told mother about the birthday gift and gave the letter. ‘He said he was busy, mom. He will come next time.’

Lemo tore the letter open with shuddering fingers as if anticipating a sinister message. Inside there was a photograph of a monk, the man with the birthmark and a scar.

‘That is the man who gave me this today – the stranger.’ Tsheten yelled from behind, dangling a golden timepiece from her forefinger. It was her birthday gift. ‘But he was in orange sport tracksuit when we met.’ She blurted in confusion.

Lemo felt her heart race faster. Her face was effusing with warm blood. She knew her past could haunt her forever if she did not tell her daughter everything. As she read the letter the hidden past streaked through her hazy memories and tears welled up in her eyes. It read: ‘*Dear Lhamo, my only Lemo! A decade had passed without a word. Since the time you left*

me I was unable to live successfully, gnawing on the painful separation from the one I loved first and the most.' The words echoed from the past in waves of emotions. Lemo tried to hide her tears from Tsheten who sat innocently watching her mother become stiff and pale. *"Am a monk at Namdroling Nyingma Institute in the remote part of France. I may not be able to see you two anytime soon. I shall be grateful to you for my daughter.'* She bit her lips and sighed trying to effuse a smile when she looked at her daughter. It was a smile of madness longing for redeeming whatever past fledged through her mind. *'You know Tsheten is just like you, pretty and demure. You are a great mother!'* Signature had changed but the handwriting still seared her heart like a denial letter from a lover.

Lemo fell to her knees and embraced Tsheten with an unforgiving strength from the past. They cried, mother and daughter, to the last of their feminine tears.

'I have a story to tell.....' Lemo stood up and looked out of the window. The rain had ceased to a silent melody of the night. The breeze fluttered through the banana leaves rustling her to the present. She gazed into the starless sky and smiled mournfully for the second time in a decade.

The Deer's Tale

Namgyal Tshering

It was June. The shadow of the giant fluffy cloud traversed over the hills darkening the valleys and gorges below. Presently the sun appeared lazily from behind the tree tops as I climbed on the spur, my favorite place to bask the late morning sun. The panoramic expanse of the valley opened before me. The trees were green and dotted with medley of lucid flowers. The spur itself was alive with the buzzing bees that flew from one tiny flower to the next. At the foot of the hill, some distance down, I could see the winding course of the sparkling stream flowing as if in meditation, without the usual chatter and rumble. I knew it was too far for its chatter to reach my young ears. Beyond the river was a cluster of human habitation shrouded under the trails of bluish smokes.

Father buck had told me of the rich fields of potatoes and maize which was fenced by strings of spiked barbed wires all around the field. He warned me of the furious and snarling grey hounds farmers kept and about the hunters who laid traps in the forest to catch us for their evening meals. Father told me how his father got trapped in the loop one night while sneaking through the fence and was torn to death by the grey hounds under the moonlight in front of his eyes.

I had never been to the valley in the three years of my life. The knowledge of the rich things to eat in the valley fields

increased my juvenile temptation. On one occasion I asked father if I could go down to see the crop fields. He rubbed his warm muzzle on my face and told me how he and others forayed into the valley, drank cool water of the stream, visited the fields by darkness and retired before dawn. He was reluctant to send me fearing the same fate of some of his friends who either got shot by arrows, trapped in the noose or killed. He sighed in nostalgic reconciliation and said how men had cut down much of the trees on the hillside to till the grasslands into dusty fields to plant crops and the helpless family had to migrate higher and deeper into the mountains away from the hunters who loitered the thinning forest throughout the four seasons. 'We lived by the stream when I was younger than you. It was warmer there.' Father buck whispered despondently. At their new home up in the mountains it was cold in winter and snowed seasonally. Many young animals died from the long cold winter. Father buck had seen two tiger cubs dead in its lair the last winter after the tigress was killed by hunter's venomous arrow.

Dark clouds once again shrouded the forenoon sun. We, father and I returned to our lair beyond the ridge some miles away. Mother doe was sleeping peacefully after she had a heavy meal that morning from below the ridge where much of the succulent leaves flourished in the marshy shade. I barked at her with my sharp voice to wake her and told her how beautiful the valley looked this time. I wanted her to take me to the valley that night for my first visitation.

That evening just before the crimson skyline on the valley darkened, three of us, my brave father, mother and me, the amateur with the heart of an angry tiger sauntered downhill. We kept our eyes wide and open peeking into the darkening night and the ears upright to catch any animus rustle from the woods. Father led the way through the thick

bushes and narrow gorges keeping away from the human trail all the while. We reached the valley safely. I had my first full body dip in the water of the river as we wallowed in silence. It was almost midnight as we walked towards the field. The starry sky dotted the sky grandiosely. There was no better way to celebrate the first night than that curious night.

When we reached the fence father broke the bamboo fence from one corner of the field with his strong antlers. We entered discreetly into the potato field. The smell of the potato leaves watered my mouth. I followed father to dig up potatoes using my sharp hooves. I munched on the potatoes relishing every crunch I heard as my teeth drove through the fat potatoes. I ate a lot and by dawn I could barely breathe as we clambered uphill briskly. It was a successful expedition. Thereafter we made quite a lot of nightly visits. Some nights I went alone much to the annoyance and fear of my parents. They were however happy that I had learnt to feed myself safely.

In the evenings, just as the crescent moon began to rise from behind the rocky cliff, I would climb upon the spur and gaze at the starry sky until my neck became stiff and painful. Father told me those are the souls of our good ancestors striding upon a silver throne among the celestial beings. The owls and bats flew in circles above the trees hooting and shrieking incessantly as if jealous of my 'striding ancestors.' The colourful beams of lights from the human lair looked like stars upon the valley. I would bark sonorously into the moonlight sky straining my neck as high as it could stretch and listen to the sweet echo reverberating from the hills around me followed by the annoying bark of the hounds from the valley below. I would walk back to the lair and lay down to sleep under the dried leaves and twigs I had gathered for my bed and blankets.

Months wore on gradually, yet peacefully with the season changing from green to yellow. Trees began to become skeletal scarecrows and the rill below the ridge began to parch. In the mornings, cold breeze blew into our lair whistling through the leafless shrubs. It was almost a fortnight since I last had whatever remained in the field after the village farmers had harvested their crop. I longed to visit the valley again which I knew was warmer. Father cautioned me of the hunters and their ferocious hounds who lurked in the woods more frequently in winters and of the woodcutter who laid traps to catch partridges, rabbits, fowls and even deer for winter foods.

In January, one winter, it snowed for four days and nights. It was the second time I saw a snowfall in the six years of my life. I was overjoyed to see my glossy coat covered with snowflakes unlike the summer rain that drenched me and made me sneeze through the night. Mother doe and I ran to the spur and watched the mountains and valleys blanketed with snow. We laughed when we turned back to see our hoof-prints in the snow. We knew that neither the hunters nor the hounds would be able to climb up the hill through the thick layer of snow. The snow would hide our scent as the top layer melted in the first rays of the sun. Mother told her story upon the spur. She said how the hills were changing and becoming barren every year. She told me of a certain flower that she loved to see during the winter after the snows melted. When mother was young she had played in the snow, hopping and galloping all over a certain knoll in the snow every winter. She told me that it did not snow every winter anymore. In the last six years it snowed twice. The winter was bitterly cold in the past and in the few years' time winter had become shorter and warmer. Even as she narrated her little tale I could see lonesome tears in her eyes of some hidden sorrows.

In the midst of February, mother gave birth to my sister, a fawn. She had lucid eyes, puckered brow and soft furry body. I licked her muzzle to welcome into our race and the forest world. The tip of her ears bore a clump of white fur that made her more charming to look at. I stayed at the lair when father buck went in search of food. Frequently he returned with some frozen wild fruits in his jaws. I spent my days teasing my sister fawn, pulled at her hind legs as she fed herself from mother's breast until she got irritated and chased me into the woods. Sometimes I bit her ears without hurting her. She stared at me imploringly and makes a gurgling bark of annoyance. When she was healthy enough, about a month old, we went to the spur where I showed the valley and the stream. I showed her the crows' nest on an oak tree and a squirrels' hole on the trunk of the same tree. She was callow and cute. Those were the happiest days of my life.

One afternoon we were chasing a young grass snake down the hillside when we heard the ferocious bark of the hunter's hounds from other side of the stream that ran down in the valley. We sprinted uphill as fast as our legs could carry for couples of minutes by our calculation of time until we reached at the foot of a huge bluff. Sister fawn was panting and wet with perspiration. There was fear in the limpid eyes, fear of getting killed. I brushed her face with my short antlers to comfort her. The waterfall dropped some hundred metres into the chasm where sunrays could barely touch. There were ice spikes hanging like menacing weapons, sharper than my antler, glinting in the crimson shadow of the evening. The place was a great discovery for us. It became our favorite hiding place and we went every winter to watch the ice spikes melting at noon. We played hide and seek around the waterfall.

Soon spring came. The forest and the hills became a beautiful home. It was warmer. The sweet fragrance filled the lair every morning with the flowers blooming in twos and threes on the trees. The forest came alive with twittering and singing birds. The cuckoo particularly cooed us awake in the morning. The restless squirrels began to take their place upon the branches of the trees. One day a troop of monkeys came chattering noisily from the west and settled themselves on the giant oak tree. On the spur we saw countless anthills sprouting out of the ground. The ants seem to live harmoniously, working tirelessly throughout the day in and out of the anthill.

A few days later sister fawn and I were playing outside the lair when we saw a sounder of boars migrating down from the mountains nearby. Even the snakes came out of their dark holes to bask in the warm summer sun. A small herd of deer came into our territory and I was happy to see them. Sister and I ran after them for a mile or two enjoying the mass ride.

In August I took my sister to the valley and into the potato field. She returned home happy and satisfied with the first night's foray. From then on, we forayed into the valley whenever we yearned for something new to eat. Our parents were happy that we had learnt well the tricks of the trade. On one unfortunate night we went to the valley with mother doe and entered the paddy field. We spread around to prevent being noticed. Just before dawn we heard a 'BANG' of the so called gun. The hounds barked wildly. As I jumped the fence I saw sister fawn creeping underneath the fence. We ran at a lightning speed into the hills without waiting for mother. That night we waited impatiently for mother's return from the valley. Father feared that she must have been killed by the

'Bang'. He told us that it never missed its target. The gun had been the most fearsome weapon for us.

At daybreak mother came, much to our relief, limping and groaning with pain. There was a deep wound on her left leg where the bullet had grazed through the skin. I could smell the strange stench of gun powder which was nauseating and dull. Father licked the wound tenderly removing any trace of poison. For the next two weeks mother did not walk further from the lair. In a few days' time the wound healed, sooner than I presumed. Two months passed before we could regain from the fear of the gun to go even to the spur.

Mother was still in bed fast asleep when I awoke. I stretched my limbs and inhaled a pallid whiff of air which smelled of smoke. I looked at the father's bed which was empty. He had left for the jungle before dawn. I woke sister up from her slumber without waking mother. We went to the spur and from there towards the valley following an old trail. The sun was half way up the horizon and it was becoming warmer and warmer. As we walked down, the sky became hazy with smoke and the smell of burning foliage and grass filled the air making it difficult for us to breathe. A giant plume of smoke rose from the foot of the hill. Father once told me farmers in the valleys cut down trees for cultivating crops and burns them in early summer to make the field fertile, or for making houses and roads. I told sister that there was nothing to worry. It just indicated that farmers were busy at work. We saw the smoke become darker and thicker as we reached the end of the tree line. Suddenly we heard the crackling sound of the blazing grasses and twigs. Air became hotter and hotter. We stopped and listened somewhat panicked. The next minute tongues of flames rose up into the sky from below the tree-line. There was commotion all around us. The fire rampaged our beautiful home. The birds

fluttered away into the mountains and monkeys leaped from tree to tree shirking cacophonously. Out of the thicket father materialized and we followed him sprinting towards our lair. The flame was just some hundred metres away behind us. From a nearby thicket dozen of fowls came sprawling before us. I leaped over them just as father and sister did. At one moment sounder of boars and leash of foxes darted into the hills alongside us unconcerned of who was following whom. Everybody had their tails flailing like a victory banner as they ran for their dear life. Amidst the chaos I did not realize that I had reached our lair until I bumped heavily against father who waited wide-eyed at the door of our home. We waited for sister in vain. I thought that she must have been either trampled by others on the run or burnt to death by the ravaging fire. I consoled myself that she must have ran aimlessly into another direction or fallen into some crevice and is alive waiting to return home. Once again that night we waited for her anticipating seeing her limp out of the bushes. It was the longest night I ever spent in the lair awake. When I looked at mother I saw bold tears in her hopeful eyes. She was agape and speechless.

A week after the fire catastrophe when the last curls of the smoke had ceased, father and I went in search of sister fawn. The hot cinders still burnt at some places. The whole face of the hill had become black and covered with ash. There was not a plant standing with leaves and the trees stood like pylons and scaffolding in the valley below. I could sense faint smell of roasted flesh and burnt fur. At the foot of the oak tree stump, near the spur, we saw a mother monkey and her baby burnt to death. A squirrel had his fur singed but alive. We were not astonished to see dozen fowls lying in the ashes, featherless and cold. At the place where foxes and boars had come running on that fateful day we found my sister fawn lying in the ashes. I was happy to see her but she was burnt

and dead. I cried as did father. My tears fell on her charred corpse and I prayed that she regain her life. We could do nothing. I regretted for taking her that morning down the hill. We lingered there in lamentation expecting any signs of life in her body but it was a hopeless wait. Father dug up a shallow pit near a rock and we buried her to prevent the farmers from feeding on my sister's flesh and bones.

It was noon. We were hungry and thirsty. We were covered with ashes all over. We went to the stream to quench our thirst. We were peacefully lapping in the stream when I heard a swishing sound. The next instant I felt an excruciating pain on my left croup. I recoiled and ran. The hunter's dogs appeared from the other side of the stream barking menacingly. I saw father fleeing ahead of me towards the hill. I clambered up the rugged side of the cliff face for couple of minutes before I crumbled down behind a boulder. I could not move my left limb. It was senseless and heavy. The arrow had broken off somewhere on the way but the barb of the poisoned arrow remained lodged in my croup's muscle. The numb pain seared across my heart. I licked the blood from around the jagged remains of the arrow. I began to feel drowsy and utterly debilitated. My breathing was laboured and rapid. Tears blurred my vision. It was tears of distress and fear of dying. I knew I was going to die. The poison would soon reach my heart and cease my breath.

I could hear the barking hounds. Instinctively I raised my head to see the hunter coming towards me with a dagger held firmly in his dark big hand. I began to tremble. His intemperate smile as he squatted beside me sent cold shiver through my nerves. I knew he could stab me with that sharp glinting metal through the heart and cut me into pieces. I hated him. I condemned him for being ruthless and uncompassionate. He had destroyed my home and now he

was going to kill me for no wicked act of mine. I tried to tell him that I had eaten his potatoes for no selfish obsession but my throat was parched and could hardly groan. I stared despondently in his dark eyes; somehow I was earnestly begging him to forgive me to save from dying. I knew my hiss and gurgle meant nothing to him. As I grovelled down on the gravel trying to make the final attempt to flee I saw the hunter's face fade like a morning star. A shroud of death fell over me thereafter.

When I opened my eyes after what seemed like an eternity I saw the hunter putting his dagger on the ground. I thought he would strangle me with his bare hands but instead he wound one hand around my neck and with the other mopped my wet eyes off its tears of fear. I could barely think of anything thereafter. Mumbling some incomprehensible words he caressed my wound gently and with a sudden jerk pulled out the barb from my croup. I released a shrill cry of agony kicking out my limbs to take in the pain. I lost consciousness again.

In the morning, I was bewildered to find myself crouched in the corner of a roofed hut which was the hunter's house. I longed to see my parents by my side. An iron chain was fastened around my neck and the other end hooked from the ceiling beam. My arch enemy, the hunter was at the other end heating something over a woodless oven. The fire was strangely bluish-yellow. I was surprised he had not killed me. Instead he had cleaned my wound and some sort of oil was applied over it. There was some fresh lettuce leaves on the floor in front of me. I nibbled some hungrily even as the hunter gazed at me with his greedy heartless grin. When the sun shone through the door he tied me to a peg outside the hut for the day. His hungry hounds snarled at me from a distance.

For countless number of days I was his prisoner. He brought all sorts of delicious vegetables every day. I knew he would slaughter me when I was healthy and fat. Men, women and children came to watch me eat and play. Although my left limb was infirm the wound was healing well. In the next two months I was able to walk and run in circles around the peg. I tried several times to push and pull the peg out but to no avail. The rope was woven from bamboo fibers and it was too strong for my teeth to cut through or break with my juvenile strength.

The grasses began to grow; trees bore its leaves and the buds started to sprout into flowers with the changing seasons. I wondered if my parents worried for me after all these days. I wistfully waited for my release. On several occasions I attempted few times to escape without success. Whenever I heard a deer bark from the forest I barked back as loudly as possible calling for help which never came.

One full moon morning just before dawn I lay down to sleep under the shed built for me with some old sacks and tin. I had almost dozed off when the silhouette figure of my guardian coming towards me brought to my senses. It was a very odd time for him to visit me. He was carrying a double barrel gun, slinging from a leather strap. I remembered the hateful sound it made and the nauseating odour it gave on my mother's leg. The sight of it made me send shiver down my spine. 'This is my last night' I said to myself, not knowing what to do. He had nursed and fed me enough for months. I waited helplessly for him to shoot me with a resounding 'Bang', but he did not. Instead he dragged me to the forest and I followed him helplessly like his humble hound through the potatoes field. I hated potatoes at that moment.

When we reached near the stream, which I crossed several nights with my parents and sister, he sat down to rest.

He was breathing heavily as if unable to decide how I should be killed. He yanked me close to him and rubbed my back tenderly with his hands. I trembled. He held my muzzle in his hands and kissed me for a long time. 'Is he trying to smother me?' I wondered. If he did not shoot me he would strangle me to a slow and painful death to avenge his stolen potatoes. He kissed me on the brow and then loosened the chain that bound me to captivity for five months from my freedom. I did not run for my life neither could I fear of being shot in the back. I stood rooted near my killer. I stared at him in perplexity rather than trepidation. Once again he held my head in his gruff hands and wiped his sweat on my fur as if readying to do what he wanted to do. He hugged me for the last time and shoved me away from him into the shallow stream. I wallowed through the stream as fast as possible. As I clambered through the thickets I saw him pick up his gun. Three reverberation echo of the gunshot 'Bang' filled the quiet morning. I panicked and sprinted into the woods wondering all the while whether I was shot in the back. I realized that I was alive and running for my life at last.

As I climbed uphill I glanced back at the hunter who was already walking through the field in penitence or in pride of my freedom. I barked at the hunter two times to say a word of valediction and gratitude but he did not even turn to wave me goodbye.

Before the day broke I reached our lair only to find my parents gone. I sniffed around to locate their trail without success. I cried feeling lonely. I knew then that they had gone to other hills to live in peace. For the first time in eight years I slept alone on the cool bed hoping they would return one day to find me. As I closed my eyes I saw the hunter smiling at me from the lair's door.

India

Village Well

Kolakaluri Inoch

People swarmed around the Village well. Those who peeped in looked ugly with screwed up faces. Though it was late in the day there was no trace of dampness on the platform of the well. The frog that was living in the muddy pothole next to it came out, peeped and kept looking out.

People kept coming and going. Even the elderly said they had neither seen nor heard anything like this since their birth. As soon as the *munsif* came, some made way for him. The *munsif*, peeped in. The water had turned red. A bull's skeletal frame, completely devoid of its skin, that had neither drowned nor was afloat and had its four legs upwards having been tied with ropes to the pulleys! The worn-out skeletal frame the substance of the meat having drained into the water!

"Who did it?" The anger that descended from the *munsif's* spread over his moustache, slid over his lips and was sharpening between his teeth—the *munsif* reached home lost in the same thought. The *karanam*, the bonded servants and the fanners were with him. No paid servant was around.

"Who could have done this?" —Everyone had the same question! Some had a hunch that it was "he". They also felt, "It's not fair to say it's him for everything." The suspicion was

confirmed. Ramudu's son Chidambaram must have done all this.

The *munsif* sat on the platform next to his compound. Some farmers stood in the street opposite. He took the cheroot given by the bonded servant, sucked the smoke in so the glands of the throat would be dented, puffed lip the cheeks to let out the smoke, bit the cheroot, cleared his throat, spat it out and said, "It's definitely he!" Saying this, he inhaled the cheroot smoke deeply, retained the smoke in his throat for a while and letting it out said, "Chidambaram." The thought machine moved with the grease of smoke and again with the smoke the name, Chidambaram, came out like the husked grain in the form of rice from the machine.

"That's it! It's he!" "What wretched times?" "What has befallen us!" "They'll be destroyed, destroyed!" The farmers in the street in front of the platform by the compound were saying all kinds of things. Before civilization had begun, before society had taken its precise shape, when nothing like an institution had been properly founded, at a stage when nothing had been established, just as the Vedas had become the base for everything in a society that wanted to make sure that everything was methodical, proper and according to moral law, just as everything that followed the Vedas had the official sanction, today even when we are living at a time that is supposed to be civilized, well mannered, cultured and mentally free, the *munsif's* word is accepted in that village. To put it in a nutshell, the *munsif's* word was the word of the Vedas.

Of the approximately four hundred houses in the village, a hundred were in the *Harijan palle*, the *Harijan* part. During summer, there is water problem there. If one has to go by the saying that there would be no gruel for the wretched mouthful to go down, one wonders what sin *Harijans* has

committed for the only well in their part of the village going promptly dry in summer. The well that had a water level of a couple of inches in the night would have no moisture left during the day.

Of the five wells in the village too, three go dry during summer. Of the two remaining, the one on the road next to the graveyard has plenty of water in all seasons. A fistful of water! Except once in a while, the village never draws the water from that well. It appears as if that well has been cast off in a corner of the Village! That day, the entire village had drawn water from that very well. Once, the village used to be close to this well. As population increased, the houses began to grow, not towards the graveyard but southwards.

The well with the bull's skeletal frame hanging in it used to be close to the *palle*. When the village grew the well became close both to the village and the *palle*. As the *palle* grew to the south of the well, the well on the southern side became necessary. That well would become dry in summer. Everyone called this well between the village and *palle*, "*oorabavi*". The village well is at the turning of the gravel road between the village and the *palle*. There was no dearth of water in that well during the entire year.

The government had the well dug to provide for the comfort of tourists who walked three miles from the railway station to visit the historic temple, since the beginning the Village had been using that well. The well! There was a cement platform around it so fifty people could sleep without any problem on it. More recently, the cement had peeled off, holes had formed and the bricks were visible: Grooves had conveniently formed so the brass pots, vessels and water pots could sit comfortably. Old age had set in the well with ropes touching it, water pots and buckets scratching it, cement peeling off, stones worn off and sides ripped off. A few

peepul saplings clinging to the stones above the water leaned over to peer.

During summer, mostly people from the village take water from it. At other times, the water in the village wells is more than enough!

At the time when the village people draw water, if the people from the *palle* come there, if they beg and if the farmer wishes to, he draws water and pours it to the men who come there with pots hanging on either side of a yoke or to the women who come with vessels and pots. And the people from the *palle* take the water back. If the farmer is not inclined to do it or is not able to take the trouble or finds it too tiring the people of the *palle* will have no water. The people of the *palle* don't draw water from the village well. They shall not! Until there is someone to draw water, they have to wait, however late it is! Some days those who come in the afternoon won't be able to take water even till the evening.

The woman arrived with the earthen vessel the morning of the previous day! She had come from the *palle*. It was late in the day. Nobody knew her name. Everybody in the *palle* knew her only as Chidambaram's wife! But in the village they knew her as Ramudu's daughter-in-law! She was married and came to live with her husband last summer. She was a tall and hefty person. Did not decorate herself much. Had all the wealth youth had bestowed all over her body. Huge figure. One feels like looking at her again and again. Her eyes and nose were shapely and reminded one of a carefully sculpted idol. The body parts were all in perfect symmetry. Her eyes had a charm about them.

She brought the vessel and kept it away from the platform of the well, arranging it in such a way that the gravel did not harm it. The person who was drawing water then was

neither an old man nor a boy. A young man! So she pleaded. "Pour a couple of pots of water in this, *dora*." Saying "All right," the young man drew a couple of water and poured into the vessel. Just before placing the pots, he had drawn for himself on the support rings attached to the yoke on his shoulder, he stopped to look into her face. She was standing right there. When he threw the yoke on to the ground, came close to her, peered into her face, laughed and asked her, "Why are you still standing?" she asked him, "Why are you laughing like that?" and went on to say, "Who do you think will lift the vessel?" "Why you're so tall and hefty, can't you lift it yourself?" he said. She replied, "Someone will come," to which he said, "How can I lift, tell me?"

"How can you lift it, *dora*, where's the question of your lifting it?" she said.

"Hold it, I'll lift it, hold." Saying this, the youth bent down. Saying, "Okay," she tucked in her *pallu* tight, kept a cloth on her head to keep the pot in place and bent down. Staring at her eyes, nose, lips, neck with protruding eyeballs, alternately closing and opening his eyes and looking at her from top to bottom, he held the vessel by the edge and lifted it up. She had put her hands at the bottom of the vessel and was about to bring it on to her head. Looking at the tightly held sari, her tightly held hands and body, he took out his hands in a hurry even before she had placed the vessel on her head and was caught red handed in the act. "What's this? What?" Saying so, she withdrew. The vessel did not stay on her head, her hands came down to her chest. The vessel fell forward on the youth. It broke. The water spread all over his body. She stretched out her hand and gave the youth a tight slap. She walked away in a hurry and told her father-in-law. The husband came to know of it later on. The entire *palle* was furious.

"What guts he has that he dares lay hands on a woman? I'll bleed him to death," When someone was expressing his anger like this, Ramudu who was washing *chappals*, bit the leather strap and spat out, saying, "Keep quiet! Why do you get worked up for something that wretched fellow did? What will he achieve? His sin will only hit back at him! Why all this commotion? Shut up, won't you? Why all this fuss and threats? The frogs belonging to a lake should remain there alone, shouldn't they? Why all this animosity? Leave it. Whatever God has ordained for each, each will get! Who is responsible for another's fate? How can we intrude? Shut up and go back to your houses!" All those who came there went back. It was at that point that Chidarnbaram arrived there, bunch of palm fruits on his shoulder and a knife tucked on his waist, listened to everything, pulled out the knife, struck it four inches right through the middle of the palm fruit bunch and said, "It was my mistake! To have gone for the palm fruits early in the morning, my foolishness! It would have been good if I had not let her go there! There would have been no problem." When his father warned him, saying, "Don't you quarrel with the village fellow!" he responded, "Where's the question of a quarrel or anything? It will be good if we don't send this one to fetch water from the well! Everything will be all right!" The father did not leave it at that. He went on: "Going by the adage, a word infects another just as moss infects water, you may ask why I had done it like this! Unnecessary! How can I believe that you'll simply listen and keep quiet when someone says something like this! But, listen to me and just ignore the whole thing! What do you say?" When he said this, Chidambaram said, "Okay!" and placed the yoke on his shoulder, went near the well and fetched enough water for the day when someone obliged.

It was not as if what happened the previous day had not reached the *munsif's* ears. He was of the firm belief that

Chidambaram must have stealthily put the bull's skeletal frame inside the well; hoping the village folk would leave the well to them. How could the village people drink the water from the village well once the bull's skeletal frame had fallen in to it? – The *munsif* took a long puff at the cheroot.

So Chidambaram was not seen by anyone since morning – the *munsif* gathered. This strengthened his suspicion. "Where has he disappeared?" The *munsif* too wondered as everyone did. He did not agree to the suggestion by a farmer who looked at the bonded servant who had placed his stick on the ground and was crouching on the street opposite the platform the *munsif* was sitting on – "Don't you think you would do well to ask the bonded servant?" As the smoke came out, his thoughts in the innermost recesses of his mind got illuminated like lightning. He bit the end of the cheroot, spat it, took a deep breath, exhaled, dropped the cheroot on the ground, looked up at everyone in front and gave a broad smile.

That smile had significance. Nancharaiah's bull had died the previous day. Rarnudu was in his employment. He was to stitch chappals for his entire household. Therefore, the dead bull was Rarnudu's property! The skeletal frame in the village well must be that of Nancharaiah's bull! This deed must only be Chidambaram's! Even before the *munsif's* smile completely merged with the blackness of his moustaches, he had ordered the bonded servants to fetch Rarnudu's son.

Desire had swelled in the heart of Chidambaram who was sitting two years ago on the platform of the lake near Venugopalaswami temple where festivities were taking place. He had taken a vow, "If I get married to her, I'll break twenty five coconuts" but he had not thought of the consequences.

When he thought of fulfilling his vow after his marriage with the girl of his choice it was hurdles all the way.

The priest had said, "What's it to me? I'll break a coconut in the name of whosoever comes here and brings coconuts." The trustee had said, "How does one solve problems just because you're devoted to God?"

"Where's the question of rejecting your wish? If you do that, people in the village are not going to be cowardly, wearing bangles. The rest is up to you," the *munsif* had said.

Rarnudu had said, "It's good! I don't know how it'll work. Think about it yourself. What's there for me to say? It's okay, do anything. Don't use knives and such in this matter. It's going to be tough, whoever is hurt. After that, it's left to you."

Everyone's not that clever. That was why everyone from Nancharaiah to Naraiah in the *palle* had said it was not a good thing. He had thought that it was better to fulfill his vow at home itself and give to God whatever money was due to Him. That was a decision made out of fear. He had also considered whether it would be all right to go into the temple stealthily at midnight when no one was around and fulfill his vow but thinking it was something only cowards and faithless people did, Chidambaram had chastised himself.

Finally, he had fulfilled his vow with the help of a police official. But it had become a heart sore for the people in village. They used to feel as if chilli powder was thrown at them whenever they saw Chidambaram. That wound had not yet healed. It had not even been a year.

Around that time, the *munsif's*, the village representative's wound had been healing, when it festered

again. The reason for that too was Chidambaram. The stage was the railway station.

That day, Chidambaram had left for the town to see film with his wife. He had bought the tickets. The signal had been given. He had felt the train would not come right then. Near the fence, under the *chitikesara* tree, was a vacant cement bench. He had sat there along with his wife. Four people from the village who had found no place to sit felt as if ants were crawling all over their bodies. The moment he had seen them, Chidambaram had a natural impulse to stand up. He had stopped unnaturally. Had not got up. Reason—maybe his wife next to him. It could be that they were not his farmers. Perhaps because he did not like to do so. All the three emotions could have worked Simultaneously. It could have been arrogance thrice over.

“You there! Can’t you see?” When they had said this, Chidambaram lifted his head, looked into their eyes and said, “I can see.” When they had said, “How arrogant you are” Chidambaram responded, “No,” and did not get up. “Give him a few blows! He’s arrogant.” Saying this one of them had raised his hand. Even before Chidambaram could sense that he would be hit, she had held the hand and threatened, “Wait, great man! Why have you raised your hand? Ah!” Shouts could be heard. Porters and passengers had gathered. The station master had arrived. They had set things right saying, “Why are you beating up a woman?” The station master had said, “We too don’t have the right to say that some passengers can’t sit here. No one else has either. Hence the fight.” The train had arrived in the meanwhile. Each one had got on to the train. The fight had ended outwardly. It started to simmer like the fire in the haystack. From that day on, the people from the *palle* sat on the benches without any hesitation. That was why the fire did not die out.

With this the wound in the *munsif's* heart had become sorer.

With the atrocity at the well the sore of the heart was hurting like the crow gnawing at the festering sore on the bull.

The people in the village did not like Chidambaram's behaviour. The people in the *palle* were not happy about it.

Satyanarayana got his law degree. He put up a board in a rented place in the town. Except once in a while he lived all year long in the village. During his student days he took part in protest meetings. Talked of Gandhiji. Went to jail. Was thought of to some extent as a student leader. Spoke out words like rights, equality and independence and heard them being uttered. That day, he had said, "*Orey*, brother Chidambaram" and heard him say, "What, *dora*?"

"Don't call me *dora* or anything like that! You did a couple good things. I appreciate them. I am full of praise for you. There must be progress. It won't come if you just scream like crows. It'll come if you obtain it. We shouted asking for independence. We could not but get it. We got it. Effort.... effort is necessary. There is no point in shouting hoarse that untouchability must go, in wasting paper, in budgeting lakhs of rupees and just burning them or in passing bills or laws like cats on the wall. Equality is not something that is given. It is obtained. If you don't make the effort to get it, if you don't believe that you're equal to all, it will be like the blanket remaining where it was thrown. Brother, I happily accept the things you've done. Casting away the two hands of the village called *malapalle* and *madigapalle*, what is purpose of moaning that we aren't doing anything, we're unable to do anything! Not just for this village, but this pest has eaten the entire country. This runs in the blood of this very race. When will

these hands join together? When will the country make use of these hands? When can we place our hands on our hearts and say that our country has progressed?"

Having heard everything, Chidambaram had gone home adjusting the crow bar and the spade on it on his shoulder.

The bull had become old. Its time was over and it died. Till it was alive, it had worked hard. Just as much as it was dear then, it had aroused as much fear when dead. However much he liked it, how long could Nancharaiah keep it in the cattle shed!

Ramudu and Chidambaram had got the cart ready, got the bull onto the cart, tied the bulls and had driven the cart. Having casting away the bull on the barren land to the west of the *palle*, Chidambaram had taken the cart and had gone home. Ramudu would not go back home without skinning the bull, throwing away the membrane between the skin and the flesh and taking the bull's hide with him. On the barren land beneath the neem tree, on the bull's carcass and in the sky above were crows, eagles and vultures like people in a carnival.

That evening Ramudu had put the minced membrane into a mixture of lime, crushed *karakkaya*, bark of *tangedu* in a earthen cauldron and soaked the hide in it.

What was left of the bull's skeletal frame under the neem tree were the remnants after the crows, eagles and vultures had clawed and eaten till nightfall. It was said that the man from the neighbouring village who had come that night reported that he had seen it. But by morning it was in the village well. Chidambaram was an impulsive guy! This must have been his work! Otherwise, someone else from the *palle* must have done it!

Ramudu's house was thirty yards from the village well. Around his house, there was a thorny fence and a neem tree that had grown in a small thorny patch and tiny branches had grown from it. Ten cents of land within. A house on two poles, it was built with quarry stones. Mud walls. Not cemented. The roof was not strong. Palm roof. At the back of the house on the left side a heap of garbage, on the right haystack. In front of the house, on the left a cowshed without walls. In that there were two cart bulls and also a milch cow. In front of the house over six hollow poles a palm *pandal*. The west wind having played havoc, the palm leaf rose and made a hole.

Ramudu sat in the middle of the *pandal*. On the right were the tool bag and the hide, on the left, reddened water in a small pot. Behind, leaning on the pole was the tortoise shell bag filled with water. The work-stone in front. Next to it hammer, awl and work-knife. Ramudu was stretching the thread on his little finger. Someone had left a pair of old chappals with a broken toe-ring. He had left it in the water. Before that he had unfolded the hide which was on the attic, took what he needed and put it back on top.

"Ramudu, aren't the chapplas ready?"

"Why won't they be ready, you rascal? I had repaired them yesterday itself, hadn't I?" he told the man who came. The man who had come had got ready to attend a marriage in the neighbouring village. He had got creaking chappals made for the bridegroom. Ramudu had a wonderful reputation in making them.

"They're fine, stupid, Take them." Ramudu gave him the chappals,

"I'll pay you during the next crop."

"That's okay." When he did not leave with the chappals, Ramudu himself asked, "Are you coming back at night?" He did not say anything. He said again, "Otherwise, will you enjoy the feast and come in the morning?" "How can I? I have to come back tonight. She's finding it tough to manage the brats at home.' Leave that aside. Everyone says that our Chidambaram did all that!" Now it was Ramudu's turn to answer. "*Cha! Cha!* He's not that kind! He talks openly about what he does.' He's not capable of doing anything stealthily. He's my son, after all! What do you think!"

"I don't know, everyone says he only did it."

"They'll have worms in their stomach!"

"It's good Ramanna! It'll be the end of all problems if their well becomes ours. Let's see what happens!"

"What's all this?" The man left thinking so. Ramudu got immersed in work again. The chappal had soaked near the toe ring. He placed the chappal on the workstone, toughened it with an iron pesle, cut the ring from the hide, pulled up the hole with the awl, pushed the ring in, readied the thread, made a hole with the awl, pulled the thread through the hole and finished stitching.

There was a crowd near the well. They were peeping in. The farmer yelled from there itself, "Ramudu! *Orey* Ramudu! Are you done?"

He said it was done. The farmer came, took the old chappals in his hands, examined the toe rings, placed them on the ground, wore them and left, saying, "See you later!"

"I don't know if he'll come back or not!" Ramudu muttered to himself. To think that the farmer would give him by way of crop, he was not his farmer. He had come to see the village well. When he was coming, the toe-ring gave away.

He gave it to Ramudu. Ramudu repaired it for him. He took it and went away. He had no thought of paying him anything. That man believed that God had created Ramudu and thrown him there to work without a fee and to protect his feet. Not just him, all other farmers too!

In village life when they were not dealing with money, that man would give a little bit of the crop he grew during the season to this man for doing the job. In the same way, things that would last yearlong would be provided.

That era was over. Everything had changed now. When the life of farmers itself was hard pressed, things were not good. Even now the big farmers gave something during the crop season. The small farmers could not. But these farmers too would like to have the same status as those farmers. But they do not think of anything else.

The newly cut leather had soaked well. He was toughening it with the iron pestle on the work-stone. A big black ant had come to eat the neem fruit that had ripened and fallen down, ate it, became arrogant, did not remain where it ought to, came into the *pandal*, did not stop at that, crawled up Ramudu's leg, did not get off, and bit his thigh. It did not go even when he shook his *panche*. When he pulled, its head fell off. The head got stuck in his *panche*.

When there was a burning sensation in his thigh, he removed his *panche* and saw. There was blood where the ant had bitten. It had become red. He rubbed it hard with his hand. It made a reddish mark. It was still burning. He turned the pestle, rubbed himself with it, and when he felt a bit better, put the new leather on the work-stone, and waited before trying to toughen it. He was not able to apply force.

To which bull or buffalo did this leather hide belong! How many whiplashes did the skin suffer or not suffer, how

fast did it run when it was touched or did it suffer hell unable to even walk-this animal was still useful to man even when dead. People alive who are dead and useless-how fond are they of their bodies! How much they love them! Ramudu could not work. He held the tortoise shell water bag high, took a few gulps of water, called out, "*Ammayi*," heard her say, "Umm" and asked, "Hasn't he come yet?" When she said he had not, he thought, "I don't know where the hell he is!"

She was his daughter-in-law. Chidambaram's wife. Ramudu's wife died two years ago. Satyanarayana had not failed to tell Chidambaram, "Your mother did not die because her time was up. She died because she did not have medical attention." Ramudu too had heard it. He did not believe it. How many people with medical attention did not die? Her days were up. She died. That was it! "Is it easy to die when you're destined to live for some more days! Will death really come?" Ramudu thought all kinds of things.

Chidambaram was his only son! Since his wife's death he had not eaten a meal at the right time. He got his son married. Since last year, he did not have that problem. He was able to eat a little bit at every meal at home. There are not many women who can make even their husbands feel proud. Both the parents and in-laws were proud of Ramudu's daughter-in-law. Ramudu could say, "my daughter in-law with a lot of satisfaction. Chidambaram could boast loudly "my wife." She brought fortune to the house. Their five acre yielded a good crop last year. As the entire village was happy the farmers gave some of their yield generously. He was able to buy back the milch cow, which had gone away from home after his wife's death when his daughter-In-law came into their household. Without putting away the work tools from the *pandal*, Ramudu rolled his towel, placed it under his head

and lay down, his thoughts turning away from the past to the well.

There were fewer people coming to and going back from the village well. There were some seen now and again. The skeletal frame in the well! The thought was painful. Who to blame? What to say? He looked painfully towards the well. The well was a symbol of slavery and lack of freedom of men for generations. Take skeletal frame inside like the impurity afloat the heart, like rot within of a ruined culture!

When he could not look in this direction any more Ramudu, who was lying down, noticed the bonded servants turning at the corner of the well, coming forward and moving towards his house and got up. A bonded servant called out, "You, Ramudu, you Ramudu, come here! "Why are you calling out so impolitely? Why don't you speak properly?" said Ramudu, looking at him questioningly. "That's not it, Ramanna. We came because the *munsif* sent us," said the second bonded servant. When he heard the *munsif* mentioned, for some reason, Ramudu got scared. But he asked, "Why?"

Both the bonded servants told him a little bit. Ramudu was really scared. He did not know what to do. They would definitely beat Chidarnbaram to a pulp. "Don't know what'll happen" he muttered. "How do you expect him to be at home? He is not here." Saying this he looked this way and that and Solid, "He'll come!"

A bonded servant stood up leaning his waist against the pole, placing his chin on his walking stick and putting his weight on the stick. Another one placed his stick between his knees and crouched. "Where the hell has he gone?"

"Don't know!" He looked at their feet. Strong chappals! Not worn out! Would last at least another year!

In the meanwhile, Chidambaram came. He came carrying the mid-day sun on his head. His feet were red with the red dust. He did not even have chappals. Those who cannot stitch chappals always have chappals on their feet but his son who could make them had none! Ramudu laughed to himself.

Chidambaram was six foot tall. Broad chest! Strong hands and feet! A body that was all the more strong with the cowardly tonic his father gave him! A body that had been nurtured with the confidence that he had never hurt anyone! The strength that held three thieves at once! He could face any injustice, however terrible. Had the strength to pull a cart effortlessly that two bullocks would be hard pressed to!

She was so equal to him in physical structure and strength that it was difficult to differentiate the left from the right in their life together! There was a difference between them. Chidambaram's calmness was a right he had inherited from his father. Her sprightliness, emotion, determination and revenge were familial traits she had inherited. She could do effortlessly what four men could.

Taking the cloth off his head and giving it to his father, throwing the sickle in his hand on the ground, placing the bunches he had put down from his shoulders against the wall and wiping the sweat dripping on his nose, under his eyes, on the eyebrows, over his ears and rolling down his hair, Chidambaram said, "What's the matter? All the big people are here!"

After listening to everything, Chidambaram took the knife, dropping one fruit from the bunches with every blow, cut the fruit, gave them to his father, the bonded servants and his wife, wiped his hand with a grimy rag, and asked his father, "What shall we do?" "Another fruit," said his wife

from inside. Saying, "I'm coming," he took a bunch and sickle, went in and said, "You cut and have it." Then they spoke many things to each other. Nothing was heard outside.

When he came back to sit in the *pandal*, the bonded servants said, "Come, let's go," to which he replied, "I've come back after roaming all over the red soil. My legs are aching. Tell the *munsif* I'll come in the evening." When they said, that's not possible," he kept quiet saying, "Then, it's up to you."

"He says he can't come. Come, I'll come and tell this to him." Ramudu got going. Unable to say anything, the bonded servants followed him.

At that time, there was no one at the well. The sun was right on top. The hot *Rahini* days! Heat that could break the mortars! Added to it, the west wind. The red dust that had been kicked up by the wind looked like saffron cloth hanging between the sky and the earth. Though there was such a breeze, it was sultry. He was sweating. The body was burning.

All the village folk drew water that day from the well to the cemetery. They were commenting that it was as sweet as tender coconut water.

When no one was around, Chidambaram and his wife peeped into the village well. They did not speak to each other. The four legs of the skeletal frame were tied to four ropes and tied at the corner of the rod holding the pulleys. Chidambaram spotted those knots. They were elephantine knots! He was surprised at the skill of the person who tied the knots. They were well-tied knots without any unevenness. Thinking they may be noticed, both of them went back home.

Seeing Ramudu with the bonded servants, the *munsif* said, "Where's he? Why have you brought this one?" "He's not feeling too well, dora. He looks very weak. He's at home," they said. "What's it, dora? You asked him to come?" Ramudu asked.

Nancharaiah sat leaning against the wall opposite the easy chair on which the *munsif* was sitting. Next to him, seated on chair was Satyanarayana. A house as huge as Lanka! "Their family is not like' that. They're good people." When Nancharaiah said this, the *munsif* replied, "Yes, he's a good' fellow. Not as' if we don't know. That fellow is a rotten one born to this one. If we tie this one up and give him a few blows, he'll 'come' running. Such people won't listen unless' they're hurt. A blow does the magic."

Satyanarayana mumbled, "There's 'no point in beating this one lip. Law won't allow it. It would be good to make him tell the truth. But..." The *munsif* said, "You chit of a fellow, for them, only blows will work. What does a baby' crow know of a hit from a catapult! You keep quiet. See how he'll confess," and getting up, he ordered, "Tie him up to the pole in the shed."

Though he said, "I didn't do anything, dora," nobody' took note; The bonded servants took Ramudu to the shed. The *munsif* screamed, "If not you, your son. If not him, his father. If both of you are innocents who know nothing, then the people your *palle*..." They tied Rumudu to the pole. The *munsif* came carrying a tamarind bark and said, "Tell me who did this?"

"I didn't." The tamarind bark stung him like a cobra.

"Who?"

"I don't know, 'He doesn't."

"Then who?" The tamarind bark performed Siva's dance of destruction. The result was lashes on Ramudu's body. Rashes erupted on his face. The chin split and was bleeding. The eyebrow was swollen. "Your son must have done it."

"He doesn't know. God promise. I know. He won't do such a thing. He can't do anything surreptitiously. If he does anything, he does so openly. Please listen to me *dora*."

"What's there to listen, rascal?"-He hit him. His hand hurt after hitting him repeatedly. Ramudu's tears dried up.'

Satyanarayana's eyes were filled with tears. Nancharaiah was shocked. All said and done, Ramudu was Nancharaiah's age. He could not bear the fact of such an older person being beaten lack and blue like cattle. There was nothing he could do by not being able to bear it. He took hold of the *munsif's* hand, said, "Come along, *munsibugaru*," led him to the verandah, and made him sit on the easy chair. The *munsif* was panting. Nancharaiah pacified him, saying, "You who have beaten him are like this, then what about him-who has received ... how much would the older soul have suffered! Umm!"

When-the *munsif* looked at Nancharaiah and said, "Keep quiet;' Nancharaiah felt hurt. Whatever it may be, the *munsif* was younger than him. Talking without giving due respect to his age hurt him.

At home, after his father left for the village, Chiddambaram was on pins and needles. When it was almost dusk, a paid worker in the village, a *palle* youth came and said, *Anna, anna* the *munsif* Rom him till his body was one big sore! Beat him!" Chidambaram could not sit down any more. He started with the cloth on his shoulder and stick in his hand. His wife pleaded, "Don't go." The husband brushed her off. "Don't prevent me!" She warned him, "They'll kill you!"

Chidambararn did not care, “*Chi! Go!*” He set out for the village. Did not walk. Did not run. Walked as if he was running.

When Chidambram arrived at the *munsif’s* house, the same three were in the verandah, The street was full of people! As soon as the *munsif* saw Chidambarnrn, he stood up. “*Dora!*”

“What’s it?”

“Why have you tied my father up?”

“Do I have to tell you the reason?”

“Yes!”

“You’re asking me for an explanation because there’s no one to thrash you till your bones break!”

“Don’t speak too much, daro!”

“Rascal! Catch hold of him!”

The bonded servants tried to get hold of him. He shrugged them off.

“Free my father. I’ll go, it’ll be better.” Chidambararn turned around. The *munsif* took a thick stick and hit him with force on the nape of the neck from behind. That was it—he lost consciousness. The bonded servants pulled him inside the shed, tied him to tile pole, threw water on his face and attended on him. Ramudu was writhing in pain. The father was unable to see his son. There was just enough space to tie a cow between them. Chidarnbaram opened his eyes. Saw his father.

“*Ayya!*” he called out.

“Yes,” he replied.

"Ayya! 'Just Say yes and I'll kill him!"

"That's wrong! Don't!"

"Ayya!"

"Listen to me! Don't!"

The *munsif* came. "You'll kill me! Try killing me!" He stretched the stick and hit him on his waist. The stick that Chidambaram had brought along to protect his life! The stick that had fallen next to Chidambaram when he lost consciousness!

"Ayya!"

"Don't!"

Chidambaram was swaying unable to control his temper. The pole swayed. The shed shook. For a moment, the *munsif's* heart missed a beat.

The *munsif* asked in a leisurely manner, "Who the hell has done this?"

Chidambaram did not speak.

"Tell me!" No response. He was beating him at every word. "Do you want to see God!" A blow! His head broke like the coconut in the temple. But there was no water. Only blood! The *munsif's* hand trembled. Chidambaram lost consciousness. The blood was flowing. Elephant's strength! Rat's courage!

The bonded servants burnt the soiled rags, turned them to ashes, and dabbed the ashes at the spot on the head where it was bleeding. It stopped bleeding. Did not regain consciousness. Ramudu, who did not shed a single tear, when he himself was beaten, wept aloud unable to do at seeing his son whom he had raised fondly, the son who had never

before been beaten and the son whom he had raised as the closest to his heart being beaten unjustly right in front of his eyes. When that wail touched the strings of Chidambaram's heart somewhere, he became conscious.

When the *munsif* came to the verandah, Satyanarayana shook like a frenzied person and said, "If he dies, if don't see to it that you get the death sentence, my name will no longer be Satyanarayana."

"What can you do but wait!"

"That too will happen," he rushed out.

"What's this? How can human beings do such things? Beasts! Beasts do like this! You, you're not human-you're a brute! *Chi!*" said Nancharaiah,

"Nancharaiah!" roared the *munsif*.

"Keep quiet. Are you speaking like a human being now?" Nancharaiah went away.

Watching them till they vanished from his Sight, he tried to gain control of his trembling hands. His right hand continued to tremble vigorously. The thick stick in the corner was like God's hand. If it were not there, the rascal would have escaped. In the verandah, it appeared as if it was laughing. The *munsif* sat feeling a little out of sorts. Good people, a bit friendly, both went away angrily. But some enemies praised him that this was the only good thing he did in a long time. The *karanam* said, "I don't doubt your good intentions to stop injustice but I'm not convinced that this is the right path." The more he thought, the more his mind became like an insect gnawing at dung. For no reason, he was feeling scared. He could hear a slight sound from somewhere. In some corner of his heart, a spark of fire was getting ignited. Some kind of pity enveloped his body. It was not the *munsif's*

nature to have these emotions. As if he had committed some evil deed, some indefinable apprehension concerning it engulfed his entire body in the form of fear, worry and invisible shadow. Such an experience does not occur so quickly to everyone. There are so many who commit innumerable murders and remain unperturbed like a wall of the fortress. If all of them go through such an experience, they may not be able to do anything more. The heart that gave scope for this kind of an emotion must have been somewhat delicate. The *munsif* was an illustration of someone who had authority, self-esteem and looks being quickly ruined when there was no self-control.

In the *palle*, next to the ruined well, under an age-old banyan tree, five elders sat. The paid servants, the young students and the farm hands-all gathered there. They reflected on who could have hung the skeletal frame in the well. They did not know. Would both have done it? No. But the *munsif* had punished them unjustly. What was to be done? Whatever it was, there was- no alternative but to stand shelterless. They thought they should think carefully. The youth felt that a blow for a blow was the right thing.

When they were thinking seriously about what do the village folk decided to have the skeletal frame removed from the village well by the people in the *palle* and sent a farmer there. It was not appropriate to ask the *palle* elders at that time. Theirs was a natural response! Theirs was a natural response! They should not touch that well. Therefore their reply was that they would not do it.

The village elders got angry. They abused why they should have so much pride and arrogance not to listen to them. They thought that this was a thing committed by the entire *palle*. The farmers came bringing along paid workers, bonded servants and riffraff. They gathered near the village

well. The sun was setting in the west. The plan was to untie the four ropes, place them on the four pulleys, pull at them together, get hold of the skeletal frame that would come up and throw it outside. They did just that. The bull's skeletal frame had soaked and had become heavy. It was indeed difficult to pull it up. They did not know how to push it aside once it came up. A paid servant failed in that attempt, slipped and fell in to the well. Observing that some let go the ropes out of frame and bewilderment. For the rest, it became too heavy. Unable to hold, they let go. The skeletal frame fell into the water. It did not drown. It was floating slightly. Till the paid servant who had fallen under it lifted his head, those on top were scared to death. The thought of removing the skeletal-frame was put aside and the attempt to bring the servant out took over. The servant, who came to the shore said, "That skeletal frame demanded a sacrifice." Everyone became terrified. They slipped away one by one. Thinking that they should get the people from the next *palle*, the farmers went away. The people of the *palle* who were watching the fun went back home. It grew very dark.

Chidarnbaram's wife had been crying her eyes out for a very long time. Till now, the commotion at the well was heard in the crying. When there was a sudden strange silence, she looked towards the well. The well was deserted. She stopped crying.

When his son regained consciousness in the shed, Ramudu felt happy even in his sorrow. Just like on the fertile earth called unhappiness, when a small plant called happiness sprouts, the earth becomes beautiful, Ramudu's sorrow, worry and pain became beautiful. Chidambaram's heart hardened,

"What is it, *ayya*?"

“What’s there?”

Ramudu’s heart was overcome with sorrow. Each one received blows their age could bear. Their wounds were hurting more in the cool night breeze. More than the wounds on the body they were unable to tolerate the torture of the heart.

Suddenly, the thought came, “I wonder how she is!” Chidambaram trembled. He grew furious. He was shaking violently. “What’s happened again?”

“Nothing,”

In the *palle*, Chidambaram’s wife did not cook that night. She sat thinking She did not light the lamp either. The old woman next door came, said, “How can you be like this, my girl? How many such things haven’t we seen! They’ll come back home tomorrow morning,” lit the lamp and forced her to eat some of the morning’s food. When Chidambaram’s wife insisted, “You sleep here, avva,” she said, “Okay,” put the cot and started snoring the minute she lay down.

The lamp was burning. Chidambaram’s wife’s sorrow did not abate. The chappals were at the door and the stick in the corner. She looked at them a couple of times. She called out, “*Avva, avva.*” She did not stir. Did not speak. She was snoring and sleeping. Chidambaram’s wife stretched her legs in the middle of the cot and folded them. She was not trying to sleep.

In the village, the *munsif* was trembling for no reason.

Due to that fear, he sent word to Guravaiah, who had thick moustaches, red eyes and fearful face, who one would have nightmares about if they saw him during the day and seeing whom children would cry aloud, to come and stay with him and he came. When there was absolutely no breeze

in the house, the *munsif* had his cot moved to the verandah. Guravaiah, wearing a water-tinted *panche*, spread a mat next to him and lay down. The *munsif* said, Remove that thick stick from that corner." "Why are you so scared when I'm here?" Guruvaiah answered him.

"Let's keep the light on and sleep!"

"*Cha!* Why? I'm your protection. Place a hand on your heart and sleep, okay! I can't sleep with the light on!"

Both lay down. Both slept the very next moment. One was sleeping without worry, the other out of sheer exhaustion from anger and beating those two.

The lamp was burning in Rarnudu's house. Someone was knocking at the door. "You there! You there!"

"Who?" She asked, from inside. "It's me."

"Who's it who says I?" She had not slept till then. She was agitated with endless thoughts! She opened the door. A youth. The thoughts took shape. "You!" "Yes! You, did I lay my hand on you? Why did you make such a noise? Umm!"

"Why did you come like this?" She took the walking stick against the door and struck a blow on his head. "Oh God!" said the youth. "You're a devil! A devil" he said. She lifted the stick again. He bent back. She came forward. He turned back. She followed him. Rubbing his head, the youth then went to the village, first quickly, then running once again quickly and then slowly. She locked the door. *Avva* continued to sleep. Her body kept trembling. The lamp was still burning. She sat again on the cot. Her thoughts were reaching the shore.

'There was no light in the verandah *munsif* was sleeping. There was no moonlight in the sky. The light of lakhs of stars was not falling on the earth.

Someone was untying the knot around Chidambaram's hand in the shed, in the dark. "*Ayya!*" he said, 'thinking it was his father. "What is it?" said Ramudu from a little distance. "Who are you?" Chidambaram asked. Ramudu asked who's there?"

"Who's it?"

"Who's it? What's he doing?"

"He's untying the knot."

"Sh...! Don't shout!" The third voice.

Silence again. Rarnudu's and Chidambaram's knots were untied, "Go! Runaway!" Warning. "We won't go, *dora!*" said Rumudu,

"Go, go away from here." "We won't go, *dora*" said Rumudu.

"If you don't leave, I'll kick you. Go!" "We won't go, *dora,*' said Ramudu,

"I'll kick you if don't go. Go" They recognized his voice. There was a sound behind the shed. When the man heard the sound, he hid behind the haystack.

The sound of someone coming was heard clearly. Assuming that the servant was coming to feed hay to the cattle, the man got up quietly, and came to the street from the corner of the shed. The sound of the man walking behind the shed was heard clearly for a couple of seconds. Then it was not heard. The son and father were talking to each other. "Sathyanarayana is a god-like man, *ayya!*"

"Yes"

"Let's go, come!"

"Where to?"

"Home."

"Go and do what?"

"What's there to do? Let's go!"

"Orey, if we go back without the *munsif* permitting us, he'll catch hold of us again tomorrow and beat us to a pulp. Then what'll be our fate! We can't run away from the village, if four of them come, can we? They will come to know the truth tomorrow and will let us go"

It didn't stop there. "Why should we stay here till they let us go? Let's go! We'll be back if they want us. If they are violent, we'll hit back it'll be resolved one way or the other."

"Orey, my son. You're a young boy. It's difficult to live if we go against them. When they give you one, you hit back, if four of them come, you'll take four; if they get the entire village along and even if you revolt with the entire *palle*, will you win against them? Except to fight and die, " what purpose of these fights?"

'How long their cruelty?"

"You're human! They're human! Won't it be proper for humans to respect one another? If they have to change how is it possible if we ourselves resort to violence?"

"I don't know why you always say such things!"

"Listen to me, my son! Someone has thought it fit to do this to the well! It's for the good, really! That is another matter! Let it be! What's the harm? The water problem for the people in the *palle* will be solved to an extent if we sneak out, everything will be messed up! Listen to me!" You sit near your pole! Isn't that fine?"

"I don't know where the ropes are to tie ourselves once again."

“Can they tie us? Morality! Morality! Morality will bind us.”

The sound that was heard when the father and son were being untied and stopped behind the shed then was heard once again. From there the sound of a matchstick being struck. The light of a matchstick. The burning of palm leaves. The father placed his hand on the mouth and warned. “Don’t shout!” The fire behind the shed was stretching out its tongue. It did not catch fire fully. There was some light. They found the ropes, which had bound them. Ramudu reached for them. He was tying his son. In that same burning shed at the same pole. “What’s this?” Chidambaram could not comprehend. “Don’t shout!” Ramudu tied a bow-knot. He put the rope Mound himself as if it bound him. There was a huge fire behind the shed. “Ayya’ Are we going to burn right here and die!”

“Don’t! Don’t, at all! *Dora! Dora!* The shed is burning down. *Dora! Dora!*” He shouted aloud. Chidambaram could not utter a word. He remained looking in the direction of the fire.

The neighbours woke up. People gathered in the street. Someone untied the buffaloes, cows, bulls and calves. Satyanarayana carne near the father and son. “Why the hell are you still here?” he asked, He thought for a while and said, “You did the right thing.” Ramudu got rid of the rope. The son untied the bow-knot. “Don’t shout! Don’t say a thing! Keep quiet! Say you know nothing no matter who asks you. Come Oil.” Saying this, he came out of the shed and shouted, “Do you have to set the shed on fire to kill them? *munsif* where are you? Wasn’t it the *munsif*’s plot to kill them-had I not untied them?”

All together put out the fire in the shed. It was half burnt. Chidambaram, forgetting the bandage on his hand, forgetting the pains in his body, who put down the fire and Ramudu, not paying heed to the work that the heavily lashed body doing, who was passing pots of water, looked at each other and wiped their eyes after the fire was put down. All those who came there looked at both of them in their own manner. Many felt sorry for them.

There was commotion in front of the *munsif's* house. Someone had tied him to his cot. The thick stick in the corner of the verandah was not there. It was near his cot. His right hand was not all right. It was broken above the wrist. That was all-there was no other injury. After people gathered, he gained consciousness. By the time Ramudu and Chidambaram went there, the *munsif's* wife' was crying. Someone was untying him. Only then Guravaiah woke up. Chidambaram looked towards the *munsif's* cot. The hands were tied to the box near the head and the legs to the legs of the cot! Knots! Clever knots! Elephantine 'knots! He recalled the knots that were tied to the pulley ropes of the village well.

Ramudu felt sorry for the *munsif*. There were tears in his eyes. "I thought he shouldn't face the pain I suffered!" He said, "But I can't see you suffer, *dora!*" The elders asked, "Who did this?" The *munnsif* replied, "But.., it's certainly not they." Ramudu, such a grown up man, cried loudly. Others thought the pain might have reminded him of his own.

The sky was gloomy beyond the *palle*, near the cemetery. It was like the white ash mixed vermilion whirlwind rising into the sky. The *munsif* lifted his head and saw. "My haystacks are on fire. Go. Go and put it out. The cattle will not have any feed!" he said. For some reason, everyone believed this to be true. Some ran. Ramudu and Chidambaram too went with them. It was not possible to put,

out the fire in the haystacks. Someone went to the station to ask for the fire engine.

Satyanarayana and Nancharaiah did not go to see the *munsif*. "They are angry with me," thought the *munsif*. His life spirits-sank. Overnight he became older by ten years. Guravaiah did not sleep again. He sat next to the cot. He could not see tears in the eyes of the *munsif* who had never shed tears in his life. It was sunrise. Even when the sun rose, the stacks were still burning like the corpse of Ravanaasura. The fire engines had just arrived. They went in search of water for half an hour.

The lamp that had been burning all through had not become big even when it was late in the day in Ramudu's house. The two women continued to sleep.

The *munsif* was taken away in the train that comes early in the morning. The bull's skeletal frame continued to rot in the well.

The fire engines put out the fire by the afternoon. It was not to stop the hay from burning but to prevent the ash being swept away. Ramudu and Chidambaram came back to the *munsif's* house. When somebody said, "Why did you come here "You go away," Ramudu responded, "If anything happens we will be held responsible. We won't go. Moreover, the *munsif* had not asked us to go."

Both were sitting inside tile compound, leaning against the wall. Entire body was aching! Hunger was gnawing at the stomach!

The village elders did not know what to do when the workers from the next village refused to do the work. The skeletal frame in the well remained there.

Chidambaram's head split above the left year. When people asked the youth who had a bandage at the same spot, he said that the pole of the shed had pierced him. The right hand of the *munsif* who had beaten the father and son was broken.

The village elders met at the *karanam's* place. They were wondering what to do. They were reviewing the things that happened since the previous morning. This was not a single person's job. The entire *palle* had got together to do it. They had gone beyond the limits. Anything should not be stretched till it snaps. That is why they should not pay heed to the well! Whenever happened, they should get to its end! Today this had happened, tomorrow something else might happen. There must be a limit to anything. If you gave them an inch, they would take an ell. If need be, they must be kicked to bring them back on the right track. They said the elders, though young in age were old in experience. The common folk though old in age were young in their thoughts. They felt that finally if there were fights, if atrocities took place, it was the village folk who suffered more, that if there were death threats, if they left the *palle*, if they were put in jail, it was problematic for the village folk, that it was not good to get into conflict with people of no importance and decided to convey this to the *munsif*.

Satyanarayana was listening to everything. Because the *palle* people felt they could not live a life if they left the village, they were living a subdued life. The village folk were adjusting out of fear, out of fear that they would be the losers, out of fear that they would face difficulties, out of fear that they would not get farm hands. They were going to be non-violent out of fear. Not out of love. Not out of friendship. Not out of understanding. Not out of desire for happiness. Out of fear. Only out of fear!

How long would this village and this country which lived on the foundations of fear survive? Not out of desire for love and happiness, but out of fear! Only out of fear!

How long would this village and this country, which lived on the foundations of fear survive? When would the society and institution that would be based on love be born? At least how far away is the human life that could live fearlessly?

The *munsif* who got off the train the next morning with a cast on his hand was taken directly to his house. When Nancharaiah met him and asked about him, he said, "Let's not have anything to do with that well! Let them do whatever they like about it!"

"They won't go back home unless you tell them to."

"Orey, go back home! Use that well."

Ramudu and Chidambaram turned to go towards the *palle*. The village elders who had come just then and they too approved of it.

Chidambaram's wife, who was sitting in the *pandal* in front of the house worried, who had not touched food or water since the previous day, saw her husband and father-in-law went to meet them with the strength of thousand elephants. She looked at their wounds and bit her lips. The husband bent his head down. The father-in-law said, "It's okay." "They came. The people from the *palle* swarmed around the house" Heard about the well. But no one moved. When they said! "Why?" they said, "It seems the well demanded a sacrifice. We don't want it. They are trying to kill us like this." Chidambaram's wife shook to the core. She looked peculiarly at everyone. She shook her hair and tied it into a knot. "Is that so? Is that so? What? Is that it? Then I'll be

it. I'll be the sacrifice!" She reached the buffaloes in two strides. She untied the rope around their necks. She put the yoke on their necks. "What's your problem?" She did not pay heed to her husband's words. She placed the bands around the buffaloes. She shook them. They went towards the well. "What's this?" the husband asked.

"Keep quiet!" she told her husband tucking her sari at the back. She let the coir rope into the well. She tied the other end to the rod holding the pulleys. She climbed down the steps into the well. She held on to the edges of the ropes that had been tied to the legs of the bull's skeletal frame. She came up. She tied the two ropes on one side to the rod holding the pulleys on one side. She threw the other two ropes on the other side over the pulleys and tied to the yoke on the necks of the buffaloes. She tightened the bands. She stretched out her hands and slapped both the buffaloes hard. The buffaloes that do not keep quiet at the touch of a hand lunged forward. The skeletal frame came up in a jiffy. Ramudu and Chidambaram looked at each other in surprise. Both of them went and brought two neem poles. Then she looked up at everybody. All of them had strange looks, "Aren't there men among you! Are all of you only women? If there are men, come and help me," screamed Chidambaram's wife. Ramudu ensured that both the poles would go over one of the bands of the pulleys along the spine of the bull's skeletal frame to the band of the other pulley so that the skeletal frame would be thrown up. The people of the *palle* held the ropes. On the other side they untied the ropes. She gave the buffaloes a jolt. At one go, the carcass came out and fell. The buffaloes dragged the bull's skeletal frame in that position to the outskirts of the village.

Chidambaram was thinking all this while. About the knots she had tied on the rod with the ropes she had retrieved

from inside the well. Wonderful knots! Skillful knots! Elephantine knots!

"The water had been spoilt. We will draw the water out and remove everything so we can reuse the well," said Ramudu. The old and young of the *palle* gathered. Coir ropes, pots, brass vessels, leather buckets, baskets, spades and crowbars had all arrived. The work was progressing rapidly. The *palle* was in a festive mood. The people from the village were looking on from their house fronts. Though all this was happening, there was no consensus as to how the skeletal frame came to be in the well. Chidambaram went into the house and looked at her *chappals*. They were dusty. The dust from the red soil. The dust from the black soil. Strange colours had mingled together. In the meanwhile, Chidambaram's wife had left the skeletal frame under a neem tree in the barren field outside the village and herded the buffaloes back. When Chidambaram found the four ropes of the cart that ought to be on the attic missing, he looked into his wife's bag.

They drew the water and threw it away. They drained the well clean. Fresh water was oozing out. The people inside the well came up. Children were saying, "I've found two *annas*, I've found four *annas*!"

"Who knows whose this brass pot is!"

"This pot hasn't broken, did you see?"

"This rope is mine..." They were talking happily like this about the things they found in the well.

Ramudu's daughter-in-law, Chidambaram's wife brought a rope and a pot, dipped the pot down till it immersed completely and collected a potful of the oozing water from the village well and took it to light the kitchen

stove which had not been lit in the last two days. The people in the *palle* were drawing water. Drinking it. And bathing.

The village kept looking on.

Translated by Alladi Uma and S.N. Sridhar

Stopping at Nothing

Jose Lourenco

Bholanath's bulls froze as though a red traffic light had just blit up right in the middle of the paddy field. Anxious to get the ploughing done before the day got much hotter, Bholu slapped them smartly on their backs. But the bulls refused to budge. He let go of the plough's wooden handle and walked to the front; there was no one and nothing blocking their path.

Bholu pulled out some fodder from the bag around one bull's neck and offered it to them. Uncharacteristically, both bulls shook their heads. Now thoroughly irritated, Bholu delivered a hefty thwack to their rumps. The bulls bellowed and veered off to the left, yanking the plough clear out of the soil and dragging it behind them.

"What kind of crackpot behaviour is this!" Bholu wondered. 'He took the bulls to the farthest end of the field and, started ploughing from there. Five, six of the runs went off well. But as the bulls approached the centre of the furrowed paddy field, they came to a dead halt again. "Bloody madness!" He shook his head, then walked around to the front and checked the ground closely. No pits, no stones. Absolutely nothing.

Bholu got back behind the bulls and whacked them with his thin stick and shoved and pushed - "Hirrrrr... huuuuuuuuuuuuuu.... "

This time, wide-eyed and snorting in terror, the bulls turned to the right and went galloping off across the field towards the village. Bholu, his wife and their bulls lived in a little thatched hut at the outer edge of Keri village. The paddy field was just a five minute walk from home.

The bulls feared Bholu. Bholu feared his wife. In a custom befitting the tradition, she never addressed him by name. Instead, she said things like, "Now you're blaming the bulls? Lazy fucker! Can't earn two paise even! Arre, look at Chandu, such a smart man. Only because Chandu comes to our help, we are okay."

To avoid listening to his wife's harangues, Bholu rose next morning at the break of dawn, fed and groomed his bulls and went with them to his field. But once again, the ploughing did not go well.

Bholu dug up the left side of the field and then the right side. The area in the middle remained untouched. The bulls simply refused to go there. Bholu tethered his bulls to a tree at the edge of the field and went to his neighbour's house for help.

The conversation was brief. "O Madhu! Madhu, *re!*"

Madhu emerged from his hut.

"Please lend me your bulls."

"What's wrong with your bulls, then?"

"Nothing. I will bring them back soon, in two hours time."

"Take them, then." Madhu scratched his head and went back inside. Madhu's bulls knew Bholu and he had no trouble harnessing them; they trotted willingly ahead of him as he turned them towards the field. But as he led them to the island of unploughed soil the new bulls began lowing, and with an eerie keening sound they too stood their ground a few feet away from the spot where Bholu could see only thin air.

A smack with the stick didn't help. A butt kick didn't either. After Bholu had slapped them several times, the bulls slowly reversed and went back the way they came.

Bholu scratched his scrawny buttocks and pondered the situation.

"Eh, Bholanath" He heard a familiar voice. Madhu came by, smoking a bidi.

"What's going on, bhai?"

"They are not willing to do the middle."

"Hett! I will show you," Madhu said. "Ehhh Kallyah ... eh Longya... ahurrrr...hirrrriaaaaahhhhh!"

But though Madhu danced and waltzed with his bulls this way and that, the same thing repeated itself. So Madhu and Bholu went home scratching their heads.

That evening at the village tavern, Madhu shared the story. Everyone sitting around with their pegs of feni had a comment to make.

"There must be something in Bholu's field..."

"Arre, someone must have buried some gold there..."

"Something is trying to get onto Bholu..."

"The way Chandu tries to get onto Bholu's wife...?"

"Shut up, mad fellows!" Shembu the witchdoctor roared from a darkened corner. "What are you chattering about! Don't you see what's happening? Bholu's field lies at the border of the village! Where do you think the Guardian lives?"

A hush fell on all those present; they exchanged worried glances. Madhu even poured a little feni on the ground, to appease in advance any spirit that chose to appear.

"Things are not going well in the village these days ..."
The witchdoctor stood up with widened eyes glowing like coal embers. "Just a few nights back, as I was walking along the edge of the village, I saw a great blinding light above the trees."

"The Guardian can turn night into day ...!"

In the other corner, old Bhikumam said with a gaptoothed smile – 'Arre, there's nothing there ..."

"Maybe the Guardian has been angered" said Shembu, without heeding the oldman. "Bholya, did you make your *sur-rontt* offering this year?"

Bholu shook his head. There wasn't enough gruel to wet their stomachs at home, where would he come up with toddy and *bakri* for the *sur-rontt*!

The night wore on. By the time they left the tavern, stumbling and colliding with the door jambs and with each other, everyone had agreed they should do something about Bholu's problem.

That night an offering of toddy, coarse bread and incense was placed at the foot of the Tree of the Guardian of the village.

The next evening, the villagers accompanied three pairs of bulls to the field. One after the other, the bulls and the villagers maneuvered, and dodged round and round the field like soccer players. The ominous middle patch of land about ten to twelve feet across remained unscathed; none of the bulls would lay even the shadow of a hoof there, even though Shembu the witchdoctor had prayed at the spot for a whole hour! The villagers returned home, mightily mystified.

As Bholu approached his house, Chandu, the headman of the village panachayat, emerged from within. Just behind him, Bholu's wife came to the door. She saw her husband and was briefly taken aback; then she uttered a forced laugh.

"Look, Chandu has brought bananas. What a good man, no?"

"Ye, Bholya!" Chandu said. "Something funny is happening in your field, I hear?"

The whole village knew that Chandu ran a numbers gambling business, and poked his finger in everybody else's house.

Bholu went in without saying a word.

That night, a lot of feni flowed at Sazulos tavern.

"The Guardian's belly is not filled with the *sur-rontt*," the witchdoctor proclaimed. "We will have to offer him something more."

"A cock?" Sadu, the barber volunteered.

"I have a hen," Madhu stepped forward. "You can pay me anytime, Bholya ... this badness can affect the whole village, that's why I'm..."

Bhikumam laughed from his corner. "How can nothing affect anything!"

Chandu tipped off the schoolmaster.

The schoolmaster tipped off the local journalist.

The journalist spoke to Kamarbandh.

Doctor Kamlakar Kantak was indeed a brilliant and intelligent scientist at Panjim University, but the college boys as well as the outside world knew him better as 'Kamarbandh Kantak'. He was so brilliant that he could speak at length extempore on any topic. Just the other day he had delivered a powerful lecture at the National Institute of Oceanography on 'Goan Fish Curry'. And in the Kala Academy's Black Box Theater the day before that, he had spoken for an hour and a half on 'How White Holes Negate Black Holes and Empower the Universe'.

When Bholu went to the field in the morning, he found a crowd had already gathered. Chandu, the schoolmaster, the local journalist, and Dr. Kamarbandh were all there, talking loudly. Off to one side, Madhu and the other villagers were getting ready with a hen, some chillies, salt, and a lemon.

Kamarbandh observed the curious case of Bholu's bulls. Amazed, he too kept running in circles around the field.

"There is certainly something here," he admitted at last.

"Shall I publish that?" the journalist asked.

"Someone has done some magic here," said the witchdoctor darkly.

"Something has affected the field," said another villager.

"Someone is sitting on Bholu's head."

"The way Chandu..."

"Shut up!"

Dr. Karnarbandh and his men spent a good couple of hours walking and running around the field. The villagers trotted around behind them and finally sacrificed their hen. By noon everyone returned home for their siesta.

As Bholu entered the house, his wife berated him - "Today also you have come early, good-for-nothing fellow!"

Bholu understood. Chandu had been busy with the journalist and the scientist, or by now there would have been delicious chikoos in the house.

"How will the bulls go there! The Guardian is still sitting at that spot," Shembu the witchdoctor said that night to the villagers huddled around the warmth of Sazulos feni. "We will have to give him some greater honour."

Madhu came forward again and got ready to put up a goat.

Bholu's debt was mounting. He fell into a resigned silence.

As soon as Bholu arrived at his field the next dawn, he abandoned all thoughts of ploughing for the day. Some thirty scientists and fifty or so journalists had massed there. Dr. Kamarbandh had rigged up a large instrument in the center of the field and was carrying out tests on the earth below. One of the doctors came up to Bholu and began closely examining the rear ends of Bholu's bulls. When he pulled a probe out of his pocket Bholu became greatly alarmed and drove the man away.

Close to Dr. Kamarbandh's machine, the villagers were preparing to sacrifice their goat. Chandu pranced to and fro between the two groups.

"These damn fellows should be driven from here," Madhu told Chandu. "They come to this holy land and make such a noise!"

"Get these lunatics away, man!" Kamarbandh said to Chandu. "Such a significant event has taken place here and these nuts are dancing with a goat!"

The hullabaloo continued through the day.

At about four in the afternoon, Kamarbandh let out a triumphant yell. All the scientists gathered around the machine's screen and began to jump about in joy.

"Look!" Kamarbandh shouted to Chandu. "There is something down here! We can see it on this screen. Like a flattened ball, about eight feet long and five feet in height."

Bholu, Madhu and the other villagers were puzzled. They could not see anything in the middle of the paddy field. Chandu too did not understand why the scientists were jumping about, but as head of the panchayat he knew his responsibilities: he stood up and began to give a speech.

"Our village will become known all over the world now," he pointed out. "From now on, if anybody wants to do anything here, the government will have to support our panchayat with help and money. You scientists must also help. If our village is going to be famous, we also must progress and prosper!"

Then Chandu went to the assembled villagers. "Let us build a great temple here in honour of the Guardian," he said. "I will propose this to the panchayat, and they will pass it. These doctors and the government will give us money. And I will build it."

By the time Bholu reached home that evening, his wife was grumbling and fretting restlessly. Bholu understood.

Chandu had been totally occupied in the progress and prosperity of the village; had it been otherwise, there would have been a basketful of ripe papayas in the house by now.

In four days time, Bholu's paddy field turned into a fairground. Two to three hundred people were camped out there. Scientists and TV crews from all over the world were busy at work. Having collected some money from the government, Chandu and the villagers began constructing a temple close to the point of interest.

The landlord whose field Bholu was tilling received a hefty compensation from the government.

The scientists tied a rope around the mysterious spot and cordoned it off from the public. "The object here must be an extra-terrestrial entity," Kamarbandh told the reporters. "What it is, where it has come from ... all this we must find out!"

"I have named this entity 'Kamarbandh Bandhkamar'," he continued. "We must crack open this closed capsule and see its contents. To do this, we must lift it from here and take it to our laboratory for further study."

Hearing this, old Bhikumam standing by with his hands behind his back cackled.

"How will you take away what is not there!"

One of the scientists brought a rope, but found nothing to tie it to.

Another brought a crane, but there was nothing to lift.

They sprayed water on the ground.

Then they passed an electric current through the spot.

And they subjected the ground to all kinds of radiation and vibration tests.

But nothing changed.

Man could walk on that hallowed ground as much as he liked, but no bull, dog or cat was ready to even sniff or shit on that spot.

The whole world was shaken. Newspapers blared the news; TV channels aired endless speculations.

Thinking the world was coming to an end, some people left their homes and went into the forests.

The American President blamed the Iranians for the incident and bombed them.

The schoolmaster took a leave of absence.

Chandu floated a petition.

By the evening of the fifth day, two thousand people had gathered. Donations flowed in for the temple and Chandu danced back and forth to near exhaustion. That night, Chandu told Bholu to guard the temple property and left him asleep on the temple's unfinished veranda. By the time Chandu reached his own house, it was nearly dawn.

When Bholu rose at daybreak, he saw his bulls sleeping soundly in the midst of all the ropes and machines and cameras. On seeing the bulls there, the scientists ran to their screens.

"It's gone! It's gone!" they wailed.

On hearing of this, old Bhikumam shook his head. "How did what was never there go away!"

The villagers flocked to the *mandd*, the sacred ground. They rejoiced that the Guardian had risen satisfied. The pace

of the temple work increased; a large amount of money had already been raised; more poured in. Chandu bought himself a car, though he could not drive.

The scientists rolled up all their equipment and left, deeply disappointed. The people who had retired to the forests believing the world was coming to an end reluctantly returned home.

Dr. Kamarbandh received an international award. He called a press conference to deny reports that he was being considered for the Nobel Prize, thereby helping to spread the rumour wider. The Goa government increased his salary threefold. His expose entitled 'The Pointless Inquiry of Karnarbandh' sold out in three months. He quickly got to work on a new book, 'Fish Curry and Kamarbandh'.

On the little patch of earth that Bholu once tilled, a grand new temple arose. At the inauguration, the chief guest placed a garland of flowers around the necks of Bholu's bulls. They went to garland Bholu as well, but Bholu was not at home, so they garlanded Bholu's wife instead. Later in the night she placed the garland around Chandu's neck.

In the very next elections, Chandu stood as candidate and was elected as a Member of the Legislative Assembly. He would now go from rich to richer. Bholu's wife went to live with him.

The chief committee of the Temple of the Guardian declared that Bholu's bulls were holy. They were taken from Bholu and thenceforth fed and clothed by the temple. Bholu would get up in the mornings and begin fondling the bales of hay that had been left behind but were no longer needed. He began roaming here and there. One day he disappeared. Nobody bothered much.

But every Shivratri, when that glorious religious festival rolls around, the temple rousers can be heard chanting and singing:

Jai Bholanath. Long live Bholanath. Long live...

Translated by the author

The Foot-Track

Harish Mangalam

“**H**urry up Kashi, we’re running late ... that fellow will tear us apart,” Rukhi shouted at the top of her voice. When she didn’t receive any reply from Kashi, she went into the verandah, picked up the sickle and yelled, “You bitch! How long will you take?”

Kashi who had bent down to wash her face, looked obliquely at Rukhi and smiled. Then she started brushing her teeth with her finger. Rukhi was surprised to see that Kashi wasn’t ready yet. “So your highness! Were you playing Queen of Hearts last night?” She paused abruptly and stared unblinkingly at Kashi. She didn’t want to finish saying everything in one go; there was the whole day ahead. Kashi laughed her usual sunny laughter. How her white teeth shone against her dark skin. “Rukhli, everybody knows how slovenly you are. At least let me freshen up! If the landlord thinks he is the king, he is free to. He may throw his weight round but only in his house. If he acts funny with me, I’ll pluck his penis out, do you understand?” Kashi retorted in a shrill, but low voice. Wiping her face with the *pallav* of her sari, she poured tea out of a *jharm*¹ silver kettle into a saucer.

¹ Spoken to mean German. These days English words have found their way into the Gujarati language in a big way. Thanks to increased interaction between literate and illiterate—semi-literate

Tea gushed out of the broken spout. She offered the brimming saucer to Rukhi. The latter muttered, "How much more did you want to pour?" As soon as Rukhi had guzzled the tea, the duo set off in a jiffy.

As day dawned, the *vas* was animated with familiar movements. Shouting, "Hey there, Pashli, Revima, Isla, Dhaniya," they gathered everybody together – They were behind schedule. Like a whirlwind they took off. The atmosphere in the *vas*² was by then enlivened by the birds calling in the grand neem trees and the conversations of the labourers.

The sun was out and so were the young daughters-in-law, gossiping away to glory. Boys were at their jokes, slapping one another's palms while elderly women were sitting and sniffing snuff. The village outskirts lay silent and deserted at this hour. The green cover all around was a feast to the eyes. In the fields, as far as the eye could see, there were beautifully tender leaves fluttering on the plants. Gentle breeze caressed the plants and they swayed in perfect unison. And with parrots and sparrows winging in formations in the sky overhead, the scene looked like a picture postcard. Nature seemed tuned to celebration mode.

A file of labourers was proceeding along the edge of the field. This was the longer route. Eshwar, Dharni and Shivo wanted to report to work early. So the trio took a Short cut.

people (domestic servants, drivers, clerks, peons, watchmen, gardeners, etc.) exposure to media (especially television), etc. English words largely by way of aural inputs have become part of the common man's vocabulary. These words are however, pronounced in a distorted way. For example heart-attack is generally pronounced as 'heart-huttuck', 'capsicum' as 'pepsicum', 'rubber' as 'rubbad' or 'lubbard'. etc.

² Dalit ghetto, at the outside of village

They diverged from the foot-track and entered the tobacco field. Thanks to such people's habit of cutting across the field to save time, a winding ribbon like foot-track had been carved out through the standing crop. It resembled a parting in the hair.

The *neliyu*, the narrow path between two fields was lined by rows of tall cacti on either side. Creepers had wrapped themselves round the cacti to create a lush green thick wall of a kind. The moment Bahechar *kanbi*³ came to the end of the *neliyu* and set foot in the field, he lost his temper. As soon as he caught sight of Eshwar, Dhanji and Shiva on the foot-track, he reacted as on seeing monkeys. "You rascals ... just wait!" Then, with a spade in hand he began to run after them.

Bahechar's cry cut through the silence of the outskirts sending ripples far and beyond. On a mango tree across, a monkey was hooping about. The women were stunned. "It's Bahechar the dribbler, that scoundrel!" exclaimed one of them. The sight made them tremble like leaves. Eshwar, Dhanji and Shivo took to their heels with Bahechar behind them. He was shouting, breathlessly. "You rascals I'll kill you today!" The women, were gasping out of fear. "Oh! The dribbler's gone berserk. I hope he doesn't mean what he says!" Nani was frightened. "The dribbler is as obstinate as he is insensitive," remarked Revima who shared Nani's fear. "Don't worry! The boys can run like horses. He won't be able to catch up with them. He'll have to give up!" Nani said emphatically and assuringly. Kashi just couldn't take it, she plopped down on the edge of the field.

"Whatever happened? Weren't you boasting of biting off his head this very morning?" Rukhi seized the opportunity to snipe at Kashi.

³ Person belonging to the Kanbi (Patel) caste; farmer

At a distance, the wild chase continued. Bahechar tightened his grip over the handle of the spade as he caught up with Eshwar. The latter was alarmed when he turned back and saw Bahechar closing in. "Dhaniya, Shivla! Run faster!" Eshwar cried out with his heart in his mouth. You vagabonds ... You think I've sown this crop for you to trample? Shame be upon my name if I don't make you pay with I your lives today!" The three youths could feel their hearts pounding, almost eone was hammering hails inside, as they were fleeing with Bahechar at heel. Never before had they known such fear. "The villain, we will finish him when we will, but if he strikes us with the spade will have done with us!" Shiva spoke, one word at a time, as running had made him short of breath.

The three were smart enough. They kept looking backwards as they ran to keep track of how far or close the dribbler was and monitored their speed accordingly. Then all of a sudden, much to their relief, Bahechar stumbled over the kerb and was flung down. He lay frothing at the mouth with his spade a few feet away.

"Oh! What a scene! The hunter himself in the snare!" It was a hilarious situation but no one dared to laugh. Bahechar quickly got up to his feet, picked up his spade and resumed the chase.

"Shivla, you have such long legs, why are you Jagging behind? This time if we are caught, he will smash our bones, that's for sure!" Eshwar burst out laughing even though he tried his best not to.

"Buck up, Shivla," Dhanji said to cheer him up. Bahechar could still be heard cursing, "I'm not going to let go of them this time ... I'll seek them out from beneath the earth's crust if I must but catch them I surely will." Shivo picked up speed

and with long giraffe-like strides overtook his two companions. They hardly realized that they had covered an immense distance of about 18 kilometres, from the outskirts of Jagatpur at one end to this area of Thakorepura on the other end.

Eshwar was relieved when he spotted Dhulsinh near the *kanji*⁴ tree, sowing his field with a *danti*?⁵ I don't think our legs can carry us further. Let's go to Dhulsinh there," suggested Eshwar, his lungs working like a pair of bellows. All the three were driven to the point of complete exhaustion, hollow-eyed and stiff-legged.

"What brings you running like this?" Dhulsinh asked in surprise, still at his work. Bahechar's arrival at that juncture left Dhulsinh's question unanswered, but he was soon able to grasp the situation.

"This is ridiculous! Full three of you and scared of a kanbi. How chicken-hearted you are!" Dhulsinh's utterance was cut short by Bahechar's threat. "There you are. Where will you go now?" He was so enraged that it showed in the tone of his voice. The three took cover behind Dhulsinh. Sensing the potential danger of the situation, Dhulsinh heaved the *danti* onto his shoulders. "Don't you take one step forward, as else you'll be a dead man!"

Bahechar wiped the saliva off the corner of his mouth. Panting heavily he gave a rebuff to his adversary, "They've damaged my standing crop, they could have easily gone along the edge of the field but lazy that they are ... today I'll..."

⁴ The pomgamia tree (pomgamia glabra)

⁵ Kind of farmer's sowing implement, tool

Dhulsinh brandished his danti forcing Bahechar to stop mid- sentence and charged at him. His eyes were blazing with menace. "You can get away with your balderdash elsewhere, certainly not with Dhulsinh, do you understand?"

Dhulsinh and the trio were classmates in school. Moreover, the relation between *kanbis* and *darbars*⁶ in the village had since long been discordant; like the snake and the mongoose they couldn't stand each other.

"I'll have to give them a thrashing today. That's the only way to teach them a lesson."

"Just dare to touch them. Can't you see this *danti*? Just one blow is enough to make you bite the dust. You think you can bully them, simply because they are *harijans*. How many times have I told you to turn back. But no, you just won't listen, now step out of my field or else ...The *darbar* in Dhulsinh became prominent as he shouted at the top of his voice.

Bahechar had been drained of all his energy from running continuously. And as it is no one could ever match the fanatical *darbars*. If was with this thought that Bahechar turned back, crest- fallen. Flinging his spade on the cloddy earth, he left in a huff.

"Dhulsinh, you have saved our pride!" Eshwar beamed.

"This is the stuff that *darbars* are made of! They dine on freshly slaughtered goat meat, not the whey which we eat," Shiva said, relief writ large on his face.

Dhanji was equally relieved as their good fortune had saved them by the skin of their teeth. He embraced Dhulsinh in gratitude. Dhulsinh was quick to free himself from the

⁶ Kshastriya caste

embrace and voice his hesitation. "Personally I don't subscribe to it... but you know what will happen if someone from my community sees it."

The four sat down under the kanji tree. The relief that Bahechar's retreat had brought to them was evident on their faces. Dhulsinh was impatient to know. "Why don't you to tell me all about it?"

"Nothing, our crime is that we walked across his field, that's all!"

"You haven't spoiled his harvest, have you?"

"No, no. We were walking along the foot-track."

"Then it's just that the sly dribbler has got into the nasty habit of picking up quarrels for no reason at all."

"He's envious of our people."

"The bagger is vindictive."

"Vindictive or not, it's pluck you need. Vaktubha used to tell us: A shoe runs out of steam in slush, a wooden horse runs out of steam in a race, a *brahmin* runs out of steam when it comes to taking a bath and *baniyas* and *kanbis* lose steam when it comes to fighting." Laughing heartily he added, "Lose steam, always keep this in mind."

Dhulsinh resumed work with his *danti*. The threesome turned towards home feeling exceptionally light.

Back home in the *vas*, only one topic was being discussed: Hope the poor fellows have not been hurt!

On the other hand, Eshwar, Dhanji and Shiva could not stop bragging. "That dribbler, what harm can he do to us? How we made him run after us! At last, when he could run no further, he stumbled and lay in a heap in the field, frothing at

the mouth. He was armed with a spade but just one threat from us and he turned tail!"

"Fantastic! How boastfully you speak of your bravery!" Saying these words of praise, Kashi whispered in Rukhi's ears, "The scoundrels are making fools of us."

At night, weary and exhausted, everybody fell asleep. Only Shiva lay owl-eyed. He could feel the veins throbbing in his legs. A stream of questions flooded his head. He was confronted by a kind of weirdness. It just refused to be dispelled. Like a herd of wilder- beast, the questions caused a stampede in his head, echoes of the uproar reaching out far. An unbearable pain overcame him. He had never felt so sad. All of a sudden, the tiled roof of the house began to spin. Single-handedly Dhulsinh had faced Bahechar, the dribbler. How he had made Bahechar retrace his steps. The mettle that Dhulsinh had exhibited was commendable indeed. Undauntingly he had stood, whereas the three of them had instead of holding their ground, chosen to flee. Everyone's life is dear to him. So what? What was it that had stopped them from retaliating? Wasn't Dhulsinh of their age? And did he not like them, work in the field? How easefully he had tamed the frenzied dribbler? How the dribbler's foul mouth had been locked as if by a *Khambhati lock*⁷. How completely numb the berserk horse had become! His galloping dulled as by fetters! How his grip over the spade had loosened! How in a split second the equine freshet had receded! Dhulsinh's 'loss of steam' saying came back to him. It made him smile. Then seriousness took over and he became lost in thought. At night! he couldn't sleep a wink and kept turning sides. The night seemed endless. Something like a glowing red globe started

⁷ Padlocks made in Khabhat (Cambay) in Gujarat, in demand for their quality

rotating before his eyes, orangish-red flames leaping out of it. If this continues, he thought, everything will be reduced to ashes. His mouth felt dry with anguish. Sweat broke out all over his body. He could feel his eyes burning. The atmosphere was charged with heat. Was it a bird that had hit the globe and was trapped in the blaze. As its wings caught fire, its eye-balls popped out and its neck hung limp. The red hot globe continued to throw up flames. Time went ticking by...

Everybody in the *vas* knew that Bahechar the dribbler frequented Somabapa's house in search of labourers. At Shiva's behest they decided to give the dribbler a good thrashing. However, they were plagued by a number of thoughts: Beating-up a high-born and staying in the same village would be difficult. They had a hold over everything, the village, the *Sarpanch*; they ruled the roost. Even if they were at fault, it was the dalits who had to suffer. And if the matter went out of hand, it could get as worse as ostracism. Support of all kinds would be denied. Life was impossible without their support. Come morning and they had to go to the house of the upper castes to collect a potful of buttermilk. How were they to get two square meals a day if they were not employed as farm-hands by them? They would end up suffering pangs of hunger. And be rebuked by the elders in the *vas*.

Shiva had learn to overcome the mundane issues which cropped up now and again. Much had changed after the battle waged in his head. One long *Shiva-tandav* it had been! Today, however, Shiva was silent as ever. Perched on the parapet of the Ramapir temple, the youths had just wound up their daily act of jesting. Kashi was on her way to buy kerosene, with a bottle in one hand. She stopped and said mockingly, "His name is Dhaniyo Dhoko but you should

have seen him running for his life yesterday.” Unwillingly Dhanji retorted, “One must always act prudently.”

Shiva wasn't paying attention. Somehow that night's scene refused to leave his mind. He could clearly see the intrepid Dhulsinh blocking Bahechar's way. Then all of a sudden, Shiva stood up and in no time vanished down the temple lane. Eshwar and Dhanji were startled to see Bahechar approaching them. Taking a cude, the twosome ran to take cover in the lane. Clutching at stones they lay in wait for the dribbler. The moment he entered the lane, stones flew at him, one hitting him on the forehead. “Who the hell is it?” He yelled out in pain. The blood gushing out from the wound made him feel dizzy and he slumped down on the ground. Shiva pounced upon him like a hound and dragged him by the leg. They beat him black and blue. There was nobody to hear Bahechar's cries for help. It was a covert operation that was carried out in the temple lane. The victim's cries were drowned in the fading light. Just as he was trying to turn over and stand up, Dhanji's powerful kick landed on his butt. Eshwar tugged at his *dhoti*. Once again the fiery, red sphere started rotating before Dhanji's mind's eye as he and Bahechar were locked in a duel. Bahechar jumped over the parapet and escaped, the loose end of his *dhoti* trailing behind him. “Damn you dribbler! Coward.... just wait...” Shiva shouted indignantly after him and spat at him. Just then Kasbi returned with the kerosene. “That was just a sample of Dhaniya Dhaka's strength!” Dhaniyo said to Kashi, his chest puffing with pride.

“Is that so?”

“Of course yes. I drained the dribbler of all his saliva!”

“Serves him right... but had you plucked out his penis, he wouldn't have been worth a penny!” Kashi burst out

laughing as she I tightened the cork of the bottle and turned to go home.

Kashi's remark triggered a round of laughter among the trio. They talked in gestures before darting off.

Poor Bahechar! He had fallen into the very pit that he had dug for others. When somebody inquired how he had been hurt, he lied that giddiness had caused him to fall and his head had hit a stone. How on earth was he to tell them that dalits had given him a thrashing? It would be a blot on the reputation of the upper castes. Moreover, Bahechar was considered to be a bully. Having taken a beating, a cissy is what he had actually proved to be! He could neither bear the humiliation nor bare his soul to anyone.

The raging fire in the minds of Eshwar, Dhanji and Shiva had died down. Shiva thought to himself, "You whine and the predator comes lurking!" I

Meanwhile, the incident became the talk of the *vas*, circulating from mouth to mouth it wound its way through the village. "Good, enough, the rascal deserved every bit of it..." "Notwithstanding, people more than willingly believed what they heard straight from the horse's mouth. And as the last embers of the dung cake in the hearth die down when water is poured over it, the real incident was sidelined. The danger looming large over the dalits was averted. Nevertheless, the trio alerted their people.

Bahechar's wounds were taking time to heal. Now and then, his hand went up to the bandage and each time he touched his wound, that humiliating scene would spring up before his eyes. Bahechar who had acquired the reputation of being a scoundrel, was actually coming apart.

Eshwar, Dhanji, and Shiva, on the other hand, were bursting with new energy and were in high spirits. A snake may not bite but raise its hood menacingly it must, if it has to survive. Back in the vas, people couldn't help raving about their valour. The elders were stunned. "Times have truly changed. In our time we had to not only bow down to the high born but also toil for them!"

To collect firewood from "Bhikha Temba", Shiva had to pass by Bahechar's field. Instead of walking along the edge, he diverged once again and set off on the foot-track, to take the short cut. Across the field he spotted someone atop the machan under the mango tree. Ongoing closer he recognized Bahechar even though the latter's back was towards him. He was hooting away the monkeys. Then, wielding the sling, he turned round. Shiva was merrily going his way, the collar of his kurta unbuttoned, his locks of hair flying wildly in the breeze, an axe thrown carelessly over his shoulder.

Brandishing his sling Bahechar approached Shiva and called out to him. "Shiva!" "Yes, *Bahechar kaka!*⁸ Shiva responded. The moment he saw Bahechar he was alerted to the impending danger. He was determined to give Bahechar a good thrashing if the latter provoked him, one that he would remember for life!

Like a pillar Shiva stood, a tobacco plant crushed under his heel. In a soft voice Bahechar began mildly while eyeing the trampled plant, "Shiva, it would be nice if you could go along the fringe!" Shiva was more than surprised to hear Bahechar talking so entreatingly.

"It's just that this foot-track leads straight to 'Bhikha Ternba', Shiva said smiling slightly. Adjusting the axe on his

⁸ Uncle

shoulder, he went his way, thinking to himself, 'Bloody goons! What a drastic change has overcome them. There was a time when this dribbler couldn't think beyond 'Hit and kill'. And now. He has changed completely. What a miracle it was!'

Bahechar sat down to straighten the plant by heaping mud around its injured stem. He stared after Shiva striding away, back upright.

Every evening the village boys gathered at the outskirts to play, *gadeliyu*⁹, Dhulsinh happened to go that way. Shiva was preparing to roll his *gadeliyu*. On seeing Shiva, Dhulsinh was reminded of what he had just heard. Shiva stiffened as Dhulsinh stood to talk to him.

"Shiva, you are an expert at playing *gadeliyu*!"

"Who told you?" asked Shiva feeling flattered.

"Gossip and wind are two things that nothing can stop."

"You're absolutely right."

"If you show courage in adversity, nothing can work against you!"

"That is indeed the million dollar truth ... the foot-track had proved too costly for the dribbler!"

⁹ Gadeliyu is an inexpensive game devised by village children. Much like the game of nine pins. Pieces of dried branches or cactus are planted in the ground. Turns are taken to hit the *gadeliyas* in the ground by rolling a piece of dried branch or cactus. The winner takes home the fallen *gadeliyas* as trophies. Ample such games are played in villages even today when urban children have switched over to video games, electronic toys and the like. Nagolchu is another game which is played by making a tower of flat stones and hitting them with a stone. Games such as these are responsible for the robustness and agility of village children.

“Make it a point to walk only on the foot-track whenever you go that way! Do you hear me? He won’t dare to say a word to you.”

With his pupils dilated and his teeth clenched, Shiva took position twenty steps from the starting line and then sprinted. He could see Bahechar standing among the *gadeliyas* planted in the ground. Gathering all his strength he rolled the *gadeliyu* and it went bouncing to the side across.

Translated by Dr. Rupalee Burke

Alif Laila

K.R. Meera

Once upon a time, an Almighty Serial Producer ruled supreme over the realm of TV Airwaves. The Commander of a vast array of production crew, the owner of thousands of novelists, He telecasted two serials at the same time through two channels. The viewer-rating of these two serials was the stuff of fables. The first one was perhaps many strides ahead of the second as far as viewership was concerned. It was about ordinary folk. The second one was about the rich and the famous. They were popular and family-friendly; the people loved and enjoyed them. The gay banner of their glory unfurled endlessly across the land.

One day, the Producer had a wish. He wanted to compare the popularity of his two serials. The peon set off towards the Audience Research Bureau. But, alas! How terrible was the sight that assailed the Producer's eyes as He compared the figures! The script-writer of His beloved serial-of-the-seven-thirty-slot was in carnal coupling with another serial in another channel at the same time. The result? His Highness' serial had fallen in advertisers' ratings.

He had become lax about these things only recently. If things were so bad even now, what if he'd been away on a campaign into the realm of Cinema or something? Blinded with rage, he decapitated the director of the serial in a single

swish. And besides, directed His production executive to despatch him without a single paisa.

Then He turned to his nine-o'-clock-slot-serial. As He scrutinized the figures closely, and -- alack, another shocking fact! Another carnal coupling! This time by the script-writer of nine-o'-clock- serial, who was secretly writing for other serials in other channels! The shock knocked His Highness to the floor!

These sorry events opened the Producer's eyes. "Woe! My poor helpless Serials," sighed He.

The production executive was called up and ordered to summarily dismiss the regular script-writers of both serials with minimum notice. After the next episode, they were to make themselves, along with their scripts, scarce. Then, the production executive was summoned to the Producer's room.

"Go; find out a new script-writer each day..." the Producer commanded.

"Otherwise you and I will part ways..."

The production executive set out to fetch all the script-writers he could find. Each night, the Producer would meet up with a different script-writer. They would talk of a new script. He'd ferret out the script-idea from the script-writer's mind. Then, he would despatch the poor soul, now divested of creative virginity.

Three years passed in this fashion. Idea after idea ferreted out fresh night after night by the Producer from newer and newer script-writers infused life into his serials: seven- thirty-slot-serial climbed to one thousand and five hundred episodes, and its nine-o'-clock counterpart, to one thousand and two hundred. A pall of fear fell over the land. Viewer-subjects stayed on tenterhook constantly; they broke

into cold sweat worrying about what story would be summoned to prolong the life of the serials. The script-writers were uptight, too. The numbers of script-writers who hadn't yet lost their creative virginity fell drastically in the land. Some of them escaped to Mollywood and Kodambakkam with their scripts. Others began to write for other directors in other channels under other names. Yet others turned to association-building or novel-writing. At last there was no script-writer left in the land who had some name or fame.

This worried the production executive who had no other means of livelihood. One day, he had no script-writer to present to the Producer. Fearing the Producer's anger, he stayed at home, disheartened, paralysed.

Now, this production executive had two daughters. The older one was called Scheherazade. Scheherazade was a bright young woman, unrivalled in her knowledge and learning. There was no book she hadn't read, no story she didn't know, and no serial she hadn't seen. She was the owner of a late-modern TV that could show a thousand serials from all over the world. She was also in the habit of flicking through channels day and night, except when she slept.

Scheherazade saw that her father was very worried. She asked him why he was so sad. The production executive held back tears and said, gently caressing her forehead:

"My dear, our life is about to take a turn. I may lose my job. If that happens, the only wealth I possess will be your sister and you ... we have a long way to go with our home-loan. Liabilities from the fall in rubber and pepper prices, besides. If the Producer doesn't relent, the only way out for us is a mass-suicide."

Scheherazade was shocked. But being an intelligent girl, she inquired about the facts. Then she said: "With God's

grace, I will find a way out. Let me be the next script-writer. Irrespective of whether I fail or succeed, script-writers will be liberated..."

The production executive had to give in to Scheherazade's persistent entreaties.

Accordingly, she entered the Producer's room to apprise him of the story's thread and rolled out a full story (as per the usual conventions of the scene, we may imagine that a bottle of foreign liquor, a few glasses, and an ice-box may be found there). The Producer heard her out, scratching his endearingly- balding head and aristocratically-greying beard. But it didn't fire him up. But Scheherazade could make out what he wanted from the expression on his face.

"If you will allow me, Sir Producer," she requested humbly. "I will narrate another story." Devil take the story, I want my ratings back, murmured the Producer who wasn't happy with the story, and told Scheherazade to proceed with the next one. Thus she told him another story that night too.

Here begins The Thousand and One Episodes.

Two

Scheherazade said: "O Blessed Producer! Let me tell you the tale of a merchant of this city. Once upon a time there lived in this city a great merchant whose ships brought back riches from many countries of the world. We could name him Eapen Varghese. He had a daughter upon who he bestowed all his affection; her name was Nina. The men of this city thirsted for the sight of her shampooed hair, lips glistening with the finest lipstick, and body clad in clothes tailored closely, to perfection.

The Producer-Sir started to sit up straight.

“Aw, what sort of story is this, eh, Scheherazade?” He puckered his lips. “How is this new? And seventy-five per cent of our viewers are Hindus ... so let’s not have a Christian angle. Tell me if you have another story.”

“Yes, indeed, Sir ...” Scheherazade said. “Let’s make the fellow who falls in love with Nina a Hindu. Just a name-change, after all?”

The Producer thought over this again.

“There are other hitches. Who’re we going to cast as Eapen Varghese? You know how little the channels give, girl ... we need a guy who’ll settle for below that. So you’ll have to tell the story to fit that. .. Well, since you’ve told this far ... Why don’t you write, um, four episodes?”

Upon this, Scheherazade commenced her script-writing. But by then, dawn had broken over the land. She said: “It is dawn now. The episodes to come are full of tension and suspense. If Producer-Sir allows, I will narrate the rest of the tale the coming night.”

The Producer-Sir looked at her and told himself:

“Cheeky wench! I will anyway finish her. But before that, let me hear the rest of the tale ...”

The Producer went off to the mega-serial shooting-location; Scheherazade went home.

When the second night arrived, she went to the Producer’s room and gave him four episodes to read.

“Not bad. I’ll tell the director to start shooting these from tomorrow ...” The Producer allowed it though he wasn’t totally happy. “Another thing. Add more suspense to all episodes. Our viewer subjects need something to hang on to.”

Scheherazade agreed. When the third night descended, she appeared in the Producer's room with the fifth episode's story-line. The Producer, who looked tense, told her:

"We have a problem, girl... We had an old Bollywood actor as Eapen Varghese. He's got cramps in his legs ... won't do more than two scenes a day ... but if we don't shoot one and a half episodes a day we'll lose money. So we can't have him ..."

"If that's so let's pick another story," Scheherazade suggested humbly.

"Aw, no," The Producer said. "We're through one and a half episodes. We've Eapen Varghese in those. So we can't dump him..."

Ah, Good Lord, God Above, Scheherazade groaned in her mind, my dad's job, my family's honour, our daily bread...

--She suddenly became practical.

"Don't worry, Sir. We'll twist the tale. Now, one fine morning, Eapen Varghese disappears."

"Where did he go?" The Producer rolled his eyes. "Last time we shot him, he had settled down in his office to look at his files and had ordered tea..."

"Oh, then it's easy!" Scheherazade's face was shining. "The guy bringing the tea finds the room empty."

"Where did the fellow go?" The Producer was genuinely concerned now.

"That will be the suspense, right?" Scheherazade got up to leave. "It is almost dawn now. Let's think of the next episode at night, Sir..."

The Producer returned from the location earlier that evening and sat waiting for Scheherazade and the next episode. Sitting by himself, he pondered, really, where did he disappear, the fellow who'd been sitting peaceably in his office?

Scheherazade arrived at the regular hour. She continued:

"Eapen Varghese's disappearance is a mystery. It creates uproar in the land. Daughter Nina Eapen Varghese prepares to take over the management of the factory orphaned by his disappearance. From now on, we will tell our story around Nina Eapen Varghese."

"No, no, no," The Producer shook his head. "That's a girl with a face like cold rice-gruel. Maximum five scenes with her per month, that's the best we can have. More, and people will break their own TV sets. Not that angle..."

"Ok then. Not that angle." Memory of her family's want made Scheherazade's words bold. "There's uproar in the land over Eapen Varghese's disappearance. There's pressure on Nina to take over the orphaned factory. Employees force her to go to the factory. When she reaches there - a shocking sight awaits her ... a woman in the Managing Director's chair!"

"Which woman?" The Producer wanted to know.

"Dawn has come, and we didn't know," Scheherazade got up. "Next episode tomorrow, same time."

The Producer sat up the next night, waiting for her. Scheherazade arrived, and narrated the story.

But, just two days later, the actress who was playing Nina Eapen Varghese eloped with the director of another serial. She declared that she was married according to the rules applicable to heavenly entertainers, the *Gandharvas*, and that she would henceforth act only in her husband's serials.

The last shot was of Nina Eapen Varghese sitting down to lunch. Scheherazade made the maid speak of how Nina left for college after lunch on her two-wheeler, and how it got hit by a car. She also arranged for a garlanded photograph of Nina in the next episode.

Thus Scheherazade glided from Campus Love-story to Action and to Tear-jerker, Marital -tension, and Horror-story, in that order.

Rocking back and forth between life and death, what could Scheherazade rewrite, except stories?

At your fingertips, O Guardian of the Universe, our lives - she told herself. And at my fingertips, characters from serials.

Each night, characters appeared before her, waiting to be murdered, debarred, romanced and rejected.

Three hundred and sixty-five nights passed this way. Producer-Sir was on Cloud Nine. Scheherazade used many-hued tales, heard and unheard, in her script. The serial's rating had broken through the roof.

"Let's ask the viewers how they'd like the next episode to be. Let's let the majority opinion guide the story. A special gift - a kerchief - for selected entries!" Scheherazade suggested.

"Right," the Producer agreed. "Viewers will need it anyway!"

But viewers needed much more. A kerchief was nothing; every evening, they presented themselves before the TV exactly on time for the serial, armed with bed sheets. During commercial breaks in the half-an-hour telecast, they wandered around, despondent, in search of fresh sheets to wipe their eyes.

Scheherazade completed another three hundred and sixty-five nights. But the Producer's enthusiasm, too, had gone up in leaps and bounds as the days passed. Why not end it now since it's gone this far, many began to ask.

But Scheherazade was unfazed. She went on till Eapen Varghese who'd fled the country, returned (following relief from leg-muscle cramps), brought into the open a secret wife and family, accepted Janardanan as his son-in-law, and Nina, stung by this, reappeared as a spook (following the return of the actress disillusioned in marriage, begging for a role). By then, another three hundred and sixty-five days had passed.

And by that time, the serial's rating was reaching for the stratosphere. The Producer was very pleased indeed. He summoned Scheherazade and her father the production executive to his side and said: "O Wise Young Woman, this serial is spell-binding, indeed. You have taught me many things. You convinced me that viewers are but dolls that dance to script-writers' tunes. Through the thousand episodes you filled my soul with divine ambrosia! Now I am all the more enthused by production!"

The production executive entered the room in the middle of this speech with the latest rating-charts. He asked the Producer who was shedding tears of joy seeing them:

"O Your Highness, am I allowed to keep my job? Will you dismiss me?"

His Highness the Producer burst into tears. "Never, my friend, never."

Delighted at this, Scheherazade gave the serial a happy ending in the next episode. And the Producer? He aired the serial first in the government channel, then in a private channel, and finally made a movie out of it which was a

thumping hit. He ordered his serial company to enclose the original script in a golden case and keep it under lock and key.

Here ends the marvelous, wise, and rare story of The Thousand and One Episodes.

Or maybe, it begins (after all, a second part can always be launched).

For the suspense scene in that yet-to-be-shot Episode Thousand and Two we have two options:

One, the Producer, who lost his heart to Scheherazade's alluring story-telling, marries her. Before long, attracted by a sixteen-year-old who came seeking a role, Producer makes a grand announcement -- "From today, Mayavinodini will breathe life into the role of my wife" -- and dismisses Scheherazade.

Two, Scheherazade gets married in due time. Her husband mercilessly tortures and interrogates her over many thousand subsequent nights about the thousand nights she'd spent in the presence of an infamous lecher of a Producer. She is so utterly drained that she can't narrate even a mini-story.

What will be Scheherazade's lines in those tense final scenes in which she will be de-story-ed?

That smashing dialogue, God Almighty, be so good as to write. By Your-self.

Translated by J. Devika

The Lover

Rajanikanta Mohanty

Warbling, Satura was on the way home. The sun was about to set. He was not far from home on his way back from Anantapur. Just six miles. For fifteen long years he has been doing this. Carrying food items or any other necessary things to the people's relatives living at far off places. Indeed his readiness to do this made him everyone's cynosure.

Satura was forty. Frail and dwarfish. A man fondly requisitioned for everyone's chores on festive occasions. He was well-acquainted with his villagers' relatives and friends. With an all-embracing attitude, he would glorify their relatives. His eulogy was so superlative, in a flourish of language bordering on fiction.

"Lo, your relative, what a man! Fed me with delicious dishes befitting the elite. Fish, various curries, sweets, what not! Really wonderful. "

He would never forget to sing the panegyrics of his own locality in amazing hyperboles. Satura formed a bridge between people and their relatives. A marvellous feat indeed!

Suave and naive, he could endear himself to all and sundry. On festivals like Durga Puja, Holi, Raja, etc. people would want Satura to carry their things to their friends and relatives. Satura's cup of joy reached its brim. He would be

overwhelmed with their requests and entreaty. However, he used to go on a first come, first served basis. Very much capricious, he was instinctive. Credulous too. His voice, a little bit piping. Generous in paying for things, often more than their price. People took him to be a muddle-head. He breathed free in spite of self-inflicted discomfort and troubles caused to himself due to his naivete. Yet he remained impervious to them.

But, he turned stultified and stumbled for an answer when asked about his family. A lava of torment seemed to sear into his heart. He felt hollow. Tears trickled down his cheeks to the shock and surprise of the questioner. Benumbed, he would feel like offering his sympathies to Sarura. Sarura would then leave the place crestfallen and sullen.

He had left his village, Sunapur, fifteen years back, ignoring his kith and kin, hearth and home. There, he belonged to a Pradhan family. His father had two sons, Santia and Satura, and a daughter who was married off before the old man's death. The old Pradhan too had incurred much debt to meet Santia's marriage expenses. However, before death he could repay all the loans. He had left behind eight acres of alluvial land for his sons.

Satura turned more reverent towards his elder brother and sister-in-law after his father's departure. He considered them as his parents. Never went against whatever they commanded him. . Far his brother, he would do anything ... he could climb mountains indeed. His brother was his dearest. No less was his sister-in- law's filial love for him. The lady, having no child of her own, showered all her affection on the slightly quaint Satura, her only brother-in-law, and cherished him.

Just after a year of his father's death, Satura got married. Lo, what a girl he got! A paragon of beauty who stole everyone's heart in no time. But strangely she left for her father's house disgruntled, only a month after her marriage. She complained to her cousins against her husband's apathy towards her. His brother and sister-in-law were his sole concern, she added. Frankly she declined to stay with such a blockhead. She preferred death to such a creature.

Since then Satura's world turned topsy-turvy. The sonorous stream of his life metamorphosed into a raucous cascade.

He married again six months later. Rejuvenated, he turned over a new leaf. Life was now roses and roses all the way. But the second stint at conjugal life also nosedived four months after his marriage.

One day, after hours of hard labour in the cornfields, Satura returned home in haste, exhausted to the core.

It was midday. He deposited the pickaxe on the veranda of the cowshed. He was about to cross the threshold of the middle door. He was taken aback to find his brother's room closed from the inside though his brother's wife had been to her father's.

Satura halted at the door speechless and listened to the ominous conversation between his brother and his own wife. Giddiness overtook him completely. Amorous whispers accompanied by romantic chuckles from inside the room whizzed past his ears and whittled him away.

"Don't worry, I own everything—the house and the property. I shall see that the bloody fool leaves the village brother whispered into his wife Tulasi's ears.

"If he knows about the relationship between us ...? she queried.

"No no, how will that dullard know? Even if knows, he will keep mum. Otherwise I shall thrash him or...."

"Or...?" she asked.

"Finish him off while asleep."

Satura could fathom the conspiracy. An inexplicable torrent of shock ran down his spine. Tears wet the ground under his feet, tears betokening his reverence for his brother. Without delay he set out, traversing miles after miles. At last he reached here Jhandasahi, where he had completed fifteen summers.

Jhandasahi is a place thirty miles away from his native village, Sunapur. Time has worn him out turning his hair white. Nobody neither any kith or kin, nor his brother has ever enquired him since then.

Dusk... Satura reached his modest hut at the outskirts of the village. Kept to a side, the bamboo-plank used to carry things on his shoulder. Then he called out: "Hello my dear, open the door. I am totally exhausted. So much work... do you hear?"

A while later he continued: "Why are you silent, are you are you suffering from fever? What a pity! How I wish you massaged my tired limbs. Let me not grumble since you are unwell

He unlocked the door and entered. Lighted a lamp. Pulled out of his bag, four new rings of earthen bracelets. Brimming joyfully, he burst out, "See, how dainty these are! Tell me, do you like them? Upon my name, be frank. O, why don't you speak? I see, fever is the cause. I shall not worry you. Let me light the hearth, fetch water. Then I shall tend

upon you. Put on the bracelets around your wrists. O, yes, let me cook rice for you first."

At this moment Nari Master called him again and again from the outside. A pitcher in hand, Satura came out.

"Hello, my boy, today I learnt about a hidden truth. You have never broached the subject. It's good you got married. You are lonely no more. Really you have beautified the house. But I am confused, tell me when was the wedding solemnized?" Nari Master said.

Satura listened to him, mute and crestfallen. Completely forlorn.

Nari Master queried again. "Why don't you answer me? Are you bashful about it?"

Bisia Jena, a neighbour, approached the master and asked, "What's the matter?"

"About Satura's marriage. I just want to know when he got married. Nothing more."

"Sir, why do you think Satura is married?"

"I was outside his hut. Heard his dalliance with his wife. Satura told his wife to put on the bracelets, and he even comforted her saying that he will tend upon her as she was ailing. A very happy couple indeed! They will face no misery in life."

Nari Master laughed heartily while Satura stood sepulchral. Bisia led the master inside to see the bride. But the latter seemed not interested in coming forward probably because she was unwell.

Bisia insisted and Nari Master entered the room totally nervous. Satura stayed out. Nari Master, in the dimly-lit light, saw a fully wrapped woman sleeping. Notwithstanding the

master's repeated cautioning, Bisia pulled out the sheet to Nari's stupefaction.

"What is it!" Nari couldn't believe his eyes. Not a woman, but a *Pakhia*¹! Wrapped up neatly resulting in the resemblance of a sleeping woman. Struck dumb, Nari Master fumbled... bracelets for this Pakhia...!

He found Satura weeping inconsolably. With a touch of emotion, he called him. Satura felt awfully overwhelmed with a tidal wave of tears.

His real life was in tatters fifteen years back. Now his fancy was no better; the fancy, very much his own, has been caught and unveiled by others.

Nari Master requested Sarura to carry sweets, fruits and vegetables to his pregnant daughter at Sunapur. Like an apparition, Tulasi had been haunting him. He reminisced her romantic way of addressing him: "How sweet you are dear...!" Those words shook him to the core. He felt their sledge-hammer blow pounding on his chest still.

Distance and difficulties notwithstanding, he agreed to go to Sunapur after some initial reluctance and dithering. A spasm of enthusiasm of visiting his brother swirled him.

He reached his native village in the evening. However instead of feeling elated he felt lackadaisical and was gripped with fright. Terrible indeed! His village failed to console him, rather it spread a blanket of disillusion all around. What an irony! Gathering himself he drank deep the country panorama ever though for a moment. He felt sandwiched between identity and its loss.

¹ Palm-leaf-made article used as umbrella by the rural peasant at the time of cultivation, especially in rainy season. It resembles a human being in shape.

His dramatic arrival thronged the villagers around him. The volley of questions concerning his present whereabouts, his condition, wearied him. The village folk told him they had known about his wife's affair resulting in his leaving home. Then his committing suicide in the river, or some such suspicion. Some even said they thought he had been killed by his brother.

Satura heard them patiently but straightaway proceeded towards Nari Master's daughter's house. Delivered the sweets etc. to her family and busied himself listening to the old woman of the house about the village affairs. She related everything threadbare ... how Santia made Tulasi his concubine ... the rumours about his murder by his brother ... how the villagers were opposed to Santia who fathered as many as nine children by his two wives. And how Tulasi had died three years ago unable to deliver the last child.

She continued with her narration... that things did not go well after he left home. Santia suffered from rheumatism and turned a lame duck. His family life went like a ninepin, two wives always at loggerheads with each other, a large family banking upon him, and to cap it all, the continuous floods compelling him to sell out his landed property to sustain the family. Neck deep in debt and failing crops, the Pradhan family was almost like a cadaver.

Satura heard it all without a blink, though disinterested. But the moment he heard his brother was suffering from fever for a week, he broke down emotionally. All his sulk melted in the air. He rushed to meet him.

Santia clasped him sobbing non-stop.

"O, my brother dear! I am the most ignoble sinner. It's good you have come back. People accused me of killing you.

Now the truth is out and I am saved. Do tell me, where had you been?"

Satura stood, tears welling up in his eyes. His sister-in-law held him fondly and in a voice choked with emotion she wept relating the children's misery. He could not return to Jhandasahi and so he stayed back. Arranged medical treatment for his brother and took charge of the cultivation too. At times, however, he felt an ache, a pang, which was inexplicable. He also recognized that he had a sense of hatred along with love for Tulasi's children.

One night he felt tormented with gnawing loneliness. Tulasi's words, "How sweet you are, darling," nibbled at him deceptively. Wounded, he would remember while in bed, his brother's words of conspiracy. Frightening.

Restlessness led to sleeplessness. Some days he spent this way. Santia recovered from his illness by degrees. Now, he was able-bodied. One morning Santia's wife asked Sarura. "You seem worried and sleepless. Why? Do you feel the pang of separation from your sweetheart at Jhandasahi?"

Satura smiled.

Next day, he finished his morning duties, ate the rice gruel and took up his bamboo plank. Santia asked, "Where are you going?"

"Jhandasahi."

"What for?"

Satura had no words; he stood motionless. Santia and his wife felt deep sorrow. Their children clasped their uncle. Sarura assured them, "Don't worry, I shall be back, yes, I shall come back. Now I must return to meet Nari Master because I had been here for his work. He must be a worried man now

Rajanikanta Mohanty

as I did not return in time. I may go now, but I will certainly come back. Moreover, she was suffering from fever."

"Who is she? Suffering from fever?" Asked his sister-in-law.

"O, yes, she is suffering... let me be off."

"I must come back... must... good bye."

Bowing his head down at his sister-in-law's feet, Satura came out, flushed.

Translated by Brajamohan Mishra

The Other Jew

Kapil Krishna Thakur

Right at the centre of platform No.3, there is a *kamini* tree. It's not a huge one, but its top looks like an umbrella. In its shade Brajabasi runs his shop of seasonal fruits.

It's mid-noon. The heat is terrible. People feel like dying of thirst. Even the dogs pant sitting in the shade with their legs apart and tongues out. Since morning Brajabasi has sold three lots of cucumber. Now he needs some rest. All of a sudden Chennu's grandma Harimati comes from somewhere and tells him,

'O Bejo, have you heard anything?'

'No auntie, is there any news?'

'People have come from Boultali.'

'People? Who?'

'Bishtu Pandit.'

'Bishtu uncle!'

Brajabasi looks at Harimati's face for some time in wonder.

'What are you saying? Has he come alone?'

‘No, no, with his family. They are sitting in your courtyard. Bishtu pandit has told me, “Can you please inform Brajabasi?” I thought whom do I send to you at this time of the day, that’s why I myself have come.’

‘You have done the right thing, auntie. Would you like to have a cucumber?’

‘No, no, son. I don’t have teeth.’

When Harimati laughs, her sparse teeth with stains of tobacco look like some milestones that indicate her age. Brajabasi turns his eyes from Harimati’s teeth and says, ‘You then manage my shop for a while. A few customers may come. Sell one cucumber for fifty paisa and two for a rupee. Will you be able to manage? Tell me.’

Harimati once again laughs her toothless smile.

‘Do you think I am that same old auntie of yours? I now know the coins.’

Brajabasi feels relieved. He stands up. The next shop is Moti’s. Moti sells betel-leaf and cigar. Brajabasi shouts, ‘Moti, keep an eye on auntie, will you? She’ll be alone.’

Beside the train line, there is a series of huts. People evicted from Bangladesh have recently settled down here. If one moves across any one train line of Eastern Railway from Sealdah, one can see thousands of such huts. Those who came earlier have occupied comparatively better places close to the station. Brajabasi is one of them.

In the normal course, these people walk across the railway line. Odd, unruly stone chips around the track have been smoothed a lot under the pressure of feet. If one takes a three-minute walk down this road and crosses around ten to twelve huts, one reaches Braja’s hut.

These huts are indeed very low. They look almost like igloos of the Eskimos. In order to get in, one needs to crawl. Most of the huts have roofs of leaves. Only two to three huts have roofs of tiles or straw. Those who have not even been able to manage that have hung cheap polythene sheets over their heads like canopies.

Brajabasi's hut has a tiled roof. In this poor land, that tiled roof, as it were, bears a mark of elegance.

Bishtucharan is sitting on a *chatai* under the sunshade of Braja's house with his hands and legs spread out. He has lost the glow of his body. His bald head seems to shine more than earlier. The colour of his hair has also changed. Brajabasi has not seen Bishtu uncle for a maximum of six to seven years, yet it seems he is meeting him after a lifetime.

'Oh ho ho! How amazing! My uncle has come!'

Braja touches the feet of Bishtu uncle and then sits at one corner of the *chatai*.

'Tell me, how are you, uncle?'

Bishtucharan was feeling sad all this time but this question of Braja makes his eyes glitter in joy.

'O Bejo, I'm seeing you after so many years!'

They look at each other with silent, moist eyes for some time and then they begin talking all at once. They want to exchange so many words so quickly that they don't get time to shape them properly. Then after some time, it is Braja who says,

'So, uncle, ultimately you have come!'

'Yes, I have come. I could not stay there any more.'

‘But didn’t you say that you would not leave your native village even if your life was at stake?’

‘Yes, I said that, but at that time I didn’t know that one day ... I was a primary school teacher. Villagers respected me. I thought that was how I would spend my life. Why should I leave my village?’

‘Don’t talk of respect. What respect have you got in a country where you don’t have independence, you don’t have freedom of speech and no one pays any attention to what you want or don’t want?’

During the conversation, a young woman comes and touches Brajabasi’s feet. The woman is tall, fair-complexioned and has an oval face like a betel leaf. Altogether, she has a charming appearance. But owing to the tiring journey or maybe for some other reasons, the brightness of her beauty seems to have faded somewhat—the bright moonlight of autumn, as it were, veiled by a thin strip of cloud.

With a smile Brajabasi says, ‘Aren’t you Jhunu?’

The woman does not answer Brajabasi’s question and quickly moves back into the room. Bishtu pandit tries to suppress a sigh and says, ‘No, she is Runu.’

‘Runu! How quickly she has grown! I thought she was Jhunu. They were born back to back. Jhunu must have grown even bigger. Where is she? Does she feel shy to come in front of me? O Jhunu, Jhunu, come, my sister. Why are you so shy? Am I not your Bejo dada?’

All of a sudden, Bishtu pandit starts weeping, covering his face with his hands, and the sound of Runu’s weeping is also heard from inside the room. Brajabasi is totally bewildered. He holds Bishtu pandit with both hands and

says, 'Uncle, oh, uncle, what has happened? Why are you weeping? I cannot understand anything!'

Bishtu pandit takes some time to control himself. The sound of weeping from the room gradually dies away. Wiping his moist eyes with one end of his dhoti, Bishtu pandit says, 'Jhunu is no more, Bejo, Jhunu is no more ...'

'No more! What do you mean—"no more"? Has she died?'

'She has not died. She was killed. My beautiful, innocent daughter...'

'Who killed her, uncle? Who?'

Braja notices that the colour of Bishtu pandit's face starts changing the moment he hears this question. Within a few seconds his face becomes all red in anger.

'That dirty, rotten scoundrel Ferumiya. One day when Jhunu was coming back from college, Feru and his mates kidnapped her. Feru wanted to marry her. She did not agree. They assaulted her all through the night and just before daybreak ...'

Bishtucharan's words seem to stick in his throat.

Brajabasi realises that anger is mounting up in him. The colour of his face also changes.

'That's why we left our home so early. I told you to do the same thing. You did not listen to me then, you were not ready to accept me. Today you accept me, but for accepting me what a heavy price you had to pay! It's not Ferumiya only, I tell you ...'

Brajabasi wanted to say something harsh but controls himself. Within such a short span of time he does not want to forget that once they had kept the highest seat of honour in

their society reserved for the man who is now sitting in front of him.

Bishtu pandit helplessly looks at Braja's face and then tightly holds his hand.

'O Braja, you used to call me pandit. But now I realise I was the stupidest of you all. That's why at last I have come to you, Braja. Please give me shelter, my son. I cannot roam about in the streets with Runu. I won't have peace until I can marry Runu off.'

'Hmm!'

Brajabasi just gives a sigh.

Bishtucharan is the cousin of Brajabasi's father. He grew up in Brajabasi's father house. Though later on he went to his own village and began his own school, the close relationship between the two families remained unaltered. How can Braja allow Bishtu uncle to roam about in the street at this age and with a motherless daughter, particularly when he has gone through such a trauma?

Bishtucharan, for the time being, gets shelter in Brajabasi's house. He lost his wife during the turbulent days of 1971. Ferumiya has destroyed his dear daughter. Now the entire existence of Bishtucharan rests on Runu. He won't have peace until he can manage to marry her off.

After the murder of Jhunu, Bishtucharan was so terrified that he did not think it wise to stay in Boultali even for a single day.

Bishtucharan now cannot look at the pale, depressed face of his daughter without pangs of anguish. He feels restless in apprehension of some unknown danger.

Brajabasi says, 'Let some time pass. Things will be all right again. Then we'll try to find a good groom for Runu ...'

Bishtucharan thinks in the same way. At any cost he wants to get Runu married here, in this country. He cannot go back to that cursed land any more with her. But finding a match for a daughter is not an easy task, particularly when one does not have that known land under one's feet and that known sky over one's head. Bishtucharan knows that they are unwanted, unwelcome in this land where people can at most only look upon them as objects of pity.

How unwanted they are Bishtucharan realises within a few days. One day even long after dusk, Bishtucharan went on managing the shop with Brajabasi. Then he bought a bundle of cigars and two kilograms of flour and started moving towards their hut.

If one crosses the platform and walks a little, one can see on the right side a shop for local liquor very close to the railway line. With the onset of evening, the shop gets crowded. The air gets filled with shouts, shrieks and the pungent smell of liquor. Nobody warned him about this place, still Bishtucharan used to cross it cautiously. That day too he was walking with the same alertness. All of a sudden a flash of torchlight fell on him. A frail young man came towards him on unsteady feet and asked him, 'Where do you live?'

The sharp smell of liquor came from his mouth. Turning away from him, Bishtucharan said, 'Nearby.'

'O, one of those creatures who live by the railway line? *Banglu!* Ha, ha, ha...

'Banglu' and 'creature'—these two words pierced the core of Bishtucharan's heart. For a moment the ego of a pandit

woke up in him. He wanted to give the unruly young man an exemplary punishment. How many times in the past he had to whip young men like this one to bring them into line, had to teach them a lesson by making them carry a heavy load under the sun! All such memories came back to Bishtucharan.

But now he could not do anything. He sorely lacked the courage to protest—for that would only invite further trouble.

Another young man who was standing alongside said in an undertone, 'Hey buddy, this man seems to be the father of that new *myna*.'

'Which one?'

'Oh, that dishy one.'

'Oh!'

Bishtu pandit thought he had got rid of them. But after taking just a few steps, he was dumbfounded to hear the sound of a vulgar whistle. It seemed as if a piece of hot iron had pierced his back.

That very night, listening to all this, Brajabasi told him, 'Don't be afraid, uncle. When drunk, people do such mischief. But these young men don't disturb us. After all, they are not Muslims. They are from decent families.'

Brajabasi's words consoled Bishtucharan for some time, but could not reassure him. A burnt child will always dread the fire. Above all, people for whom survival faces the biggest crisis, those who are landless, homeless, rootless, whose destiny is to be afloat all the time in the river of life, how can those people feel relieved—Bishtucharan cannot understand.

When he looks at Runu's face, he feels more helpless. Runu moves around and does her household duties like a lifeless doll. Neither does she speak loudly, nor does she burst

into laughter. She has even thrown away somewhere her anklet-bells as if in great pain.

At the fag end of the afternoon, the women of this slum get a little bit of relief. At that time, they sit idly in the courtyards of their huts and exchange stories. They comb each other's hair, find out lice, and have fun.

Runu sits by their side very much like a sombre princess. The fingers of Anjali, Braja's wife, move through her long, black hair. The teeming crowds on the running trains seem to watch these scenes in pleased wonder. Some young men sometimes make a few loose comments, but the women of this railway slum don't mind them.

They may not bother. But the teacher in Bishtucharan feels disturbed even over such trifles. All through these years he had got used to a peaceful, intense life, now he finds difficulty in adjusting to this sudden change, to this open life, to this hustle and bustle. Can there be any comparison between that peaceful, clean backyard of his house and the shameless indecency of this railway slum!

Who knows one day he might adjust even to all this! But there is another question which has already made him spend sleepless nights. He does not find any answer to this question.

To a section of the people of their native land, they are spies of India, and here in India they are known as 'Banglu' or refugees. These innocent, illiterate refugees do not understand the politics of the state. They do not even know the meaning and significance of citizenship. They are not bothered about all these. Somehow they have understood that they won't get any help from the government—no relief, no rehabilitation. They are no part of any arrangement in any state of the world. Knowing this fully well, how these people go on living by the

side of the railway line and with what dreams – Bistucharan cannot understand.

One morning, a man who looks like a leader of sorts comes and calls out, 'Braja, are you home?'

Braja was combing his wet hair, getting ready to go to his shop. He comes out quickly and says, 'Yes, please sit down.'

The leader seems to be in a hurry. He remains standing and says, 'No, I won't sit. I'll have to go to so many places. Listen, next Sunday a lorry will come at noon. There's a meeting in Kolkata. We need at least a hundred people from here.'

Brajabasi hesitates, 'So many people... at the peak time of work ...'

The leader almost snubs Braja and says, 'Don't tell me about work – I don't want excuses. Don't forget my words.'

While crossing that place by the other side, Chenno's grandma listens to the voice of the leader, comes near and says, 'All is god's will. I have been thinking of you for the last few days. What about our ration cards ... we don't get even a drop of kerosene ... to whom can we tell our plight!'

The leader measures Chenno's grandma, Harimoti, with sharp eyes. 'Ration card? Old woman, don't talk about that now! If I give ration cards to people who live by the side of the railway line, I'll have to go to prison.'

Bishtu pandit was about to say something, but Brajabasi does not give him a chance and says, 'Dada, please don't mind auntie's words. But please see to it that next time our names are entered in the voters' list.'

‘I’ll see to it later on. First, think of Sunday’s meeting – Don’t forget.’ Saying this, the leader moves away from that place at a great speed. Chenno’s grandma gives a sigh and tells Bishtucharan, ‘We are all illiterate people. You could have said something, pandit.’

In utter frustration, Bishtu pandit looks at the sky and then says, ‘To whom should I say? Who will listen to me? Nobody counts us even as human beings.’

After a few days, one autumn evening, while having a chat with Brajabasi in his shop Bishtucharan sees a few young men moving from one shop to another handing over a receipt each to the shop owners. After some time, they give one such receipt to Brajabasi too. Bishtucharan can identify them to be those young men of the liquor shop.

Braja feels a chill when he looks at the receipt. Bishtucharan says, ‘Let me see what it is.’

He snatches the receipt away from Braja’s hand and finds it to be a receipt of subscription for *Durga puja*. Five hundred rupees have been written against Braja’s name.

Five hundred rupees! Bistu pandit feels as if someone has thrown him to the earth from space.

‘O Moti, how much for you?’

Moti does not speak a word. He only signals with his fingers – three hundred.

Bishtucharan bursts into anger and says, ‘Is it a lawless country? Do not give even a single paisa.’

Braja looks around with watchful eyes and then says, ‘You please stop speaking, uncle. If anybody hears you, we’ll be in deep trouble. You cannot fight with a crocodile when you are living in water.’

In a voice as low as it could be, Moti says, This is the tax for doing business in the station: big amount or small—you will have to give something. No way out. I am thinking of falling at their feet with a fifty rupee note. Last time I did the same thing. There is no other way out. You cannot lose your temper!’

Bishtu pandit listens to Moti in wonder, and says with sarcasm, ‘Wonderful, Moti, wonderful! If you can compromise with wrongs, then why did you leave your home?’

Braja feels disturbed at these words. He tries to find strength within and says, ‘How can we poor people give even fifty rupees? Moti, if we can protest together. ...’

With a wan smile Moti says, ‘From where do you get such courage? You have neither house, nor land, nor even people who can stand by you.’

One day Bishtu pandit seems to find such a man who can stand by them, at least that is what he thought when he met him for the first time. During Durga puja the chariot of Ram will travel through the whole country. It will come to this part of the country as well. That man has come to give the event publicity. Finding the man awfully worried about the predicament of the Hindus of the world, Bishrucharan feels relieved.

Bishtucharan becomes emotional while talking to the man. He says, ‘You people are our real friends, dada. We are utterly helpless, please save us. If you cannot manage citizenship for us, please do something so that we are at least considered as refugees. Arrange camps. Bring help from within the country and from abroad. If you feel pity for us as Hindus, why should you not do this much?’

Had the man known that the chariot of Rama would raise so many questions, he would not have come to this locality at all. Hesitantly he says, 'Wait, wait, you will get everything one day. First let us possess the Rama temple, and then if we can stop infiltration ... You know, dada, these are no problems at all.'

Bishtu pandit suddenly loses all his interest in the man for taking their life-and-death problems so lightly. He imagines saying in a resentful voice, 'Lakhs of people are roaming about in the streets like cattle and there is nobody to think for them. What a pity! You cannot give man his right to live and you seem to be busy with the rights of god!'

The sudden conversion of his initial faith in the man into absolute distrust depresses Bishtu pandit.

'No, we don't have any place for ourselves in the whole world, Bejo. You don't get anything to eat, still you somehow manage fifty rupees for subscription. They are saying even that has insulted them ... these are all devil's excuses. I do not know where this wheel will stop—I can only sit and think over it. 'It seems all that is left with us is this feeling that we have left our home behind!'

Brajabasi says, 'Don't be so downcast, uncle. We live our own lives here. At least nobody is trying to evict us. That terrible anxiety at every moment—that fearful uncertainty—at least we are free of that.'

Chenno's grandma Harimati says, 'Whether we eat or don't, we can at least sleep peacefully. Nobody is pulling our daughters out of our houses. We are not having riots over trivial issues. What more do you want?'

Bishtucharan shakes his head and says, 'I don't know, I feel so confused! What we should safeguard—religion or life—I cannot seem to decide.'

Braja says in a light-hearted tone, 'You don't need to decide, uncle. Go back to your native land and submit to Ferumiya's bondage. Yes, you need to save your life at the cost of your honour!'

Bishtucharan stops arguing, finding no solution to this debate. He has only understood one truth—they are not welcome anywhere in the world. Though they have grown up in the same atmosphere like others, have utilised the same resources as others, just because of religion, to them the world seems to be simply a place full of painful memories. To some, they are untouchables, to some others, sworn enemies.

About five or six months pass by. By this time Bishtucharan has started finding it extremely difficult to earn his bread. Following Braja's advice, he has started hawking fried chick-peas in trains.

Even Runu is doing something. She has learnt sewing blouses. Runu and Braja's sister Shiuli sew blouses. Everybody in this slum is doing something or the other.

Though the word 'chi-ck-p-e-a' does not sound sweet in Bishtucharan's hoarse voice that has taught so many things to so many students, he continues to hawk till late at night. Actually, he cannot sit idly in his house. If he takes rest for a while, the tortured body of Jhunu comes back to his memory. At those moments, he wants to tear his own hair out like a lunatic.

When he is in the speedy train, he seems to be free of the trauma of these memories. However undignified or ugly his

new profession is, Bishtucharan wants to lose himself in his present work.

Deliberately he comes home late. When he comes back, Orion starts descending down the arch of the western sky leaving the eastern sky behind. The noise of the railway slum also seems to die down.

Only Runu with her sleepy eyes waits for her father's return. On some days, even she falls asleep.

On the day after *Kali puja*, Bishtucharan meets Gobinda of Paschimpara. He gives him wonderful news. Ferumiya has been shot dead by unknown persons. Some of Feru's mates have also been killed.

Bishtucharan thinks he should pass on this information to Runu. She must be very happy. Who says God does not punish the sinners? Bishrucharan thinks that this is the right moment to visit his native land. This is a golden opportunity to make a permanent arrangement regarding his property.

While returning home, Bistucharan's mind gets crowded by all these thoughts. After crossing the platform the moment he comes down to the mud road, it seems that he has taken the wrong route.

He stands still for a moment, observes the surroundings and then realises the real reason for this impression. To his surprise, he finds the liquor shop, which otherwise continues to remain open all through the day like the ever-burning pyre of Ravana, closed, though the surroundings are full of the strong smell of liquor. Bishtucharan releases a sigh of relief. He says to himself, 'Everybody seems to be angry with us only. Nobody is after these hooligans — none kicks them out of the locality!'

They continue to flout the law in full view of lakhs of people, but nobody tells them anything. Everybody seems to be angry with the refugees only! — But what has happened to these men today? Have they been chased away by the police? Pooh! — Bishtucharan laughs at his own thoughts. These men are not as unfortunate as the likes of Bishtu!

Almost in a trance he crosses a few huts. Then suddenly he has to stop. Four young men spring up out of the darkness and obstruct his path, 'Stop, don't move.' The voice is known. He has heard this voice many times while crossing the liquor shop. But today does it not sound like Ferumiya's voice? A chill runs through Bishtucharan's spine. In a trembling voice he can only say, 'Who are you? What do you want?'

'You'll see in a minute.'

One of these men come forward and puts a pipe gun to Bishtucharan's head. Bishtucharan becomes dumbfounded in fear and shock.

Smelling danger when Brajabasi also comes out of his hut, they put another gun to Braja's head. And then within a fraction of a second, they do an unthinkable thing.

Those frenzied, drunken members of so-called 'decent families' forcibly pull Runu, Shiuli and other girls of Chenno's age out of the huts and demoniacally take them to the darkness on the other side of the railway line.

'Alas! Alas!' Bishtucharan cries out. Though portions torn off from their saris sealed the mouths of the girls, he can still hear the sounds of their groaning. To Bishtucharan, these young men seem to jump out of the memories of the Albadar group of seventy-one. After some time, Bishtucharan falls down to the ground senseless.

Bishtucharn does not know when, wounded by the handle of the pipe gun, a protesting Braja also fell in a heap by his side. When he slowly recovers consciousness, Bishtucharn hears Chennu's grandma Harimati cursing some people at the top of her voice.

Around himself Bishtucharn can only see helpless, dazed faces. The way one withdraws within oneself when one finds faith crumbling, these people seem to be sinking in darkness the same way. Nobody can understand how to console others.

Bishtucharn looks at some of the faces in perplexity and then he bursts into sobs.

'O Bejo, my Bejo ... for what then did you leave your home behind?'

This simple question becomes so difficult in a moment that nobody finds an answer to it. But today Bishtu pandit wants an answer. He won't calm down without an answer to his question. He stands up with a jerk and says, 'Tell me, you tell me ... where is our real home?'

Finding nobody giving any answer to his question, in anger and grief Bishtu pandit starts hitting himself. Then, all of a sudden, there seems to be a change in him. Seeing the last train for Bongaon coming, he starts running down the track in utter desperation, crying out, 'O my Runu ... O my Jhunu ...'

At one point of time this cry gets mingled with the whistle of the train. And piercing the heart of the dark earth the monstrous machine too seems to run to an unknown destination crying out like Bishtu pandit, 'O my Runu ... O my Jhunu ...'

Translated by Angshuman Kar

Glossary

- kamini* : a kind of sweet-scented flower
chatai : a coarse mat made of date-leaves or palm-leaves
Banglu : a slang term used for those Bangladeshi people who when evicted got shelter in West Bengal
myna : a singing bird, here a lewd term for a girl
Durga puja : the biggest festival for the Hindus in West Bengal when goddess Durga is worshipped
Kali puja : Another festival of the Hindus in which goddess Kali is worshipped

Democracy Held in Bondage

Omprakash Valmiki

It was as though someone had thrown a big clod of earth into a pond of dirty water, whose waves had shaken up the life of the entire village. Outing the last sixty years this was one event that had struck the village suddenly. Right before the elections to gram panchayats the panchayat in this village had been placed in the reserved category, which had put the *gaddi* of the panchayat chief that Chaudhari Bhup Singh's family had held for several generations in jeopardy. As the news spread all over, the politics of the village started hotting up. While the faces of the Chaudharis showed deepening lines of tension, the atmosphere in the dalit *bastis* was somewhat peculiar—it couldn't be called either joy or sadness. However, the faces of dalits of the new generation had started brightening up as though there was still some hope left.

Whoever heard of the development was simply taken aback. People of a certain kind had started assembling at Chaudhari Bhup Singh's *chaupal*. Climbing the stairs of the *chaupal* Chaudhari Chandgi Ram said in his heavy high-pitched voice: "*Arra babba*, what is all this that you've got done!"

"It only seems bad days have come upon these *kamins*. Those whom we send up with our votes didn't even realize

what would happen as a result. They who don't even know how to tie their cloth strings will now become sarpanchs and order us about.... The government has made up a scheme to disturb the peace of the village.... "

"You know so many people. Even then you couldn't have got it stopped? ... This was not a right thing to happen." Chandgi Ram gave vent to all his anger.

"These big people who hold high places, they who rule the country, they look to their own profit and loss. The, rest could go to hell." The Chaudhari said with bitterness.

His mind was in a state of deep turmoil. He wasn't able to figure out how the government's decision could be countered. He well knew that once the authority that went with being a sarpanch was taken away, he wouldn't get it back. Along with this there was the fear of exposure of all the misdeeds that he had been guilty of all these years: this filled him with inner dread. So far, the entire village had remained mute because of the terror that the family struck. Once this awe was cast out, they would lose no time in turning hostile.

The horses of his fancy were at full gallop but being directionless, they only moved in circles. From among those yes-men who crowded round him, there was hardly anyone who could be trusted.

He spent the whole night without closing his eyes. When it was morning he set out to meet the top officers in the city.

He fully believed that the officers in the city wouldn't turn down his plea and that they would have to reverse the decision of the government. The *izzat* of the village was at stake. Earlier also he had been successful several times in getting government decisions altered in his favour. But this

time the opposite happened. Wherever he went he met with disappointment.

After two or three days he came back totally exhausted. Nowhere had he received a favourable hearing. He was simply told: "This is a government order. Nothing can be done about it" At one or two places there were officers who were relatives of Chaudhari Bhup Singh's. But they too disappointed him.

"That means, the many years that we have been serving; does that count for nothing?"

"It does, why not? But in a democracy everyone must get a chance..."

"Does it seem to you... these worthless people who had slaved for us till yesterday will order us about now?" The Chaudhari spoke with deep agitation of mind.

The officer of course understood the whole thing. But this matter related to elections which were outside the purview of his work. He said trying to evade the issue: "*Tau*, you are getting agitated for nothing. It doesn't matter who becomes the sarpanch; you will still continue to call the shots. Not a leaf can stir in the politics of the village without you."

If it had been some other occasion, he would have twisted his moustaches even higher. But the Chaudhari appreciated the delicacy of the situation. He well knew that once the centre of power slid away from him, his enemies would feel emboldened. Those who were silent till now would also learn to speak out.

The nearer the panchayat elections came, the more disappointed the Chaudhari became. He had tried his best to see that the office of the sarpanch was freed from the reserved quota and put back in the general quota. But this did not

come about. In this connection he met important political leaders of his community also but no one was able to gauge his distress. Everyone said the same thing: "Just you wait. This time, in stead of being a king, play the role of a kingmaker. This move would prove even more profitable." But all these utterances only deepened the dejection of the Chaudhari. No one had any time to heed the cyclone gathering in his mind.

He had come to equate the office of sarpanch that had come down in his family from generation to generation with his prestige and as an ancestral property. There was also the fear that lurked in a corner of his mind that whatever the family had done in all these years might get uncovered.

Meanwhile, if anything had remained undone, the announcement of elections did it. As the dates of nomination drew nearer, his worries increased. He thought of calling a meeting of important members of his community and men of confidence in the *haveli*. He kept the matter a secret and didn't let anyone get wind of it.

The meeting itself was also kept a top secret. Many people came with half a mind. There were also those who considered the Chaudhari's pleasure their own. But there was one thing that was common to all—that no *kamin* should occupy the chair of the sarpanch. Almost everyone had said this. Everybody also agreed to it. But when the post had been put in the reserved category, then what was to be done?

They were all speaking in high-pitched voices. Master Bhola Ram was listening to the debate quietly. He stood up to say: "Chaudhariji, there is one thing that is clear to me. If you permit me, I will say something.... "

"Speak up, Master... This isn't my problem alone. It will affect everybody. Come out with what is in your mind." The Chaudhari urged Master Bhola Ram to speak.

"*Bas ji*, I wish to say only that now that the government has taken a decision against us, why should you try to extract ghee with the help of straight fingers? Where straight dealings fail to get things done, one has to try crooked ways to do them." Master Bhola Ram tried to prepare a background.

"Look, *bhai* Master, save this involved language for teaching *jaataks* at school... talk straight here. There isn't much need for any *lecture-baazi*." The Chaudhari's nephew Satbir interrupted Master Bhola Ram.

"Chaudhari Saheb, I was only saying—why don't you put up a special man of your own as a candidate for sarpanch? The purpose will be achieved and there will be no harm done.... Whatever will happen will happen at the bidding of your *haveli*...." Having said what he wanted to say, Master Bhola Ram kept quiet.

After he spoke, there was stunned silence for a moment. Everyone had started looking for a person who would heed their advice and who also belonged to the reserved category.

However, Chaudhari Bhup Singh didn't wish to take any risk—tomorrow the man might turn against him. So he chose to keep quiet. But Chaudhari Tegha Singh liked the idea. So trimming his moustaches, he said: "Sarpanchji, what the Master has said has a lot of substance. Do you know of any reliable *kamin*, Master, who will carry on his *sarpanchi* at the behest of the village headman?

"Yes, sir, there will be many of this kindIf I have Chaudhari Saheb's permission, I have a name in mind." The Master said hesitatingly.

Everybody started looking at him inquisitively. The Chaudhary glared at the Master, which he was not able to see.

"Master, tell us quickly who such a person can be?" Thekedar Sunil Singh said with emphasis.

" .. Ji, Chaudhari Saheb's ploughman, Karma...?" The Master said quickly. At this the Chaudhari jumped up.

"*Abey*, Master, you haven't come after drinking, have you? That illiterate uncouth rustic, will he become the sarpanch ...?"

The Master felt as though some mistake had been made. He tried to say something but the Chaudhari shut him up.

With a view to quietening Bhup Singh down, Chaudhari Tegha Singh said: "The idea isn't bad, sarpanchji. Karma may well occupy the chair but it will only be your wooden sandals that will rule ... just give it a thought."

Chaudhari Bhup Singh feared that the matter might not slip away from his hands. So with a view to convincing everyone, he said: "This is not a light-hearted matter as you seem to think. There is no trusting these *kamins*, is there?— They might take a u-turn tomorrow... Then there will be nothing left but disputes ... I have a proposal in mind. Consider it if you think it proper—Why don't we ensure that the elections are not held here at all..?"

"How will that be ensured ...?"

Thekedar Sunil raised a doubt.

"... It is possible.... If no one from the village files nomination papers, how will the elections be held? The government will have to bend.... So long as elections are not held, the panchayat just cannot be constituted."

At this proposal of the Chaudhari everyone started talking in hushed tones. While several people looked at the Chaudhari with surprise, there were several others whose faces showed their joy at his view. The reaction was mixed. One or two persons even mildly raised the question of whether the people of the village would agree to this. For sometime there was silence. This was broken by Vijay Singh. He stood up to say: "Sarpanchji, boycotting the elections means opposing the government order. This can produce negative results also for the village. It can even affect the development of the village."

Thekedar Sunil Singh almost shrieked: "When the government has put these illiterate and ignorant people on our heads, is there any alternative left for us?" He gave evidence of his faithfulness to the Chaudhari.

Vijay Singh said without getting worked up: "In a democracy the difference between the big and the small needs to be forgotten and there has to be a sharing of things. But by following the suggestion you are going against democracy itself."

Vijay Singh's argument had turned the drift of the discussion. The Chaudhari however made another move: "When did we say that we are against democracy? We have believed in panchayati raj from ancient times. All decisions of our society have been taken only by panchayats. It is we who have given democracy to the world. That's why our society is knit together even today. It's all part of democracy. Whatever is wrong—why is that being inflicted on us in the name of democracy?"

Vijay Singh didn't like to debate the issue. But he was also very familiar with the way panchayats had been used to further caste interests.... In soft words he said: "I only wish to

say that the real aim of the panchayat is achieved only when everyone gets justice. The office of sarpanch of this panchayat has been reserved for a dalit. So it's also quite wrong to prevent that from happening. Without reservation you do not permit a dalit from reaching up to that position."

"Who is stopping them? Let them fight the election and let them win?" The Chaudhari said with emphasis.

"Have you allowed anyone to win during all these years?" Vijay Singh said with distress.

"Look, sonny, don't let the surge of youth make you utter things that are wrong. Do they have the capability to become a sarpanch? Just sit down quietly... Let whatever is being said complete itself. If you are dreaming of becoming a leader of these *kamins* and going to Delhi, forget it.... Dilli is still far off." Glaring at him, the Chaudhari put an end to his obsession with democracy.

After this no one had any guts to oppose what the Chaudhari had proposed. For sometime there was complete silence. Then people started slipping away one by one.

The Chaudhari's decision had received the stamp of silent approval. The Thekedar and Chaudhari Tegha Singh continued to sit till the endThekedar Sunil Singh said to the Chaudhari: "What are your commands for us ...?"

Pushing the large pillow lying on the *diwan* between his thighs, he said: "What is there to say? It's all clear right in front ... No one is to go from the village to file nomination papers. This is to be ensured. And if someone does file a nomination, it is to be withdrawn, or it must be got rejected. For this we must use whatever method seems right."

Chaudhari Tegha Singh said addressing the Thekedar: "There shouldn't be any negligence in this. *Saam, daam, dand,*

bhed—[incantation, bribery, threat and guile] Whatever method is necessary has to be adopted. This matter involves the *izzat* of the village.”

A peculiar kind of tension had been produced in the village. Vijay Singh had come out from there with a deep sense of disappointment. But there were several questions that faced him. To what extent could he go on opposing all this particularly when he knew that panchayat raj had always been anti-dalit. He was not in a position to do anything. So his opposition turned out to be merely paper opposition. He became silent and stayed at home.

In this atmosphere no one was willing to speak out freely. This was also what Chaudhari Bhup Singh wanted.

Even so twenty-six people filed their nomination papers. The Chaudharis strongmen had tried hard to intimidate those filing nomination papers but still the nomination papers had been filed. This was a sign that the common people were going against the Chaudhari. This had happened for the first time. But suddenly something happened that altered the atmosphere of the village on the caste basis. All the candidates belonging to the general category took back their nomination. Only the nomination of six reserved category candidates remained unwithdrawn. This dealt a severe blow to the Chaudhari.

From the next day itself the entire village had started boycotting the six people. First of all the Thekedar said to Rup Chand after slapping him. “Mind you, Rup Chand, this is only the beginning. Go and take back your name tomorrow. Or else you will lose your life even before you become the sarpanch....”

Rup Chand also seemed determined to fight it out: “Fight the elections I will, whatever be the consequences.”

"All right, we shall also see how you become the sarpanch." Thekedar Sunil Singh went away threatening him.

Rup Chand taking some people of the *basti* went to the police station with the intention to file a report. But the inspector declined to register it: "Elections are in the air. You wish to break the peace of the village."

"I have filled in my nomination for the responsibilities of the sarpanch. Thekedar Sunil Singh has slapped me in the open and has tried to intimidate me into withdrawing my nomination. I have come to lodge a report against him and..."

He wasn't able to complete what he had come to say when the inspector interrupted him: "If this is how things are, why do you have to fight the election? Take back the nomination."

"Why should I take it back? When the constitution has given me this right as a citizen, who is the Thekedar to prevent me from fighting the election? You are the guardian of law and order and the constitution. That is why I have come to you to file a report. Please write it down."

"So, you will instruct me what law and right are. Get you gone, I won't write the report." The inspector giving a demonstration of his arrogance tried to make Rup Chand see his proper place.

Rup Chand found the attitude of the inspector unbearable. But he wasn't able to understand why he was unwilling to register the report: "Darogaji, if the police joins hands with the goondas, who will be with people like us? There is an effort going on to ensure that elections to the village panchayat are not held because this time the office of sarpanch is reserved for a dalit and you too ..."

"When you know all this, why are you putting your life in danger? *Bawale bandar*, bring up your children quietly and keep serving the village. Don't dream of occupying the seat of power. Let those who deserve them sit on them. This is where prudence lies." The inspector made a strong move and tried to dispense *gyana*.

"That's right, *darogaji*. I have got a hang of things.... what is it that you want." Rup Chand said this slowly and getting up went away. The daroga thought that his words were proving effective. So when he saw Rup Chand go away, he, trying to twist his trimmed moustaches into a sharper point, said: "Look Rup Chand, if you and men of your community withdraw your papers, this daroga will always remain with you and will try to protect you in every way This is the word of a Rajput ... Or else, you are your own master."

Hearing him speak Rup Chand stopped. After a moment of silence, he said in a practiced voice: "*Darogaji*, what will you gain by helping people like us?... It's after a long, long while that I have come to understand these smooth slippery wordsIf I had understood them earlier, you wouldn't perhaps have got the chance of making a suggestion to withdraw my name."

Rup Chand had come to understand that it was all a game played by Chaudhari Bhup Singh who didn't wish to give up the ancestral chair of sarpanch. Thekedar Sunil Singh, daroga, and the officers and the other officials sitting in the *tehsil* and the court were merely pawns in that game.

Before he returned the news had spread all over the village that Rup Chand had gone to the police station in order to file a report against the Thekedar but had come back disappointed after being threatened by the daroga. This will spell great trouble for the entire *basti*. Everyone was trying to

convince Rup Chand. “If you stay in water, you can’t afford to be hostile to the crocodile.” But Rup Chand had decided that he would not take his nomination back. This decision of his had become a grit in the Chaudhari’s eye.

When he reached his *basti*, the entire atmosphere had changed. No one in the *basti* was prepared to talk to him. Actually some people had come to reprimand and scold the entire *basti*—that if they don’t withdraw their name, dire consequences will follow. Or else, they were their own masters. There was also a constable with him who was trying to convince people of the *basti* that the Chaudhari was a gentle, honest respectable man of good family who meant well for the village and that everyone should accept what he said, so they should keep away from the perplexities of election.

The hope for change that had brightened in the dalit *basti* suddenly disappeared. People there also avoided coming face-to-face with one another as though someone had dug a deep gulf between them, which it was proving very difficult for them to bridge. The fear of the Chaudharis had confined them within their homes. Rup Chand had tried hard to hold a meeting and acquaint the people with the situation but no one was prepared to come. They feared that if the Chaudharis came to know of the meeting, they would resort to physical fighting and stop them from working in their homes. If there was no work, how would they feed themselves? This fear was weakening them.

The other reserved category candidates who had filed in their nomination withdrew their names quietly. They couldn’t stand up to the pressure that had been exerted on them for long. Terrified by the kind of atmosphere that had been built in the village, they withdrew their names.

The Chaudhari was certain that Rup Chand too would withdraw his name before the last date. But this didn't happen. The last date for the withdrawal of names was over. Rup Chand's was the only name for sarpanch of the village, and he was declared elected without a contest. In a manner of speaking it was a unique event in the history of the village that should have made everyone happy. But everywhere there was a stunned silence. As far as the announced result was concerned, Chaudhari Bhup Singh's ancestral seat of power had devolved on a dalit. That too, without a contest. This was truly a historic moment. But the moment became the occasion not for celebrations but for mourning.

In a manner of speaking Rup Chand had been constitutionally declared elected as the sarpanch of the village. But he hadn't been given charge of anything in any manner.... He had got tired of waiting. But he wasn't given any charge. Sick and tired of waiting he paid visits to the election office but his plea remained unheard.

The Chaudhari in whose fields Rup Chand used to work dispensed with his services. No one else was prepared to give him work. The question of livelihood-cum-food stared him in the face in a serious manner. So much so that wherever his wife Rajbiri went to ask for work she came back empty-handed. In addition she had to hear caustic and humiliating remarks: "Where is the need for work now! You are sarpanch now. Everything belongs to you... Enjoy yourselves. Be a Chaudharain and order the entire village about." Rajbiri would come back feeling utterly humiliated. A few days later they reached the threshold of starvation. In other words the *sarpanchi* had become a noose round his neck.

It wasn't that the work of the panchayat had come to a standstill. Everything went on as before. The authority of the sarpanch still lay in the hands of Chaudhari Bhup Singh. On

paper Rup Chand was the sarpanch. But Rup Chand couldn't enter the premises of the Panchayat Bhavan because officially he hadn't been given charge. That was why he had no powers with him. There was hardly any government office which he had not visited and where he hadn't narrated his tale of woe, no newspaper in the city, big or small, where he hadn't told his story, but everyone was helpless.

A small village had through the exercise of its rights made democracy a bonded slave, to liberate which Rup Chand was haunting the city streets along with his family. Reduced to being a pauper, he had almost, reached the brink of starvation. Democracy had no doubt made him a sarpanch – only on paper, but depriving him of his livelihood, it had made it hard for him even to find crumbs to eat.

Possibly, Rup Chand dressed in tatters along with his family has passed by you, but then how were you to recognize him? Men in rags like him cross your path every day, which out of your own compulsions you cannot but ignore and proceed.

Translated by Naresh Kumar Jain

A Purchased Woman

Veena Verma

Word had spread in the whole village. Driver Maghar Singh had brought home a Bengalan woman-a short and dark one. Just today morning, she had come to Desu Ram's shop to buy dal and rice.

"No one's ever seen this woman before in the village," the customers standing by, whispered to each other.

As she moved out of the shop holding the packets of dal and rice, three men followed her. Following in the footsteps of this unknown woman they reached the outskirts of the village. Away from the village, where driver Maghar Singh had a *kachcha* house, and many a time his truck was parked.

Who was Driver Maghar Singh, what he did, nobody knew. He shared nothing with the village.

Some two years back he had rented this house and started living here. He had never entered the village, nor had he ever spoken to anybody. He'd come by truck, park, go into the house, and come out the next morning, just to drive off. What happened beyond the house Maghar Singh knew nothing.

A few times when he had gone to the fields of the village to answer the call of nature, no one dared talk to him. Who dare do so? Seeing him no ordinary man had the courage to

even greet him with a Sat Sri Akal. Tall and well built, one and a half times the size of any ordinary man, when he walked his elephantine walk, the ground seemed to resound. Curled moustaches, thorn bush like hair, fair pink complexion, bloodshot eyes. Maybe he was perpetually drunk. He was usually dressed in black. Why? Nobody knew. Black tehmat, knee length black shirt and black turban which stayed more under his arm than over his head.

Seeing him coming from far, women working in the fields stepped back a few steps. There was every reason to do so. Very often Maghar Singh would have strangers visiting him. His fellow drivers, with their trucks would crowd the place. There was an aura of awe attached to his name in the village. No decent person liked to pass by him. None had the guts to question him.

In this village no one knew that Maghar Singh was once a Police Sub-Inspector. He was yet a fresh recruit, when he was involved in a case of bribery. He had extracted money from a shady person, whose relatives had approached the minister and had him cashiered.

When the woman entered Maghar Singh's house, the followers were dumbfounded, "What?"

"Who is this woman? What is she doing in Maghar Singh's house? He has no daughter or a sister, where has she come from?"

The news spread like wild fire in the whole village. People from far and wide thronged his house but none dared to peep in.

"It's very sad. If such debauchery spreads to the villages, it will rub off on everyone's sisters and daughters ... ", one said.

"How do we know? May be she is his wife" the other said.

"How can he have a wife? No one's ever seen a woman, only young male boozers visit him day and night... even no old woman has dared visit him ..." said hunch-backed Naazar.

"He may have wed, my dear ... and never invited you ..." Dogar, the cattle-drover joked.

"That's why he's got your mother home for nuptials. Had he married, wouldn't everyone have known?" Old Jagir Singh angrily rebuked Dogar.

Everyone laughed, but nobody could decide conclusively. The whole day was spent whispering.

At nightfall Maghar Singh came back with his truck. He parked the truck outside his house. People kept standing at a distance and watching, none dared come near and question. In this way many days passed. By now that woman had become ordinary. She was no longer the talk of the village. She'd come to Desu's shop, buy, and go back. People stopped following her and clearing their throats on seeing her.

She herself had probably sensed it. She couldn't speak Punjabi, but definitely understood everything and answered in Hindi. Now, she would either go on the terrace or take a walk in the fields and talk to the children on the way. But no one visited her or spoke to her. What could she talk? After all she knew nobody. New village, new people, new atmosphere.

Her name was Lachhmi. Maghar Singh had bought her from' Kolkata two months back. For a paltry sum of twelve hundred rupees. That too on a sharing basis, with three other friends. He had gone to Kolkata to deliver goods, and on his way back got her along. He had gone straight to Ludhiana

where his mates lived, but didn't meet anybody. Eventually he brought her along with him to the village. It had never happened before that a woman stayed in his house for two months. He would bring in a woman at odd hours and leave her back in his truck before dawn. But this time, he had been forced to keep this woman, as he had failed to meet his friends.

Whenever they got an opportunity, anyone of them four or five friends, brought a woman, and then turn by turn they kept her, used her and sent her back. There was a strange unwritten agreement between them. They shared the woman and the expenditure incurred among themselves, and had a good time. There had been no differences between them in this matter or regarding the money spent.

Maghar Singh would come back home totally drunk, throw his turban in the corner and get after Lachchmi, He twisted and turned her limbs as if she were a rubber doll. And then fell into deep sleep, snoring.

And Lachchmi would lie in bed till noon like a dead dog; not knowing when the driver got up and left. Her bones seemed to have been ground to powder by the morning, and she would have no strength left to move. She would get up by the evening, bathe, twirl her long black hair into a bun, pin a flower in it and was ready and dressed by the time he came back.

There wasn't even a single utensil in Maghar Singh's house when she came. She bought two cups, two plates and a pan to make tea. She would also cook dal and rice for herself in it.

She made a mud hearth by placing bricks, plastered the floor of the small makeshift kitchen with a mixture of clay and cow-dung and washed and neatly placed the four glasses

used by Maghar Singh and his friends for alcohol. She exchanged Maghar Singh's old discarded clothes for two steel bowls, and his empty alcohol bottles for plastic containers for the kitchen. Now the kitchen looked like a kitchen.

Maghar Singh was not interested in how Lachchmi occupied herself, nor did he have the time. He had never eaten food at home, would always eat out before coming back. Yes, he did give Lachchmi money to buy whatever she wanted to eat. The first evening he had got food for her from the *dhaba*.

"I won't eat..." Lachchmi had turned her face away.

"Why?" Maghar Singh asked angrily.

"I don't like this food sahib ... I eat only dal bhaat," she said in a weak voice. "What is that?" Maghar Singh couldn't understand.

"Dal and rice sahib ...", she said with her head bent.

"So what, tomorrow you can have dal and rice, today eat this." Maghar Singh tried explaining it to her.

"No, I can't eat this..." She shook her head.

"If you don't" want to eat go jump into a well. ..," angrily he threw the food in the courtyard.

Lachchmi ate nothing, for not just one but three full days. She lay sick on the bed. At last, he had to give in and started giving her money for dal and rice. She started cooking her own meals.

"Sahib get me machchli one day, I know how to cook it well," Lachchmi appealed one day.

And the next day, Maghar Singh maybe took pity on her or just cared to remember, on his way back home from the

city he bought fish for her. Lachchmi was very happy. When she roasted the fish in spices the aroma spread all around. When she served him two pieces with his drink, he just gobbled them down.

"Lachchi, is there any more machchi...?" He called out to Lachchmi, sitting in the kitchen.

"I'll just fetch some more ...," so saying, she put one by one, every morsel of her own share into his mouth and then wiped his mouth with her sari.

"How handsome you are." Looking into his eyes, she said.

"Why, am I bedecked with flowers?" Maghar Singh laughed.

"Really sahib, you look very good, when you laugh ..."
She ran her fingers through his rough hair.

"Where do you get this flower in your bun from, Lachchi?" Maghar Singh pulled the flower out of her hair.

"I fetch it from the garden, sahib..." she said coyly.

"Has, your father planted a garden here? I haven't seen even a wild Akk flower in the village ..." Maghar Singh undid her bun.

"I wear it for you ... wherever I may fetch it from." So saying, she stood in front of the mirror.

"See how pretty I look..." She was speaking with her back to Maghar Singh.

"This mirror has seen much ..." Maghar Singh spoke seated where he was.

Don't know why, but she started crying, standing there.

"Why are you crying ...? So many girls have been here, none ever cried, all went back happy ... What is your problem?" Maghar Singh was irritated.

"Do other girls also come here ...?" She was surprised.

"Do you think you are the only one with breasts, there are loads of them" Maghar Singh answered casually.

"Then why have you brought me here ...?" She started crying again.

"I have paid in cash for you ... Do you think I've married you ...?" Maghar Singh hissed.

Lachchmi was quiet, and lowering her eyes kept thinking for a long time. Maghar Singh, drunk as he was, soon slipped into sleep while sitting there.

Lachchmi remembered, what he said was true, after all he had bought her. The deal had been struck for just a sum of twelve hundred rupees. Many girls from her neighbourhood had either been sold like this or sent out for sometime on hire. There was extreme poverty, and in her locality, flesh trade was not regarded as a sin. In fact a household that had a young and beautiful daughter, grew rich in days. But Lachchi was neither a beauty nor very young. She had turned twenty four but looked all of eighteen. She had a dark complexion like any other Bengali. She was short with a simple face. Her one beautiful feature were her eyes - doe like, with long lashes. Also her thick, black, silky and curly mane extending till her ankles.

At the first glance Maghar Singh hadn't liked her at all. When the matron had asked for fifteen hundred rupees, he had laughed.

"This woman, for fifteen hundred rupees? Neither height nor stature ... no beauty ... truly worthless..."

“No sir. Not even a penny less than fifteen hundred...”. The old Bengali woman had resisted.

“What is worth fifteen hundred in her ...?” And he laughed.

“She is fresh, sir. If not a virgin I shall return the money.... The Bengali woman highlighted her attribute.

“Okay then Here take twelve hundred rupees.... Not even, a penny more ...” And Maghar Singh pulled out twelve hundred rupee notes from his pocket and extended them towards her.

The woman, sneering, took the money and handed Lachchmi over to Maghar Singh. The deal was struck in her presence.

And now she was living with him for a short while; soon he would take her back. And then somebody else would come, pay her price and take her along. Such transactions would keep taking place. Brooding thus, the whole night went by and Lachchmi didn't get even a wink of sleep.

At daybreak Maghar Singh went out with his truck. At about eleven, somebody called out Maghar Singh's name. Half asleep, Lachchmi went out to look. An elderly man with a grey beard stood there. “Who are you ...?”

Lachchmi was surprised. Today for the first time, a visitor had come to the house.

“Where is Maghar Singh ...?” The elderly man came in.

“He is off to work...” She understood that he was known to Maghar Singh.

“I am his Bapu ji, Nihal Singh I've come to see him ...”

The elderly man put the bag in his hand on the cot lying in the courtyard.

Lachchmi didn't understand properly but nodded her head. The man lowered himself on the cot in the courtyard.

Lachchmi made him a cup of tea. She heated water for him to bathe and gave him a clean towel to wipe himself. The old man went off to sleep after lunch and Lachchmi got busy in her daily chores.

At night, Maghar Singh came home. He was surprised to see his Bapu. It didn't occur to him what to say. Hiding his face he went in. No words were needed, Nihal Singh sensed it all. What could he say to his young son?

Next morning Maghar Singh left home for work before dawn, without meeting Bapu. Two three days went by in the same manner. Bapu stayed at home, Lachchmi spent the whole day looking after him. She washed his clothes, cooked food for him and performed other small chores.

Since Bapu had come, Maghar Singh had never come home drunk. Nor had he spoken to Lachchmi. She too went about her work with fear. Even though she didn't know much about Punjabi culture, she would cover her head in Bapu's presence, speak with her eyes lowered and never addressed Maghar Singh. A strange silence had enveloped the house.

The reason for Maghar Singh's silence and shame was different. This related back to the time when he was a Police Sub-Inspector. He was good friends with his colleague Karam Singh. Karam Singh was in need of money for a law suit. And Maghar Singh without consulting his father, pledged the land on his name and lent seventy thousand rupees to Karam Singh. Karam Singh, too, under the influence of alcohol,

promised Thanedar Maghar Singh, his sister's hand in marriage.

Nihal Singh also got wind of the land being pledged. He couldn't believe his ears.

"What is this I hear Maghar?" Bapu asked him, making him sit next to him. "Nothing much, I have had an agreement with Karam. Whenever he is able to sell his house, he will return my money, and we shall free our land." He spoke with great conviction.

"There isn't much difference between an agreement and a deal, Maghar, they are two sides of the same coin. One may either strike an agreement or a deal it's one and the same thing. I don't think you are going to gain anything in this deal," Bapu said in a pained voice.

"Why do you think like that Bapu? He is my friend not a stranger." His young blood didn't take his friend's criticism well.

"What friend and what friendship? Everyone here is a pickpocket. Till you have money in your pocket the friendship is on. Once the money is over the friendship too is. I, too, haven't turned my hair grey in sunlight, after all. I've studied men all my life." Bapu flared up.

"How can it be over so easily? They have, after all, pledged their daughter's hand." Maghar Singh boasted.

"Which girl and what pledge ...?" Nihal Singh was at a loss.

"Karam has pledged his sister's hand in marriage to me ..." Maghar Singh lowered his eyes.

"And you accepted it? Without asking me?" Nihal Singh shook with anger.

"I was going to tell you, Bapu ..." Maghar Singh didn't know how to handle this.

"What is left now to tell, you fool? You have let me down in this age, Maghar. It's been twenty years since your mother died, and I have never let you miss her. But today you have made me aware that your mother is dead ..." Nihal Singh's voice choked.

"No, dear Bapu"

"No, don't talk anymore. Only time will tell if the pledge will be carried to its rightful end." So saying, Nihal Singh got up.

Nihal Singh's prediction came true. With the bribery case, the truth about Kararn's friendship was also revealed. Maghar sitting at home was planning how to ask Karam Singh to return his money so that he could defend himself better, when Karam Singh himself visited him.

"Come Karam, I was just thinking about you..." Maghar Singh said with uplifted spirits.

"Yes dear... are you well?" Karam said in a weak voice.

"What well, you know I am stuck in the bribery case. I need the money now.... was wanting to speak to you" Maghar Singh replied succinctly.

"That money... Well, it can't be arranged now. My house is already pledged. Don't know when I'll be able to sell it..." Karam said vaguely.

"But I need the money now ... I too had helped you once." He felt flustered. "I know but when I don't have any, how can I produce them?" Karam expressed his helplessness.

"What can I say, after all we are related," said Maghar Singh wiping his forehead. Karam paused a while.

"I too, had come here to talk to you about relationship ..." Karam took a deep breath.

"What is it?" Maghar Singh felt suspicious.

"O... dear... my sister doesn't agree to this match ..." Karam stopped midway.

"Why, is she jittery?" Maghar was as if hit by a rock.

"No ...It's a world of the educated now. She is no sheep or a goat that I can hand over her leash to you." Karam said harshly.

"Why, when you pledged her to me, wasn't she a sheep or a goat then?" Maghar Singh was shaking with anger.

"That was just a joke Maghar..." Karam laughed.

"A joke? Is this the kind of joke you play on people?" Maghar couldn't believe his ears.

"That was different Maghar. You were a Sub-Inspector of Police then, but now..."

"So the match was not for me but for my status ..." Maghar Singh swallowed blood.

"Leave aside the match ... We are still good friends ..." Karam wanted to cool him down.

"Friendship doesn't mean cheating others, Karam. You aren't worth my friendship ... God forbid such friendship." Maghar Singh stressed on each word.

"Hey just listen to me ..."

"There's nothing left to say and to listen to, Karam. You have milked me as much as you wanted to. Get lost ... before I lose my mind and use my hands." Maghar stood up.

"I am your friend ... be cool..." Karam was trying to mend broken ties.

"It's better to have an enemy than such a friend, at least one is forewarned ..." So saying Maghar Singh walked out, leaving Karam sitting there.

Maghar Singh had never met Karam since that day. Neither did he ask for his money nor did he talk of friendship or the relationship. And forever buried his dead money and the dead relationship.

They say a broken engagement is much more painful than, a broken marriage. A man is broken from within and then the wounds don't heal all his life.

He had lost his job, but Maghar couldn't bear the breaking up of the relationship. Leaving home and without telling anybody, he moved to Ludhiana. All thoughts of the job that he wanted to resume were removed from his mind.

He went to settle his accounts with the merchant to whom he had pledged his land. The merchant didn't give him any money, but employed him as a driver for his truck. Now he transported the merchant's goods to Kolkata twice a month. He became friends with other truck drivers. He was used to drinking earlier too, now he was virtually drunk all the time. He hated all women. He got home a new girl every day, visited prostitutes and brothels and indulged in debauchery. He had shed all shame. His friends still called him Thanedar. He had also written the same behind the driver's seat of his truck.

He may be immoral in the eyes of the world, yet he never even lifted his eyes in the presence of his father. And now when Bapu had suddenly arrived, he shied away from him.

One day Bapu waited for Maghar Singh till midnight. When he came back with his truck, Nihal Singh caught him at the doorway.

“I want to talk to you, Maghar...” Bapu said sternly.

“Ok, Bapu ji...” And lowering his head he started walking behind him.

“This girl Lachchi, I like her.” He looked at his son’s face for a few moments.

“Have you married her in the court or are you betrothed to her...? Bapu hit out with double sarcasm.

“She has just come by the way. She’s from a poor family, has lost her parents ... I thought I’d help her get employment in a hosiery in Ludhiana.” Maghar Singh lied blatantly.

“I know you’ve been a Thanedar ... But don’t bluff your own father ... “ Nihal Singh felt angered.

“No, Bapu ...” He was scared.

“Some like to count their acts of cleverness as their success. Being clever here, befooling someone there ... and cheating others. Life cannot be lived with cheating as a prop. But with the power of truth,” said Bapu.

Maghar was as quiet as the wall.

“I tried to warn you earlier also but you never listened to me. As they say, she went wearing a choker and was looted by her own friends ... “Nihal Singh tried to remind him of his past.

“I really like Lachchi.. She’s from a humble background... is an orphan ... and looks after me well... I am going to fix the wedding ceremony for the coming sangrand,” said Bapu.

Maghar Singh was in a tizzy.

What was this? He had never thought of that.

He couldn't sleep the whole night. How could he make Bapu understand? How could he say who was Lachchi and from where she had come? What for, and who all are the shareholders? Lying on the bed he kept scheming, finding a way to send her back and to get rid of her. So thinking, the whole night went by.

Next day he was ready to take his truck and go when Nihal Singh called out from behind. "Yes, Bapu ji..." He turned back stealthily.

"I have to go back today. We had our talk last night. I will be back after ten or fifteen days ... and then we shall plan the wedding." Nihal Singh almost ordered. Maghar Singh was quiet.

"And I am planning to put the rest of the land on Lachchi's name after the wedding, she is a very sweet girl. I may not have long to live ... if I put it on your name, you may waste it on your friends again." So saying, he started reciting the Japuji Sahib.

Maghar Singh could barely wait for the clock to strike twelve. Today for the first time he had returned home in the afternoon. Lachchi was surprised to see him.

"What happened..?" she asked anxiously.

"You just get ready quickly ... we're going to Ludhiana today..." He was in a tearing hurry.

"Why, what has happened ..?" Lachchi couldn't figure out a thing.

"Don't ask me too many questions pick up the box that you brought with you" Maghar Singh roared like a lion.

"But where shall I go..." Lachchmi was overtaken by an unknown fear.

"I will leave you with my friend, he will drop you off at Kolkata" Maghar Singh pulled a bottle out of his waist-band and put it to his mouth.

"But Bapu had said that now I shall stay here for always..." Lachchmi was tearful.

"Sali. What spell have you cast on the old man, you Bengalan. I believe you all know", black magic. You can turn a man into a fly and stick him on the wall. Did you mix something in his drink that my father was ready to put the land on your name..." He pulled Lachchmi's hair with full force.

She shook with fear.

"Where would I go Sardarji...leaving my home behind ..."
" She fell at his feet.

"Your home? Is this your father's place?" Maghar Singh jerked himself free.

"When a woman comes into a home, it is her home for all times." She clung to him crying.

"Don't be mistaken, this is not your home. You are just a woman purchased. I had bought you for cash. Now, time is over, so I'm sending you back. You keep calling me Sardarji, am I your husband? Call me Thanedar Sahib." Maghar Singh mouthed each word slowly and deliberately.

Lachchmi was shocked. Her eyes were glazed. Like a mute statue she crumbled to the floor.

"Have you understood what I said?" Maghar Singh again pulled her hair.

"What a macho man you are, can't you give shelter to a woman?" She looked into Maghar Singh's eyes.

"What shelter? Do you think I'm running an orphanage-here ... there are so many of them making the rounds here, swinging their skirts around. How many can I give refuge to?"

"A woman is like the river, once submerged cannot be separated. I'm the river, you are my sea ... You are my destination ... " Lachchmi threw the last dart.

"Don't try to impose yourself on me. You are no ordinary woman, who can be set up in a home." Maghar Singh pulled her ear.

"Every woman is ordinary, it's the circumstances that make her different." Lachchmi let out a deep sigh.

"Don't give me that nonsense ..." Maghar Singh slapped her with full force.

"If you so much as open your mouth, I shall crush you under my truck, Sali. Wherefrom has this pestilence stricken me."

Lachchmi's head hit the head-post of the bed lying nearby and she fell unconscious. Maghar Singh again caught her by her hair and pulled hard. Lachchmi let out a yelp of pain and half opened her eyes.

"I'm going to get the truck serviced ... Be ready by the time I come back ... " Maghar Singh shook her by the neck and left her lying on the floor.

The sun had set, but Maghar Singh wasn't back yet. Having cried herself out, Lachchmi was quiet now. She had given in to her lot and packed her belongings into her box. She had been waiting for Maghar Singh all evening, who hadn't returned till now.

A fierce wind was blowing outside. It had been overcast since the afternoon. Before leaving, she brought down the cow-dung cakes from the rooftop, put everything in its place for the last time, smeared clay and cow-dung on the hearth, washed and folded away Maghar Singh's clothes.

At last when the evening gave way to night, she started to get worried. Even though Maghar Singh didn't interact with her much, she knew him well. He meant every word that he said. And today when he had said he will be back soon, and still hadn't come, she had started to panic. He had never been delayed so much. He was usually back by ten, and now it must be twelve. Time and again she opened the door and peeped out.

Eventually, when her patience was stretched to its limits, she picked up a lantern and went out of the house. She walked for miles but Maghar Singh's truck was not in sight. In the dark gloomy night, for miles, there 'was no light. The wind was growing into a storm. It could turn violent anytime, and she could get caught in it. Tired out, she was about to turn back, when a few yards away she saw a faint black form. She quickened her steps. She had shaded the flickering lantern, against the wind, with her sari.

It was Maghar Singh's truck. It was parked on the left side of the road, and he was trying to change a flat tyre. But he was not being able to accomplish it due to the darkness and the hard wind. He couldn't find the flashlight 'in- the truck or probably he had forgotten it somewhere. For another he had had too much to drink, so he couldn't coordinate his hands. For the past couple of hours he had been struggling but was unable to accomplish much. A little away from him, he saw a shadow walking with a light.

Maghar Singh stood up to ask this passerby for help. He came and stood in the middle of the road waving out to the stranger, asking him to stop. The shadow came near and stopped.

Maghar Singh was astonished. He opened and shut his eyes many a time, rubbed them wondering if they were deceiving him.

"You Bengalan...?" He was swaying in a stupor.

"Yes it's me..." said Lachchmi in a feeble voice.

"Why have you come here...?" Maghar Singh was confused.

"I kept waiting for you for a long time ... when you didn't come, I came with a lantern to look for you. I thought in this violent storm your truck may have broken down ... and you may be stuck in the dark." She said timidly.

Maghar Singh sobered up. He looked at her closely. Her ankle-length hair flowing freely around her in the wind, her doe eyes filled with fear and anxiety from walking alone, her shaking hands holding the lantern, and her bare feet.

"Silly girl, what if something had happened to you, being alone on the way....?" He clenched her hair in his fist.

"I'm okay, but what if something had happened to you in this dark obscure night ...?" And she lifted her eyes.

"You're so worried about my darkness Lachchi...? And the gloomy shadows where I was going to leave you, no woman has ever returned from there ... not even a single ray of light reaches there." Maghar Singh said to himself but couldn't say aloud.

"You're so concerned about me, Lachchi ...?" He moved closer to her.

"You're my man, my master...for you I may be your 'purchased wife.'...." Lachchmi's pain-soaked, wounded voice, spread all around in the quietness of the night.

"Lachchi...!" Maghar Singh felt a sharp pain somewhere within. "Crazy girl, no woman is purchased ... circumstances maybe. Has a wife ever had a price? Helplessness does ... conditions do." Saying this, he enveloped Lachchmi in his arms.

Lachchmi like a frightened bird let herself be embraced. The clouds rumbled deeply, and the earth shook. Maybe lightning had struck somewhere. They both trembled, standing there. And a gust of wind extinguished the lantern held in Lachchmi's hand.

"The lantern has blown out...," said Lachchmi nervously.

"Now there is no need for a lantern, Lachchi... there is enough light now..." Saying so, Maghar Singh took the lantern from her hand and threw it on the other side of the road.

Lachchmi's long, loose hair was being blown in to his face ... errant...naughty hair. Maghar Singh took her hair in both his hands and wrapped them around his neck. Lachchmi's eyes started glowing like earthen lamps, wonderstruck, understanding same things and others not. She felt as if it was not a man dressed in black standing in front of her but a huge black mountain. The odour of sweat coming from Maghar Singh's youthful body so intoxicated her that she placed her head on his chest. She felt as if her head was not lying on a man's chest but on a rock.

Maghar Singh put his warm lips on her forehead. Lachchmi felt as if a burning piece of coal was placed on it. She felt, her forehead was on fire. A warmth was spreading

from her forehead, through her blood vessels to the rest of her body. And under this warmth her whole body seemed to melt, a body which had been frozen numb since morning.

Another peal of thunder woke them from their stupor, "Come, let's go home ... We should not get caught in the storm...." said Lachchmi lifting her head from his chest.

"The storm has passed Lachchi ... Now there will be no more storms ... Now we're safe on the bank." Saying so Maghar Singh lifted her into his arms and carrying her, started walking on the unmetalled track leading to the village, leaving the metalled road.

He had just taken a few steps when there was a sudden downpour. Lachchmi hid her face in his chest. It was raining heavily. Maghar Singh was completely soaked. He felt as if Lachchi was hiding her face in his chest and crying. He wasn't sure, if these were Lachchi's tears or the rainwater, whatever it be, he loved the wetness.

Translated by Hartej Kaur

Glossary

<i>akk</i>	: a wild plant growing in wilderness, with poisonous berries and fruit
<i>dal</i>	: pulse or split grain
<i>dhaba</i>	: a small commonplace hotel, usually on the roadside, frequented by truck drivers and other travelers.
<i>japuji Sahib</i>	: a composition of Guru Nanak Devji, that is usually recited early in the morning as the first prayer of the day
<i>kachcha</i>	: built with bricks, lined with clay
<i>sangrand</i>	: the first day of every month in the Punjabi calendar, celebrated with a religious ceremony
<i>tehmat</i>	: a sheet tied around the waist as a waist-cloth

U Cut

L.C. Sumithra

“On the second floor of the big building, the last room and at the end of the long corridor,” that was what Preeti had said. I saw the weak old figure seated on the white bed and felt very sad. Peeling the musambi. I asked, “Had Komala come?”

“She had come, but how is it possible for her to stay here leaving behind family responsibilities, tell me?” She said.

“Children must have completed their studies by now, is it not?”

“No both the daughters are studying here.”

“Oh, Komala is here? I didn’t know that she had moved to Mysore.”

“After the children came to the college level, she rented a house and stays here now.”

“In that case, it shouldn’t be a problem for her to stay with you for a few days.”

“She says she can’t take the smell of the hospital. And then she has put on some weight and finds it difficult to move about.” There was no disapproval apparent in her voice with regard to her daughter. For a little more time, we spoke of this and that and then, of the land her husband sold. Like how

olden people put it, “be damned and become a city-dweller!” She confided about his ill-health and expressed her sadness about it all. After consoling her a bit, when I asked her how Jyotsna was doing, she brightened up and said that Jyotsna was in Bangalore. A little while later, when I said I would leave, she said, “it’s about time Komala came, sit, you can leave after you have spoken with her.”

When I was studying from my Grandmother’s house, Jyotsna was my classmate from school and Kamala was her elder sister. But neither in their beauty nor in their personas were they similar. Kamala’s nature was fickle, ‘now calm, now excitable’. When she used to come to school, a servant would carry her bag and accompany her. One day, she had left school in the middle of the class and ruri home because the teacher had scolded her!

Even when she was in high school, she would plait her hair in an especially slack way. She was famous in the school for her long hair. And rain or shine, she would always have an umbrella with her. Sunrays were barred from touching her skin. Even while at home, walking in her garden, she would cover herself with a *dupatta* over the head. She never did any work that could roughen hands or feet. Always with a novel in hand; her posture on an easy chair was usually there for us all to behold. Newsletters on beauty and magazine tips—she would follow them all without fail. Having read that eating more vegetables is good, she would take very little rice in a plate, and curry, four times of that. Face and legs would be massaged with milk cream. One tumbler of milk would be mixed with five tumblers of water and that had to be used for washing hair and at the end of her bath. Amla, lemon juice, egg yolk—everyday a different thing would be massaged into her hair and she would bathe for hours. Her long baths prompted her grandmother to say that “Komala’s bath was

like Urrmila's bath." According to the grandmother's *Ramayana*, the reason why Urmila was not taken to the forest along with her husband was because when Rama and Lakshmana were starting, "Urmila who was bathing did not finish at all. Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana even crossed the Palace gate and had left. She had to be separated from her husband for fourteen years... it is not good for girls to take bath for too long." Grandmother's words were very entertaining for all of us. Komala would not care for it in anyway. When she would spread her hair out to dry it, to our eyes she seemed like Akka Mahadevi from a photograph we had- seen.

Her long hair was the centre of everybody's attention at college. She had won the appreciation of girls as well. She would twist a strand of hair beside her ear, and let the curl fall upon her cheek. For that, when she passed by, boys would tease her by saying "Tirukkural" – well within earshot. Those boys, who were enamored by her skin colour and her hair, wrote letters and sent greeting cards to her, making her father worry about her marriage, even before she had finished her studies.

Had a *svyamvara* been arranged, it's possible that many grooms would have arrived! Since a planter's son from Chikamagalur was thought of as suitable, a 'showing the girl' was arranged for. Because her father knew that she was beautiful, he was not ready to take her to be shown to anybody for bridal examination here and there. It was instead decided, that Komala be sent to the wedding of her aunt's sister-in-law, on a Sunday of the Jyeshtha month. The groom's family was told that their daughter could be 'seen' in the bus that she was taking, to go this wedding being held in Shimoga. She would take a bus from near their house and alight near her aunt's house.

Komala wore the sari bought exclusively for her, the previous year, in her sister's wedding: with pearl jewelry. And her hair would be slackly tied since it would then reach down, till her ankles. An almost invisible *tilaka* was on her forehead. With her was her PUC-studying sister and high school-going brother: he was needed in order to stop the bus. When the bus did not arrive after a ten minute wait on the road and it started to drizzle, Komala was worried that her make-up would be ruined. For her dressing up today, preparation was made from the previous day itself, with some help from sister and brother. She had washed her hair with the juice of *matti* leaves, dried her hair in shade and sorted each strand with care, and had plaited her hair in a way that would make it look four times thicker than its original size. She had massaged her face with cow's milk-cream the previous day. All family members discussed as to which sari should be worn, and only after a dark green silk one was chosen and matching jewellery selected, did she go to bed. She had taken an hour-and a-half to bathe and get dressed in the morning. Both younger brother and sister had moved about and helped her. Only after her mother hastened her about the bus arriving did she step out of the house, after checking herself in the mirror; just once more. Until such time as she crossed the gate and went out onto the road, the housemaid Gulabi keenly observed the way she had worn her sari and the way she walked; Gulabi followed her. Gulabi had hair that stopped short right at the forehead! She saw with mouth open, the long pallu and the excessive make-up that made Komala look like an actor in a play; she stood by the roadside. Only when the younger sister Jyotsna had scorned her saying, 'don't you have anything to do?' did she return home. Komala held her sari pleats delicately with two fingers so that they would not touch the ground. She stood on a stone slab by the roadside. When others waiting for the bus stared

at her and her hair, even Komala, who was used to such staring, felt uneasy. Finally when the bus arrived, with great effort she had managed to not get brushed by other people and got into the bus and found to her dismay that there were no empty seats left. She desperately wanted to be seated somewhere. Although she knew that the groom's family that had to 'see' her was in the bus, she could not muster enough courage to search for them. When somebody offered her a seat, she turned and saw a young man getting up for her. Afraid that someone else might take the seat, she quickly sat down. Just like the others noticing her, the boy who offered her the seat was also examining her and her hair—something she didn't notice. What must have been on her mind then is something impossible for me to say from this distanced time and space. The 'boy', having seen Komala and her hair reportedly said that, if he would ever marry, it would be with her. Komala's bridal examination had continued until the bus reached Shimoga.

Everybody actually called Komala a "*supaani*" or the delicate one. She had dreamt of marrying a man working in Bangalore, and the groom that had come now was one who grew coffee in the middle of a forest! Although she grumbled about it, the wedding took place and in a great hurry.

Now after all these years, an unexpected meeting with her! Is it difficult for her to visit her mother who is taking treatment in Mysore...?

"Where is Jyotsna?"

"She is in Bangalore. She works."

Jyotsna was sensitive and calm. Of simple nature, she was an unadorned dusky beauty. Once when explaining that people of different groups have different coloured skin, our Geography teacher Narayana Swamy said that the "people of

Kenya are dark in colour"; then pointed to Jyotsna and said "like her." Jyotsna was tearful. We all had felt sorry for her then.

But that year she scored the highest marks. Listening to her father say all the time that "her marriage is going to be difficult for us," she would get angry. In that very anger she studied M.Sc. and now held a good position. Her parents are now proud of her achievements. In the flash of a moment all this had come back to me.

The mother said, "It's almost time for Kamala to be here."

"It's been years since I saw Komala, how might she be now?"

She is older than me by four-five years.

It was difficult to believe that the rotund woman who moved the door curtain and came inside was Kamala. In place of her plaits was very little hair in a u-cut. Her heavy body had a face that was lacking in energy.

"How are you?"

When we asked each other that, we both became aware of the years that lay between us. We spoke of our children and homes. She put some of the food she had brought in a carrier into a plate and gave it to her mother. As the mother ate, our conversation continued. And then she finally opened up: "You did a good thing by deciding to work. You shaped your career just the way you wanted it. What do I see when I turn back and look now? I don't know why, but I am very sad, of late." I was surprised. The Komala who had acted as if there was nothing in life except her physical beauty had finally come off her illusion. Or at least that's what I thought

...I remembered the earlier Komala who was crazy about having long hair. Just so her hair grew long, she had once tried touching the edge of her plait to the green fence-snake. And in that attempt, she had slipped and fallen into the manure water pit. That morning, a Sunday, she had gone into the garden to pluck hibiscus, at the plantain garden's fence and just beside the compost pit, to prepare a shampoo to wash her hair with. There was a lot of water in the compost pit. The hibiscus on the fence was of a bell variety and it had grown in heaps. What Komala needed, however, was the leaf of the pepper hibiscus variety. Just when she was going to pluck those leaves she saw the green snake. She remembered Jalaja saying that getting one's hair in contact with a green snake would give long hair, and so with the edge of her plait in her left hand, she proceeded towards the snake. All eyes on the snake and she slipped and fell right into the compost pit! It was the rainy season, the pit had lots of water in it and, she was soaked in dark coloured dung. Chinnappa who was working in the cattle-shed came running saying "Ayyo sannamma" (ayyo little girl) and lifting her and stood her on the ground. Her mother had then washed and consoled the crying girl. Even after all this, her craze for growing long hair only increased and had never decreased. If one day she had applied *menthya* on her hair and washed off; another day it was to be mehendi. And she always sat on that easy-chair upstairs, reading a novel, forgetting herself...

Because of my mother's modern-ness, my hair was subjected to many experiments with the scissors. My hairstyle was something to be made fun of, for Komala.

...No matter how much we criticized her, I felt that she somewhere exposed all our inner selves. She ran away in the middle of a class because the teacher scolded her and then, although she gave birth to two children, escaped carrying

them around, growing them up and clearing their shit by putting away all such work, for somebody else. She lived happily and in the exact way she had conceived of happiness, without caring for others. There is no circus she had not engaged in, in order to make her skin-colour a shade lighter. And where is the hair now that was tended to for that many years? Her small u-cut however somehow seemed to be critiquing my life. Had fellow travellers in life's journey gone ahead? And is Komala alone, right where she used to be, like a rock set in running water?

Translated by Sushumna Kannan

Nepal

Biplavī, the Rebel

Illya Bhattarai

“**B**iplavī !” Mm... What sort of name is it? A wave of rage surges in her mind even at the thought of the name they use to call her. ‘Who are they to give a name to someone else? Do I not have my own name given by my parents that they have to give me again?’ Mm... ‘Biplavī!’

Even at the moment, her heart is floundering more than ever. Why has she been unable to adjust herself with these people and this environment, though it has been ever so long since she came here? Her love for her village, her parents and her cattle has least ebbed away from her mind. Every time her thoughts turn to them, she cries her heart out ceaselessly with a series of terrible hiccups. Poor little girl! She cannot even cry openly in front of all. If the leader knows that she has been weeping like this, she does not want to imagine the physical torture she has to undergo from his hands. Even at the moment, she is weeping secretly hiding herself, as a matter of fact.

Because of this, she knows how to pretend to be happy in front of the others while swallowing the tears of anguish.

In the beginning, she would often burst into tears. Seeing her plight, their leader consoled her- “Look, do not weep like this. There are many others in our group like you. At first, all had felt the same difficulty, for they had to

separate themselves from their families. However, later as they began staying with us, they understood about our mighty contribution and sacrifice. Then they followed us heart and soul. Now you know how happy they are for the opportunity they are given to join us and struggle together."

"The same is true for you. At the moment, you are in a state of panic, for you are just separated from the laps of your parents, but later you will surely be proud of yourself for the opportunity you have got to participate in such a noble task. Goodness, you happen to be lucky so you got a chance to participate in this mighty People's War. Now having involved yourself in this war, you will be able to pay off your debts to your mother land."

However, nobody knows why even after listening to their ever so many exhortations and speeches, never had these words impressed her. She had not in the least been able to digest their words. She could not justify that the game of violence they were enjoying was right at all. She was never happy with their act of forcing the innocent to follow their words and kill them without rhyme and reason. They had power in their hand but it did not mean that they could play with others' lives uncaring for their troubles and wills. She could never stand such atrocious activities.

However, what could she do! She was helpless like a bird in the cage and in front of the barrel of the gun, she had to act that she was also changed.

She had just turned thirteen at that time. She had passed the twelve years of her childhood amidst the killings, the fear of violence and the nauseating stench rampant in her surroundings. Since her childhood, she had been encumbered with the violence raged by the terrorists from her own surroundings. In the same breath, she had also witnessed the

oppression of her neighbors by the security personnel in the name of giving them security.

Her parents had a terrible fear that, they might abduct their daughter like other children in the village. As they began abducting the young children even from the classroom, they stopped their daughter from sending to school.

Though her parents had kept her at home, they could never feel secure. The ever-blossoming body of their daughter, who was in the first flush of youth, would further stir the eddy in their hearts.

They had not abducted any Brahmin girl from that village so far, maybe because they had been married off and gone somewhere else by the time they reached the right age to be abducted by these people.

Being a person involved in the field of education himself, he hesitated to break the law and go for child marriage. The daughter on the verge of adolescence was still with them, as a matter of fact.

Two of the abductors were familiar to her. They were the untouchable boys from her own village. In school, they were some grades senior to her. They had disappeared from the village for some years. The people had a sneaking suspicion that they might have been involved in the gang that would enjoy in the game of killing and violence. No one else knew what the reality was though. After all, their suspicion came true.

At that time, she was assured of herself that they would protect her though she had never spoken with them before. So to some extent she felt secure. She had been hesitating to speak with them openly, for she had exchanged no words with them before.

At first, she also degraded these boys the way the villagers did on ground of their being lower caste. Like others, she would look at them with the eyes filled with disrespect. However, contrary to the old thinking, they looked like angels for her at that time. She was assured of herself that they had been watching for an opportunity and they would free her from the grip of these unknown people any time, and would take her unhurt to her parents.

All of a sudden, she remembered them talking during their departure from the house. She was not sure which one of them had said, "The old fellow would always boast about his higher caste. After his daughter becomes a prostitute his pride will crumble into dust."

She did not understand clearly who they were talking about and whose pride would crumble into dust. Nor could she figure out who was going to be a prostitute. Indeed, she even did not know much about what it meant by being a prostitute. Yet she was assured, "Luckily, they happen to be the people from my own village. They will let me go free as soon as they get a chance. The girl whom they are going to make a prostitute might be someone else."

At that time it was still dusk. After giving fodder to the goats tethered in the pen, she sat on the dooryard and started reading her book— *He is Rām. He is a boy. She is Sītā. She is a girl.* Her mother with just brought basketful of grass, had moved towards the shed to feed the cattle. While her father had begun puffing on a *bidi*, after cleaning off the cattle droppings, making the grass bed for the cattle and washing up himself. At the very moment, there turned up five or six persons in their front yard, tramping their boots.

Everyone of them had guns in their hands. Supporting himself on the gun in his hand as one does on a stick, one of

them sighed deeply, picked up a tumbler placed nearby and gulped down the water and he said, "Don't you have whey, Bāje¹? If you have, do bring some. We are dying of thirst. Let us quench our thirst, drinking a bowlful of whey!"

Following him, the other one said, "Yes, you are right. The whey of this man's house is very tasty. In the past, he had sometimes given us some whey to drink, hadn't he?"

"But what great task had he performed by offering a bowl of whey after forcing us to work all day without a single penny! In those days these people did not exploit us any less."

"Well, Bāje! How are things with you? Do you still segregate the people like us or allow them to step into your kitchen? What are you preparing to cook for the evening? Lo! Cook for us as well. Now you also might have learnt a lesson or do you still brandish at us from your kitchen?"

During the lunchtime, they had entered their kitchen with their boots on. They had touched all provisions indiscriminately. And, they had eaten in the very plates which her parents used to eat in.

She and her parents had been mortified by their behavior and curled in one of the corners of the house. No morsel of food could they swallow, for the shadow of the terror had blanketed the surroundings. Nevertheless, these unwelcome guests had not left much food to eat to the full.

Despite that, three of them had lost their appetite due to the utmost terror. White with fear, these three helpless

¹ A term of address for a Brahmin man (also to any elderly person)

creatures had been choking their breath back and awaiting their exit so that they could take a deep breath.

In the meantime, all of a sudden the leader-like person from the group pointed to her and said to her father, "We have decided to recruit this girl into our People's Liberation Army. Now onwards, she along with us will struggle for the liberation of the proletariat. Well, pack her personal belongings into a bag. We will take her with us right away."

These words of the leader came as a thunderbolt to her parents. They turned senseless by that unexpected shock. They could not think of what they had to do. However, as they came to the sense, they understood the complexity of the problem.

"Master, my daughter is still young. This young child does not know anything about the world. Then, how can she understand what you say? She is even scared of a petty mouse. Master, how can this terrible coward fight in your ever so big a war? Do spare my daughter. We will be at your beck and call. We are ready to cook for you and feed whenever you wish. We are ready to feed as many people as you say, but we implore you, do spare this young child. Do not say that you will take her with you."

In front of that cold-blooded leader, the moans of her parents were pouring like water into the sand. To prevent them from taking their daughter, both of them had wailed, holding on to their feet. Having seen the plight of her parents, she had also wept frantically. After all, these revolutionaries sacrificed that thirteen year old girl to strengthen their revolution, no matter how much they had implored.

They made that child walk all night without letting her plump down for a solitary moment. The next day they reached their camp at the crack of dawn. She was stupefied

all night. All the way these villagers had many chances to let her go free, yet why did they not choose to do so?

The poor girl! In those days, she knew nothing how much she had to pay for her birth in the higher caste. Her abduction was not for the sake of revolution. Rather it was done in the spirit of revenge against the higher caste.

On the very night, when she had reached the camp, the abductor-leader had come to initiate her into the revolution. While the child was crying at the top of her voice with physical and mental torments, he had mirrored the liberation of the destitute, the helpless and proletariat in her heart-rending cry. The more she jerked and wailed with pain, the more he cried with greater pleasure.

Thus, having quenched the sexual thirst of the leader, she was initiated into the path of the revolution. The next morning, the leader had duly named her Biplavī, that is, a revolutionary, so as to instigate the revolution.

She spat contemptuously right there.

That night the leader had told her rather a lot of things about the revolution. Then he had also congratulated her for the opportunity given to participate in the revolution.

However, the revolution she was supposed to bring about was slightly different. Actually, she did not have to wield a gun for the revolution. What all she had to do was to satiate others' hunger. They say a man with an empty stomach and an empty heart cannot fight. Hence, she had to cook for the fighters to satiate their stomachs. In the same breath, she had to lie in their beds to quench their physical thirst. They say it was the people's war she could fight from her side for the sake of the proletariat. They say it was a sort of revolution she had brought about, putting up her dignity

for auction under coercion. They say the revolution she has brought about in the society is to satiate them with her body and to stir them to participate in the People's War.

In this way, she has turned into Biplavī by getting engaged in the kitchen chores and stripping off in their beds and she is waging a mighty people's war.

Translated by Govinda Raj Bhattarai

Aghoris-The Filthy Eaters

Bhaupanthi

It is not known what time of night did the incident took place but a mouse fell into the bucket, full of water and died. The splashing sound was not heard either. The water became like silent killer. The bucket filled with water should have been covered to keep it hygienic. It would also be advertised. It is easy to say that water should be covered. However a question is raised how to fill water from the tap in which there is no water and why to cover the pot without water. There is a tap, connected with water pipe as well but there is no water. Water into tap would appear somewhere once or twice a week but it has been long since there is no water in his tap. Long ago, there would be water but it has been like a legend. Water from the tap has disappeared as King's photo in a bank note. Therefore, they fill their empty vessels in the public taps, waiting for their turn in a queue.

It was not only the problem of water but also of power cut. Beyond these problems, drinking water will be a myth for the future generation. This is a matter of the future. Even the past was not so good. In the past, the dream of Melamchi (a stream near Kathmandu) water was supposed to wash out the whole city. This would also be like the disappearance of King's photo in a bank note if the politics couldn't have

shared dreams. They were habituated to be satisfied with hope and dreams.

This country is said to be a rich in terms of water resources and even richer for drinking water. We proudly say that in future there will be war not for females, land and the extension of power but for drinking water. We are proud in the sense, we have countless resources of drinking water. Whether there is war or peace we are rich in the resources of drinking water. Others will be involved in war for drinking water but we will be onlooker taking bottles of clear-looking water at hands while watching the watching Olympic Games. But now there is a play of empty jars and buckets.

But this mouse has been floating on bucket water raising a question mark. This bucketful water is what they filled with struggle the day before yesterday. All the family members filled it queuing up turn by turn. It is very difficult to have turned in an infinite queue and if water appears there in the tap, it may disappear before the turn comes or before the water fills up the bucket. The vessels placed under the faucet are like a black eagle's mouth opening its thirsty and dry mouth. How, much water can one fill up becomes the mark of his or her bravery. This achievement is counted in their groups. Those, who are unable to fill water, look coward in their neighbours' eyes. Nobody wants to offer a bowl of water; the tradition of earning religion by distributing water has been faded away.

He shakes his head. Three quarters of the earth is water and one quarter is land. Our country is full of the Himalayas which provide drinking water profusely. However, should we drink recycling human urine in the future? How can dehydrated people urinate? He dismisses all these logics that arose in his mind and thinks that all these will happen yet, his arguments continued into his mind like troops of landless

people. One of his arguments reminds him of the present problem that is how the mouse sank into the water bucket and died. If it died at other places than at the bucket, it would be alright and there would not be any problem regarding whether the water should be kept or thrown. Now, he was in a dilemma as to whether he should drink or throw the water into which the mouse had been dead. There was next argument; they could substitute it with mineral water. It was impossible to drink mineral water every day. Again there was no guarantee for pure mineral water. It would be like the uncertainty of the government. How to control? Everywhere there is impurity. There is freedom for anyone to do anything. It is meaningless to pronounce mineral water to be pure but to buy it requires money. Only for drinking water, one can't go to America. America- the word has entered his consciousness in such a way that everything is pure there. There is security as well. Ten policemen in average are deputed for a single citizen in America. How wonderful in our context! The policeman spend whole day in putting on dress and they become late to reach the spot. The day before yesterday, someone was carrying a pistol hiding it around his pelvic cavity. The policemen could not check it being embarrassed. As a result, somebody was nearly murdered in jail.

Did this mouse come into this house like the pistol bearer, hiding itself from the secret path? Nowadays, there is anarchy of mouse. Perhaps, the mouse might have come out in search of water. To quench its thirst, it might have dived into the bucket water to drink it all. However, it did not know the importance of this bucketful water for our family. Even this mouse may have its own family, which may be in its search because it is like a kidnapped person, who disappears without any information. This mouse could not return to its family. Mice are said to have high reproductive power. So are human beings. "We are two and ours two" has been a slogan

but the population of Kathmandu is increasing at the rate of increase in the number of vehicles. As a result, a litre of drinking water has been rare.

Let the mouse die! Didn't it get another place and it died making a bucketful of water impure? However it is not enough to think about it fictitiously because this mouse has polluted twenty litres of bucket water. This event can be imaginary and the imaginative power may make it thrilling but now the mouse is in reality and it has disturbed his mood; not his mood but the water, he has been addressed by himself. There is overwhelming hatred inside him. What time had it died? In the bucket water, the mouse was floating in such a way that he once thinks to throw it out of the water catching by its tail and wish forever peace for its departed soul. Ultimately, death is a reality, why he should uproot the dead tiger's moustaches. However, he loathes the dead mouse, which hadn't swollen yet.

Once he almost decided to throw the water out, onto which the mouse can flow and get its obsequy performed. Other members of the family were still sleeping. He had a habit of drinking a glass of pure water early in the morning, when his stomach was empty. 'Pure? - a big question was created within him. "Is there anything that is pure in the city?" The family protests his habit of drinking pure water. It was usual to drink a glass of water after meal and he had to lessen the amount of drinking pure water. Like the slogan of saving power, to save electricity is to produce it. However, the whole country is suffering from power cut. In fact, it is the case of underdevelopment and poverty. There is no electricity; nobody is using it but it hasn't been saved, nor has its production increased. However, there is a slogan, "save the electricity."

Early in the morning, he drinks a glass of water satisfactorily. He silently fills a big steel glass with pure water and gulps it without producing any sound. To drink water secretly gives him a feeling of romance, and extreme satisfaction because he has a capacity to drink brimful of a glass of water. There is fashion of public rebellion but the family does not threaten him of public rebellion for a glass of water.

The problem was the same, however. The mouse was small but it was drowned in the bucketful water and its gender (male/female) could not be found out. Now, the water no more remained useful. He paused for a while. He had read in the newspapers, which tried to dig out filthy things with concentration of mind. They would keep filthy account of whom and how the political leaders eat everything. They walk in a tip-top, clean and fair way; they drive Pajero and fill up petrol granted by the government; they move with security circle, and are safe from dust and dirt. However, the newspapers try their best to defame them. Why is this happening? News was like this, "There is a heap of human stool at the source of drinking water." Is drain mixed somewhere? It was not written in the newspapers. Even the newspapermen drink water. They should not wash their dirty linen in public. Because of drain, Bagmati (a holy river in Kathmandu) has been Dhalmati (Drain + Bagmati). This is a great wonder. Isn't Tukucha's (a ravine's) water used to prepare delicious food in restaurants? Nowadays, people are in search of tasty readymade food. The metropolis life becomes stale. To refresh it, one should eat spicy, pungent, sour, fried and mixed food.

How can drinking water be pure when its source is filthy?

He has been entangled in self-arguments about the mouse in vain. It is either a mouse or a dog; it would be rotten in the water source. If so, one can drink the bucket water although millions of mice drown and die into it. The people of this metropolis have been Aghoris (filthy eaters) and then, why to abhor? "This logic is useful", he thought and caught the dead mouse's tail slightly. He picked it up, did not squeeze, but hanged it by its tail to drop water soaked on the mouse's body. He had a tyrannous feeling towards the mouse that it had polluted the hardly collected bucketful of water. It is natural that hanging the dead mouse by its tail results in dropping its body's water into the bucket, into which it got drowned and died. He thought he should squeeze the mouse to drop the water. He remembered the proverb of a fly which lies onto the milk. If the fly is squeezed into the milk pot, why should he not squeeze the mouse, which would drop half a glass of water? Nowadays, the metropolis has been a place of Aghoris. Aghoris!

Silently, he opened the door and he was at the verge of throwing the mouse out of his room. It was good thing for him that the door did not produce any sound while opening it. Otherwise, someone would wake up and ask a number of questions. Since the mouse's tail was damp, he was feeling pleasure of touching water. It felt him like an opportunity of keeping hand on the catchy breast.

Before he went to throw the mouse out, he slowly lifted the covering of the bucket from one side and covered the bucket with it. He was aware of doing it so cautiously that nobody would notice that the mouse had been dead in the bucket of water. He once more thought that in the great scarcity of water what would happen to it only by drowning the mouse into it; it was not the case of large animal like a dog.

After covering the bucket filled with water, he assured himself that the water got its purity even if the mouse had drowned there. However, water-bucket should have been covered because it was good thing for maintaining health. He did so right then. Despite this all, the date for filling up bucketful water was not guaranteed.

Translated by Nabaraj Neupane

The Colonel's Horse

Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala

The Colonel loved Mrs. Colonel exceedingly. Who wouldn't love a young wife married at one's old age? But the love of the 45 year old Colonel was not enough for Mrs. Colonel. She was just 19 year old. He used to buy her something – sari, powder, rouge, bangles, ear rings, and many more whenever returned home so as to please her. But his wife's heart was never attracted towards her husband. Sitting in that very room filled with articles that her husband brought to please her, she would weep all alone. She had entered her husband's home with such a great expectation and excitement! She had expected boundless happiness from him. Mrs. Colonel would think over the past and weep slowly. Before her marriage, a young man in the neighborhood had proposed to her for his love. The young man looked robust and vigorous. He had an eye-catching personality. Whenever she recalls that incident, she still feels thrilled. But lost in sweet imagination of the husband she would get in future, she had turned him down. Now she remembers the young man from time to time, and her heart longs for his strong arms. She can no more feel the strength of his strong arms; only an unfulfilled desire keeps haunting her. Agitated, she looked around the room; the articles in the room seemed to tease her. Surrounded by so much stuff brought to please her, she appeared like a prisoner.

In the meanwhile the Colonel entered his quarters with things he had purchased – some keeping under his arms and others dangling from his hands.

“Have a look, my dear, what things I have bought for you.” The Colonel spoke placing a heap of things in front of her.

The Colonel’s wife looked at the Colonel dispassionately and then shifted her gaze from him to the items before her.

“I have told you many times that I don’t require all these items. Why are you wasting money on them?” Mrs. Colonel spoke wiping her tears.

The Colonel asked lovingly, “Why do you always look so worried, my dear? You are now quite young when one loves to enjoy life – eat good food and wear new dress? What is your problem, my dear? Do tell me.”

Mrs. Colonel thought it worthless to reply to him. Who will understand her problem? A forty-five year old man will never understand the feelings of a nineteen-year old girl. Then the Colonel lifted Mrs. Colonel lovingly who was sitting quietly. At that moment she forgot the painful feelings of her heart that she had been occupied by till a few moment ago. Forgetful of her husband’s age, she threw her body upon his. Unable to hold her weight, the Colonel fell on the floor. Suddenly the strings of Mrs. Colonel’s dream snapped away. She looked at the Colonel with hatred when he was puffing and panting in order to lift her up. From that very day a strong sense of hatred developed in the mind of Mrs. Colonel towards her husband.

One day the Colonel and his wife were inspecting their house compound. The Colonel had kept five hybrid cows

brought from the foreign land. They kept observing the animals in the cowshed. Close to the cowshed was his horse stable. Having heard the neighing of the horse, Mrs. Colonel asked, "Have you kept horses, too? I didn't know."

The Colonel had bought a white horse with a great fondness for this. He himself used to feed him. He would bathe him every day and. Every morning he would mount him and strolled for fresh air. But for quite some days he had not been able to pay attention to the horse. He had not taken a ride for some days.

"Let's go and have a look at it." He proposed.

Having seen his master, the horse began to neigh beating his front hooves on the floor. The eyes of the horse, tethered in the dark, shone brilliantly. While the horse neighed, his nostrils flared up widely. His sinews twisted around his legs like a snake. For the Colonel's wife the animal became an endearing object. When she tried to touch him, he didn't allow, throwing his neck sideways, he threatened her to bite. However such a behavior of the horse didn't frighten her, instead she became all the more attracted towards him.

"Such a strong horse you have! I think he lacks proper care" said she.

"In the beginning I myself used to take care of him but these days I have left him in the trust of the groom. How can I take care of everything?"

The Colonel's wife said "I myself will take care of this. How can one trust a groom—whether he offers him feed timely or not. They say the grooms steal the feed and sell it secretly. The owner himself should take care of their domestic animals."

The Colonel gave a sweet smile; he gave no reply. From the following day the Colonel's wife herself began to feed the horse. In the beginning the horse did not allow her to come closer, but gradually she won his heart with her love and care for him. While feeding on the fodder, she would stand close to him and place her hands on his back. The horse gave a startling tremor whenever her palm touched his body. Removing his mouth from the feed, the horse neighed and again started to eat. Once or twice he would beat the planks of the stable with his hooves that broke the silence of the stable. Mrs. Colonel would know whenever flies irritated the horse. She was content that the horse was well cared for.

The Colonel on the other hand didn't like this—Mrs. Colonel's taking care of the horse. Had it been once or twice that would be fine but spending the whole day at the stable is not becoming for her. Why should she feed him herself in spite of the stable boy? Why should she start cleaning the horse?

One day the Colonel told his wife, "My dear, why do you worry about the horse? You never care about the kitchen, what's going on there but you are so concerned about the horse!"

"I am not the woman cook *bahunee*, who always confines herself to the kitchen. I do whatever I do want to. I gain peace in taking care of the horse, and that too has become intolerable to you." The Colonel's wife replied curtly, her voice enraged.

"What's the trouble with you; tell me all this? What is it that you have lost peace of mind and get peace by grooming the horse? You do have a duty towards me, too. Have you ever thought of me as much as you do of the horse? In fact,

Mrs. Colonel, your behavior has aroused envy against the horse in me." The Colonel spoke in almost a choking voice.

The Colonel's wife gave no response. Protruding her lips with hatred, she glared at her husband. The sight of Colonel's filling his eyes with tears at such an old age looked very unbecoming and detestable for her. She thought of showing him how much she detested him. But, having control over herself, she stood up abruptly went away.

One day both the Colonel and his wife were in the stable. The Colonel showed his desire for riding the horse; and whenever the Colonel approached the horse, he threatened to bite him. And when Mrs. Colonel went near, he began to neigh instead. Then Mrs. Colonel went close to horse and began to stroke him. The beast expressed his gratitude by neighing and beating the wooden floor with his hooves.

The Colonel managed to get up on the horse with a great difficulty, but the horse did not come under his control. He began to resist moving ahead by raising both of his front hooves. The Colonel was skilled in horse riding so he didn't fall down. However, he got suddenly angry and with a whip in his hand he began to lash the animal. The Colonel's wife began to shout 'you cruel!' as soon as he gave a thrash to the horse. Despite his harsh beating, the horse refused to move ahead. On the other hand the Colonel was lashing the horse more severely with his eyes closed. The horse threw both his hind legs. As he was busy beating the horse, the reign was not under his control so he fell off the horse with his head first. By then the Colonel's wife approached the horse. Without paying any attention to the husband, now somersaulting in the heap of dust, she began to stroke the horse. Because of anger, the horse's nostrils flared, and runny nose began to release hot breath. The horse stood victorious, his defeated enemy was lying flat on the dust. The Colonel's wife had no doubt about

the power of the horse. The horse was the matter of pride for her. Lovingly she put her cheeks against the horse's neck covered with thick mane. She also grew desirous of riding the horse. And by stepping her feet on the stirrup, she got up on the horse easily. Her husband was still lying prostrate on the floor. Mounting on the horse, she began to feel herself a moment of great pleasure. Today she had had an opportunity to take a revenge on her husband. Her love for the horse increased more. By twisting her neck, she gave a hateful glance to the husband, who was still licking the dust, and spurred the horse. The horse, as if carrying a load of flowers, began to gallop.

When she returned, the Colonel was standing there. There were still some patches of dust on his coat.

His hair was messy. His cap was still in the dust. By stopping the horse close to the Colonel, she alighted swiftly on the ground. The horse neighed letting an ear-piercing sound. Mrs. Colonel had never experienced such a great pleasure in her life. In the meanwhile was heard the sound of 'bang' twice. The horse faltered for some time and fell on the ground. In the Colonel's hand was a pistol, which was still releasing smoke from its bore. Blood was welling up from the belly of the horse. The Colonel's wife looked at the horse once and again to her husband. In no time her face wrinkled and deformed. Covering up her mouth with both her palms, she collapsed on the floor.

Translated by Govinda Raj Bhattarai

A Hammer-headed Baby

Sanat Regmi

“**A**llah, have mercy on us! Forgive me! Give peace to my Rajiya. Why this trouble with us? We helpless creatures!” The old Kadir Miyan is praying to Allah for the end of his wife's suffering. His wife is lying in a bed nearby, writhing in labor.

“Aye, Allah. I’m dying. Baba, I’m going to breathe my last. Ouch! ... Khurshid’s Abba, I’m dying.” Kadir rises, and sitting on one end of the bed takes his wife’s head on his lap. Consoling her, he caresses her hair and utters, “By grace of Allah, everything will be okay. Rajiya, don’t panic.” Tears stream down Kadir’s cheeks. He keeps looking out in the hope of someone turning up for help. Khurshid, who has gone to call out Sister Sarbatiya, has not returned yet. Here Rajiya is going to breathe her last. Kadir grows panic-stricken. He cannot go out leaving Rajiya alone. What is he supposed to do? A poor creature! He rises again to pray to Allah. Looking westwards, he begs for His grace, immersed himself in Allah. All of a sudden, he is alerted by a deafening scream of his wife. Then a cry of a baby reaches his ears. He rises to his feet to see his wife bathed in blood. Her gown is all blood-spattered. Also, he saw a strange, terrifying figure entangled in the afterbirth, its presence making the environment more terrifying. He sees Rajiya lying unconscious in the bed. The

baby's appearance strikes fear into his heart. His fear is escalated by the condition of his wife. He shifts his gaze from the child to his wife. Panic-stricken, he feels giddy and collapses with muttering, "Allah!." He hits his head on the floor and faints.

After a long while, Kadir opens his eyes to find Sister Sarbatiya busy helping Rajiya. Khurshid is in tears, leaning his head against the door. Muhammad is sprinkling water on Kadir's face. As Kadir regains consciousness, Muhammad, helping him to rise, questions, "What's the problem, *bhai*? Sister-in-law is in such a condition, and you lying here like this!"

Kadir cannot understand anything. Slowly, he rises to his feet and looks around. His eyes fall on the new-born baby. His body shudders with horror; he mutters, "a Satan is born from Rajiya's womb. Muhammad bhai, Allah is angry with us. Allah! Have mercy on us. Have mercy on us!"

Muhammad too looks at the baby closely. Never has he seen such a strange baby before! A baby with a head as big as a pumpkin, big nose and flat lips. Its face looks as mature as that of a grown-up. Its eyes rolling here and there. Scared, Muhammad shifted his eyes to Rajiya. Sarbatiya, who is struggling to bring Rajiya to consciousness, screams all at once, "Kadir, Rajiya sister is now dear to Allah..." Unable to hold back her tears, she wipes her eyes with the hem of her shawl. She throws a look of contempt at the baby and keeps muttering, "The Satan has taken Rajiya sister's life... Allah! May Rajiya's soul rest in Zannat."

Dumfounded, Kadir looks around. Slowly escapes a cry from his lips. Sobbing gives way to cry full of anguish. "Alas! Dear Rajiya, you have gone leaving me alone. Why such

misfortune befell me! What is fault of this poor." Writhing in anguish, Kadir begins to complain against Allah.

Muhammad is consoling him, "Calm down, Kadir. Who can defy Allah's wish? Accept whatever has happened. Now we should be preparing for her funeral. You stay here calmly, I will call out the neighbors." Leaving Kadir in the hut, Muhammad goes out. Kadir is staring at the new-born baby, simmering with contempt and revenge. Suddenly a thought crosses his mind that calms him down—the baby is soon to die for want of care and mother's milk. Kadir feels at peace at the thought of the baby's death. Then he shifts his thought to his five-year-old son Khurshid.

Tired of sobbing and wailing, Khurshid is quiet now. Keeping him in her lap, Sister Sarbatiya is consoling him. Nevertheless, the five-year-old child is shocked by the death of his mother. Kadir gets up and takes Khurshid in his lap. Caressing his son, he lets his tear flow down.

After a while there appear four or so Muslims from the neighborhood in front of Kadir's hut. Muhammad has borrowed a lantern from Munna's. The neighbors enter the hut and in the light of the lantern see a strange baby. Their eyes are wide-open at the sight of that strange creature. Forgetting Kadir and his dead wife, they keep staring at the baby.

"No doubt, Rajiya Begam has given birth to a Satan. How was she supposed to be alive after giving birth to a child with such a big head? Is this a human being or a Satan? Oho, we've never seen any human being like this before. They were murmuring and whispering. Kadir finds himself helpless. He is standing speechless. Sarbatiya loses her temper to see the neighbors gathered there showing their interest in the baby—Are you people here to express your grief or to see the

*tamasha*¹? Are you going to prepare for the funeral or just keep standing here to see this Satan? The Satan ate its mother as soon as it came out."

Now the neighbors turned towards Kadir. The aged Jumman Miyan speaks, "Kadir Miyan, what about coffin clothes? It's already dark. The bazaar might be closed now."

"Coffin...I have no money to buy anything else. I had earned only five rupees today. I spent two rupees on flour and two on *daal*. Before I could finish baking the *rotis*, she complained of stomach pain. Began writhing on the floor. For two or so hours, I just waited. But when it was unbearable, I sent Khursid to call out Muhammad bhai. When they arrived, Rajiya ..." His words choked his throat.

"Oh.. Kadir, you have suffered too much. It's Allah's wish. I will go to Bhagwan Bhagauti's shop and buy a piece of coffin cloth. The rest we will do together. No need to worry." Consoling Kadir, Jumman Miyan called a youth standing outside and said, "Let's go to Bhagauti's to buy coffin cloth."

As Jumman Miyan, along with Yusuf, leaves for the shop, the rest in the hut are preparing for the funeral.

"Kadir bhai, cut the child's navel string and tie it in a knot." Someone instructs him.

Terrified and helpless, Kadir looks around, but no one from the crowd seems to be going to help him. Intimidated, Kadir moves towards the baby, cuts its navel and makes a knot. Sarbatiya washes the baby. With the feeling of warm water and clothes, the baby lying almost unconscious for long begins to cry. His sound startles all, including Kadir. Then wrapping the baby in some clothes, he places it in one corner of the room. He comes out carrying Rajiya's dead body. He

¹ Kind of spectacle, show

picks up a bucket, walks to the well nearby to fetch water. He washes her body and changes her clothes. In the meantime arrives Jumman Miyan with a piece of coffin cloth. They wrap the dead body in the coffin and move towards the grave. The little Kushid stays in the hut with Sarbatiya. Rajiya died leaving Kadir alone Kadir finds this small hut all desolate. When there was Rajiya, he would often row with her. He would complain about this and that. Rajiya would always show him an empty bag. The sight of an empty bag would escalate his pain of not getting work and the fire of hunger. He would run amok and would hurl abuses at her. But Rajiya would understand his helplessness. Rowing with his wife, he would leave the hut and come back late in the evening. Rajiya would be waiting for him with whatever she had cooked by borrowing some edible stuff from her neighbors. With the food in front of him, Kadir would be grateful to her. Rajiya would mix her love with his gratitude in their bed at night. Quarrelling and loving both had become the part of their everyday life. Now there is no Rajiya anymore. All he finds around is a complete void. He feels as if every corner of his house is gnawing at him. Crestfallen, he feels like leaving the hut. But that large-headed son has been a trouble for him. Both in terms of size and shape, the child looks like a Satan incarnate. He cannot stand the sight of the child. It is this Satan that took his better-half's life. Consumed with anger and hatred, he feels like throwing the child somewhere, but he cannot do so. All of a sudden, he senses something ominous, and shrinks back with fear. If he is really a Satan incarnate, what if he shows his wrath. Though scared, Kadir is bound to take care of him. He hates this hammer-headed child. He becomes indifferent to him. He becomes cruel to him. But when the child screams for want of food, Kadir is terrified by his scream. Kadir's hatred towards the boy gives way to fear. Then he fetches some milk for him.

Kadir is terrified by the death of his wife, the ominous presence of the hammer-headed and his own loneliness. On top of this, hunger is gnawing at his entrails. He cannot go out in search of work leaving the hammer-headed behind. He gets nothing to eat if he remains absent from work even a single day. He must go out to work for food. This large-headed child has become a noose around his neck. He fumes at this child—he ate his mother as soon as he came out. This Satan is now going to finish his father too. Khurshid is in the care of Sarbatiya. Terrified by the sight of the monster's face, he does not want to return home. It is only Kadir, who is undergoing the ordeal created by the hammer-headed.

Kadir did not step out of his hut for work for two days. Today, he is feeling a brunt of hunger. Without any work, surviving is next to impossible. Kadir resolves to go out for work. He thinks— this Satan too should suffer for what he has done. I will put him somewhere at the corner and I will keep working. If died of heat and hunger by the grace of Allah, I will get rid of him. With this thought in mind Kadir wraps the baby in a large piece of rag and walks out of his hut. He approaches the contractor and explains to him his plight. Keeping the baby under a *pakad* tree he begins his work.

Having seen a strange baby under the tree, people gather around him. What a strange baby! Whose baby is this? Look at the size of his head! The eyes full of surprise hover the baby. The crowd finds a means of entertainment—the baby—his unnaturally large head and unnaturally large eyes, and his body disproportionate to them. Some of them feel sorry for his parents and they hurl some coins at him.

Busy in his own work, Kadir casts his glance at that hammer-headed, who is surrounded by people. He rushes to the child to find some coins scattered around him. Full of surprise, he stares at the coins and bends down to collect

them. The total amount is eight rupees- nearly double the amount he earns a day.

Kadir stands there dumbfounded. He looks at the people surrounding his son and the money he has collected in his hand. Never had he imagined that money would pour down because of his hammer-headed son. It occurs to him that Allah is kind to him. A thought crosses his mind- what about walking around the town carrying this large-headed. The demonstration will certainly bring him money. This will be a good source of their livelihood. With this thought, Kadir's eyes brighten up, "Ya Allah, no one can understand your mercy. Even this hammer-headed is capable enough to earn for himself. How kind you are!" His father can also benefit from the entertainment that this large-headed is going to give to the public. First time Kadir's love surges up in his heart for this innocent child. He looks at the child, his eyes full of love. He wraps the child and kisses him.

"Bhai, is this your son?" someone from the crowd asked.

"Yes, hajoor."

"Was he born like this?"

"Yes Sir. His mother died while giving birth to him."

"Ch...ch...ch.... How could she survive while giving birth to such a large-headed child? A poor creature without mother! How are you going to bring him up?"

"Allah is the Master. He will surely grow up by the blessings of you people?"

More and more people show their sympathy to the child, and they throw some coins at him. Kadir raises his hand and offers *salam* to each, showing his respect and gratitude. Then he takes to collecting money. Now the total amount is twenty-five rupees. Kadir lifts the child into his lap and walks

through the crowd, saying, "Now, I have to go to buy milk for this child."

As Kadir leaves, the crowd disperses. Kadir goes straight to the contractor and tells him that he is not going to continue the work. Then with much care and love, he holds the baby gently in his arms and leaves for another town for exhibition. Now Kadir is becoming more and more professional. He has all forgotten Rayia and her death, and fear created by the presence of this large-headed son. Rather, he is praying silently to Allah, "Ya, Allah! Give a long life to this hammer-headed child and protect him all the time."

Translated by Bal Ram Adhikari

The Sky was Still Overcast

Sirjana Sharma

Jamunā had returned to her parents' house after a long time. Squatting on the dooryard, she was busy scraping the grass spears off her *sari* with a sickle. At the very moment, an unfamiliar voice attracted her attention, "How are you sister? Fine?" They were four in number. Who were these people? Jamunā could not recognize their faces in the twilight. She replied in a low and soft voice- "Yeah fine... But who are you people? I could not recognize you in the dark."

"Slowly we may know each other." Saying this much, these people sat on the dooryard, a short distance from Jamunā. After a moment, one of them entered the house, brought a kitchen knife and a plate and began chopping the meat he had brought with him. Jamunā went close up to her sister-in-law and gestured at her, asking who these people were. As her sister-in-law gave a quick reply, saying "the guests," she did not wish to ask more about them. She sat to take a rest. After a while, her brother Chandra Lāl appeared in front of her.

The conversation between the brother and the sister began. The brother was asking after her husband's family and the things going on there, while Jamunā, showing no interest in these things, inquired about the guests there. Chandra Lāl answered ever so proudly- "These guests are the policemen

from the nearby police station. These days they sometimes come here to stay the night."

Jamunā spoke without waiting for other words from her brother- "Why have they come here instead of staying in their appointed station? Do not let them make a habit of coming our home like this. Bear in mind, they may take a mile while you give them an inch. It is better if everything goes by the rule. Anything that goes against the rule yields no good result."

Chandra Lāl did not seem to like what she was hinting at and uttered, "Do not speak like this. What wrong have they done? These poor things come here, cook themselves and eat. Whenever they cook something delicious, they give us, too. They have not snatched our beds. They just settle themselves on the ground floor. Why should we hold them in contempt?"

Jamunā did not like her brother's one-sided thought and his plain words. She said, raising her finger- "The snake, in spite of being tamed by feeding milk, shall bite one day. Don't you know this old saying? The main thing is it is not good to let these outsiders enter the house at night."

His sister's words struck Chandra Lāl. *It is not good to let the outsiders stay in the house at night*, but it is too hard to say 'No' to the powerful people. Today the sister has come; on this occasion I will tell them, "it is rather cramped here. Bed down somewhere else." Thinking so, he went downstairs.

On the ground floor, one of the guests was sitting by the hearth and was busy stirring the meat being cooked in the pot on the oven. The delicious smell of the meat pierced Chandra Lāl's nose and aroused all the senses of his body. He got stuck into that tempting smell and forgot what he had decided to tell the guests. In no time, the next thought crossed his mind-

“our tradition says that a guest in the evening is equal to God. Because of their coming here, sometimes we also have such delicious food to eat. Why should I sow enmity against them for no rhyme or reason? Furthermore, they are not going to stay in my house forever. On the top of this, I have never heard and seen them do anything wrong so far. Why should I suspect such gentle people? To tell the truth, it has been good for me since they began visiting my house. When I find their behaviors rather suspicious, I will tell them whatever is to be told the very day, not now.”

Buried in such thinking, Chandra Lāl moved to the shed. He rubbed some tobacco on his palm and pushed it into his mouth. He tethered the calf to the peg; he made the cattle sit in their proper places, pushing and pulling them. Then he returned, giving some fodder grass to the cattle.

Jamunā was upstairs. She was thinking what her brother might be saying to these people. She was trying to eavesdrop on their conversation. She heard the guests talk in a low voice- “My wife is due to give birth any day now. Mother also has grown old. In this present situation, the resignation will not be approved, either. If I run away from the service, I have no other way to live from hand to mouth. And, you never know when we will fall prey to these Junglese.”

Replying to his friend, the other one of them spoke- “Now what can we do? God willing. Here goes the old saying that when death comes, one dies even of tripping over anything else. At present if we are killed, the state will pay seven-hundred thousand Rupees to our survivors in the family. Such a huge amount can be sufficient for them to live a comfortable life. Why should we worry? Everyone has to die one day. It is said that if you die for your country, the door to heaven is open. Then if killed, we may go to heaven. There is nothing else to worry.”

Having heard their conversation, Jamunā felt compassionate towards these policemen. She spoke to herself- "The poor things are drawn in the eddy of troubles. However, how can the people like us afford to give shelter to those who are in the trouble like this? In particular, the common citizens like us should also enjoy the rights to live freely."

Getting engrossed in such thoughts, Jamunā went down to the kitchen to take her meal. Chandra Lāl returned from the shed and entered the kitchen after washing up himself. He sat close to his sister and began taking the food. Both of them tucked in the rice with the meat given by the guests. As they had ever so delicious food to their heart's content, soon they felt sleepy. After a while, Chandra Lāl began snoring in his bed, but his sleep broke before the midnight. Various ominous thoughts began haunting his mind.

Some years back, the criminals, who manhandled and raped Phurba brother's daughter-in-law, were the like of these policemen. It is those very people who would regard themselves kings and would hurl abuses at the villagers. How can we really trust such people? Now they seem to be very innocent. Particularly, they have become very intimate with me. However, who knows what ill motive lurks beneath this intimacy. All policemen might be of the same type. How come the radish from the self-same bed taste different? My sister is sharp. She is a worldly and down to earth sort of girl. What she says is not wrong. Why am I being lured by such petty delicious food? Why did I not understand in time that the fish that nibbles at easy bait will soon be caught in lamentation. Nobody has died for want of delicious food in this world. Whatever happened so far, let it go anyway. Tomorrow I will certainly have courage to tell them, "Today onwards do not come here to stay your night."

The next morning as Chandra Lāl got up and saw that the front yard was clean swept as usual. The shed was cleared off the dung. The cattle were licking the pots in front of them, after finishing the fodder. Chandra Lāl, who had failed to see whether the frequent visits of the policemen were right or wrong, began pondering again- "These poor things work here as if it were their own house. Why do ever so powerful people need to work in other's house? They harbour no greed at all. Whatever they cook, they share with us, too. How can I say to such good people not to come to my house and go somewhere else? Ah... let them come if they wish'.

In the evening, all the family members were sitting on the dooryard and chatting among each other. As Jamunā spotted the policemen coming towards her house again, she asked her brother, "Brother, even today they are striding towards our house. Didn't you tell them not to come like this today onwards?"

"No. Listen, they do not stay in the same house for a long period. They stay in one place for some days and move somewhere else next time. Had they done anything wrong, it would have been easier to say '... you did this or that so stop coming'. Tell me how can we shove off the guests in the evening with no rhyme or reason ? After some days, they will move somewhere else themselves."

Jamunā did not like what her brother was saying. She spoke irritably- "Ooh, what you think is we have to wait till they do something wrong? Right? You never know where and when you trip and fall over even while walking along the path. Then, why should we shoulder this unnecessary burden? If this continues, one day another party might burn even this house to the ground. Wait, if you feel awfully uneasy to put it, I will talk with them myself."

As ever, the policemen came and plumped down on the dooryard to take a rest. Having spent a few moments chatting to these policemen, Jamunā asked in a soft voice- “Brothers, is it not the police station where you are supposed to stay? But I always see you in the village?”

The shaft of her question pierced the breasts of the policemen. The pangs of the deep wound was written all over their faces. The faces drenched with self-abasement replied- “Sister, you are right. It is the station where we are supposed to stay, but what to do? These days the rebels have changed the station into a large wooden death-cage. The nearby stations have been destroyed. Many of our friends have been turned into ashes. We know, the duty of the police is to give security to the people, but if we are not secure ourselves, how can we safeguard others?”

Jamunā had thought that they would give the reply like- “Ah those were the days. Everyone in the village would cower in front of us. All would greet and respect us. How stringently we had enforced our system in the village with the help a small baton. These days we are even armed with guns, but these petty weapons have failed to guarantee the safety of our own lives. Who might not love their lives? We harbor no ill motive to cause pain or distress to anyone else. It is only for our own safety we are taking shelter in the village. If our coming here has caused you people inconvenience, then we will move somewhere else. In this situation even if you treat us like a dog and brandish us with a wooden stick, saying ‘Never darken our door’, we are not in a situation to utter a single word.”

However, they cracked with different words- “Sister, we will go, we will certainly move towards the police station. We have entered the village to patrol. If it is too late, we

sometimes stay the night in the village itself. After all, we have to carry out our duty."

Saying this much, one of the policemen asked for water, he gulped it down. He emptied the tumbler moistening his parched mouth. Then all the policemen sitting on the dooryard rose to their feet and made their way with the downcast faces.

All the way to the station, they walked talking about Jamunā- "The brother is ever so simple and gentle, but the sister is so spiteful like a shrew. She darted her piercing words- 'I always see you in the village'... as if we had really harmed her. Need she have said so? Do we not know our duty ourselves that she had to teach us that?"

The next policeman said, "That's life, only the wearer knows where a shoe pinches. How can that callow girl feel our suffering?" The other one added- "What can we do? That's life. When an elephant is in trouble even a frog kicks him, goes the old saying. In those good old days the villagers would prepare food before they said- 'let us cook for you here today'. These days, we have a tough time. Nothing is easy for us."

The policemen reached the station while talking. As the night fell, they lay spread-eagled on their beds to sleep.

Meanwhile, a sergeant took a deep breath and spoke in a melodious voice- "*Jai Nepal*. If we remain alive until tomorrow, we will carry out our duty. If dead, then see you in the heaven." Then, he buried his face in a sheet all at once. Other policemen also took a long breath and said- "Right you are sir," while the sergeant next to him tuned on the radio and began listening to the songs. One of the policemen, who was left prostrated by the fear that the radio might broadcast the news of the security personnel being killed by the rebels,

said- "Sir, do tune to the next program at the time of the news, will you? It is far better not to listen to the news on the radio. It broadcasts no good news at all."

After a while, the policemen lying on the bed began snoring while some of them stayed vigil out of the terror of rebels' attack. During the midnight, the flashes of a dream began reeling in the eyes of one of the policemen lying dead asleep: the people suffocated by the odor of gunpowder are stampeding. The mutilated corpses are scattered all over the battlefield. On a nearby ground a mourning assembly is going on. Thousands of people have joined this assembly. They are bowing their heads and are maintaining silence in the honor of the dead. Amidst the assembly there happens to lie the corpse of the policeman himself- tightened onto a cane and covered with a sheet marked *Rāmnām*. 'Oh, I also happened to die' the policeman was startled. Neither any injury nor any pain, how come I died? The officers are saluting and offering garlands to the corpse. Some are greeting and offering *khādā* shawls, too. Oh, though I am not a Buddhist, they are offering me shawls, too. The people following different religions are paying tribute to him. The policeman was overjoyed. Many people, one after another, paid the last homage to his dead body. Before his very eyes, the Chief marched towards the corpse and offered a heavy garland and a bunch of flowers. He saluted to him erecting his body. After a while, the corpse also received a salute from the battalion. The policeman was overjoyed to himself- "Aha, my fate... Aha, my life. Even ever so high-ranked an officer and the battalion are offering me a salute. My achievement can never be trivial. What a great joy! This is the only profession everyone else should strive for. We receive respect while living and glory even at death."

From one of the corners, his newly-wed wife came close to the corpse pushing and shoving the people gathered in the assembly as if the curtain of the play had risen. Then she began lamenting – “I need a life partner to pass the long way of my life sharing the joy and sorrow. There are many ups and downs in the journey of life. I need your loving hands to climb up this steep mountain. I do not wish to live the mundane life devoid of my sweetheart. I long for the spring replete with the flowers in full blossoms. If you go away leaving me alone, I will immolate myself upon your funeral pyre. Take me along with you, too.” To his surprise, his wife, lamenting and mourning there, bore him a child before his eyes. Wow, what a cute baby! What a healthy baby! That baby began asking about his uncertain future, crying on the top of his voice and thundering the universe...

The policeman rose to his feet. Trying to hold the baby in his hands, he said– “Dear, you are the son of a policeman. How can your future be uncertain? You need not cry...” However, the child did not hear his voice. He tried to hold the baby and place him in his lap, but in vein. He could not even touch him. The policeman’s body turned stiff like a log. Then he came to know that, goodness, he is already a corpse. The corpse was unable to move its limbs. The mother and the child both were letting an ear-piercing shriek. A horde turned up and dragged them away. Before his own eyes, a pyre was prepared right there. The dead policeman was placed on it. The priest poured some ghee and oil onto the corpse and began chanting the hymns. Before offering the crematory torch, the bugle sounded for the last time to offer a salute to him. Oh!! This happened to be a dream. Somewhere down the stream, the jackals were wailing.

As he woke up, he was drenched with sweats. He got up, quivering. He went close to the policeman of the next

bed and said- "Sir I had a nightmare." He told his dream in detail and kept saying-"Yuck, what misfortune might befall me? Sir, my dream is the sign of ill omen. My woman at home is due to give birth to baby any day now. Sometimes, it occurs to me that, I should not have married. Not a solitary moment did we get to sit together and love each other." The policeman kept staring and the tears began trickling down his cheeks.

Comforting him, the next policeman spoke- "Do not cry, Ekrām, Do not cry... It is God's will. God protects us. We have not harmed anybody else to these days and nor anybody else will harm us. These days my dream is not good either. People say if you have a nightmare like this, you should tell it (to yourself) while defecating. This will propitiate the malevolence of the dream. This is what I did yesterday. You also tell your nightmare while defecating. It would have been better if you had done so before telling me. We never knew it!" The policemen spent the remaining hours of the night chatting with each other.

At the crack of dawn, one of the policemen rushed out to relieve himself. His eyes fell on something like a horde far away. He entered the room frantically, restraining his bowel movement and informed of it to his friends. All the policemen in the room began peeping at the horde, through the windows and the door. "It is sure to be the horde of people, but where might they be going and why?" These policemen began speculating over it.

"Be alert. Do not lose your heart! If attacked, then resort to any measure to save your life." One of the aged sergeants said.

However, as the dawn broke over the village, that horde was nowhere in sight. It was a cold day; today the sun did not

shine, either. After having the food, the policemen came out in the front yard and spoke, "We had to stay vigil all night. Sergeant, I am dog-tired. Let me lie flat for a while..." After getting the permission, he entered the room and lay on the bed covering himself with a sheet. The other one also followed him.

Burying their hands in the armpits, the somber-faced policemen outside expressed their doubts stuck in their minds- This village has never been veiled by ever so thick haze before in recent memory. What an awfully overcast sky! Sir, even a storm might brew today. Right?

The sergeant was grating the impotent baton in his hand. Looking into the sky, he said- "Do not get scared, no storm will brew... These days this is what is happening everywhere. Have patience, the sun will shine after a moment."

After all, they had no strength other than patience at that moment. The policemen standing on the front yard relied on the sergeant's words and began looking into the sky.

The sky was still overcast.

Translated by Govinda Raj Bhattarai

Pakistan

The Mughal Inn

Mirza Hamid Baig

The evening's shadows had deepened. The two figures silently walking up the path were like two blurs in that turgid darkness. The wind rustling in the birch trees along the path was now quite audible. Then the two persons stopped, they who had come that far walking in step with each other.

Not too long ago, some young men had walked along with them, playfully keeping them in their middle, and the two persons had walked, heads bowed and slow-footed, like criminals. Then that rowdy group had gone ahead, and now there was no one on the path beside them in either direction.

The two stood shoulder to shoulder. The boy was leaning over the girl, as his left arm curled around her, holding her close. They were new to the place and had come here having merely heard something about it. Now they stood, leaning against the last birch, with their backs slightly bent under the weight of their knapsacks, while darkness swelled up in waves around them.

They looked somewhat scared. The boy pulled out a flashlight and cast the noose of its milky light here and there in the darkness but caught nothing. His head drooped further in disappointment. They could feel their legs beginning to

weaken under them, as they swayed on their feet in an altitude of despair, pressed down by their heavy packs.

They had not stood there for very long when a carriage, wildly swaying and drawn by a pair of fine horses, came rattling up the path from behind them. It hurtled past the two persons, but, after a few yards, jolted to a shuddering stop. As the boy and the girl watched, its doors opened and two ashen-faced men got down, holding glittering lances in their hands. They hurried over and with the utmost courtesy led the boy and the girl to the soft, hammock-like seats. Then the carriage set off again.

The boy's arm, though still curled around the girl's shoulder, was now relaxed. The fear that had gripped both of them not so long ago was now only a fading memory. They abandoned themselves on the wings of the wind, as their eyes grew heavy with sleep and their heads swayed, in rhythm with the carriage, between the upturned collars of their coats.

In a little while, the carriage began to slow down and gradually came to a halt. The two passengers stepped out, helped by several obsequious attendants who immediately relieved them of their heavy knapsacks. A huge ebony gate, covered with brass nails, opened before them, as the rattle of the heavy chains pulling it from the inside filled the air with a crash of noise. Two ornamental lamps flanked the gate, and their dismal, yellow light cast a gloom around them.

The boy and the girl walked shoulder to shoulder, his arm once again holding her close to his side. Behind them, marching in close time, came two stocky servants dressed in crimson tunics and striped cummerbunds, carrying the knapsacks with extreme care. They came to a dimly lit archway marked "Reception" where their host received them with a low bow. He had a moustache that curled down

towards his chin, and thick sideburns that curved up like daggers to touch the lobes of his ears. As he led their way with abounding humility, his silk-smooth tongue did not let them get in a word edgewise.

‘Dear Madam – Dear Sir – we’re so fortunate to have you here – to have this chance to serve you. As you know, the Portuguese came first – then came the Dutch. They were our highly esteemed guests. And so were the French and the British who came later. As for the Arab sheikhs – why, they’re our own flesh and blood. Now you have graced this place. That’s wonderful. You needn’t worry about a thing. We shall take good care of you...’

The group walked down an arabesque of paths paved with bright red bricks. Around them were pools of clear water reflecting the dark, indefinite shadows of the trees. The boy and the girl walked shoulder to shoulder, led by their fawning host.

‘I’m sure you must have heard a lot about us – that’s why you have come. It’s all true – let me assure you – it’s all true. Here we treat our guests in the Mughal style – the real Mughal style. I can’t describe it to you – you’ll see it for yourself very soon. Then you’ll say. ‘Yes, indeed...’

They carefully wended their way between wide flower-beds tilled with violets and marigolds, and followed a low wooden fence. Then came a series of narrow corridors where, at every ten steps, there was a carved door flanked by two flaming torches. The smoke from the torches had left dark patches on the ceiling. The host stopped before one of the doors and opened its rusty lock with a key; then he gently pushed the two panels of the door and stepped aside with a bow. The panels swung back with an unexpectedly loud groan. The host hurried in ahead of his guests and set to lighting a fire in the fireplace. The boy and the girl waited

inside the door as the servants carefully laid down the knapsacks in one corner, then melted away in the gloom. Then the host stepped back from the fireplace and, with an expansive gesture of his hands and another bow, took his leave. As the flames crackled and the sparks flew up the chimney, the things inside the room slowly began to take on distinct shapes.

It was a law-ceilinged room, full of shadowy corners, dominated by a heavy four-poster that stood close to the fireplace. Over the mantel were displayed two shiny scimitars laid across a dull shield. The walls were ringed with stuffed heads of deer and antelopes which looked only too real. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, there appeared two maid-servants, graceful and willowy in their costumes. Coming to the couple still standing just inside the door, they held the girl's hands and gently led her away. The boy took a step to follow them but his feet seemed to sink in the thick carpet. He faltered, and felt a numbness come over him. When he recovered, he saw that his companion now looked like a Mughal princess:

She was dressed in satins and brocade, and shown on the expanse of the bed like the lull moon.

The next moment, like a somnambulist come half-awake, he found himself being guided by those same willowy maids, through an antechamber, back into the main room. Now he looked like a Mughal prince, wearing a kurta made from the finest muslin, a gold brocade vest, and a silk cummerbund, into which was tucked the jewel-encrusted crescent of a dagger. There were long silk tassels dangling from the dagger's haft, and as the boy moved towards the bed his feet kept kicking them ahead of him.

His eyes were heavy with sleep. He wanted some privacy. But the two maids were still in the room; they stood near the bed, waving broad fans made of peacock feathers.

Then the princess reclining on the bed asked for something, and another strange feminine figure, covered in a heavy veil, came in with bashful steps through the side-door. She set up a tall silver samovar and a large tray laid out with tiny enameled cups and plates of dried fruit, then disappeared.

The boy did not touch any of the food. He lay sprawled on the bed, face up, and gradually his eyes closed. Perhaps he even fell asleep. In the meantime, his companion got up and left his side. She slowly circled round the room, then remained standing before the open window that faced the ornamental garden.

As the night advanced, strange sounds—like growling animals—began to come from under the dense trees that seemed to stretch to the horizon.

Flurries of crows and other birds rose from the tree-tops and circled in the sky in bewilderment. The noise only grew louder. The uneven hedges of cacti by the corridors, the silver light of the moon on the marble benches scattered across the patches of lawn, the violet plants heavy with sweet-smelling flowers—they all dwindled and faded away. Only a maddening roar remained, which seemed to come from everywhere and have a life of its own.

Terror-stricken, the girl stumbled as she backed away from the window. Just then, the voice of the genial host rang sweet and clear in the room:

‘Please don’t be alarmed. Dear Madam. There’s nothing to worry about. These sounds are of our own making. Just to add to your fun. These are our own servants moving among the trees, hiding behind the bushes. It’s they who are making these animal noises, pretending to howl like jackals and wolves. It’s merely to give all extra touch of reality to the scene. Please rest assured, there’s nothing to worry about...’

He then stepped forward and drew the curtains across the window.

The noise could still be heard clearly. It sounded as if a great many packs of wolves had come and surrounded the place. But the host's explanation apparently satisfied the girl. She sighed in relief. The next moment she began to shake her friend by the shoulder. She wanted him to get up and come with her into the garden. But the boy was very tired and sleepy.

Suddenly the girl ran back to the window and, with eyes wide with excitement, leaped through it into the garden. The host kept calling after her, but she went on running, fearlessly, across the soft patches of grass and the purple flower-beds. She could hardly wait to look at the servants hiding in the bushes, making that animal noise. Above her, the birds fluttered and collided with branches as they rose in agitation. The girl's mind was set on one thing, and she kept on running further and further away, beyond the neatly laid out garden, into the forest that bordered it.

In the room, the boy sat up in the bed. He could not understand what had happened. In his sleep he had, as if, heard someone call his name again and again. For a few moments he sat there in a daze, then he turned to the host and asked about the girl. For the first time the host looked very nervous. He was glib as ever, perhaps more than ever, but his legs shook and his face was white as fresh linen.

The boy clambered down from the bed, one hand firmly gripping the bejeweled haft or the dagger tucked in his cummerbund. With his other hand, he tore off the large rings hanging from his ears; also the heads round his neck and the jewel-encrusted wristbands. Then he picked up one of the torches sputtering in the room and himself climbed through

the window into the garden. The host came stumbling after him and the animal noises suddenly grew terribly loud, but the boy was oblivious to everything. He kept running, calling out the girl's name.

In the muddy first light of dawn, he reached the spot where the birds circling above and the birds clinging to the lacework of branches were all wailing raucously. As he came to a stop, two shadows shot out of the nearby bushes and disappeared in the tall undergrowth of the forest. He called her name and bent down. In one hand, he still held the torch—gone out long ago—while his other hand slowly fell away from the dagger's haft.

Now the sun was up in the sky. The genial host kept repeating himself:

'Sir, we're very sorry... the management of the Mughal Inn is extremely sorry ... it's a terrible, terrible accident ... we can't understand how it happened ... how these wild beasts got into the garden ... we just can't understand it... we're extremely careful around here ... please Sir, don't take it so badly ... and don't worry about anything...we have a well-trained staff here, they'll take care of all the arrangements...we'll do everything to make up for your terrible...'

Meanwhile, back in the room, in that semi-dark corner, two knapsacks lay unopened on the thick, crimson carpet. Close by were a tall silver samovar, flecked with ashes from the dead fire, and a large round tray, in which enamelled cups and ewers and plates heaped with dried fruit were arranged, all still undisturbed.

Translated by C M. Naim

The Black-out Child

Asif Farrukhi

Nobody told him what had happened, but he guessed that something was wrong. Whenever there was a quarrel between Mummy and Daddy, then too nobody would tell him but he would sense it. Mummy's eyes would be red, and it appeared that she would burst into tears any moment. Daddy had angry lines on his forehead and would be hanging down things. Whenever this happened, he could guess what was the matter. He would collect his school bag and toy engine and take them down-stairs. Otherwise he wouldn't know what to do and would feel like crying even though he had not even hurt himself. And Mummy would not even come to kiss him and make it all right. But what had gone wrong today? Mummy and Daddy were both all right. Mummy was making a cup of tea for Daddy. They didn't seem angry, but why were they looking worried? I had somebody broken anything, or were they annoyed with him?

Early in the morning he had realized that something was wrong because nobody sent him to school. Otherwise, as soon as it was seven o'clock Mummy would make him get up. How he wished to God that for once there would be no seven o'clock and that he may sleep on peacefully. But every morning, the clock would strike seven and Mummy's soft hands stroke his head, telling him to get up, rise and shine. With that magical touch, the deliciously cold darkness lodged

in his closed eyes would explode with a flash. He would get up, rubbing his eyes, and suddenly everything was bright and cheerful, as if a light had been switched on in a dark room. Mummy would take the tooth-paste, unscrew its cap and press the tube's tummy, and gelatinous paste would start flowing out on the bristles of the brush. Mummy would say 'Open your mouth now, say umm mm... '. His lips trembled and his mouth was full of the fragrant taste of mint. Then washing the face, from end to end behind the ears, scrubbing dry with the soft warm towel, and then straight to the breakfast table. Mummy would say 'Hurry up and finish your glass of milk, you have to grow strong and brave, don't you? Now that's a good boy.' The edges of the glass would make creamy whiskers on his upper lip, and making sure that Mummy wasn't looking, his tongue would dart out to lick them clean. Then Mummy helped him change his clothes. The freshly pressed shirt would tickle his tummy and make him giggle. Socks he could put on himself but Mummy had to help him with the laces, and keep on gently scolding him too, 'Sit straight, can't you?' And as soon as the school bus sounded its trumpet-like horn at the end of the lane. 'Um pah, Um pah pah ...' he could see Mummy's hand waving him goodbye and her face growing smaller and smaller. But none of this happened today. He awoke surprised and kept lying down on the bed, dreading the moment when somebody would callout his name and this magic spell of a lazy, drowsy moment would be broken. And then again to that dreary, old school. He awaited anxiously, but nothing happened. It was nice and warm in the bed, but bright sunshine overflowing the room hurt his eyes. He got up and went to the living room. They were all there, crowded around the radio set and all talking loudly.

Uncle was explaining something to Mummy, 'On the fifth, one of their ships was in our territorial waters, so they

kept quiet. Now their ship has gone away, so they have attacked. This is what you call tactics.

And Daddy sounded worried, 'Is there any flour in the house?' Send somebody today to get at least three or four sacks. Afterwards we may not be able get anything.'

Mummy suddenly gave a start, 'Manzoor Bhai must have been called to the front.'

Even the radio sounded different. The songs were louder today, and somebody seemed to be shouting angrily, 'Jet planes ...'

He stood there quietly. Nobody noticed him. Mummy didn't turn her head to look at him and smile. She just sat there, wiping the lantern with a rag. It was the same lantern which was stored away in the attic among old discarded bits of furniture and taken out only when electricity failed. The familiar room had something strange about it. Everybody seemed so far away. He had become so small, so insignificant. He felt like crying. Tears hurt his eyes like grains of sand. Tears that would melt away all these distances, install him once again at the centre of the secure, comfortable world of home. But what if tears didn't help? First he must find out what was wrong,

'Mummy, why have you taken out this lantern? Is there no electricity?'

'Because there will be a black-out,' Daddy told him. Old newspapers and a sheet of brown paper was lying on the floor, the same sheet which Mummy had used to cover his school books. Daddy had a pair of scissors in his hand and was cutting the paper. The open scissors would quietly slip in and with the repeated action of thumb and fingers the sheet would fall down, neatly snipped into two.

Black-out? This new word dropped in front of him like a shining, new coin. What does it mean? This strange, new word lay in his path like an unfamiliar animal, and he stood silently to watch and wonder. It excited a mixed feeling of fear and curiosity. 'Black-out' he repented under his breath, and carried it over his collection of other strange words ... *namaz*¹ and mathematics and curfew and the school prefect - which little children collect like sea-shells, pieces of coloured glass, buttons and beads. Then one day this strange, new word, never before tasted or touched, would merge with some object, known and familiar, and the pleasure of giving things their proper name would become the pleasure of discovery. A moment would light up in a magical, mysterious childhood playing hide and seek with itself. A fairy-tale would become a part of his experience. And he even knew what some of these words meant... like curfew. Mummy used to tell him that he had been born in the days of martial law and curfew was imposed in those days, and nobody can come out of their houses during the curfew, otherwise he was shot. But he couldn't understand. 'Who shoots them?'

Mummy explained 'Nobody could come out in the curfew. When you were born, nobody could come to see you in the hospital. Daddy also saw you after two days.'

'Even Daddy can't go out in the curfew?'

'No, nobody can go out otherwise he is shot immediately.'

Questions swarmed his head like ants on a pot of honey, 'Who shoots them? And why do they shoot? What happens to those who are shot? Do they die, even if he is a little boy's daddy?'

¹ Prayers

‘You and your questions!’ Mummy groaned. ‘You are driving me crazy. Go and play outside.’

So this was a word he couldn’t understand. He accepted what he could understand, and left the rest to be worked over by imagination.

But these things which he did not understand ... If you can’t come out in the curfew then it must be like a dust-storm or one of those long slimmer afternoons when the hot ‘*Loo*’ wind blows. Bad people are out in the afternoons to catch little boys. Mummy had told him. These had people must be coming out in the curfew also. Or was it like the school prefect and mathematics, unpleasant things far away from home. But still he didn’t understand what a black-out was. His mind stood still like a spinning top that had stopped humming.

Granny used to say that when day light begins to fade, one must stop all work, because it’s the time for the *maghrib*² prayers, and there must be lights in the house when the dark night approaches. Darkness made him afraid. He loved the liquid, soft, bright cone of light that lit up as soon as he pressed the switch. He would wait for the twilight anxiously, and when he saw birds beginning to roost in the tall *neem* tree he would switch on all the lights in the house. The dreary, half-hearted twilight would become lively, as if the house had suddenly cheered up. But today Daddy wouldn’t let him put the lights on ‘Its black-out,’ Daddy told him. Daddy was pasting old newspapers and brown sheets on the windows. And how strange did their windows look with glued-on brown sheets as if somebody had made them wear *burqas*. No lights blazed in the room. Darkness was flowing in. Uncle was busy painting the head-lights of the car half black.

² Prayer after sunset

‘Daddy, why do we have black-out?’

‘So that when the enemy planes come they may be deceived by the darkness, because if there is any light they would see everything and drop bombs.’

‘Why do they drop bombs?’

‘To kill people.’

‘Why do they kill people?’

‘Because they are enemies.’

‘Why are they enemies?’

‘Because of the war,’

‘Why are people killed in the war?’

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake, don’t eat my head. Can’t you see I’m worried?’

He didn’t understand anything. Is this a war? But he had read about wars in his school book, and how could anything written in school books be true? He was very confused. It was growing dark. A dirty, muddy darkness filtered ill through the veiled windows. Everything was drowned in it. The dirty claws of darkness were peeling away the left-over brightness from everything. The bright patterns printed on the curtains dimmed. Shadows were creeping out of their secret hiding places, lengthening, crawling all over, claiming everything for their own. With darkness, there lurched fear and suddenly this sound, this horrible sound coming from all directions as if the sky were sobbing loudly and these groans surrounded him, dancing all around him like a whirlpool.

‘Mummy...’ he yelled.

‘Hurry up, it’s an air raid ...’ Daddy picked him up, and hurried down. He closed his eyes tightly and clutched Daddy.

Darkness was running around in circles in his closed eyes. Just like when electricity failed, he thought. He opened his eyes a little, but it made no difference. The darkness was the same.

‘Daddy, I am afraid. I am afraid. Daddy ...’ he hid his face and sobbed.

‘Hey, a big boy like you mustn’t cry!’ Daddy comforted him.

‘Don’t be afraid, pray to God. He always answers the prayers of little children.’

He closed his eyes and started moving his lips as he had seen Daddy in the *namaz*. He knew that God was more powerful than Daddy and his school teachers. For him, life followed a well ordered pattern and the world was like Alice’s wonderland, mysterious, elusive, exciting and all the things which he did not understand, would someday become comprehensible, everything would be crystal clear. Things seemed to be moving towards a fairy-tale ending, but here was something large and unpleasant, something which even made Daddy feel helpless. He had never known fear of this kind, never even suspected that there could be anything like this.

He didn’t know what to do. There was no home-work as he had not been to school, and he didn’t feel like playing. He went downstairs where Granny lived. Granny was making a paan for Auntie next door. ‘Arey bibi’, a few days back, I had got up for the Fajar prayers. The sky was blood red and right in the middle was a huge sword ...I tell you I saw it with my own two eyes...’.

And Auntie was saying. ‘I recite the *ayat-al-kursi* every night. It will make all enemies blind. I’ve heard a very

authentic report that it's actually not our soldiers fighting but angels are helping them.'

He went over to his uncle's room. There the radio was blaring at full speed, 'Bombers...Fighters...Halwara, Pathankot...'

He came back upstairs. There was a fine film of dust along the staircase and he deliberately dirtied his elbows.

'Why have you come here?' Mummy asked him. 'You should have stayed downstairs. It's safer during air raids.'

He kept quiet. He sat down and watched Mummy tidying the room, then he got up, and lay down in the bed. Soon the darkness began to overwhelm him. It was everywhere. All around him. Over him. He was drowning in it. He wanted to scream but couldn't. The darkness strangling him and suddenly two hands lifted him. It was Daddy taking him downstairs. He had a lantern in one hand, and was holding him with the other. He rested his head on Daddy's shoulders and peered down from there. Daddy was going down carefully. The lantern dangled, sending small, wobbly circles of light. All the neighbouring houses had become dark patches. And the sky ... it was so red. Blood red. Daddy was about to set down his foot on the next step, when suddenly there was the same sound, loud and terrifying. Daddy hurried down. Air-raid, he muttered. There was a loud rumbling in the sky. Suddenly something darted in the dark, there was an explosion, and brilliant red tongues of flame in the horizon. Daddy turned down the wick of the lantern, clasped him firmly, and rushed down. He could see the stair case receding at the end and shutting down like a Japanese fan. The rumbling in the sky grew louder. Something passed overhead like a flash of lightning. There were strange whistling sounds in the ear. The double storey house seemed to be trembling.

He clutched Daddy desperately. Daddy we are going to fall down ... he wanted to cry out, but his voice was lost in the noise like a little boy buried deep in the darkness and debris.

Translated by the author

She Went in Search of Butterflies...

Zaheda Hina

Across the barricaded door, Narjis looked at *Amma's*¹ white head and the steady stream of tears flowing from her eyes. *Bhaiyya's*² head was bent low. Narjis couldn't see his face. Mehdi clapped his hands and let out a loud squeal of laughter. Thrusting his hands through the bars, he chirped, *Mamoo*³ my toffee?' That was when *Bhaiyya* raised his bent head, and clasped Mehdi's hands in his own. Drops of brine fell on Mehdi's grubby hands, in a vain attempt to wash the dirt off them.

Narjis recorded this scene in her store of memories, her visual library of assorted experiences. She felt a relief deep inside her. Even after *Amma's* departure, Mehdi would have someone looking out for him. *Bhaiyya* doted on him; he would certainly cherish him dearly.

To what lengths had *Bhaiyya* gone, to persuade her to sign the Appeal for Mercy, but that was out of the question for Narjis. The period for filing the appeal had lapsed, and here she was now, standing at the threshold of death. *Amma* clutched on to her hand as if she was saving her from

¹ Mother

² Brother

³ Maternal uncle

drowning. There was desperation in this moment; of separation, of unbearable sorrow. This moment was her last contact with the outside world, the world that was full of beauty and ugliness, good and evil, love and hatred.

Mehdi went on laughing and talking to *Bhaiyya*, He stuck his little face between the bars and kissed his *Mamoo*; he reached for his *Nanna*⁴ and slipped his fingers through her white hair.

'*Amma*, at least be happy that Mehdi will be free now. What has he known besides these bars, handcuffs, chains and fetters? He was born in these barracks; they are his entire universe, he can go to school now, he can go to the bazaar, play in the park. *Bhaiyya*, do take him to the swings.'

'*Apa*,⁵ please... don't ... for God's sake,' *Bhaiyya* burst into tears, and she became quiet. She understood *Bhaiyya's* torment and *Amma's* agony, but she couldn't make them understand that sometimes one chooses death so that others can live. A few lives must be sacrificed at the altar of death before absolute salvation can be attained.

She and Hussain had been arrested at the same time. And then news arrived that Hussain had committed suicide during the interrogation. She knew very well that when prisoners succumbed to the tortures of military detention, their bodies were not handed over to their families. They slept in unmarked graves, and their murderers dubbed their deaths as 'suicides.' Her faith in Hussain had not wavered for a moment. Like her, he was also a prisoner of conscience. And prisoners of conscience don't commit suicide, they don't write appeals for mercy.

⁴ Grandmother

⁵ Elder sister

When the time for the last visit came to an end, *Amma* fell into a swoon. *Bhaiyya* clasped the bars and kissed her hands, touched her hair. Then they went away. No, they didn't go. They were taken away.

How *Narjis* is wanted to hug *Bhaiyya* and hold him close one last time. But that was not possible. Alas, the jail rules had been drawn up by humans; yet it was impossible to find any sensitivity or feeling in them.

When his *Mamoo* left, *Mehdi* started to bawl. He wanted to go to all the places that were in *Ammi's* stories. But *Ammi* will never let him go anywhere.

'You can go tomorrow. *Mamoo* will take you there tomorrow,' *Narjis* kissed *Mehdi's* cheeks.

Warden *Marium* glanced at the mother and son for a moment, and then turned her eyes to the ground. What kind of woman was this, who hadn't sent an appeal for mercy against her death sentence, who hadn't shed a single tear after coming onto death row, hadn't screamed, hadn't cursed God, or even the jailer?

This was a indeed a strange woman: when she was given the Quran, she had simply touched it to her eyes and put it away, going on to caress and kiss her son. When the *Maulavi Sahab*⁶ came and told her to say her prayers, to beg forgiveness before the most Beneficent, most Forgiving Lord, she had smiled. After *Maulvi Sahab* left, she put the prayer mat under her pillow, put her head on the pillow, and started telling stories to her son.

The female ward was full of all kinds of criminals and convicts, but they all felt that *Narjis* was not one of them. In the last four years these 'bad' women had been very good to

⁶ Muslim priest

her. They couldn't understand that if she hadn't cut all anyone's nose or anyone's hair, hadn't stolen anyone's cattle, hadn't sold toddy or marijuana, hadn't murdered anyone, then what was she getting such grave punishment for?

'*Bibi*⁷ aren't you scared?' Warden Marium had asked her a few days after she was shifted to death row.

'Scared of what?' There was serenity in Narjis's voice.

'Of death?'

'No, when one has control over death, one is no longer scared of it. Besides, there's also Mehdi. He will live on after me, and I will live in him. Then, when he is gone, I will live on in his children.'

After this, Marium had not asked Narjis any more questions. However, news quickly spread around the barracks that the *Bibi* on death row was a great mystic, and had had the revelation that she would live on after her death. She was a woman of amazing strength.

Narjis had noticed that when the wardens came close to her, they would always look down. That the Jail Superintendent was always in a hurry to leave her cell, and twice every day when she was taken out of her cell, a sudden hush would fall all around. All the screaming and fighting women would become silent, and look at her through the bars of the prison doors as if she was not one of them, as if she had come from somewhere else.

How ceremoniously was the last meal served! 'The Last Supper'. She was reminded of the paintings of great artists. Mehdi had been delighted with the meal.

⁷ Form of addressing; also a respectable or virtuous woman

'The food is delicious today, *Ammi*,' He had put his arms around his mother's neck.

'Yes, my darling, you're quite right,' Narjis had avoided looking at him as she put a morsel of food in his mouth. She didn't want him to see the tears that were gleaming on her eyelashes.

Night fell and Mehdi started to drift into sleep. But Narjis wanted to talk to him to her heart's fill; she wanted to hear his voice, and keep him awake till very late, so that when they came to get her at dawn, Mehdi would be sound asleep.

Narjis looked at his sparkling eyes. She looked at his beautiful forehead. He had Hussain's eyes and Hussain's forehead. His body exuded Hussain's fragrance, the fragrance of beauty, of vitality, of flowers.

Hussain, now that you all are no more, are you still somewhere? Between heaven and earth? Her blood started to rush, and she held Mehdi in her embrace.

'I'm very sleepy *Ammi*,' Mehdi entreated.

'My darling, just a moment longer, and then you can sleep. Talk to me a little more: there was a tremor in Narjis' voice, tomorrow morning *Mamoo* will take you to his house. He'll tell you stories, he'll take you to the bazaar. You'll go. won't you?'

'Really *Ammi*? You'll come to the bazaar with us too, won't you?' Mehdi forgot his sleep and sat up.

'I won't go with you, my dearest.'

'So will you go on living in this house?'

'No precious, I'll go looking for butterflies for you.'

There was a sound from the corridor. Narjis looked up. Warden Marium was holding onto the bars and peering in at the two of them.

‘*Ammi* will go looking for butterflies tomorrow,’ Mehdi told Marium excitedly. He had never seen a butterfly, but *Ammi* had told him many stories about butterflies.

‘Yes Prince, talk to *Ammi* as much as you can, give her lots of hugs and kisses,’ Mariums voice started to quiver, and she turned away quickly.

‘You’ll be back by the evening, won’t you?’

‘No Mehdi, butterflies will fly very fast. When I go looking for them, I’ll go very far away.’

‘Which butterfly will you look for?’

Narjis is halted for an instance, ‘The butterfly of Freedom, my darling,’ she kissed her son’s hair.

‘What colour is Freedom?’

‘It has all the colours of the rainbow.’

‘What is a rainbow like?’

‘When it rains this time, tell *Mamoo* to show you the rainbow.’

‘Then I will also go looking for rainbow butterflies.’

‘No my darling, rainbow butterflies will come to you on their own. I’m going out to look for them so that you won’t have to go on the same search,’ Narjis started to tremble, and fervently kissed his unsoiled neck. For the first time this week, tears welled up in her eyes and streamed down.

When Mehdi went to sleep, Narjis picked him up and lay him on her. A ray of hope had made its home in Mehdi’s

being, and this hope had erected entire mountains inside her, had given her the revelation of living on in the future.

The surrounding barracks started to come alive with the sounds of prayer and chanting. A woman was reciting *Soora' Rehman*⁸ in a beautiful voice. They all knew that it was the day of *Bibi's* departure and this was all in preparation for that.

Something pierced her heart. *Bhaiyya* must be sitting in the dust outside the main gate of the jail. When he had done his Masters in Statistics, he could not have had the slightest suspicion that he would be calculating the remaining minutes of *Apa's* life, or that he would be left all alone after that.

Many faces revolved before her eyes. Kind and unkind faces, familiar and unfamiliar voices. Narjis is felt an uncontrollable love for those voices that were sacrificing their sleep to make her last journey less painful. Just a week ago she had been with these voices, but they had never understood her; they didn't know anything about her.

On the last day at the end of the appeal period, when news came that the Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent of the jail were coming to move her from the barracks to death row, there was complete silence all around. As she and Mehdi were leaving the barracks, she could see some women furtively wiping their eyes and bowing their heads. These were the same women who normally flared lip at the slightest provocation, cursed each other and tore each other's clothes to shreds, so that the matron and warden were forced to whip them apart.

A fleeting drowsiness passed over Narjis, and her heart began to sink. Mehdi's heart was beating to the rhythm of her own heartbeat. The very beating of this tiny heart was her

⁸ Seventy eight soora of the Quran

great triumph in the face of death. She would live on after herself. But what was the Spirit? And if it existed, where did it go after it left the body? Where was Hussain? Nowhere! Everything had perished. What did 'perish' mean? She knew the literal meaning of the word, but she was going to experience it for herself in a very short while.

'*Bibi*,' Marium came close to the bars, and called softly.

'Yes Marium?'

'Put the little prince on the bed, *Bibi*, they are coming,' Marium's voice faltered.

For an instant, Narjis felt the ground tremble beneath her. Then she got a grip over herself, turned on her side and loosening Mehdi's embrace, laid him on the bed. He isn't going to remember my face; I will just be a name, an idea for him.

'Forgive me for everything, *Bibi*, but this is the hand that feeds me, and I am helpless before it,' Marium rested her head against the bars and started to cry. Narjis got off the string bed and put her hands on Marium's shoulders through the bars. Words were pointless. There was a sound of heavy footsteps. Narjis patted Marium's arm; she raised her head and looked at Narjis through her tears. She wiped her eyes with her white muslin *dupatta*⁹ and stood at attention.

Marium turned the key in the lock, and opened the door as softly as she could. The Jail Superintendent pushed open the iron door with such force that it banged against the wall.

'Sir, the child is sleeping, he might wake up,' Warden Marium deferentially pleaded with the approaching company.

⁹ Long scarf

‘Oh, shut up! It’s not your child, is it?’ the Superintendent ticked her off impatiently.

‘Sir, I request you not to talk loudly,’ the young Magistrate said, wiping his brow as he glanced at the slumbering Mehdi.

The Superintendent frowned with annoyance. What do these new officers think of themselves? He checked his mounting irritation, and started the official procedure: he first formally identified Narjis, then he ceremoniously unfolded a document and read out aloud from it. The document started with: ‘I begin in the name of Allah, the Beneficent and Merciful’ and ended with the words, ‘the convict must hang until death is established.’

The medical officer stepped forward, checked Narjis’ pulse and heartbeat, and nodded quietly. The Deputy Superintendent had him sign some papers; the young Magistrate testified the signatures and the Superintendent left the cell.

The Deputy Superintendent gestured to Warden Marium. Her face seemed to have been cast in bronze, her eyes were cast down. She got hold of Narjis’ hands and tied them behind her back with a leather strap. Narjis could feel the warmth and the tremor in Marium’s fingers. She was not alone. There were so many people outside, and plenty inside too. Armed guards must be protecting all the barracks right now; a platoon of twelve wardens must already have taken their positions at the main gate; there will be ten bullets in each of their rifles, and *Bhaiyya* must be sitting on the ground right next to them.

Mehdi’s face was in front of her; she was staring straight at him, unblinkingly. At a signal from the Matron, Marium reached for her arm, and said, ‘Let’s go, *Bibi*.’

She took a step, then turned around and looked at Mehdi. He stirred in his sleep and gave a little sob. Maybe he was having a nightmare. Something clutched at Narjis heart. With great effort, she forced back the tears welling up in her eyes. She was in front of the people who had done everything to break her will and the will of others like her. But she had not accepted defeat so far; why should she give them the satisfaction of victory in these last moments?

The young Magistrate's eyes followed her gaze, 'Where will the child live?' he asked the Matron.

Narjis is felt the air knocked out of her. What a supreme test she was putting *Bhaiyya* through!

The Magistrate's brow was furrowed. He looked intently at Narjis, and then called out to a warden in the corridor.

'Yes Sir,' the warden entered.

'Pick up the child. Be careful.'

'Sir, may I lift him?' pleaded Marium.

'All right then. You, let him go with *Bibi*.'

'But Sir, this is not what the Jail Manual...' the Deputy Superintendent tried to intervene.

'To hell with the Jail Manual,' the young Magistrate said, and hurriedly left the premises.

Marium carne forward and lifted Mehdi in her arms. He immediately quietened down and went into a deep slumber.

The caravan took off under the charge of the Deputy Superintendent. Two policemen led the way, and two others brought up the rear. Narjis was in the centre, flanked by Marium on one side and another warden on the other side, Narjis' gaze was fixed on Mehdi as they walked.

Out in the open, a delightfully cool May night was drawing to an end and dawn was about to break on the horizon. She saw the execution platform in the fading moonlight. She could see the steps going up to the platform. Death is a lowering into the depths of the earth; why does one have to climb up stairs to go down into these depths? She saw the executioner. His children will be happy today; their father will bring home his earnings from today's execution. Ten rupees is a lot of money; you can buy a lot of things with so much money.

'Marium,' her voice flashed in the silence like lightning.

'At your service, *Bibi*,' Warden Marium's voice was soaked in tears. Who could say who was the master here, and who the servant. She signalled to Marium and called her close. Marium bowed down before her. Tied behind her, Narjis' hands made a desperate attempt to reach out for Mehdi, and then became still again. Mehdi was chuckling in his sleep, probably playing with fairies. Narjis looked at life with misty eyes, and bent down to kiss his forehead, his cheeks. Life was bidding farewell to life.

She went up the steps. When she got to the execution platform, the executioner bent down before her and tied her feet together. Narjis cast a final glance at the vanishing scene, and made a mental record of this as well. Her eyes were shut, and the scene was inside her. She knew that the moon was going down, and the morning star shone in the sky. Mehdi played with the fairies. The sun was about to rise, and the time to fulfil the directive that started with God's auspicious name, had arrived.

Translated by Samiya K. Mumtaz

History

Amar Jaleel

In the last row of *namazis*¹, a person suddenly got up. He was dark, had curly hair and bright eyes sunk in a face which was black as soot and flat and colourless. He was a tall young man. On his dress, almost everywhere, there were patches of all sizes and shapes. He had carried the load of existence on his back and endured the adversities of life. The aftermath was now visible from his hunched back. His back-bone had curved like an arch.

The man got up from the row of devotees and took a bird's eye view of the *eidgah*².

The entire *eidgah* was filled with people of all sorts from every walk of life. The *Eid* ³prayers were about to commence. There was a sea of people, dressed in new, clean, perfumed, white clothes, listening to the *Maulavi*⁴ *Sahib*'s sermon with great respect. Some were dozing. The *Maulvi Sahib* was in great spirits and addressed the congregation in an emotionally charged voice. Sometimes stretching his arms, then lowering them, in a low voice, other times gently, but

¹ The faithful offering prayers

² Place where Eid prayers are offered

³ Muslim festival

⁴ Muslim priest

more often loudly, he delivered his speech dramatically, in a sort of frenzy. He was trying to rouse the faith lying dormant in the hearts of the people.

People were listening attentively, trying to grasp the true significance of his sermon. At the same time, their eyes were fixed on their shoes, which were placed neatly in front of them; shoes and sandals and slippers were juxtaposed, their soles touching each other. They were on the other side of the prayer rug, about an inch away from the spot where the devotees would touch the ground with their forehead. Some *namazis* had brought children with them, dressed brightly and colourfully. They had one eye on their children and the other on their shoes.

The *Maulvi Sahib's* health was enviable. Had there been no microphone, his powerful, vibrant voice would still have reached the black man standing in the last row.

'Sit down, you nigger!' a lean man next to him suddenly said, grabbing the black man's arm. 'What the hell are you doing? Looking for your lost monkey?'

The dark man wrenched his hand free with a jerk. He then pushed his way forward to the next row.

'Move away, *yar*⁵', a tiny, quail-like little fellow pushed him away and said contemptuously, 'Is he a human being or a drum of coal-tar?'

The black man didn't say a word. But he left that row of devotees, too, and went forward to the next row where he found standing-room.

⁵ Friend

‘Oh! what a fool you are *ama habshi*⁶!’ one elderly man said angrily. ‘Aren’t you ashamed of yourself? How dare you trample my spotless white payjama with your filthy feet?’

The black man ignored the elderly gentleman's fury and decided to abandon that row, too. He moved forward to the next row.

‘*Khabardar*⁷!’ thundered a man whose face resembled that of an angel. He pinched the black man’s thigh and shouted, ‘*La haul wala!* You’ve soiled this prayer mat that I had brought from Madina. Are you a man or the son of the Devil ... *Ibn-e-Iblees*⁸?’

The black man refused to be provoked by either his anger or his pinch. He was gazing ahead, far ahead, as if he were in pursuit of someone, chasing some being. Again, he left that row and went forward to the next.

‘O you, gorilla!’ a young man addressed him haughtily. He had taken pains to groom his hair into a wave on his forehead. He was trying his best to look and behave like Film-star Waheed Murad.

‘Idiot! Are you coming straight from a cage in some zoo?’ he hissed disdainfully.

Another young man sitting by his side with a lot of makeup on his face, and looking more like a heroine than a hero, started grinning. ‘It seems he has just been imported from Africa,’ he murmured with a gleam in his eyes.

A respectable old man was dozing nearby. Startled by the sound of laughter, he suddenly opened his eyes and

⁶ You blackie!

⁷ Don't you dare

⁸ Son of satan

glanced towards the pseudo film-star and his companion. He gave friendly advice: 'Listen attentively to what *Maulavi* Sahib is saying, young man.'

At this, one young man retorted, 'So you woke up after all. It's quite late, sir, isn't it?' They exchanged mischievous glances and chuckled. Meantime, the black man had left that row, too, and had managed to acquire standing-room in the next row.

'You, blackie, why are you gate-crashing like a camel?' someone shouted. The devotees in that row looked at his torn, dirty, old, patchy clothes and black complexion with disgust.

'Is someone distributing sweets here that this bloke is leaping forward and jumping about like a monkey?' someone asked.

That seemed to be a signal for the others to begin. A shower of noise began to come from all corners.

'*Abay*⁹, get out.'

'Move away.'

'Go back.'

'Don't come forward.'

'He's crazy.'

'Stark mad.'

'From his face he looks like a gorilla.'

'Resembles a chimpanzee.'

'It's the same thing. Belongs to the same family!'

⁹ O man

Under this generous shower of abuse, the black man leaped and swept forward from one row to another crossing many lines of devotees. His sudden movement created a stir in the audience. A commotion began. Those who were dozing suddenly woke up and became alert. Those who had been listening to the *Maulana Sahib's* sermon with their eyes on their shoes, looked apprehensively at the black man. And when the tension mounted, they leaped forward in alarm and picked up their shoes.

'You wretched fellow! You're interfering in our devotion, disturbing 'our concentration,' someone cried. There were a few young men around, valiant and daring. They offered the *Eid* prayers regularly. Fired by the passion of youth and the zest of their devotion, they rushed on the black man and overpowered him. Then some of them went up the last step of the pulpit. They began to watch the show standing there. Suddenly everyone present in the *eidgah* was attentive to the black man. They all looked at him, then began to curse him. Different kinds of people—different types of voices and tones and accents. A variety of languages. But all conveying the same sense and meaning.

'He's a bloody thief.'

'He was running away with shoes under his arm.'

'Not a thief but a pickpocket.'

'See that he doesn't escape.'

'Don't allow him to get away.'

'Hold him fast, the bastard.'

'Son of a pig.'

'Look at that swine stealing in the House of God.'

‘Wretched fellow. From his face, he looks a thief all right.’

‘Keep the bastard firmly under control.’

‘Hold him securely.’

The black man’s clothes were tatty and in really bad shape. The people tore to pieces whatever remained of those rags. He was panting for breath as they manhandled him, but his eyes were fixed on some distant object, some axis far away. Suddenly a dwarfish fellow shook him fiercely.

‘Don’t thrash him any more. Poor wretch!’ an elegant gentleman said. ‘Flog him after the prayer.’ At this the dwarfish fellow withdrew his hand from the blackie’s hair and slapped him gently on the head.

Just then, pushing out of the crowd, someone came forward. He was not black, but he, too, was in tatters like the dark man. ‘I know this man!’ he announced in a loud voice. The noise around them suddenly subsided.

‘You know this man?’ people asked him in surprise. ‘Yes. I know this man,’ this newcomer replied. ‘This black man is not a thief. He isn’t a pickpocket either.’

The noise suddenly came back.

‘It seems you’re his partner, sort of an associate,’ someone observed and then quickly advised, ‘Catch this scoundrel too.’

‘Please wait,’ the newcomer pleaded. ‘I am not his companion.’

‘Then who are you?’ somebody asked. ‘And how do you know this blackie, this nigger?’

‘I sell green tea at Keamari,’ the newcomer replied. ‘This man offloads wheat bags from ships and reloads them in railway wagons.’

‘Oh don’t talk rubbish. Go and sell green, no, red tea at Keamari,’ a man standing nearby replied with anger.

‘We will set them right,’ someone else added confidently. The newcomer once again tried to say something. But no one was in a mood to listen to him. Then someone from the crowd shouted: ‘Are you leaving or should we thrash you also?’ Their tone and their menacing looks unnerved him and the newcomer moved away from the crowd. After his hasty retreat, the volcano of abuse erupted again.

‘Beat him up,’ someone suggested spiritedly. Someone else had a better idea.

‘Not now. After the prayers.’

‘There should not be any commotion during *namaz*¹⁰.’

‘After the prayers, this disgraceful fellow’s face will be blackened and he will be paraded through the city on a donkey.’

‘He’s pitch-black. How will you blacken him?’

‘That’s a point. How can we blacken the face of a black man?’

‘We shall lay the foundation of a new tradition. We shall whitewash his face with lime!’

‘The face of a thief should be painted only black, not white,

¹⁰ Prayers

‘You are right, brother.’

‘Then why not put this issue to vote?’

‘First the accountability of this man.’

‘You cannot talk about votes before the process of accountability ends.’

‘Then what should be done with this bloke now?’

What should be done with the black man? People began to argue and wrangle on the issue. The noise intensified. There was a riotous uproar all around, and in the midst of that deafening noise it was impossible to hear or understand what was being said. In the turmoil, the black man suddenly leaped forward and in one jump escaped the crowd. With great agility he began crossing row after row of *namazis*, moving fast, never looking back.

As the crowd watched his incredible progress, their apprehension mounted. Those who only moments ago had thought of him as a thief and a cheat, now began to consider him as a murderer.

The elite of the city, the Revered Citizens, were occupying the first row of the congregation. The city’s industrialists and factory owners. The capitalists, seths, bankers and money-lenders, the pious, the gold-and silversmiths, and renowned politicians. They were all sitting close to the pulpit. The Honourable Janab Mahmood was sitting just behind the Imam. He was now being photographed by newspaper reporters. It was obvious that Janab Mahmood was also aware, though vaguely perhaps, of what was going on in the back-rows. He appeared profoundly disturbed by the peculiar situation which had developed in the *eidgah*.

Leaping and crashing, the black man had almost reached the first row when the posse of police pounced on him and seized him. They dragged him out of the *eidgah*, slapping him en route, kicking him and beating him with their batons.

Just then, the *Maulvi Sahib's* voice began to roar from the loud-speakers which had been fixed all over the *maidan*¹¹. He was explaining the correct technique of offering the *Eid* prayers.

'When your Imam says *Allah-o-Akbar*¹² for the third time, you must lift your hands to your ears and then bring them down.'

'You bastard, why the hell were you moving towards the front row?'

Outside the *eidgah*, the black man was being interrogated. Senior officers and famous detectives of the country were participating in this on-the-spot inquiry. Punching in his belly, a policeman fired another question at him, 'Why were you approaching the first row? Come on, out with it.'

The black man's nose and head were bleeding. Slowly he turned his head and looked at the men, the country's top detectives and officers surrounding him.

'I say, out with your answer,' an officer next to him snarled. 'Why the hell are you silent?'

Another blow landed on his belly, and then one on his nose, followed by a kick on his ankle. He was asked roughly: 'Who is at the back of your movement? At whose behest and for what purpose were you advancing towards the first row?'

¹¹ Open ground

¹² Allah is the Greatest

Vomiting blood, the black man replied dully, 'I want to offer prayers in the first row!'

'You want to do what?' thundered someone. 'Offer prayers in the first row?' Flabbergasted, the senior officers and constables looked at him as if they had not heard him correctly. They looked at him closely. Then they turned their heads to observe those who were present in the first row. Noting their personalities and importance, they burst out laughing.

'Nut, have you ever seen your face in the mirror?' Someone asked in mock-seriousness. Another slap landed on him, this time on his temple.

'You son of a baboon!' He received yet another title.

Slowly the black man wiped the blood flowing out of his nose with the sleeve of his tattered shirt. Then he declared, 'I shall say my prayers in the first row!'

'You will offer *namaz* in the first row?' He was greeted with several blows and kicks. Then someone said, 'Don't you know the elite of the city is present in the first row? And you, a baboon, wish to offer prayers with them?'

His eyes began to close from the horrible, throbbing pain. In agony, he repeated unsteadily, 'I shall offer prayers in the first row.'

'The bastard is stark mad.' Someone thrust his hand into the black man's curly hair and raised his head. His blood-stained face was turned towards the sun and then he was informed: 'You son of a baboon, don't you know that Janab Mahmood is sitting in the first row?' The hand was withdrawn from his dirty mass of hair and once again his head went down. His eyes began to close. With effort, he lifted his head and, turning his neck, threw a cursory glance

at the sea of people around him. Then, once again, he declared gently but firmly, 'I shall offer prayers in the first row. By the side of Janab Mahmood ...close to him.'

The constable burst into laughter. Then one of them said. 'Nut's really gone mad. He'll offer prayers with Janab Mahmood Sahib, shoulder to shoulder;

'I shall offer prayers by the side of Janab Mahmood Sahib,' the black man repeated in a frenzy.

Losing patience, one of the detectives caught hold of his neck, pulled him close and, looking into his dull, half-closed eyes, asked softly, 'Who are you? What's your name?'

'I am Ayaz!' He declared. 'I am Ayaz, Ayaz, Ayaz! I wish to offer prayers in the same row as Janab Mahmood Sahib!'

Slowly, his voice dropped as if he were sinking, being extinguished. His eyes began to close and he collapsed on the black, coal-tarred road.

Translated by the author

Note: King Mahmud of Ghazni (968-1030 A.D.) and Ayaz, his African slave, always dined together and prayed side by side in the same Suf (row).

A Poor Man's Home

Abdullah Jan Jamaldini

Within the foothills of the Chilian range, one may see a few tents. In one, out of all these tents, a dim small light was flickering. A woman was mending an old rug and four children lay sleeping near by. A harsh wind was blowing outside. It was a pitch dark night and one could hardly see one's own hands. The father of these children had gone in the afternoon in search for his lost ram and had not yet returned. At each bark of the dog the woman would go outside to look around, and return as she was unable to see anything. And thus the early night changed into midnight.

Due to the fear of wolves and other dangerous animals she could hardly sleep. She was fearful at the thought of something having happened to her husband who had not returned so far. She went outside and looked around but could find nothing except the screaming of the wind and hurried back into the tent and picked up the Quran. She kissed the sleeping children one by one. At the same time she thought of the two children of her widowed cousin Gul Khatoon, who was raising her kids through the terrible hardship of life. She trembled at the sheer thought of Gul Khatoon and her orphan children and she jumped up to see outside once again. There was nothing but darkness.

Somehow she was struck by the fear of life without her husband through the thick and thin of existence. Her eyes filled with tears, looked towards her children and held the Holy Quran firmly. She sat calmly for a while and then thought of going and asking about the welfare of Gul Khatoon and to see whether there was a bite of bread for them or not. 'To hell with the ram in whose search I have been running around through the day without eating anything. But what was there to eat except a few grains of barley?

She returned to her tent after having found that all was well in the tent of Gul Khatoon. But then the thought of stillness in her cousin's tent made her nervous and she went back. Gul Khatoon was lying with her eyes closed and her head was hanging towards one side. One of the children was lying on her chest and the other was sleeping by her side. She cried, 'Oh God!' and started weeping. She held her heart firmly and picked up the two children and took them to her own tent and laid them on the bed. 'Oh God! you are merciful!.'

Some time after midnight she heard the barking of dogs outside. She went out. There was a vague figure to be seen at a distance. She became hopeful. After few moments she could see her husband coming back. She ran into the tent and quickly lit the fire. Her husband entered and warmed himself. He told her that he could not find the ram. Maybe the wolves had eaten it, his wife exclaimed, 'Forget the ram. Thank God you have come back safe' The husband asked about the children and she told him that they were sleeping. At the same time he saw the other children and asked whether they belonged to Gul Khatoon. She said yes and told him sorrowfully that her cousin had died during the night.

She then told him how she had been looking for the ram all day long, and children had gone to sleep without eating

anything. 'There were only a few grains of solid barley,' she said, 'I could not fetch water or milk the sheep.' Nor I could ask about the welfare of Gul Khatoon the whole day. Last night she seemed a little better and I thought that she was improving. How would I know that the angel of death was waiting to take her away? And now she has breathed her last. There was no one even to put a few drops of water into her mouth.'

She wept and wept. The husband consoled her and went into the tent of Gul Khatoon. After a while he returned, kissed the orphan children on their forehead, and said to his wife, 'God is the protector of these children. Now they are our responsibility. You must raise them like your own children. No one should call them orphan. All hardships are from God, and he is also merciful to remove them. No one is there to help except God.' Afterwards, hungry and tired he started for the city with a few sheep to sell them and buy the shroud for Gul Khatoon in order to bury her with respect.

Translated by the Author

The Jackal

Dur Muhammad Kasi

Islamabad is one of those cities in the world where a stranger cannot judge whether the city has been built in a jungle or a jungle has grown in the city.

I questioned many people whether there was a jungle here when the city of Islamabad was planned? Some people think that there was a jungle, but others would say that first the city was built and then the jungle grew. This city in the jungle or jungle around a city has a unique grace and grandeur. Some of its parts look nothing else but a jungle, whereas some parts seem to be a beautiful combination of city and jungle.

The place where I stayed for the first time looked more like a jungle than a city. There were some scattered mansions, catering for the privileged class as hostels. I found such a hostel to stay in with much ado.

The main characteristic of this place was the atmosphere of privacy. Everybody considers his privacy more important than any other aspect of life. There were many people in that hostel, but everyone was lonely.

Amidst the jungle, this hostel looked like a solitary house in the mountains of Kalam. There was, however, one point of contrast, and that was the layout of some very important

roads around that hostel. The importance of these roads was due to their structure which could facilitate cars to run as fast as they could. Secondly they could not be used by any Tom, Dick or Harry to disturb the privacy of the distinguished people.

In the room I was as lonely as in a jungle. When I looked outside the window, there was really a jungle. When I walked out in the veranda, the veranda and corridors were empty. Hushed whispering and laughter coming casually out of some rooms sounded as if stones were falling in the Saif-ul-Maluk, clattering and ringing.

In this ocean of mystery and silence, there was, at least, one living creature which did not feel defeated, nor was it ashamed, nor would it retreat. It was the tiger of the jungle of Islamabad---no, sorry, it was the jackal. It was the jackal. In this jungle of tranquility, jackals were reigning.

In the late afternoon, when darkness was falling and spreading apace, a mysterious howl would echo, followed by a howl or two, and then it would multiply into a chorus.

I was scared in the beginning to hear that howling. Gradually I got used to it. Then a time came when I did not hear it. I was surprised and would think about the comrades of my privacy, where had they gone? But it would not take long. After a short pause the friends would start the chorus.

Sometimes, the piercing sound of the tires of speedy cars mingled in that lyrical howling. Casually the jackals kept silent when a motor car was running by. But sometimes they were annoyed to feel that man was not leaving them in peace in the middle of that jungle even in the darkness. Hence they would increase their howling in protest.

Sometimes I felt that the jackals of the city were too brash and immodest creatures. Those of our mountains and plains had some sort of meekness and modesty. I am sure that most of the people of the mountains would not have seen a jackal from close by. Because those jackals are shy to some extent. They keep away from man in particular. Probably, they are well aware of the nobility of man. For when they are hungry, they come down covertly in the night, steal some fowls, run back to the mountains. It is just impossible to see a jackal in the day time. But these jackals of the city! Heaven forbid!

I used to walk to my office at seven every morning and see on those wide roads, dead jackals which were run over by speedy cars.

Once I mentioned it to a friend and wanted to know about the reason of such shamelessness. That dear friend said, 'O brother! modesty and immodesty are related to subsistence. If the earning is legitimate, modesty is there, if it is not, there is no modesty.' I laughed heartily. The friend looked at me with astonishment as to why I was laughing like a madman. Finally he asked, 'What happened! Are you crazy!'

I said, 'O, you are crazy! I am not crazy! You are crazy that you talk about the law in case of jackals. It is an animal. And probably, the meanest and most inferior of animals.'

He said, 'No, it is not inferior. But it has no power. Let us pray that it may not get power, otherwise you will forget the brutality and cruelty of tigers.'

I said, 'Give up your philosophy. Just tell me how could a jackal get legitimate subsistence?' Then my friend embarked on an explanation: 'O brother! Big officers, politicians, landlords, capitalists, *jagirdars* and other big people live in

Islamabad. They are rich knowing no bounds of their prosperity and wealth. There is no beggar or poor in this city.

I said, 'What relation has this argument with jackals?'

'It is there. The argument is closely related to jackals. These buildings are treasures of wealth. There is no dearth of food. Much more is prepared than could be eaten. The rest is thrown in dust-bins, Jackals come and eat it.'

'Then what! Jackals get it by labour. It is not a theft. How could it be illegitimate?'

My friend was a little vexed. 'I cannot convince you. May God help you. You are crazy.'

I requested him not to be irritated. 'You talked about legitimate and illegitimate earnings. I wanted its explanation.'

He heaved a sigh and said, 'Had this wealth been legitimate, would it be thrown in the dust bin, and how could it be devoured by jackals?'

I was confused. What my friend was saying was really worth consideration.

One day I went to the Friday Bazaar to find some cheap commodities. I was still roaming about when I heard the *azaan* from far away. I looked at my watch. It was time for the Friday prayer. I thought of ablution. I asked someone about water. He guided me to where there was a stream of clean water. I had to go there to perform ablution.

I found the stream with abundant water running through the thick grass and trees. A beautiful jungle it was. I went down and sat for ablution. When I put my hand in the water, there arose some noise in the grove and jungle in front of me.

I looked up and saw a fat jackal put his forelegs in the water, looking at me in anger, and growling.

I was surprised. What to do now? Inadvertently, I shouted at it. 'Be off!'

It looked more angry as if thinking, 'What courage you have to drive me out of my own Jungle!'

Its growling rose into howling. Then I adopted politeness. I said. 'O brother, draw out your forelegs out of the water so that I could perform ablution. Because as long as your forelegs are in, this water is not pure and my ablution would not be correct.'

My request was taken as an affront like a bullet. It turned over its face and howled, 'Ooooo, my comrades!' Three or four jackals immediately stretched their heads out of the jungle. Then their leader addressed me, 'Who the hell are you? Are you not satisfied that we have tolerated your existence so far in our jungle? And you dare ask me to get out of the water.'

'I was scared and confused. How could I escape? I was, in fact, in their area. I was all alone, and they were too many. I thought that there was no way to escape. The stream was deep. And the jungle thick. If you run and reach the road you would be exhausted. The death of honour is far better than the death of cowardice in flight. I composed myself, frowned and shouted at the jackal, 'Jackal! You dirty creature! Get your arms out of the pure water. If you want your safety, then go away. Don't you know to which mountains I, a brave Pakhtun belong?'

The jackal laughed, and then wept.

Surprise! O, God! Help me! What a situation I am in.

The jackal said, 'I laughed because you are more crazy than us. And I wept because nobody of your family or clan or tribe would even know about your death, the way the youths of our kind are found martyred every morning on the roads of the city.'

Yes, it was telling the truth. I had seen many jackals lying dead on roads. Then what! Would he be run over by a car? I was still thinking when the jackal said, 'O brother! you are probably a guest. You are not aware of the way of life of this city. Therefore we give you a chance. Go away, in silence and honour. If not, then you will have to take this water that we take. If we tolerate you, you will have to tolerate us.'

I said, 'This water is not pure. Ablution with this water is not correct and the prayer would not be correct. I will have to force you out of this water.'

I stood up and wanted to pick a big stone. I had not yet touched the stone when a great number of jackals swarmed up around me. The elder said to me, 'You know that I am the king of this jungle, and they all are my army.'

I said, 'Be off! The king of the jungle should be a lion and not a jackal.' It again laughed. 'Be thankful that it is Islamabad and we are fed well, otherwise you would not have seen a moment more of your life. Whosoever tried to bully us like a tiger, we have transformed him by the power of our majority, into a jackal, or killed him. But you – you are not worth either death or to be a jackal. Go away' Be off! Don't think of coming this way again. You are disturbing our privacy.'

Really, they were too many. They were a force. I was all alone. The weak is meek. I bowed my head.

Even now when I am alone in the darkness, the voice of a jackal from far away raises my hair and puts me in thought.

O God! Be merciful! Don't bring light over this darkness. This darkness is a curtain. If the light comes and I see my face in clean water---my face---my head---O God---my hands, my ears, my body---I too, a jackal, no, a dog, no a hyena---God forbid---forgive us, before the curse, before the day of judgment, forgive us---the apes, the bears and the boars, they were also human beings---but these jackals---jackals---what are they?

Translated by Dr. Sher Zaman Taizi

Identity

Masud Mufti

‘When Islam does not forbid marriage between the People of the Book, why are they making it an issue?’ he asked irritably, raising the glass or chilled beer to his lips.

‘Because they are your parents! Because they do not want to bring a Christian daughter-in-law into a Muslim home.’ Saleem spelled out each word slowly and distinctly before popping a couple of salted peanuts into his mouth and munching them with great deliberation.

‘Even if it means washing their hands off their only son?’

‘They believe that their son will reconsider his decision about this marriage and the question of washing their hands off him will not arise.’

They looked away from each other and an uneasy silence—tense, bitter as gall, fraught with the exigencies of the moment—descended between them. With a crash Khalid brought his fist down on the table. ‘But I cannot live without her—and she cannot live without me—for the past two years you have seen our relationship grow; you know how deeply we love each other—why can’t my family comprehend this simple fact?’

Saleem smiled. 'How can they understand? Your formative years were spent in an American university – their childhood was spent in Lahore; in schools where they read about the Khilafat Movement and witnessed the mass rallies for freedom from colonial rule. Their adult lives have been lived in a Pakistan where the only time Islam and Christianity are mentioned in the same breath is with reference to the Crusades! How can they even begin to understand the logic of your international, cross-religious love?'

'And how long ago was it that the Crusades took place?' Khalids smile was caustic.

'Somewhere around the eleventh, twelfth and thirteen centuries – they carried on for a few hundred years.'

'And what century are we living in now?' asked Khalid raising his glass to his lips.

'By the Grace of God, we are in the twentieth century – and if you are not tall far gone to remember, we are now in its eighty-eighth year!'

'And do my parents think that nothing has changed in all these years?'

'I don't know about "nothing," said Saleem sipping his drink, 'what *I do* know is that the *musalman*¹ has not changed – his ways haven't changed – nor does he have any intention of changing them.'

'But I'm determined to change them – and Josephine is just as clear about what she wants – after all, her parents are equally opposed to this match,'

¹ Muslim

‘Come, come! Who gives a damn about what parents want in America’? The youth of this country have the bit well and fairly between their teeth and go wherever fancy takes them. They do what they please! Josephine is raising the spectre of parental opposition on her part simply to give you courage in dealing with your own! Lovers like you only know how to fall in love – you people don’t *know* women!’

‘And you, who saw your wife’s face for the first time after you were married – what do you know of women?’

‘True, true – I saw my wife’s face for the first time after the wedding – but all the rest that there is to see of women I had seen long before that!’

They began to laugh and Khalid got up for more beer.

The buxom young woman behind the bar was serving mugs of frothing beer and Khalid turned a practiced and prurient eye on the contours of her firm and well-rounded body. Their eyes met and in an instinctive feminine response to the challenge in the male look, she smiled and scooped up the money he had placed on the counter. Carefully balancing the brimming glasses, he threaded his way to their table through the crowded bar.

‘This place is getting to be quite impossible on weekends,’ he said placing the drinks on the table, and in no time at all the two were caught up again in the tangles of the old debate, It was the free and easy exchange of compatriots in a strange land. The conversation of friends who had grown up together and between whom there were no secrets.

Saleem’s arguments were based on calm reason and commonsense, but Khalid, carried on the floodtide of passion, heard none of them. This argument had been raging under American skies for the past so many months, while in

Pakistan his parents fretted and worried and sent a stream of letters, not only to their son but also to Saleem. In America, on the one hand, two individuals had defied all conventions and taboos to lose themselves in the joy of love; in Pakistan on the other, two other individuals weighed down by the burden of personal, familial, religious and cultural considerations were devastated with grief.

A few years ago when Saleem had returned to Lahore to marry the girl of his parents' choosing, they had showered blessings on him and made a vow at the shrine of *Daata Sahib*² – a pledge of thanksgiving to be fulfilled when their son too returned for the same purpose. Carried away by his role of the 'dutiful son', Saleem had promised to extricate his friend from the toils of the woman who belonged to a different race and followed a different religion. And today, in an overcrowded bar, he was doing his best to honour a promise made thousands of miles away under another sky in another world.

The room hummed with the various, indiscriminate voices like the buzzing of innumerable bees. Faded, discoloured jeans mingled randomly with loose jackets and heavy joggers; there was an abundance of scantily clad femininity, of barely covered unselfconscious, tumescent flesh, innocent of the pressures of another culture that demanded the constant adjustment of the slipping *dupatta*³. Here everything was explicit, out in the open. People were drinking but no loud voices marred the scene; no slurring tones disturbed the indistinguishable rise and fall of many conversations simultaneously held. For all the difference the alcohol seemed to make, they could have been drinking so much coloured water—nothing more. In this the American bar bore a surface family resemblance to a Pakistani teahouse

² Great mystic saint, Ali Hajvery

³ Long scarf

—despite the crucial fact that the liquor they consumed had the power to shock the body and awaken the senses to the spirit of camaraderie and our tea merely assisted a ritual conviviality – to the one belonged life and abundance – to the other – frugality and tedium.

Located at a crossroads, the bar belonged to an older, more graceful architectural age with its tall glass windows open to the bright lights of the square outside. It was their favourite haunt, and occupying seats next to one of the windows, the two friends would discuss anything and everything under the sun, ranging from whichever woman happened to be occupying the next table to matters and memories of their distant homeland. This day was no different from the others already spent within its walls. The drink had softened the edges of the world, but they were sober enough- and the topic for the day was Khalid's transgressive relationship.

'Once the passions have cooled down, you will have to deal with hard realities! To begin with, what religion will your children belong to? Will you bring them up as Muslims or will they subscribe to the Christian faith?'

'Look! The religion that I grew up with – the form it acquired in my parents' home – never appealed to me. I felt circumscribed by it and it compelled me seek one with a different face. I see myself as a humanist - the gift of the twentieth century and the two world wars. My religion is not to be found in either mosque or church. My children will be brought up in the same belief system; it will be up to them to decide what they want to be. In today's world people have the freedom to search for meaning along so many different paths – they have walked the way of the hippies, opted for atheism or agnosticism, and have found comfort in orthodoxy and religion - why should I deny my children the right to choose

what they want to be? Why should I insist that they follow the faith of their parents?"

'Oh come! All this sounds very fine in theory and suits the mood of this bar, but it won't work!' Saleem replied dryly. 'Your family will come to grief down the uneven byways and highways of life.'

'Why will they come to grief? Josephine thinks the way I do, and that is how we will bring up our children!'

'If she is as liberal as you make her out to be, will she give up her own faith and adopt Islam?'

'You're not getting me are you? Look, she's as much of a Christian as I am a Muslim. Just as I don't go to the mosque, she doesn't go to church. Neither of us is bound by any established creed – we are like ships on life's ocean – free to choose our direction: Khalid replied with a touch of pride.

'Yet you yourself say that during the course of one life, people change – move from belief system to belief system – what if tomorrow she chooses to become a practising Christian and feels herself bound by the demands of her creed – what will you do then?

'Yar,⁴ you sociologists drag your "whys" and "wherefores" into everything. Don't you understand that marriage is at best a gamble, and gambling relies heavily on chance?'

'Yet engineers like you do not fail to take into account that a building does not rely on its foundations alone hut must be built to resist the shock of earthquakes and the encroachment of termites.'

⁴ Informal way of addressing a friend

Having reached an impasse, the two turned their undivided attention to their drinks.

‘Look, there he is – the same mysterious Bengali.’ Khalid pointed out of the window to where a man sporting an insignificant beard and clad in jeans and cardigan with a couple of books tucked under his arm, was hurrying down the sidewalk.

‘It seems he must be late for his prayers,’ Saleem commented facetiously,

‘But there is no mosque in the vicinity.’

‘Just joking,’ replied Saleem. ‘I sometimes go to the mosque for the *Jumma*⁵ prayers and he is always there – and in the front row too. He is probably somebody important on the *Masjid Committee*⁶’. We come here regularly – I’ve never known him to set foot in this bar.’

‘Even if he comes in here what difference will it make? He’ll cut us dead.’

‘Yes. I wonder why he’s so cagey. He must be allergic to us. Even when we meet face to face, he has always looked away.’

‘Perhaps he’s uncomfortable in the company of young men.’

‘O come, he is not that old and we are not that young. He couldn’t be much over forty.’

‘True – but then why does he avoid us? May be he disapproves of our visits to the bar – or perhaps it is something else –’

⁵ Friday

⁶ Mosque committee

Khalid's cell phone gave an imperative beep. 'I've received my summons,' he said, downing his drink, 'I'm needed urgently at the Project – see you later – *khuda hafiz*⁷.

Seemingly uneventful, time went on as each day followed the sun's trajectory across the sky and merged with evening: but each revolution of the planet brings with it, its quota of hopes, doubts and fears and when a life-giving drop of hope or a flinty particle of doubt, gets caught in the interconnecting threads of life, it causes a short circuit. Then sparks fly. Often they only flare harmlessly into a brief life, but there are times when they ignite great fires with clouds of black smoke. But there are also times when no visible disaster occurs and still, impassive faces become masks that hide great upheavals.

Having raised a storm of prayer in Lahore, *Abbu*⁸ and *Ammi*⁹ were oscillating between hope and fear when one of these cosmic splinters collided with their lives. Nobody knew how the news reached them, no one could tell where it came from, but somehow they learnt that in far-away America Khalid had married Josephine in a civil ceremony. Panic-stricken they called him only to be met with the impersonal voice of the answering machine informing them that he was out of town for a few days.

'Must be away on his honeymoon.' *Abbu* said in a stricken voice.

They phoned Saleem only to have their worst fears confirmed. He told them that he too had been away and had heard of the marriage only on his return. Khalid had not taken him into confidence – but *Ammi* and *Abbu* did not

⁷ Good bye

⁸ Father/ Dad

⁹ Mother/mum

believe him – they saw his answer as a poor excuse to absolve himself of responsibility. Overcome by grief and unable to face people they stopped going out of the house altogether.

The news of Khalid's marriage spread. Feigning ignorance, driven by curiosity, acquaintances came to call. They were received with determined smiles, but the facade of normality was tremulous with the fear that someone might raise the one topic they could not bear to talk about. With every departing visitor they agonised over the thought of whether they had managed to fool the others or whether they themselves were the dupes. But the joint efforts of genuine well-wishers and malicious onlookers ensured that this duplicitous farce should end. The thing that they least wanted to talk about would find a voice – sympathisers, mockers, mischief-makers saw to that. But all questions were parried with a quiet dignity that discouraged further questions. No explanations were given, no blame attached to their son, no excuses were made. The topic was simply allowed to die down. Only the wan faces belied the resigned acceptance of the recurrent 'As God wills it!' at the conclusion of each statement. But the floodgate of grief would burst with the departure of guests when *Ammi* would collapse on her bed, giving way to silent tears, and *Abbu* barricaded himself behind the newspaper as if, like the great wall of China, it would hold back the world.

Daily they lived the whole gamut of shock and horror at their son's behavior shame for themselves, and grievance with God. Alternating waves of blame, self-pity, anger tossed and swirled them around like leaves in a storm – 'how did this happen?' – 'how could it happen?' – 'what will happen now?' Bat-winged, these questions fluttered and crashed against the walls of their minds. A man of orthodox belief, *Abbu* was assailed by questions of apostasy and doubt that

had breached the impregnable fastnesses of his house. At another time, thoughts of filial ingratitude would strike adder-tongued sending their poison coursing through their veins, only to be replaced by the fear of ridicule that pecked at the living flesh causing untold torment. No sooner had the mind reached some compromise with the one hydra-headed fear – another raised its head, bringing with it, its own message of pain. Each minute brought a hundred torments; each hour saw the death of countless dreams. The only time they addressed the other children was to say repeatedly: 'Khalid is dead for us! Do not mention his name!'

The psychological, cultural and religious horizons of the middle-aged parents lay beyond the vision of the younger generation, poised on the first rungs of life. Their boundaries were shaped by the glitter and dazzle of modernity - by the internet, email and the new culture beamed in by satellite television; their eyes were blinded by the flashing lights and the jungle beat of disco music. Not surprisingly, the family's response to Khalid's marriage was not uniform. Some sided with *Abbu*, some took a voyeuristic interest in the proceedings and others wondered what all the fuss was about.

Then Saleem came to Lahore for the vacations and he and his wife called on the family. Khalid's parents enacted the role of conscientious hosts, but *Abbu* was absent in the spirit and after a while even the forms of polite conversation faltered and gave way to silence. When the family album that their son had sent them was handed over to him, and he looked at the face of his American daughter-in-law, for him the pleasing visage and the gentle smile were misted over and distorted by the prism of Christianity.

As the cautious, halting conversation gathered pace, Saleem did his best to lead up to a point where he could be persuaded to forgive Khalid so that he could then convince

him to visit his parents with his new bride. But *Abbu's* face remained as unmoving as a waxen image that the longing in *Ammi's* eyes had not the power to melt. In a losing game, Saleem played his trump card and announced that Khalids wife was expecting a child and if his father agreed to speak to him on the telephone, he would like to give him this good news himself.'

All eyes were fixed on *Abbu*. The innocent excitement of the younger brothers and sisters, *Ammi's* yearning love and Saleem's hesitant daring – converged ill the look that was cast upon him.

'*Allah hu Akbar, Allah u Akbar*'¹⁰- the *muezzin's*¹¹ call to prayer fell on their ears.

Head bowed, *Abbu* continued to sit there; a tremor passed across his face and the lips moved, 'The *azan*,¹² it is not heard there - if he wishes -I will say the *azan* in the child's ear over the telephone - but for him, there is no forgiveness!' and he left the room as if escaping from the issue.

Silence – awkward phrases – attempts to pick up conversational threads – long pauses – then gradually the ice began to melt. The two younger girls slid over to Saleem's wife and began to ask questions about their brother's American wife. *Ammi* wanted to hear details about the wedding, which had not been graced by parental presence. Was Khalid really happy? Did he really have no regrets? Saleem's answers were diplomatic in the extreme, but when he got up to take his leave it was with a sense of failure about his mission – perhaps that was why he failed to hear Khalids younger brother's whispered confidence, that *Abbu* had

¹⁰ God is great (segment of the prayer-call)

¹¹ One who calls to prayer

¹² Call to prayer

forbidden him to even think of leaving Pakistan but could *Bhaijan*¹³ somehow win *Abbu's* forgiveness and arrange for him to join him in America!

Time passed and the centre of life shifted from the chilled beer and light- hearted camaraderie of the bar to the home and the two friends were no longer part of its convivial world. For where a thirsty bachelor is free to quench his thirst at any source, the wellspring of domesticity lies within the four walls of the home. The men enjoy their drinks in the living room and the women glare at them disapprovingly and the music and bonhomie of the bar is subsumed by the gurgling of babies and the comforts of home. Conversational trends change. Irreverent speech, following the irrepressible trajectories of its own bawdy logic gives way to innuendo and insinuation, while the wayward eye that had critically followed each passing breeze, is now subject to the behests of the one and only spouse. Children and their needs dominate the conversation and desire is reduced to the celebration of each coming birthday.

'Read my child – *Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim*¹⁴, the bearded Egyptian *maulavi's*¹⁵ western mode of dress belied his foreign nationality but his ability to speak Urdu marked him as a student of a *madrassa*¹⁶ in Islamabad.

It was the *Bismillah*¹⁷ cum birthday party for Saleem's son – the rituals of home take a long time to travel to distant lands, but the fact that they had taken no more than twelve years to get there was cause for some celebration.

¹³ Brother

¹⁴ In the name of god, the most gracious, the most merciful

¹⁵ Muslim priest

¹⁶ Muslim religious school

¹⁷ Ceremony to introduce the reading of the Quran

Saleem's wife was extremely happy, but one hijab-clad lady had faults to find with the occasion – 'How could a *Bisinillah* be valid if neither student nor teacher displayed the mandatory inch of naked ankle between the trousers and the shoe?'

'I am not qualified to speak about this matter *Apa*,¹⁸ responded Saleem after a momentary silence. 'Perhaps you are better informed and can tell me how the Almighty dresses or can comment on his sartorial preferences!'

Not deigning to reply, the hijab-clad lady turned sourly away and the rest of the guests turned their attention to the Pakistani sweetmeats and *gajar ka halwa*¹⁹ Muslims as a people are traditionally prone to pushing knotty problems under the tablecloth.

Photographs of this occasion made their way to Lahore. As it happened, Khalids parents got to see this album and the old wounds began to bleed again. But the years that had passed since Khalid's exile, had taught them to strangle their emotions, and not a word passed their lips, though the thought that they had not seen their grandchildren, took birth and made them wonder if this was the punishment ordained for some sin unwittingly committed. But God in his Heaven smiled in His infinite wisdom, for He was saving them from the greater hurt of the alien affinities of children brought up in an unfamiliar world. When Khalid had relinquished his particular identity to the romance of liberal humanism, there had been nothing to stop the American mother's culture from swallowing them whole.

Weekends were integral to this way of life, and the children had learnt that after five days of hard work, these

¹⁸ Sister

¹⁹ Carrot sweet

two days were reserved for the pursuit of pleasurable relaxation so that tired minds and bodies could renew their lost energy. With this in mind, Khalid and Saleem often organized family picnics over the weekend. This time Easter holidays coincided with the weekend and the two families had booked themselves in a small family hotel on the shore of Lake Tahoe.

On their first evening there, Khalid and Saleem were enjoying a drink in the veranda; the children, members of a new generation that thrive on the noise and simulated speed of technological artefacts, were in their room, surrounded by toys and absorbed in the loud music of a violent movie, and the two wives were strolling in the lawn, when suddenly Saleem's wife burst upon them with the excited announcement that she had just met an old school friend who was also staying in the same hotel with her family.

'What a pleasant surprise,' said Saleem. 'Why didn't you bring her with you?'

'They'll be coming soon. They were on their way back from the lake and have gone in to freshen up. I just thought I'd come and tell you first.'

'Who is your friend married to?' asked Khalid.

'You'll find out when you meet him - I didn't pay him much attention - I was too busy hugging Zainab. Do you know, we shared the same bench at school'

When they met, the two friends exchanged a meaningful look. Zainab's husband was the man whom they used to call the 'mysterious Bengali.'

Chairs were dragged out and rearranged amid much laughter; the families regrouped and drinks were offered. The guests opted for orange juice and conversational threads were

picked up. ranging from the weather to the beauty of the lake, cultural programmes and entertainment – very different from the concerns of Pakistani conviviality, where politics tend to dominate the talk. Somehow, the evening did not jell. Zainab's husband did not stay long, making some important telephone calls as an excuse to leave, and the women went inside and stayed there talking for a long time. It was only over dinner, after Zainab had gone, that the conversation became interesting. According to Saleem's wife, while Zainab herself belonged to Lahore, her husband Mofeez was from Bangladesh. They had met as students in an American university and after completing their studies had married and moved to Dhaka, where both had found employment, and that is where they live until 1971. Then the worsening political situation in Pakistan led to the formation of Bangladesh. Those were days fraught with tensions and emotions ran high – Zainab was unwilling to remain in Bangladesh and Mofeez was equally clear that he could not live in Pakistan. A move to the US was the only viable solution open to them and this is where they had gone. After a brief period of economic instability both had found employment there and had later improved their prospect by reading for and getting doctoral degrees, and now they were firmly settled in America. The strange thing was that despite being married to a Pakistani, Mofeez wanted nothing to do with Pakistanis in general and avoided them as far as possible.

'Why is that?' they asked sotto voce.

'I don't know,' she replied. Zainab didn't give any details – but I did get the impression that during the 1971 civil war his family suffered badly at the hands of the Pakistan army. Perhaps that explains his behaviour,' and the conversation shifted to the fallout of 1971.

The next day Zainab told them that they were moving to another nearby lakeside resort, as that was more beautiful than this one, but whispered in passing that her husband was uncomfortable in the proximity of so many Pakistanis and had lost all pleasure in this place.

For eons the sun, moon and stars have observed the antic of passing generations. Indissolubly tied to the threads of human destiny, they follow their appointed course across the heavens. But though astrological lore has much to say about this view, no one has unravelled the hidden logic of this plan – no one has understood on what basis sorrows and joys are distributed among human beings; no one has discovered why some lives are given more than their fair share of happiness and others are lost in the tangled maze of confusion and sorrow. These vagabond questions have exercised the human mind for centuries, and for centuries, countless individuals, like the moths of a monsoon night, have come to grief over them.

Like a bomb, one such question fell from the skies on one fine day when on September 11, the trumpet of doom sounded and left the entire globe in a state of shock. Just as the incubating scarcities bred of deep-rooted injustice find expression in tears, so too did the silence and anger of four centuries of repression find manifestation in the flames that erupted at the World Trade Centre in New York and mixed with dust the arrogance of its heaven-bound towers.

In one definitive moment the organized patterns of the known world went awry. The flame of Imperial anger leapt forth and engulfed the world. Like crazed elephants the forces of destruction laid waste whatever lay in their path. For months the universe trembled and helpless and afraid, humankind waited and watched. Then the high tide of the flood abated and slowly, hesitantly, life began again.

With time, the noise of this universal explosion began to die down, but the certitudes of Khalid's life had been shaken and he continued to feel its reverberations. The suspicious gaze of the post 11 September world gave birth to a new sense of insecurity within him. An insecurity that had been completely alien to and outside of his experience of life in the free and liberal American world he had known so far. Often he would wake up in the night to find that the darkened room was peopled by threatening shadows; ghosts that shifted and changed, taking on first one face and then another. One moment the faces of American leaders would lurk in the dark, at another the 100m would fill with the old crusaders – Constantinople, Jerusalem, armies on the march, Frederick the second, Richard, Salahuddin – would flicker and dissolve before his eyes – then day would break and the shadows would disperse and he would laugh at his fears and become the same old liberal-humanist Khalid, proud of his freethinking modernity.

'What's the matter darling?' asked Josephine on one such occasion when he had laughed out loud while thrusting his feet into his joggers.

'I was thinking of going to the park when suddenly I remembered a snatch of an old forgotten rhyme.'

'By Wordsworth I suppose – something to do with the beauty of nature...'

'No, something from my schooldays – in Urdu – a child's poem – it goes something like this –

I want to go out of the house today –
Walk and skip to the garden to play!'

He translated the words for Josephine and she began to laugh: 'It seems that your unconscious is at work today.'

‘The unconscious is always present and at work,’ he replied. ‘It’s more like the past making its presence felt.’

‘Why should it need to do that? But then, the Muslims are well-known for their inability to let go of the past.’

‘True – but that doesn’t apply to me.’

‘You’re different – but then culture exercises a strong pull – it is not easy to let go of it entirely.’

A shadow passed across his face. He looked fixedly at Josephine for a moment before saying in a somewhat depressed voice – ‘You at least shouldn’t say that – a person who forsakes his parents, his brothers and sisters, his country – what links can he have left with his past?’

‘I’m so sorry – I didn’t mean it like that!’ she was immediately contrite but he left the room without replying.

Having gathered up its rays from the receding day, the sun was getting ready for its plunge into the ocean. The park was saturated with the green of growing things and the pathways were heavy with the scent of flowers. Except for the occasional chirrup of a bird among the lengthening shadows, no sound disturbed the evening’s silence. A mood of contentment upon him, Khalid walked briskly. Thinking to end his walk with a few exercises, he left the path and stepped on to the green lawn only to be brought up short by what he saw. A short distance away, backed up against the trunk of a tall tree he saw Mofeez – crowding him in with threatening gestures were three white American boys. Drawing nearer he realised that one of the boys was Josephine’s nephew Bill, while the other two were friends of his own son.

‘Bill!’ he called out, ‘what are you doing?’

The boys stopped short – Bill turned and looked at him and then the three boys ran up to Khalid, and accosted him with an air of righteous ownership: ‘Uncle – he is a member of Al Quaeda!’ said one. ‘The Taliban!’ said the other.

‘And what were you guys doing?’

‘We were going to teach him a lesson!’

Suddenly he became alive to the perils of the situation. ‘You will do nothing!’ he said. ‘He is an old friend – I have known him for years. He has nothing to do with Al Quaida!’

Running up to Mofeez, he caught him by the hand and began to exhort the kids to behave themselves. They tried to argue with him but lost heart after a while and left as if baulked of their prey.

Khalid heaved a sigh of relief. There was a profusion of thanks matched by gratitude in Mofeez’s eyes.

‘What happened?’

‘Nothing – I did nothing – I was late for the *asr*²⁰ prayers and stopped under the tree to pray. These boys were whispering and scuffling among the bushes and just as I finished my prayers and was about to leave, they surrounded me and would not let me go – this had been going on for about thirty minutes!’

‘Did you drive here?’ asked Khalid after a thoughtful pause. Mofeez nodded in reply.

‘Right, then I’ll come with you. Don’t leave here alone. Just drop me off near my house and then you can go on.’

A few minutes later Mofeez dropped him off where requested and left, but instead of going home, Khahd went

²⁰ Afternoon prayers

and sat on the bench at a nearby bus stop. It was Moleez who had been threatened with violence, but it was Khalid's body that had felt the blow. It seemed as if the nightmare monsters of the dark had stepped out into the clear light of day to stand before him – every aspect of their hideous visage etched out in detail. A bus arrived and left – another came – and then another, but Khalid continued to sit there, wondering how much of the incident to recount to his wife and children. Unsure of their response, he found himself a prey to such uncertainty for the first time in the twelve years of his married life.

In the days that followed September 2001, the issue of violence had been discussed in their home – but only as a human rights issue. The religious dimension had never been touched upon because both husband and wife, one of them a Muslim and the other a Christian, had exercised a degree of cautious restraint in discussing these matters. Even when the children, coming across different views on these issues, broached the topic at home, the parents would turn the thrust of the argument away from Islamic terrorists towards a general condemnation of extremist groups. But what had happened today would undoubtedly open wide the very doors that the husband and wife had kept so carefully shut – now the storm against which they had been barred would pass through his house and wreak havoc in his carefully nurtured world. Silence seemed the best option under these circumstances – after all they did not discuss everything with the children. This incident too could join the list of proscribed topics like sex, pornography and the rest. Even his parents – who had disinherited him long ago – were part of this taboo. His children knew nothing about them- in fact, by now even he did not know how they were living their lives.

This silence was to cost him dear, for his sleep was full of menace as the inchoate, faceless ghosts jostled and wrangled through the night.

The next day Khalid and Saleem went to see Mofeez and after much deliberation it was decided that none of them would go to the park alone. In any case these walks were not a daily occurrence – the pressure of work was such that they could seldom manage to go there more than once a week. Mofeez clearly stood in need of protection, but Khalid felt equally concerned – he believed that any such incident, involving one of his friends, would wreck the even tenor of his days and vitiate the placid calm of his home.

September 11 had brought home to him the unpalatable knowledge that his house stood on uncertain ground. Built upon the fault line of two different faiths, it was constantly under threat of earthquakes and seismic upheavals.

Just as a strange gust drives the detritus of a storm, the scattered twigs and leaves, in some sheltered corner, so too had the incident drawn the three men together in a new intimacy. The Mofeez of earlier times, who had avoided all contact with Pakistanis, now sought protection in their company.

Strange are the vicissitudes of human relations. The imperatives of today sometimes compel a backwards glance into the enclosures and courtyards of past lives – not so much on the insistence of some external force, but for personal reasons. The desire to open up closed windows and skylights is rooted in the need for a breath of air to lighten the fug of long shut rooms. At odds with external circumstance, the human spirit is tenacious of life and constantly aspires to change them in accordance with its own needs – sometimes in a sudden burst of anger – at others, slowly like the constant

dripping of water that wears away stone. Or then again, like a mischievous child at play, with a sudden splash of water flung from the inner reaches into the world outside.

Their walks around the park left Khalid and Mofeez open to these sudden forays of the inner spirit. The sporadic exchange of past memories bred a familiarity not unlike that of neighbours living on different sides of a wall; separated by brick and mortar yet connected by the glimpses into each other's lives through the occasional cracks and apertures that pierce its length. With the passing days Khalid learnt that Mofeez's family had actively supported the Pakistan Movement.

'I don't know why,' he had said hesitantly on one such occasion, fumbling for the right words, 'whether as a result of misinformation – or bad faith – incompetence or deliberate viciousness –that my family became the target of army action in 1971. Without known cause, some of us were arrested – others "disappeared". Twenty-one years have passed and the whereabouts of my father are still unknown, and my mother. She was a young woman at that time.' He did not complete his sentence and remained silent till the end of their walk when he left with a '*khuda hafiz*' but refused to meet Khalid's eyes.

His silence left Khalid prey to an indefinable sense of guilt that lasted for many days and made him long for ignorance. He wished that some unseen hand would fill lip the apertures and gaps that persisted in showing him what lay on the other side of the wall and restore to him his earlier complacency.

But even God does not block up these windows into the past. In order to do that He would have to change His ordained plan.

The daily routine of the working day world aside, it seemed that the Creator fulfills His purposes more actively during the dark reaches of the night, for it is the seeds sown in darkness that grow and blossom in the full light of day. Mofeez's confidences sowed one such seed in his mind and drove sleep away from his nights.

Years of isolation had dried up the watercourses of his soul. A self-absorbed individualism, accommodated at the expense of relationships and blood ties, had parched the soil of his very being. Cracks had appeared on its arid, drought-stricken surface. Only Josephine and his children had house room there. But his conversation with Mofeez had tapped some forgotten source of life. The seed had been planted; there was an awakening within the depths of his being – a new scent pervaded the air – there was a susurrations among dead leaves. It marked the beginnings of a new relationship, but one that was lacking in colour. Amorphous, nameless, it was built upon negations. Owning no ties of blood or kinship – unfamiliar with the close intimacies of friendship, this new bond grew out of the forced confluence of sympathy and shame. Shame especially, for the lost father and the mother desolated by her loss. It was a relationship that gave rise to hitherto unknown perceptions and opened up new vistas that had nothing in common with the abstract concerns of a detached universal humanism. Mofeez's story had personalised it all and brought it close to home. With it came a sense of a shared humanity that placed the burden of guilt and responsibility on his shoulders and gave rise to questions, demanded explanations – 'How did we let this happen?' 'How could we have done this to those who were from among us?' For the first time too, memories of the family he had lost appeared on Khalid's mental horizon. Cracks appeared on the facade of his self-avowed religion of abstract humanism. But

carried along on the whirlwind raised by his experience in the park he did not hear this facade splinter.

When night's shadows thickened, Khalid would sit lip in the storm-tossed ghost-driven dark. He could not understand what was happening to him.

Some days later, a conversation with Mofeez caused a new crack to appear in his perceptual horizons –

'I was a citizen of Pakistan: then my country rejected me. I became a citizen of Bangladesh, but circumstances defeated me once again and I was an exile once more. Now I am an American citizen only to be negated under this new dispensation.'

Silence descended on both, then another crack appeared. 'Where are your brothers and sisters?' he asked.

'In Bangladesh'

'Then surely that is where you belong!'

'True—but my circumstances don't allow me to live there.'

'Yes, but your circumstances don't prevent you from meeting them, do they?'

'No they don't—I visited them only two months ago.'

'There are some whose circumstances don't even allow them that much houseroom—you are much better off than those.'

'Perhaps,' he answered. 'There are times when we have the power to change our lives—my circumstances are not in my control.'

The walk ended and the conversation ended—but the brain continued to think—and went on thinking long into the

night. Sleep fled his eyes and the ghost-ridden shadows that crowded around him in the darkened room were thicker, more turbulent as they shifted and changed, taking on now one face and now another. Mofeez's words had opened up new possibilities for him. Examining the balance sheet of his life, he read new meanings in the spectral faces that paraded before him and found himself more alone than Mofeez, for the column reserved for his parents and siblings was empty and there was a question mark in the one reserved for his family. He did not know which narrative thread he needed to unravel if he was to change the patterned warp and woof of his life.

Coming home from his office the next day, he took out an airways ticket from his brief case and announced that he was going on a visit to Pakistan.

Josephine looked at him speechlessly for a moment, then asked, 'Why? is anything the matter?'

'No. It's just that I haven't been back for fifteen years and thought it was time to pay a visit,' he answered.

'Perhaps one of the children would like to go with you.'

'Not this time round. I'd like to check out the scene first.'

When he pressed the doorbell of his childhood home, the prodigal son who had returned without informing anyone of his arrival, had no idea about who would be there, or how he would be received. Then the door opened and he came face to face with the woman who stood there. Her tired eyes did not immediately recognize him, but the mother's heart knew him for who he was, and between tears and laughter she clasped him to her breast and the mountains of self-centred arrogance within him disintegrated and scattered like sand. The response of his siblings was different. Visible expressions of

joy were undercut by an indefinable lack of warmth. There was a degree of reserve – an element of uncertainty in their manner. The rituals of welcome were observed but carried with them a sense of unease. Something was missing – something rankled like a buried splinter that makes its presence felt when two hands meet and are clasped in a handshake.

‘Where’s *Abbu!*’ he asked, as his eyes flitted across the room.

Silence – evasive looks – then finally the youngest sister spoke up, ‘He’s in the hospital.’

Khalid wanted to go to him immediately, but it was not so easy. The wisdom of such an act had to be considered – given the state of his father’s health, was such a sudden and unexpected meeting a good idea? Much time was spent in this debate when it was finally decided that they would play it by the ear when they got to the hospital. In the event of their father’s displeasure, Khalid would immediately return home.

The face disfigured with white stubble of many days growth, pale, sunken cheeks, clammy forehead and sparse dishevelled grey hair, his father lay there with his eyes shut. *Ammi* tiptoed in. She was followed by her younger son, the two daughters and last of all Khalid. *Ammi* addressed him, her voice deep with emotion, ‘Look, Khalid has come from America.’

Slowly the tired eyelids lifted and the light-dimmed eyes fixed themselves on his face. Slowly the minutes ticked by, then – the hand lying by his side moved – slowly, very slowly, it lifted.

Khalid watched with bated breath. He knew his father’s nature. Tension mounted within him. Would the hand beckon

and call him in? Or would it repudiate him? The hospital, the room, the patient – everything receded, was inconsequential. Only the hand remained. His eyes fixed painfully on it, saw nothing else.

One inch – then another – painfully, slowly, another inch – and then it fell like over-ripe fruit from a tree. *Ammi* leapt forward to clasp it. The younger brother bent over his father. The daughters rushed out to call the nurse. Confuse, Khalid left the room. The nurse and duty doctor went in – he began to pace the corridor. After a little while he looked into the room and saw the doctor cover his father's face with a sheet and the room filled with the sound of suppressed weeping.

Abbu left for the next world, but in the process he demolished with utter finality his son's plans to fill with plenty the empty spaces of his life. Not only had he frustrated his hopes, with his parting gesture he had placed on him the burden of confusion and uncertainty. What message had that lifted hand intended? Was it a gesture of acceptance? Or was it an act of final rejection?

The last rites were observed, and each day's ritual proceeded to the next according to the set plan, but Khalid continued to live with the torment of those filled questions. Was his father's sudden death caused by an excess of joy at the prodigal's return? Or was it the result of an upsurge of unforgiving anger? Whichever way he looked at it, he found himself guilty of his father's death.

Some days later, still bearing the burden of guilt and grief, he returned to America, a different man from the one who had returned so full of hope for the future. Once home he was surrounded by the love and sympathy of his wife and children. Saleem offered cautious condolences, for he alone among all others, had been witness to the fraught relations

between the father and Son, but Mofeez embraced him and without saying a word, wept with him in his sorrow.

Khalid had brought back a framed photograph of his father and he gave it pride of place in his study, where it now kept company with his eclectic collection of books on all faiths and points of view. The children saw their Grandfather's photograph for the first time and they spent a long time asking him about their 'grandpa', and his little daughter, trying to find points of resemblance between his and her father's face, repeatedly asked, 'Did you love your papa as much as I love you?'

'Yes darling, just as much,' he replied cradling the child tenderly.

It was Sunday and Josephine had gone to the market. Khalid slept late and woke up to find his daughter waiting impatiently for him.

'Come Papa, I have a surprise for you!' Dragging him by the hand she led him to the study, 'Now shut your eyes and don't open them till I tell you to!

Obediently shutting his eyes he allowed her to direct his footsteps.

'Papa, stop!' He could hear the children laughing and whispering among themselves.

'You may look now.'

Khalid opened his eyes and his gaze fell on his father's photograph. Then he heard his daughter say, 'This is how we honour our American heroes at school. Today we are going to honour Grandpa.'

The framed photograph was draped with garlands. A copy of the bible lay before it and on it was a cross, made up of two sticks tied with twine.

‘Now you must sing with us Papa, cried the little girl.

‘But I don't know the words of your song,’ he answered.

‘We’ll repeat each line twice; you just have to follow the words and sing with us – all right? Now – one – two – three –’ and the children began to sing.

We all swear by the Holy Cross
We will always remember you!

Khalid joined in the singing, and kissed them all before joining them in their games. He laughed and joked merrily with them but his heart was troubled. This incongruous proximity of the Bible and the Cross with his father, bothered him – surely it must disturb his father’s spirit. He did not want to change the children’s arrangement. They had acted in good faith and in all innocence. Any such gesture on his part would only hurt their feelings. He felt that after his marriage and his visit to Pakistan, this was the third time in his life that he was instrumental in hurting his father’s feelings. Yet the facade of normality had to be maintained – there seemed to be nothing he could do. Then he had an idea. He took his copy of the Quran from the bookshelf and placed it on the Bible and stood the photograph on it. Suddenly his spirit felt lighter, but the little girl had noticed the change he had made. ‘Why have you done that?’

‘I’ve raised Grandpa’s picture so that you can see it from a distance.’

‘Good ideal’ exclaimed the older boy as he ran to the bookshelf and pulled out a thick tome, with the intention of

placing it on top of the Quran. Casting a glance at its title he saw that it was the *Detailed History of the Crusades*.

His father's photograph remained in its pride of place for the rest of the day while Khalid. In a futile attempt to distract his attention from its absurd arrangement, busied himself with minor household tasks. As much as he longed to change the way the picture was placed he also wanted to safeguard and respect the feelings that had prompted his children to honour their Grandfather. He had arrived at a cross roads in his life and did not know which way to turn. He was helpless in his own house. He could discern no window or skylight that could be opened to let in the breeze that would lighten the closed air of the room.

He called Saleem, hoping to ask him to come over for the evening, but he was not at home. Now he had only the bottle to keep him company. He was not in the mood for heavy drinking, but he also did not want to think of the iconic arrangement of his father's picture. He failed to achieve both ends. Prey to a deep restlessness, he drank more than he intended and the fumes of alcohol ascended slowly to his head. The room with its bookshelves, furniture and other knick-knacks misted over and dimmed. Now he could see the faint line of the distant horizon—like a bird in flight he saw the empty vastness of the ocean spread out beneath him. Above him the sky lowered, heavy with the dark turbulence of wind-tossed clouds. He was beginning to tire but no tree, promontory or back of a sea creature offered succor. Utterly alone he flew on with nagging wings. Beneath him lay the drowning waters, above him hung the unfriendly sky and everywhere there was the cold, freezing air.

When he opened his eyes he was in hospital and saw the relieved faces of his wife and children. He came home the next day and his little daughter hugged him and said, 'Papa I

prayed for you to get well – I read the Bible too.’ Josephine spoke lovingly to him and he learned from her how he had been found drunk and weeping over his father’s picture while the books and flowers that had been arranged around it were scattered all over the room.

A few days passed and Khalid was out driving with Mofeez when the latter slowed down and parked the car in a side lane.

‘I hope you won’t mind waiting for me in the car Khalid – I’ll be away for a few minutes – it is time for the *asr* prayers. I’ll be back in no time.’

Khalid nodded abstractedly and Mofeez got out and began to walk towards the mosque. Khalid watched him for a few minutes, then quickly got out of the car and called out after him – ‘Wait for me Mofeez. I’m coming too.’

Translated by Neelam Hussain

A Short Distance

Afzal Ahsan Randhawa

The honest one made both ends meet by selling *pakor*as while the thief lived luxuriously with his family...'

'The very beginning of the story is false, how can the story be true?' said Dari, the weaver.

Baba Bhoj, the story teller was annoyed and burst out at Dari, 'How do you know, you son of a bitch, that the beginning is false?'

Dari did not mind Baba Bhoj abusing him and said laughing, 'You yourself have said many a time that the thieves never prosper and now you say that the thief lived luxuriously while the honest one just made both ends meet.'

The School Master sitting nearby came to Dari's help and said, 'Baba, Daris comment is worth considering. He means that the thief and the trader are at least cousins if not real brothers—one robs the customers while the other robs the near ones.'

Ignoring the School Master, Baba Bhoj flared, 'Yes, thieves like you don't prosper, you who steal oil from the mosque to massage your body '

Dari laughed and intercepted, 'It's I who fill the mosque's overhead tank daily by drawing a hundred cans

early in the morning while no worshipper even draws a single can. If I take a few drops of oil after all that, it is not a sin. I get it from God's house, otherwise from where else should I get it? That made even Baba Bhoj laugh. He said Had you not the habit of massaging your body and bathing in the morning, you would never get to the mosque'. You massage your body daily with the oil from the mosque oil can and then draw a few cans of water from the mosque well and fill the mosque water tank as all exercise. And then you also take a bath with the same water. Have you ever prayed in the mosque? Remember, you steal from God's house, you will be afflicted with scourge, worms would eat your body.'

Perhaps Dari was frightened by the prospect of the scourge and tried to explain, 'I swear by my mother that I have left that habit of stealing oil from the mosque, rather only last Thursday I contributed oil to the mosque oil can.'

'Yes, now you only steal fodder for your cow,' said Baba Bhoj. Dari explained, 'It's not much. I have just a goat-sized cow and a cat sized calf to feed. Then I don't steal fodder daily. Often I graze them on free grass and it is only sometimes that I steal fodder. And I only steal fodder from the fields of those misers, who don't give fodder even on asking. Next day they know that Dari has stolen the fodder during the night. They do not care much, nor do I. Besides this, you tell me if I don't steal fodder from my own village fields, from where should I do that? Strangers might even kill me if caught red handed.'

Baba Bhoj again laughed heartily and said, 'I have told you many times that you can have that from my fields whenever you need. But, don't steal the same at midnight. Some night somebody may kill you. It would be shameful to be killed while stealing fodder.'

‘I don’t steal from people who might kill one for a stack of fodder. I only steal from those who would themselves feel sorry for catching me red handed.’

Dari continued, ‘Baba you must have heard of the thief who broke into the house of his own sister. His sister and brother-in-law caught him red handed. When they recognized him, they not only set him free but also entertained him well. When he returned to his friends he told them of his exploit. When he mentioned that he was caught red handed by his sister and brother-in-law, his friends asked anxiously how they behaved! He replied laughingly, ‘They felt embarrassed before me.’

Baba and the School Master laughed and Baba said affectionately, ‘You are very clever!’

At this stage the old village potter came dragging his feet with difficulty to join the company.

Baba Bhoj made him sit on the charpoy with himself and asked about his health.

‘What health now!’ the old man replied gasping for breath. He continued in a feeble voice, ‘Can’t get up if I lie down; can’t stand up. If I succeed in getting up, can’t walk, if I succeed in standing up I start gasping for breath if I walk a few steps to your place. Curse on this old age!’

Dari joked, ‘Old man there is a saying: Youth is a blessing, old age a curse;’

Hearing this all laughed along with the old potter. Bhoj and the potter were in their seventies and were old friends.

Both of them had done their early schooling from the local primary school and then got absorbed in their occupations. Bhoj did his farming and the potter got engaged in his pottery. Now in old age Bhoj’s farming was being done

by his sons and grandsons while the old potter's pottery was run by his nephew. The potter had not married throughout his life. Perhaps he could not get a wife. These two old men had two other friends also. One was the middle aged School Master, a Syed, and the other the young Dari, the weaver. Even that day all the four were there and gossiping.

'Baba, now let us move forward!' said Dari to Baba. 'We have been running forward in our time, young man.' said Baba Bhoj reminiscing. 'We used to go to Lahore full eighty *kos*¹ on foot. We used to carry our meals and remembered the old saying: If you gird up your loins, Lahore is a short distance. Then we started off and the third day we were in Lahore. There we appeared in the court and started back the same day. And we were back in another two days. The next day I was working in the fields. No tiredness, can you tell me to move forward. You who wait for hours for the train if you have to go even two *kos* distance.'

'These trains have spoilt the people,' joined the old potter, 'Young men have no stamina. The School Master was not very talkative but he could not help intervening:

'Trains have made life easy. You board the train early in the morning, appear in the court in Lahore, and come back the same day. The distance you covered in six days is now covered in six hours. No tiredness; no blistered feet. You can even sleep in the train!'

Dari came back to the subject, 'I had asked to continue the story.'

'Which story?' Baba Bhoj had perhaps forgotten.

'The same story of the thief and the honest man' reminded the School Master.

¹ Two miles

‘O yes! ‘remembered Saba Bhoj. ‘But don’t interrupt me again.’ He warned Dari and continued:

‘It is a true story.’

‘Truth is, no doubt, an ornament. It makes the thing last.’ commented the School Master.

Baba Bhoj continued the story, ‘The *pakora* seller had a customer who daily took *pakor*as from him, ate them and then walked away without paying. Neither the shopkeeper asked for the money nor the customer paid any. The shopkeeper believed that the customer would feel ashamed some day and would pay.

But neither the customer felt ashamed nor the shopkeeper pointed out anything to him. This continued for a year or two.

‘Dari could not resist and said, ‘Why didn’t he go to the police or the court? They would have taken him to task.’

‘There was no police at the time and the complaint had to be lodged to the ruler. Now the *pakorawala* could not reach the ruler,’ said Baba Bhoj apparently annoyed with being disturbed again

‘Sorry, you continue.’ Dari apologised.

‘And then one day the same customer came and saw that the fire was out and the pan was empty. There were no *pakor*as and the *pakora* seller was sitting depressed.’

‘Are there no *pakor*as today?’ asked the customer.

‘My capital has been eaten up by you’, said the shopkeeper sadly, ‘I can’t run the shop now.’

‘O yes!’ said the customer a little thoughtfully. And then requested him to be present the next day promising that he would come.

The next day the customer came as per his promise and handing over a small bag to him said, ‘Had you told me earlier your business would not have been closed. Now run it and when this is finished, tell me again secretly.’ And he went away leaving the shop keeper astonished. The shop keeper looked into the bag. It was full of gold coins, jewels and ornaments. He had never even dreamt of this.

A week later it was announced in the town with the beat of the drum that a thief would be hanged who had committed theft from the house of an elder of the town. He was to be hanged in the Central Square and almost the whole town was there to witness the event. The *pakorawala* was also there. He saw that the person to be hanged was the same customer. He understood the whole matter. For a moment he thought that the return of the stolen wealth might save the thief’s life and he rushed to the gallow stand. He was going to tell the officials about the stolen goods. The thief saw him and perhaps judging his intention addressed the gathering in a loud voice.

‘I know they would not spare me even if the stolen goods are returned. Hence whosoever has the stolen wealth with him, should keep it. If he doesn’t want to keep it he should deduct his loan and build a *serai*² and make a few wells in the town for the poor.’ The thief was hanged.

‘And did the shopkeeper build the *serai* and the wells or ate up the whole wealth?’ asked Dari. ‘No. He was an honest man. He built the *serai* and made the wells and for many

² Inn

centuries the people of Lahore and those who came to the city used the thief's wells and *serai* and prayed for him,' said Baba Bhoj.

'Centuries?' asked the School Master, a little surprised.

Yes, for centuries, because the story goes back to some four centuries, and it is true.

'Truth never dies, never gets old,' the old potter commented, trying to get up with difficulty.

Translated by the Author

Brick

Suhayl Saadi

How your prayers and pleas melt stony hearts? A tyrant remains a tyrant still..... Faiz Ahmad Faiz

The man picked up the brick and eyed it closely. Its red heat burned into his globes, searing the jelly until he could feel its edges, lines, surfaces imprint themselves in rectangles on the back of his brain. Scraping the callus of his index finger against the grain, he began to wipe the dust off the brick, first the top, then the underside. He did this to each of the brick's aspects in turn until it was totally clean. He drew it closer so that the skin of the brick touched the skin on his face. It was warm. In the pores, there was still dirt. Impurity. Without pulling it down, he went to fetch a brush. He had left the rest of the brick pile undisturbed outside the kiln. He was wearing a stained *shalvar-kamise*¹ and his feet were bare. The conical towers behind him formed a neat row, then, as he moved slowly towards his mud hut the line cracked and they became isolated, randomly dangerous. Coils of white smoke twirled elegantly from the tops of the thirty-foot high chimneys, and lost themselves in the dark blue emptiness. All the brick-kilns were active, every day. Twenty, thirty, forty ... countless numbers fading into the horizon, forming tall, brown stacks amidst the flat green. All were made of red

¹ Shirt and trouser

bricks. mounted one upon the next, (five thousand-and-nine bricks per kiln, *keemath*² 5 Rs a brick), and they grew narrower towards the top, so that the smoke tunneled, clearly-defined into the heavy air. The smoke and the brick. The two were symbiotic; one could not exist without the other. But neither would exist without blood. It was blood which gave the bricks their redness, their power. The power to form walls, buildings, palaces. The blood of the bricks flowed with their power into jagirdars and generals, presidents and factory-owners, a molten transfusion sucked from the swarming mud. No crops grew here. The soil was of poor quality. Dead earth. And yet it produced, daily, huge quantities of bright red bricks, more perfect in their inanimation than any number of fields, trees, villagers could ever be.

The man emerged from the dried brown cow dung dwelling. In one hand he carried the brick, in the other, a brush. He walked over to an open area and began to scrape bristles against the pocked surface. The hairs on the brush were dark brown, almost black but not quite. The skin on his feet was layered thick as the fissured earth beneath them. The earth was bright yellow: his feet. not-quite-so. Nothing the man possessed was absolute. While all around him, the fields glowed green, the sewers even greener, the short, starved trees purple, the sun, yellow, the sky far blue, yet his skin lay between colours, stretched, indefinable around tile bones, hardly existing in the shimmering heat. Deep beneath the covering of hard red, the blood rail fast, but now the brick was being cleaned. Scraped of all impurities. Hardened so that it would be tile most dense of all bricks, so that it would form the foundation for a hundred kilns, and would outlive the man and his progeny. As he brushed, his small metal Cross swinging from side to side, his haunches triangled into

² Price

his legs in a different type of squat from the defaecation squat (which was the same as tile birth squat) and different again from the position he would adopt when watching the great iron carriages sail past along the rails. The man had spent his life on his haunches. Humble. Mute. Bonded. As he brushed, a thin, white dust blew up and swirled around his hunched figure, coating the skin of his hands, the thin cloth of his karnise, the trembling black waves of his hair. As he inhaled, it was sucked into his lungs, into the eddies of blood around his heart and it danced inside his body and slipped into the seed of his unborn. Afterwards, he would wash his hands in the stagnant bright green water and then the water, too, would float downstream through the generations. He had no ancestors. Just the earth into clay. the clay into brick, the brick into fire. All around him, the villagers were busy digging in the areas between the kilns, ripping the earth from itself, tearing the clay food from its belly. Short, square trowels. Bent backs. Hot sun. Yellow. One thousand bricks in a day, per back. Forty-seven backs. Forty-seven thousand bricks. Three hundred days. The only breaks were in the bricks when they cracked in the heat of the furnace. Imperfect structures would never survive. Fourteen million, one hundred thousand. They began work two years after generation, their already hardened feet squeezing the milk of the earth down into usable material. Twenty-eight years, minus three days' generation time per female, six times over. One million, ninety-nine thousand, five hundred and fifty. Fifty kilns. Two zillion, seven hundred and forty eight trillion, eight hundred and seventy five billion bricks. Give or take. Take, mostly. Bricks outnumbered sperm. It was the way of things in the *elaqa*³. In the province, in the country. By the age of twenty, the villagers would have assumed the same twisted form as

³ Locality

the trees; by twenty-eight ... The man stopped brushing, got up and held the cuboid object between his face and the sun. It was black. Took it away. Red. Put it back. Black. Took it away. Red. Black, red, black, red, black, red ...

The sun burned at all times. In the morning, it was a new fire, and it scorched the mud or the huts, dried the rough, wet bricks, caused the earth to crack in jagged, irregular lines. At noon, when the trains swept past each other on the gleaming iron rails, the sun was a perfect bullet. Yellow. Pure. As it fell in the evening it would fire the kilns red, and would seep through every pore of brick and into every grain of dust that went to form each brick. And in the night, it was still there, burning behind the dark, a black sun. And through the whole night, the sun's heat would be locked in tunnels of brick, of brick within brick, and would course through the blind, hard clay, become trapped in the mud. The piles of bricks in the rural darkness gave off a heat as great as that which had been poured into them during the day, so that the entire valley of the brick kilns would remain several degrees hotter than anywhere else.

The lines of the railway track ran straight, relentless, silver from one end of the world to the next. Long green pools of algae and waste lay between the railway and the village. Scrubgrass sprouted from cracks in the yellow earth, while bricks lay in tall piles everywhere, outnumbering the small mud huts of the villagers. A dank, foetid smell hung perpetually over the village, mingling with the pungent red of the brick-stacks. Iron hooks had been bolted onto the sides of each of the stacks, and a short chain hung from each hook. At the other end of every chain, a circular fetter trailed on the ground. They were used only at night, and then only occasionally. There was usually no need. At the centre of every cluster of one-room huts, there was a conical kiln made

of deep red brick. At the centre of each kiln was a furnace. In the centre of every furnace lay the bricks. For every dead villager, two more would be generated. Five-and-a-half seconds of desperate clawing. Sodomy and debts. Counter-balances on the scale. A fine balancing act. But the only scales in the elaqā belonged to the jagirdar, and these generated only interest. Compound, Simple and Material. Every gout, another life in brick. Sinful, the priest might have said. But the priest had not been seen for years. No doctor. No teacher. No God. Just the unending creation of bricks. The foundations of life. Tugged from the soil, moulded with water, burned in fire, then laid out to dry in the air. The mounds of defaecated clay were larger than the yellow and green *dhal*⁴ which the villagers ingested. Their guts, profitable when fed little. The final hardening was done with more water. The bricks got water when the villagers died of thirst (two more would then be generated in hot gouts of human clay). When the rains came (the sewers overflowing, casting their green *dhal* in uneven measure across the land), more bricks would harden quicker and the villagers would spend all day and all night (the two were synonymous in furnace-time) inside the kilns, close to the fire, like lovers, their skins burning slowly off-red and even more bricks would be the result. The five-and-a-half seconds would stretch and expand, so that misery would be forgotten. No, not forgotten. It would be rubbed deep into the existence, and would become the structure of the soul. The rest would be burned away in the furnace of the kiln, evanescent into the pretty smoke which was visible from the windows of trains that passed by, once a day, at noon.

Once more, the man inspected the brick. He took the warm shape and placed it carefully in his kamise. It sunk down to tile level of his waist (he had no belly) where it made

⁴ Pulse

the dust-coloured cloth bulge slightly. He paced towards the last kiln, the one nearest the railway track. As he walked, he trod over the holes which had been dug years earlier, before his generation, before his generation's generation (the bricks from these now sat around the bulky, smiling forms of gun-runners. prime ministers and waderas, hundreds of miles away). Two trains ran daily, at noon, one going east, the other west. From Islamabad to Lahore, Lahore to Islamabad, Islamabad to Lahore, Lahore to Islamabad. A glimpse of faces, bored, unmoved. The land was sliding into water and fire. and the villagers with it and once a day, when the shadows vanished, the valley would be broken by the passage of the wheels, the engine, the faces. Twenty-eight years of faces. Sixteen thousand eight hundred journeys. Three thousand people per train. Ten bricks for every face. He reached the last kiln. It cast no shadow. It was empty of people. Full of bricks. The fire was burning (the fires burned twenty-four hours a day; nothing was allowed to stop the act of creation). Red and yellow flames licked at the clay, hardening it. Forming it. The sound of the trains approaching: Islamabad to Lahore. Lahore to Islamabad, Islamabad to Lahore. Lahore to Islamabad. The trains carried bricks as well as people. More bricks than people. That was the way of the world. Of the village. Of the brick. He went into the kiln. The heat washed over him. Outside, it was hot enough to dry a brick; inside, it was hot enough to create. Holding the brick between the fingers of his left hand, the man lifted the hem of his kamise with his right. Bending his neck slightly, he slipped it over his head. Still using his right hand, he removed his shalvar. The discarded clothes lay in a heap on the floor. The door of the kiln was shut. The air was thick, black. Still cradling the brick, the man stepped forward. He reached out with his left hand and threw open the fire-door. The names burst into the dark but did not illuminate it. The blackness merely grew deeper, hotter. The

man stretched out his arms, the brick poised on the tips of his fingers. The Cross on his chest was still. He teetered on the edge of the furnace. There was no movement. The silence was total.

With the extra fuel provided, three hundred more bricks than usual were created that day in the kiln nearest the railway line. They would not have been noticed. The trains had already gone past and would not cross again until the next day, when once more the kiln would cast no shadow.

The Garden of Delights

Enver Sajjad

Each one of those burning in hell dreams of making the sparks leaping all around him into a garden of flowers.

So there are restless waves in the blue sky of this world of colour. Ocean fish soar through the atmosphere. Thinking the clouds the depths of the ocean, become absorbed in increasing their race in them.

A little to one side of the horizon a conical building, suspended in mid air, built of yellow, in it circular window on various floors through which a peaceful blue sky is seen. Birds, black, long-tailed, emerging from an ancient cave, enter through one circular window, exit through another, in the distance, dissolve in the heavenly lake, descend to the depths of the lake, sleep in nests made in unmoving stones in the depths of the lake.

Four waterways swelling from the four directions, capturing and reflecting the indigo of the sky, coming together in the middle, become one in the form of a lake. In the exact middle of this lake is the fountain of life. Onion-pink, gothic conical, balanced on a blue globe, various corners forming bowed arches which take on the shape of branches, on which are swaying, blooming, half-blooming flowers, mysterious flowers, fruits of untasted joys, the flavors of which spread on the tongue the moment they are wished for.

White herons on the balconies encircling the blue globe; men, women leaping from the balconies. Naked men and women are glimpsed through the windows built in the fountain, soft, tender and transparent as the inner parts of an oyster, bodies glittering in a rainbow, who have taken one another in their arms, taken one another in their eyes.

Around this lake, four more small houses set at equal distances: in nests of this same form this same construction also, in smiling eyes, on silent lips, unspoken unknowable desires. Naked men and women who have taken one another into their arms, taken one another into their eyes.

Immediately in front of the lake, at a short distance on the other side, a deep circular pool. In this virgin maidens in various groups bathe, frolic. On the heads of a few are black ravens, white herons, blue-necked jays, and on the head of one or those seated on the bank a peacock also. Around them on the banks of the pool naked men and women on foot and riding lions, cheetahs, bears, horses, unicorns circumambulate the pool of youth in a procession. In the atmosphere they spread those songs which are born of the whispers of those who love and those who are loved.

In this world of colours all are naked, no one is naked as colours are the clothes of all, or perhaps the nakedness of one another has not yet become apparent.

Between the lake and the pool, spread around them in groups, in pairs, men and women becoming manifest through each other's existence, dissolving in each other's existence, the spheres, hemispheres of glass enveloping them so delicate they would be shattered by the touch of a breath, are seen emerging from, entering into eggs, into fruits.

She is as though just now awakened from her first sleep. Her hand is in the hand of he who awakened her, upon whose lifting her she rises up.

Fixing one hand on the soft velvet grass, resting the other hand on his thigh, sitting with spread legs he gazes in astonishment at the girl whose body like his own body is as though made of onion-skin, more transparent than even the seventh heaven, more tender than even the hearts of lovers.

Her first glances gathering him in she lowers her eyes. To each comes the fragrance of the other's body.

Taking each other by the hand they go out to explore their world, leaving behind their clasped hands.

When they return they see that their intertwined hands have taken root in the ground: soft, glossy, deep red new branches have sprouted. In awe, both wonder who had cultivated their hands even while they were not there themselves.

Both smile that it was necessary for them too to be sown in the ground.

'Listen, I wish I could grow grape vines in place of my veins and arteries.'

The girl smiles.

'Listen, when I take a deep breath it seems as though I am drinking life from the fountain in front of us.' More tender than the hearts of lovers, more clean and transparent than the seventh heaven, in amazement at their own existence, before them life persistently gushing lip from the fountain of life springing lip in the lake descended from heaven, they advance towards the procession of men, women, on foot, riding lions, cheetahs, bears, horses, unicorns,

circumambulating the maiden virgins bathing, diving, rising, swimming in the pool of life.

Now they go a few steps more in that direction when the girl suddenly stops. A slight wave of anxiety spreads on her face. She takes the boy's hand and places it on her breast. The sound of the chiming of the rapidly beating tears in her heart runs into his hand and reaches his heart. Neither knows what the chiming is, what it means. Both close their eyes to understand it.

Learning nothing from reflection, when they open their eyes they find themselves in the circle of men on foot and riding lions, cheetahs, bears and unicorns. So in the atmosphere are spreading those songs which are born of the whispers of those who love and those who are loved.

Each one of those burning in hell, having seen such a dream, struggles so to turn the sparks leaping all around him into a garden of flowers that even should the very joints and sinews of his body be melted his eyes will still be singing.

Translated by Linda Wentink

Note: A reference to the fire built by Nimrod to burn Abraham alive, which was miraculously changed into a garden of flowers. Qur'an, Surah xxi, 69.

Sri Lanka

Kinfolk

Liyanage Amarakeerthi

The Gold Leaf cigarette stub fell from his fingers and reached the ground only after several twirls. He stood staring at it. It glowed red for a short while and then died out in white ash. Now it had an anemic appearance!

He held on to the last puff of that cigarette for a while. Then, gazing at the road ahead he exhaled it all at once, in one breath. The smoke emerging from his nostrils wafted about in the air, then mingled with the other fumes encircling the Bambalapitiya Junction.

Two private buses raced each other to the bus halt like horses in a jackpot machine. The sun setting behind the Unity Plaza building cast a giant shadow across the Galle Road. Even though it was a coarse, rough, gigantic concrete structure, its shadow was cooling. His body felt a sensuous ease, soothed by the breezes blowing in from the ocean. The heroin inhaled in the morning, which had held his brain in its grip till now, seemed to have been blown away by the breeze. When the dizzying sensation in his head eased it had, at one time, been pleasurable. But that was long ago. Now he found it difficult even to stand upright without a "fix". He felt that his body was about to break in two, just above the knees.

The gigantic letters of a sign "Casino and Racing" on the

roof of the fourteen storey hotel by the sea shone in the western sky with its setting sun.

The focus of his attention all the while however, had been a young woman, a strand of whose hair was being affectionately caressed by the breeze. She kept glancing repeatedly at the gilt watch on her wrist. From time to time her soft, tender fingers would move aside a stray curl falling across her face and he could then see the tiny earlobe concealed beneath her curls. Surely those wheel-like earrings dangling from her delicate lobes must be a nuisance for her, yet when, caught in a sudden beam of light from an electric bulb, they sparkled, he found them most attractive.

One hand in the pocket of his denims had now strayed downwards and was tapping at a testicle as he continued staring at the girl in rapt attention. With the other hand he folded in two the English newspaper he was carrying and tucked it firmly under his arm. Whenever she tossed her head from side to side to control a stray curl wafted by the breeze, he would get a good view of the very red lipstick on her lips and that would cause him to lick his own chapped lips with a very dry tongue.

Sensing that his mind was beginning to roam over her entire body, he swiftly called it to order and focussed his attention on his resolution. In his pocket the hand that had been massaging a testicle moved away and his fingers delving deeper down, fastened on a two-rupee coin lying at the very bottom.

"Shit! Can't ever remember a time I've been so broke!"

He recalled a time when he had been able unstintingly, to treat every one of the guys hanging around the 'bazaar' to a shot of cannabis. That life had ceased abruptly the day he had walked off with the chain removed from around the neck of

his sleeping mother. Since then had dawned the era when everything of value immediately went into hiding the moment he stepped into the house. The only things to come out of concealment if any, were the tears of his mother which, of course, were not worth even five cents!

Yet there had been a time when his mother's tears had seemed extremely important. In the past when his father had come home sozzled and quarrelled with his mother, he could remember that he too would weep and how his own tears then mingled with hers. Now however, the thought of her could bring no tears to his eyes. Today he would need to have had two packets of "fix" at least before he could shed any tears!

The bus the young woman was waiting for, had still not come. Would a staff vehicle come for her? No, couldn't be! In that case no need for her to be in the queue.....

His target was the black handbag hanging from her shoulder and bumping against her hips. The sight of those round, mushroom hips budding beneath the thin skirt clinging closely to her body, caused his hand again to reach down deep within his pocket to massage a testicle. If only he were the handbag suspended from her shoulder, he would then be in direct contact with those hips, feeling their softness!

Not much effort was needed really to squash the desire that was welling up in him, making his body hot. One packet of the drug would give more pleasure than could be got from ten women! Once he had started using heroin he had forgotten all about Disna, not merely because she had pleaded with him to stop taking drugs but because he no longer felt any need for her.

He was afraid that dwelling on his old love might weaken his resolve. This was no time for sentiment.

The young woman opened her bag and took out a small coin purse. As she did so she stepped off the pavement and on to the street. Just then a bus with its conductor hanging on with one arm outstretched as if to snatch her up into his embrace, pulled up beside her. He stepped onto the foot-board together with her, then pushing against her, he crept under the conductor's arm and entered the bus.

"Those who got on - have your money ready - have your money ready - Bambalapiti: Wellawatte: Dehiwela: Galkissa".

"Galkissa"

Her voice was sweet. He looked away, out at the street, hoping he could get by without paying the only two rupees he had left.

"Sir, where to?"

"Dehiwela"

He handed the two-rupee coin to the conductor reaching out under her arm. In doing so his hand brushed lightly against the tip of her breast bulging beneath the loose, flowing blouse she was wearing. She made no special effort to move away and he felt sorely tempted to leave his hand there but did not. That was not why he had followed her into the bus!

She slipped her small purse back into her bag. The perfume emanating from her was clear evidence that the purse contained a good amount. It was also a scent that tempted one to snuggle closer.

He thought she must be a salesgirl in one of the big stores. Her mouth was small but he could tell at a glance that it was a mouth fluent in English.

He had paid up as far as Dehiwela. He must pluck the budding blossom before that. He took out the brand new

razor in his shirt pocket, pressed his thigh against her hip and ran the razor along the side of the bag. At this moment, it so happened, every face in the bus was turned outwards, gazing out of the window. He took the English newspaper in his right hand and, holding it with two fingers slipped three fingers into the bag. Now anyone who happened to look in this direction would see only the newspaper.

The first thing his fingers encountered was a plastic box with its lid open. That would be her lunch box. Next he found a spoon and then a fork. Like a fighting cock pursuing a hen his two fingers sped hither and thither inside the bag, searching for the neat little coin purse.

As the bus passed the Wellawatte bridge his task was accomplished. Although he felt like continuing all the way to Dehiwela leaning thus against her, he made himself get off at the next halt. With her fresh, new coin purse safely in his pocket, he was cheerfully humming a tune.

While the faces of drug pushers he knew at Wellawatte began coming, one after the other, into his mind, a name suddenly intruded, "Padmavati".

"Sha! Never again would such luck come his way!" The purse of Padmavati had yielded as much as one thousand and three hundred rupees. He had also gained the information that her name was Padmavati and that she hailed from Hambantota. Those details had been revealed by the letter in her purse. "Padmavati Liyanapatabendi, Shining Star Garment Factory, Galle Road, Ratmalana" - that had been the address on the letter written by Padmavati's sister, asking her for money.

Although all that money was now spent, the letter was there, still in the purse in his back pocket. Today, only the letter remained.

That one had been a garment chick - today's was a shop chick! There was sure to be a thousand bucks here - one could tell at a glance that she belonged to a sophisticated family. He felt as if he could still smell her perfume and was itching to open her purse and have a look. He slipped his hand into his pocket and opened the purse while it was still inside.

The road was packed with people so he had to control the desire to take it out and examine it. He crossed the Galle Road and walked down a little lane leading to the beach.

The first thing he found was a little bottle - a bottle of perfume, wafting its scent, but with no sale value. He put that in the left pocket of his pants. The next thing he found was another little box; he didn't have to pull that out to know it was an eye-shadow make-up box. He took it out and placed that too, in the left pocket. Could it be that there was no money? Without even checking if anyone was watching, he took out the coin purse and peeped inside. All that was in it was a rupee coin and a piece of pink paper!

He spread out the paper to have a look. It was a popular song by an American pop singer: "Lovers' Paradise"

He felt like flinging away that purse at once with all its trivial contents yet an inexplicable feeling for that lovely young girl was flooding his mind. He felt suddenly a need to look back on his own life, to review it from its beginnings.

He arrived at the beach. The soft, milky waves were spreading themselves out along the shore. The sun had already set by now. The cool breeze carried with it tiny droplets of water. His body, burning since morning in the heat of Colombo, felt soothed and comforted. For the moment even the hardship of not having a fix seemed to have disappeared.

Seated on a large block of granite at the edge of the shore he found it difficult to forget the young woman, his victim. Even though Padmavati's purse had contained that heart-rending letter yet he had not felt so strongly about her. In fact he had felt no pity at all!

He now saw the face of his sister, a shop assistant, come floating towards him as if borne by the waves. He didn't normally think of his home unless he needed to steal something. Why should he now be thinking of that girl and his sister both at this moment when he was hungry for a "fix"? He recalled with some sadness how he had stolen his sister's gold necklace. He could sense some sort of similarity between the young woman, his victim and his sister.

But this girl had not suffered as great a loss as Padmavati! That thousand three hundred rupees had been the woman's entire salary. Yet possibly this young woman's perfume bottle and make-up box held even more value for her, he thought. Might not the words of the English pop-song be of even greater importance?

He took out all the contents of that purse and, holding them in his hand, gazed at them.

Why did he now have to remember, each in turn, his sister who had studied at a leading school in Colombo but had failed her exams and had now become a shop assistant to help shoulder a part of the financial burden of the household; his father who had been a government servant but had lost his job because he had participated in a strike and now was a used car salesman; his mother who struggled to earn something by making cakes for weddings; and he himself, once a member of the school cricket team in a well known school who had formerly lived a happy life with lots of friends but failed his exams? The perfume bottle, the make-up

kit, the words of the English song, a beautiful woman - but, an empty purse - a fork and a spoon!

He wanted to read Padmavati's letter once more. Placing the stuff that was in his hands on the rock, he took out Padmavati's letter. "To my dear sister.....sister dear, please don't be angry with me for troubling you. I am aware you have looked after us like a mother.....sister, our exams come up next month. My white school uniform is completely worn out. At any other time I would not have troubled you.... I don't have the time, my sister, even to weave a few coconut branches to sell for thatch. I am studying for my exams.....one realises at such a time what it means not to have parents. But since I have you sister, I am not afraid. Please sister.....". This letter was meaningless, as far as he was concerned. Why he had held on to it for so long instead of tearing it up was a puzzle even to him. He had never even read it right through! Now he read it halfway, then tore it into tiny shreds and sat gazing at the vast ocean.

He flung the tiny scraps of paper in his hand towards the sea. However the wind blowing inland from the sea, brought the scraps of paper back to him again. Some of them stuck on to him but most were carried far off by the wind.

He next picked up the young girl's purse with all its contents that he had left on the rock. He felt as if he was holding in the palms of his hand the evidence of the worst crime he had ever committed in his entire life.

He remained there motionless, until darkness engulfed the ocean.

Translated by Ranjini Obeyesekere

Under the Lighthouse

Ranjit Dharmakirti

The gate leading to the Lighthouse was closed. I got out of my car and walked towards the gate, wondering what I should do.

"Where's the Light House? Do let's go in." pleaded my eight year old daughter who was behind me, pushing me forwards even before my wife could alight from the car. Ever since she had heard from her class teacher that Dondra Head was at Sri Lanka's southernmost tip and that there was a Light House there, my daughter had been fascinated and could not stop talking about it with a sense of wonder. The minute she returned home after learning from her teacher how ships' captains were guided by signals transmitted from the Light House, she had been awestruck and kept plying me with innumerable questions. I could sense from her questions and descriptions that she was overcome by a feeling of mystery because, Dondra Head as seen on a map of Sri Lanka, seems to be protruding from the sea. like a blister. She seemed to think that it would be a land mass, visible to the naked eye and that that was why the Light House situated there would present an unusual and exotic image.

Three or four months later, needing to travel south on some other business, I thought of fulfilling this deep desire of

my daughter to actually see the Light House for herself. The minute she heard we were planning to go, she became very excited and began again to ask a variety of questions. However, seeing the closed gate I felt that all her hopes were now shattered.

"So, where's the Light House, then?" she asked nudging me impatiently. Walking to and fro in front of the gate, I craned my neck, trying to get a glimpse of the Light House. On the left, a semi-circular path could be seen, running up through a cluster of palm trees leading to a hill top. We could only see a building at the top of the hill. The Light House was not visible at all from where we were. I strained my eyes to try and make out if there was anyone to be seen standing near the grass-covered compound just outside. There was not a soul to be seen. I felt that all our high hopes, like the now stationary vehicle, had suddenly come to a stop; everything around us was at a standstill.

Apart from the rhythmic roar of the ocean and the sound of waves dashing against the rocks, there was total calm. Though it was now past nine in the morning absolute peace reigned. Even at nine in the morning, the sun's rays falling on the surrounding foliage as well as on the ocean, appeared mild. The breezes blowing inland from the ocean were soothing to the body. The waves breaking on the rocks to form white bubbles, resembled tassels bordering the edge of a blue carpet. Waves struck the shore then ebbed away, like playful youngsters, showing off. Sea spray joining the breezes splattered us, as if jeering at my futile efforts.

"So let's go inside!" said my daughter pleadingly again, pushing me forwards.

My eyes, searching desperately for a human figure in that silent landscape, wandered again in the direction of the

small, solitary house adjoining the parapet wall encircling the Light House premises and this time a little girl, sitting quietly on the wall, gazing out to sea, happened to catch my eye.

The door of the small house had been closed when we arrived there, yet from the settled and comfortable manner in which the child was seated on the parapet wall, I deduced that even before we had arrived, she had been perched there, observing everything. As soon as she saw my smile of amazement, she began to chuckle merrily. The smile which blossomed on that shy, innocent, fresh face, I found especially charming. This little girl, with plaited hair in the faded flower-patterned frock, would be about eleven years old, I surmised.

"Child", I asked pointing to the Light House, "is there nobody in there?"

"Yes, there is, it was only just now that Piyadasa Uncle, closed the gate and went inside", she answered still sitting in the same posture, with her arms stretched back for support.

"The people inside are Navy personnel, aren't they?" I asked, having noticed a Navy crest on a board near by.

"The Navy gentlemen do come occasionally to visit, but there is a local person inside who looks after the place".

"Would that person shoot us, I wonder, if we go inside?" I asked jokingly.

Much amused, she laughed heartily, then composing herself replied "Goodness, no! Just jump over the gate and go in. We also do it quite often".

Feeling that it would be most unbecoming for an elderly person like me to jump over a gate and enter a place without permission, I sought for an appropriate answer which would make sense to a child of her age.

"It's rather difficult for me with my big belly, to jump over gates. So please could you go and get someone to come to the gate?".

Without a word, she jumped off the other side of the parapet wall into the garden of the Light House and ran up the neatly laid-out path towards the building that was visible to us. Since she had not sought permission from anyone inside her own house, before going, I felt in some way responsible and kept an anxious eye open for the moment when someone would emerge from inside the house. I had been hoping against hope that nobody would appear before she returned, but in a little while an old woman with a knife and a bit of firewood in hand, came out of the house. Without checking to see where the child was, she went to a log which was in front of the house, placed the bit of firewood on it and began to chop. I understood then that that little girl was free to come and go between the Light House and the compound as she wished. However, feeling that I should make contact with the old lady, I cleared my throat loudly in order to attract her attention and spoke. Still there was no sign that she had heard or that she was even aware of my presence. Therefore I raised my voice and spoke louder.

"Granny, we have come here to view the Light House".

She raised her head and looked at us in bewilderment. Then she came up closer to us, with the same look of puzzlement on her face. She must have heard my voice but not been able to make out exactly what was said. Understanding this, I waited for her to come closer and then repeated my words even more loudly.

"Oh, is that so?", a smile spread over her drawn and wrinkled face.

"The little girl here must be your grand-daughter?" I

queried.

"Now, where's that girl gone?" she asked, suddenly worried; it was as if my question had abruptly put her in mind of the little girl and caused her to check up on her whereabouts.

"It was I who asked that child to go and call someone from inside" I said with some hesitation, not wishing the child to be blamed in any way.

"I beg your pardon!" she said, hand to ear, not having caught my words. In a louder voice I repeated what I had said.

"Yes, that Piyadasa fellow should be there. But not the caretaker gentleman. he went off to town, I think."

"Who are the people living here?" I asked in order to alleviate the feelings of unease, suspicion and desolation that had pervaded me ever since we had approached the Light House and its precincts.

"Who else now, but my grand-daughter and I?" she responded with a sigh, her face wrinkling up with a look of sadness. From her response, although it had answered my earlier query, there now arose a heap of new questions. The old lady, having answered me looked at us, then turned her withered, wrinkled face towards the sea, gazing at it sorrowfully.

Before we could make any further inquiries, the lively little girl appeared again, hopping cheerfully towards us. A middle aged man, clad in a *sarong*¹ and *banian*² appeared close behind her, coming in our direction. Speaking to the man about getting permission to see the Light House, I could hear

¹ A lower garment (like a long skirt) worn by men

² Vest

in the background the old lady asking my wife where we had come from and where we were going. Since the Light House Keeper was away on official business in Galle that morning, Piyadasa said it would not be possible for us to go right up to the very top, but he would be able to let us in and show us the ground floor and the area immediately surrounding the Light House building.

"May we take this child along with us?" I asked the old lady, wishing to find out more about the cute little girl.

"Go and come, my daughter" she said, glancing sympathetically at her.

Watching the interaction between the two, I sensed some hidden, unspoken sadness. The sense of elation and felt within me from the moment we approached the Light House premises, now changed to a feeling of deep inexplicable melancholy which I did my best to overcome.

Hesitant at first but yielding to the persuasion of my wife and daughter, the little girl consented to visit the Light House with us.

"What is your name?" I asked while walking along.

"Samanthika" she replied at once, as if in answer to a question from a teacher in a school room.

The neatly laid out and well-maintained garden of the Light House was very picturesque indeed. With scarcely a weed to be seen, the grass spread itself out like a green carpet. Crossing it, we climbed to the top of the hillock along a path paved with brick and white pebbles. After going a short distance through a cluster of coconut trees, we spotted the Light House looming skywards like a gigantic rocket.

"There's the Light House!" exclaimed my daughter excitedly.

My daughter, younger possibly by a year or two than Samanthika was not, at first, very friendly towards our new companion. Probably her desire to actually see the Light House was so strong and overwhelming that it left no room for any other sensation. In order for Samanthika not to feel left out and to encourage the two to make friends, I replied to my daughter's questions by referring them to Samanthika first as if seeking her corroboration. Sometimes I myself asked Samanthika questions.

"At night there's probably a lot of light shining on this side, Samanthika?"

"My goodness, yes. It's truly beautiful at night, when the light at the top turns and a beacon shines across the sky. Our house is never in darkness, it's always as if its midday! On moonlit nights of course, the Light House beam is not so visible, but on a dark night the light falls far into the sea. Then, it's just like heaven!" she spoke dreamily, as if in a trance. She probably believed that the Light House beacon, was utilised simply to spread light in the area; she was probably unaware of its use as a place from where signals could be sent out.

"Ask Samanthika which school she attends, will you" I said to my daughter, hoping to start a conversation between the two. My daughter ignored the request at first and only complied after being prompted and nudged again.

"Oh, I don't go to school now" Samanthika responded with an obvious lightheartedness.

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Ever since I lost my father, I've stayed back home" she declared in a matter of fact tone, without any trace of emotion.

Hearing this, all of us were shaken and for a moment we walked on in stunned silence. Samanthika picked up a stick and moved lightheartedly along, poking from time to time at the flower beds. I realised, seeing her flitting about like a butterfly, that she was at an age when it must be difficult to comprehend either the catastrophe that had befallen her or to envisage the problems that might crop up in the future. This deepened the feeling of compassion and sympathy I felt towards her.

"How did you lose your father?"

"He went out to sea one day and he has still not come home."

"So wasn't even the boat he was in, found?"

"The village folk searched for many weeks yet found nothing. Grandmother told me 'Father will come home some day. Till then, wait patiently'."

"How long is it now, since father was lost?" I asked, surmising from her earlier words that by 'father was lost' she had not meant that her father had died but merely 'lost at sea'.

"I was eight years old then."

"What's your age now?"

"Now I am ten!" she said, looking up mischievously.

"His boat might have drifted to another country. Don't worry. Father will surely come home some day" I told her, reinforcing what she had already been told and softening the harshness of the probable reality.

"Then I'll be able to go to Colombo with father, and visit the zoo. In those days father used to tell me that one day he would take me to Colombo. We would go everywhere. He

would also show me the zoo and then bring me home. So in those days, after returning home from school daily, I would get on top of that wall and keep watching till our boat came home. As soon as I spotted that boat coming from afar, I would also call out to my mother and we would run to the beach on the other side of the Light House to wait until father came ashore. As soon as father stepped onto the sand he would lift me up high. Then every day I would ask him, "We'll go today shall we, to see the zoo?" Father would reply "Next week, daughter, next week we'll go and visit the zoo, alright?" After that, he would give me a fish and tell me to run home. So mother and I would return and start the cooking. When father came, I would climb onto his lap and he would feed me". She chattered on. It was probably a long time since anyone had shown any interest in her life and talked to her like this, with affection and concern. This was perhaps why we had become so friendly in such a short time.

Having read numerous stories of fishermen lost on the high seas who had been picked up by foreign ships, taken to those countries and then brought back home eventually, and yet other accounts in the newspapers, of the terrifying experiences some of them had undergone, I thought how good it would be if Samanthika's father did come home someday.

Having walked right round the Light House and seen the ground floor, we turned to go back. When you look from the Light House you can see on three sides an endless ocean with gigantic waves rising and falling. What could have happened to Samanthika's father, battling this endless ocean to eke out a living by catching fish? Could his boat have been caught in a storm and dashed to smithereens, and he and his mates swallowed up by the deep sea, now be lying on the ocean bed? Perhaps he was still alive in some place. Sprawled

on the grass next to the gate beside the sea, we stayed there awhile, feeling it would not do to leave Samanthika so abruptly and depart all at once. Again we could feel on our bodies the salt spray from the sea carried inland by the breeze, and we experienced a curious sense of exhilaration. Even Samanthika, whose whole life was spent seated day after day alone beneath this Light House near the sea, also turned her head aside, saying "Oh!" and expressing feelings discomfort due to the sea spray.

"Shall we move over to the other side?" she asked, "there's too much spray here."

"No. It's alright here" I replied continuing to sit there.

Having handed round the cakes we had brought with us, we each had some tea from the flask. Samanthika too, without much persuasion, joined us.

"Look, there are lots of shells!" exclaimed my daughter.

In a flash Samanthika leapt from the parapet wall, ran onto the beach and, jumping nimbly from rock to rock, began earnestly to collect shells. My daughter too joined her and after collecting the shells together, the two became much friendlier. After that, holding hands they ran together towards the Light House garden. We allowed them to play freely, darting to and fro like butterflies. Once when they were not to be seen for quite a while, I went around looking for them. I saw Samanthika descending to the shore from over the rocks, holding my daughter's hand. They then began paddling in the sea. Fearing that they might suddenly be engulfed by a large wave, I dashed down to the shore and despite my child's frantic protests, dragged her back. I noticed Samanthika's face, distressed by my action, growing pale and sorrowful.

The sorrow on her face deepened as we prepared to

leave. We spoke to the grandmother, saying that thanks to Samanthika, we had been able to see the Light House and then we thanked them both warmly.

"I too was watching gladly from the kitchen how this child ran about and enjoyed herself today. With whom is she to play? There aren't any houses close by and there are no children of her age anywhere around. That is her fate! The only thing she does all day is to climb on that wall and keep waiting patiently." lamented her grandmother.

"Isn't the child's mother at home?" I had waited all this while to make this enquiry from the old lady herself as, if by chance the mother too had died, it would have been too heartrending for the little girl to have to relate that to us too.

"No, she went off with another man. Now its more than one year. He too had set out to sea with my son. Now that man is supposed to be living somewhere near Mannar. We're better off without that woman. The little girl was never very close to her mother. She was my son's pet. As far as is possible, I will make and sell hoppers to earn some money and provide food for myself and the child. My sorrow is for the fate that may befall her after I am no more." She said all this speaking quite loudly though Samanthika was present. Obviously she saw no necessity to conceal anything from her grand-daughter believing that whatever happened would affect both of them and was just part and parcel of their lives.

How could I leave these two people who have no sustenance or protection? At a loss for words, I remained silent for a while.

"Samanthika", my wife asked "would you like to come with us? We could take you to see the zoo!" my wife said, inviting her.

"Sorry, I can't come. I have to sit here, watching the sea till my father comes back."

I had thought myself of making such a suggestion, but had been hesitant feeling it would not be acceptable. Now I felt I should back my wife by adducing good, strong, sensible reasons.

"Granny, would you let us take Samanthika away with us?" I said, "We would look after her very well."

"Nonsense, Sir. That cannot be done. How will I live without this child?" responded the old woman at once, angrily. I felt most embarrassed and a feeling of intense sorrow welled up in my heart. There ensued a long silence. Only the sound of the waves from the ocean was audible.

Samanthika had cuddled up close to her grandmother. Was it because she found there the warmth she needed or was it because she was afraid we might snatch her up and take her away by force, somehow or other? Difficult to tell. Since a situation had now arisen where we could take leave of them without compunction, we bade them farewell and got into our car.

Having reversed the car to face the road, I turned back to wave a final goodbye and saw that the old lady had already turned away to resume the chopping of firewood and that Samanthika was already back up on her parapet wall, gazing sadly out to sea. Although unable to leave this environment and come with us, I fancied that the silent and sorrowful look on her face seemed at the same time to express a desperate plea to us not to leave her and come away. Having looked at her for a moment, I eased my foot on the clutch and the car pulled off.

Totally absorbed in her experience of having actually

seen the Light House, my daughter began chattering unceasingly. Yet for me, the vision of Samanthika with her pale face sitting on the parapet wall near the Light House, remains still vividly etched in my mind and a question that still frequently interrupts my thoughts, is whether little Samanthika living within the very shadow of the Light House, would ever have a beacon of light shed over her life.

Translated by the author

The Fifth Scene

Jayatilaka Kammallaweera

Wijesena, the chief clerk of the department, waited for the right moment and entered the Assistant Director's room mustering all his courage. He came cradling a file with the utmost care as if it was a baby.

The chief clerk made several visits a day to the Assistant Director's table with files in hand to attend to various matters but the Director observed that this visit today was no such ordinary visit. He put away the report he was reading and settled himself firmly in his chair, adjusting his tie and casting an observant look at Wijesena.

"Take a seat, Mr Wijesena."

Wijesena looked around as he sat down. Then he eyed the telephones on the Assistant Director's table as if he was pleading with them "Please don't ring until I finish with the Assistant Director".

"Sir, can I speak to you briefly.... I need to ask a great favour of you."

"A favour? That means nothing official?"

"It's official too, Sir".

"Go ahead, tell me what it is, Mr Wijesena."

“Sir, you may not have known but I reached my present position after going through tremendous hardships in life. I was born in a village close to Mahawa. My parents were very poor, Sir. My father never had a steady job. It was from odd jobs here and there that he sustained our family. In our family, five are sisters and only me and one other brother. I may be the chief clerk here but my brother is still in our village, working as assistant to a mason. My sisters live a hand to mouth existence. I am not ashamed to reveal all this to you, Sir. It was because I passed my scholarship exam that I managed to enter the Central College. Thus I was able to study and become a clerk. But, Sir, up to now I have never been able to be of assistance to anyone in our family. I am here, and they are there. Somehow or other one of my *loku nangi*’s daughters managed to pass her ‘A’ levels. On the day that child returned home after answering her last ‘A’ level paper, her father had a fall from a tree and died. Now that family too has become destitute.”

A telephone began to ring, not heeding poor Wijesena’s innocent pleas. It disrupted the Assistant Director’s attention but out of consideration for Wijesena, he cut short the telephone conversation. Though the Assistant Director’s telephone conversation had been brief, Wijesena was worried that everything he had managed to convey to the Assistant Director so far, would have gone out of his mind by now. So he held his breath and waited impatiently until the call was over like someone on an urgent journey waiting for a closed rail gate to open.

“Sorry, Mr Wijesena, what do you expect from me now?” the Assistant Director asked as if to suggest that they should now get down to business. He returned once more to his former administrative posture and looked inquiringly at him.

Wit great care and using both hands, Wijesena placed before the paediatrician the 'sick baby' he had been clutching to his chest. The Assistant Director looked at the file placed before him and then at Wijesena. "Sir, these are the results of an interview held during the time of the former Deputy Director. This was held to select students for ten scholarships being offered to study in England. This file was handed over to me to deal with, personally."

"What? I thought selections usually have to be made without delay and the names sent in promptly."

"Yes Sir, it is quite a long time since this was started. Even the students who came for the interview may not remember it now."

The Assistant Director opened the file and went through the papers. He saw that 520 candidates had attended the interview.

"I remember that my youngest daughter too, sent in an application for this but she happened to catch chicken pox on the day of the interview. "

Wijesena closed the file and kept it in his hands.

"Selected names have to be sent to the Minister for approval, Sir."

"Leave the file with me and go. I'll attend to it later. Let's now speak of your problem."

"That's what I was trying to tell you, Sir. That child, my loku nangi's daughter I told you about before, she too had attended this interview."

"So, has she been selected?"

"That's the problem Sir. Her name is number eleven in the list.... just short of one mark, Sir."

"Oh! Is that right?"

"Sir, this file was personally handled by me. No one else knows about this."

"So.... ..Mr. Wijesena what do you want me to do in this regard?"

"If this child can be sent abroad somehow, it would be such a help for this destitute family, Sir."

"You want me to help you in that?"

"If you can do that, it will be a great help, Sir."

The Assistant Director picked up his pen from the table and held it from both ends. He tightened his lips and thought for some time.

"Honestly, Mr Wijesena, I had thought of you as one who fulfilled his duties to the very letter. What you are suggesting now, can send both of us to the gallows!"

"Sir, this is my twenty ninth year of service and up to now I have always performed my duties very honestly and conscientiously. This is the only irregular accommodation I have sought. I would like so much to do for something for my family!"

Alright, leave the file and go. We'll talk about it later."

"Sir, please do not misunderstand me."

Wijesena didn't notice how the Director's closed lips quivered slightly at one corner. Like a student walking away at the end of an interview, he got up, pushed the chair closer to the table and walked towards the door.

"What did you say the child's name was?"

Wijesena, hearing the Director's voice just as he placed his hand on the door knob, turned and walked back to him like someone who had been summoned by Maha Brahma to receive a special boon.

"D. A. Ranjanee, Sir."

"Right, we'll see what can be done."

They were seated on a tiny balcony open to the darkness and the moonlight, on the upper floor of the small but elegant, two-storey house of the Assistant Director. Though sandwiched in a cluster of houses built on 8 perch blocks of land, it was quiet and peaceful in this part of the house. It was a house that bore testimony to the skill of the architect. On a stool placed between the two chairs where the Assistant Director and Chief clerk sat, one could see two bottles of beer and a plate with two slices of fried fish on it. On either side of the plate were two baby forks.

A young girl who came and placed a serviette on the stool directed a friendly smile at Wijesena. Unused to such respect and consideration, Wijesena did not respond but remained twisting in his chair very awkwardly. Realizing his embarrassment, or feeling embarrassed herself, the girl left the place hurriedly.

"That is my youngest daughter.... The other two are married and live elsewhere. She walks with difficulty. I wonder if you had noticed that Mr Wijesena?"

Wijesena in truth, hadn't noticed anything unusual about the girl. He was not in a mood sufficiently relaxed to observe such oddities. He was still in the bemused and confused state of mind brought about by the unexpected honour of this invitation to visit the Assistant Director's house.

“Though I am taking a little beer with you today like this, I am not one who enjoys drinking much. Also, you know I am not one who mixes freely with others. It is not because of my pride but because we are people from a poor village family you know. As far as I can remember up to now, no one from any office where I have worked, has visited our home.”

The Assistant Director started filling Wijesena’s glass as he began talking.

“When you revealed everything about your family to me the other day, I began to realize that here was a man in circumstances similar to mine. To be frank, our family is really worse off than yours. Though I am an administrative officer today, I too had to study amidst many hardships.... your father and mine were in similar circumstances of life; my father had no permanent job or any other income. He fed us with what he earned from the odd jobs he could find here and there.... It is strange Wije, I too am very much like you. I only came to a school in the town after I passed the scholarship exam. From there I entered the university.... neither of my parents ever visited me in the university during my entire four-year stay there. They did not have suitable clothes to wear for such a visit. I remember that during my school days in Grades Five and Six, I only possessed two pairs of trousers – one for school wear and the other for home. I used to wash one and wear the other until the washed one was dry.... My wife of course doesn’t like revealing this part of our history to others. But I don’t feel as if you are an outsider now!”

The two bottles of beer were emptied fast, with the bigger portion of it being consumed by the Assistant Director. Wijesena noticed that there seemed to be a big burden on his mind. The young woman came out, walking slowly with another bottle of beer in her hand. Placing it on the table she retired with the two empties. Wijesena observing her carefully

this time, noted with concern, that her left foot was shorter than the other, the Assistant Director started to talk again in a sadder tone.

“This is our huge problem for us, Wije.... this child’s future. She too was short of 3 or four marks to qualify for university. My wife is in great pain of mind, wondering whether we will ever be able to find a marriage-partner for her”

The Assistant Director’s eyes were heavy with feeling. His voice was tearful.

“If I had the money I would send this child away somewhere, to a foreign country. In a country like England people look at things differently. There, she could continue with her studies, find a partner and even settle down permanently. But where are we to find the money for all that? Because we live in a fairly decent house like this and use a new car people think we are rich and important. This house carries a bank loan taller than the house itself. The payments might have to go on even longer than a life time. Even our children may have to go on paying. After retirement it will be the bus for me when I no longer have the official car. Honestly Wije, I dread to think of this child’s future! If she were a boy it wouldn’t matter. But as she is a girl.....”

His daughter returned to see whether everything was alright. When she saw only the bones of the fish left, she took the empty plate and went back with it slowly. When the Assistant Director saw his daughter walking with such discomfort, he picked up a serviette from the stool, mopped his eyes and looked downcast. Wijesena realized that his boss was trying to conceal his tears and felt very sorry for him. He kept on looking at the ceiling, not knowing how to cope with

this situation or what to do about his boss' pain of mind. How was he to console him? What could he do?

Raising his head two or three minutes later, the Assistant Director wiped the tears from his eyes and said in a half-audible voice: "Only parents themselves know the pain and the agony that they go through on behalf of their children."

The young scholarship winners, both men and women, had not yet got to know each other. Thus the eight of them had come to the airport separately to depart for England. Each of them came accompanied by parents, relatives, and well wishers. Joy overflowed from the faces of those who were leaving and those were bidding them goodbye. As the time of departure approached however, the joy of the parents turned to tears moistening shirtsleeves and jacket blouses. Those who were leaving, smiled amidst their tears.

The ninth and tenth scholarship- winning girls came in the same vehicle. It was not the Assistant Director's official vehicle but a car that had been hired from near his home, by Wijesena. When they arrived at the airport, the others had already gone through all the formalities of getting their baggage checked and obtaining their seat numbers.

A flood of tears flowed from the Assistant Director's eyes as he watched his youngest daughter managing her baggage trolley with great difficulty after bidding him goodbye by worshipping at his feet in the Departure Lounge. He allowed his tears to fall unchecked and continued watching her with misty eyes. This affectionate father watching his daughter walking on the terrazzo floor on her unsteady feet wearing a pair of shoes specially made to minimize the effect of her deformity, was experiencing a feeling that one could be called upon to bear only once in a life-time.

Friends and relatives are not able to see what happens to their loved ones once they leave the Departure Lounge and go in. But this uncle and father waited in the Lounge until the screen of the Flight Information Monitor indicated that the plane carrying their children had actually taken off. When the Flight Number of the departing plane appeared on the screen, the Assistant Director stood up and heaved a deep sigh, putting his hand on Wijesena's shoulder.

"Now, my mind is free at last!" he exclaimed, pressing Wijesena's shoulder.

"There will be a celebration as if on a wedding day, at my sister's place."

"I will be retiring next month Wije. All my burdens will be over now."

Four or five unknown young men and women could be seen moving about suspiciously on the road in front of the six storey building which housed Wijesena's department. It was around the office time in the morning. By ten o'clock young men and women as well as adults numbering about three hundred, had gathered there and a little distance away, was a police unit.

"Away with the officers who have stolen the scholarships of poor students!"

"Chase out the corrupt officers!"

"Is the Minister asleep?"

"Please Minister, we want Justice."

Poor men's children are driven out onto the roads. VIP's children are being sent abroad."

From where these slogan-bearing -posters suddenly came, no one saw. Those who pressed their faces against the

window-panes, curious to know against whom this protest was aimed, had no time find out. Even before the protest organizers could anticipate, armed riot police broke into the group and began to beat the young ones among them, mercilessly.

Seven or eight minutes later the situation returned to normal.

The Assistant Director was keeping his room locked from the inside. With his head down on the table, he remained for about quarter of an hour, with his face pressed against his arms, and his shoulders pulsating.

The bier of the Assistant Director who had died of a sudden heart attack, was laid out in the sitting room of his house, on the ground floor. Everyone in the neighborhood was shocked to hear of the sudden death of this harmless man who had lived such a quiet and virtuous life. On his face was a look of quiet contentment.

To the many large wreaths that were piled around the dead body, had been added another smaller one. In the centre of this wreath, on a piece of paper printed "Mahawa Janasiri Funeral Service", was the following handwritten inscription:

"Deepest sympathies from D. A. Ranjanee and family".

Translated by A. T. Dharmapriya

The High Chair

Sita Kulathunga

The sun was blazing down on her. Her spine ached as the hot sun drained her of energy. Now it must be well past noon she thought. When she was living at home and helping with this work every day it hadn't tired her half so much. Now her bones had become lazy! "You are spoilt" she told herself. She bent down to pick up another sarong which was particularly dirty. Whose sarong could it be? she mused. Now, having lost touch with the work, she couldn't trace the clothes to their owners. Her mother, of course, would say which sarong was Saimon Mudalali's and which was Peter Appuhamy's and which was Iskole Mahattaya's. To Prema they were all the same, all equally disgusting!

After all, my people have been doing this for generations, she thought. Washing clothes - "redi nandas", "hene mamas" they were called, why "mama" and "nanda" she wondered. What did it really mean? she remembered something she had read in some book or other about the mildness of Sri Lanka's caste system. But just now with the sun a menacing white ball overhead, with her clothes drenched and her hands smarting from soap suds, she couldn't account for the 'mama' and 'nanda', the uncle and aunt mildness of it all.

This was Prema's first vacation from the 'Varsity'. This morning she had come to the stream with the washing ignoring her mother's repeated protests. Mother herself was too ill to do any work, let alone wash a mountain of dirty clothes. She had a racking cough and had had a low fever for a couple of days. Prema was adamant that she would do the washing today if it were to be done at all. She beat the dirty sarong on the stone with added vehemence and reinforced vigour. The repetitive beat of the cloth against the stone seemed to mock her. There's nobody to see you, our heroine - none except a few village urchins to whom it does not matter who washed what.

Prema picked up another dirty bed sheet. Nausea and disgust welled up within her. The sun seemed to beat down with greater ruthlessness making her dizzyhead swim with exhaustion. Every pore of her body seemed to burn and break into sweat. She sat down for a moment trying to gulp down the disgust. She might as well have stayed home and let her father do the whole thing. Prema felt that she led a dual life; just at this moment the under-graduate was alien, the campus, the halls of residence, the walks, passages, libraries and even the waters of those streams at Peradeniya were a far cry from this reality of the dhoby bundle. Even the sun itself above and reflected below in its shimmering harshness at her wet feet, was different.

'Redi Nanda's daughter - yes, the laundry woman's daughter too, has passed her University Entrance' or perhaps they would have referred to her as 'rada kella'. She knew that the really great did not bother about getting respect from others. Did it matter to Einstein whether they offered him a seat or not? Or did it matter to Leonardo da Vinci if he were born out of wedlock? Or, closer to home, to a Minister of State or to a renowned physician, how little did caste matter?

There were so many who, with the backing of money or education, had broken the bonds of caste and migrated to the towns many a generation back.

Yet, I am not one of them she thought. If I could do something great, achieve something, hit the headlines. But with what? she wondered not with a paltry degree with no prospect of employment. Something really great, so that people would look up to her. Yet she knew in a remote corner of her mind that even this much was something. But would it suffice to lift her out of this mire of servility?

What rubbish! she chided herself - the soap and water worn hands, the chafed nails of her father - the sinewy, work-roughened hands of her mother, hunched by carrying the dhoby bundle day after day, were the reality. Worse than all this was that inescapable air of servility of which the bent back was a symbol. Dignity of labour! Prema thought. In the first place, your name Prema is not your name. It was Pransina - what on earth did it mean? She wondered.

At the loud-bellowing socialist's house her mother or father was never offered a chair, only a low stool. Condescension, low stools, even kindness and charity, they were all equally disgusting, stinking like the dirt on the soiled clothes! Some of the big houses didn't have more than one stool, so she had either to stand around or sit on a little kitchen stool. Often she did not sit. She hung around her mother, staring at the furniture which seemed so grand.

In the village school if she wore anything new the girls always thought it belonged to somebody else, that it was one of the frocks given to be washed. They thought dhoby children always wore other people's clothes. True, sometimes their people did wear other people's clothes but she herself

never did. Even as a child, however threadbare her own clothes were.

Prema knew what the village must have said when she passed her University Entrance Exam at the first sitting. It was at the same sitting that the village council Chairman's son passed too. The credit of his passing, she knew, was dampened in the eyes of the village, by her success. The progressive democratic society which admitted all children to the same school, allowed them the same opportunities, at least as far as poverty permitted. So much better off than the American black of only the other day, she thought, trying to be very objective. But it was not gratefully that her mind hosted these shreds of thought. The thousand humiliations and subtle cruelties came crowding on her. Some of the teachers had tried to make it appear that being of the dhoby caste was the most substantial impediment to arriving at the correct answer to a sum. The primary school was so much worse than the big school in the small town. As a very young child she was not able to understand the little pricks, the not-sitting-next, the not-holding-that-girl's hand spirit of her classmates. It was only later that those could harass her and make her as tough and sturdy as the Kumbuk tree nearby. No, she was still as soft and vulnerable as a rain-sodden 'niyara' by the paddy field which heaved and sucked your feet in when you walked along its grass-covered wetness with the added weight of the dhoby bundle.

This morning she thought of all this, as she had a lurking fear that she would have to take a few washed clothes to the V.C. Chairman's house. Her mother was surely not well enough and her brother would never go anywhere carrying a bundle. She knew that shirts belonging to Tilak were also there. She felt certain that it was one of those shirts he had been wearing when she first met him on the campus. As they

had not gone to the same school and he had studied in Colombo, he didn't know her very well. When a friend of Tilak's was about to introduce him to her and had paused to ask "By the way, aren't the two of you from the same village?" how she had wished she were dead! She could remember herself stammering "Yes, from the same area". He probably placed her only when she had added "On the other side of the village, beyond the paddy fields" and, so that he would know at once who she was, added breathlessly, "beyond the tea kiosk", to prevent his asking any more questions. She could have worshipped him for his quick rejoinder "Oh yes, I know. Our families have known each other for years although we are strangers". How natural he made it sound! She knew that he had been sensitive enough to pick up the pleading message in his eyes, but when he continued "even a fortnight ago, when I was home for the weekend her mother came visiting", she felt he was teasing. It was as if the two of them were sharing a sly, private joke, as if they had joined forces to deceive the others. For what purpose would be the visit of her mother, other than to bring back a bundle of clean, well-pressed clothes? The picture of her mother, weighed down by the bundle on her head, walking through the paddy fields and coconut groves, fell into focus in her mind's eye.

It was late when she came home, exhausted from the washing, from bending her back over dirty clothes for so long. Mother was still running a temperature and coughing - a dry, racking cough. The peculiar smell of dirty clothes assailed Prema's nostrils as she entered that part of the little house. Now it was so much better than when she was a kid! Then, it had been only a little cadjan shed. Now that people were paying them in cash, they had been able to put up two rooms where they could sleep. The days when people paid in kind (a measure of rice from here and a couple of coconuts from there), were coming to an end. Even so, what a very little one

could buy with money now! Soap was so expensive and so was starch -even the coconut shells to be burnt in the heavy black iron, meant money now! Would this damp, stale smell of dirty linen never leave her?

In the evening she found herself on the way to Tilak's house despite all her mother's protests. She'd had a bitter argument with her mother who had been insisting she should go herself, in spite of her fever. "Why, what's wrong with me? Why can't I go? You educated girls ought not to go!" her mother had argued. Eventually Prema had managed to send her mother back to bed.

She wore the most unobtrusive skirt and blouse she could find. By then, the defiant mood of the morning had left her. The smouldering fire of the early hours was now only a dull ache. She planned to enter the V.C. Chairman's house through the back door, leave the clothes with the servant and vanish. Would they insist on giving her the next lot of dirty linen? How could she refuse, if they had already collected the dirty clothes: 5 shirts, 4 sarees, 6 pillow cases and so many pairs of trousers, with the lady of the house noting down the list in an old exercise book, while the dhoby counted them out aloud. Perhaps some of the clothes would be Tilak's?

She felt her legs shiver and a hot, cramping shaft of pain in her abdomen. Was it from fear, shame or what? How could she ever achieve anything great, if this little ordeal loomed before her in such massive proportions! As if in a daze she rushed through the gate with the bundle of clothes (wrapped not in a cloth but in newspaper), the clothes, still warm in their newly pressed cleanliness. When she entered the kitchen quarters, Lucihamy the servant looked surprised. Yet she knew who she was, rose to the occasion and took her to some sort of storeroom cum second dining room. There was a table there surrounded by a few chairs. Prema put the bundle on

the table and stood there waiting. Lucihamy, in no time, found a small school room chair and set it down in a corner away from the ordinary high, dining room chairs.

Prema stood still, waiting, debating, wondering "Do I sit down or don't I?" when she heard footsteps just beyond the curtained door. She stood, rooted to the ground, praying it wouldn't be Tilak. Her heart beat against her ribs as if it were trying to break loose and burst through. Her throat was parched in a cracked, earthy, dryness. It was Tilak! "Just as my cursed, foul ill-luck would have it!" she thought in panic. In that one, brief moment which seemed an eternity, it was as if the years of tainted servitude, low stools, cracked cups kept apart for the visiting dhoby, came crowding into her mind one and all, pressing on her brain, smothering her! Even to sit down, she couldn't find the chair which was low, so abysmally low.

'Prema!' Tilak seemed to breathe out his suppressed surprise in those two syllables. Ignoring the bundle on the table and drawing out a tall, high backed chair from near it, Tilak said in pleading tones, 'Do sit down! Take a seat here'. Prema came up to the table. She stood, holding the high back of the chair, running her fingers over its carved edge.

The Day My Son Comes Home

Karuna Perera

Tilaka came walking along the tarred road and stopped under the huge Mara tree at the side of the road. There being sufficient shade there, she folded the umbrella she'd been using and placed it in her handbag. Taking out a small handkerchief she wiped away the sweat from her face and neck and looked about her.

The noise from the steady stream of cars passing by, was annoying. Glare from the sun's rays glancing off the shiny metal of the cars, was also painful to her eyes; not her eyes only, it was troubling her mind as well.

She had taken a half day off and come here as she'd heard so many different reports from various quarters the previous day.

"But there's no need to go and wait for him. He's sure to come straight home," Wijithasena had advised her the previous night.

Last night she had picked two nearly ripe mangoes and cooked a tasty curry, adding a little sugar as well to enhance the flavour. All her son Dimuthu ever wanted was a mango curry with exactly the right sweet and sour flavour. "He won't want anything else!" said Tilaka to herself while making it. She spoke too softly for Wijithasena to catch what she was

saying. Though aware she was muttering to herself, he was not concerned enough to try to find out what she was talking about. He left the kitchen and going towards the sitting room, paused near the door of their daughter's room.

"Now go to sleep Mandri. That's enough studying for today!".

Mandri lifted her eyes from the book she was reading and turned towards her father as if to say "But I'm not sleepy yet!"

"Check, if the window is properly closed".

"I did look at it, father".

"Never mind, look at it again".

Mandri rose from her chair. "Now lock the window securely and go to sleep. That's enough studying for tonight".

Without a word, Mandri carefully checked the locked windows passing her hands over the panes and feeling the locks to make sure they were securely fastened. She switched off the light and lay down on her bed. She knew very well that sleep would not come to her for a long time.

"People are saying that they will be dropped off at the University at two o'clock in the afternoon" said Tilaka for the tenth time. She spoke loudly so her voice could be heard all over the house.

Mandri gazed at the ceiling, listening to her mother's words. The sitting room and kitchen lights were still on and light came streaming into her bedroom. Mandri could not fall asleep. Various thoughts kept crowding into her mind. Although she had trained herself to deal with such thoughts and not let them obstruct sleep, she did not fall asleep easily and sleep often still continued to elude her. "This sleeplessness

of mine is actually a useful quality in a student studying for an examination" mused Mandri. Yet her father would not like her keeping the lights on and studying till late. What father wished, was for everyone to switch off all the lights in the house and go to sleep as early as possible. Always the last person to switch off the lights and go to bed, he usually heaved a deep sigh as he finally settled himself down to sleep; this was the last thing Mandri heard every night and each night this sound seemed to penetrate not merely her ears but to travel deep down and deposit itself in her heart as well.

All through the night her father, her mother and Mandri kept getting up and going for a drink of water, one after the other. In the silence of the night the footsteps of one would wake another but though each heard the others, not a word would be uttered; the hours of the night seemed to stretch on endlessly.

At early dawn Tilaka would rise and go to the kitchen. She would quietly cook a meal of rice and curry, make a jug of tea and call out to her husband and daughter to come and have some. They would usually be lying awake as if awaiting her summons.

"Mandri, when you get home after school today, you must clean out your brother's room, right?"

Mandri gazed at her mother for a moment eyes wide with surprise, and then looked away, while Wijithasena picked up his cup of tea and left the kitchen.

That day Tilaka arrived at the office early, dressed a little better than usual. She took a half day's leave and left, pausing only to give away the lunch packet she'd brought with her to a child who was seated near the office steps. She bent down and peeped into the child's face as she gave it, smiling kindly. She herself had felt no desire for food for quite a long while

now. She had been eating simply because it is necessary to eat something, how it tasted did not seem to matter to her any more.

She stood in the shade of the Mara tree and waited. She waited a long time. Vehicles passed to and fro. They would probably be bringing them in a large vehicle like a lorry - yes, a big vehicle would be needed, there were so many of them!

"I probably won't be able to recognise my son until he comes really close to me. He must be much thinner now, really haggard probably and with his clothes all dirty. He might have grown a beard! Yes, that's probably how it is....never mind. He will be home. Good thing I asked for leave and came. If I'd come without taking leave, thinking I'd be able to get back soon, I don't know what might have happened. How long I've been here now! They have still not come". Just then exactly the sort of lorry she was expecting drew to a halt near the gate...Tilaka turned round to look. A man in trousers came and stood quite close to her, smiling familiarly as if he recognized her. Tilaka smiled slightly; she did not think they had met before, so a warm smile would have been out of place.

The man spoke: "The bus stop is further up" he said. Tilaka made no reply. She glanced once again at the University gate.

"You are waiting for someone, perhaps?" ventured the man. Still Tilaka made no reply.

"Where do you work?" asked the man.

"Close by here" Tilaka said, lying. "Close by meaning?" was the next query.

Without replying Tilaka turned and walked towards the bus halt with the man following close behind. Having reached

the bus halt, Tilaka consulted her watch. She felt quite alarmed. The time was seven minutes to four.....she looked around her, up the road and then down, then consulted her watch again.

"It looks as if the person you're expecting is not coming. Shall we go somewhere else?" asked the man. Tilaka saw stars! She was shocked beyond measure at the man's boldness. She thought to herself 'My son probably won't turn up today either. If they were being brought here, there'd be many parents gathered around, waiting..... no, they're probably not coming'.

"There's a good place I know quite close by. Let's go there, shall we?" the man was really most persistent. A bus happened to come along just then and as it stopped Tilaka got in. It was going to Bambalapitiya which was not in her direction. "Never mind" she thought as she climbed in. She decided she would go there and then catch another one to travel to her home in Maharagama.

She arrived home at seven twenty five in the evening.

"What are we having for dinner this evening?" Tilaka had completely forgotten to buy any bread. "They didn't bring him home today either, daughter" Tilaka complained to Mandri as she was going to her room to change her clothes. She came out again quickly and hurried to the kitchen to start boiling some rice for dinner. Wijithasena wandered into the kitchen asking for a cup of tea and it was only then that Tilaka realised that she could do with a cup of tea herself.

"Don't worry about cook anything else, just a *pol sambol*¹ will do" said Wijithasena.

¹ A dish consisting of scraped coconut mixed with chilli powder, salt and a few drops of lime juice

"Just see, these people! I wonder what they could be doing with our sons - keeping them so long." Tilaka lamented to her husband. He asked her no questions about how she had spent the afternoon.

After his cup of tea, Wijithasena felt he really did not require any dinner that evening, and Tilaka too felt the same.

"I shall go tomorrow as well" Tilaka informed him, while mixing the hot rice she had just cooked with a bit of *pol sambol* and making an effort to eat some of it. Wijithasena made no comment - he did not advise her one way or the other, whether to go or not to go.

"Surely they should have completed their investigations? Why can't they send this boy home now?" Tilaka's questions went on and on, but neither the father nor the daughter attempted to answer any of these unceasing queries. Mandri quickly ate her evening meal, did the washing up and busily tidied the kitchen, hoping to be able to get in at least half an hour of study before bedtime. When dinner was over neither of her parents seemed to be in a hurry to get up and leave the dinner table. Father of course would be in a great hurry to lock up, switch off all the lights and go to sleep as soon as possible. There was this disparity between what father wished done and what Mandri needed to do, due to the examination looming ahead.

"Today there wasn't a single mother or father waiting near the gate.... it is probably tomorrow they're due to come. In any case I shall go tomorrow as well and see what happens".

"Are you going to ask for leave again tomorrow?"

"Yes, I shall ask for leave again".

"Soon all your leave for the year will have been used up!"

"That's O.K." said Tilaka indifferently, "Surely those beasts who came and carried our child away from his own home should bring him back and deliver him to us, right here, shouldn't they?"

Mandri emerging from the kitchen and going towards her room stopped for a moment near her mother.

"Shouldn't we start getting ready to go to sleep now, daughter?" asked Vijithasena. "Right Father" she said. She badly wanted to ask if she could be allowed another twenty or twenty five minutes of study time, but the words would just not come out.

"No, we shouldn't go to sleep so early. They came and carried off our son during the night hours so perhaps they may bring him home some time during the night as well. Let's keep the lights on a little while longer" pleaded Tilaka. Vijithasena just looked on helplessly. Mandri intervened "See, all our neighbours have put off their lights and gone to sleep, Mother. Let's do the same". Tilaka turned towards Mandri, but what was meant to be a smile appeared as a horrible grin on her face. Mandri turned to her father totally at a loss as to what to do or say next. Rising from her chair Tilaka walked off into the sitting room.

"Our child is definitely coming home tonight!" As she spoke Tilaka opened one of the windows and at once a cool breeze swept through the room. In the darkness outside, absolute silence reigned. Tilaka stood at the window gazing into the darkness which seemed in the silence to be wrapping itself round her.

"Don't forget dear, you'll need to buy a new sarong for our son!" Tilaka shouted out into the darkness. The words were meant for Vijithasena yet she did not turn towards him but spoke still looking out, as if addressing the darkness

outside. "I noticed at the time they were pushing the child into the jeep, that his sarong got torn. I saw it tearing!" Tilaka continued, still speaking to the dark night outside.

Mandri quietly drawing closer to her father, murmured "Father?" Vijithasena with his eyes fixed on his hands which were resting on the table, cleared his throat: "H'mm"

Tilaka continued with her monologue, her face turned outwards to the darkness.

"Our son must certainly have told you enough unpalatable truths by now to make your ears burn! Why, is it that we have to get a licence these days, to speak, to read, to discuss any issue?" she continued arguing with the night air.

"Mandri, Mandri! Come quickly! Come! Your brother's here!" Tilaka yelled suddenly at the top of her voice. Vijithasena and Mandri hurried to the sitting room but before they could get there Tilaka had already opened the front door and rushed out into the garden.

"*Denna dena deno, denna dena deno my son is coming ho-o-ome!*" she was screaming as she pranced about, waving her arms aloft. Mandri ran out with an agonised cry; tears, long held in check, were coursing unceasingly down her face. Vijithasena was trying to take hold of Tilaka and get her back into the house.

"Mother, Mother, please stop!" wailed Mandri in turn, her mournful voice mingled with the darkness shattering the silence of the village.

Translated by Vijitha Fernando

Life

Thaamaraichchelvi

She looked at herself in the mirror in front of her and for a moment wondered if all this was real. The pendent at the top of the forehead, the gold band across the forehead, the light chains on either side, the nose stud, the dangling earrings, the neck and hands covered in jewellery, the gold and red blended *Kanchipuram*¹, flowers decorating her hair.... she thought that she looked quite pretty amidst this ornamentation.

The make-up, which succeeded to a considerable extent in concealing the dark rings beneath her eyes, her lean facial bone structure and jaded complexion failed however, to conceal her age fully. It seemed like a dream to get married at the age of forty but her mind seemed empty, quite devoid of excitement, thrill or joy.

She had lost her parents. The wedding ceremony was being organised by her younger brother and sisters. She had close friends in Chavakkachcheri. However none of them would be turning up for the occasion. Ever since one of her uncles was killed when the army intercepted and opened fire at the people who were crossing the sea at Kilali, they had been mortally scared of travelling across the Kilali lagoon.

¹ An expensive type of silk sari

They could only send congratulatory messages expressing their joy and conveying their blessings and best wishes.

'What a wedding!' Her heart sagged wearily. She had actually made up her mind that she should not get married at her age, but since Sukumar was so insistent, she had reluctantly agreed for his sake. The first marriage proposal for her had come twenty two years ago when she was just eighteen. She could still remember the day they came to see the bride-to-be. The hurt she had felt on that occasion, had lodged itself permanently at the bottom of her heart. That day, as she remained seated, with her mind in turmoil and full of unfamiliar feelings, in the presence of the group who had come to visit, she remembered that Sukumar had been standing close to her, leaning on her lap. He was only eight years of age.

That marriage proposal had gone astray over the question of dowry and later, when he had found her weeping alone, Sukumar rolling his eyes in confusion, had not been able to comprehend what had happened or why. Today, at thirty he was quite grown up and fully aware of everyone's agony as proposal after proposal fell through for the same reason. From the age of eighteen he had been pondering why giving a girl in marriage should be such a big problem, as he witnessed with sorrow the gradual wearing off of the youthful bloom in his three older sisters.

The word 'money' used to stir up a terrible rage in him. However that very same Sukumar was now working day and night amidst the cold and the snow of Switzerland. She did not know what his job was exactly, but it was a job all the same. If she ever asked him, during his rare visits to Colombo, what his job was, his only response, with a broad grin, would be: "*Akka*, you should never ask people abroad about their employment. If you do you would only get told a lie."

She always felt sad, whenever she thought of Sukumar. It seemed that he had been destined by fate to grow up, travel abroad and spend his whole life earning money and sending it back to get his sisters married off. Her two younger sisters had already been married off during the six year period following his departure to Switzerland. She herself had taken the initiative to arrange marriages for each of them as soon as a suitable proposal presented itself. The younger girls had protested that she, as the eldest, should get married first but she had somehow managed to coerce them into agreeing to the marriages. Since there was now sufficient money all went smoothly without a hitch. Vinothini the younger of her two sisters would say, "Our Sukumar should have been born as our elder brother."

Now her younger brother and sisters had taken responsibility for her. All day today Sukumar in Switzerland would be thinking about his eldest sister and picturing in his mind at the different moments of Sri Lankan time, what must be happening over here...Now there will be a *pandol*² in the courtyard... food will be cooking in the rear... *Akka* will be all adorned and ready ...people wearing colorful silks will be arriving for the wedding... tears of joy would quiver on his eyelids.

However, she was not feeling the least bit happy about this wedding. The feeling that this was not a very good match for her kept persistently gnawing at her mind. It did not seem really fair for her to have to agree to this ill-matched union. God, although he had failed to give her wealth in her earlier years, had endowed her with intelligence and wisdom in abundance. She was a university graduate and now held the post of Assistant Government Agent.

² A temporary structure to shelter the guests

Riding to work each morning on her scooter with her long hair tightly plaited and the tail of her sari neatly tucked in at her waist, she was a beautiful sight to behold. The use of the official jeep that formerly went with the job had been terminated in 1987 but she had found the scooter to be most convenient. The job suited her courageous and upright character very well. Earlier, lack of money had stood in the way of her getting married. Subsequently, her learning and her career kept away potential suitors. This match had come up at a stage when she had almost completely lost interest in getting married.

Her career had exposed her to various social problems and made her aware of the plight of refugees. It was as a woman rather than as an official, that she felt sorrow for the women who came to her seeking compensation or weeping for a husband who was killed during a bombing raid. She had trembled at the sight of the statistics once presented to her, revealing the vast number of widows and orphans in her region. She had often felt disgust at the idea of enjoying life or even living on, in the midst of such misery. If not for Sukumar's persuasion she would have been inclined to lead the life of a spinster.

"*Akka*, I am not getting married unless you get married first". Sensing with agony that this younger brother who had borne the entire burden of the family, would do exactly as he said, she had reluctantly agreed to this marriage. However, it was not possible to rid herself of the feelings of bitterness. She was not sure whether the hatred she felt was for humanity at large, or whether it were directed specifically towards the males of the species.

Would any of this hatred and bitterness have been in her heart had she married at eighteen? If so, she would perhaps by now be going about her business like any other typical,

mature woman of forty. Perhaps she would even have got a daughter married off to a young man. How many years had gone by since then? She looked in the mirror and was taken aback by the sight of tears in her eyes. Recollecting that it was not in her nature to be downhearted, she picked up a towel and quickly dabbed at her eyes.

Vinothini who opened the door, let herself into the room and gazed at her sister with affection and joy. After scanning her from head to foot, she came close up to her and lifting her face by the chin, fondly kissed her on the forehead. "Oh, it is only today that I'm feeling really happy for the first time", she exclaimed.

She did not reply but wondered instead "Has the question of my being married or not, really been such a problem for them?"

"The bridegroom's party has arrived." Vinodhini said with laughter in her voice.

She could feel neither shyness nor any particular excitement at these words. There could be no cause for excitement when one is already forty, and she had forgotten how to feel shy. When she looked in the mirror her appearance seemed to be a huge pretence and she felt strongly tempted to tear off all the ornaments immediately. There seemed to her to be nothing joyful about marrying a man less educated and less attractive than herself.

Sukumar had sent five hundred thousand rupees for this marriage. What sufferings he would have undergone in that cold climate in that far away land, to have earned the five hundred thousand for her sake! He had also gifted to her the house that he had built which might be reduced to rubble at any moment by the dropping of a bomb. But it was on the strength of these that they had been able to accomplish the

arrangement of this marriage.

It had been long since the supply of electricity had been terminated. It came and went as a result of the battles. Nowadays, nobody even mentioned the electricity supply. The generator that had been running continuously since last evening caused her head to ache and the light for the video equipment, hurt her eyes; jokes that were meant to make her smile, failed to evoke any response. She could feel only irritation at what was going on. Fearing that Sukumar would notice from the video that his sister was looking unhappy and feel sad, she struggled hard to make an effort to smile. Fortunately for her, the video cameraman knowing about her and her educational and professional status, did not harass her by requiring her, in the usual fashion, to pose in one position after another with her head tilted or with her cheek resting on one hand.

She opened the window gently and saw the *pandol* in the courtyard. She watched the bridegroom walk in under it, past her office colleagues sitting on either side. His slow pace reflected his forty four years. She remembered that she enquiring at the outset why he had remained unmarried for so long and how Vinothini had explained that it was because he had three younger sisters and that it was very recently that the last of them had got married.

It seemed that men too had burdens to bear. She felt sympathy for him, as she seemed to see in him another Sukumar. That was why she had agreed, even halfheartedly, to this marriage. In fact they had not demanded a dowry. They had perhaps thought that her family would do whatever was necessary and Sukumar had sent the money to ensure that the wedding would take place with no cause for complaint.

What would he do, she wondered, with the four thousand that he will receive? Would he use it to pay back a loan, or would he thriftily set it aside for them to live in comfort since he had worked hard for so long to be able to settle his own sisters in marriage? However money was not the problem at issue here, it was the mind.

Two young women now walked in with Vinothini. The one leading was a younger sister of the bridegroom. She had seen her before; she was to be bridesmaid and had come to accompany her out. The girl now introduced as her younger sister, the girl who followed after. This girl, she noticed, was dragging one of her feet slightly as she walked in. "A bullet pierced her leg during a helicopter attack and she's got a wooden leg now. Her wedding had to be postponed for that reason". the sister explained, "It was with greatest difficulty that we managed to find her a bridegroom and it was only last year that we were able to arrange the wedding."

She looked at the two girls in surprise. These people too have suffered losses and have had to bear the consequent sorrow, she reflected. The man had witnessed the plight of his sister and struggled to build a future for her, postponing his personal happiness until that could be secured. The overwhelming feelings of gloom that had been burdening her mind, began to lift somewhat. She began to feel a confidence that the man who had loved his sisters so much would also love her.

She lifted her head slightly and glanced at him as she walked towards the *manavarai*³. There was a calm smile on his face and kindness in his eyes. Every wrinkle in his face seemed to express his concern for others and for society.

³ Arch-like structure for seating the bride and groom during the rituals

Now, neither his level of education nor his career seemed to be an issue. As she grasped his hand in the *manavarai*, a mild thrill swept over her.

She resolved that she would soon write a happy letter to Sukumar.

Translated by S. Sivasegaram

Coarse Cloth and Silk Shawls

Nissanka Wijemanne

When she asked him how he could forget her thus for fourteen long years, he had nothing left to say but to remain dumb.

He felt that a great change had come over the hillside. The monsoonal rains had soaked the soil and broken it, bruising the soft valley. The deep -dug drain remained like a painful memory.

He felt that the sterile barren half-valley was disillusioning enough to dispel his hopeful thoughts that she was still alive, a thought that had deceived him for so many years.

Yet, he yearned to see her. The wooden hut on the hillside was coming into decay. The coat of paint on the hanging name board was peeling off, allowing rust to settle in. 'Asanka Tailors'

For some reason, what he remembered was a bird's feather; it was an old deep -seated memory. The feather was there in an abandoned nest.

She was not there in that little cabin. The woman who had consoled him. The mother whom he had abandoned was not there. It was a young woman who was there instead. Sewing a buttonhole, she gazed at him momentarily when he suddenly appeared, then returned to her sewing; the thin needle the long thread, fingers and endless sewing!

He felt as if his breathing had suspended briefly but it was only momentary.

That was how his mind had prepared him to face a situation when he was still an immature novice, in life. But it need not happen that way now, the mind seemed to say. Blood started to flow back; like a red thread it flowed, causing pain to the capillaries.

No, I must return here as before,- just like that child of yesteryear, with those selfsame thoughts that could make tender hearts cry. He obeyed such thoughts. It was cradling that memory in his lap that he sat down on the lone bench placed there. He got up to stretch himself, to ease his limbs and sat down again holding on to the memory.

“Where is the mother who lived here? Where has she gone?”

The young woman looked at him - has a moist leaf from a distant mountain drifted all the way here? she thought looking back again.

This is him she recognized. The one whom mother had talked about’. But she didn’t speak aloud.

She must be sewing heavenly shawls now. She never voiced the feeling, though. Looking through the window she indicated with her eyes the grave that was there, in the green field far away.

“More than five years now” she said in her customary soft voice, as she sewed on.

He broke down. Didn’t I say, didn’t I deliberately hide this from myself? Didn’t I know this? ‘She’s alive and well’ my mind kept telling me deceitfully and that’s how this news was hidden from me. He understood it only now, he could feel a great turbulence within him as if a machine with a thousand needles was at work, he felt he was being sewn together again like a peace of cloth.

But he felt his own hand pulling a lever and stopping the machine. He couldn’t imagine how he had become so strong-willed; could have become so hard-hearted as not to let the feeling of pain torment him.

What has happened to that school child, the little one of yester-year.....am I not him? How easily he used to cry in those days! I am now used toI am now used to..... the young woman saw the man looking crestfallen. She thought he was crying, but how could she even imagine such a thing happening? With difficulty she looked at him.

I came back seeking to be comforted again, the wretchedness. He was frowning at his own soul like a father grinding his teeth, unable to thrash his errant child, being too fond of him.

It was just past 8’clock. Yet he felt as if a long time had elapsed. He saw women coming forward slowly and unenthusiastically.

He could now rouse up his anger at will, a skill he had cultivated through long and continuous practice. The woman was pregnant. Yet he had absolutely no need to lose his temper at that moment. If he had ever known that this anger

would continue to torment him all through night and affect him mentally, he would have remained calm, and quelled it, at the outset.

This bloody woman too is pregnant, was the thought that came to him suddenly, as if he was seeing her for the first time.

“Look at the time now” he said, looking at her with the customary patronizing air of the master.

She gazed at the clock..... a long sigh! He saw her belly as if it had suddenly blown up. Then was that the reason for my anger? He thought, about a thousand times after that.....

The job is one thing..... big bellies are another.....but he didn't speak aloud.

“You can stop coming to work if you are not able. There are others outside, any number, wanting to come in.”

The young woman felt that as a blow to her belly. She looked at him helplessly, in fear and shame. Then again, raising her upper lip, she looked at him in disbelief. What a transformation in this man! Thinking thus, she looked at him plaintively.

He could not comprehend any of those looks.

‘Now get out, and stop staring’.

After punching the card, the woman entered the factory. He felt that he was left with more misery now. The cacophony of machines flowed forth as if they had suddenly managed to open their sealed mouths.

By evening the mental stress had become intolerable. How can I avoid the directors' meeting tomorrow? It was I who fixed the date. I am the boss. Now I am the one

who wants to avoid it. He banished those thoughts and pursed another train of thought in his mind.

So! She is pregnant now. He wanted to go in and see her. When he walked in, she looked down. Her feet were swollen because she had been standing for so long.

She hates me, he thought trying to put the best face on it. How can I stop myself? I am what I am.

Throughout the night he was grappling with the problem. In life.....Whatever it is..... In life one needs the laughter of a woman.....Not just the warmth, not just to sit by her side.....whatever it was, he admitted to himself that he had once loved that woman who was now carrying another man's child.

My mind revolts at the thought that she has become pregnant and that she has a husband, he sighed wearily. Tomorrow the round table discussions would begin again! The day after that, it would be the meeting with the chief minister.....the next day.....! All these routine, unpleasant duties.

A long time ago he had lost a most affectionate mother. His wife too, had deserted him not long after that. Then, followed many unpleasant memories associated with various women..... And now this young woman who had stolen his heart was carrying another man's child.! These thoughts pursuing him one after the other, must lead but to one point he realized, the point at which he forgot.

Why, oh! why mother do I not feel compelled to come and visit you?

The simple shabby clothes he had on, altered his appearance and the growth of stubble on his face accentuated it. This look of a feverish person leaving hospital before recovery, terrified the driver of his car.

"Sir, are we going to the board meeting today?"

"No we're going some where else.....a bit further away." When he said so, the driver plucked up courage to point out something else.

"Sir,.....Your shoes!"

"So.....What about them?"

"No Sir, I just noticed that you're wearing slippers today."

Once again, that sudden burst of fury.....but he conquered it instantly.

"No...no this is ok."

During the drive to that town, a desolate place, hundreds of kilometers' distance away and even after his master had left him waiting in the car, the driver kept pondering that his master must have come under a spell or some sort of enchantment, during the previous night.

"From here on I shall be walking, you are to wait for me here until I return, whatever the time."

"That was the school where I studied, as a child. It was my mother who lived here then," he said, pointing towards the school which was faintly visible through the grove of tall cypress trees.

"I know.....she told me every thing."

"In that case, you do know me?"

"Of course I do" the woman smiled.

Her smile was youthful. He felt as if it penetrated through to his heart.

She too seems sympathetic.

"For years" she said leaning towards him....., "Mother was waiting for you.....hoping that you would come and see her".

"Then.....?"

"Finally she said, "As long as you didn't go astray...."

"Was that all she said?"

The young woman spoke thoughtfully, revealing these details piece-meal, only a little at a time: "What's the rush?" she asked plaintively.

"If you had turned up she would have kept you here and trained you to sew, but you didn't come. So what are you doing now?"

"Nothing, still", he felt that it would be best to answer in that way.

In those days, he mused, absorbed in thought, in those days, no one came to this small tailor shop.....they were ashamed to come here. They preferred the bigger ones in the town. But he himself had to visit the place, not just once, but for a second time as well. It was with considerable embarrassment that he had come then.

"Can't alter this any further" the matronly tailor-lady said, examining the pair of shorts he had brought. "Don't you have any other pairs of shorts?"

He was speechless, unable to answer and the tears were not far off, but her next words checked them.

"Wait a bit", she pulled open a drawer and took out a coin. "Do you see that kiosk over there? Go and buy a *vade* with this".

All his classmates were wearing long trousers. He possessed only shorts. He recalled how close he had been to tears, as he had walked over to the kiosk at her bidding. He used to feel that his classmates looked down on him. One girl, he could remember, who sat on a seat in the corner; she'd had a caring face. Tiny plaits of hair, tied with a broad ribbon, usually hung in front, dangling on her chest. She used to look at him with a kind smile, but he had resented that compassion. 'I felt they were pitying me, as if I was a disabled person!'

That day, the tailor-lady had given him a cup of tea as well as a *vade*. Then had followed several harmless, seemingly casual, questions, as she turned him this way and that, taking his measurements.

"I remember certain things mother told me" She seemed to hear his voice as if it was coming from a long distance away... 'had a daughter once.....She was snatched away from me' that's what she said one day, but I never questioned her, didn't want to cause her pain". As the young woman was listening, his voice seemed to fade away, as if into thin air. He was once again deep in his reverie, absorbed in the past.

The motherly tailor-lady had sewn a pair of long trousers for him.

“Try them on and see” – He felt overwhelmed by her warmth and compassion. This caused no resentment in him, instead her affection touched his heart like a soothing balm.

“You look like a king! You’ll be welcome anywhere – in any assembly”

Despite that, he had a feeling that he was becoming increasingly isolated in that large college, in the hostel. Almost without his realizing it, he began drawing closer and closer to the tailor-lady.

At every opportunity afforded by the hostel rules, he would seek the company of his benefactress.

“Ah! So you have come?” She would always have for him some sweet tender words of encouragement.

“Draw this flower for me child”. He would gladly perform for her, whatever little task was assigned him. It had a special value.

“Oh, that’s lovely!” she would say. He was noticing attentively her manner and style of living: The way she put herself out to please the poor folk who came seeking her help. The way one should sew up one’s life, how one could patch up any shortcomings, darn the tears, repair the frayed spots whenever they began to wear out and mend and make do.

“So, after your mother died.....?” the motherly tailor lady asked him, one day.

“My father brought home a step mother.”

“Step mothers too, can be good, child”.

But it had not taken him long to see through his step mother’s so-called affection. It was an outward affection that hid her malice. Recalling now, how even as a child he had been able to grasp that, he is filled with amazement. In his

diary he had recorded that her sort of mother-love was the kind that was carved out of stone. She had managed effectively to block every access that he had to his father; she seemed with both her hands to be covering every point of entry, so he could only catch glimpses of him through the spaces between her fingers.

"I don't want anything, just books, clothes and a little pocket-money; she grudges me even that."

"What a courageous child you are!" She said, "My Asanka has left me...Her father left us both. But I am still alive."

The husband's grave he had seen on the hillside, but, "Asanka?" he asked.

"A young man who used to hang about here, stole her away from me" she told him sadly.

The last thing he remembered about those past times was what had been recorded in his diary: On December 24th he had written, I have no regrets about leaving school, but parting from her will be painful. In future though there may be no embroidered flowers, yet she has woven my life afresh for me".

Emerging tearful from his long reverie amidst the mists of the past, he turned towards the young woman and asked "Did you feel no regret about leaving such a wonderful mother?" and he wondered at the same time, is she at all like her mother?

"Yes, I am now paying for my sin," she replied and, in her embarrassment and agitation pricked her finger with the needle, and a drop of blood appeared at the tip of her finger.

"You should wear a thimble. How much easier it is when you cover your finger with a thimble."

"I have got one here, but it is too big for my finger." She said taking one out of a drawer. "This was my mother's."

With lowered head she began to speak. From what she said, he realized that she was both like and unlike her mother.

"I struggled against mother's sternness. How could I live like that? I wished to be free of her control."

"So.....?"

"There was nothing gained, returned, in the same way I went....

"You mean the young man? Oh no, he wasn't a young man. He was a married man, from the Puttalam area."

He felt rather embarrassed at his own next question.

She, in her turn, relayed his own question back to him.

"Then why was it that such a loving son failed to come and visit the mother?"

When she asked him the reason why he had forgotten her for fourteen long years, he had nothing to say but remained dumb.

For about seven of those years he had lived the life of a vagabond, drifting aimlessly from place to place. He had felt unable during that period, to face her and her kind and tender greetings. Why was he still feeling so troubled?

"So after that you got married and then you found it impossible to come?" suggested the young woman, all unawares.

He made no response. Ripping off the pages of his memory of the last few days when he had wished to visit her, he reviewed them internally, unheard by her. He wished to

tear those pages to shreds and fling them away so no one would ever know.

That was the day his wife left him. Much of what she had said was now erased from his mind.

“We are mismatched” she had said. She was from a wealthy family.

Her magnanimity and generosity were evidenced by the fact that she had left their child with him when she went away. Having placed the child in a boarding, he had kept the memory of her affection alive by associating with hired women.

The bitch!.....The dirty bitch! Now all that remained were feelings of embarrassment. News that his divorced wife had died in England, only reached him three months after the event. Writing an extremely abusive letter to her kith and kin resident in England and, having accepted the fact of her demise, he had then abandoned his practice of using hired women.

Thereafter he had managed to wipe his mind clean and eradicate those memories for ever. Still, the efforts he had made in those days to visit the tailor-lady had ended in painful failure. If only I had come then.....But still, she would have been dead already at that time, he thought to himself.

The young seamstress was endeavouring silently to read these unvoiced thoughts. His face kept changing colour rapidly, reflecting the several shades of passing moods, like a piece of velvet cloth.

I don't think he has simply drifted here aimlessly, she thought, sensing that he had had some purpose in coming.

Why is it that I don't feel like getting up and leaving? He wondered. But I have to get back. Just as he was about to express this thought, a child came running up along the same footpath he used to come running up as a child.

"Bringing tea" she explained, with raised eyebrows, "See, I'm bringing up a little bundle of mischief!"

It was a long time since he had tasted such delicious, aromatic tea; a warm, comforting, soothing sensation spread through his entire being.

"There is no *vade* today, however" she said apologetically.

She seems to know me through and through, he thought shyly. The friendly atmosphere induced a strong feeling of intimacy. If one had something important to communicate, this was the right moment to speak out, he thought. But how should he put it? No matter, he would tell her in a roundabout way.

"Do you know 'Athena Garments'?"

"I have heard of it."

"What I mean is, instead of living here, in this lonely place, wouldn't it be a good idea to get yourself a job there? You would be able to provide this little one with a better education there....I know the boss there.... I could have a word with him."

"The boss!....I have heard about him!" she said throwing out the dregs of tea from her cup, he felt as if he was being pricked all over by a thousand sharp needles....."He treats women like bitches, I'm told."

His car was approaching along the winding road which climbed, twisting and turning up the hillside. The driver must have become alarmed at his prolonged absence and decided to come looking for him. Yet his feet felt as heavy as lead, making it impossible for him to rise..... To get up and to make his escape as he would have liked to do.

The expression on his face alarmed her. Not like a moist leaf any longer, she thought.

"Wait a moment." She said running into an inner room. "Can you remember this?" she asked.

She had a small pair of shorts in her hand. "She asked me to give this to you, if you ever returned"

He recognized the garment. Was it not a fourteen-year-long grievance, he wondered, that the dead mother was trying to express, through this torn little pair of shorts?

"No, it wasn't like that" she said. "Mother wasn't offended with you. She wasn't angry, I know. You'll find a small handkerchief too, in the pocket."

The car was moving along the road very slowly, as if it were a hearse. This, he felt, was the time to bring matters to a head. He removed the little handkerchief from the trouser-pocket. He had a sudden conviction that the embroidery on it was quite recent.

"Is this also something mother left for me?"

"No, it's from me".

"Look at me. Listen to what I have to say. How do you feel about the wearer of this old, darned blue pair of shorts?"

She looked at him in amazement. How did he have the nerve to speak like that? She had been thinking of keeping him there and teaching him to sew, if ever he turned up, but

such ideas had dissolved into thin air, a long time ago. Had he become aware of those kindly thoughts of long ago? All she could do was to hug the little boy tightly and hold him close to her.

“I would have you know, Asanka,” It was the first time he had ever addressed her by her name” I am the proprietor of ‘Athena Garments’.....yes, the boss of Athena is none other than I.”

That name could also be seen, written on the front door of the car which now drove slowly up and halted in front of them.

“Sir, I thought it would be better if I came looking for you, since you were taking so long to return” she heard the driver saying. Such evidence was not necessary. Straightaway she had been convinced that this was the man.

“Actually, I came here today, hoping to take your mother away with me. My child has no mother. No grandmother. Don’t think about me.....consider the child.....spare a thought for the child,” he said pleadingly.

“Don’t you understand?” she wept. “How have I been spending all these years here, alone? In the daytime I have been sewing, and in the evenings gentlemen having been coming here.....like you came today....stepping over the stile.....so I could mend the tears, the torn places in their lives.”

He hardly took in what she was saying. He was oblivious of everything except the small child in her warm embrace. Here he was beholding a flood of mother-love, just like her mother’s.

Translated by Piyaseeli Wijemanna

Nonachchi

Piyaseeli Wijemanne

I was at the co-operative store purchasing my weekly provisions when I heard a familiar voice call out, “Madam!” Startled, I turned round to see Jayawathie from Uda Peradeniya. “*Aney*¹ Madam, that Nonachchi has died,” said Jayawathie, holding my hand. The news quite disturbed me, diverting my attention. The sales girl turned towards another customer. Sad and disappointed, my mind raced back to the past. I had hoped that, one day, Nonachchi would come back to me. When she left me, the woman was in such good health. *Aney!* What happened?

“Last month. It was Wije who told me.” Jayawathie’s husband, Wije, worked as a lorry driver at Thalawakelle. “I meant to come and tell you. It’s not even six months since she left madam. Isn’t it so? Even that day, I heard her telling Jayakumar, that son of hers, ‘*Ukkung*², you carry on. I will be there in a few days’ but Jayakumar kept on muttering, scolding her. It was when I said ‘Nonachchi, madam wants you to go home with your son,’ that she made up her mind to leave and it was only when you gave the ID and the bank savings book that were with you, that she went to her room in

¹ An interjection, the meaning of which is versatile, depending on the context it is used in

² A pet name

a huff and started putting her few things together. She was crying throughout!" Jayawathie's words filled me with remorse and made me sadder.

"She has had no peace since the day she went. Wije had seen her working in the vegetable plots, with a child on her hip. He had seen her climb up the incline from the valley below to surface at the main road, coughing over and over, her back bent, carrying heavy gunny loads on her head. The trishaw guy has told Wije that she had died of pneumonia. Although you deposited money into her account, it was of no use to Nonachchi. Those wretches have pestered her into giving them the money."

I felt that I too had played a part in hastening Nonachchi's death. In my heart of hearts, I did not want to ask Nonachchi to leave with her son although circumstances compelled me to get Jayawathie to do so. When her son threatened Nonachchi saying, "If you don't come now, I won't be there for you even at your death bed," it stung me as a personal insult. After Nonachchi left, I felt the loss of her company much more than the loss of her services. By then, I had got so used to Nonachchi, her affection towards me, her deference and even her constant jabbering. I missed her so much that I could not collect my thoughts and get on with my work. My loneliness eased only when Saman returned from overseas, a few days later. I had talked of Nonachchi so often and with such enthusiasm that Saman too was looking forward to meeting her.

It was Wije who found Nonachchi for me. My previous housemaid, Karuna, who was with me for three years, had to leave suddenly, when her mother fell ill. At the time, Saman was overseas on a year's scholarship. Two weeks after I had asked Wije, through Jayawathie, to find me a domestic aid, Jayawathie came home with Nonachchi. As soon as I saw the

scrawny old woman, I felt disappointed. However, I consoled myself with the thought that at least, she would provide me some companionship.

“Wije said that she had four sons but that they don’t treat her well. He brought her by bus early this morning and left for Matale right away. I meant to bring her over in the morning itself but last night the wind brought down a branch from a jak tree against our house. I got together with her and cleared it up. Nonachchi does not say anything against her sons. She says she only wants to earn something and not be a burden to anyone. It seems they don’t give her work on the estate or employ her elsewhere as a labourer because she is too old. Madam, you tell her what work you want her to do. I have to collect my son from school.” Jayawathie hurried away.

Nonachchi stood there, carrying a polythene bag full of stuff, gazing innocently at me. I took her to the kitchen. The osari³ she wore was faded and the colour of the blouse did not match. Sinhalese? Tamil? Her pronunciation had a Tamil ring to it. She could not pronounce the sound ‘*ha*’. She says ‘*ari*’ instead of *hari*⁴. When I asked her how old she was, she said ‘forty five’ and handed me her identity card. Her name was Baba Nona. According to the given date of birth, she was fifty nine years old. Yet, she looked older, sixty five or more. Her address read as Line room No 8, Hollyrood Estate, Thalawakele. Line room?

“Nonachchi, Are you Tamil?”

She dismissed my question as irrelevant, with a wave of her hand. “Four sons. All married. Doing well,” was her reply

³ Sari draped in the traditional style adopted by Sinhala women who trace their origin to the central hill region of Sri Lanka.

⁴ Alright

to a question I had not asked. I showed her the kitchen, the servant's room and the servant's bathing and toilet facilities. As I described to her the duties expected of her, I became curious to find out what the salary she expected was. 'Nowadays, these estate women demand high salaries,' a comment that a friend of mine once made, came to mind. Can this frail woman work to suit the 'high salary' she expected? I thought it was best that the matter was sorted out right away. I had paid rupees three thousand to Karuna. With my monthly salary, I could not afford to pay more. With thoughts dwelling on all my monthly expenses; electricity, water and telephone bills and the cost of maintenance of the vehicle, I asked, "Nonachchi, How much do you expect as sal—" Before I could complete the sentence, she made a dismissive gesture with her hand; a gesture which could have meant 'You decide. It's not important' or 'That can be decided later', and moved away.

After Nonachchi had changed into a cloth and a blouse, I showed her where the pots and pans and the cups and saucers were and where the food items of daily usage like the rice, the flour, the sugar and the spices were stored. Although it was way too early, I also gave her instructions regarding dinner so that she could become familiar with her new surroundings at leisure without being disturbed by me from time to time.

Then I went to my room and sitting up in bed, started to read a book. Within minutes, my attention was drawn towards the kitchen from where were heard the sounds of water being splashed and the floor being scrubbed. I was overcome with curiosity not because of the sounds of the cleaning process but because I could also hear Nonachchi in conversation with someone. Has Jayawathie come back? Quietly making my way there, I watched the scene, unseen.

There was no one there but Nonachchi. She filled the bucket at the kitchen tap, poured the water on the floor and scrubbed with the energy of a young woman, talking to herself all the while. At times, her voice was raised as if in anger. I thought that she was probably scolding the previous housemaid for not keeping the kitchen clean. As it was I who used the kitchen after Karuna left, her scolding made me feel embarrassed. Let alone mopping, I did not have time to even sweep the floor. When I saw the murky colour of the water that was being pushed out into the drain, I felt mortified. Owing to the sounds of splashing and scrubbing, I could not make any sense of what she was saying. *Istoru*⁵, *Ukkung, madu*⁶, *alahana*⁷, *ullana, kallu*⁸, those villains, those rascals, were a few of the words that I heard somewhat clearly. However, since all the references were in the plural, it was obvious that she was not referring to me. I did not ask her whom she was jabbering about.

It was after dinner that I had long chats with Nonachchi. My usual practice was to watch television for about an hour, after dinner. Nonachchi too would clear the kitchen, wash and change and sit on the floor, at my feet. Though I would ask her to use the plastic chair assigned for her, Nonachchi preferred the floor. She had no understanding about television programs. During the first two days, I switched off the television and made inquiries about Nonachchi's family. She referred to her husband as *appa*⁹. His name was Nathan. "Ah! Is he Tamil?" was my thoughtless query. Though

⁵ Store

⁶ Cow or bull

⁷ Beautiful

⁸ Toddy

⁹ Father, an exclamation

important to me, to Nonachchi, it seemed to be an irrelevant question.

"You should have seen. Not like me. Very good looking. His boss at the store was very fond of him. No stealing. No cheating." was her reply.

"Was he loving and caring?"

"Of course! Used to make the women in the line rooms so jealous! *Aney!* I feel so sad, my lady. I make offerings to Mariamman kovil in his name"

"Did he die of an illness?"

"No. He was in such good health. He met with an accident when he was returning from work. We were waiting for him. Waiting and waiting. We got to know only on the following day. *Aney!* He used to give me his whole *sambalam*¹⁰ every month. He used to give me even the salary advance. He was such a good man!"

According to what Nonachchi told me from time to time, her eldest son, Jemis was a handyman who could take on almost any job such as masonry, carpentry and plumbing. His wife was Leela. They had one girl and three boys. All their children were doing well in school. The second son was Maiya. She could not remember his given name. He works in a small shop in the town whilst his wife 'Lasmi' was a tea plucker. They had two sons. The third was Ranjiya. He had an *aata*¹¹. His wife was Chandra. They lived at Chandra's place with Chandra's parents, her grandmother and her three sisters. Ranjiya had two cute little daughters. Her youngest, *Ukkung*, lived in line room eight with Nonachchi and Nathan. He worked at the tea store of the estate. He and his wife,

¹⁰ Salary

¹¹ Trishaw

Ramma, had a son and a daughter. Nonachchi tried several times to count on her fingers, the number of grandsons and granddaughters she had. Although she counted in both Sinhala and Tamil, she just could not get it right.

“Oh! Never mind, Nonachchi. In any case, you have many grandsons and granddaughters. You are very lucky. Your sons are very fond of you, aren’t they?” It was some time before she replied.

“*Appa!* All of them are so very fond of me. They don’t want me to work in houses. But I can’t be idling. It’s not good to burden my children. Not until these two hands have the strength to work,” she said laughing, holding up her two stick like arms. “My boys are smart. They can sing well. They are loved by everybody on the estate. My boys have ice boxes like ... like the one over there. Televisions, telephones, they have all that. The elder fellow has his own house. A big house. With electricity. All the boys bring me saris. Four suit cases full of new clothes ...” From what she said, I gathered that her sons were financially stable and that they and their wives loved her and cared for her. During the first two days of her arrival, I was unable to attend to any of my work as I was up till midnight, enjoying Nonachchi’s boastful tales.

On the third day, right after dinner, I busied myself in the study, attempting to finish a library book I had borrowed. It was almost an hour later that I spotted Nonachchi standing at the doorway, wide eyed and open mouthed, staring at the book shelves. Stacked on the shelf right opposite the door were the dictionaries, encyclopaedias and other such heavy weights. I stopped reading and looked at Nonachchi.

“*Appa!* God Muruga! Blessings of Mariamman! May Lord Buddha bless my lady! Jayawathie told me that our lady is doing a big job. Aren’t you a teacher?”

"Yes, I am a teacher. I teach older children. At the biggest school in the country. Those who study there do big jobs in the government."

"Oooh!" she said expressing amazement. "May the blessings of all gods be with you." So saying, she put her hands together in a gesture of obeisance and moved away. Minutes after, I heard her talking to herself in the corridor opposite my study. Surprised, I rose from my seat and peeped out. There she sat, her back against the wall, her legs stretched out, muttering to herself.

"Go to bed, Nonachchi" I called out. Startled, she looked at me.

"No, No," she said, wagging her head. "Our lady is still up with her books. I will go to bed only after our lady does."

Although I told her repeatedly that I did not mind being alone, she would not budge. As soon as I went back to my study, she started her muttering again. I was curious to know whether she would say anything about me. Hiding behind the door, I listened. She sounded different. The joy that there was when she spoke to me of her family, was absent. From the bits and pieces I picked up from her rambling monologue, I became aware of another aspect of her life.

"Jemisa, if you carry on this way, you will end up just like the one who fathered you. *Kallu!* Hooch! Muck! *Appa!* Like father, like son! *Appa* drank in front of them. *Nalla kudichchettu nalukallil vandan*¹². *Appa* would return in the evening, swaying on his feet, fully hooched. He would start to bellow - but only once he reaches home. Daily fights! But *Jemisa!* The moment the muck touches his lips, he is spewing filth! *Appa* died - hit by a lorry - walking home in pitch

¹² Would drink his fill and come back on all fours

darkness - shoved into a drain like a dog! We got to know only on the day after. But Jemisa will die of a beating! Without paying back the loan he took from Raju - walking past Raju's house, insulting him! Swearing! Raju told me that he feels so shy - has two grown daughters in the house - Tells me to get Jemisa to change his ways! Always fighting! His devilish brats are even worse! *Pisasuhal!*¹³ *Pisasuhal!* The gentlemen from the school come home. Send them to school, they say. Useless! His woman is like a she-devil." These were some of the things I gathered from her harangue. It was with some difficulty that I pieced together, the Tamil words she uttered in between. Perhaps, what Nonachchi tells me of her children is how she wants it to be. Do her lone ramblings show how it really is? Or is it how it appears to be to her? Does she talk to herself to lighten her burden?

Nonachchi made a habit of keeping vigil till I had finished all my work in the study and got to bed. I too was happy have her within earshot whilst I worked. Sometimes she spoke to herself in low tones. From the smatterings that I heard from time to time, I gathered that her second son, Maiya, had left his wife and children and was living with another woman. His wife Lasmi has asthma. She was a tea plucker and she wheezes as she works on the estate. 'That woman sleeps with the *kanakupillai!*¹⁴ *Pundi!*¹⁵, *Ketta pombulai!*¹⁶' The little ones filled their tummies with *rotis* and such like begged off other people's kitchens. Nonachchi would buy them buns with her earnings from selling vegetables. If she took them some rice from home, *Ukkung's* woman would taunt her. Lasmi wants Nonachchi to live with

¹³ Devils

¹⁴ Field supervisor of a tea plantation

¹⁵ Whore

¹⁶ Woman of bad morals, prostitute

them and mind her children. Nonachchi had no strength to be chasing behind them. 'Could have gone there - now and then - But how to? Not with that *kanakupillai* sneaking in!' Ranjiya was the only one who was at all concerned about Nonachchi but if she gets to know that Ranjiya has given anything at all to Nonachchi, 'Chandara will butcher him.' 'Chandara's whole herd lives off Ranjiya's earnings from the 'aata'. None of this wretched lot brings Nonachchi any relief. It was *Ukkung's* woman who stole her *thalla*¹⁷. 'She is forever swallowing decoctions to abort babies. Once, she almost died.' It was Nonachchi who took her to hospital. 'Not an ounce of gratitude! Dressing up and messing up with powder and paint from morning till night.' She is always pestering *Ukkung* for money. None of them had ever bought Nonachchi even a single piece of clothing.

Every night, Nonachchi would wash herself and her day-time clothes and change into a clean cloth and blouse. She had just three chintz cloths and two blouses. Feeling sorry for her, I got her several new chintz cloths and blouses to match. I also gave her two of my new saris.

"Appa! What is this? I have not worked for you for very long, my lady....." She attempted to say more but failed. With quivering lips and tear filled eyes she swallowed her words and crept into her den. Whenever I went out, all she would ask for herself were the items for a chew of betel. She enjoyed a chew of betel after preparing lunch and also, after every meal. She had a special place in our back yard, under the Anoda tree where she would relax with her chew. A large rock served as a seat and she would pound the arecanut into pieces on a smaller stone in front of her seat. She would

¹⁷ The gold necklace that the groom ties around the neck of the bride during a Hindu wedding ceremony

occasionally throw a word or two at Blackie in the kennel nearby. When she spoke of Blackie she never used the term 'dog'. She would either call her 'Kalu' or the 'Black One'. She speaks to Perumal in Tamil. Perumal was my gardener who came once a week. After lunch, Perumal and Nonachchi would spend about an hour chewing betel and chatting. However, what irritated Nonachchi about Perumal was that he always failed to clean the gardening tools and put them back in their place, before he left.

I believed, that Nonachchi held me in high regard because I was her employer, and also because I did a 'big job'. Her agitated behaviour on the day I hurt my toe whilst gardening made me realize that she also felt affectionate towards me. I was in the garden, digging a hole for a flowering plant, when the hoe struck my big toe. Seeing the blood oozing from the cut, she began to shout excitedly, beating her head with both hands, scolding the garden hoe and throwing it away to a distance. "*Appa! God Muruga! Goddess Mariamman!*" she called out to the deities. "Perumal will do those things," she said. "Never again will my lady do this kind of work." She fetched water and washed the wound. Squeezing through the fence into the neighbouring garden, she brought the tender leaves from a coffee plant and crushing them, rubbed it on the cut. Holding my hand, she helped me make my way back to the house. Then she put some coffee powder over the wound and wrapped a strip of cloth around, covering the cut wound. Being close to the toe nail, the cut was very painful but I did not feel helpless as I usually did whenever I hurt myself whilst alone. From that day onwards, for some unexplainable reason, I willingly gave myself over to Nonachchi's rule.

"You are never to take a 'head bath' in the evenings!"

"You are not to go out, my lady. It's dewy out there"

“Although your friends brought pineapples, you are not to eat them. You will get a rash”

The protection she gave, the attention, the affection she showered on me must have filled an inner need. I, a well educated woman with youthful vigour was submitting myself to the dictates of this aged, illiterate, feeble woman. Once, during one of her lone ramblings, I heard Nonachchi say, “If only I had a girl, she would have done the way I told her to - a girl like our lady!”

About six months after Nonachchi’s arrival, I met Wije at Peradeniya. “Madam,” he said. “Jemis and Jayakumar keep asking about their mother. They want to come and see her. It’s only now that they have realized her value. I told them that she is doing very well with madam. They only want her back to mind their children and to work in their vegetable plots. It is very difficult to live with those daughters-in-law. By evening, Jayakumar and his wife are both dead drunk and they keep fighting. Jemis too is ‘doped’ every evening. I said that madam’s husband would be returning soon and that their mother would come home then.”

The fear that I would lose Nonachchi crept into my mind. I did not tell her what Wije told me. I did not even tell her that I met Wije. I took Nonachchi to the temple at Getambe. She prayed aloud for a long time. Whilst she was praying at the statues of Lord Buddha and God Vishnu, I hovered around, and listened. I could not follow all that she said but from what I did understand, I gathered that all she asked for in her prayers were blessings for her children and her grandchildren; for them, she asked for wealth and luxuries befitting royalty. In addition to the names of her immediate family members with which I was familiar by then, several other modern trendy names were also mentioned in her prayers. She must have been a regular

visitor at the kovil or temple in her village for she was reciting her prayers, as if by heart. She did so unflinching, without pausing and with no prompting. The devotees who preferred to worship in silence, moved away, eyeing Nonachchi angrily.

"I prayed that god would bring more and more blessings into my lady's life," she said, on the way back home. "I offered merit to my lady. The gods will look after my lady." I never questioned Nonachchi about the things I learnt by eavesdropping on her mumbled monologues.

It soon became clear that the gods were not looking after me for when I returned from work one afternoon, I found Jayawathie seated on the bench in the kitchen along with a young man I had not met before. On seeing me, the young man rose from his seat and looked away shyly. Nonachchi was laying the table.

"This is Jayakumar, Nonachchi's youngest son." Jayawathie introduced the youth to me. "He has come to see his mother."

"Do sit down, Jayakumar" I said and walked towards my room. Jayawathie followed me. "Came with Wije this morning. Had been pestering Wije so much that he had to bring him. He wants to take Nonachchi back but she does not want to go. They were arguing in Tamil. Madam, Wije says that these sons of hers had a very bad upbringing because the father was a drunkard from their childhood. Ranjith, the fellow with the trishaw is the only one who cares about the mother. His wife seems to be a Tamil. He lives with her family and maintains that whole clan. Jayakumar's wife is pregnant again. What Nonachchi says is that there is no need for anyone to come for her and that she can go back home on her own."

When Jayakumar was about to leave, I gave him five hundred rupees and a t-shirt. What had he said? What was Nonachchi's response? Why is she reluctant to go home? I was so curious to know but I did not ask Nonachchi anything. Nonachchi was not her usual active, light-hearted self. It appeared as if she had forgotten to water the plants. She sat under the Anoda tree, chewing her betel, gazing vacantly into the distance. It was when I unrolled the garden hose that she sprang into action.

Her sons continued to send word to Nonachchi, asking her to come home. Once, when I was away from home, Wije had delivered the message to Nonachchi directly.

"Madam, send Nonachchi home. It is a real problem for me. Jemis saw me parking the lorry and having a cup of tea at the kiosk. He followed me in. He said various things. He found fault even with me. He says that she should not slave for outsiders but come home," said the note that Wije had left for me on a scrap of paper.

"Nonachchi, would you like to go home, see your sons and come back?" I asked her, whilst we were watching television that night. I chose that particular time to pop this question for I had seen that while at work that evening, she was talking to herself in an unusually agitated manner. "When our lady's master comes back, I will go. Please give the salary to my hand. The boys must be needing money," she replied after some time. "I mean... I mean ... I... I would like to give them something from my earnings too," she hastened to add. Four days after Wije's note, Jayawathie and Jayakumar came to my work place.

"*Aney!* Madam, this is a real bother. He has come to take the mother home. If she does not come with him today, he says he will not care for her even if she is dying. Jayakumar's

wife is ill. She had been pregnant and is bleeding now. He says that she is in hospital. Waiting for surgery. The other two children are also quite small. We will send her home, madam. She is sure to come back to you," said Jayawathie, in a low voice.

I made both of them get into the car and then drove home. As usual, Nonachchi ran up and opened the gate smiling broadly. As soon as she saw Jayakumar, her expression changed to one of surprise and then her face clouded over with sadness. She did not collect the parcels from the car as she usually did but hurried back into the kitchen. I went to my room to change allowing the mother and son to talk at leisure. Jayawathie sat in the corridor outside my room.

After resting for a while, I went towards the kitchen followed by Jayawathie. Nonachchi stood leaning on the door frame, staring out into the garden. On seeing me, Jayakumar rose from his seat and said, "Lady, tell my mother to come with me. My wife is in hospital. The little one has fever. When my wife gets better, my mother will come back." I just could not bring myself to ask Nonachchi to leave. With a nod of my head, I indicated to Jayawathie that she should do so.

"Nonachchi, This is what madam says. Go home with your son today and come back when the troubles are over"

Nonachchi turned and looked straight at me. I crept into my room. I took Nonachchi's identity card, her bank savings record book and three thousand rupees into my hand.

"The girl who worked for madam earlier, is coming back," I heard Jayawathie say. That was a lie and I did not like it. Nonachchi would have misunderstood. Unable to say a word, either to console her or to correct the false impression Jayawathie's words would have caused, I stood there in

silence, holding out my hand with her money, her identity card and her savings book. Casting a brief glance at them, she hurried into her den. Jayawathie handed them over to the son, saying, "This is this month's salary. The rest is in her bank account. Nonachchi can place her thumb print as signature and withdraw money from her account." As Nonachchi was taking too long with her preparations to leave, Jayawathie went in to help her. I could hear the sound of Nonachchi sobbing as she packed.

"Jayakumar had his lunch. Nonachchi, you too should have yours. We don't know at what time the bus would come ... madam was unable to put this month's salary into your bank account. It was given to your son. You know that madam's master is due soon. Till then, I will come and help her ... whenever I can ... Nonachchi, Where are you running to with that sheet and pillowcase? To wash them? I will wash those before I leave. It's late. Nonachchi, hurry up."

I continued to hear only Jayawathie's voice. Nonachchi's silence made me feel even sadder. Jayawathie came out of the room and handed the bag to Jayakumar. Nonachchi walked up to me, crying. She bent low as if to fall at my feet and worship but I helped her up and hugged her close. Perhaps it was this spontaneous outburst of affection which surpassed the employer-employee relationship that made Jayawathie and Jayakumar gaze at us in amazement.

Translated by Malini Epa

That Deep Silence

Punyakanthe Wijenaike

The sun smiles at me from outside the closed window. Ratna closed it at dawn, before the workmen came to demolish the remaining portions of my house. If the window had been left open as in the old days, the gentle rays of the morning sun would have warmed my old, shivering, withered body. Nature does not abandon a body until the breath leaves it. Man is different.....

I am living in just a quarter of what was once my home: my bedroom, my kitchen and my toilet. The rest of the house is gone.

We had not been rich people, my husband and I. Just hardworking. We had saved money and bought this piece of land at a very reasonable price, in 1952. We had been proud to own a quarter of grassland in Kotte which had a history. We had built a small, but comfortable single-storeyed house right in the middle of the block of land. Two bedrooms, one for ourselves and one for our daughter, Rushika. We had left open space right around our house so that we would get the breezes blowing in from the Diyavanna Oya¹. We could see the trees around us and the birds that nested in them. Moreover we had grass growing right around us, keeping our

¹ Rivulet

feet cool. A single-storeyed house meant that we would not need to climb stairs when we grew older and our knees became feeble.

Ratna, my maid, tells me that my dream has gone, demolished now, to the last brick, except for this bedroom which will be the last to go. In its place, a foundation has already been laid for a four-storeyed apartment block which will cover the whole land area, leaving only a small courtyard just enough for a tiny patch of grass and a birdbath. But how are birds going to exist, without trees?

"Land is precious in this area, Madam", Ratna tells me. "You were very lucky to have got forty perches at such a low price in 1952. Now that the Parliament is situated here, by the Diyavanna Oya, land has become really precious!"

Rushika, my daughter, comes in. She wears a very bright smile on her face as if to replace the warmth of the sun. This house I had gifted to her, as my only child, expecting her to carefully preserve it as it was and look after me in my old age. I had foolishly gifted it at once, without retaining the life-interest for myself.

"Amma, we will be moving you today, into the Home for the Aged. Aunty Sushila says you will be very happy there, in the company of other people of your age. Imagine, Amma, you living all alone in this house with Ratna. How are you going to manage when she goes on leave? In that Home you will have everything you need to be comfortable. There are trained nurses there to look after you, if you fall ill.

There will be a matron to see to your needs. Today they will be breaking down this last room, the kitchen and the toilet. We would like you to be spared having to breathe in the dust from the demolishing."

"I want to die with my house!" I spoke suddenly, "I want to die where your father died! Why should I be moved into a Home for the Aged to die?"

"Amma, Amma, what is this you are saying? You are not going to die! You are just going to move into a comfortable home much bigger than this house!"

I looked again out of my window. Each time I look at my ruined garden my heart breaks. My flowering bushes have been trampled down and smothered by cement dust from the housebreaking and the little brick pathway that her father built is now no more. The bench on which he and I used to sit and watch small Rushika rolling about on the green grass, is no more. The pond with the fish is gone!

"Madam, you could grow flowers in pots. Surely there will be sufficient space for pots in the new Home!" Ratna said.

Rushika was busy packing the family portraits into a cardboard box. Pictures of our house and garden and the life of my husband and our family treasured throughout the years. The family was what I had lived for, not isolation in material comfort. It was love, warmth and caring, each one looking out for the other, sharing meals, sharing life. The foundation of life was the family and the house and now it was breaking up to be transformed into high rises and apartments. My husband in one photograph, smiles reassuringly at me. He was a quiet person, but a man of deep strength and understanding. Couldn't he step out of that picture and speak to our daughter on my behalf? But he waits in deep silence as he is packed away into the box...Aunty Maisie and Uncle Willie my sister-in-law and her husband, please speak to her, tell her of the agony I am in, having to give up this , the last room of our once happy home. But Aunty Maisie and Uncle Willie only smile helplessly in their

frames. Am I dying then? Am I going into that cardboard box along with them?

My daughter and Ratna seize the handles of my chair firmly and wheel me out of my door. I am wheeled out of my room for the last time. I pass my ruined garden and the grass that is no longer green. I am pushed into her car like a zombie who is dead.

Ratna climbs into the front seat beside my daughter. Once I have been delivered like a parcel of old bones to the Matron at the Home for the Aged, Ratna will return to her village with a handsome financial bonus paid her by my only daughter.

Soon we reach the Home. I am wheeled into it by my daughter, with Ratna carrying my bags.

Ratna tries to feed me but I cannot eat. I keep seeing the demolition squad moving in on the remnants of what once was my home.

Around me I see lots of old women watching me in silent sympathy as my daughter wheels me into a large, comfortable room with a wide bed and a single window opening out onto a cement courtyard without any grass. My daughter sits on my new bed. She strokes the few white hairs remaining on my head. "You will very soon feel quite at home here, Amma" she says reassuringly. I wanted my daughter to touch me, to hold me and to take me back into her own home which she shared with her husband and my grandchildren. I needed to feel the love, warmth and caring of my own family surrounding me.

"I will hang all the old photographs round the walls of this room", said my daughter. "Soon you will begin to feel if as your own home. All those old ladies will become your good

friends and you will never feel lonely again. You wait and see!"

I can hear Ratna's voice laughing and joking, perhaps having a cup of tea with the Matron who will soon be taking charge of my life.

Suddenly my daughter put her arms round me and hugged me. She gave me the grapes, the oranges and the apples she had brought with her. I wanted to ask her if she would be coming to see me often. I wanted to stroke her head the way I used to when she was a little child and crying in distress. But I did not. A deep silence held me in its grip.

A silence which had descended on me when she first began breaking down my home to build a condominium which could be rented out so she could make money. When she failed to invite me to share her home and be part of the family as a mother and grandmother, that deep silence had held me in its grip. It would have to continue to hold me and sustain me through my new, lonely life ahead.

Editors

Bangladesh

Syed Manzoor-ul ISLAM

Syed Manzoorul Islam is Professor of English at the University of Dhaka, and an award winning fiction writer. He is also an art critic and has curated Bangladesh art exhibitions in UK, India and Iran. He has been a Fulbright Scholar and spent a semester teaching at the University of Southern Mississippi at Hattiesburg, USA in 1989. Dr. Islam's areas of special interest include Shakespeare, Modern Poetry and Fiction, literary Theory, Postmodernism and Post-Colonialism and Translatology. He is a noted column writer and a contributor to leading Bangla dailies (*Prothom Alam*, *Somokal*) and writes on political and social Issues. He is also an occasional political analyst for the BSC. Dr. Islam was a member of the jury of the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1989 (Eurasia Region) and is a jury for the 2008 Asian Art Biennale in Dhaka.

Bhutan

Gengop KARCHUNG

Gengop Karchung is a researcher at Research & Media Division of National Library & Archives, Department of Culture in Bhutan. He has already authored a number of research articles published in and outside Bhutan on aspects of culture, including the following: Diminishing Cultures of Bhutan: Costume of Merak Community; Yak Cham: The Traditional Cultural Expression of Merak Community; and Dranyen: Bhutanese Traditional Musical Instrument. He is the author of the book *From Yak-herding to Enlightenment* published in June 2013 by National Library & Archives of Bhutan. The author is holder of a BA (Hons.) degree from

Sherubtse College and an MA from Rangsit University, Thailand.

India

E.V. RAMAKRISHNAN

E.V. Ramakrishnan is a Professor of Comparative Literature and Dean of the School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Central University of Gujarat, Gandhinagar. His areas of specialization are Comparative Literature, Translation Studies and Culture Studies. As a bilingual writer he has published poetry and criticism in Malayalam and English. He has also translated extensively from Indian languages into English, mostly poetry. Among his works in Malayalam are *Aksharavum Adhunikatayum* (1994) *Vakkile Samootham* (1997) and *Desheeyatakalum Sahityavum*. In English his prominent works are *Making It New: Modernism in Malayalam, Marathi and Hindi Poetry* (1995), *Narrating India: the Novel in Search of the Nation* (edited, 2000), *Tree of Tongues: An Anthology of Indian Poetry* (edited, 1999), *Terms of Seeing: New and Collected Poems* (2006) and *Locating Indian Literature: Texts, Traditions and Translations* (2011). He is a recipient of the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for Literary Criticism (1995), K.K. Birla Foundation Fellowship for Comparative Literature (1997-1999), Indian Institute of Advanced Study Fellowship (1992-3), Fulbright Fellowship (2001) and Faculty Enrichment Award of Canadian Government (2012). He has been part of an Indian delegation of writers to Moscow in 2010.

Nepal

Govinda Raj BHATTARAI

Govinda Raj Bhattarai is the first Nepali scholar to earn Ph D degree (in 1996) from the University of Hyderabad. He has

more than three decades of teaching (as well as administrative) experience with Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu Nepal where is serving as Professor of English today. Dr Bhattarai is primarily a creative writer. To his credit there are four novels and five anthologies of travel essays written originally in Nepali. Of the four novels, two namely, *Muglan* (the story of Nepali people's plight in Bhutan during the 1970s) and *Sukaratko Dayaree* (the depiction of the horror, plight, disappearance and death of people during the conflict and war of the previous decade in Nepal) are translated into English as *Muglan* (by Lekhnath Sharma Pathak) and *Socrates' Footsteps* by Bal Ram Asdhikari). Besides, an anthology of English essays titled *Pilgrimages* is due to appear. He is a famed Translation Studies scholar, and translator in Nepal. There are a couple of pioneering works in Nepali literature that Dr Bhattarai has rendered first time into English. They include *Stories of Conflict and War*, *Selected Nepali Essays*, *Selected Nepali Short Stories*, *Contemporary Nepali Poems*, etc. Apart from these, he has edited more than a dozen works in translation.

Pakistan

Rashid HAMEED

Rashid Hameed obtained his Ph.D. in Iqbal Studies from Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad. A prolific writer in literature and history, he has authored a number of books which include; *Mukalama Numa* (56 Interviews of renowned Scholars, Poets, Fiction Writers, Critics etc.) (1999), *Zinda Rood: Tahqeeqi Aur Tanqeedi Mutalaa* (2007), *Javedan Iqbal* (2007), *Iqbal ka Tasawwur-e Tareekh* [Iqbal's Concept of History] (2008), *Faiz Banam Iftikhar Arif* [38 Published Letters of Faiz Ahmad Faiz] (2010), and *Guftagu Numa* (55 Interviews of renowned Scholars, Poets, Fiction Writers, Critics etc.) (2011). He had

been the Director/ Chief Editor and the Director General (acting) at the Pakistan Academy of Letters, Ministry of Education, Islamabad and Lecturer in History, Punjab Government College. Some of his other publications are: *Justice Dr. Javed Iqbal: Shakhshiyat Aur Fun, Harf-e Tanha* (Literary Columns published in *Daily Nawa-i Waqt*), *Hurmat-e Lafz* (Published articles relating to History, Culture and Literature), and Urdu Translation of *Thoughts on Pakistan* by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. He was awarded the prestigious National Presidential Iqbal Award by the Government of Pakistan in 2008. Dr. Hameed is currently the Deputy Secretary of National Language Authority, Ministry of National Heritage and Integration, Government of Pakistan.

Sri Lanka

Piyaseeli WIJEMANNE

Piyaseeli Wijemanne is a well-known creative writer of short stories in Sinhala. Her published works include eight collections of short stories, two novels for young people, eight stories for children, one novel, one analytical study, one translation and over forty academic papers. She has considerable experience in editorial work, having been on the University Editorial Board for Sinhala Publications. She has been the recipient of the State Literary Award for Short Story Writing on four occasions, in 1987, in 1991, in 1996 and in 2012; she also received the State Literary Award for a Children's Story in 1996. Piyaseeli Wijemanne was attached to the Peradeniya University as a Senior Professor of Sinhala until she retired in March 2007, but continues to serve as a Visiting Lecturer. Her short story included in this anthology has been translated from Sinhala by Malini Epa.

Contributors

Bhutan

Pema CHOIDAR

Pema Choidar is a keen reader and loves writing short stories for fun. He used to write and publish several short stories and poems in the *Kuensel* (Bhutan national newspaper) in the early 2000s. At present, he works as a teacher and vice principal in the secondary schools of Bhutan and he teaches English and Geography. The author is a holder of a B.Ed (English & Geography) from the National Institute of Education, Samtse and a Post Graduate Diploma in English from Sherubtse College, Bhutan. He is currently undergoing M.Ed (Educational Management) at Mahidol University, Thailand.

Namgyal TSHERING

Namgyal Tshering is the Vice Principal at Phuntsholing Middle Secondary School in Chukha, Bhutan. He started his career as a teacher in 2002 and taught biology and chemistry. His interest in writing short stories and poems began from early years when he was in the primary school. He has contributed several articles to *Kuensel*, the National Newspaper of Bhutan and to the www.writersofbhutan.com website in the last five years. He has Master's Degree in Management from Mahidol University, Bangkok, Thailand.

Sherub TENZIN

Sherub Tenzin is a college student at Royal Thimphu College in Thimphu, Bhutan. He is pursuing his education in Bachelor's of Commerce.

India

Kapil Krishna THAKUR

Kapil Krishna Thakur is a popular novelist, poet and writer of stories. His novel, *Ujantalar Upakatha* was awarded the Adwaita Malla-Barman Award of the Government of Tripura. He has been an active member of the Dalit Literary Movement. The short story in this volume has been translated from Bengali by Angshuman Kar.

Harish MANGALAM

Harish Mangalam is a leading writer of fiction and poetry in Gujarati. He is a pioneer of the Dalit Literary Movement in Gujarati. He was a civil servant till he retired from service recently. He has won several awards for his works. His short story included in this anthology has been translated from Gujarati by Rupalee Burke.

Omprakash VALMIKI

A prominent Hindi writer and founder of Dalit literary movement in Hindi, Om Prakash Valmiki has published four collections of short stories, five collections of poems and an autobiography, *Jhootan* which has become a landmark in Hindi literature. He has also published critical articles on Dalit literature. He passed away in 2013. His short story included in this anthology has been translated from Hindi by Naresh Kumar Jain.

L.C. SUMITHRA

L.C. Sumithra is a contemporary Kannada short story writer. Among her well-known works is *Gubbihallada Sakshiyalli* (short stories) besides several essays. She teaches in a college at Teerthahalli in Karnataka state. Her short story *U Cut* included in this anthology has been translated from Kannada by Sushumna Kannan.

Contributors

Jose LOURENCO

Jose Lourenco has published short fiction in Konkani and English. He also translates from Konkani into English. He lives in Goa. His short story *Stopping at Nothing* has been translated by him from Konkani.

K.R. MEERA

K.R. Meera is a well-known novelist and short story writer in Malayalam. She won the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for her collection of short stories, *Ave Maria* in 2009. Her latest novel, *Aarachar* (The Undertaker, 2013) has won wide critical acclaim. Her short story included in this anthology has been translated from Malayalam by J. Devika.

Rajanikanta MOHANTY

Rajanikanta Mohanty is a short story writer, novelist, playwright and critic in Oriya. He has published over ten volumes of short stories, four novellas, and several poems in Oriya. He is the recipient of Odisha Sahitya Akademi Award, Visuv Jhankar Award, Kadambini Story Award, Chandacharan Srijan Samman etc. His short story included in this anthology has been translated from Oriya by Brajmohan Mishra.

Veena VERMA

Brought up in Punjab, Veena Verma has been living in England since the 1980s. She is considered a major woman writer of Punjabi diaspora. Her stories depict the plight of women who migrate to the West. She has published three collections of short stories and one collection of poems. She was awarded the Shromani Sahitkar Purskar of 2010. Her short story included in this anthology has been translated from Punjabi by Hartej Kaur.

Kolakaluri INOCH

Kolakaluri Enoch is a reputed novelist, short story writer and poet of Telugu. He began writing in the 1960s and is considered a prominent author of modern Telugu literature. He has published over 300 short stories in ten volumes, 9 novels, 3 compilations of novellas, 6 plays, 11 volumes of poems and several volumes of critical works and translations. He retired from academic life as Vice- Chancellor, Shri Venkateshwara University. His short story included in this anthology has been translated from Telugu by Alladi Uma and S.N.Sridhar.

Nepal

Bishweshwar Prasad KOIRALA

Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala is one of greatest writers and a trend setter in Nepali literature. He introduced for the first time psychoanalytical techniques of exploring human psyche through writings. He was influenced by Freud, Yung, Adler and Havelock. But his first stage of writing was shaped by great Indian masters like Premchand. So he began in Hindi and wrote first modern short stories. His Doshi Chasma (collection of short stories) have been translated into English by Keshar Lall, his *Sumnima* has been translated by Prof. Taranath Sharma, and his *Modiaain* by Prof Jaya Raj Ascharya. In the same way *Hitlar Ra Yahudi* has been translated by an octogenarian scholar/ writer Nagendra Sharma and is awaiting publication which will also mark the the writer's birth centenary.

Sanat REGMI

Sanat Regmi has been writing short stories for about four decades. To his credit his anthologies include: *Matritwako Chitkar* (Cry of Motherhood 1967), *Chandra Jyotsna Ra Ka1o Badal* (The Moon Beam and the Dark Cloud 1968), *Dinanta*

(End of the Day 1978), *Banda Kothaharuko Shahar* (The City of Closed Rooms 1988), *Lachhmaniyako Gauna* (Lachhmaniya's Send Off 1994), *Samaya Satya* (Time and Truth 1997). *Sanat Regmika Katha* (Sanat Regmi's Short Stories 2005). Mostly he writes by focusing human life and social contexts. In his opinion life is complex, life is meaningless, and therefore it is compelled to struggle. Economic depravity, social evils, degradation of human values, etc. have forced men towards devaluation. His identity lies in getting the contemporary spirit of the age expressed. All the more he gives local colors to the circumstantial reality. Currently he is the Member Secretary of the Nepal Academy.

Bhaupanthi

Bhaupanthi is a renowned fiction writer. He has achieved mastery of art over characterization and presents the story in slightly satirical tone. He sometimes goes for experimentation with style. To his credit there are some well acclaimed collections of short stories namely *Euta Aakarko Barema* (About a Shape), *Sambandha* (Relations), *Sattachyoot Ra Aru Kathaharoo* (Deposed and Other Stories), *Isawr Pani Sutchha Nadi Pani Nidhaaucha* (Even the God Takes Rest and the River Also Sleeps) etc. Recently a new novel of Bhaupanthi has been published namely *Paatraheen* (Devoid of Characters) which wonderfully portrays the socio-political farce which represents circumstances that is prevalent in Nepal. Bhaupanthi's fictional works reveal the hardships and suffering that humble Nepalese mass is undergoing—the oppression, terror, sycophancy and corruption during these decades. He satirizes degraded value system and man's helpless condition worsening at present.

Sirjana SHARMA

Sirjana Sharma was born in Kathmandu. She has earned a Master's degree in Sociology from Tribhuvan University and

has made a significant contribution in the field of social service. It has been a decade since she entered the field of writing short story. Her first story titled *Suryodaya* was published in 1988. Her poems are collected in the anthology titled *Udne Junkiri* while her fifteen short stories are collected in the anthology *Antyahin Pahiraharu* (2005). Sirjana writes stories in a vivid style. She presents in an exquisite and artistic craftsmanship a shocking reality of gender discrimination. Her short stories revolve around the subject matter of illiteracy, poverty, women's plight and their exploitation in a male dominated society and destitution rampant in the society. She was awarded with the prestigious prize *Mainali Katha Puraskar* in 2001 for her achievement of excellence in writing short stories. Her style of presenting the story, the psychological journey of the character and its presentation is appealing. She has developed her own original craftsmanship of writing. Present story is the mental picture of a security personnel deployed during insurgency.

Illya BHATTARAI

Illya Bhattarai was born in Kathmandu. After earning a Graduate degree from Thribhuvan University, she took up teaching. Though she began publishing her literary works (mainly short stories) since the year 1986, she has made tremendous progress in the last two decades. During this period, she has published her travelogue titled *Laphabarako Waripari* (2005) and three anthologies of stories. They are—*Man Manai Ta Ho, Ani...* and in these anthologies, particularly in *Ani...* some of her best stories are collected. Her recent work is *Nishabda Prashnaharu*, a collection of 16 short stories. Illya has written some short stories in an innovative style. They are the sketches of diaspora and the honest expression of what she has experienced in her society. She enters the subtle layers of the society and explores the separate worlds of males and females. There is also a deep rooted passion and

Contributors

a search for novelty. She is a successful story writer. Two of her masterpieces are contained in *Beyond the Frontiers: Women's Stories from Nepal* (2006). These are 'The Pet' and 'The Price of Life'

Pakistan

Mirza Hamid BAIG

Mirza Hamid Baig has published several collections of Urdu and Punjabi short stories. His research and work on criticism have appeared in more than one dozen volumes. His short story included in this anthology has been translated from Urdu by C M. Naim.

Asif FARRUKKHI

Asif Farrukkhi is a fiction writer, critic and translator and has published six collections of short stories in addition to his translations and essays on varied themes of literature. He is also Guest Editor of Pakistani Literature. He is a medical doctor by profession. His short story included in this anthology is a translation from Urdu by him.

Zaheda HINA

Zaheda Hina is a well-known fiction writer and writes both short stories and novels. Of her collections are *Qaidi sans leta hai* and *Rah men ajal hai*. She also writes social and cultural columns for reputable newspapers. Her short story included in this anthology has been translated from Urdu by Sainiya K. Mumtaz.

Amar JALEEL

Amar Jaleel has worked with the stage, television, film and print media. He has published twelve collections of short stories. He writes both in Sindhi and Urdu. His short story included in this anthology is a translation from Sindhi by him.

Abdullah Jan JAMALDINI

Abdullah Jan Jamaldini is a noted Baluchi scholar and writer and is Head of the Department of Pakistan Studies at Baluchistan University. He has written extensively on literary criticism and is at present editing *A Short History of Baluchi Language* in Urdu. His short story included in this anthology is a translation from Baluchi by him.

Dur Muhammad KASI

Dur Muhammad Kasi has been associated with Pakistan Television. He writes short stories in Pushto. His short story included in this anthology has been translated from Pushto by Dr. Sizer Zaman Taizi.

Masud MUFTI

Masud Mufti retired as a senior civil servant. He is a short story writer and novelist and has published six books so far. His short story included in this anthology has been translated from Urdu by Neelam Hussain.

Afzal Ahsan RANDHAWA

Afzal Ahsan Randhawa writes fiction and poetry in Punjabi and has several collections to his credit. His short story included in this anthology is a translation from Punjabi by him.

Suhayl SAADI

Suhayl Saadi is a novelist, short story writer and poet. He runs a creative writing forum in Glasgow and has published a novel and a collection of short stories.

Enver SAJJAD

Enver Sajjad is one of those writers who introduced the 'new short story' in Urdu Literature. He is also a playwright and has several collections to his credit. His short story included in this anthology has been translated from Urdu by Linda Wentink.

Sri Lanka

Liyanage AMARAKEERTHI

Liyanage Amarakeerthi is a versatile writer of fiction, a poet, a translator and a literary critic. He has published three novels, six collections of short stories, one volume of poetry, two children's stories, seven translations and three analytical works. He won the State Literary Award for a short story in 2000. He won the prestigious *Swarna Pusthaka* Award for a Novel in 2009. He holds a PhD degree from the University of Wisconsin in the U.S.A., and is at present a Senior Lecturer attached to the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. His short story included in this anthology has been translated from Sinhala by Ranjini Obeyesekere.

Ranjit DHARMAKIRTI

Ranjit Dharmakirti is well-known as a writer of novels, short stories and plays in Sinhala, besides being a translator and a literary critic. His publications in Sinhala include five novels, five collections of short stories, three novels for young people and seven children's stories; he is also the author of four analytical works on literature, as well as being the translator into English, three of his own Sinhala books. Thrice, in 1987, 1991 and again in 2009, Ranjit Dharmakirti was the winner of the State Literary Award for Novels for Young People; he was the recipient of the State Literary Award for a play in 1974, in 1984 for his short story collection *Pradeepagaraya Yata* and again in 1997 for a work of criticism. He has served as a Staff Officer of the Central Bank and as the Director General of Tower Hall Theater Foundation. His short story included in this anthology has been translated by him from Sinhala.

Jayatilaka KAMMALLAWEERA

Jayatilaka Kammallaweera is the author of six novels, nine collections of short stories, three novels for young people, three children's stories and one translation. He has won the

State Literary Award for short story writing, four times, in 1985, 1992, 1994 and in 2003; he won a State Literary again in 2012 for his novel *Chumbana Kanda*. His short story included in this anthology has been translated from Sinhala by A. T. Dharmapriya.

Rathidevi KANDASAMY

Rathidevi Kandasamy (pen name - Thamaraichchelvi) is a prolific writer of novels and short stories. Her publications include six novels, two novellas and over two hundred short stories. She is also an artist whose work has been published in Sri Lankan and Indian magazines. Her short story included in this anthology is taken from the anthology *Oru Malaikkaala Iravu* published in 1998 and has been translated from Tamil by S. Sivasegaram.

Sita KULATUNGA

Sita Kulatunga is well-known as a creative writer of novels, short stories and poems in Sinhala and English, and also as the translator of novels and other works by herself as well as by other writers, from one language to the other, besides two analytical works. Her publications include two novels, two collections of short stories, one in Sinhala and one in English, one volume of poetry and one supplementary reader. She has been awarded several prestigious prizes and commendations, including a State Literary Award in 1963 for her novel *Dari - The Third Wife*.

Karuna PERERA

Karuna Perera has published five novels, seven collections of short stories, five stories for children and three books on the subject of social injustice and discrimination against women. In 1971, she was awarded the State Literary Award for a short story which was her very first attempt at creative writing. Karuna Perera was the first Sri Lankan writer to portray with deep sympathy, the lives of urban slum dwellers in the city of

Colombo. She is a Women's Rights Activist as well as an experienced journalist who has served as Sub-Editor and later Editor of two of the newspapers owned by Vijaya Newspapers Ltd. Her short story included in this anthology has been translated from Sinhala by Vijita Fernando.

Nissanka WIJEMANNE

Nissanka Wijemanne is a writer of fiction who likes to explore new narrative techniques. He is the author of six collections of short stories, a volume of poetry and one novel. He was the winner of the State Literary Award in 2011 for his collection of short stories. Nissanka Wijemanne was born and bred in a very remote, rural area in the dry zone regions of Sri Lanka, and that social background and cultural milieu is reflected in many of his stories. He still lives and works as an Art Teacher in a school in his home town, Mahiyangana. His short story included in this anthology has been translated from Sinhala by Prof. Piyaseeli Wijemanna.

Piyaseeli WIJEMANNE – q.v.

Punyakanthe WIJENAIKE

Punyakanthe Wijenaiké is a well-known creative writer of novels, short stories and poems in English. She has published five novels, two novellas, five collections of short stories, and several poems. She is also the author of two autobiographical sketches and two children's books in English. She has won several prestigious prizes and literary awards viz: the *Kalasuri* (1988) and a Special Presidential Award, *Sahityaratna* (2003), for her contribution to Sri Lankan literature. Her novel *Giraya* has been translated into Sinhala and also adapted by Dr. Lester James Pieris to produce as a teledrama.

Contemporary Short Stories of the SAARC Region 2013

'Contemporary Short Stories of the SAARC Region- 2013' is one of SAARC Cultural Centre's many initiatives taken to promote regional culture in its many forms including that of literature. This volume includes 43 short stories from six Member States of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) including Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The stories in this collection reflect unique South Asian ways, rituals and habits displaying the essence of South Asian way of life. The SAARC Cultural Centre hopes this collection of short stories will act as a platform to bring together people of the region and strengthen cultural cooperation among Member States.

SAARC Cultural Centre, Sri Lanka

SAARC Cultural Centre

No. 224, Baudhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 7, Sri Lanka

Tele: 0094 11 2584451 Fax: 0094 11 2584452

Email: saarc-scc@sltnet.lk Web: www.saarcculture.org

