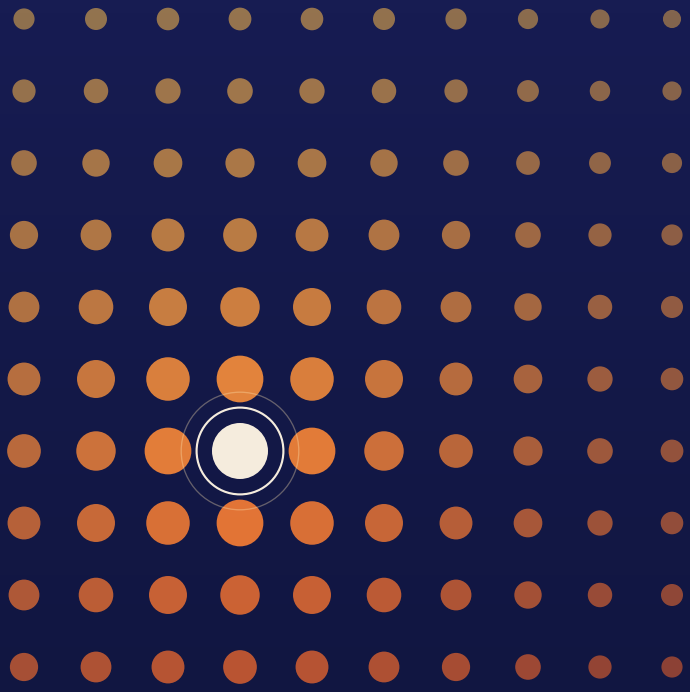
THREE HUNDRED SELECTED STORIES



The Hundred-Story Trilogy

VOLUME I

GAJENDRA THAKUR

Stories 1–100

The Hundred-Story Trilogy (Volume I)

The Hundred-Story Trilogy

Volume I

Three Hundred Selected Stories by Gajendra Thakur

Gajendra Thakur

Translated from the original Maithili into English by the author himself

The Hundred-Story Trilogy (Volume I)

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Gajendra Thakur's three hundred selected stories form a vivid mirror of the many shapes of life in Mithila, Vajji and Anga: folk life, human relationships, changing times, village and town, sorrow and joy, tradition and modernity, nature and society, women and men, childhood, old age, life away from home, memory, struggle and hope.

Across these three volumes, the simplicity of the people's language, the depth of life, and the cultural pulse of Mithila, Vajji and Anga dwell together.

A story lives as long as people and language live.

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Story 1

The Flowerpot by the Window

On the second floor of the old District Education Office building, Shashibhushan Babu's desk stood beside a window. Outside the window were two ashoka trees, beyond them the road, and across the road a small tea stall. In thirty-five years the building had been painted four times, officers had changed who knew how many times, files had gone from thick to thin, and computers had arrived alongside paper; yet his desk had remained almost exactly where it was. On the window ledge stood a small earthen flowerpot, too, with two or three sprigs of periwinkle that managed to carry some blossom or other in every season.

By now, no one in the office clearly remembered who had put the flowerpot there. Shashibhushan Babu used to say that long ago a woman clerk—Meera Devi—had left it behind on the day she was transferred. Others said that Ramvriksh, the cleaner, had brought it from some fair. Once, perhaps, when the district magistrate of the time had instructed that something green be kept by the window, someone had placed it there. Whatever the truth, for many years now it was Shashibhushan Babu who had been watering it.

That Monday, five days remained before his retirement. On the table lay his pension papers, service book, leave account and a copy of his retirement order, all together. Neeraj, the new clerk, was typing rapidly at the computer when he said, "Babuji, all these old files will be scanned now. Once the cupboards are empty, the room will feel so much more open."

Shashibhushan Babu smiled. "An open room is a good thing."

Neeraj perhaps did not hear the reply at all. Small earphones sat in his ears. Every now and then he leaned towards the screen, then glanced at his phone. Shashibhushan Babu liked his speed. He did not consider many things from his own time worth preserving. Carbon paper, copy registers, the dispatch book, red tape—he felt no reverence for any of them. Yet sometimes he wondered: when everything became fast, where was a human being to keep the slowness within himself?

At one in the afternoon, Mahendra the peon set down his tea. "There'll be a feast on Friday, won't there, Babuji?"

"A feast?" Shashibhushan Babu started, as though the question concerned someone else.

"Your farewell. Everyone was saying so."

"I don't know. We'll see what happens."

Mahendra looked at the soil in the flowerpot. "It's gone dry."

Shashibhushan Babu poured the water left in his glass into the pot. He remembered how Malati used to say at home that one must never give a plant leftover tea; one must give it clean water. It had been seven years since Malati had passed away, but many of her sentences still hung in the corners of the house like rules for living.

On Tuesday came word that the office would be inspected. Files began to be straightened, dust was wiped away, broken chairs were pushed to the back. While checking his service book, Shashibhushan Babu found an old application. The paper had yellowed. Some student had written asking for a scholarship—Name: Manoj Kumar Mandal. In one corner, in Shashibhushan Babu's own handwriting, were the words: "Have the income certificate attached." The date was twenty-two years old.

He stared at the paper for a long time. Who was Manoj? He could not remember the face. Perhaps a thin boy; perhaps he had come with his father; perhaps he had been crying, perhaps not. In thirty-five years thousands of names had passed before him. Some people received scholarships and some did not; some became teachers, some went away to earn a living, some he would not even have been able to recognise. In his service book, his own life was recorded clearly year by year; but the people for whom he had spent all those days moving papers had grown blurred in his memory.

The inspector did not come on Wednesday. Word arrived that the programme had changed. But because of all the preparation, the office was unusually clean. The windowpanes had been wiped, and the road outside looked clearer than before. The owner of the tea stall was teaching his son how to keep accounts. Shashibhushan Babu watched the scene for a while.

That day Neeraj asked, "Babu, what will you do after retirement?"

It was an ordinary question, and he ought to have had an answer ready. Most people, when asked, said they would go on pilgrimage, live with their grandchildren, look after the fields, read books. Shashibhushan Babu said, "I haven't thought about it yet."

"You'll have so much time!" Neeraj laughed. "If I get even one day off, I feel as if I've got my life back."

Shashibhushan Babu laughed too. But that evening, after returning home, he kept looking at the clock for a long time. Seven o'clock, eight, nine. There truly was a great deal of time; but the amount of time and its usefulness were not the same thing. For the first time, the thought became clear to him.

On Thursday his daughter Nidhi called. She lived in Bengaluru. "Babu, we'll video-call on Friday. You'll cut a cake at the office, won't you? Send me pictures."

"We'll see," he said.

"Make some plans for yourself. Come here and stay for a few months."

"Yes, we'll see."

When the call ended, the house fell silent again. The woman who cooked for him had left in the evening. Shashibhushan Babu remained seated on the veranda. On the empty chair in front of him he sometimes put a newspaper, sometimes clothes. When Malati was alive, she used to sit there cutting betel nut. In seven years Shashibhushan Babu had thought many times of removing the chair, but he never did.

When he reached the office on Friday, there was an unusual bustle. An urgent letter had come from the district office: details concerning teacher appointments in several schools had to be sent that very day. Everyone was absorbed in their own screens and files. Shashibhushan Babu too opened the old registers and began matching the figures. Ten o'clock passed, then noon, then two.

In the afternoon Mahendra said softly, "Babuji, we were supposed to bring a cake. But Sahib said the report should go first."

"Send the report first," Shashibhushan Babu said. Saying it caused him no pain. On the contrary, it brought a familiar calm. Countless times in thirty-five years, work had come before ceremony. Why should the last day be different?

The report went at half past four. The officer came out of his room and said, "Oh! Today is Shashi Babu's last day!" Five or seven people gathered at once. Sweets were ordered on someone's phone. Rasgullas arrived in a plastic box. The officer gave a two-minute speech—"honest, disciplined, experienced..." Shashibhushan Babu listened. The words were not wrong, yet they seemed to him not the life of a person but the summary of a service book.

Neeraj draped a gamchha over his shoulders. Mahendra took photographs. Everyone applauded. Shashibhushan Babu stood and tried to say, "I... all of you..." but his throat went dry. He drank some water, then said, "We have worked together for many years. If I have ever made any mistake..." The rest of the sentences came by themselves. On such occasions, almost everyone says much the same thing.

At five twenty, people returned to their work. Some had buses to catch; some had reports to correct. Shashibhushan Babu opened the drawer and took out his belongings—an old pen, a small calculator, Malati's photograph, which he had kept inside, two clips, a handkerchief. He himself was surprised

to see how little there was. Thirty-five years of presence fitted into one small bag.

He rose to close the window. The flowerpot was still there. The soil was faintly damp. The periwinkle bore three flowers—two pink, one almost white. Shashibhushan Babu had just reached out when Neeraj said from behind him, "Babuji, take this pot with you. You're the one who has always looked after it."

Shashibhushan Babu stopped his hand. "No. Let it stay here."

"Why? The cleaner may throw it away on Monday. There's a plan to put a second computer monitor on the windowsill."

For a few moments Shashibhushan Babu looked at the pot. Then he said, "In that case, give it to me."

Neeraj wrapped the pot in newspaper and placed it in his hands, separate from the bag. As he went down the stairs, Shashibhushan Babu was afraid for the first time that his hand might slip. Mahendra walked out with him. Evening was settling over the road. Smoke from the tea stall drifted upwards. Shashibhushan Babu looked back at the building once. The window on the second floor was still open. Inside, Neeraj's face glimmered in the light of the screen.

When he reached home, Nidhi video-called. She looked at the photographs, the gamchha, the box of rasgullas. "You didn't cut a cake?" she asked, laughing.

"There was a lot of work," Shashibhushan Babu said.

"All right. Now rest."

He said, "Yes." When the call ended, he placed the flowerpot on the veranda beside Malati's empty chair. After a while he felt that was not the right place, so he moved it near the window. Too little sunlight would reach it there. He brought it back to the veranda. In the end he thought—tomorrow I'll see.

The next morning his eyes opened at half past five, as they did every day. He bathed, shaved, and put on a clean kurta. While making tea in the kitchen, he took out his tiffin box and set it on the table. After straining the tea, his eyes fell on the box and he went still. A few moments later, a faint smile came to him. He put the box back in the cupboard.

At seven o'clock, the bell of some distant school could be heard. The sound came thinned by the air, yet it was distinct. Shashibhushan Babu stepped onto the veranda. One periwinkle blossom had fallen in the night. He bent, picked it up, and looked at it for a while in his palm. Then he touched the soil in the pot. It was still damp.

He brought a small lota of water from inside. Before watering the plant, he stopped—the soil was damp; it needed no water yet. Holding the lota, he sat down on the veranda steps. A milkman passed along the road; two children

ran by with schoolbags hanging from their shoulders; an empty rickshaw went past. Suddenly Shashibhushan Babu felt like calling the office to ask whether Neeraj had put the copy of the report in the right place.

He went inside, picked up his mobile, and found the office number on the screen. His thumb reached the call icon. It stayed there for a few moments. Then he put the phone down on the table. Outside, the sound of the bell had stopped.

Returning to the veranda, he lifted the flowerpot and placed it on Malati's empty chair. Then he sat facing it. The sun was climbing. On a periwinkle leaf, an old drop of water shone—a drop he had not given it.

Story 2

The Leave Application

Prabha Mishra's leave application had been lying in her bag for three days. On the first day she had written three days' leave on it. On the second, she struck out "three" and made it "two." On the third morning, after reaching school, she drew a small line through "two" and wrote "one." In the space for the reason she had first written: "Because of my mother's illness." Later, "illness" had seemed too weighty a word, so she crossed it out and wrote, "Urgent work at home."

Prabha taught science at a girls' high school in Madhubani. She was forty-six, but in the eyes of her students she always seemed almost the same age—plain cotton sari with a white border, a small bindi on her forehead, a watch on her wrist, and the attendance register in her hand as she appeared at the classroom door five minutes before the lesson began. At school she was regarded as a dependable teacher. If another teacher was absent, Prabha took her period; if a list was needed for the science laboratory, Prabha prepared it; if the examination papers would not tally, Prabha sat late and set the count right.

That week the half-yearly examination answer books were being marked. Two teachers were away for training, one was at home because her child had a fever, and every day the principal said, "Just manage these four days. After that, everything will be all right." No one was quite sure from which day those four days were to be counted.

On Monday evening Prabha's younger brother Amit had called. "Didi, Ma's fever has come down, but she is very weak. The doctor says it would be better if someone stayed with her for a few days. I have to return to Patna tomorrow. Can you come?"

Prabha had answered at once, "Yes, I'll see." "I'll see" was the kind of reply that could mean yes or no, depending on the circumstances. After the call ended, she opened a bundle of answer books and sat down to mark them. Her red pen kept moving until half past eleven at night. Once, in between, Amit sent another message: "You don't need a ticket. Just come by bus." Prabha read the message and laid the phone face down.

On Tuesday she wrote the first application. Three days. The moment she wrote it, three days seemed far too much. Her mother was over the fever, not admitted to any hospital, facing no emergency. Examinations were under way at school. Prabha put the application into her bag and went as far as the principal's office. Two parents were sitting inside. She stood outside for five minutes; then the bell rang, and she returned to her class without submitting the application.

By Wednesday, the application had become one for two days. During the lunch break her colleague Meenakshi asked, "You've been very quiet since yesterday. Is everything all right at home?" Prabha said, "Yes. Ma is a little weak." Meenakshi immediately said, "Then go and see her. The answer books aren't going to run away." Prabha smiled. "It isn't anything that serious. My brother went and saw her."

Meenakshi opened her mouth as though to say something, then did not. Both went back to marking papers. One blade of the fan in the room was slightly bent. As it revolved, it made a faint "tick" on every turn. Counting that "tick," Prabha reached Question Fifteen.

On Thursday morning the application became one for a single day. After assembly, the principal was walking towards her office. Prabha followed her. When they reached the door, she said, "Madam, I have a leave application."

The principal turned. "For when?"

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Oh, Prabhaji, the science practical list has to be prepared tomorrow, doesn't it?"

"Yes. I'll prepare it today."

"Something urgent?"

Prabha paused for a moment. What she was supposed to say was—my mother is ill. But the word "ill" seemed to summon an image of a hospital bed, oxygen, doctors rushing about. Her mother was only weak; she was speaking on the phone and taking her medicines. Prabha said, "There's some work at home."

The principal took the application, looked at the date, and signed it without a second question. "All right. Leave the list today. And I need the marks sheet for the question papers on Monday."

That was all. Prabha kept looking at the blue signature on the application. For three days she had carried that sheet in her bag and weighed it against herself; before the principal it had not lasted even ten seconds. She felt a little relief, followed at once by a strange emptiness. The permission that had seemed so difficult to her was, for another person, merely an ordinary signature.

That day Prabha was the last to leave the school. She finished the laboratory list, handed two bundles of answer books to Meenakshi, and put the marks register in the cupboard. At the gate the watchman said, "You won't be coming tomorrow, Madam?" Prabha replied, "I have one day's leave." The watchman nodded casually, as though one day were no particular part of the world.

When she reached home, she began packing clothes, fruit and medicines for her mother. Her own home was a small rented house ten minutes from the school. Her husband Arun had died suddenly of a heart attack two years earlier. At that time the school had granted her seven days' leave, but on the fifth day she had returned to school of her own accord. For a long time people kept telling her, "If you keep your mind on work, the grief will lessen." Prabha too had accepted the sentence, because no other sentence occurred to her.

Two or three of Arun's things still remained in their old places in the house. His raincoat behind the door, his spectacle case on the book rack, and, in the upper recess of the kitchen, the steel cup from which he used to drink his evening tea. Prabha neither removed these things nor really looked at them. When she cleaned the house, her hands simply went around them of their own accord.

At twenty past five on Friday morning, Prabha's eyes opened. As on a school day, she sat up at once. She bathed, put on a sari, tied her hair, and fastened her watch. As she lifted her bag, she remembered that she was not going to school today. For a few moments she stood by the door. Then she set down the bag with her books and papers and picked up a small cloth holdall.

The bus was going towards Jhanjharpur. September sunlight was caught in the clouds. On both sides of the road the paddy fields were green, with water glinting here and there between them. Prabha sat by the window. Messages kept arriving in the school group on her phone—someone's question-paper marks would not add up; who had the laboratory key; the principal was asking the time of Monday's meeting. Prabha read every message. She felt like replying to the first two, but did not.

Her mother lived in a small rented house. The old ancestral home had become unfit to live in after a flood, so a few years earlier Amit had rented her a room near the market. When Prabha arrived, her mother was sitting on the cot, propped against a pillow. Her face was thin, with faint shadows beneath her eyes. But the moment she saw Prabha she said, "Why did you bring so much fruit? I'm hardly ill."

Prabha laughed. "Then why did you call me?"

"When did I call you? Amit makes a drama out of everything on his own." Her mother pulled the bag towards herself and began looking through it. "Apples are so expensive. Why did you bring four?"

At noon Prabha made khichdi. Her mother said twice that there was too little salt, then ate half a bowl. After giving her the medicine, Prabha changed the bedsheet, dusted the mesh on the window, and arranged the packets of medicine according to their dates. She found pleasure in doing all of it. The work had a clear sequence—do this, then that; this thing here, that thing there. Like school.

In the evening her mother sat on a chair on the veranda. Rain began. The sound of water filled the tin roof. When the electricity went out, Prabha lit a candle. Her mother asked, "Is the inverter at your house working properly?"

"Yes."

"Aren't you afraid alone at night?"

"Afraid of whom?" Prabha said. "There are people all around."

Her mother fell silent. A little later she asked, "Do you sleep well?"

"Yes."

The rain grew harder on the tin roof. Prabha watched the candle flame. Her mother had laid her thin hands on her knees. Five minutes later Prabha said on her own, "Sometimes it takes a while."

Her mother said, "Hm." Nothing more.

After that "hm," Prabha understood that the matter was finished. Yet she did not get up. Outside, there was the sound of water running along the road. After a while her mother suddenly asked, "You spend the whole day at school among so many people. Do you ever talk to anyone?"

Prabha laughed. "I'm talking all day. I teach the children, in the staff room..."

Her mother did not interrupt. She only kept looking at her. Prabha's laughter faded by itself. She understood that by "talking," her mother did not mean teaching a lesson or giving instructions.

After a long while Prabha said, "Arun's cup is still up there."

Her mother did not look away.

"Sometimes I think I should remove it. Then I think—why should I? Sometimes, in the evening, when I hear a scooter stop at the door, for one moment..." Prabha left the sentence unfinished. Outside, someone's motorcycle really did pass along the road. Its sound receded into the distance.

Her mother asked softly, "Have you ever told anyone this?"

Prabha shook her head. "What would I say? Everyone knows, don't they?"

"Knowing and listening are not the same thing."

Prabha watched the wax melting down the candle. There were no tears in her eyes. Instead, a great weariness suddenly came over her, almost like sleep.

She leaned her back against the chair. "I used to think school was what made me tired," she said.

Her mother asked nothing.

Very softly, Prabha said again, "Perhaps I get more tired from being silent all the time."

Her mother reached out and laid a hand on Prabha's palm. Her hand was no longer hot; the fever had passed. The two of them sat that way for some time. The rain slowly weakened. Less than half the candle remained.

That night Prabha slept in the room beside her mother's. For the first time in many days, she put down her phone without setting an alarm. Sleep did not come immediately, but while waiting for it she did not look at the clock. Once she got up, drank some water, then looked into the darkness through the window. A dog barked far away. She could not clearly recall Arun's face; she remembered only the way he laughed, the hand that lifted his cup of tea, and the small sound of the key striking the lock when he opened the door. This time she did not try to push the memory away.

In the morning her mother looked somewhat better. She insisted on making the tea herself. Prabha tried to stop her, but her mother said, "Don't turn me into an invalid." They drank tea together. As Prabha was leaving, her mother said, "Call me when you reach school." Prabha replied, "I'm not going to school today. Today is my leave." At that, both of them burst out laughing.

On the bus back, for the first time Prabha did not open the school group. She put the phone inside her bag. Rainwater from the night had gathered along the roadside. The leaves of the paddy looked washed clean. When the bus stopped near a small station, children in school uniforms climbed aboard. A little girl stood beside Prabha. Prabha offered to hold the girl's bag in her lap. The child thanked her and turned to look out of the window. No conversation passed between them. Prabha did not find the silence heavy.

When Prabha reached school on Monday, all the work was exactly where she had left it. The science list needed only two corrections. Holding out a bundle of answer books, Meenakshi asked, "How is your mother?"

"She's better now," Prabha said.

"Then that's good." Meenakshi returned to her papers.

At ten o'clock the principal sent for Prabha. "Here—your leave application. I've attached it to the attendance register. And a training letter has come from the district office for Monday and Tuesday; you may have to go."

Saying, "All right," Prabha took the application. Beneath the blue signature, "CL-1" had been written in red ink. So many days of hesitation, her mother's thin hand, rain on the tin roof, Arun's cup, the darkness of the night

—all seemed to have been folded into that small "CL-1," yet the paper bore no trace of any of them.

She started to leave, then stopped at the door. "Madam?"

The principal raised her spectacles. "Yes?"

Prabha was silent for a few moments. Then she said, "Next week I need two more days' leave."

The principal asked the dates. Prabha told her.

"Has your mother's condition worsened again?"

Prabha looked at the blank reverse of the application. Outside, the bell rang. The veranda filled with the sound of the girls' footsteps. Quietly she said, "No. Ma is well now."

The principal looked at Prabha for a few moments, then glanced at the calendar on her desk. "Then leave the application with me."

Back in the staff room, Prabha took out a fresh sheet of paper. She wrote the date at the top. After writing "To," she paused for a moment. The fan was turning; that same old bent blade made a faint "tick" with every revolution. This time Prabha did not count the sound. The nib of her pen did not rest on the paper for long. She began writing the next line.

Story 3

The Letter That Arrived Late

Sharda Devi found the letter at the bottom of an old iron trunk. She had not opened the trunk in search of any letter. After the monsoon, damp had spread through the room at the back of the house, and the carpenter had said the trunk would have to be moved a little away from the wall. So Sharda was sorting clothes, old receipts, wedding photographs and useless papers when a thin blue envelope slipped out from between two old account books.

A fine layer of dust lay on the envelope. The paper had yellowed at the corners, but the name was still clearly legible: "Shri Harinarayan Jha, Village —Belahi, District—Darbhanga." Below, in smaller letters, was written: "Personal." The post-office stamp was only partly visible, yet the year was clear: 2006.

Sharda kept looking at that year for a long time. Twenty years. It seemed to her that twenty years was not a number written on paper but something like the dust gathered inside a house—something that, at the mere touch of a hand, could release an old smell.

She carried the envelope to the veranda. Harinarayan Babu was sitting there with the newspaper open. His spectacles had slipped down his nose. Sharda said, "Look at this."

At first Harinarayan Babu did not lift his eyes from the paper. "What is it?"

"A letter."

"Who writes letters nowadays?" He laughed.

"Not a letter from now. One from twenty years ago."

This time he folded the newspaper. He took the envelope, read the name, examined the postmark, turned it over and looked at the back. There was no sender's name. Only the line of old gum, still unbroken.

"Where did you find it?"

"In the trunk. Between two account books."

Harinarayan Babu looked at the envelope again. His brows contracted slightly. "Why was it never opened?"

Sharda did not answer. It was hard to tell whether the question had been addressed to her or to the household of twenty years ago.

The old papers in the trunk had generally been Harinarayan Babu's responsibility. Bank passbooks, receipts for seed and fertiliser, land records, the children's certificates—he kept them all in separate cloth pouches. Sharda took them out only when they were needed. But this envelope had not been in any pouch. Why had it been pressed between two account books? She could not remember.

Harinarayan Babu touched one corner of the envelope with his fingernail. "Shall I open it?"

Sharda was about to say, quite naturally, "Open it," but the words did not come out. Instead she asked, "Shouldn't we first think who it might be from?"

"My name is on it."

"Your name is on it, yes. But who wrote the letter?"

Harinarayan Babu was silent for a few moments. In the courtyard the leaves of the guava tree moved in the wind. Far away, some devotional song played very softly over the temple loudspeaker.

"Manoj?" Sharda said quietly.

Harinarayan Babu placed the envelope on the table.

2006 was the year their elder son Manoj had left home for Delhi. Even now Sharda used the words "left home" carefully in her own mind, because Manoj had not run away in the night. He had bought a ticket, packed a bag, and caught the morning bus in front of everyone. Yet after what had happened in the house during the three days before his departure, to say merely that he had "gone for work" always seemed incomplete to Sharda.

Manoj had been working for a private company in Patna. He wanted to marry a girl of his own choice. She was from Madhubani and was educated, but by the family's old calculations of clan and marriage, the match was not considered acceptable. Harinarayan Babu had refused outright. Manoj first tried to explain, then argued, then raised his voice. On the third day Harinarayan Babu had said, "If your own decision is so dear to you, then take responsibility for it yourself as well."

Sharda still remembered that sentence word for word. After it, Manoj had said very quietly, "All right."

For six months Manoj did not come home. Even his phone calls were infrequent. Sharda would try his number from a neighbour's phone. Sometimes he answered, sometimes he did not. Then one day word came that Manoj had found a job in Delhi. Two years later he married. Harinarayan Babu went to the wedding, though his mouth remained almost entirely closed throughout. Slowly, visits began again. A grandson was born. There were celebrations. When illness came, Manoj rushed home. Life, in its own way, began tying the broken ends together.

Now Manoj lived in Gurugram and came once or twice a year. Harinarayan Babu asked about his grandson's studies, argued with him about the share market, and had him bring blood-pressure medicines. The old dispute over the marriage had not been mentioned for many years.

Sharda looked at the envelope. "What if it is from Manoj?"

Harinarayan Babu said, "So what? He may have written it twenty years ago. We'll read it."

"Should we ask him first?"

"Why should I ask him about a letter addressed to me?"

In that answer Sharda caught a faint glimpse of the old Harinarayan—the same man who, once he had made a decision, built walls around it. But at once she felt the comparison was unfair. Whether Harinarayan had changed in twenty years could not be answered in a single sentence.

Until lunch, the letter remained on the table. They talked of ordinary things—the dal needed more salt, the gas cylinder had to be booked, their younger daughter Rekha would video-call tomorrow. Yet every now and then both of them glanced at the envelope.

After lunch Harinarayan Babu went to his room for a nap. Sharda washed the dishes and returned to sort the remaining things in the trunk. One account book contained the expenses for 2005–06: wheat, urea, Manoj's bus fare to Patna, Rekha's college fees. On one page, in Sharda's own handwriting, was a small entry: "Manoj Delhi—1000." She could not remember when she had sent those thousand rupees. Perhaps through someone. Perhaps without telling Harinarayan.

The letter had been wedged inside that very account book. Sharda thought for a long time: was it possible that she herself had put the letter there and forgotten? Perhaps the postman had delivered it, and she, afraid of Harinarayan's anger, had first kept it aside herself? She remembered nothing. Memory sometimes leaves a blank precisely where a person remains certain that something must once have been there.

At evening tea, Harinarayan Babu picked up the envelope again. "Bring the scissors."

Sharda took two steps towards the kitchen, then stopped. "Open it by hand. The paper might get cut."

Harinarayan Babu smiled. "Is it an old letter or a government document?"

"It is old. That is why."

He tried to slip his thumb under the edge of the envelope. The paper was no longer crisp; after years of damp air it had softened. One corner tore a little. Sharda said involuntarily, "Wait."

Harinarayan Babu stopped. "What now?"

Sharda searched for an answer. "What if it contains something from that time that no longer exists?"

"If the thing no longer exists, does what was written change?"

"No. But perhaps reading it will change something."

Harinarayan Babu leaned back in his chair. "Sharda, what can a piece of paper from twenty years ago change in me now?"

Sharda looked at him. His hair was almost entirely white, there was a thin sheen of moisture at the corners of his eyes, and two fingers of his right hand were slightly bent from arthritis. She had spent forty-five years with this man. In forty-five years, how many things had actually been spoken, how many understood by guesswork, and how many left untouched simply because there would be another day to live together—there was no accounting for any of it.

Softly she asked, "When Manoj went away, did you stay awake at night?"

Harinarayan Babu looked startled. "When?"

"During those six months."

"Why are you asking that now?"

"No reason."

Harinarayan Babu looked out of the window. "I slept less."

It was the first time Sharda had heard that answer. Back then she had assumed Harinarayan stood firm by his decision, that he was angry with Manoj, that he felt no regret. On many nights she had risen and seen him sitting on the veranda, but she had never asked. She had thought that asking might start the quarrel all over again.

"I used to think nothing had happened to you at all," Sharda said.

"You never asked."

The words were spoken in an ordinary tone, not as an accusation. Even so, Sharda felt as though some closed window from twenty years ago had opened for an instant.

She said in turn, "You never told me either."

Harinarayan Babu nodded. "Yes."

They both fell silent. The tea on the table was growing cold. Through the torn corner of the envelope a thin white edge of the paper inside could be seen.

After a while Harinarayan Babu said, "If Manoj did write it, perhaps if I had read it then, something might have been different."

Sharda asked, "Better or worse?"

"Who knows."

"Then what will we learn by reading it now?"

Harinarayan Babu gave a faint laugh. "What he wrote then."

"Not what we would have done then."

"No."

Evening fell. Sharda switched on the light. Under the yellow glow the envelope looked older still. Harinarayan Babu picked it up once more, but this time he made no attempt to open it.

After dinner Manoj called. He usually telephoned on Sundays, but this was Saturday. His wife had perhaps gone to the market; his son was at coaching class. Manoj asked the usual questions—were they taking their medicines, had the mason looked at the roof, he might be able to come for Dashami next month.

Twice Sharda wanted to say, "We have found a letter of yours from twenty years ago." But each time some small domestic question slipped into the middle of the conversation. At last Manoj said, "All right, Ma. Give the phone to Babujii."

Harinarayan Babu took the phone. "Hm, tell me." His voice carried the same familiar mixture of sternness and affection that had formed over the years between father and son. Five minutes later the two of them had talked about cricket, medicines and train tickets, and he put the phone down.

Sharda asked, "You didn't tell him?"

"Neither did you."

They looked at each other and laughed. It was a very small laugh, but for the first time since the old dispute it seemed to Sharda that they were laughing together at their own silences from those days.

Before going to bed, Harinarayan Babu was about to put the letter on top of the cupboard. Sharda said, "You'll forget it there again."

"Then where shall I keep it?"

Sharda looked towards the trunk, then said, "Let it stay here on the table."

The next morning, when Sharda got up, Harinarayan Babu was drinking tea on the veranda. The envelope lay before him. The corner was torn exactly as much as it had been the day before.

"Did you open it?" Sharda asked.

"No."

"Why?"

Harinarayan Babu placed his cup on the table. "I thought I'd wait until you woke up."

Sharda sat down opposite him. There was night dew on the guava leaves. A milkman went past along the lane on his bicycle. Inside the house the clock struck seven.

Harinarayan Babu held the envelope out to her. "You open it."

Sharda extended her hand but did not take it. "Your name is on it."

"We'll both read it."

For a few moments their hands remained on either side of the envelope. It suddenly seemed to Sharda that whatever lay inside the letter was twenty years

old, but this moment belonged to now. Twenty years ago, each of them had borne many things alone. At least now, before this small piece of paper, they were not alone.

She took the envelope and placed her thumb against the torn corner. The paper could have opened very easily.

Just then there was the sound of milk boiling over in the kitchen and spilling onto the stove. Sharda sprang up. "The milk!"

She ran inside. Behind her Harinarayan Babu called, "Turn off the gas first. The letter isn't going anywhere."

Sharda turned off the gas and began wiping the stove. A laugh came to her without warning. On the veranda Harinarayan Babu coughed. Outside, the milkman rang his bell again.

A little later Sharda made two fresh cups of tea and came out. The letter was still lying on the table, not half-opened—only one corner torn. She placed a cup before Harinarayan Babu and sat down herself.

They drank their tea. The letter remained between them. This time, neither of them was in any hurry to open it.

Story 4

After the Rain Stopped

On the third day after the floodwater began to recede, Ramlochan Yadav went out towards his field. For nine days the fields, the paths, the bamboo thickets and the pond behind the house had all merged into water of the same colour. Now the water had gone down, but the land had still not fully recovered its old shape. Where green rows of paddy had stood, there were sticky mud, debris and leaves of water hyacinth caught in the slush.

The earthen ridge between Ramlochan's northern field and Bindeshwar Mishra's southern field had been washed away for nearly thirty cubits. Only two traces of the boundary remained—at one place a bamboo stake half-sunk into the earth, at another a small rise covered with grass. Everywhere else the flood had levelled the two fields so completely that it seemed there had never been a boundary between them.

Ramlochan stood for a while with the spade in his hand. Two years earlier he and Bindeshwar had had a serious quarrel over this very ridge. The surveyor's tape had once fallen a little to one side, then on the second measurement a little to the other. The dispute had begun over two cubits of land and had travelled through old accounts, old bitterness, all the way to the conduct of their children. At the end Bindeshwar had said, "Keep what is yours. I do not want even a finger's breadth of your land." Ramlochan had replied, "Nor do I want anyone's charity."

After that day, members of the two households still spoke to one another, but conversation between Ramlochan and Bindeshwar had shrunk to necessary words alone—"Your cow has come loose," "Have the drain cleared," "The postman left your letter." At times even a greeting ended with nothing more than a nod.

Today Ramlochan had decided he would first rebuild the ridge from his own side. If they called the surveyor after the flood and waited for a fresh measurement, the time for sowing would pass. He drove the spade into the earth. The mud was soft on the surface and heavy underneath. With every spadeful he lifted, his breath grew quicker.

After five or seven spadefuls a voice came from behind him. "If you go on like that, you won't finish even ten cubits by evening."

Ramlochan turned. Bindeshwar was approaching with a spade over his shoulder and a bamboo basket in one hand. His dhoti was folded up to his knees, his feet caked with mud.

Ramlochan only said, "The soil is heavy."

"Leave the sludge on top and cut from below. The lower soil will hold."

"I'm seeing."

Bindeshwar set down the basket. For a few moments both men looked at the broken ridge. The question was whether they should begin the work together or each start from his own side. Neither felt like putting the question into words. Without saying anything, Bindeshwar began working with his spade at the far end of the broken stretch.

For half an hour there was only the thud of spades, the scrape of the basket over earth, and the distant cries of egrets. After the flood the village itself sounded different. In one house a fan was running to dry a wall; somewhere sheets of tin were being hammered into place; elsewhere people were opening sacks of wet paddy and spreading the grain in the sun.

From time to time Ramlochan glanced towards Bindeshwar. Three days earlier, when the water had stood chest-high, this same man had gone with him at two in the morning as far as the main road. Ramlochan's wife, Phoolmati, had suddenly begun breathing hard. She had long suffered from asthma, but that night her medicine had run out. The mobile network kept disappearing. Ramlochan had repeatedly tried to call his son, who lived in Pune, but the call would not go through.

Bindeshwar had probably heard about it from his granddaughter. Without asking anything, he had come carrying a large torch, a plastic bag and a bamboo staff. "Come," was all he had said.

Together they had waded through water above their waists towards the main road. At one place the current was strong. When Ramlochan's foot slipped, Bindeshwar caught him by the arm. A relief vehicle was standing on the road; from there they obtained an asthma inhaler and two tablets. On the way back neither of them mentioned the old dispute over the ridge even once.

Phoolmati was well now. Yesterday morning she had said, "Thank Bindeshwar Babu properly at least once." Ramlochan had replied then, "Yes, I will."

Now the weight of that thank-you felt heavier than the earth he was lifting with his spade.

Bindeshwar asked, "Is Phoolmati Bhabhi breathing all right now?"

"She is fine. She took the medicine last night."

"Is there any inhaler left?"

"Yes."

"The market must have opened by now. Get another one. You can't trust a flood."

Ramlochan said, "Yes." A few moments later the words "That night..." reached his lips, but he drove the spade into the mud instead. The sentence remained unfinished. Bindeshwar may have heard it, or he may not have.

By noon the ridge had begun to take shape. Each man had understood the rhythm of the other's work. Ramlochan cut the earth, Bindeshwar carried it up in the basket; after a while, without a word, they exchanged jobs. In earlier days they had done such work together many times—digging drains, lifting pump pipes, planting bamboo poles for a wedding. Perhaps for the first time since the quarrel, their bodies were remembering one another's pace.

Bindeshwar wiped his head with his gamchha. "The ridge won't come up on the old line here."

Ramlochan grew alert at once. "Why?"

"Look at the stake. The water has pushed it half into the ground. The old channel is gone too."

Inside Ramlochan, the voices from two years ago awoke with alarming speed—the tape, the surveyor, two cubits of land. He said, "Then let us measure it."

Bindeshwar gave a slight laugh. "With what? The measuring tape at home was soaked and rotted. The surveyor will be making the rounds of the whole block now."

"Then?"

"We join the surviving ends of the old ridge. The line through the middle will find itself."

Ramlochan looked at the bamboo stake. It seemed to him that this method could produce a difference of a cubit or two. Two years ago they had spent an entire day arguing over exactly that much.

He asked, "Does that seem right to you?"

With both hands resting on the handle of his spade, Bindeshwar said, "Both our paddy crops have washed away. What will two cubits of earth give anyone now?"

The sentence was spoken in the most ordinary way. Ramlochan could, if he wished, have taken it as sarcasm. He could also have heard in it an answer to the old quarrel. But Bindeshwar's face was tired; there was swelling under his eyes. Perhaps he had not slept properly through the night.

Ramlochan asked, "What about the back wall of your house?"

"It has sunk a little. The mason will look at it tomorrow."

"The wheat in the store?"

"Half survived. Half is gone."

"Has your name been entered on the government list?"

"They say it will be." Bindeshwar smiled. "The list moves more slowly than the flood."

Ramlochan too gave a small laugh. He could not remember whether this was the first time since their quarrel that the two of them had laughed at the same thing.

At noon Phoolmati came to the field carrying a bucket of water and two brass tumblers. The moment Ramlochan saw her, he remembered again—the thank-you. Handing Bindeshwar a tumbler, Phoolmati said, "If you had not been there that night, we would have been in terrible difficulty."

While drinking the water, Bindeshwar said, "What is there in that? If people in a village do not come to one another's aid, then who will?"

Phoolmati said simply, "Even so, you did us a kindness."

"Leave the word kindness, Bhabhi." Bindeshwar lowered the tumbler. "Ramlochan has run with me to hospitals, police stations and the block office more times than I can count. If we start keeping accounts of such things, nothing will work."

Ramlochan kept looking at the earth. He remembered that seven years earlier, when Bindeshwar's younger son had been in a motorcycle accident, he had spent the night with them at the hospital. He had almost forgotten it.

Phoolmati went back. After a while Ramlochan said, "That night..."

This time Bindeshwar looked at him.

Again the sentence began to stick in Ramlochan's throat. He could have said, "Thank you." He could have said, "What I said two years ago was not right." Both sentences were perfectly clear in his mind, yet the moment they came close to his lips they sounded too formal.

At last he said, "The current at that bend was very strong that night."

Bindeshwar looked at him for a moment, then said, "Yes. The earth under the road is probably still cut away. Don't let the children go there."

Ramlochan nodded. The conversation had returned to earth, water and children. He felt a little disappointed, and at the same time relieved.

Towards evening the ridge was almost finished. In the middle stretch Bindeshwar drove in a bamboo stake to align the boundary. Where he placed it, Ramlochan could clearly see that, compared with their old estimate, it had shifted slightly into Bindeshwar's field—which meant Ramlochan's portion would grow a little larger.

Ramlochan said, "The stake has gone a little onto your side."

Looking down at the ground, Bindeshwar said, "After all this wind and water, who knows where the old line was?"

"It could be as much as two cubits."

"Then let it be."

Ramlochan wanted to pull up the stake and move it a little towards his own field. His hand even went out to it. But Bindeshwar had meanwhile walked away to bring another basket of earth. Ramlochan stood holding the stake for a few moments. Finally he moved it half a cubit towards his own side—not all the way to the old position, only half a cubit.

Bindeshwar returned. His eyes went to the stake. He said nothing. He emptied the basket and began pressing the soil firm with his foot.

Ramlochan asked, "Is it all right here?"

Still levelling the edge of the ridge with his foot, Bindeshwar said, "It is all right."

That was all.

The sun showed faintly through the clouds. Yellow light fell on the floodwater still pooled in small hollows. Two egrets came down at the far end of the field.

When the work was over, the two men went to wash their spades in what water remained in the drainage channel. The handle of Bindeshwar's spade was loose. Ramlochan took it from him and struck it twice against the ground. "Hammer a nail into this when you get home. Otherwise it will split tomorrow."

Bindeshwar said, "We have to come back here tomorrow?"

"Five cubits at the northern end are still left."

"Morning?"

"Morning."

They put their spades on their shoulders. There was only one narrow path back towards the village, so they walked in the same direction. In earlier times Ramlochan would have dropped a little behind at such moments, or Bindeshwar would have quickened his pace and gone ahead. Today they walked at nearly the same speed.

At one place the path was still badly waterlogged. Bindeshwar's foot sank. Instinctively, Ramlochan caught him by the arm. Pulling his foot free, Bindeshwar only said, "This place is still bad."

Letting go of his arm, Ramlochan said, "Yes, let us go a little to the side."

Near the first house in the village, they had to turn towards their separate courtyards. Bindeshwar stopped. "Tell Phoolmati Bhabhi not to miss her evening medicine."

"I will." Ramlochan paused, then said, "And you... if the mason doesn't come for the wall, tell me. I'll phone the younger mason."

Each man walked towards his own courtyard. No thank-you had been spoken. No apology either. Whether the old quarrel had ended, or had merely grown tired and fallen silent for a few days, neither man knew clearly.

After darkness fell that evening, Ramlochan looked towards the fields from the veranda. The new ridge appeared from a distance as a thin, slightly crooked line. On this side lay his field; on that side, Bindeshwar's. But as the darkness deepened, the line slowly dissolved into the earth.

Ramlochan was about to go inside when he remembered that in the morning, along with his spade, he should take a hammer as well. A nail still had to be driven into the handle of Bindeshwar's spade.

Story 5

The Evening Bus

When Niranjan Jha boarded the bus, there were still two hours to go before evening. At Darbhanga bus stand, dust, the smell of diesel and the voices of people were so thoroughly mingled that a man speaking on his mobile had to raise his own voice to hear himself. Niranjan placed his small suitcase on the overhead rack and sat down by the window.

He was going to the village after four years. In between, he had come as far as Darbhanga twice—once for a wedding, once on company business—but on both occasions he had spent the night in a hotel and returned the next day. The family had accepted this under the phrase “there was no time.” Niranjan too had learned the convenience of that phrase.

All day, congratulatory messages had been arriving on his phone. The company had given him a new position; his salary had gone up, his team had grown larger, and a new designation had been added before his name. In the office group, his photograph had appeared with the words, “Best wishes for the next phase.” Since getting off the train, Niranjan had opened that post three times.

And yet there was no particular exhilaration inside him. He took the absence of it for fatigue.

The bus began to fill. A woman with two children sat in the front. Two college students at the back were arguing loudly about cricket. Moving through the aisle and urging people farther in, the conductor called out, “Benipur, Bahera, the turning for the villages ahead.”

Just before the bus started, an elderly man climbed aboard slowly. He wore a white kurta and grey pyjamas, carried a faded canvas bag over one shoulder, and had thick-framed spectacles on his eyes. As soon as he mounted the steps, he paused once, held the rail and steadied his breathing.

At first Niranjan saw only that the man was old. Then, when he moved a little farther along the aisle, Niranjan caught sight of the old scar on the left side of his forehead and rose to his feet.

“Sir?”

The old man looked at him over the top of his spectacles. It took two moments. “Niranjan?”

Niranjan was astonished. Fifteen years had passed since he had left school. He laughed. "You still recognized me?"

Rameshwar Sir adjusted the strap of his bag on his shoulder and said, "There is a little less hair on your head. The face is the same."

Niranjan urged him to take his seat. At first Sir refused—"I'll sit here on the aisle"—but the conductor said, "Sir, sit by the window. You'll get some air." So he sat down, and Niranjan shifted into the seat beside him.

The bus moved off. The crowd at the stand fell behind, the rows of shops thinned, and soon ponds, small bazaars and paddy fields appeared on both sides of the road.

Rameshwar Sir asked, "Where are you living now?"

"Gurugram. I'm with a private company."

"For a long time?"

"Eight years."

"Everyone at home is well?"

Niranjan answered, "Yes, everyone is fine."

Sir thought for a moment and asked, "Did your Babuji get his hearing aid repaired? The last time I met him, he said he could not hear properly on one side."

Niranjan was silent for a moment. He did not know about this. He had spoken to Babuji twice on the phone the previous month, but both conversations had been about the farm accounts and some bank papers.

"Perhaps... it still hasn't been repaired," he said.

Rameshwar Sir began looking out of the window. "At this age, small things demand time."

There was no reproach in the sentence, yet Niranjan lowered the screen of his phone.

After a while Sir asked, "Work is going well?"

Niranjan had answered this question many times. He said easily, "Yes. I was promoted today, in fact. A larger division will be under me now."

"Good." Pleasure came over Sir's face. "Congratulations."

That was all. Niranjan felt slightly awkward. All day in the city, people had asked about the post, the salary, the shares and the new responsibilities. Sir turned back towards the fields, as though the information were complete.

A few moments later he suddenly said, "In Class Eight, you once made a water-driven wheel for the science exhibition. Do you remember?"

Niranjan laughed. "It never even worked."

"Not the first time. The next day you cut a new channel and made it again."

"How do you remember all this?"

"I don't remember everything." Rameshwar Sir laughed. "Who can make a list of what one has forgotten?"

The bus stopped at a small crossroads. The moment the conductor opened the door, a middle-aged man came running from a tea stall. “Rameshwar Sir!”

Sir opened the window. The man held up two paper cups. “Tea?”

“Less sugar.”

“For you, it is always ready with less sugar even before you say so.”

The shopkeeper’s name was Shambhu. Sir told Niranjan, “He was a student of mine. In Class Seven he forgot his mathematics notebook for three months in a row.”

Laughing from outside, Shambhu said, “Sir, now I keep accounts better than you do. Not one customer can escape after eating on credit.”

Sir began taking money out of his bag. Shambhu tried to stop him, but as he took the cup Sir said, “Run your shop. The age for paying guru-dakshina passed long ago.”

As the bus began to move, Shambhu ran alongside the window and called, “Sir, Neha’s form has been filled in. She chose the subject you suggested.”

Sir merely raised a hand. The bus moved on.

Niranjan asked, “Neha?”

“His daughter. She has passed Class Twelve. She wants to study further.”

“You still keep track of everyone’s studies?”

Rameshwar Sir took a small sip of tea. “Not everyone’s. Whoever comes to ask, I tell them whatever I understand.”

Niranjan opened his phone. The company director’s message was at the top: “You deserve this position.” He typed a thank-you and sent it. Then he switched off the screen.

The road ahead was bad. The bus slowed, swerving around potholes. At one bend, three schoolchildren got on. The moment one of the boys saw Rameshwar Sir, he pulled his bag into his lap and made space for him, although Sir was already seated. Everyone laughed at the boy’s confusion.

Sir asked, “Whose son are you?”

The boy gave his father’s name.

“He too was my student,” Sir said at once. “When he wrote, the ink used to smear all over his right hand.”

The boy looked at his own hand in amazement, as though the trait might be hereditary.

Niranjan laughed again, but this time a strange thought rose within him. Rameshwar Sir’s life seemed to be spread along this road in small signs—the tea stall, the conductor, the child’s father, some Neha’s application form. His name was written on no plaque, yet the moment people saw him, they opened some old page of their own lives.

Niranjan thought about his own life. In the Gurugram office, his name was printed on the glass cabin. His photograph was on the company website. But if

he were no longer there five years from now, where and in what places would any trace of him remain? The question had never occurred to him before.

He was immediately irritated with himself. He disliked such sentimental comparisons. Work was work; a school belonged to another world. Success, he told himself, had its own measure for each person.

Rameshwar Sir, as though he had heard none of Niranjan's thoughts, opened his bag, took out a small box and swallowed some medicine. Niranjan gave him water.

"Your health is all right?"

"One may call it all right. My knee has begun to act according to its own wishes, and I am to have an eye operation next month."

"Will you go alone?"

"To the hospital? No. My younger son will come. He is in Pune."

Niranjan asked, "Why don't you live with him?"

Sir smiled. "I stayed there for two months. They looked after me very well. But if I got up in the morning there, whom would I ask whether the water in the pond had risen or fallen? Here one finds people willing to ask such useless things."

Niranjan remembered his mother. On the phone she too asked almost the same questions every time—"How hot is it there?" "Has it rained there?" Niranjan usually said, "Yes, yes, everything is fine," and moved the conversation on.

The bus stopped again. This time a woman climbed aboard carrying a bag of medicines. The moment she saw Rameshwar Sir, she bowed to him. Sir asked, "Has your mother's fever gone down?"

"She is better now. The reports were normal too."

"Good."

The woman went and sat at the back. Niranjan asked, "Was she also your student?"

"No. Her brother was."

"And you even remember that her mother had a fever?"

Adjusting his spectacles, Sir said, "I met her at the medicine shop last week. She told me."

The answer was utterly ordinary. Niranjan felt his question had been a little foolish.

The evening light had softened now. Long shadows lay across the paddy fields. Smoke rose from a courtyard somewhere in the distance. Niranjan remembered those childhood afternoons when, at this hour, he used to race his bicycle home from school because he was impatient to get back and play cricket.

"Sir," he asked, "do you remember everyone from my batch?"

"Many of them."

"Who became successful?" The question had barely left his mouth when Niranjan himself was startled by it.

Rameshwar Sir looked at him. "In what sense?"

Niranjan searched for an answer. "I mean... who did well in life?"

Sir was silent for a while. A rattling vibration came from the roof of the bus. At last he said, "How would I know the answer to that question?"

Niranjan laughed. "You were our teacher. Surely you must have some idea."

"At school I knew the marks. Who gave me the answer sheets of their lives to examine?"

Having said this, Sir turned to the window. The matter was closed.

The answer felt incomplete to Niranjan, but there was relief in it too. He had feared Sir might offer some sermon—that money was not everything, that he must not forget the village, that he must serve his parents. Nothing of the kind was said.

After they had gone a little farther, Rameshwar Sir spoke on his own. "There was Rakesh in your batch, wasn't there?"

"Yes."

"He does electrical work now. Last year he repaired all the school fans without taking any labour charge. I scolded him for it—why had he not taken his wages?"

Niranjan smiled.

"Sushma?" Sir asked.

"She became a doctor, I think. In Patna."

"Yes. She came once for a health camp. She tested my blood sugar and said, 'Sir, fewer sweets.'"

"And Manoj?"

Rameshwar Sir's face changed slightly. "He is no more. He died of an illness three years ago."

Niranjan fell silent. Manoj had sat on the bench behind him at school. Niranjan could remember his laughter clearly; he could not connect it with death.

Sir said softly, "His daughter is in Class Nine now."

For a while neither of them spoke.

Niranjan's phone vibrated again. This time it was the property broker. Negotiations were under way for two kathas of land behind the old village house. Niranjan was making this trip mainly to have Babuji sign the papers. The buyer had said he would meet them that night.

He declined the call. A message from the broker appeared at once: "What time will you reach?"

Niranjan did not reply.

Rameshwar Sir asked, "Where will you get down?"

"At first I had thought of getting down at the bazaar. I have to meet someone there." Niranjan paused. "But perhaps I'll go as far as the village turning."

"The bus goes that far."

"And you?"

"One stop before that."

The bus was growing dark inside. The conductor switched on the lights. In the yellow glow, every face looked a little tired, a little unfamiliar.

Rameshwar Sir took an old sheet of paper from his bag and examined something on it. Niranjan happened to glance at it—it was some sort of school list, torn at the edges.

"What is that?"

"An old list of the library books. The headmaster said many books appear to be missing. I told him to compare it with the old list first. That's why I had taken it with me."

Niranjan laughed. "Even after retirement, the school hasn't let you go."

Sir laughed too. "The school has let me go. The people haven't."

The bus stopped where Rameshwar Sir was to get off. Niranjan stood and brought down his bag. Sir reached the steps, then turned back.

"Will you stay at home for two days?"

"I had been thinking of returning tomorrow itself."

"All right. If you have time, go by the school once. That old science room is still there. The window has been changed, but I think the table is the same."

Niranjan said, "I'll see."

Sir got down. Two young men by the roadside stepped forward to take his bag. Sir called one of them by name. The bus moved off.

Niranjan kept looking back through the window until the white kurta had dwindled into the darkness.

He returned to his seat and opened his phone. The company's congratulatory message was still at the top. Beneath it were three missed calls from his mother.

Niranjan called her.

"Where have you reached?" his mother's voice asked.

"The bus is not far from the village turning."

"But you had said you would get down at the bazaar?"

"No. I'm coming straight home."

His mother was silent for a moment, then asked, "Shall I put the rice on?"

Niranjan had been about to say, "I've already eaten." Whenever he returned from the city, he said this whether he had eaten or not. Then he looked out of the window; lights had come on in scattered houses beyond the fields.

"Yes," he said. "Put it on. Tell Babuji I'm coming."

"If only he can hear me," his mother laughed. "The hearing aid is broken again."

Niranjan's hand tightened slightly around the phone. "We'll see to it tomorrow. I'll take it to town and get it repaired."

His mother said, "First reach home."

The call ended.

The broker's message came again. Niranjan read it but did not reply. The papers were in his bag; the sale had not been cancelled. Only the meeting that night no longer seemed necessary.

The bus reached the village turning and stopped. Niranjan took down his suitcase and stood by the road. His house was not visible from there, but from that direction came smoke and the familiar smell of cow-dung cakes.

An auto-rickshaw driver asked, "Where to?"

Niranjan gave the name of the village. The driver quoted the fare. Niranjan put his suitcase inside, then suddenly asked, "Does the old high school fall on the way?"

"A little out of the way."

"That's all right. Go there first."

The driver turned the auto. Niranjan did not know whether he would find the school gate open or closed, whether the old table was still there, or whether he would simply look at the building from outside and then go home. His promotion was still real, the land papers were still in his bag, and the train for the next day was still booked. Nothing had changed dramatically.

And yet, in the darkness of the road, watching the small headlamp of the auto turn towards the school, he felt for the first time that perhaps success did not mean arriving at one particular place. Sometimes it might also mean understanding who had remained along the road, and who still remembered your name.

He did not allow the thought to form itself into a complete sentence. The phone rang again. This time it was Babuji. Niranjan smiled, answered, and spoke loudly, "Yes, Babuji, can you hear me? I'm on my way."

Story 6

The Empty Bed

On the fourth morning after the wedding, Kaushalya Devi went into Anupama's room with a broom for the first time. For three days there had been so many people in the house that, even when the room was empty, it had never felt empty. Someone's sari would be lying there, someone's bag, someone's child would be jumping on the bed. Today the veranda was clear, the bamboo poles of the wedding pavilion had been taken down and stacked to one side of the courtyard, dried flower petals had mingled with the dust, and the door of the room stood half open.

The sheet on the bed was the same one Anupama had left there on the morning of her departure—the one with blue flowers. One corner was crumpled, the pillow lay askew, and a red thread had caught at the foot of the bed. Standing at the door, Kaushalya said aloud, "Anu, could you not even leave the sheet pulled straight?"

Once the sentence was complete, her own voice sounded slightly unfamiliar to her. The room did not answer.

She went inside, stretched the sheet smooth, straightened the pillow, then for no reason set it askew again. "You liked it this way," she said softly.

Sweeping should have taken five minutes, but she spent twenty. She picked up a hairpin left on the table and placed it in a little box. She wiped the dust from the window frame. From beneath the bed came a scrap of paper—a receipt from a box of sweets bought for a guest. Instead of throwing it away, she placed it on a corner of the table, then laughed at herself, picked it up again and put it in the rubbish.

From outside, Maheshwar Babu called, "The tea is getting cold."

Kaushalya said, "I'm coming." But she did not leave at once. She stood for a few moments with a hand resting on the footboard of the bed.

Anupama's wedding had taken place in Janakpur. The groom, Abhishek, worked in a bank; the family was good, the household well ordered, everyone courteous. These were precisely the things Kaushalya herself had wanted for the last two years. When the match was settled, no one had been happier than she. For three months her days had been consumed by lists—saris, utensils, the

wooden trunk, books, sheets, spices: what would go with Anupama, what would not.

At the farewell, Anupama had wept a great deal. Kaushalya had wept too, though in between she had been preoccupied with whether a bottle of water had been put in the car, where the bag of medicines was, and whether the jar of pickle had been handed to Abhishek's mother. Even after the car vanished around the bend and people led her back inside, her first worry had been: "Anu's phone charger hasn't been left behind, has it?"

The charger had not been left behind.

On the first night Anupama called three times. On the second day, twice. On the third day, only once, and that too at night. By the morning of the fourth day there had been no call.

Kaushalya sat on the veranda with her cup of tea. Maheshwar Babu had opened the newspaper. His spectacles had slipped a little down his nose.

"Has Anu called?" Kaushalya asked.

"She called last night, didn't she?"

"She called me last night too. I mean today."

Maheshwar Babu looked up from the newspaper. "It is only half past eight in the morning."

Kaushalya fell silent. She felt that Maheshwar Babu had not understood the question. It was not a question of time.

At half past nine the phone rang. Anupama's voice was brisk. In the background many women could be heard talking.

"Ma, where did you put my green shawl?"

Kaushalya stood up at once. "It was in the upper shelf of your cupboard."

"I couldn't find it there."

"Did you look in the blue trunk?"

"The trunk is here, but the shawl isn't. I thought perhaps it was left at home."

Holding the phone between her ear and shoulder, Kaushalya went into Anupama's room. She opened the cupboard. Half of it was empty now. On the upper shelf were two old salwar suits, the college bag, some files and a white box. No green shawl.

"It isn't here," Kaushalya said.

"All right, I'll find it. Yesterday the didis had put some clothes in another room. I'll look again."

"Have you eaten?"

"Yes."

"What did you eat?"

"Ma, I'll tell you later. Everyone is going to the market. I have to go too."

"All right."

"Are you all well?"

Kaushalya looked at the bed. "Yes, we are well."

The call ended.

For a few moments Kaushalya stood with the mobile still in her hand. Then she said to the bed, "What was such a hurry? You could have talked for another two minutes."

She smiled at herself. "What am I saying to you? You are wood and mattress."

Then she remembered—she had spoken to an inanimate thing as though it were a person. As if correcting Anupama's grammar, she corrected her own words: "It is wood and mattress." The tiny correction made her laugh.

That afternoon, Lalita Kaki from next door came over. In her hand was the large brass platter she had borrowed for the wedding. As she returned it, she said, "The house must feel deserted now."

Kaushalya answered at once, "Why deserted? I am here, and he is here. The house is the same."

Maheshwar Babu heard from outside and laughed. "It is enough that I have been included in the count."

Lalita Kaki laughed too. Kaushalya felt her own answer had sounded a little harsh. She changed the subject.

In the evening, while putting away the utensils, Kaushalya took out two small bowls and then returned one to the shelf. Anupama used to eat curd in a small bowl. Maheshwar Babu ate very little curd.

At half past ten that night Maheshwar Babu said, "Close the window of that room. Mosquitoes will come in."

Kaushalya said, "Let it stay open. The smell will go out."

"What smell?"

"There were so many people here for the wedding. If the room stays shut it will turn damp."

Maheshwar Babu said nothing.

Once during the night Kaushalya awoke. She thought she had heard the bed creak in the back room. Whenever Anupama turned in her sleep at night, one slat of the bed used to sound. Kaushalya had heard that creak for years. She rose and went as far as the door.

A cat had come in through the window and was sitting on the bed. Kaushalya gently shooed it away. The cat climbed onto the window and leapt outside.

"Because of you my sleep was broken," she said to the bed. "Are you satisfied now?"

As she spoke, she felt moisture in her eyes. She wiped them with the end of her sari as though a speck of dust had fallen there.

By the second week the house had almost returned to its old rhythm. Maheshwar Babu went for his morning walk, Kaushalya performed her worship and cooked, the milkman came on time, the newspaper dropped beside the door. Only a few small tasks had lost their purpose. There was no tiffin to prepare for Anupama, no old college water bottle to wash, no need in the evening to ask, "What time will you be back?"

Kaushalya had once thought all this would save time. Time was saved. But she did not know where one was supposed to keep saved time.

She continued to go into Anupama's room at least once a day. Sometimes to close the window, sometimes to open it, sometimes merely to straighten the pillowcase for no reason.

One day Maheshwar Babu said, "Shall I put my old books on the shelves in that room?"

Kaushalya answered immediately, "No."

Maheshwar Babu looked at her for a moment. "All right."

The "no" had come out so quickly that Kaushalya herself felt uncomfortable. She added, "Not yet. The dust hasn't been properly cleaned."

Maheshwar Babu said, "All right," again. This time his voice was ordinary, but all day Kaushalya wondered whether she had postponed the books because of the dust or because she was afraid the room would become something else.

That evening Anupama sent a photograph. Five women of Abhishek's family were standing on the roof. Anupama stood among them in a green sari, smiling. Behind her were the pink wall of the new house and a clothesline.

Kaushalya enlarged the photograph. There was little tiredness in Anupama's face. She looked at ease.

First a feeling of happiness rose inside Kaushalya. Immediately after it came a very slight, almost ashamed sorrow—how had she become at ease so quickly? Kaushalya was ashamed of the feeling itself. Did she want her daughter to be unhappy there?

That night she sat beside the bed and said, "Did you see? You are smiling so much. Good. You should smile."

After a few moments she added, "But what mountain comes crashing down if you make a phone call?"

The bed remained silent.

Kaushalya laid her palm on the sheet. It was cold. She remembered how, when Anupama was little and burning with fever at night, she used to sit beside her head on this bed and keep changing the wet cloth on her forehead. During the Class Ten board examinations, Anupama would study until two in the morning, and Kaushalya would come in twice with milk. On her first day of college, Anupama had sat here and cried that she would not make a single friend. Three months later the same girl had brought so many friends home

that Kaushalya had come out of the kitchen and said, "Is this a house or a hostel?"

Not all the memories had the same colour. There had been quarrels with Anupama too—clothes flung across the bed, returning home late, never putting down the phone, sulking whenever marriage was discussed. Kaushalya had said countless times, "One day, when you go to your own home, then you will understand."

Now the words "your own home" in that sentence stung her. Had this house, then, never been Anupama's own?

In the third week Anupama said that her old books could be given to Pinki. Pinki was Lalita Kaki's granddaughter and was studying in Class Twelve.

"All of them?" Kaushalya asked.

"All the competitive-exam books. I don't need them now."

"Keep some."

"Why? If Pinki studies from them, they'll be useful."

Kaushalya agreed.

The next day Pinki came with two bags. Kaushalya took books out of the cupboard. Anupama had written her name in every one of them—sometimes in neat letters, sometimes in haste. When Kaushalya opened a biology book, a dried gulmohar leaf fell from between its pages.

Pinki asked, "Mausi, shall I keep this?"

Kaushalya picked up the leaf and looked at it. "Throw it away."

Pinki was about to throw it when Kaushalya said, "Wait." Then she put the leaf back between the pages. "Let it stay as it was."

After Pinki carried the books away, two shelves of the cupboard stood entirely empty. The bed began to look larger than before.

That day Kaushalya removed the sheet for the first time. She put the blue-flowered sheet with the clothes to be washed, shifted the mattress into the sun, and beat the pillow free of dust. Beneath the mattress she found a thin sheet of paper.

It was a list in Anupama's handwriting: "Saris 6, slippers, medicines, certificates, needle-thread, pickle, oil, small scissors, charger..." At the bottom, on another line, she had written: "Ma's green shawl?" There was a question mark after it, and then the words had been crossed out.

Kaushalya remembered her green shawl. It was old, its border worn, but Anupama borrowed it from time to time. While packing for the wedding, Kaushalya had offered it to her; Anupama had said, "No, it looks good on you."

Kaushalya moved her hand to fold the list and throw it in the rubbish, then instead put it in the drawer of the table. This time she did not laugh at herself.

That night Anupama's phone call lasted a little longer.

"Ma, did Pinki take my books?"

"Yes."

"Good. She studies well."

After a while Kaushalya asked, "Are you able to sleep there?"

Anupama laughed. "Not the first two nights. All the sounds felt unfamiliar. It is all right now."

The words escaped Kaushalya's mouth: "Your bed is lying empty here."

There was silence for a few moments at the other end of the phone.

Anupama said softly, "I'll come at Dashami, Ma."

"I was only saying it. Why should I make you worry?"

"I'm not worrying."

"All right. Is everything well there?"

"Yes, everything is well."

The conversation moved back to cooking, bank timings and the expected arrival of some relative. After the call ended, Kaushalya sat for a long time. It seemed to her that she had been asking her daughter for proof that she too felt the same emptiness. Kaushalya did not like giving that feeling a name.

Two days later, in the afternoon, Maheshwar Babu went into Anupama's room with the newspaper. Sunlight fell near the window. He sat on the bed and began to read. When Kaushalya came in with water and saw him there, she stopped for a moment.

Maheshwar Babu asked, "May I sit here, or is the place reserved?"

Kaushalya looked at him. His voice was teasing, but there was caution in his eyes.

"Sit," she said. "The bed won't break."

Maheshwar Babu reopened the newspaper. After a while he lay down there and fell asleep.

Kaushalya stood at the door and watched him. At first she felt a small irritation—Maheshwar Babu's head on Anupama's pillow! Then she noticed that, in sleep, he had stretched one hand out towards the empty side, as though from old habit he were leaving space for someone.

Silently she brought a thin cotton towel and spread it over his feet.

In the evening Maheshwar Babu said, "That room gets good sunlight."

Kaushalya replied, "Yes."

"We'll see about the bookshelf later."

"We'll see."

It was the first time that "no" had not come out at once.

The next morning Kaushalya spread the washed blue-flowered sheet on the bed again. She put a fresh cover on the pillow. She placed Anupama's old

college bag on the upper shelf of the cupboard. She removed the empty box from the table.

When she opened the window, the outside sunlight fell across half the bed. Fine grains of dust began floating in the brightness.

Kaushalya sat at the foot of the bed. For the first time in many days, there was nothing in the room that needed doing.

Softly she said, "It is good that you are able to sleep there."

After a moment she smiled at herself. "I should have said that to her, not to you."

The bed gave no answer.

From outside Maheshwar Babu asked, "Will there be tea, or shall I make it?"

Instead of replying at once, as she usually did, "I'm coming," Kaushalya looked out of the window. On the neighbour's roof, Pinki was reading one of Anupama's old books. In the courtyard, a labourer was carrying away the last bamboo pole left from the wedding.

"Make it," Kaushalya called back. "I'll come a little later."

Maheshwar Babu may have been surprised, but he said nothing.

Kaushalya remained seated with her hand resting on the bed. The room was still empty. Anupama was still far away. Dashami was still many days off. None of that had changed.

The square of sunlight that had entered through the window kept moving slowly across the blue-flowered sheet. Kaushalya watched it until, from the kitchen, came the faint sound of tea beginning to boil.

Story 7

Pension Day

In the third month after his retirement, Bhuvaneshwar Babu was going to the bank himself for the first time to collect his pension. For the first two months the amount had appeared in his account, but this month even after the fifth had passed, the passbook showed no new entry. He did not trust the messages that came to his mobile. He believed that only figures printed on paper were truly real.

By seven in the morning he had bathed and dressed in a white kurta, light-grey pyjamas and his old black shoes. They were the same shoes he had worn to the office through the last five years of his service. The leather had softened, but after a polish they still looked respectable.

His wife, Vimala Devi, came out of the kitchen and asked, "The bank opens at eleven. Why are you ready already?"

Bhuvaneshwar Babu looked at the clock. "There will be a queue. On pension days there are many people."

"Today is the seventh."

"So what? The later it gets, the greater the crowd."

Vimala Devi said nothing. She placed his cup of tea before him. As he drank, Bhuvaneshwar Babu opened his old leather file. Inside were the pension-sanction letter, copies of his Aadhaar and PAN cards, the bank passbook, two photographs, a copy of his life certificate, and an old black pen.

Vimala Devi looked at the file and smiled. "Has the bank asked for all this?"

"It might."

"The photographs too?"

"Who knows when a rule may change?"

He carefully tucked the photographs back inside. During his years in office, he had never accepted anything without documentary proof. Three colours of files used to lie on his desk - red, green and blue. Whenever an application was incomplete, he would write in red ink across the front: "Required documents not enclosed." The shape of those words had become so familiar that even three months after retirement, his fingers sometimes seemed to write them in the air.

At eight-twenty he left the house. The bank was in the bazaar, about two kos away. He could have found a rickshaw, but he preferred to walk. During his service years he had gone on a motorcycle. His son Neeraj had now taken the motorcycle with him to Patna. Neeraj had said, "Babuji, what do you need the motorcycle for now? Where do you go?"

Bhuvaneshwar Babu had laughed then. But for three months the words "Where do you go?" had remained lodged in his mind.

It was ten past nine when he reached the bazaar. The bank shutter was closed. Five people were already sitting on the veranda: two elderly men, an elderly woman, a middle-aged man, and a young man who had probably accompanied someone.

Bhuvaneshwar Babu stood beside a pillar. There was space to sit, but he remained standing. Out of old office habit, waiting for the bank to open felt almost like conducting an inspection.

One of the elderly men, with a white gamchha tied around his head, asked, "You too, pension?"

Bhuvaneshwar Babu paused slightly before saying, "Yes."

"New?"

"New?"

The old man laughed. "New among pensioners. One can tell from the face."

The others sitting on the veranda laughed too. Bhuvaneshwar Babu smiled faintly, but he did not like the expression "new among pensioners." During his service people had called him "Babu Saheb," some "Bhuvaneshwarji," some "Barka Babu." In the word "pensioner," it seemed as though age had been written where a name should have been.

He asked, "How long have you been coming?"

"Eighteen years," the old man said. "I was a khalasi in the Railways. Now half my pension goes on medicine, half on the household. But I like bank day."

"Why?"

"My daughter-in-law says, Babuji, give it to me, I'll withdraw it for you. But I say no. The pension comes to me, so I will go to the bank." He laughed again. "At least once a month my kurta gets ironed."

The remark seemed rather light to Bhuvaneshwar Babu. Yet the old man's kurta truly was neatly ironed, and the gamchha looked freshly washed.

The elderly woman, who had been sitting quietly on the iron bench, said, "He comes to show his kurta. We come to see people's faces."

Everyone laughed again. The woman introduced herself as Janaki Devi. Her husband had been a primary-school teacher and had died five years earlier. She received a family pension.

Looking at Bhuvaneshwar Babu, Janaki Devi asked, "Which department?"

"Land Records Office."

"Oh, then you are a man of papers."

Bhuvaneshwar Babu replied instinctively, "Can work be done without papers?"

Janaki Devi took a folded sheet from her bag. "See this. The bank people had told me to submit a life certificate. My grandson did it online. Even so, I keep this paper. When there is paper in hand, the mind stands firmer."

Bhuvaneshwar Babu took the paper and examined it. Everything was in order. Without thinking, he said, "The place for the signature is blank here."

Janaki Devi put on her spectacles and looked. "I give my thumb impression there."

"Right -" Bhuvaneshwar Babu stopped. "Then it is all right."

Janaki Devi said, "My thumb has been doing my work longer than my name has."

Bhuvaneshwar Babu handed the paper back. Unbidden, he remembered how many elderly women's names he had written beside their thumb impressions during his service. At the time the sight had seemed part of a rule, not part of a human life.

By half past nine there were fifteen people on the veranda. Some were pensioners, some farmers, some had come to open accounts. The bank guard arrived and lifted one side of the shutter, then began sweeping inside. People started forming a line.

Bhuvaneshwar Babu moved forward at once and secured the seventh place. Janaki Devi stood behind him. The railway pensioner was in front.

"Will there be tokens?" someone asked.

The guard said, "The machine is broken. Stay in the queue."

Bhuvaneshwar Babu's brows tightened. A system without tokens? He thought the branch manager ought to be told. Then he remembered: he did not know the branch manager, and the branch manager did not know him either.

At five past ten the bank opened. The queue moved inside. The fans started, computers came alive, and employees took their places behind the glass counters.

Bhuvaneshwar Babu held his passbook tightly. His mobile still showed no message about the pension being credited.

The railway pensioner turned back and asked, "The first pension makes one afraid, doesn't it?"

Bhuvaneshwar Babu said, "Afraid of what? All my papers are in order."

"Even when the papers are in order, one feels afraid. I did too."

"Why?"

The old man thought for a moment. "I did not understand then. Now I do. In the days of a job, money may have been little, but one knew what would happen next month. On the first pension day, it feels as though next month will no longer arrive by itself - one will have to wait for it."

Bhuvaneshwar Babu did not fully understand what he meant. The pension was credited automatically. What was there to wait for?

The computers at the counters were slow. Each person took five or seven minutes. The queue advanced in fits and starts.

Behind Bhuvaneshwar Babu now stood a thin old man named Rahman Ansari. He kept patting his pockets. Suddenly he asked Bhuvaneshwar Babu, "Brother, where do I write the account number on this withdrawal slip?"

Bhuvaneshwar Babu took the slip. "Here."

"My eyesight is poor. Would you fill it in for me?"

For a moment Bhuvaneshwar Babu was silent. During his service people used to crowd around his desk asking him to fill forms, and he would usually say, "There is a form-writer sitting outside. Get it filled there." Today he bent over the slip.

"Name?"

"Rahman Ansari."

"Amount?"

"Three thousand."

"Why withdraw so little?"

Rahman Ansari laughed. "Let the rest stay in the account. If it stays at home, my grandson will say, Dada, I want this, I want that. If it stays in the bank, I can say - there isn't any."

Bhuvaneshwar Babu laughed too. He filled in the slip. At the end, indicating the proper place, he said, "Sign here."

"I do sign, but the letters change every time."

"What if they change?"

"The bank people say the signature doesn't match." Rahman Ansari showed him his hand. "The hand has grown old. How can the signature remain young?"

Bhuvaneshwar Babu handed the slip back and looked at the man's hand. His fingers trembled.

The queue moved two places forward.

Behind the glass, a young woman employee looked at an old man's passbook and said, "Dada, your life certificate has not been updated." The old man became anxious. The grandson who had come with him took out his phone and began showing something on it.

A faint tightness entered Bhuvaneshwar Babu's chest. He opened his file again and checked his life certificate. The seal was clear. The date was correct.

From behind him Janaki Devi said, "Your papers must have been checked four times already."

Bhuvaneshwar Babu turned. "Caution is good."

"It is," she smiled. "But paper does not get frightened. We do."

Bhuvaneshwar Babu gave no reply.

After that the queue did not move at all for nearly twenty minutes. The server had gone down. The employees began making phone calls. The guard kept asking people to remain calm.

There were too few chairs inside the bank. Elderly people sat near the floor by the wall, leaned against window frames, or stood wherever they could. Bhuvaneshwar Babu remained standing at first, but the railway pensioner shifted aside on his bench and said, "Babu, sit down. In a pension queue, rank is not taken into account."

The sentence pricked Bhuvaneshwar Babu a little, but his legs had begun to ache. He sat down.

The railway pensioner's name was Shambhunath Paswan. He took a small box from his pocket and began cutting betel nut.

"What do you do at home?" Shambhunath asked.

Bhuvaneshwar Babu replied easily, "Nothing in particular yet. I put some papers in order. I read the news."

"Grandchildren?"

"One granddaughter, in Patna."

"You must see her on the phone."

"Yes."

"I have three grandsons at home. They make such a racket that sometimes I come to the bank in search of peace."

Janaki Devi laughed. "He is lying. Nobody listens to him at home, so he comes to the bank to talk."

Shambhunath laughed. "Both things are true."

After a while Rahman Ansari too sat nearby. For no particular reason, conversation began among the four of them - the price of medicines, the electricity bill, potatoes in the bazaar, grandchildren's studies, the old railway line, schoolteachers, new bank rules.

At first Bhuvaneshwar Babu only listened. Then, now and again, he began to answer.

Janaki Devi said, "My son says, Ma, why do you go to the bank? You have an ATM card. I tell him, the card will give me money, but it will not give me people's voices."

Rahman Ansari said, "I am afraid of the ATM. A machine will give money, but it will not ask - is everyone at home well?"

Shambhunath smiled. "The bank people don't ask that either."

"Not the bank people. The people in the queue ask," Janaki Devi said.

Bhuvaneshwar Babu quietly watched them.

The server was still down. It was half past eleven. Bhuvaneshwar Babu thought how many people he would have scolded if such disorder had occurred in his office. People used to wait before his desk; from inside he would call, "Next." Someone would enter carrying a file. One person's papers incomplete, another's copy blurred, another's name wrong. The authority to decide - however small - had rested in his hands.

During the first week after retirement many people had phoned. "Babu Saheb, where can I get a copy of this khatiyan?" "Which cupboard is that file in?" "Do you have such-and-such employee's number?" He told everyone what they needed. In the second week the calls became fewer. By the third, they had nearly stopped.

One day he himself phoned an old colleague, Manoj, and asked, "Everything all right at the office?" Manoj said, "Yes, Babuji, it is going on slowly." Then, five minutes later, he added, "Someone has come in; I'll talk later."

"It is going on slowly." He had been thinking about those words ever since. The office was continuing without him. Perhaps more slowly, perhaps at exactly the same pace.

In the meantime an employee announced that the server was back. The queue formed again. Bhuvaneshwar Babu stood up.

His turn was now third.

Shambhunath Paswan's work was completed first. Taking the passbook in his hand, he looked at the printed amount, then put the book in his bag without counting anything.

Bhuvaneshwar Babu asked, "Won't you check the amount?"

"I checked."

"It is correct?"

"It is what usually comes. If they send extra, will the government itself call me?"

Laughing, he walked out.

Then Bhuvaneshwar Babu's turn came. He went to the glass counter. The young woman employee took his passbook and typed in the account number.

"Name?"

"Bhuvaneshwar Jha."

"Pension?"

"Yes."

After looking at the computer screen, she said, "The amount was credited on the sixth."

Bhuvaneshwar Babu immediately said, "No message came on my mobile."

"Is the mobile number updated?"

"Yes."

"Sometimes the message doesn't come. I'll print the passbook."

The printer rattled. A new line appeared. Bhuvaneshwar Babu took the passbook through the opening in the glass. The amount was correct. Exactly the same as the previous month.

The tightness he had carried inside him since morning loosened in an instant. Yet the relief was not as great as he had expected.

The young employee looked towards the next customer and said, "Next."

Bhuvaneshwar Babu moved aside. Standing near the counter, he suddenly remembered that during his service he too had said "Next" hundreds of times a day. What was happening inside the person who moved away with a file in hand - had he ever once wondered?

Behind him, Rahman Ansari came forward with his withdrawal slip. The employee looked at it and said, "The signature does not match."

Rahman Ansari became flustered. "Sister, my hand trembles."

"Sign again."

He did. The employee checked the screen once more.

Without thinking, Bhuvaneshwar Babu returned to the counter. "His hand trembles. Look at the old signature - the main strokes are the same."

The young woman looked at him. "Are you with him?"

Bhuvaneshwar Babu was about to say "No," but Rahman Ansari immediately said, "Yes, he is with me."

Bhuvaneshwar Babu fell silent.

The employee checked a few more things, consulted a senior colleague, and then accepted the slip.

When Rahman Ansari came outside with the money, he searched for Bhuvaneshwar Babu and said, "If you had not been there, I would have had to stand in the queue again."

Bhuvaneshwar Babu said, "I did nothing. The rules allowed it."

"Even so." Counting his three thousand rupees, Rahman Ansari said, "Sometimes it is enough simply to have beside you someone who understands the rules."

It was an ordinary sentence. But Bhuvaneshwar Babu remained silent for a few moments.

At the tea stall outside the bank, Shambhunath Paswan was already standing. Janaki Devi too was sitting with tea.

"New pensioner!" Shambhunath called from a distance. "Did you get the money?"

This time the word "new" did not annoy Bhuvaneshwar Babu. He said, "I did."

"Then the tea is on you."

Janaki Devi immediately objected, "With the first pension people take sweets home, and you will drink his tea?"

Shambhunath said, "The people at home will eat the sweets. I will drink the tea."

Everyone laughed. Bhuvaneshwar Babu paid for four cups of tea.

As they drank, no one asked what post he had held in the Land Records Office, how many files had gone out bearing his signature, or over whom he had exercised authority. Someone merely asked, "Where is your home?" "Where does your son live?" "Do your knees hurt?" "What date will you come next month?"

Bhuvaneshwar Babu kept answering.

When the tea was finished, Shambhunath said, "We usually meet around the seventh. Whether the pension comes earlier or later, I come anyway."

"Why?" Bhuvaneshwar Babu asked again, although by now the answer was beginning to become clear.

Shambhunath shrugged. "The days at home are very long."

Janaki Devi added, "And here the queue is never very short."

Everyone laughed again.

Bhuvaneshwar Babu walked home. The sun had grown strong. The file was tucked under his arm, the passbook inside it. The amount was safe in the account. All the fears of the morning - that the pension might have stopped, that some paper might be wrong, that the bank might send him running from place to place - had proved groundless.

Yet as he walked, he understood that the tightness in his chest since morning had not been about the amount alone.

For three months the shape of his day had seemed to be shrinking. Earlier there had been a fixed time to leave home, people waiting for him, files arriving on the desk, telephones ringing. Now even after he had read the entire newspaper in the morning, the clock had not yet reached ten. Vimala Devi remained occupied with her own work. His son said on the phone, "Rest, Babuji."

Slowly the word "rest" had begun to sound to him like "no one needs you."

He stopped in front of a stationery shop on the way. Out of old habit his eyes went to the red pens. Then, for no particular reason, he bought an ordinary blue one. The shopkeeper returned five rupees in change.

When he reached home, Vimala Devi asked, "Did the pension come?"

"Yes."

"Then why so late?"

Taking off his shoes, Bhuvaneshwar Babu said, "The server was down."

After a moment he added, "I met some people."

Vimala Devi asked, "What people?"

Bhuvaneshwar Babu began listing names: "Shambhunath Paswan, from the Railways; Janaki Devi, the schoolmaster's wife; Rahman Ansari..."

Vimala Devi looked at him in surprise. "You got acquainted with everyone?"

"There was time in the queue."

After lunch, Bhuvaneshwar Babu went to put the old file back in the cupboard. The red pen was inside it. He took it out and placed it in the desk drawer. The new blue pen remained in his pocket.

At three o'clock there was a call at the door. Sonu, a boy from the neighbourhood, had come holding an application form.

"Babuji, this is the scholarship form. Father is away. Will you fill it in for me?"

The first words that rose to Bhuvaneshwar Babu's lips were, "Get it filled at the cyber shop." But before the sentence could be completed, he remembered the bank withdrawal slip.

He said, "Sit. Let me read it first."

Sonu pulled up a chair and sat down. Bhuvaneshwar Babu opened the application. The paper was simple: name, date of birth, school, bank account, income certificate. He read each line aloud, and Sonu answered.

Halfway through, Bhuvaneshwar Babu opened the drawer to look for the red pen. His hand went to it, then stopped. He took the blue pen from his pocket instead.

When the form was complete, Sonu said, "Thank you, Babuji."

"Attach all the papers."

"Yes."

Sonu left.

From inside, Vimala Devi asked, "Have you opened the office again?"

Bhuvaneshwar Babu laughed. "No."

He looked at the table where the completed form had been. There was nothing there now.

"It was only one paper," he said.

In the evening Neeraj called. At the end of the conversation, as was his habit, the son said, "Rest, Babuji. You don't have to worry about work any more."

This time Bhuvaneshwar Babu did not become irritated as he usually did. He only said, "I am not worried about work."

Neeraj began saying something else at the other end. Bhuvaneshwar Babu kept looking out of the window. Sonu was running down the lane, carrying the same application in his hand.

After putting down the phone, Bhuvaneshwar Babu opened the passbook once more. The pension entry for the sixth was printed there clearly. He looked at it once and closed the book.

Whether there would be any need to go to the bank on the seventh of the following month, he did not yet know. The amount might arrive beforehand. A message might come on the mobile too.

Even so, in his mind Bhuvaneshwar Babu counted forward to the seventh.

Then he opened the drawer and placed the blue pen beside the red one. The two pens lay there quietly.

Story 8

Two Letters

Sudhanshu Babu always kept the umbrellas hanging behind the door. One black, one blue, one light grey. The black umbrella was his, the blue one belonged to his wife, Malati Devi, and the grey umbrella belonged to no one —at least, no one in the house called it their own.

The grey umbrella had hung there for six years. Its cloth had faded in places, fine rust marks had appeared on two of its metal ribs, and the wooden handle had grown smooth. Just below the handle, two letters scratched with a small knife were still visible: "R. C."

Ramakant Chaudhary.

Sudhanshu Babu read the full name in his mind, but did not say it aloud.

Clouds had gathered since morning that day. It was September rain— neither a full downpour nor a complete pause. Water stood between the courtyard bricks, the tulsi platform was wet, and heavy drops fell now and then from the edge of the roof.

Malati Devi asked, "Is it necessary to go to college today?"

Folding the newspaper, Sudhanshu Babu said, "I have a class. Second period."

"Will students come on a day like this?"

"Some will certainly come."

He rose and began getting ready. A year and a half remained before the end of his service in the Maithili Department. Once, failing to reach college on a rainy day had seemed to him a breach of discipline. That conviction had loosened a little now, yet sitting at home still did not come naturally to him.

At a quarter to nine he came to the door. He tried to open his black umbrella. It opened halfway, then one rib slipped loose from inside. He forced it again. The cloth sagged crookedly to one side.

Watching from behind, Malati Devi said, "I told you yesterday to get it repaired."

"I forgot."

"Then take the blue one."

Sudhanshu Babu reached for the blue umbrella, but Malati Devi said, "Its catch is loose too. If there is wind, it will turn inside out."

Their eyes went to the grey umbrella at the same time.

Without saying anything, Malati Devi went inside. Sudhanshu Babu stood there for a few moments. The drops in the courtyard had begun to fall more heavily.

He took down the grey umbrella. There was no dust on it; Malati Devi wiped it from time to time. The moment the handle came into his hand, there rose the mingled smell of old leather and damp wood. Sudhanshu Babu felt he had known that smell somewhere before.

From inside Malati Devi called, "Does it open or not?"

Sudhanshu Babu opened it in the courtyard. The umbrella trembled once, then spread fully. There was a small hole in one corner of the cloth, but it would serve.

"It is all right," he said.

Malati Devi came to the door. Her eyes fell on the letters on the handle, then on Sudhanshu Babu's face. "You have taken it out after a long time."

"Mine is broken."

"I did not say anything."

"Nor did I."

After those words both felt a little awkward. Malati Devi went back inside. Sudhanshu Babu opened the umbrella and stepped into the lane.

Ramakant had been dead for six years. Very few people at the college now remained who remembered him as "Ramakant Sir." Some of the newly appointed teachers had heard the name; some had not. Two books written by him were still in the department's old cupboard, but dust settled quickly now on their spines.

Sudhanshu Babu and Ramakant had been appointed in the same year. They sat in the same room, drank tea at the same tea stall, and often walked together to the station after college. In thirty years of acquaintance there had been so much between them that it was difficult to tell it like a story, from a clear beginning to a clear end. Their friendship had formed slowly, and its ending too had not come suddenly on any one day.

Yet in his mind Sudhanshu Babu had marked one day.

That day too, it had rained.

Water had collected at the bend in the lane. Sudhanshu Babu walked with the rim of the umbrella lowered slightly. Two schoolchildren were splashing barefoot through the water. One child looked at the grey umbrella and said, "Babu, that umbrella is very old."

Sudhanshu Babu smiled involuntarily. "Yes. It is old."

The child ran on.

On the main road he found a rickshaw and got in. The rickshaw-puller reached to fold the umbrella and place it behind the seat. Sudhanshu Babu said at once, "I'll keep it."

The rickshaw-puller withdrew his hand.

By the time he reached college the rain had eased a little. Ramvilas, the peon, stood beneath the awning by the main gate. Shaking the umbrella, Sudhanshu Babu went in. Ramvilas stared at it.

"That looks like Ramakant Sir's umbrella."

Sudhanshu Babu's hand stopped for a moment. "You still remember?"

Ramvilas laughed. "He had scratched letters on that handle. He used to say all umbrellas in a college are the same colour; if there is no name, people exchange them."

Sudhanshu Babu looked at the handle. The letters "R. C." were very small.

Ramvilas said, "Once he took my umbrella home too. The next day he came saying, 'Ramvilas, your umbrella is healthier than I am.'"

He laughed. Sudhanshu Babu laughed a little too, then immediately walked towards the department.

In the room, Praveen, a young assistant professor, was already seated with his laptop open, writing something. Sudhanshu Babu placed the umbrella in a corner. Praveen looked up and said, "Sir, very few students have come today."

"We shall teach however many have come."

Looking at the umbrella, Praveen said, "That is a beautiful old design. You do not get handles like that now."

Sudhanshu Babu merely said, "Hmm."

The class began at ten past ten. There were fourteen students. The subject was memory and the present in modern Maithili fiction. It was an old unit in the syllabus, one Sudhanshu Babu had taught for many years. As he wrote on the blackboard, "Memory changes the present," the chalk broke in his hand.

He took another piece of chalk.

A girl asked, "Sir, is memory true, or do we change it later?"

Sudhanshu Babu paused before answering. Usually, when asked such a question, he gave an example at once. Today the words did not come quickly.

"Both," he said at last. "The event is one thing, but the form in which we keep it in the mind can change with time."

The student asked again, "Then which one is the truth?"

There was a little laughter in the room. Sudhanshu Babu smiled too. "That is a good question for a storyteller, and a difficult one for an examination."

Everyone began to write.

He turned towards the blackboard, but before his eyes there suddenly appeared that rainy day from six years earlier.

Ramakant had come to his house that afternoon. It was the same grey umbrella. The cloth had looked almost new then.

For three months the two of them had barely spoken. The cause was so slight that now, even to state it fully in his own mind embarrassed Sudhanshu Babu. On a college selection committee, Ramakant had supported a young candidate, while Sudhanshu Babu had pressed particularly for one of his former research students. The younger candidate had been appointed.

Sudhanshu Babu had never openly said that he was hurt. He had merely stopped going for tea with Ramakant, stopped walking with him to the station, and limited himself in the department to whatever conversation was necessary.

At first Ramakant had tried two or three times to laugh the matter away. Then he too had fallen silent.

On that rainy afternoon Ramakant had appeared unexpectedly at the house. Malati Devi made tea. Sudhanshu Babu sat on the veranda. The lower part of Ramakant's pyjamas was wet.

"There is a lot of water on the road," he said.

Sudhanshu Babu replied, "That happens in the rains."

Ramakant was silent for a few moments. Then he took a paper from his pocket and said, "I have to go to Patna tomorrow."

"Why?"

"I have to see a doctor."

Sudhanshu Babu did not take the paper. "There are no doctors here?"

Ramakant gave a faint laugh. "There are. One of those doctors has sent me to Patna."

Malati Devi set down the tea and went inside.

Holding the cup, Ramakant watched the steam for a long time. Then he said, "Can you come with me?"

For years Sudhanshu Babu kept that sentence in his memory in a form that made Ramakant's question seem merely polite: "Can you come with me?"—like an ordinary invitation to which it was easy to say no.

That day Sudhanshu Babu had answered at once, "I don't have time just now."

That was all.

Ramakant nodded. "All right."

After a while he got up to leave. The rain was very heavy by then. From inside, Malati Devi said, "Stay a little longer in this."

Ramakant said, "I'll get a rickshaw."

The umbrella remained hanging in a corner of the veranda. No one noticed.

The next morning Sudhanshu Babu saw it. He thought of taking it to college, then did not. "He will come and take it," he told Malati Devi.

Ramakant went to Patna. Two weeks later came the news that he had a serious blood disorder. Treatment began. Sudhanshu Babu telephoned twice. The first conversation was brief; the second time Ramakant's son answered.

"Babuji is asleep," the son said.

Sudhanshu Babu said, "When he wakes, tell him I had called."

He kept thinking that he would call again.

Three months later Ramakant was gone.

The class bell rang. The students began to rise. Sudhanshu Babu looked at the sentence on the blackboard—"Memory changes the present." He wiped the board clean with the duster.

On her way out, the girl said, "Sir, the answer to the question is still incomplete."

"Which question?"

"Which one is the truth?"

Sudhanshu Babu smiled slightly. "Next class."

By afternoon the rain had grown heavy again. The sound of drops filled the roof of the department. While eating, Praveen asked, "Sir, Ramakant Sir was an old friend of yours?"

"Yes."

"I once read an article of his. The language was very simple."

"He wrote simply."

"What was he like personally?"

Before answering, Sudhanshu Babu looked at the umbrella. "Very talkative."

Praveen laughed. "The opposite of you."

"In some ways."

Praveen opened his lunch box again and continued eating. The conversation ended.

Sudhanshu Babu suddenly remembered that Ramakant had not been a talkative man. Not, at least, in his last ten years. He had simply talked more in front of Sudhanshu Babu. Sudhanshu Babu understood the difference only now.

College ended at three. The rain showed no sign of stopping. Students stood along the veranda. Some had motorcycles, some umbrellas; some were calling home to ask for a vehicle.

Sudhanshu Babu opened the grey umbrella. As he reached the gate, a voice called from behind, "Sir!"

He turned. Vishal, a first-year student, came running with a book held over his head. "May I walk with you as far as the bus stand? I didn't bring an umbrella."

Sudhanshu Babu was instinctively about to say, "I am in a hurry." The sentence reached his throat, but did not come out.

He lifted one side of the umbrella. "Come."

They walked together. The umbrella was a little small for two people. Sudhanshu Babu's right shoulder was getting wet, and Vishal's left arm too.

Along the way Vishal kept talking about the college—the hostel roof leaked, no new books had come to the library, he wanted to stage a Maithili play. Sudhanshu Babu answered now and then with a "Hmm."

Near the bus stand Vishal said, "Sir, you got wet."

"So did you."

"The umbrella is small."

For the first time Sudhanshu Babu looked at the umbrella as a whole. "It did not seem this small before."

Vishal did not understand. His bus arrived. He bowed and got on.

Sudhanshu Babu went and stood beneath the awning of a tea stall. The rain fell across the road like a curtain. Visibility had shortened.

Suddenly he remembered one part of that last meeting which, for six years, he had never remembered completely.

Before saying, "Can you come with me?" Ramakant had been silent for a long time. He had put down his teacup and rested both hands on his knees. His eyes had not been on Sudhanshu Babu but on the rain in the courtyard.

And after asking the question, when he heard Sudhanshu Babu say, "I don't have time just now," he had not immediately said, "All right."

There had been a moment between the two.

A very small moment.

In that moment Ramakant had looked straight at Sudhanshu Babu. Directly. As though he wanted to say something. Then he had looked away.

Sudhanshu Babu understood clearly now that the moment had not vanished from his memory; he himself had repeatedly cut it away. He had kept reducing the event so that his own answer too might seem like a smaller offence.

The tea seller asked, "Tea?"

Sudhanshu Babu started. "Yes."

As he held the tea, his other hand remained around the grey umbrella's handle. His thumb moved again and again over the letters "R. C."

He thought—if he had gone to Patna that day, what would have changed? The illness would still have been there. Perhaps death would still have come.

Whether the friendship would have become what it had once been, he did not know that either.

It was also true that Ramakant himself had not telephoned him during those three months. They had both been adults; the silence had belonged to both of them.

And yet a sentence does not remain merely a sentence. "I don't have time just now."

Sudhanshu Babu finished his tea. The rain had eased a little.

When he reached home, Malati Devi came to the door with a towel. "Your shoulder is completely wet."

"A student walked with me."

Malati Devi took the umbrella. "The hole has grown. Shall I have it stitched?"

Sudhanshu Babu was about to say, "Leave it. What use is it now?" But after a moment's thought he said, "Yes. Have it stitched."

Folding the umbrella, Malati Devi asked, "Will you hang it in the same place again?"

Sudhanshu Babu looked behind the door. There were three hooks there. For six years the grey umbrella had hung separately on the middle hook, like some object in the house meant not for use but only for remembrance.

He said, "Take the black one down. We'll have that repaired. Keep this one in front."

Malati Devi looked at him. "In front?"

"Yes. The umbrella that works should be in front."

Malati Devi said nothing. She opened the wet umbrella and left it in the veranda to dry.

After dinner Sudhanshu Babu took out his old diary. Ramakant's home number was still written there, though the number might have changed. His wife, Sharda Devi, lived in Patna with their son.

Sudhanshu Babu picked up his mobile. Ramakant's son Amit's number was in his contacts. In six years they had spoken only twice—once after the shraddha, once about a copy of a book.

He opened the number and stared at the screen for a long time.

From beside him Malati Devi asked, "Will you call?"

"I don't know."

"Then why have you been looking at the number so long?"

Sudhanshu Babu did not switch off the phone. "I'll ask how Sharda Bhabhi is."

Malati Devi simply said, "Ask," and got up to take her medicine.

Sudhanshu Babu moved his thumb towards the call button, then stopped. It was ten o'clock. "It has become late," he said to himself.

He placed the phone on the table.

In the veranda the grey umbrella stood open. Its cloth was drying. Through the small hole, the yellow light of the bulb fell on the floor like a single point.

Sudhanshu Babu went as far as the door. He looked at the umbrella. Then he picked up the phone again.

He did not call. He merely wrote Amit a short message: "It has been a long time. How is Sharda Bhabhi?"

No reply came immediately after the message was sent. Sudhanshu Babu put the mobile in his pocket; the umbrella was still open in the veranda.

At night the rain began again. Amid the sound of the drops, the mobile chimed once. Sudhanshu Babu reached towards his pocket, then paused for a moment. In the veranda, the old umbrella was slowly drying.

Story 9

The Day the Key Was Handed Over

When Ramcharit Kaka reached the school, the clock showed six forty-seven. The main gate was still closed, the bricks of the veranda looked dark with the night's dew, and water rested on the leaves of the peepal tree in the middle of the grounds.

He took out the small bunch of keys tied at his waist. There were eleven keys on the ring. Five of the eleven were no longer used—the old storeroom, a broken cupboard, the first room of the laboratory, and two locks that had been replaced years ago. Even so, all five keys were still on the ring.

As he opened the gate, the familiar scrape of iron sounded. Without thinking, Ramcharit Kaka ran his hand along the upper bar of the gate. From tomorrow, someone else would do this.

It was his last day at the school.

Thirty-eight years earlier, he had come to this same school as an attendant. At that time there had been two permanent rooms; the rest were under tiled roofs. Now there were eight rooms, an office, a library, a kitchen, toilets and a large iron gate. Only the peepal tree had been there then too.

The first thing Ramcharit Kaka opened was the headmaster's office. He drew the window curtain to one side, blew away the dust that had settled on the table overnight, filled the water jug and set it in place. Then he opened the teachers' room, the classrooms and the library.

He did everything in the same order in which he had done it for decades. He no longer had to think about the order. His feet knew the route by themselves.

At seven twenty, Phulo Devi, the cook, arrived. The moment she saw him she said, "Kaka, today is your last day, isn't it?"

Ramcharit Kaka smiled. "That is what the paper says."

"Then today you won't give the keys to me. You'll give them to the headmaster."

"I'll give the keys to the key-holder. You look after the khichdi."

Phulo Devi laughed. "And who is the key-holder from tomorrow?"

Ramcharit Kaka was silent for a moment. "Whoever has been appointed."

In fact, no new attendant had yet been appointed. An order had come from the block office that, temporarily, the cook and one teacher would open and close the school. Ramcharit Kaka had heard this three times already. Even so, it seemed to him that keys required one definite hand.

By half past seven, the children began to arrive. Some came running, some dragged their schoolbags, some were unwilling to let go of their mothers' fingers. Standing near the gate, Ramcharit Kaka would lift someone's bag, tell another, "Brush the mud off your shoes before you go in," and another, "Don't run. You'll fall."

Ravi from the lower class shouted from a distance, "Kaka, will we get sweets today?"

"Why?"

"Master Sahib said you are leaving."

"Where am I going?" Ramcharit Kaka asked.

Ravi stopped short. He could not think of an answer.

Ramcharit Kaka placed a hand on his head and said, "Go to class. The bell will ring."

With five minutes to go before eight, he went to the iron wheel used as a bell. An electric bell had been installed at the school two years earlier, but it was often out of order. The old iron wheel and hammer still hung by a pillar of the veranda.

Ramcharit Kaka struck it three times—clang... clang... clang...

The children began forming lines in the field.

As he listened to the sound, he remembered his first year, when the bell had actually been a piece cut from a railway track. The headmaster then, Lakshminarayan Babu, had told him, "Time is the school's first teacher. The bell must never be wrong."

Lakshminarayan Babu had died many years ago. The old brass plaque bearing his name lay in the library.

The prayer began. Ramcharit Kaka stood at the far end of the veranda. The children's voices rose together, then sometimes moved ahead of one another, sometimes behind. He heard this every day, but today the voices seemed slightly different. Perhaps it was not the voices that had changed, but the listener.

After the prayer, acting headmaster Sudhir Jha announced over the microphone, "Today is Ramcharitji's last day of service. We shall have a small programme at noon."

The children applauded.

Ramcharit Kaka immediately looked down. He was not accustomed to hearing applause. When the bell rang, classes began; when people clapped, he did not know what he was supposed to do.

When Sudhir Jha stepped down from the platform, he said, "Kaka, all the teachers will be here at twelve. I have informed the BEO Sahib as well; if he gets time, he may come."

Ramcharit Kaka only said, "All right."

He went into the office. The attendance register lay on the table. The teachers came one by one to sign it. There was a separate staff register for Ramcharit Kaka, and on almost the last line of its last page the space for today's date was still blank.

He took his spectacles from his pocket. He looked at his name on the page —"Ramcharit Paswan, Attendant."

The signatures from the previous months did not look alike. Sometimes there was a curve like an R, sometimes "Ra" was clear, sometimes only a line. His hand had grown old, and so had his signature.

He left today's space blank for now.

"Kaka, won't you mark your attendance?" mathematics teacher Manoj Kumar asked.

"I will. The day has only just begun."

Manoj laughed. "Rules even on the last day?"

Ramcharit Kaka said, "Does time run faster on the last day?"

Manoj seemed about to say something, then smiled and went to his class.

After the first bell, Ramcharit Kaka placed the post on the headmaster's table. Two envelopes, one registered letter, and the statement of rice for the midday meal.

Then he took a screwdriver and went to tighten the loose latch on the door of Class Three. It had been loose for three days. Yesterday he had thought, "What is it to me now?" But when he saw it that morning, his hand had picked up the screwdriver by itself.

As he tightened the latch, Rani from Class Three asked, "Kaka, you won't come tomorrow?"

"No."

"Then who will repair the latch?"

Turning the screwdriver, Ramcharit Kaka said, "There are plenty of people who can repair a latch."

"And the bell?"

"The bell too."

Rani did not look satisfied. "But like you?"

Ramcharit Kaka did not answer. He tightened the final screw, opened and closed the door to test it. The latch worked properly.

Some Class Ten students came to the office to submit examination forms. Ramcharit Kaka went on matching the files. He did not know every student's name, but their faces had long been familiar. He remembered stories such as

whose father had studied with him, whose grandfather had donated bricks when the school's first building was being constructed.

Tea was made at ten. Five cups were placed in the teachers' room. Ramcharit Kaka usually drank his own tea on the veranda. Today Sudhir Jha said, "Kaka, sit inside."

"I'm fine here."

"Sit today."

Ramcharit Kaka sat on an empty chair inside. The moment he sat down, he felt slightly uncomfortable. For years he had entered this room to serve tea; he had rarely sat there.

Nirmala Devi, the history teacher, said, "Kaka, now you will rest."

Ramcharit Kaka smiled. "At what time does rest begin?"

Everyone laughed. Nirmala Devi too. But Ramcharit Kaka had not asked the question as a joke.

As he left home that morning, his wife, Sita Devi, had said, "From tomorrow you can sleep late."

Ramcharit Kaka had said, "Yes." But once his eyes opened at five in the morning, he did not know how one went back to sleep.

At school, his clock ran by the bells—prayer at eight, the second bell at nine forty, recess at half past ten, lunch at twelve, dismissal at two. At home, time had no such pieces.

As soon as the tea was finished, he stood up.

"Sit, Kaka," Sudhir Jha said.

"I'll go and check the kitchen water."

In fact, there was enough water. He had only been looking for a reason to stand up.

Near the kitchen, Phulo Devi was washing rice. She asked, "Will you wear a garland at the programme?"

"A garland looks good on a tree."

"If you show too much stubbornness today, I'll put it on you by force."

Ramcharit Kaka laughed.

At eleven, a call came saying that the Block Education Officer would not be able to come. Sudhir Jha's face fell a little. He said, "Never mind, we shall hold the programme ourselves."

At eleven forty-five, sudden word came that an inspection team from the block office was at a nearby school and might come here too. The teachers began checking the registers, attendance, the meal register and the grant papers.

The small programme planned for twelve was postponed until "after the inspection."

Ramcharit Kaka said nothing. He rang the bell for the midday meal.

The children stood in line for khichdi. Ramcharit Kaka straightened the bowls of the smaller children, picked up a fallen spoon for someone, told someone else not to break the line.

Ravi asked again, "Sweets?"

Ramcharit Kaka said, "Eat the khichdi. Sweets later."

"When?"

"When they come."

Ravi was satisfied with the answer. For a child, "later" is a very large stretch of time.

By one o'clock, the inspection team had not come. Sudhir Jha remained busy on the phone. The teachers went back to their classes. The two marigold garlands bought for the programme lay wrapped in paper near the office window.

Ramcharit Kaka looked at them once, then began drinking water.

He did not feel bad—he told himself this twice. The work of the school had to go on. Inspection was important. A programme was only a programme.

Even so, when at half past one Phulo Devi silently picked up one garland to look at it and then put it back, Ramcharit Kaka walked out towards the field for a few moments.

The peepal tree's shadow had grown short. Two Class Seven students were playing ball in the field. Beyond them, the fields were white with sunlight.

Ramcharit Kaka placed a hand on the trunk of the peepal tree. The trunk had grown thick. In thirty-eight years, how many children had come and gone, teachers had changed, buildings had changed, nameboards had changed. He thought—if the peepal tree retired too, where would it have to go?

The thought made him laugh at himself.

With ten minutes to go before two, Sudhir Jha said, "Kaka, it seems the inspection people won't come now. We'll stop everyone for five minutes after dismissal."

Ramcharit Kaka said, "The children's buses will leave."

"Then the teachers will stay."

Ramcharit Kaka again said, "All right."

Five minutes to two. He went to the bell. He raised the hammer in his hand.

After this bell, the children would go home. Tomorrow, at this time, he would be at home.

It suddenly occurred to him how many times in thirty-eight years he had rung this final bell, and yet never listened to its sound all the way to the end. The moment he struck it he usually moved to the next task—open the gate, let the children out, check the rooms, close the windows.

Today he struck once and stood still.

Clang...

The sound crossed the veranda and travelled towards the field, returned from the building walls, then slowly weakened.

The second strike.

Clang...

The third.

Clang...

The children's voices rose at once. Chairs scraped, schoolbags closed, doors opened. The school filled with sound.

Ramcharit Kaka lowered the hammer. It seemed to him that the sound of the bell had not ended; it had mingled with the children's voices.

A crowd formed at the gate. Someone said, "Namaskar, Kaka," someone ran out without looking, someone waved a hand. Ravi remembered again —"We didn't get the sweets!"

From the kitchen Phulo Devi called, "Come tomorrow and eat them!"

Laughing, Ramcharit Kaka said to Ravi, "Did you hear? Tomorrow you will eat them, not me."

Ravi did not understand what that meant. He ran off.

After the children had left, the teachers gathered in the office. Sudhir Jha took out the garland.

Just then the phone rang again. The block office wanted some information immediately. Three teachers began searching through papers.

The programme stopped for another five minutes.

Ramcharit Kaka looked at the clock on the wall. Two thirty-five. In his daily routine, the school had to be empty by two fifteen, the windows and doors checked by two thirty, and by two forty he would set out for home.

Slowly, he went out to inspect the classrooms.

On the board in Class One, some child had written in chalk, "Today is Saturday." The vowel mark in "Today" leaned a little crookedly. Ramcharit Kaka picked up the duster, then did not erase the writing.

One window in Class Two was open; he closed it.

The latch in Class Three, which he had repaired that morning, was fine.

A pencil lay on the floor in Class Four. He picked it up and placed it on the teacher's table.

At the back of Class Five, an old map had peeled halfway from the wall. He pressed it with his hand, but without glue it would not stay. The thought came —tomorrow I'll bring some glue and...

He stopped the thought midway.

Tomorrow he would no longer be the attendant.

When he returned to the office, the information requested by the block had been prepared. Sudhir Jha stood with the garland. "Kaka, now just two minutes."

Ramcharit Kaka let them put the garland around his neck. Everyone clapped. Nirmala Devi gave him a gamchha. Manoj Kumar gave him a small diary. Sudhir Jha said, "The school family is grateful for thirty-eight years of service."

The sentence was correct, respectful, but very short.

Ramcharit Kaka was asked to say something.

He stood before them. He looked at the faces of the teachers. Some were very old acquaintances, some new. On the wall behind the office was written the year the school had been established.

He wanted to say—thirty-eight years is a long time. He wanted to say—he had been twenty-two on his first day. He wanted to say—he had enrolled his own son at this school, and later the boy had left for the city. He wanted to say—even when his wife was ill, he had rung the bell before going home. He wanted to say—on the day Lakshminarayan Babu died, the school bell had remained silent for half the day.

But all that came out of his mouth was, "Open the school on time. It is not good if the children have to wait outside."

Everyone smiled.

Ramcharit Kaka added, "And in the rains, water comes in through the Class Three window. Keep an eye on that."

Sudhir Jha said, "Don't worry, Kaka."

Photographs were taken. One teacher held up a mobile. Ramcharit Kaka stood in the middle wearing the garland. Once the photograph had been taken, he felt as though the work were over.

He removed the garland and wrapped it in paper. He tucked the gamchha under his arm. The diary went into his bag.

Then he opened the staff register.

Today's blank space was still waiting for him.

He put on his spectacles and slowly signed—Ramcharit Paswan. The final "n" trembled slightly.

He wrote the date. There was no box for the time.

As he closed the register, he felt strange. Tomorrow, on this page, there would be no blank space opposite his name; there would simply be the next date's line, which no one would fill.

He took out the bunch of keys.

Sudhir Jha said, "Kaka, until a new arrangement is made, why don't you keep the key to the main gate with you? We may need you sometimes."

Ramcharit Kaka's hand paused for a moment.

It would have been very easy to say, "All right."

Instead, he separated the main gate key from the ring and placed it in Sudhir Jha's palm. "If you need me, you people can call."

He placed the remaining keys on the table as well. Eleven small pieces of metal clinked together.

His waist suddenly felt light.

He picked up his bag.

"Shall someone drop you?" Manoj asked.

"My house is right here. Have my feet forgotten the road?"

Everyone laughed. Ramcharit Kaka said namaskar and went out.

When he reached the gate, habit made him turn and look back—windows closed? Office door? Kitchen? Bell? Everything was in order.

His hand moved to close the gate, then stopped. He no longer had the key.

Sudhir Jha came up from behind and closed the gate.

"See you tomorrow, Kaka," he said casually.

Just as casually Ramcharit Kaka said, "Yes."

After ten steps, it occurred to him—why would he come to the school tomorrow?

The village road was bending towards evening. Shops were open, bicycles passed, a cow grazed beside the drain. Ramcharit Kaka had walked this road home every day. Today's road was the same, but the time felt different.

Earlier, on his way home, he would think about the next day's work—the rice would arrive, there was an inspection, the flag rope had to be changed, the holiday notice had to be pasted up. Today the next day was empty.

He thought, tomorrow morning I'll get up at five. Then?

Tea.

Then?

Sweep the courtyard.

Then?

No answer came.

Near the village pond, his old friend Jaynarayan was sitting. From a distance he called, "Ramcharit! So now you've joined our group!"

"What group?"

"The group of people with no work." Jaynarayan laughed.

Ramcharit Kaka laughed too, but the words caught slightly inside him.

Jaynarayan said, "From tomorrow morning, sit here with us. We'll play cards."

Ramcharit Kaka said, "We'll see."

"What is there to see now? You don't have to go ring the bell."

Ramcharit Kaka looked at the water of the pond. The evening light was breaking across it.

"Yes," he said. "I don't have to go ring the bell."

When he reached home, Sita Devi saw the garland at the door. "Good, they gave you a garland too," she said happily.

Ramcharit Kaka showed her the gamchha and the diary.

Sita Devi examined everything with delight. "Did they take a photograph?"

"Yes."

"Did you give a speech?"

"I said two things."

"What?"

"Water comes in through the window."

Sita Devi stared at him, then burst out laughing. "After thirty-eight years, that was your speech?"

Ramcharit Kaka laughed too.

After dinner, he opened the new diary. The first page was completely blank. He wrote his name, then the date. After that, nothing occurred to him.

From old habit, his hand went to his waist. There were no keys.

He took his hand away and began looking out of the window. The school building could not be seen from there, but the upper part of the peepal tree was visible.

From the bed Sita Devi said, "Tomorrow you can get up at your ease."

Ramcharit Kaka said, "Yes."

At four fifty-eight in the morning, his eyes opened.

The house was silent. It was still dark outside. Lying in bed, he went on estimating five o'clock, five ten, five twenty. He did not look at the clock.

At six he got up. He swept the courtyard. He filled water from the tap. Tea was made.

At six forty his body began getting ready by itself—the gamchha on his shoulder, slippers straight, the impulse to look for his bag. He stopped midway.

Sita Devi understood. She said nothing.

At seven, two children were going past the house towards school. One stopped and said, "Kaka, aren't you coming?"

Ramcharit Kaka said, "Now it is all your responsibility."

The child laughed and ran on.

At seven fifty-five Ramcharit Kaka was sitting on the veranda. He could not hear the school bell clearly; it was too far away. But at exactly eight, some metallic sound came faintly through the air, broken by the distance. Once, then again.

Ramcharit Kaka raised his head.

The sound was irregular. Perhaps Phulo Devi was ringing it, perhaps some teacher. There was too long a pause between the first strike and the second.

From inside Sita Devi asked, "What happened?"

"Nothing."

Ramcharit Kaka kept listening. The third strike came.

He did not get up.

A little later he sat on the veranda with the new diary. Beneath the date on the first page he wrote: "The bell rang at eight."

Then he held the pen still for a long time.

Below it he wrote: "I was at home."

He kept looking at the two sentences.

The children's voices faded along the road. The house became quiet again. Ramcharit Kaka did not close the diary. The page remained open.

After some time, he noticed a loose door in the courtyard. He got up and began looking for a screwdriver.

Story 10

Two Cups of Tea

It was an evening in Chaitra. The last patch of sunlight in the courtyard had caught beside the tulsi platform, and the fragrance of tea leaves was drifting slowly out through the kitchen window.

Devaki Devi lifted the lid of the kettle and looked inside once, then lowered the flame. Three cups stood on the table.

For three months, three cups of tea had not been made together in the house.

Two cups were still made, but not at the same time. Harinath Babu's cup was usually placed on the small table in the veranda, while Devaki drank hers sitting on the low stool in the kitchen.

No one had sat down one day and devised this arrangement. It had formed gradually, the way fine dust gathers by itself in the corner of a wall.

That day the third cup was for Tarakant Babu.

Tarakant Babu was an old colleague of Harinath's. The two had taught in the same college for thirty years—Harinath taught history, Tarakant economics. After retirement they met less often, but now and then he would come by on the pretext of a wedding, a shraddha, an illness, or some pension-related paperwork.

Today he had come with an invitation to the wedding of his younger daughter, Rashmi.

The red-lettered card lay on the table in the sitting room. With his spectacles low on his nose, Tarakant Babu was explaining the wedding date once again.

"The eighteenth of Vaishakh. Wednesday. The wedding party will arrive at eight at night. You both must come during the day."

Harinath Babu stroked a corner of the card with one finger. "During the day?"

"Yes. I regard Bhabhi as my own sister. If she isn't there, the family will never let me hear the end of it."

Devaki heard this from the kitchen but gave no reply.

Raising his voice, Tarakant Babu called, "Bhabhi, you heard me, didn't you?"

"I heard."

That was all.

Harinath Babu looked once towards the doorway, then back at the card.

Tarakant Babu may have noticed the small pause, but at once he moved on to other wedding matters—the confectioner, lodging for the wedding party, relatives arriving by train, and the nuisance of having the roof repaired before the rains.

Devaki strained the tea into three cups. She put no sugar in the first cup. Two small spoonfuls in the second. Half a spoonful in the third.

She did not think while doing it about which cup belonged to whom. Her hands knew on their own.

The first cup—Harinath's.

The second—the guest's.

The third—her own.

Harinath Babu had been diagnosed with diabetes five years earlier. The doctor had told him to cut down on sugar, and since then Devaki had made his tea without it.

Three months of silence had not changed that rule.

The silence had changed many things—where they sat, when they ate, the small remarks once exchanged before sleep, the way the newspaper pages were divided in the morning—but not the amount of sugar in his tea.

Devaki carried the tray into the sitting room.

Tarakant Babu looked up from the card. "Oh, Bhabhi, tea too! The doctor has told me to drink less."

"He told you to drink less, not to give it up," Devaki said.

Tarakant Babu laughed. "I like that interpretation."

Devaki placed the tray on the table. Usually she would slide the first cup towards Harinath. Today, with all three cups there together, her hand paused for a moment.

Without sliding any cup towards anyone, she sat down.

Tarakant Babu pushed the wedding card towards Harinath again. "This address is new. I sold the old house."

"You sold it?" Harinath was startled.

"Yes. My son said, what will two old people do in such a large house? I too thought—one cannot spend one's life holding on to walls."

Harinath Babu's finger became still on the edge of the card.

Devaki kept watching the steam from her cup.

Tarakant Babu continued the story on his own. "At first my heart would not agree. Babuji had lived in that house, the children were born there. But Rashmi said, 'Selling a house does not mean selling memory.'"

Harinath said nothing.

Three months earlier Mrinal had telephoned from Hyderabad.

Mrinal was their only daughter. She had married two years before. Now she was pregnant, and the doctor had given the first week of May as the expected time.

That night on the phone Mrinal had said again and again, "Ma, come here now. Stay at least two months. Babu should come too."

From that very moment Devaki had wanted to go. Her daughter was going to become a mother for the first time. She wanted to be beside her, just as her own mother had stayed in Darbhanga for a month when Devaki had given birth for the first time.

Harinath had been listening on speakerphone.

Mrinal said again, "Babu, please look at the tickets."

Without looking at Devaki, Harinath said, "I am not going anywhere. If your mother wants to go, she may."

The sentence was short. His tone was not especially harsh either.

But Devaki could not find her own name anywhere in that sentence.

"Your mother."

As though she were not Harinath's companion in life, only the person connected to him through Mrinal.

After the call ended, Devaki had asked, "Are you telling me to go?"

Folding the newspaper, Harinath had said, "If you want to go, go. Why should you stay because of me?"

Devaki had asked nothing more that night.

The next morning she placed Harinath's tea in the veranda. She drank her own in the kitchen.

The third day too.

Then the arrangement became a rule of the house.

The Hyderabad tickets were never booked. Mrinal asked twice. Devaki said, "There is some work at home."

Mrinal perhaps did not understand, but she did not press very hard.

Tarakant Babu was now describing the measurements of the veranda in his new house. "It is small, but enough for two people."

Harinath tried to laugh. "Where will your books go in a small house?"

"I gave half to the college library. Rashmi took away the other half."

"You gave the books away?"

"I did. What else would I have done? After I die, the children will sell them by the kilo."

Tarakant Babu laughed, but Harinath did not.

Devaki looked at his face.

The hair on Harinath's head had grown very thin. The white around his ears had increased. None of this had changed in three months, yet for some reason Devaki suddenly saw it today.

Tarakant Babu reached for his cup when his mobile rang.

He looked at the screen. "It's from home."

The moment he answered, his face changed.

"What? Now? ... All right, I'm coming."

He put the phone away and stood up. "Bhabhi, forgive me. The confectioner has arrived and there is no man at home. I have to go now."

Devaki said, "At least drink your tea."

"Next time I'll drink two cups," Tarakant Babu said with a laugh.

The words slipped from Devaki's mouth: "Tea made once does not remain for another time."

For a moment Tarakant Babu looked at her, then said easily, "Then I'll drink it at the wedding."

Harinath Babu picked up the card and went with him as far as the gate.

Devaki remained in the sitting room.

There were three cups on the table.

One without sugar.

One with two spoonfuls of sugar—for the guest.

One with half a spoonful—her own.

Outside came the sound of Tarakant Babu's motorcycle starting, then fading at the bend in the lane.

Harinath returned to the sitting room.

Devaki thought of getting up, but did not.

Harinath too did not immediately sit in his usual chair. He stood by the table, looking at the three cups.

"The tea is getting cold," Devaki said.

In three months, this was the first sentence she had spoken to Harinath that was not merely some necessary household information.

Perhaps Harinath understood this. Very softly he said, "Yes."

He picked up the cup on the right side of the table.

Devaki said at once, "Not that one."

Harinath's hand stopped in mid-air.

"That one has sugar," Devaki said. "Yours is this."

She slid the cup on the left towards him.

Harinath looked at the cup, then at Devaki.

Devaki lowered her eyes.

For a few moments only the ticking of the clock could be heard in the sitting room.

Harinath sat down. He lifted the cup and took a sip.

"It hasn't gone cold," he said.

Devaki lifted her own cup.

The guest's cup was still full in the middle of the table.

There was more steam rising from that cup than from the other two, because no one had touched it.

Harinath asked, "Had Tarakant told you earlier that he had sold the house?"

"No."

"To you... to you formally?"

Harinath began with the intimate "to you," then stopped and shifted to the more formal form of address.

Devaki's fingers tightened slightly around the handle of her cup.

"He hadn't told me either."

Silence again.

But this silence was not like the silence of the previous three months.

In the earlier silence, each of them would turn their face in a different direction. Today they were sitting at the same table, with the third cup between them.

Harinath ran a finger around the rim of his cup. "Will we go to Rashmi's wedding?"

Before answering, Devaki took a sip of tea.

"The invitation is for both of us."

"Yes."

After that "yes," Harinath seemed to want to say something more, but the sentence would not form.

Devaki thought he might bring up Hyderabad.

He did not.

Outside, a child rang a bicycle bell while passing through the lane.

Devaki looked at the cup made for the guest. The sugar was settling at the bottom.

"Shall I throw this away?" Harinath asked.

Devaki said, "Leave it."

"It will go cold."

"Let it."

Harinath fell silent.

After a while he took his spectacles from his pocket and began reading the wedding card again.

Devaki kept looking at the red border of the card lying on the table.

"The eighteenth of Vaishakh," Harinath said.

"Yes."

"Mrinal's date is in the first week of May, isn't it?"

Devaki put down her cup.

"The doctor said the seventh of May."

Harinath lowered the card.

"After the eighteenth of Vaishakh..." He left the sentence unfinished.

Devaki looked at him.

Harinath began looking out of the window.

"After that, what?" Devaki asked.

Harinath's lips moved slightly. "Nothing."

Devaki picked up her cup again.

The old anger in her had not vanished all at once. On the contrary, the sentence—"If your mother wants to go, she may"—rang clearly again.

But today, beside that sentence, another unfinished sentence had appeared: "After the eighteenth of Vaishakh..."

The two sentences did not cancel each other out.

They had merely begun to live in the same house.

At dinner that night Devaki served the dal. Harinath took a little less rice than usual.

"Have you taken your medicine?" Devaki asked.

The moment she asked, she herself was surprised. For three months she had continued to place the medicine box on the table, but she had not asked.

Harinath said, "Not yet."

"Take it after dinner."

"Yes."

After that small exchange they again ate quietly.

At night Devaki looked through Mrinal's old messages.

In one message there was a photograph of blue baby clothes. Mrinal had written, "Ma, is this nice?"

Devaki had replied, "It is nice."

Another message: "Have the tickets been booked?"

The reply beneath it was: "Not yet."

Devaki switched off the phone and placed it beside the pillow.

In the other room Harinath was opening the cupboard. She heard the wooden panel slide.

Devaki continued listening to the sound.

After a while came the sound of something heavy being set down.

She did not get up to see.

In the morning, when Devaki went to the kitchen, the old brown suitcase was lying in the veranda beside the sitting room.

That suitcase had been used ten years earlier on a journey to Kashi. Afterwards it had been kept on top of the cupboard.

A thick layer of dust lay over it, but across the middle a broad handprint had been wiped clean.

Harinath was watering the tulsi in the courtyard.

Devaki looked at the suitcase, then at him.

She asked nothing.

In the kitchen she put the tea on.

Out of habit she took out two cups.

She put no sugar in one. Half a spoonful in the other.

For a moment she thought of placing the first cup on the small table in the veranda, as she had been doing for three months.

Then she remembered yesterday's third cup—the guest's cup, which no hand had touched until the end.

She placed both cups on the same tray.

She carried them into the sitting room and set both on the same table.

Harinath was returning from the tulsi platform.

He looked at the table.

Devaki sat down.

Harinath stood for a few moments, then pulled out the chair opposite and sat.

Before lifting a cup, he asked, "This one is without sugar?"

Devaki said, "Since when have I begun putting sugar in your tea?"

A very faint smile came over Harinath's face. At once he lowered his eyes to the cup.

Devaki too lifted her own cup.

The old suitcase lay in the veranda.

There was still dust on it.

Neither of them said anything about cleaning it.

Story II

Across the Road

Shivakant Babu's house stood beside the main road. The road was not very wide, but by evening the sound of bicycles, motorcycles, milk vans, and people returning from the market lingered for a long time.

The old veranda opened towards the road. On it stood a bamboo chair and a small table, and on the wall hung a clock that ran five minutes fast.

Shivakant Babu had been living alone for three years.

His wife, Saroja Devi, had died on a winter night. Since then very few things in the house had changed. The spice tins in the kitchen remained in the same order, the brass lamp in the shrine hung from the same hook, and on the small table to the left of the bed still lay Saroja's spectacle case.

The spectacles were not inside it. During her last month, whenever she went to the hospital, Saroja had worn them. The case had remained empty.

Shivakant Babu had thought many times of putting the case away, but had never done so.

He had retired from the district post office. While he was working, his days had moved by the accounting of hours and minutes. Now time was long, but had fewer marks within it.

The newspaper in the morning. The market at ten. Rice at noon. Sometimes a nap at three. The veranda in the evening.

Night was not the most difficult time. The difficult part was that short stretch of evening when the day had ended but night had not yet taken on its shape.

At that time Shivakant Babu would sit in the chair on the veranda.

Across the road stood a two-storeyed house. A metal gate below, a small courtyard inside, and upstairs, facing the road, a square window.

A pale yellow curtain hung at the window.

Every evening, at almost the same time, a light came on behind it.

At first Shivakant Babu had not paid attention to this. One day after rain, when the electricity returned late, the window suddenly turned yellow in the darkness across the road. It was then that he realized he had been seeing that light almost every evening.

After that, without intending to, he began to learn its time.

At around six forty-five, two or four children returning from school could be seen on the road. Before seven, the milkman would pass ringing the bell on his bicycle. A little after that, the light across the road would come on.

Once the light came on, Shivakant Babu would often fold the newspaper.

Sometimes he switched on the radio. Sometimes he went into the kitchen and warmed the dal. Sometimes he simply remained in the chair.

He did not know the people in that house very well.

Now and then a middle-aged man could be seen by the gate, perhaps the son of the household. Sometimes a young woman brought out a scooter. And behind the upstairs curtain, from time to time, there appeared the outline of an elderly woman.

Shivakant Babu had assumed that the elderly woman was the mother of the family.

He did not know her name.

Once, at the grocery shop, he had heard the shopkeeper call someone "Uma Kaki." Shivakant Babu had thought it must be the elderly woman from that house. Then the detail had not stayed in his mind.

He had not felt any need for that acquaintance either.

The light was simply a light.

Like the peepal tree at the turn in the road. Like the whistle of a distant train that came at eight each night. Like the wall clock that had been running since Saroja's time.

Some things make a place for themselves in a life without ever being properly introduced.

Shivakant Babu's daughter, Swati, lived in Gurugram. She telephoned two or three times a week.

"Babu, don't sit outside in the evening. There are too many mosquitoes."

"The veranda is not outside. It is part of the house."

"Have the mosquitoes been told that?"

Swati would laugh. Shivakant Babu would laugh too.

After the call ended, the veranda would become quiet again.

Once Swati insisted strongly that he come to Gurugram for two months.

Shivakant Babu said, "Who will look after the house here?"

"A house can manage on its own for two months."

"The plants?"

"We'll tell the gardener."

"The shrine?"

Swati was silent for a moment, then said, "The gods can come to Gurugram with you for two months too."

Shivakant Babu laughed, but he did not go.

He felt he could not leave his house.

What exactly there was in the house that held him back, he had never thought through clearly.

One Wednesday evening the air was warmer than usual. The sun had been strong all day, but clouds were gathering in the west.

Shivakant Babu sat on the veranda reading an old editorial in the newspaper. He read the same paragraph twice and realized that not once had he really been paying attention.

The milkman went past.

The temple bell rang.

The wall clock reached five minutes past seven.

Shivakant Babu folded the newspaper.

He looked across the road.

The window was dark.

At first it did not seem especially significant. He thought the light might simply be late coming on.

He leaned back in the chair.

Ten minutes later he looked again.

Darkness.

Even the curtain in the upstairs window was barely visible.

The gate below was closed. There was no light in the courtyard either.

Shivakant Babu got up and went inside. He switched on the radio. The news was playing. The volume was ordinary, yet it seemed very loud to him. He turned it down.

In the kitchen he lifted the lid from the pot of dal.

Then, without heating it, he covered it again.

He returned to the veranda.

The window was still dark.

He looked at the switchboard in his own house. There was electricity. The veranda bulb was on. The streetlights were on too.

"Everyone must have gone out," he said to himself.

Even after saying the sentence, the matter did not end.

He wondered why he had begun wanting to know.

A light had not come on in someone else's house. What was there in that?

People continued to come and go along the road. Three young men were laughing at the paan shop. A child ran after a ball. A motorcycle horn sounded.

Everything was moving as usual.

Only that window was dark.

Shivakant Babu kept tapping his fingers on the arm of the chair.

Suddenly he remembered the last days of Saroja's illness. After returning home from the hospital, Saroja spoke very little at night. But when sleep would not come, she would switch on the small light in the bedroom.

Sometimes Shivakant Babu would say irritably, "I can't sleep with the light on."

Without answering, Saroja would switch it off.

Why this tiny memory had returned after so many years, Shivakant Babu did not know.

He rose and went as far as the gate.

The thought of crossing the road came to him.

Then he stopped.

If he went to that house, what would he ask?

"Why didn't your light come on?"

What would people think of such a question?

He stood at the gate for a while, then went back inside.

Eight o'clock came. The window remained dark.

Shivakant Babu ate very little dinner.

He picked up the phone. Swati's name was on the screen. He thought of calling her.

Then he put the phone down.

It seemed strange to telephone his daughter merely for this reason.

"The light in the house across the road didn't come on, so I felt like hearing your voice"—he could not say such a sentence.

At night the rain began.

Drops kept striking the window glass. Shivakant Babu lay in bed, but sleep came late.

In the morning the road looked washed clean.

He set out for the market. While crossing the road, he involuntarily looked towards the gate of that house.

The gate was closed.

At the grocery shop he bought oil, soap and tea leaves. Raju, the shopkeeper, was putting the things into a bag.

Trying to sound casual, Shivakant Babu asked, "Where has everyone in Mishraji's house across the road gone?"

Without looking up, Raju said, "Uma Kaki has gone to Darbhanga. She had an eye examination. Her son went with her. She'll probably return in two days."

Shivakant Babu said, "Oh."

That was all.

Raju asked, "Did you need something from them?"

"No. I was only asking."

He picked up the bag.

Walking home, he felt a slight relief.

Then he felt almost ashamed of the relief.

Uma Kaki—the name was clear now.

He thought that in three years he had exchanged greetings with the elderly woman only twice. Then why had her absence changed the taste of his dinner the previous night?

No answer came at once.

The second evening the window remained dark too.

This time Shivakant Babu knew why. Even so, he kept looking across the road again and again.

He tried to read the entire newspaper. He played old songs on the radio. He lit the lamp in the shrine.

But the evening was long.

Then a simple thing became clear to him.

He had no use for that light, yet that light was present in his evenings.

He did not talk to anyone there, but merely knowing that life was going on in someone else's house was also a form of company.

He had continued to think that he lived entirely by his own strength. His own time, his own house, his own food, his own illness.

But so many unnamed people had taken places in his routine—the milkman, Raju's shop, the temple bell, the yellow light across the road.

That night Swati telephoned.

"Babu, what are you doing?"

"Sitting on the veranda."

"Again?"

"Yes."

After a pause Shivakant Babu asked, "Does the light in your veranda come on in the evening?"

Swati laughed. "Why?"

"Just asking."

"It does. Anshu studies there."

"All right."

Swati seemed about to say something more, but Shivakant Babu changed the subject.

On the third evening he switched on his own veranda bulb earlier than usual.

The daylight had not entirely faded yet.

The bulb's yellow glow was barely visible in the remaining light of day.

Shivakant Babu remained sitting in his chair.

He wondered what his veranda looked like from across the road.

The question had never occurred to him before.

On the fourth afternoon a car stopped at the gate of the house across the road. Shivakant Babu saw it from his window. A man got out and began unloading luggage. Then Uma Devi stepped out from the back in a white sari. She wore dark glasses.

Shivakant Babu let the curtain fall.

He did not like admitting that he was waiting for evening. Even so, he sat on the veranda five minutes earlier than usual.

The milkman went past.

The temple bell rang.

Darkness thickened along the road.

The window across the road was still dark.

Shivakant Babu turned a page of the newspaper.

Then the window glowed yellow.

He did not keep looking at it for long. He looked once, then lowered his eyes to the newspaper.

But his shoulders relaxed a little.

The next morning he was going to the market. As he crossed the road, he saw Uma Devi sitting on a chair near the gate. She was not wearing the dark glasses; there was a slight swelling around her eyes.

Shivakant Babu greeted her.

Uma Devi raised a hand in reply.

Shivakant Babu took two steps forward, then stopped.

"Are your eyes better now?"

Uma Devi smiled. "The doctor says I'll begin to see clearly in a few days."

"Good."

Then both were silent.

Shivakant Babu had just begun to move on when Uma Devi said, "The light in your veranda came on very early the day before yesterday."

Shivakant Babu stopped.

Quite naturally, Uma Devi said, "I was returning in the car. I saw it from a distance. I knew you were at home."

Having said this, she lightly pressed the corner of her eye with the end of her sari.

For a few moments Shivakant Babu did not answer.

Then he said, "Yes, I was at home."

He walked on towards the market.

That evening Shivakant Babu sat on the veranda. Across the road, the light came on at its usual time.

After a while he rose and went into the kitchen.

This time, unlike before, he did not switch off the veranda light.

The dal kept warming.

The radio played the news softly.

Outside, the traffic on the road thinned.

The road between the two houses was exactly as wide as it had always been.

As Shivakant Babu ladled dal into his bowl, he looked once towards the open doorway.

The veranda light was still burning.

He let it burn.

Story 12

Notice of Name Removal

It had been eight months since Raghunath Mishra died.

His bamboo chair was still on the veranda, though now clothes were often dried on it. His walking stick still stood beside the household shrine. At first no one had dared to move it. Later there seemed no reason to move it either.

Death changes many things first, and then, slowly, a few objects remain as though nothing has changed at all.

Shailendra did not pay attention to this.

He was a clerk in an insurance office in Darbhanga. He left home at half past nine in the morning and returned by seven in the evening.

When his father was alive, the moment he heard the door open he would ask from the veranda, "Late again today?"

Shailendra would usually say, "It is an office, Babu. It doesn't run by looking at the clock."

Raghunath Babu would laugh. "The clock doesn't run. You do."

Sometimes Shailendra laughed at the remark; sometimes it irritated him.

Now, when he came home in the evening and opened the door, no one asked.

For the first few months that silence had been very distinct. Now it too had dissolved into routine.

One Sunday morning, while shaking out the ration bag, Shailendra's wife Malati said, "Babuji's name is still on the card."

Shailendra did not look up from the newspaper. "Let it stay if it is there."

"The shopkeeper says we should have it updated next time. The members of the family have changed."

Shailendra turned the page.

Malati was silent for a while. Then she said, "The death certificate is in the file. There is a copy of his Aadhaar too. We only have to submit an application."

"Next week."

"You said next week last month too."

"Where do I get leave from the office?"

Malati did not answer. It was Sunday, a holiday—they both knew that.

In the courtyard, Shailendra's mother, Kamala Devi, was sitting in the sun sorting paddy. It was difficult to tell whether she could hear the conversation.

After a while she came inside and said, "If the name has to be removed, remove it. A person does not remain alive because his name remains on paper."

For the first time Shailendra looked up from the newspaper.

Kamala Devi carried the plate of paddy towards the kitchen.

The application was not prepared that day either.

Three days later the ration shopkeeper telephoned.

"Shailendra Babu, get the list updated. If a deceased member remains in the system, there can be trouble later."

Shailendra said, "All right," and ended the call.

Three insurance-claim files lay on the desk in front of him at the office. One of them contained a photocopy of a death certificate.

Without thinking, he read the date on it.

Then suddenly he remembered his father's certificate.

That evening, after returning home, he opened the old iron cupboard.

On the upper shelf was the blue file containing the family's papers.

The first page was a land-revenue receipt. The second, an old electricity bill. The third held a copy of his mother's Aadhaar. Behind it was his father's death certificate.

The paper was clean. The name was printed in bold letters—Raghunath Mishra.

Year of birth, date of death, place.

Shailendra stood for a few moments with the paper in his hand.

On the day of the cremation so many people had surrounded him that he had not had a moment in which to be alone.

At the ghat there had been wood, the priest's instructions, phone calls, vehicles, relatives, the evening meal—one task had followed another.

Until the thirteenth day the house had remained full of voices.

On the first morning after everyone had left, Kamala Devi had asked, "Shall I make two cups of tea or three?"

Immediately she herself had fallen silent.

Shailendra had walked out of the kitchen then.

In eight months even that moment had grown blurred.

The death certificate now seemed more solid than all those days surrounding the death.

He put the paper back in the file.

Malati asked, "Shall I prepare the application?"

"Tomorrow."

The next day, on his way to work, he put the blue file into his bag.

After lunch he took half a day's leave.

The supply office was at the rear of the block building.

Around twenty people sat or stood along the veranda. Several notices about schemes and eligibility had been pasted to the wall. The corners of some pages had curled.

People were submitting applications at one window.

Shailendra took a token. Number thirty-seven.

The screen showed thirty-one.

He sat down on a wooden bench.

Beside him, a newly married young woman was filling out an application to have her name added to the card of her new family. An elderly woman with her kept asking, "There won't be any problem if your name is removed from your mother's family card?"

The young woman laughed and said, "My name can't remain in two places, Ma."

In front of them a young man was saying to someone on his mobile, "I live outside, but I need to ask whether my name should remain here or not."

An old man was showing papers and saying that his year of birth had been entered incorrectly.

Everyone had come to put their place in the list right.

There was a name in Shailendra's bag too. But his was not a name to be added or corrected. It was to be removed.

He took out the application form.

At the top it read: Change in Family Details.

In the first box he wrote his own name as the head of the household.

In the second he entered the card number.

In the third section were the options: Add Member / Remove Member / Other Correction.

His pen stopped.

After a few moments he marked "Remove Member."

Below it was written: Name of Member to Be Removed.

He wrote "Raghunath Mishra."

The letters came out clearer than usual.

The next box asked for the relationship.

Shailendra wrote "Father."

Reason.

There the pen stopped again.

The space on the form was small.

There was room enough for the single word "Death."

Shailendra wrote the first letters, then lifted his pen.

Why, he himself did not understand.

Beside him, the young woman was showing her form to the elderly woman and saying, "Look, I wrote 'husband' here."

The older woman said, "Write everything properly, otherwise you'll have to run around again later."

Shailendra looked back at his form.

He completed the word: "Death."

Token thirty-seven was called.

Behind the counter sat an employee of about thirty. An empty tea glass stood beside the computer.

"What work?"

Shailendra handed over the form.

The employee read it. "Removing a member?"

"Yes."

"Deceased?"

"Yes."

"Certificate?"

Shailendra gave him the photocopy of the death certificate.

The employee typed the card number into the system.

The monitor was not fully turned towards Shailendra, but the names could be seen.

Kamala Devi. Shailendra Mishra. Malati Mishra. Saurabh Mishra. Raghunath Mishra.

His father's name was at the bottom.

The employee asked, "Date of death?"

Shailendra looked at the certificate even though he remembered the date.

He told him the date.

The employee kept typing.

Then he paused the mouse and asked, "Remove?"

Shailendra understood that it was only a confirmation required by the system.

Even so, the word sounded different in his ears.

"Yes."

There was a very soft click.

The screen went blank for a moment, then the list returned.

This time there were four names.

Raghunath Mishra was not there.

Shailendra kept looking at the screen.

The employee reached for the printer. "Take the receipt. The update will show in seven to ten days."

The paper came out.

Shailendra took the receipt.

People were waiting behind him at the counter.

He moved aside.

By then the sunlight on the veranda had shifted to one side.

The young woman's work had been completed. She was going down the steps with the elderly woman.

The old man was still arguing about the correction of his birth year.

Shailendra sat down on the bench again.

He was in no hurry to go anywhere.

The receipt said: Request Accepted. Process to Remove Member Initiated.

Below it: Raghunath Mishra. Reason: Death.

Shailendra thought that his hand had not trembled when he lit the funeral pyre at the ghat.

The priest had said, "Offer the water." He had offered it.

He had taken the ashes to the Ganga.

The pind-daan had been performed on the thirteenth day.

Through all those acts he had felt that there was something he had to do.

Here there was nothing left for him to do.

There had been one click, and the list had become shorter.

He did not fold the receipt. He placed it straight inside the blue file.

It was evening by the time he reached home.

Malati opened the door. "Done?"

"Yes."

"Did you get the receipt?"

"Yes."

"Good. We'll check with the shopkeeper next month."

Shailendra took off his shoes and went towards the veranda.

Two dhotis were drying on the bamboo chair.

He lifted them, hung them on the line, and cleared the chair.

Earlier he himself rarely sat in that chair.

That evening he sat down.

Kamala Devi was pouring water over the tulsi plant in the courtyard.

She asked, "The name was removed?"

"Yes, Ma."

Kamala Devi set down the small water pot.

For a few moments she was silent.

Then she said, "That is right."

Having said only that, she went inside.

Shailendra felt like asking—how was it right?

But he did not ask.

Dinner was rice, dal and potato curry.

As Malati served the rice, she said, "Next month the ration will come for one member less."

Then immediately she fell silent.

Kamala Devi was mixing dal into her plate.

She did not raise her head.

Shailendra too said nothing.

After dinner he opened the blue file again.

The receipt lay behind the death certificate.

Two pieces of paper.

One said that Raghunath Mishra had died.

The other said that the request to remove Raghunath Mishra's name had been accepted.

Shailendra had seen the first paper many times.

The second he was seeing for the first time.

It seemed to him that the second paper was harsher.

The death certificate recorded an event.

The receipt arranged an absence.

He closed the file.

Two weeks later Malati returned with the ration.

Whether the bag was a little lighter than before, Shailendra did not weigh.

Showing him the card on her mobile, Malati said, "There are four names now."

Shailendra took the screen. Four names—Kamala Devi at the top, then Shailendra, Malati, Saurabh. That was all.

He handed the phone back to Malati.

Much later that night Shailendra went out to the veranda.

The bamboo chair was empty; he did not sit down.

The walking stick stood beside the wall.

Shailendra picked it up.

The handle was smooth; years of contact with his father's palm had darkened the wood.

He took two steps into the courtyard with the stick, then stopped.

From inside Kamala Devi asked, "What happened?"

"Nothing."

He put the stick back in the same place, then sat in the chair.

A bicycle passed outside the door. Its bell rang.

Inside the house Malati was putting away utensils, Saurabh was studying in his room, and Kamala Devi coughed.

Shailendra remained seated in the darkness of the veranda.

Suddenly he remembered his father's old sentence—"The clock doesn't run. You do."

This time he did not try, as he once would have, to find an answer to it in his mind.

He kept running his palm over the bamboo arm of the chair.

After a while Malati called from inside, "Shall I switch off the light?"

Shailendra said, "Not yet."

The veranda light remained on. Beside the wall, the shadow of the walking stick stretched long across the floor.

His name was no longer on the list.

A few things in the house were still in their places.

Story 13

The Last Page of the Notebook

Sudha Mishra sat alone in an empty classroom at the school.

The afternoon dismissal had taken place long ago. There were no children's voices in the veranda now, only the dry swish-swish of Ramdulari's broom.

Outside the window the peepal leaves moved. Sunlight had crept halfway across the sill.

On the desk lay two piles of Class Seven notebooks.

One pile had been checked. The other remained.

Sudha Devi uncapped her red pen.

She had been teaching for thirty years. Checking notebooks was no longer merely work for her; it had become almost a habit.

Underline a misspelling. Put a question mark beside an incomplete answer. A small tick for neat handwriting.

If someone wrote very well, she would write "Good."

She rarely wrote "Very good." She believed too much praise made children overconfident.

She believed this firmly.

She disliked the language of approximation. She wanted things to be definite.

She picked up the next notebook.

On the cover, in blue ink, was written: "Pallavi Kumari, Class Seven, Roll No. 23."

The corners of the notebook were worn. In two places, pages had been stitched back together with needle and thread.

Sudha Devi opened the first page.

Title: "My Village."

Below it was an old comment in her own red ink: "Complete the sentence."

Second page: "A Rainy Day."

In the margin: "Submitted late."

Third page: "Mother."

Half a page had been written. At the bottom, in red: "Incomplete."

Sudha Devi continued turning pages without pausing.

"Handwriting unclear."

"Write again."

"Answer incomplete."

"Do your work on time."

She had seen sentences of her own like these thousands of times before. There was nothing unusual today.

But as she reached the end of the notebook, her hand stopped.

After the last written lesson there were two blank pages.

Then, on the page just before the back cover, something had been written in tiny pencil letters.

There was no title above it.

The first line read: "We should finish all our work."

Sudha Devi pulled the notebook closer.

The second line: "Being late is a bad thing."

The third: "Crying does not finish work."

The fourth: "Someone who does not do the work always has many excuses."

Sudha Devi put the red pen down on the desk.

That fourth sentence was hers.

Exactly as she said it.

She had said in class countless times, "Someone who does not do the work always has many excuses."

How many times?

She could not count.

The writing continued down the page: "I write slowly."

"I reach home late."

"I feed my little brother, so my homework gets done late."

"When Ma goes to the fields, I look after my brother."

"When my brother cries, I have to stop studying."

"I should learn to write faster."

"I should not cry."

"Madam says, be strong."

Sudha Devi's eyes stopped on that line.

Had she said, "Be strong"?

Yes.

Last month Pallavi had begun to cry in class.

Her notebook had not been submitted. Sudha Devi had asked the reason. Pallavi had remained silent.

Then Sudha Devi had said, "Why cry over such a small thing? Be strong. I want the notebook complete tomorrow."

The sentence had seemed entirely proper to her that day.

Now, on the page, it had taken on another shape.

"Be strong."

As though a child were issuing an order to herself.

Sudha Devi leaned back in her chair.

The sound of sweeping in the veranda had stopped.

Ramdulari must have gone to another room, she thought.

The school suddenly seemed very quiet.

She tried to remember Pallavi's face.

A thin body. Two plaits. The left plait usually loose.

She sat at the edge of the fourth bench.

Even when she knew an answer, she rarely raised her hand.

If someone asked for a pencil, she had the habit of breaking her own pencil in half and giving one piece away.

Had Sudha Devi noticed these things before?

She had seen them. But seeing and paying attention were not the same thing.

She read the page again.

Lower down, the pencil writing grew fainter.

"Ma says if I study, my life will become better."

"I want to study."

"Sometimes I feel sleepy."

"Feeling sleepy is not a bad thing, but then the homework remains unfinished."

"Unfinished is bad."

This time Sudha Devi's eyes went to her own red comment—"Incomplete."

On the third page of the notebook.

When she had written that single word, she had seen nothing particular in it.

Now it seemed as though the word had not been written on the notebook at all, but on the child's forehead.

Sudha Devi looked out of the window.

The sunlight on the peepal leaves was fading.

She remembered herself in Class Seven.

Her name then had been Sudha Kumari.

There were five brothers and sisters at home. She was the eldest daughter.

Her mother was ill for long stretches of time.

Before leaving for school in the morning, blowing the cooking fire, tying her little sister's hair, filling two glasses of water—these were all part of her share of the household.

She used to reach school late.

The old headmaster, Nandkishore Babu, would look at the clock and say, "Time is equal for everyone."

That sentence had remained inside Sudha Kumari for a long time like a thorn.

One day she had arrived late. Her mother's fever had not gone down all night.

She remembered being made to stand in the veranda.

The class continued inside.

She kept copying the lesson into her notebook outside.

That day she had taken a vow within herself: she would not be late.

And indeed she began to be late less often.

She learned to finish many things on time.

Her examination marks were good. She completed her training. She found a job.

People said, Sudha is disciplined.

She liked hearing it too.

Gradually discipline ceased to be merely one of her qualities. It became her identity.

She had never questioned that identity.

Outside the window two students ran past. Perhaps they had come back from the playground to fetch their ball.

One said to the other, "Hurry. Madam is still here."

Both lowered their voices.

Sudha Devi heard them.

She tried to smile faintly, but the smile did not fully form.

Pallavi's last page was still open.

At the very bottom was one small line: "I am not bad."

It had been crossed out in pencil.

Below the crossed-out line she had written again: "I will improve."

Sudha Devi stared for a long time at the sentence that had been struck through.

"I am not bad."

Crossed out.

"I will improve."

Left standing.

She picked up the red pen.

She wanted to write something.

"Good."

"Very good."

"You have written what you feel."

No sentence seemed right.

She put the pen down again.

Just then there was a voice at the door.

"Madam?"

Sudha Devi looked up.

Pallavi stood there.

In her hands was a small steel container.

"What is it?"

"Ma told me to give this to Ramdulari Kaki. She wasn't at home. I thought she might be at school."

"She is at the back. Give it to her."

Pallavi turned to go.

Sudha Devi said, "Pallavi."

She stopped.

"Your notebook is here."

Pallavi's face changed slightly. She looked at the desk.

"Yes, Madam."

"What you wrote on the last page..."

Pallavi's hands tightened around the steel container.

"That... I was practising."

"Practising what?"

"Just... writing."

Sudha Devi was silent for a few moments before answering.

"Your mother goes to the fields?"

"Yes."

"Every day?"

"In the season. Right now there is paddy work."

"How old is your little brother?"

"Four."

"You look after him?"

"When Ma is late."

"And then your homework?"

Pallavi gave a slight shrug.

"I do it at night."

"You feel sleepy?"

Pallavi looked first at the notebook, then at Sudha Devi's face.

She could not tell whether this question came before a scolding or instead of one.

"Sometimes."

Sudha Devi felt like saying: divide your time properly.

Then she felt like saying: the work must be completed.

Both sentences came as far as her tongue, but neither came out.

She asked only, "Do you tell your brother stories?"

For the first time Pallavi's eyes brightened a little.

"Yes. He listens to the same story again and again."

"Which one?"

"The Bird and the Pond."

"You made it up?"

"Yes."

"Have you written it down?"

"No."

Sudha Devi closed the last page of the notebook.

"Bring it written."

Pallavi immediately asked, "Tomorrow?"

That "tomorrow?" sounded like a request for a deadline.

Sudha Devi heard it.

"Whenever it is done."

Pallavi was silent.

"Even if it is unfinished, bring it."

This time Pallavi truly looked at her face.

"Even unfinished?"

"Yes."

"Yes, Madam."

She went towards the back carrying the container.

For a while Sudha Devi kept looking towards the doorway.

Then she opened the notebook again.

On the last page, "I am not bad" had been crossed out.

She took the red pen in her hand.

Once again she felt the urge to write something beside the crossed-out sentence.

This time too, she wrote nothing.

She placed the notebook on top of the checked pile.

On the way home, Sudha Devi stopped at the vegetable stall.

She bought okra, potatoes and coriander.

The shopkeeper said, "Madam, very late today?"

Sudha Devi looked at the time.

Half past five.

"Yes. I was checking notebooks."

When she reached home, her younger sister telephoned.

Her sister now lived in Purnea.

They spoke about two or three household matters.

Suddenly Sudha Devi asked, "Do you remember Nandkishore Babu?"

Her sister laughed. "The one who made you stand in the veranda for being late?"

Sudha Devi fell silent.

"How do you remember that?"

"You came home and cried so much. Ma said, 'If the teacher scolds you, it is for your own good.'"

"I cried?"

"A lot."

Sudha Devi still held the phone in her hand. Evening was descending outside the window.

She remembered that day, but she did not remember her own crying.

After a few moments she said, "All right, we'll talk again," and ended the call.

She went into the kitchen.

As she cut the okra, one line kept returning to her mind: "I am not bad."

That night she opened her old trunk.

Inside were certificates, training papers, two of her mother's old saris, and a few notebooks.

She had not looked at those notebooks for many years.

On one thin notebook was written: "Sudha Kumari, Class Seven."

She did not smile.

She turned the pages.

The handwriting was not neat. Ink had spread in many places.

On one page was a teacher's comment: "Submitted late. Learn discipline."

Sudha Devi touched the sentence with a finger.

Below it, in her childhood handwriting, was half an essay.

Title: "My Mother."

The essay stopped midway.

The page after it was blank.

Why she had never completed it, she could not remember.

Perhaps her mother had been ill.

Perhaps she had not had time.

Perhaps she simply had not felt like it.

All three were possible.

Sudha Devi did not close the notebook.

She left it open on the table.

The next day in class she was checking homework.

Pallavi held out her notebook.

Sudha Devi turned the pages in the usual way.

The work was half finished.

Earlier she would have written "Incomplete" in red.

Her pen went to the page.

She made a small tick.

Then she wrote in the margin: "Add the rest whenever it is done."

She handed the notebook back.
Pallavi read the comment.
She said nothing.
The class continued.
Two days later Pallavi brought a separate sheet of paper.
At the top was the title: "The Bird and the Pond."
The story was not complete.
Its final sentence stopped in the middle: "Then the bird thought that..."
Sudha Devi read it.
"What comes next?"
Pallavi said, "I haven't thought of it yet."
Sudha Devi looked at her for a few moments.
Then she did not fold the sheet. She placed it straight inside the notebook.
"All right."
Pallavi went back to her seat.
The bell rang.
The children rose and ran outside.
Sudha Devi continued gathering the notebooks from the desk.
Pallavi's old notebook was still in her bag.
That evening, as she left the school, Sudha Devi looked at the time.
Ten past five.
She would be late reaching home.
She did not look at the clock again.
She came down from the veranda and walked slowly towards the gate.

Story 14

The Dried Mango Branch

When Malati stepped into the courtyard, she looked first not at the house but at the mango tree. On the right-hand side, where a thick branch used to be, there was now the fresh round scar of a cut.

She stopped.

Prabhakar came out from inside. “You've arrived?”

Instead of answering, Malati looked up and asked, “You cut the branch?”

“Four days ago.”

“Without telling me?”

Prabhakar paused a little. “It split halfway in the storm. One part fell on the tiled roof. I called Jitan and had it cut.”

Malati's eyes went to the roof. Two tiles were new.

“The registry is tomorrow,” Prabhakar added. “I thought this danger should be removed first.”

Malati put her bag down in the veranda. Inside the house there was the smell of closed rooms, dust and old wood. Since their mother died, the house had rarely been opened.

The matter of selling the house had arisen gradually. At first Prabhakar would talk about repairing the roof, the electricity bill and the worry of an empty house; Malati would say on the phone, “See to it.” In the end, Suresh Chaudhary from the village had shown interest in buying the house to open a small clinic.

Malati had signed the consent paper. At the time she had felt no objection. Standing in the courtyard today, it seemed to her that signing a paper and leaving a house were not the same thing.

Prabhakar brought two cups of tea. “There wasn't much sugar. I used what was in the house.”

Malati took the cup. Their mother never made tea this weak. She wanted to say it, but did not.

“Where is the branch?”

“Behind the house, by the wall. Once the wood dries, Sharda Kaki will take it.”

Malati did not get up at once. The steam from the cup slowly faded.

"You could have made one phone call."

Prabhakar said, "The storm came at night. In the morning the roof began to leak. Jitan happened to be available that day. I thought this wasn't a question of making a decision; it was a question of safety."

Malati set the cup on the table. "For you, everything becomes a decision very quickly."

Prabhakar did not answer.

Both understood that they were not speaking only about the branch.

"Look through the things inside first," Prabhakar said. "Set aside whatever you want."

There was no bed in their parents' room. On his previous visit Prabhakar had given it to Ramsevak from the village. On the phone Malati had said then, "You did right." Today, looking at the empty space, she felt that the bed should still have been there.

In the cupboard were two old blankets, some papers and their mother's small iron box. Inside the box were buttons, needles, two old coins, a broken chain and a ball of red thread.

"Take this box," Prabhakar said.

"You don't want it?"

"What would I do with it?"

"Then what will I do with it?"

For a moment they both laughed. In the closed house, that small laugh sounded very clear.

In the next room were two bamboo stools. Malati said, "Don't sell these two."

"All right."

"You take one."

"Where will I keep it?"

"On your balcony."

"There are already three chairs on my balcony."

Malati ran her hand over the frayed cane weave of the stool. Their mother used to sit on it in the evening and cut vegetables. Memory wants to save an object immediately; the question of where the object will go comes later.

In an old trunk they found a photograph. Prabhakar was twelve in it, Malati seven or eight, and their father sat on a charpoy beneath the mango tree. A swing hung from one branch.

Malati brought the photograph close to her eyes. "The swing was on this same branch that was cut, wasn't it?"

Prabhakar took the photograph. "No. It was on the left side."

"I remember it."

"The old kitchen is on this side in the photograph. By that reckoning, the swing was on the left."

Malati looked again. Prabhakar was right. The branch that had been cut was not the branch that held the swing.

She took the photograph back. "But Babu used to put the charpoy on this side."

Prabhakar said nothing.

Around noon Jitan arrived. He carried two roof tiles and a small hammer.

"I'll replace the tiles where the branch fell," he said.

Malati asked, "Had the branch gone very bad?"

Jitan looked up at the cut scar. "It was hollow inside. Once half of it split, it was difficult to leave it there."

"Could it have been cut earlier?"

Jitan did not laugh. "It is better to cut a dry branch in time. But I do it when the people of the house tell me."

Prabhakar continued untying an old rope in the veranda.

Malati asked, "Since when had Ma been saying it should be cut?"

Prabhakar's hands stopped. "For two years."

Malati remembered an old phone call. Ma had said, "One branch of the tree is drying. Prabhakar says we should have it cut." Malati had replied, "Let it stay for now. I'll come and see."

She had not been able to come.

"Then why didn't you cut it?"

"Ma said Malati would come and see."

"And after that?"

"After that something or other kept happening every time. You didn't come. Ma kept waiting. Even after she was gone, cutting it did not feel easy to me."

A part of the anger inside Malati suddenly changed direction.

"And four days ago it suddenly felt easy?"

Prabhakar looked at the roof. "The branch had broken halfway. By then there were fewer choices."

This time Malati did not answer.

Jitan replaced the tiles and left. When the sound of his hammer stopped, the house became quiet again.

Sharda Kaki from next door had sent lunch. A little later she herself came over too.

"The registry really is tomorrow?"

"Yes, Kaki," Prabhakar said.

Kaki's eyes went to the cut scar on the tree. "So the branch was finally cut."

Malati asked, "You remembered it too?"

"Until last monsoon your mother kept saying, 'Let Malati come. She loves this tree very much.'"

Malati's hand became still.

Sharda Kaki immediately moved on to talking about an old pickle jar, but her first sentence remained in the veranda.

After Kaki left, Malati said, "Ma kept it because of me."

Prabhakar said, "Not because of you. She kept waiting for you."

"What's the difference?"

"A great deal."

Malati was silent.

While gathering the plates, Prabhakar said, "Ma understood everything. Even so, she kept waiting."

In Malati's mind, phone calls from the last several years began to rise one after another—the leaking roof, the broken pump, the electricity bill, the leaning wall, the drying branch.

Every time she had said, "See to it."

Prabhakar had kept seeing to it.

"Had you already been thinking of selling the house?" Malati asked.

"Six months after Ma died."

"Why did you tell me only later?"

"At first I was only thinking about it myself."

"It wasn't a decision that belonged only to you."

In a calm voice Prabhakar said, "If you want to keep the house, we can still stop."

Malati grew uncomfortable. She could not keep the house. She found it difficult even to come twice a year; she did not want to manage repairs, taxes, security, the garden—anything. She only wanted the house to remain.

"That isn't what I'm saying," she said softly.

"I understand."

There was no taunt in that "I understand." That was why it hurt Malati more.

After lunch Malati went alone behind the house. Pieces of the cut branch lay by the wall. The wood inside the thicker sections was brown and hollow.

She picked up a thin piece.

The wood was lighter than she had expected.

She remembered how, in childhood, Babu used to keep dry mango twigs separate for the kitchen fire. He did not like cutting green branches.

She could not be certain whether the memory was truly this clear or whether her mind was making it so now.

Memory is not always clear like a photograph. Sometimes it fills in the empty places by itself.

Malati walked a little way holding the piece of wood. Then she put it back beside the wall.

In the evening the belongings were divided. Malati kept their mother's iron box. Of the two stools, one was left for Sharda Kaki and Prabhakar agreed to put the other in his car.

Prabhakar set aside Babu's thick sweater.

Malati said, "It won't fit you."

"It isn't for wearing."

Malati asked nothing. She put the photograph in her purse.

That night they spread bedding in the veranda and slept there. In the darkness, the gap left by the cut branch could not be seen clearly.

After a while Malati asked, "Does selling the house make you feel bad?"

Prabhakar answered after a long pause. "Yes."

"Then why such a hurry?"

"Seeing the empty house makes me feel worse."

Malati was silent.

Prabhakar said, "Whenever I came, I would first open the front door, then all the rooms. In the evening I would close everything again. Sometimes it felt as though I wasn't opening the house; I was only checking that no one was there."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"What would I have said?"

After a while Prabhakar himself added, "Weariness and attachment can live together."

Malati did not answer.

All night the wind moved through the leaves of the mango tree. Inside the house, the tied bundles lay still.

In the morning Suresh Chaudhary arrived early with the file.

Sitting in the veranda and looking through the papers, he said, "The front room will become the waiting room. The two inner rooms will be for examination. We'll leave the old wall cupboard as it is."

Prabhakar asked, "And the courtyard?"

"It will remain open. Patients can sit outside. We won't cover the earth with cement."

Malati watched him without saying anything.

Suresh Babu began talking about old memories of the house—how as a child he had sat in this very veranda with their father, how he had once come during examinations to drink water, how their mother had once given him pickle.

Malati knew barely half of these things.

It occurred to her that the memory of a house does not belong only to the family. Many people carry away their own small portion of it.

Before leaving for the registry, Malati looked once more through every room—their mother's room, the kitchen, the veranda, the courtyard.

At the end she ran her hand over the inner bolt of the door. In childhood, the bolt had been beyond her reach.

Prabhakar stood at the gate. "Shall we go?"

"Yes."

Malati opened her purse and checked—the photograph, their mother's iron box, her papers. Everything was there.

Prabhakar closed the door of the house and turned the old brass key. The lock gave a single metallic click.

Malati asked, "The key?"

"After the registry, I'll give it to Suresh Babu."

For a few moments the key shone in Prabhakar's palm, then disappeared into his pocket.

The two of them stepped out through the gate.

As they walked along the road, Malati placed a hand on her purse. The hard edge of the iron box pressed against her fingers.

She did not look back.

Story 15

The Unemployed Afternoon

Aniruddh never reached the crossroads before one in the afternoon. If he arrived after one, it seemed to him that he was not going there to sit at the tea stall at all; he was out on some necessary errand and had merely stopped for five or ten minutes along the way.

Those five or ten minutes usually lasted three hours.

Lakhan's tea stall stood exactly at the corner where the road to the bus stand, the lane into the market, and the road to the block office branched off in three directions. It had a tin roof, two bamboo posts in front, a coal stove inside, and biscuits in old glass jars. Three long benches stood outside.

Aniruddh usually sat at the right end of the middle bench. From there he could see the road clearly, while from the road his face remained half-hidden behind one of the posts.

Whether he had chosen that place deliberately, even he did not know.

He was twenty-eight. He had completed a postgraduate degree. Twice he had taken the teacher eligibility examination, once a bank examination, three railway examinations, once the secretariat assistant examination, and many other recruitment tests large and small. In some he had cleared the written stage, in some he had missed by two or four marks, and the results of some were still pending.

His shoulder bag always contained two or three admit cards, photocopies of certificates, a black pen, and a folded newspaper. Because of the bag, anyone seeing him assumed that he was on his way somewhere.

When he left home, his mother would ask, "Where are you going?"

"To see if there is any news about forms."

Sometimes he said, "I have some work at the cyber café."

Sometimes only, "As far as the crossroads."

His mother no longer asked many questions. Aniruddh should have felt relieved that her questions had become fewer, but instead her silence made him more uncomfortable.

Babuji ran a small grocery shop in front of the house. Earlier he had farmed too; after the pain in his knees worsened, he had given the fields out on sharecropping. No one in the house kept an account of what had been spent on

Aniruddh's education. But inside Aniruddh, that account was always being made and remade.

Babuji never said, "Sit at the shop."

For that very reason, sitting at the shop was even more difficult for Aniruddh.

The moment Lakhan saw him, he would put tea on.

"Less sugar?"

"Yes."

Aniruddh even liked that small question. At least here he had one definite preference.

People at the stall changed through the afternoon. Bus drivers, the clerk from the fertiliser shop, an employee from the panchayat office, a farmer wandering through the market, a rickshaw-puller, sometimes two college boys. Everyone came, drank tea, and went off in their own direction.

Only Aniruddh usually remained where he was.

He opened the newspaper and read recruitment advertisements. Then he read advertisements he had already read. Salary, age limit, last date to apply—he knew almost all of it by heart. Sometimes he opened old question papers on his phone, solved two questions, then began looking at the road.

There was no clock on the wall of the stall. Even so, he knew the time. At two the small school bus passed. At half past two the milkman returned on his motorcycle with empty cans hanging from it. At three the first employees from the block office began to appear at the crossroads.

Aniruddh would get up before four. As soon as he reached home, his mother would ask if he wanted tea, and he would say, "I've already had some."

One day his mother said softly, "Tea outside every day is not good for the stomach."

Aniruddh understood that she was not speaking about tea.

"I only drink one cup."

"I wasn't asking how many cups you drink."

His mother continued sorting rice. Aniruddh said nothing.

That day, for the second time, his bag felt heavier than usual.

The next afternoon he was again at Lakhan's stall.

It was September heat. The rainy season was almost over, though muddy water still stood in some of the potholes in the road. The air was damp. Lakhan's ten-year-old daughter, Nidhi, returned early from school. Her teacher had not come, so school had closed at midday.

Nidhi put her schoolbag in the back room of the stall and came straight to sit at the counter.

"Babu, give me a notebook."

"There's one in your bag."

"Not that shop notebook. A new one."

Lakhan pulled out a thin five-rupee notebook from beneath the biscuit jars.

"What will you write?"

"Homework."

Sticking the tip of her tongue out, she began writing the heading on the first page: "The People Around Me and Their Work."

Lakhan laughed as he put milk on the stove. "Write about me first."

Nidhi wrote: "My Babu makes tea."

"Only tea?" Lakhan called from behind her. "I sell biscuits too."

Nidhi added, "and sells biscuits."

Just then Raghu came for tea. The moment Nidhi saw him, she asked, "Raghu Kaka, what do you do?"

"I cut your Babu's ears."

Nidhi burst out laughing.

"Tell me properly."

"I shave beards and cut hair."

Nidhi wrote it down. Then she looked across the road at Munna, the tempo driver, and wrote his name too.

Aniruddh had the newspaper open, but he was not reading a single line. He liked Nidhi's exercise. In a child's notebook the world was very clear—one person, one occupation.

Suddenly Nidhi turned towards him.

"Aniruddh Bhaiya, what do you do?"

The question was so simple that at first Aniruddh could not understand why no answer came out.

He folded the newspaper.

"Me?"

"Yes. I have to write five people. I've got four. You're the fifth."

Raghu had already walked away drinking his tea. Munna had started his tempo. Lakhan had turned back towards the stove to watch the milk. No one was looking at Aniruddh.

Even so, it seemed to him that every sound in the stall had suddenly grown quieter.

"I study," he said.

Nidhi stopped her pen. "Which class?"

This time Lakhan turned around and looked at his daughter as though to scold her.

"Don't ask so many questions."

"It's homework," Nidhi said naturally.

Aniruddh tried to laugh. "Not a class. I study for job examinations."

Nidhi began to write in the notebook, then stopped.

"Then what should I write for work?"

This time Aniruddh gave no answer.

Lakhan said quickly, "Write—he studies."

"But Madam said to write the work people do."

Lakhan banged the lid of the pot down harder than necessary. "Go take the tea inside first."

Nidhi closed the notebook and went into the back room.

For some time Aniruddh kept rubbing his thumb over one place on the newspaper. There was an advertisement there: "Vacancies: 48." The paper grew pale where his thumb rubbed it.

Lakhan placed the tea in front of him.

"She's a child," he said.

Aniruddh picked up the cup. "Yes."

"Don't take it to heart."

"What would I take to heart?"

Lakhan said nothing.

The tea had less sugar that day too, but Aniruddh could not taste it.

At a quarter past two he got up. Lakhan was surprised.

"So early today?"

"There is some work at home."

The moment he said it, the sentence sounded strange even to Aniruddh.

When he reached home, Babuji was sitting inside the shop with an old ledger open. One arm of his spectacles was tied with thread. He was adding up the accounts for oil, soap, dal and biscuits.

"Back already?"

"Yes."

Babuji bent over the ledger again.

Aniruddh started to go inside, then stopped.

"Shall I add up these accounts?"

Babuji looked up. The question appeared on his face as though Aniruddh had spoken in some distant language.

"You study."

"I will study. Give it to me."

"What if you make a mistake?"

Something pricked inside Aniruddh, but he understood that Babuji was joking.

"Then I'll strike it out and write it again."

Babuji pushed the ledger towards him.

The work could have taken five minutes. Aniruddh spent fifteen. Not because addition and subtraction were difficult, but because behind every

number he could see the thing it represented—three kilos of sugar, seven bars of soap, two packets of salt. Everything had been sold. Everything had some use.

"That's all?"

"That's all," Babuji said. "No need to interrupt your studies for so little."

Aniruddh closed the ledger.

"When did the studying stop?"

He said it so softly that he did not know whether Babuji heard.

That night Aniruddh sat at his study table for a long time. The book was open, but Nidhi's notebook kept returning to his mind: "The People Around Me and Their Work."

In his mind he wrote many words after his own name—student, candidate, unemployed, competitive-exam aspirant, waiting.

No word seemed to contain him completely.

"Unemployed" was the word that frightened him most.

It seemed to him that the word crossed out every examination he had taken, every night he had studied, the money the family had spent, his mother's silence, Babuji's ledger—and made one empty box out of all of it.

But that night, for the first time, he also understood how many names he had given his afternoons in order to avoid that word—cyber café, forms, news, preparation, just going as far as the crossroads.

In truth, most afternoons were only afternoons.

The next day at one, his mother asked, "Where are you going?"

Aniruddh stopped with the bag on his shoulder.

The first words on his tongue were, "To look for forms."

He did not say them.

"I'm going to sit at Lakhan's stall. Then at two I'll go to the library."

His mother looked at him. There was neither relief nor worry on her face, only ordinary acceptance.

"Bring half a kilo of mustard oil on your way back."

"All right."

Aniruddh went out. He was surprised that this was all there was to it.

Nidhi was sitting at the stall again. The notebook lay open.

"Bhaiya, yesterday's fifth person is still left."

Aniruddh sat down on the bench.

"Still?"

"You didn't give an answer."

Lakhan said from between them, "Write somebody else's name."

Nidhi shook her head. "Madam said people around us."

Aniruddh pulled the notebook towards himself. Four lines were written there—Babu makes tea, Raghu Kaka cuts hair, Munna Kaka drives a tempo, Sarita Didi stitches clothes. The fifth line was blank.

He picked up Nidhi's pen.

For a few moments he looked at the empty line.

Then he wrote: "Aniruddh Bhaiya is looking for a job at present."

Nidhi read it.

"Is that work too?"

Aniruddh rolled the pen between his fingers.

"I don't know."

Nidhi looked at him, then pulled the notebook back towards herself.

"Then Madam will cross it out."

"Let her."

Nidhi laughed. "Then we'll write it again."

Aniruddh laughed too.

Lakhan set down his tea. "Less sugar."

"Yes."

The two o'clock school bus could be seen approaching from a distance. Aniruddh did not drink his tea in a hurry.

He was supposed to go to the library, but even after the bus had passed he remained seated for another minute or two.

Then he lifted his bag.

"Don't forget the oil," he said aloud to himself.

Lakhan asked, "What?"

"Nothing."

He began crossing the road. A motorcycle passed in the middle, so he had to stop. The sun was still harsh. He still had no job. The result of his next examination had still not come.

Behind him Nidhi was writing something in her notebook. Aniruddh did not turn to see whether she had left his fifth line exactly as it was for her teacher, or changed it.

He crossed the road and took the path towards the library.

Story 16

No Call Came

On Sunday morning, Gopal Babu made tea a little earlier than usual. At seven forty-five he turned off the gas, covered the cup, and placed his mobile on the window ledge, where two bars of network usually remained steady.

His son Neeraj usually called at around eight thirty. Sometimes at eight twenty, sometimes at eight forty, but on Sunday morning the call would come—over the past three years, Gopal Babu's week had settled into a rhythm around that certainty.

Neeraj lived in Bengaluru. His wife and two-year-old daughter were there with him. Gopal Babu lived alone in his old house in Madhubani. His wife Shailaja had died four years earlier. From that year onward, Neeraj had made the Sunday call regular. At first he used to call twice a day; then work increased, the child was born, the family moved house, the office was farther away. In the end, one long conversation on Sunday morning became fixed.

Gopal Babu was satisfied with this arrangement. At least that was what he always told himself.

At eight twenty he swept the veranda. At eight twenty-five he watered the tulsi. At eight twenty-eight he reheated the tea. At eight thirty he sat down in the chair.

The mobile remained silent.

He looked at the screen. Battery: eighty-eight percent. Network: two bars. Volume: full.

At eight forty Gopal Babu lifted his cup. The tea had gone slightly cold.

"He must be tied up with work," he said softly.

No one needed to answer, but saying the sentence made him feel better.

At five past nine, Sonu, Ramvilas's grandson from next door, came to the gate.

"Dada, can I borrow the spade?"

"Why?"

"I have to clear the drain behind the house."

Gopal Babu glanced towards the inner room where the mobile lay on the window ledge.

"Take it. But if the phone rings, will you hear it?"

Sonu laughed. "Your phone?"

"Yes."

"I'll be digging the drain. How will I hear it?"

Gopal Babu laughed too. "All right. Take it."

Sonu went away with the spade. The gate closed. The house became silent again.

At nine fifteen Gopal Babu opened Neeraj's name on the screen. The green phone symbol was just below it. His finger reached towards it, then stopped.

Last Sunday Neeraj had said, "Babu, this week is a little difficult. There is a new presentation."

"Then I won't call now," Gopal Babu said to himself. "He'll call on his own."

By ten there had still been no call.

He ate breakfast. Opened the newspaper. Read the first page and moved to the second, but read the same report three times. Then he folded the newspaper.

The day went on. At noon an unknown number called. Gopal Babu's heart quickened for a moment. He answered. It was a recorded voice from an insurance company. He cut the call.

In the afternoon he put the mobile in his pocket and went up to the roof. The drain needed cleaning before the rains. He had been thinking about it for two months. Some dry leaves had collected there. He reached out to remove them, then felt as if the mobile had vibrated in his pocket. He took it out and looked. No call.

He cleaned half the drain and came downstairs.

By evening Neeraj still had not called.

That night Gopal Babu considered calling him himself. At seven fifty-five he took the mobile in his hand. Then thought—the child might be sleeping. At eight ten he thought—they might be having dinner. At nine he thought—if I call now, Neeraj will understand that I have spent the whole day doing nothing but waiting.

That last thought made him slightly uncomfortable.

"I haven't spent the whole day only waiting," he said to himself.

Then he began counting the day's tasks—sweeping, watering the tulsi, breakfast, the newspaper, half the roof drain. The list was short.

On Monday morning no call came.

Gopal Babu rose at five. If Neeraj missed Sunday, he sometimes called on Monday morning. Because of that possibility, Gopal Babu kept the mobile in the kitchen while making tea.

Nothing by six thirty.

He took out his shopping bag. On the list were oil, salt, matches and soap. At the gate he looked at the mobile. One bar of network. He went back inside, put the phone on charge, and sat down without going to the market.

Half an hour later he became angry with himself.

"The phone can keep charging. What am I supposed to do?"

He picked up the bag and went to the market.

There he met Banwari Sah.

"Gopal Babu, will you take a mango sapling? The nursery man has come."

"Not now."

"You said 'not now' last year too."

Gopal Babu smiled. "There is an old tree at home."

"How much fruit does the old tree give?"

"Two or four."

"Then plant a new one."

Gopal Babu did not answer. He bought the oil and salt and returned home.

There were no missed calls on the mobile.

On Monday afternoon, for the first time, he considered calling Neeraj's wife, Anamika. Then the thought made him even more uneasy. If Neeraj was busy, why worry Anamika? And if something had happened, surely they themselves would call.

"Why should anything have happened?" he said aloud.

The house clock went on ticking.

On Tuesday, Sonu came to return the spade. The wooden handle had split slightly in the middle.

"Dada, I didn't break it," Sonu said quickly.

Gopal Babu examined the handle. "It was old."

"Shall I have a new handle fitted?"

"Leave it."

Sonu paused. "Did you finish cleaning the drain yesterday?"

Gopal Babu looked up.

"No."

"If it rains, the water will collect on the roof again."

"Yes."

Sonu left. Gopal Babu placed the spade in the veranda. For some time he ran his fingers over the split in the handle.

Then he placed the mobile on the window ledge and climbed to the roof.

He cleared out the leaves gathered in the drain. Scraped away the moss. At one place a brick joint had loosened, so he opened an old small bag of cement and mixed mortar. Nearly an hour and a half passed as he worked. Twice he thought he heard the phone ringing below, but he did not go down.

When he finally came downstairs and checked the mobile, there had been no call.

The surprising thing was that this time he did not feel greatly disappointed. His body was tired, cement dust clung to his hands, and on the roof the path for the rainwater now lay visibly clear.

That afternoon he went to the carpenter to get a new handle fitted to the spade. On the way he saw Banwari Sah with the nursery man again.

"If not mango, will you take guava?" Banwari asked.

Gopal Babu stopped.

"How much for the guava?"

"Eighty."

"Too much."

"Give seventy."

Gopal Babu looked at the sapling. Two new leaves had emerged.

"Sixty."

"Take it."

He did not put the sapling in the bag. He carried it home in his hand.

Behind the house was an empty corner from Shailaja's time where coriander and green chillies had once grown. After Shailaja died, weeds had slowly filled the patch. Gopal Babu worked the soil with a hand hoe, cleared the grass, and planted the small guava tree.

As he poured water around it, he remembered something Shailaja used to say: "If you plant a tree, you create the work of looking after it."

At that moment the mobile rang inside the house.

Gopal Babu straightened at once.

The sound was clear. Once. Twice. Three times.

He put the hand hoe down on the ground and started towards the house. Then he noticed that only half the water around the sapling's roots had been poured. There was still some water left in the bucket.

He stopped. Poured the remaining water around the roots. Set the bucket upright. Washed the soil from his hands at the tap. By then the phone had fallen silent.

When he went inside and looked at the screen, there were three missed calls from Neeraj.

Relief and a small flare of anger rose in his chest at the same time. He had waited three days, and now, when Neeraj finally called, he had not answered.

He did not call back at once. First he dried his hands with a towel. Cleaned his spectacles. Sat down in the chair. Then he dialled.

Neeraj answered on the first ring.

"Babu! Where were you?"

Gopal Babu paused a moment before replying.

"I was behind the house."

"Why didn't you answer? I called three times—"

"There was soil on my hands."

There was a brief silence at the other end.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm all right."

"I feel terrible. On Sunday I was out with the office people. I left my phone at the hotel. I got it back last night. All the numbers were in the cloud, but the password—"

Neeraj began explaining in detail. Gopal Babu listened. All the possibilities he had built over three days—meeting, illness, accident, forgetfulness, neglect—collapsed into one ordinary mistake.

"All right," he said.

"Are you angry?"

"No."

"Really?"

"What is there to be angry about?"

Neeraj was silent again. "You must have waited on Sunday."

Gopal Babu looked through the window towards the back of the house. The guava sapling stood slightly crooked.

"For a while," he said.

"I never imagined the phone would get left at the hotel."

"These things happen."

"You could have called me."

Gopal Babu smiled at the sentence, though Neeraj could not see him.

"Yes. I could have."

Neeraj put the little girl on the phone. She said something indistinct. Gopal Babu asked "What?" two or three times, then laughed without understanding. Anamika came on the line too. Altogether they spoke for about eleven minutes.

After the call ended, Gopal Babu looked at the screen for a while. He was happy. Relieved too. But mixed into the relief was a little embarrassment at the waiting of the previous three days.

He went outside. Beside the guava sapling he drove a thin bamboo stake into the ground and tied the plant to it loosely with a strip of cloth.

On Wednesday morning he went to Banwari Sah's shop and looked at two lemon saplings. He did not buy them.

On Thursday he finished repairing the loose brick joint on the roof.

On Friday Sonu came, and Gopal Babu showed him the spade with its new handle. Sonu lifted it and said, "This time I won't borrow it."

"Why?"

"If it breaks again, the blame will fall on me."

They both laughed.

On Saturday, while cleaning the cupboard, Gopal Babu found an old diary. Shailaja had used it to keep household accounts. The pages listed rice, oil, milk, medicines and things for worship, but every now and then there was a separate line: "Sowed fenugreek," "Cleaned the roof," "Neeraj's letter arrived," "Gopal's cough is better."

Gopal Babu did not close the diary. He left it on the table.

Sunday came again.

At seven forty-five in the morning he made tea, but did not place the mobile on the window ledge. The phone, charged overnight, remained on the table.

At eight he went behind the house. Dust had settled on two leaves of the guava sapling. He watered it. A little grass had come up in the empty patch; he pulled it out.

At eight twenty-seven the phone rang inside the house. Gopal Babu heard it. At that moment he was shaping a small circular ridge of earth around the guava sapling. The ridge was half finished. The phone rang again.

He stopped his hands, looked towards the house, then scooped up the last two handfuls of soil and finished the ridge. He washed his hands at the tap. The phone was ringing for the third time when he reached the veranda. He answered.

"Yes, Neeraj."

"Babu, what were you doing?"

Gopal Babu looked out through the window. The guava sapling shone with the morning water.

"I had some work to do," he said. "Now tell me."

Story 17

A Small Award

Shashikant Mishra received the news of the award over the phone while he was sitting in the veranda, cutting an old newspaper into small slips.

The secretary of the City Literary Council said, "Mishraji, this year the Council has decided to confer its annual literary honour on you."

At first Shashikant Babu said, "What?" He thought the network had broken.

The secretary repeated, "The honour. This Sunday. At Town Hall. Five o'clock."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. For your long contribution to literature."

Shashikant Babu remained silent for a few moments. In front of him was the rusted iron lattice of the veranda, and in one corner a spider was spinning a new web.

"All right," he said at last.

After the call ended, it occurred to him that on receiving such news people usually telephoned someone. He kept the mobile in his hand. His daughter Neelima was in Delhi. His son Vivek was in Pune. Both numbers were on the screen.

He called Neelima first. She did not answer immediately.

Vivek was in a meeting; he sent a short message: "Babu, I'll call later."

Shashikant Babu placed the mobile on the table. The newspaper slips he had cut were blown to the floor by the breeze. He bent and gathered them all.

About twenty minutes later Neelima called.

"Babu, is everything all right?"

"Everything is fine. The Council is giving me an honour this year."

The other end of the line brightened at once. "Really! That's wonderful. Finally."

The word "finally" stayed in Shashikant Babu's ears a little longer than the others.

"What date?"

"Sunday."

"I won't be able to come, Babu. The child's examinations are on. But have someone make a video. Wear a good kurta."

Shashikant Babu laughed. "I still know how to wear a kurta."

Neelima laughed too. Then she asked, "What will they give with the award?"

"I don't know."

"Prize money?"

"I didn't ask that either."

Neelima seemed about to say something more, but a child's voice came from behind her. "Babu, I'll call again in the evening."

She did not call in the evening. Shashikant Babu did not remind her either.

That night he opened the cupboard and looked through his kurtas. There was a white khadi kurta whose collar had yellowed slightly. There was also a pale sky-blue kurta Neelima had given him on his last birthday. Its fold lines were still straight.

He took out the sky-blue kurta and hung it over the back of a chair.

Then, from the upper shelf of the cupboard, he took out his three books of poetry. The first, "The Last Line of Sunlight," 1998. The second, "The Voice from Across the River," 2007. The third, "The Remaining Light," 2016.

After the third book was published, he had written very little.

It was not that words no longer came. They did come, but before they could settle on paper, they turned into some other task—electricity bills, medicines, the bank, roof repairs, someone's wedding, someone's death, someone's phone call.

When his wife Meera was alive, she would ask after dinner, "Did you write anything today?"

Shashikant Babu would often say, "I've written it in my mind."

Meera would laugh and say, "Books written in the mind aren't sold in the market."

It had been five years since Meera died.

On the night he received the news of the award, Shashikant Babu opened his old diary after a long time. The last written date was a year and a half old. There were four lines, a word crossed out after the third, and then blank pages.

He picked up a pen.

For a while he looked at the page.

Then he closed the diary.

Over the next two days calls kept coming. The Council secretary told him the order of the programme. A local journalist asked for a photograph. An acquaintance from the library said, "You should have received this long ago."

Shashikant Babu kept saying, "Yes," "Thank you," "You are kind."

On Saturday, while shaving, he looked more carefully than usual at his face in the mirror. The front of his hair had turned completely white. There were faint pouches beneath his eyes.

Suddenly he wondered whether the announcement would describe him as a "senior poet" or an "elderly poet."

He did not like the word "elderly."

On Sunday he was ready by four. Sky-blue kurta, grey pyjamas, black jacket. He also wore the old watch Meera had bought, the one he did not wear every day.

Pramod from next door took him to Town Hall on his motorcycle.

"Call me when you are returning," Pramod said. "I'll come and get you."

"I don't know how long the programme will last."

"Just call."

Two strips of coloured cloth were tied outside Town Hall. Inside there were about seventy chairs. Five chairs stood on the stage, a bouquet in the middle, and the name of the Council and title of the programme on the curtain behind.

Shashikant Babu's name was spelled correctly on the poster. This gave him an unnecessary sense of relief.

The secretary came hurrying over and took his hand. "You've come! Come, sit in front."

Three people were already seated in the front row: a retired headmaster, a local businessman who was the chief guest, and a young professor whom Shashikant Babu recognized by face but not by name.

All three rose and greeted him.

The young professor said, "I studied your poetry in college."

Shashikant Babu's face brightened. "Which poem?"

The professor hesitated. "That one... about the river. Very good."

"The Voice from Across the River?"

"Yes, yes, that one."

Someone immediately called him away to look after the stage arrangements. The conversation ended there.

The programme began at twenty past five. A ceremonial lamp was lit. There was a welcome song. In his speech, the Council president called Shashikant Babu "a poet rooted in the fragrance of Mithila's soil." The secretary read his literary introduction—year of birth, education, government service, three poetry collections, publication in many journals and magazines.

Shashikant Babu listened attentively. The introduction was accurate.

But while listening, he had a strange sensation—as though the person sitting on the stage was not himself but a short paragraph written about him.

The chief guest said, "Such senior writers are the heritage of society."

Everyone applauded at the word "heritage."

Shashikant Babu smiled too.

The young professor gave a five-minute address. He spoke about modern Maithili poetry, folk memory, regional sensibility, and the responsibility of the new generation. He tried to quote two lines from one of Shashikant Babu's poems, but altered the words slightly.

In his mind Shashikant Babu immediately repeated the correct lines. Outwardly he said nothing.

Then a shawl was draped over him. He was given a memento. An envelope. A flower garland. Photographs.

The photographer said, "Sir, lift the certificate a little higher."

He lifted it.

"Smile."

He smiled.

"Now look towards the chief guest."

He looked.

There was applause again.

He was given five minutes for a vote of thanks. He had brought no written speech. First he thanked the Council, then recalled the first time one of his poems had been published, and then, without naming Meera, said that a writer does not write alone; many people in the household carry the weight of the sentences he never speaks.

His voice grew slightly heavy at that sentence. He changed the subject at once.

"An honour is not the end of writing, perhaps only a small halt somewhere in the middle," he said.

The moment he said it, he felt a little embarrassed. To speak of a "halt in the middle," where exactly was his writing now?

By the time the programme ended it was seven. People became occupied with tea, samosas and photographs. Someone posted a photograph of the certificate on Facebook. Someone else took a selfie with him.

An elderly reader came up and said, "You won't recognize me, but I bought your first book."

Shashikant Babu became interested. "Do you still have it?"

"A lot of books were lost when we moved house. Probably not."

They both laughed a little.

The envelope contained five thousand one hundred rupees. Shashikant Babu did not count it; the secretary told him the amount himself.

By seven twenty the chairs had begun to empty. The organizers grew busy with arrangements for the meal that followed. He telephoned Pramod.

Pramod answered, but said that his child had a high fever and he was on his way to the hospital.

"Take an auto," Pramod said.

"All right. Look after the child."

There were two autos outside Town Hall, but both were full. He waited for a third. Ten minutes. Fifteen.

Evening had settled on the road. Shashikant Babu thought his house was only about two kilometres away; he could walk slowly.

The shawl, memento and certificate bag were in one hand. He had no walking stick in the other—he had not brought one.

He began walking.

The lights of Town Hall fell behind. Shops were still open along the main road, but after one turn the road became sparse.

Shashikant Babu walked slowly. The hard folder of the certificate kept striking his arm. The garland was sticking slightly out of the bag.

At one place he stopped and pushed the garland completely inside.

The words from the programme began returning to him—"heritage," "senior," "long contribution," "fragrance of the soil."

They were all good words. None of them was wrong.

Even so, he felt that together they had made a clean glass box around him. Inside it his old books were safely kept; outside, the present evening was going on.

He smiled at himself. "Why does a man begin thinking so complicatedly after receiving an award?"

A small tea cart at the roadside was still open. He stopped.

The teenage boy at the cart did not recognize him. "Tea?"

"Yes, less sugar."

He sat on a small plastic stool. He placed the bag beside him.

A girl was with the boy, perhaps his sister, writing something in a notebook while still wearing her school uniform.

The girl's eyes fell on the flower garland visible from the bag. "Are you returning from someone's wedding?" she asked naturally.

Shashikant Babu laughed. "No."

"Then?"

The boy scolded his sister. "Why do you ask everything?"

Shashikant Babu said, "I received an honour."

The girl stopped writing. "For what work?"

"I used to write poetry."

The girl asked again, "Used to? You don't write now?"

The question was so ordinary that Shashikant Babu did not answer immediately.

The boy set the tea before him. “Here.”

Shashikant Babu held the cup. The warmth touched his fingers.

The girl bent over her notebook again. For her, the question had probably ended.

For Shashikant Babu, it had not.

“Even now... sometimes,” he said after a delay.

The girl looked up. “Our teacher says rhyme isn't necessary for writing poetry.”

“It isn't.”

“Then how is poetry different from prose?”

Shashikant Babu remained holding the cup. On the stage his life had been introduced in a speech; here an unknown child had asked him a question that could not be answered in five minutes.

“That's a good question,” he said. “I'll think about it and tell you.”

The girl laughed. “I'll go to school tomorrow.”

“Then I'll have to tell you now.”

He thought for a moment. “Prose is like a road—you keep walking, and it takes you somewhere. Poetry... sometimes it isn't a road, but a way of standing in one place and looking.”

After saying it, he was not entirely satisfied with the sentence.

The girl said, “Like a photograph?”

“No, not a photograph.”

“Then?”

Shashikant Babu laughed. “See, I'm still thinking.”

The boy laughed too.

After finishing his tea, he stood up. While paying, the girl asked, “Your name?”

“Shashikant Mishra.”

“I'll search.”

“Where?”

“On the phone.”

Shashikant Babu picked up his bag. “I don't know how much of my poetry is on the phone.”

“What if I don't find it?”

“Then you won't.”

He started walking. After ten steps, the girl called from behind, “What you write now—where will that be published?”

Shashikant Babu turned.

He did not know the answer.

“Let me write it first,” he said.

The road towards home was almost empty now. Between the electric poles there were patches of darkness.

As he walked, Shashikant Babu suddenly wanted to remember the sentence from the ceremony he had liked most.

The president's speech? The young professor's remarks? The chief guest's "heritage"?

None of them.

Again a small question sounded in his ears—"Used to? You don't write now?"

It pricked a little, and pleased him a little too.

When he reached home, he first removed the shawl. He placed the memento on the table. He propped the certificate against the wall; he did not feel like hammering in a nail.

Then he changed out of the sky-blue kurta and put on an old one.

There was leftover rice in the kitchen. Before reheating it, he came and sat in the veranda.

The diary lay on the table—the same one whose last date was a year and a half old.

He opened it. Four lines, a crossed-out word, a blank page.

He picked up the pen.

He wrote one sentence, then crossed it out. He wrote another, then crossed out half of it.

He stopped.

The award envelope lay at the other corner of the table. Five thousand one hundred rupees. The shawl was on the chair. His name shone on the memento.

Shashikant Babu looked at all of it once, then turned back to the diary.

This time he did not try to complete a poem. He simply wrote the date at the top of the page.

Below the date he wrote: "Today a child asked—don't you write now?"

He read the sentence.

Then beneath it, after a very long time, he wrote a new line.

He did not think the line was entirely good.

He did not cross it out.

Story 18

The New Neighbours

Saraswati Devi first learned that new neighbours were moving in not from the sound of a truck, but from the creak of the iron gate.

The house next door had been closed for five years. The owner's family had moved to Patna, and the small two-room house had remained silent with the rain, the sun and the dust.

Every morning Saraswati Devi sat in a bamboo chair on her veranda and drank tea. The gate of the neighbouring house was to her right.

That day the gate opened three times, closed twice, and then remained open.

A small goods vehicle drove in.

First came down the frame of a bed, then two plastic chairs, a gas stove, five cardboard boxes, a small bookcase and three flowerpots.

Saraswati Devi continued drinking her tea.

She was not looking for the sake of looking, yet everything was visible.

A young man was telling the driver, "Put this box in the inner room."

A young woman stood at the doorway reading the words written on the boxes—Kitchen, Books, Clothes.

The woman's hair was tied up, and every now and then she tucked a loose strand behind her ear.

Saraswati Devi's first thought was: how could anyone set up a home with so few things?

In her own house there were two old trunks, four cots, three cupboards, and who knew how many small and large things that had not been used for years.

Even so, all those things were part of the house.

By afternoon the goods vehicle had left.

In the evening the young man met her at the gate.

"Namaste, Kaki," he said.

Saraswati Devi was slightly startled.

"Live long," she replied.

"I'm Abhinav. This is my wife, Neelima. I work at the bank. I've been newly posted here."

Neelima stood two steps behind. She too greeted Saraswati Devi.

Saraswati Devi asked, "For how long?"

Abhinav laughed. "The bank knows that."

There was a lightness in the answer that Saraswati Devi did not like.

How could some other institution know how long a home was for?

She said only, "All right."

The next morning, at ten past seven, a scooter started.

The sound was not very loud, but after five years of silence it seemed very loud to Saraswati Devi.

She looked at the clock. Seven ten.

The scooter went out through the gate. Abhinav was driving; Neelima sat behind him.

At seven twelve the lane was quiet again.

The third day was almost the same.

On the fourth day the scooter did not start.

Saraswati Devi had finished her tea on the veranda, but involuntarily she looked at the clock—seven fifteen.

The gate next door was closed.

At seven twenty Abhinav came out on foot. He was carrying a helmet.

Though she wanted to, Saraswati Devi did not ask anything.

In the afternoon Neelima appeared at the gate.

"Kaki, where can I get curry leaves here?"

Saraswati Devi said, "You'll get them in the market, but why go there now?"

She rose, went to a corner of the courtyard, and broke off a few sprigs from the curry-leaf plant.

Neelima held out her hand. "So much?"

"Dry it and keep it."

"I only need two or three leaves."

"Go to the market for two or three leaves?"

Neelima laughed.

Saraswati Devi found nothing impolite in her laughter.

The following week Neelima brought a small bowl of semolina halwa.

"For the curry leaves the other day," she said.

Saraswati Devi did not want halwa. She was supposed to eat less sweet food.

Even so, she took the bowl.

"I take very little sugar," she said only that much.

"This has very little too," Neelima said.

The halwa was indeed not very sweet.

That evening Saraswati Devi did not send the bowl back empty. She put two nimkis in it.

Abhinav returned the bowl.

"Kaki, Neelima said your nimki is very good."

Saraswati Devi said, "The oil was a little old."

"I couldn't tell."

"What would you know?"

Abhinav laughed.

Saraswati Devi smiled too, but after he left she felt a little displeased with herself.

Why had she smiled?

After a few days she realized that the sound of the scooter no longer felt like noise.

The seven-ten sound had become a small marker in her morning.

If the scooter left at seven five, she thought: early today.

If it had not left by seven twenty, she assumed: perhaps a holiday.

Immediately she would scold herself.

"What need have I to know?"

Even so, her eyes would go towards the gate.

One day there was a violent downpour.

In the afternoon the wind suddenly grew strong, and clothes drying on Neelima's roof began to blow about and catch against the railing.

The neighbouring house was locked.

Saraswati Devi watched from the veranda, then stopped midway as she turned to go inside.

She brought out her old bamboo ladder.

One leg was slightly loose.

When she was working, she used to do such things herself; now her son repeatedly told her on the phone, "Ma, don't climb ladders."

She set the ladder in place.

First rung. Second.

Just then Rambabu, the vegetable seller, saw her from the lane.

"Kaki, what are you doing?"

"The clothes are blowing away."

Rambabu climbed up and brought the clothes down.

Saraswati Devi spread them out on her own veranda.

When Neelima returned in the evening, she asked shyly, "Kaki, these clothes?"

"The wind was taking them away."

"Did you climb up?"

"Not me. Rambabu."

Gathering the clothes, Neelima said, "If you hadn't been here, half my clothes would have been lying in the lane."

Saraswati Devi gave no reply.

At nine that night the electricity went out.

The lane went dark.

Saraswati Devi lit a lantern and placed it on the veranda.

After a while Neelima called from inside her gate, "Kaki, may we sit on your veranda?"

"Come."

Abhinav came too.

The three of them sat in the dark veranda.

First they talked about mosquitoes, then the electricity department, then the drain in the lane.

After a while Neelima asked, "Do you live here alone?"

Saraswati Devi said, "Alone is a very large word. I am in the house."

Abhinav fell a little silent.

"Your son?"

"In Surat. My daughter is in Janakpur."

"Do they come?"

"They come."

Saraswati Devi did not say that her son had not been able to come the previous Diwali, and that her daughter had come only for two days.

That was not necessary.

When the electricity returned, Abhinav and Neelima got up and left.

The veranda became empty again, but for some time that night it did not feel empty to Saraswati Devi.

Two weeks later, the pain in Saraswati Devi's knee increased.

She had left the prescription for her medicines on the table, but did not feel like going to the market.

In the evening Neelima returned carrying a bag of vegetables. Saraswati Devi asked without planning to, "Coming from the market?"

"Yes."

Saraswati Devi looked at the prescription for a few moments.

Then she said, "Will you go again tomorrow?"

"What do you need?"

"Nothing. There were some medicines."

Neelima took the prescription. "I'll bring them now."

"Tomorrow."

"The shop is open. Five minutes."

"Abhinav will be waiting."

"He's at home. He'll come too."

Saraswati Devi could not stop her.

Twenty minutes later Abhinav came with the medicines and the bill.

"Kaki, one of these is to be taken after dinner at night."

"I can read."

"All right," Abhinav said with a smile.

Saraswati Devi counted out the money and gave it to him.

Abhinav returned four rupees.

Those four rupees lay on the table for a long time.

A few days later Saraswati Devi told her daughter on the phone, "People have moved into the house next door."

Her daughter asked, "Who?"

"A bank boy and his wife."

"Good people?"

Saraswati Devi said, "People always seem good at first."

After ending the call, her own reply seemed a little harsh to her.

The next morning she was sweeping fallen leaves beneath the curry-leaf plant when Neelima came over.

"Kaki, shall we grow coriander here?"

"Now?"

"The patch is empty."

"Grow it in your own courtyard."

"It doesn't get enough sun there."

Saraswati Devi looked at the soil.

"Coriander won't last very long here."

"However long it lasts."

Whether Neelima had said this only about the plant or about something else, Saraswati Devi could not tell.

She said, "Do you have seeds?"

"Yes."

Together they prepared a small bed.

Neelima scattered the seeds; Saraswati Devi covered them with a thin layer of soil.

From that day, every morning before opening her own gate, Neelima came to look at the coriander.

On the fourth day tender shoots appeared, thin as green threads.

"Look!" Neelima said like a child.

Saraswati Devi bent to see. "Don't call it coriander yet. Let two leaves come out first."

"You test everything."

"If I don't test the plant, shall I test you?"

They both laughed.

This time Saraswati Devi was not displeased with her own laughter.

Katik was approaching.

The evenings were growing shorter.

Sometimes Abhinav returned late from the bank. Neelima would sit on the veranda talking to her mother on the phone.

Saraswati Devi could not hear the words clearly, only the tone.

Sometimes Neelima laughed; sometimes she remained silent for a long time.

One evening the silence lasted longer.

Saraswati Devi wanted to ask, Is everything all right?

She did not ask.

The next day Neelima herself said, "Ma was ill."

"And now?"

"She's better."

"Will you go?"

"Abhinav can't get leave. I'm thinking of going alone."

Saraswati Devi said, "For one's mother, one can travel alone."

Neelima looked at her.

"Do you say the same thing to your daughter?"

The question was simple.

Saraswati Devi looked towards the curry-leaf plant.

"Sometimes I say the opposite."

Neelima asked nothing more.

Three days later she went to see her mother and returned after two days.

On her way back she brought peda from Janakpur.

Saraswati Devi took one piece.

"Too much sugar," she said.

"I knew you would say that."

"Then why did you bring it?"

"Because you'll eat it."

Saraswati Devi ate half a piece.

The coriander had grown somewhat thick now.

One morning Saraswati Devi was looking at the dew on its leaves when Abhinav came over.

He was dressed as on an ordinary day, but there was no scooter key in his hand.

"Kaki, I wanted to tell you something."

Saraswati Devi straightened. "Tell me."

"I've been transferred."

For a moment Saraswati Devi understood that she had heard the words, but their meaning arrived a little later.

"Where?"

"Muzaffarpur."

"When?"

"Next week."

Saraswati Devi looked at the coriander leaves.

"So soon?"

Abhinav did not laugh. "The bank knows."

Saraswati Devi remembered the same answer from the first day.

This time it did not sound light.

"Neelima?"

"She's packing."

Saraswati Devi said, "Cut the coriander. Otherwise it will spoil."

Abhinav looked at her for a few moments, then said, "Yes."

That day there was no sound of the scooter.

The next day the cardboard boxes appeared again.

Kitchen. Books. Clothes.

Saraswati Devi sat on the veranda drinking tea.

Five months earlier she had watched these boxes going inside; now she watched them coming out.

Neelima was bent over one box sealing it with tape.

In the middle of the work she stood up and came to Saraswati Devi.

"Kaki, will you keep this coriander?"

Saraswati Devi said, "It's my soil."

Neelima did not laugh.

"I thought I'd leave some of the flowerpots."

"Why? Take them."

"There may not be enough room in the vehicle."

"Room can be made for plants."

Neelima was silent for a few moments. "All right."

Saraswati Devi immediately felt she had spoken a little too harshly.

But she could not call the words back.

On the day of the transfer, the goods vehicle arrived at ten.

This time there were a few more things. A bamboo basket, two new flowerpots, a small table, and the old brass-coloured tin Saraswati Devi had given Neelima, in which she kept spices.

Saraswati Devi saw the tin.

Neelima said, "I'm taking this."

"It's yours."

"You gave it to me."

"Once I gave it, it became yours."

Before closing the gate, Abhinav handed the key to the house-owner's nephew.

Then both of them came to take leave of Saraswati Devi.

When Neelima bent down, Saraswati Devi placed a hand on her head.

There was something she wanted to say.

"Call when you reach." The sentence came to her mind.

But she said, "Keep drinking water on the way."

Neelima laughed. "All right."

Abhinav said, "Kaki, come to Muzaffarpur."

"First settle the house properly."

"It will settle."

Saraswati Devi did not ask: for how long?

The vehicle drove away.

The gate was closed again.

In the afternoon the veranda of the neighbouring house stood empty.

Three round marks left by the flowerpots remained on the floor.

Saraswati Devi went back into her own house.

At seven ten in the evening she suddenly felt like looking at the clock.

Then she remembered—seven ten was the morning time when the scooter used to leave.

She laughed a little at herself.

At night Neelima called. "Kaki, we've reached."

"All right."

"Cut the coriander."

"Plant some new coriander there."

"I will."

The call ended.

The next morning Saraswati Devi sat on the veranda with her tea. The lane was quiet. Seven ten came. No scooter started.

Saraswati Devi put the cup on the table and went towards the curry-leaf plant.

Beside it, the small coriander bed was wet with dew. She bent and pulled out two handfuls of weeds. The leaves had grown somewhat dense.

Whether it was time to cut them or whether they should be left a few more days, she did not decide. She only loosened the soil a little.

Then a breeze came from the direction of the closed gate next door. The gate did not open.

Saraswati Devi straightened, brushed the soil from her hands, and returned to the veranda. The tea was still a little warm.

Story 19

The Creak of the Chair

Ramlochan Yadav went to the panchayat building on the pretext that he needed a copy of an old drainage scheme.

In truth, there was no immediate need for the copy.

That paper was already kept in the iron trunk at his house.

Even so, in the morning he bathed, put on a white kurta, slung his old leather bag over his shoulder, and set out.

His wife asked, “Where?”

He said, “As far as the panchayat office.”

His wife asked no second question.

Until four months ago, that answer had meant meetings, papers, applications, crowds of people.

Now it meant only that Ramlochan was going out of the house.

The gate of the panchayat building was half open.

Two old benches had been placed in the sun on the veranda.

From inside came the rough sound of a broom.

Raghunandan, the watchman, saw him and stopped sweeping.

“Ramlochan Babu, so early?”

Earlier he used to call him “Mukhiya-ji.”

This was not the first time Ramlochan had noticed the difference.

Even so, today's form of address lingered in his ears a little longer.

“I came to look for a paper.”

“Which paper?”

Ramlochan made as if to open his bag, then closed it again.

“The drainage one.”

Raghunandan nodded. “It should be in the old cupboard. The key is inside.”

Ramlochan crossed the veranda.

The chair stood in the left-hand corner by the door.

Dark brown, heavy, wooden, with armrests.

The end of the right arm had been worn smooth.

There was a long crack down the middle of the back, held in place by nails driven into it twice over the years.

He had sat in that chair for ten years.

After the new mukhiya took charge, she brought in a new metal chair.

The old chair had been moved against the wall.

Ramlochan walked towards it.

He placed a hand on the armrest.

There was not much dust.

Raghunandan had probably wiped it the day before.

He sat down slowly.

The chair went, "Kirr."

Ramlochan's body went still for a moment.

It was the same sound.

The first time he had sat in this chair after becoming mukhiya, it had made the same sound.

That day the veranda had been full of people.

Someone had garlanded him, someone had brought sweets, someone had tried to push an application forward before the others.

He had sat down, and the chair had creaked.

At the time he had felt as though the old chair were protesting while accepting his weight.

Two weeks later he had stopped hearing the sound.

The chair still creaked, but Ramlochan no longer heard it.

Now, four months later, the same sound was clear again.

From the doorway Raghunandan asked, "Shall I have tea made?"

Out of habit Ramlochan said, "Tell them two cups."

Then at once he remembered that what he said here was no longer an order.

He added, "If you feel like having one too."

Raghunandan laughed. "I always feel like having tea."

He went outside.

Ramlochan looked towards the desk.

The new mukhiya had a new desk.

A corner of the old desk had swollen with damp, and during the rains papers could not be kept there.

Now that desk was in the storeroom.

A new list for the gram panchayat hung on the wall.

The names were printed in clear letters.

Ramlochan did not look for his own name.

There was no reason for his name to be on that list anymore.

Even so, his eyes travelled from top to bottom.

The election result had come four months earlier.

The defeat had not been very large—one hundred and twenty-seven votes.

For the first two days he told everyone the number.

"Only one hundred and twenty-seven."

As though calling the number small would make the defeat smaller too.

From the third day he began saying, "It is the people's decision."

A week later he said, "I have got some rest now."

After a month he stopped saying that sentence.

Rest had very quickly turned into long days.

When he woke in the morning, no one was waiting at the gate.

The phone rang no more than two or three times a day.

Earlier his wife used to complain that meals went cold.

Now the food stayed warm, and Ramlochan sat down to eat on time.

After a few days his wife had asked, "Do you really like so much silence?"

Ramlochan had said, "What's wrong with silence?"

His wife had not answered.

The chair gave another faint creak.

Ramlochan straightened slightly.

How many times, sitting in this chair, had he told people, "Sit down."

Many people would remain standing until he himself invited them to sit.

In the first year this had embarrassed him.

In the second year it became a habit.

By the fifth year he no longer noticed it at all.

Once a farmer, Bhola Paswan, had come carrying an application.

Ramlochan was speaking on the phone.

Bhola stood for almost ten minutes.

When Ramlochan ended the call, he asked, "Yes, tell me."

Bhola held out the paper.

On his way home that day, Ramlochan had suddenly remembered that he had never once said, "Sit down."

He had remembered it, and then the memory had served no purpose.

Today the scene appeared very clearly.

Bhola standing with a blue gamchha over his shoulder.

Mud on his slippers.

The paper folded in his hand.

And Ramlochan himself laughing into the phone.

Ramlochan ran a finger along the armrest.

The smooth wood of the chair was cold.

Raghunandan returned carrying tea.

Two glass tumblers.

He placed one on the desk and kept one in his own hand.

Earlier he used to drink his tea outside.

Ramlochan noticed that too.

"Sit," he said.

Raghunandan pulled a bench closer and sat down.

Without hesitation.

They began drinking tea.

Raghunandan asked, "Shall I look for the paper?"

"Leave it."

"Then?"

Ramlochan watched the steam rising from his glass. "What will they do with this chair?"

Raghunandan looked at it.

"The new Madam says a list of old items will be made. Things that are usable will be kept; the rest will be auctioned."

"This isn't usable?"

Raghunandan did not laugh. "It creaks when someone sits on it."

Ramlochan did not laugh either.

"It creaked before too."

"Then why wasn't it changed?"

The question was very simple.

Ramlochan searched for an answer.

"I got used to it."

Raghunandan kept drinking his tea.

After a while a bicycle bell sounded outside.

A man came in—Bhola Paswan.

Ramlochan recognized him at once.

Instead of the blue gamchha, he now had a white towel over his shoulder.

The hair on his head had grown very thin.

Bhola looked first at Raghunandan, then at Ramlochan.

"Ramlochan Babu."

"Come, Bhola."

For a moment Bhola remained standing in the old way.

The words "Tell me" almost came out of Ramlochan's mouth.

He stopped them.

He gestured towards the bench. "Sit down."

Bhola sat.

"What work?" Ramlochan asked.

Bhola laughed. "Not with you. I had to ask Raghunandan about a birth certificate."

Something very small shifted inside Ramlochan.

As though one step of a staircase had suddenly dropped lower without his noticing.

He placed the glass on the desk.

"Yes, yes. Of course."

Raghunandan took the papers from Bhola.

The two began talking about the date on the certificate, the name, and the Aadhaar copy.

Ramlochan listened.

Only four months earlier, a conversation like this would have begun with him, in front of him.

Now the conversation was flowing past him.

There was no insult in it.

No one had ignored him.

Even so, it seemed to him that his size in the room had become a little smaller.

After handing over the papers, Bhola stood up.

Ramlochan asked, "Everything all right at home?"

"All right. My little granddaughter has started school."

"Which class?"

"Second."

"Make sure she studies properly."

The moment the sentence came out, Ramlochan's own voice sounded old to him.

Bhola smiled. "She studies. She understands more than I do."

He left.

For a few moments Ramlochan kept looking towards the doorway.

Raghunandan gathered the files.

"Ramlochan Babu, if you want, you could buy this chair at the auction."

Ramlochan looked at him.

"Take it home?"

"Yes. It's an old thing. It won't fetch much."

Ramlochan's first thought was that it would look good on the veranda at home.

Then he remembered the veranda.

There were already four chairs there.

One bamboo chair, two plastic chairs, and one his wife used while sewing.

Space could be made for this heavy chair.

He placed his hand on the armrest once more.

How many people had stood before this armrest.

How many applications had been placed upon it and signed.

How many times had he leaned over it while making phone calls.

How many times had the chair creaked while he did not hear it.

"Will you take it?" Raghunandan asked again.

Ramlochan said, "Let it stay for now."

"The auction notice will come."

"Let it come."

Raghunandan nodded.

Ramlochan stood up.

The chair creaked loudly once.

He turned and looked back.

The empty chair stood still.

For a moment he felt something strange—he could not decide whether the sound had come because his body rose, or because the chair had become empty.

He slung the bag over his shoulder.

Raghunandan asked, "The drainage paper?"

Ramlochan laughed.

"It's at home."

Raghunandan laughed too. "Then why did you come here?"

Ramlochan moved towards the door.

"To see."

"What?"

He did not stop.

"The chair."

As he came down from the veranda, the sunlight had grown a little stronger.

Two children were riding bicycles along the road.

One saw Ramlochan and greeted him.

The other did not; he was busy keeping his bicycle balanced.

Ramlochan blessed the first child.

He paid no attention to the second.

A little farther on, Bhola Paswan was standing by a tea stall.

Bhola called, "Ramlochan Babu, tea?"

Ramlochan's first impulse was to say, "I've just had some at the panchayat office."

Instead, he crossed the road towards the stall.

Bhola shifted along the bench to make space.

Ramlochan sat beside him.

The bench did not creak.

The shopkeeper asked, "Sugar?"

Ramlochan said, "Less."

Bhola began talking about his granddaughter's school.

Ramlochan listened.

In the middle of it, his phone rang.

The screen showed the name of an old supporter.

He looked at the phone, but did not answer immediately.

Bhola was saying that his granddaughter could write her own name in English, but wanted to write her grandfather's name in Maithili.

Ramlochan smiled.

The phone stopped ringing.

"If she can write your name, that's plenty," he said.

The tea arrived.

Ramlochan took the glass in his hand.

The veranda of the panchayat building could be seen some distance away from there.

The doorway was open.

The chair inside was not visible.

Only the dark rectangle of the doorway could be seen.

Ramlochan took a sip from the glass.

At that moment he remembered the creak of the chair again.

But this time the sound seemed very far away.

Bhola asked something.

Ramlochan turned towards him.

"What did you say?"

Bhola repeated it.

Ramlochan began listening carefully.

Story 20

Seven in the Morning

Raghunath Jha's eyes opened at five forty-five in the morning.

The alarm had been set for six.

He reached out and switched it off before it could ring.

The habit was thirty-five years old.

On school days the alarm hardly ever woke him; it merely told him that it was now time to leave the bed.

He sat up.

The room was still slightly dark.

Outside the window came the first cawing of a crow.

His wife, Kamala Devi, was still asleep.

Raghunath put on his slippers quietly.

At the tap in the courtyard, his hands moved by themselves through the same sequence they had followed every day.

First the face, then the eyes, then two splashes of water over the head.

He placed the towel over his shoulder.

A freshly ironed pale blue shirt hung from a nail in the veranda.

The previous evening Kamala Devi had asked, 'Why have you taken this shirt out now?'

Raghunath had said, 'No reason. Just like that.'

In truth, he himself had not understood why.

Yesterday had been his last day at school.

At the farewell he had been given a flower garland, a watch, and a large sheet of paper on which the children had written together: 'Master Saheb, keep coming back.'

Raghunath had folded the paper, put it into his shoulder bag, and brought it home.

After dinner he had not even opened the bag.

Only now, in the morning, did he remember for the first time that there was no need to get ready for school.

Even so, he took down the shirt and put it on.

While fastening the buttons, his hand stopped at the second button.

He looked towards the mirror.

'Where am I going?'

He did not say the question aloud.

He did not fasten the remaining buttons.

After a while he took the shirt off and hung it back on the nail.

Over his old striped vest he put on an ordinary kurta.

That small change filled him with a strange emptiness.

As though the day had been given another name.

At ten past six Kamala Devi woke up.

On her way to the kitchen she saw him sitting in the veranda.

'So early?'

'My sleep broke.'

'Now you can sleep at ease.'

Raghunath smiled.

'We'll see.'

Kamala Devi began lighting the stove.

Raghunath sat on the low wooden platform in the veranda and looked at the clock.

Six sixteen.

By this time he would ordinarily be pressing the bicycle tyres to check them.

He would check whether the attendance register, red pen, two pieces of chalk, and the midday-meal list were all in the bag.

Today the bag lay in a corner of the room.

He got up and went inside.

He opened the buckle of the bag.

From inside he took out half a piece of chalk.

Chalk dust had drawn a white streak over the black lining of the bag.

Raghunath turned the chalk in his hand.

Then put it back in the same place.

The greeting sheet he had received along with the garland was inside too.

He felt like opening it, but did not.

He closed the bag again.

Six twenty-eight.

Kamala Devi brought tea.

'Today the tea won't go cold,' she said.

Raghunath looked at her questioningly.

'There's no hurry for school now.'

He gave a faint laugh.

'Yes.'

The tea was in his hand, but he looked at the clock again.

Six thirty-two.

The school was about a mile and a half from the house.

On his bicycle he usually left at six thirty-five.

Rain, fog, winter—the time hardly changed.

Today six thirty-five came.

Raghunath's feet moved involuntarily towards the slippers beneath the platform.

Then he looked at the cup of tea in his hand.

He did not put the slippers on.

From the kitchen Kamala Devi called, 'Is the sugar all right?'

'It's all right.'

He began drinking the tea slowly.

Six forty.

Two children ran past through the lane with schoolbags on their backs.

One child shouted from outside the door, 'Master Saheb!'

Raghunath stood up instinctively.

The child folded his hands in greeting and moved on.

Raghunath remained standing for a few moments.

Then sat down again.

A little tea remained in the cup.

He drank it in a single swallow.

At six forty-five the village milkman came by bicycle.

'Master Saheb, no school today?'

The question was entirely ordinary.

Raghunath paused a little before answering.

'Not anymore.'

The milkman stopped his bicycle.

'Oh! Yesterday was your last day, wasn't it?'

'Yes.'

'You served a long time.'

A smile came to Raghunath's face, but no answer formed.

The milkman rode on.

'Not anymore.'

For a while the two words seemed to remain in the veranda.

Raghunath thought: he had never practised giving that answer.

Six fifty-two.

He stepped down into the courtyard.

The soil near the tulsi platform was slightly dry.

He poured water from a lota.

Then he pulled out two weeds that had sprung up beneath the small pomegranate tree.

One of the weeds had a deep root.

He kept tugging at it.

The root broke.

Half of it came away in his hand.

'It will grow again,' he said to himself.

He looked at the clock.

Six fifty-six.

He returned towards the veranda.

The bicycle leaned against the wall.

There was no dust on the handlebar; he himself had wiped it with a cloth the night before.

He pressed the bicycle bell.

Tring-tring.

The sound was familiar.

For years that sound at the turn in the lane had told the children that Master Saheb was coming.

Raghunath did not ring the bell again.

Six fifty-eight.

From the direction of the school, the blurred sound of children began to reach him.

Paddy fields lay between the village and the school.

The voices did not travel clearly, but now and then, in the morning air, a collective murmur floated across.

Raghunath stood beside a pillar of the veranda.

A few seconds before seven, he felt a faint tightness in his chest.

He did not know why.

Then, from a distance, the school bell rang.

Once.

A second time.

Then several short strokes in succession.

The very bell he had heard for thirty-five years.

For many years he had rung it himself whenever the attendant was absent.

Many times he had been annoyed when it rang late.

Many times children had run towards their classrooms as soon as it sounded.

Today the bell rang.

Raghunath went nowhere.

For one moment his feet moved towards the bicycle.

Then stopped.

The bell fell silent.

The air became ordinary again.

Raghunath remained standing with one hand on the pillar.

He could not tell whether what he felt was sorrow or relief.

The two feelings had dissolved into each other.

As though a heavy bag had been lifted from his shoulder, but the shoulder was still searching for its weight.

Kamala Devi came into the veranda.

'Did you hear the bell?'

Raghunath looked at her.

'Yes.'

Kamala Devi said nothing.

She picked up the empty cup from the platform.

Raghunath asked, 'Is it seven?'

Kamala Devi looked at the clock.

'Seven two.'

Raghunath nodded.

Two minutes.

On school days two minutes had meant: prayer has begun, reach the class before attendance, some child has come late again.

Today those two minutes had no task.

He began walking in the courtyard.

At five past seven, for the first time, he noticed a small square of sunlight on the eastern wall.

He was not ordinarily at home at this hour.

The light was climbing slowly upward.

An old crack in the wall ran through it.

Raghunath had perhaps never seen that crack so clearly—

He stopped the word in his mind.

He laughed at himself.

He thought: after living in this house for so many years, why had he never noticed that crack?

Then the answer came on its own—where was he ever at home at seven?

Kamala Devi was kneading flour.

Raghunath stood at the kitchen doorway.

'Is there anything to do?'

Kamala Devi looked at him in surprise.

'Now?'

'Yes.'

'Cut the vegetables.'

Raghunath sat on a low stool.

He began peeling potatoes.

The peel came off the first potato much too thick.

Kamala Devi saw it, but said nothing.

With the second potato Raghunath's hand became more careful.

Seven twelve.

Again the collective recitation of children came faintly from afar.

Raghunath's hand stopped.

Something like the rhythm of 'two twos are four' reached him, broken by the air.

He began cutting the potatoes again.

Kamala Devi asked, 'Is your mind going there?'

Raghunath answered, 'My mind is right here.'

After saying it, he understood that it was not a complete answer.

Kamala Devi too perhaps—

The same word returned to his mind.

Raghunath smiled.

Kamala Devi asked, 'What happened?'

'Nothing.'

He pushed the plate of cut potatoes towards her.

At seven twenty he brought the bicycle out.

Kamala Devi asked, 'Where?'

The first answer that wanted to come from Raghunath's mouth was: 'School.'

He stopped it at once.

'As far as the market.'

'What will you bring?'

Raghunath thought a little.

'Nothing. I'll just ride around and come back.'

Kamala Devi smiled.

'Then go.'

Raghunath mounted the bicycle.

At the turn in the lane, his hands automatically began turning the handlebar left, towards the road to the school.

He turned halfway and stopped.

Straight ahead was the road to the market.

To the left, the school.

He stood still on the bicycle for a few moments.

A farmer passed with a bullock cart.

'Master Saheb, forgotten the road?'

Raghunath laughed.

'A little.'

The farmer too laughed and moved on.

Raghunath straightened the handlebar and rode towards the market.

At that hour the market was only half open.

Four men were sitting at the tea stall.

The moment they saw him, one of them shifted to make room.

'Come, Master Saheb. Now you've got all the time in the world.'

Raghunath stopped the bicycle.

He could sit there.

Earlier, sitting at a tea stall at this hour had seemed impossible to him.

'It's school time,' he would have said, and ridden on.

Today he looked at the clock.

Seven twenty-eight.

At the school, prayer would be over.

The first class would be beginning.

He leaned the bicycle against the front of the stall and sat down on the bench.

Without asking, the shopkeeper put tea on for him.

'Less sugar,' Raghunath said.

'I know.'

At those words Raghunath fell silent.

Suddenly he realized that people outside the school knew some of his habits too.

It was a very small thing.

Even so, he liked it.

The tea came.

The men on the bench continued talking about crops, roads and electricity bills.

No one spoke about his farewell.

No one counted his thirty-five years of service.

No one asked what he would do now.

At first Raghunath thought someone would ask.

Then, after a little while, he was glad no one did.

He held the glass of tea in both hands and kept looking at the road.

At seven forty a school bus passed.

Children's faces were visible through the windows.

Raghunath raised a hand without thinking.

Whether anyone saw him, he did not know.

His hand remained in the air for a little while.

Then came down.

He finished the last sip of tea and rose.

On the way home he did not take the road past the school.

Even so, once, in the air, he heard the bell from very far away.

Perhaps the second period.

The moment he heard the word 'perhaps' in his own mind, Raghunath smiled.

He thought: what need is there for me to know now?

When he reached home, Kamala Devi was sweeping the courtyard.

'What did you find in the market?'

Leaning the bicycle against the wall, Raghunath said, 'Tea.'

Kamala Devi laughed.

'You went all the way to the market for that?'

'Yes.'

'There wasn't tea at home?'

Raghunath thought a moment and said, 'Tea at home was different.'

Kamala Devi continued sweeping.

Raghunath sat down on the platform in the veranda.

The clock now showed eight five.

For the first time, he took off the watch and placed it on the platform.

He did not do very much for the rest of the day.

He tied up old newspapers.

Repaired the handle of a broken bucket.

After lunch he slept for a while.

When he woke, for a moment he could not tell whether he had taken leave from school and fallen asleep, or whether he truly did not have to go to school anymore.

Once he understood the distinction, he lay looking at the ceiling.

His heart grew a little heavy.

Then the call of the vegetable seller came from outside.

He got up.

In the evening two former students came to see him.

Both worked in the city now.

One had brought a box of sweets.

They touched his feet.

Raghunath tried to stop them, but it was too late.

As they talked, the students recalled old incidents from the school.

Raghunath laughed.

After they left, the veranda became quiet again.

Putting the box of sweets inside, Kamala Devi said, 'People remember.'

Raghunath said, 'People remember their own things.'

That night he went to bed early.

The alarm clock was on the table.

He switched off the alarm for six.

Then, after thinking for a moment, he did not set one for five forty-five either.

Kamala Devi asked, 'Will you sleep late tomorrow?'

Raghunath said, 'We'll see.'

The next day his eyes opened again at five forty-five.

There was no alarm.

For a few moments he remained lying in bed.

Unlike the previous day, he did not get up at once.

Outside the window the morning was slowly growing bright.

Kamala Devi was asleep.

Raghunath closed his eyes again.

Sleep did not return.

At ten past six he got up.

Today he did not even look towards the blue shirt.

He put on an ordinary kurta.

Tea was made.

He took the cup and came to the veranda.

The bicycle leaned against the wall.

The bag lay in the room.

At six forty-five the children ran through the lane again.

One called, 'Master Saheb!'

Raghunath raised his hand.

He did not stand up.

At six fifty-eight he stepped down from the platform into the courtyard.

On the eastern wall the same square patch of sunlight was beginning to form again.

He watched it.

Seven o'clock came.

The distant school bell rang.

For one moment Raghunath's feet shifted towards the door.

He stopped. The cup of tea was in his hand. The bell kept ringing. He looked at the sunlight on the wall.

Was it a little higher than yesterday, or did it only seem so? He did not know.

From inside Kamala Devi called, 'Your tea will go cold.'

Raghunath raised the cup to his lips.

The bell stopped.

He went back and sat on the platform.

The clock was inside the house; Raghunath did not get up to look at it.

Story 21

Two Tickets

At the ticket window of the Madhubani bus stand, Mahesh first looked at Ramvilas Chaudhary's face and then at the two five-hundred-rupee notes in his hand.

"Patna?" he asked.

"Yes. The six o'clock bus in the morning."

"How many seats?"

Ramvilas said, "Two. Side by side."

Mahesh ran his eyes over the computer screen. "Eleven and twelve are vacant."

"All right."

The tickets were printed. As Mahesh handed over both slips, he smiled slightly. "Is someone travelling with you this time?"

Ramvilas folded the tickets. "We'll see."

The answer was not new to Mahesh. For the past year and a half, whenever Ramvilas travelled to Patna, he had bought two tickets. Yet when the bus departed, he was usually seen travelling alone.

People interpreted this habit in different ways. Some said he was an old man and wanted the seat beside him empty. Others said his knees hurt, so he bought a second seat to stretch his legs.

Ramvilas explained himself to no one.

He was a retired postal employee, sixty-four years old. His wife, Nirmala, had died five years earlier. His daughter Kavita was a schoolteacher in Begusarai. His son lived in Delhi.

He was going to Patna for an eye examination. Three months earlier the doctor had told him, "Don't postpone the next check-up."

When he returned home, his neighbour Manoj saw the tickets and asked, "Kaka, who is the second ticket for?"

Putting his spectacle case into his bag, Ramvilas said, "For no one yet."

"Then why did you buy it?"

"The seat may remain empty."

Manoj laughed. "Full fare just for an empty seat?"

Ramvilas laughed too, but gave no answer.

The next morning the bus stand was wrapped in fog like cotton. Steam from the tea seller's kettle rose together with the bus exhaust.

Ramvilas arrived at five forty-five. In his bag were one change of clothes, his medicines, an old umbrella and the tickets.

The driver was inspecting the engine at the front of the bus. The conductor, holding the seat list, was calling out numbers rather than names —"One to ten in front, eleven to twenty in the middle."

Ramvilas sat in seat eleven. He left seat twelve empty.

Tearing the tickets, the conductor asked, "Where is the passenger for twelve?"

"Not here yet."

"The bus leaves in five minutes."

"Let it leave."

The conductor looked at him but said nothing.

One by one all the seats filled. Only twelve remained empty. Outside, several people who had failed to get tickets were asking about the next bus.

Ramvilas kept watching the faces outside through the window. He looked less at the road than at the ticket window and the bus door.

Two minutes before six, a woman came running. She carried a child of about four in her arms, a bundle of clothes under one arm, and an old bag in her hand.

"Patna?" she asked, panting.

The conductor said, "The seats are full."

The woman looked towards the ticket window. From inside, Mahesh called out, "The next bus is at eight-thirty."

"Bhaiya, I have to reach Patna Medical. The child's examination is at ten."

The conductor softened a little. "One seat is showing vacant on the list, but the ticket has already been sold."

Ramvilas took out the ticket for seat twelve and looked out through the glass.

The woman said, "I'll travel standing."

The conductor shook his head. "It's a long journey, and you have a child. It's against the rules too."

Ramvilas rose and went to the door. "This ticket is yours."

The woman stared at him. "Mine?"

"Seat twelve."

"But the money—"

"The bus is about to leave. Get on first."

Still hesitant, she boarded the bus. The child was half-drooping with sleep. Ramvilas put his own bag overhead and made room for her to sit in seat twelve.

The bus pulled away.

For some distance the woman said nothing. Then, stroking the child's head, she asked, "Do you know me?"

"No."

"Then why had you already bought the ticket?"

Ramvilas looked outside at the harvested paddy fields. "The answer to that question is a little long."

"There is plenty of time before Patna," the woman said.

Ramvilas smiled faintly.

Thirteen years earlier, his daughter Kavita had been going to Patna to sit the written examination for a teaching appointment. It was her first such examination, and the family was in very difficult circumstances then.

When they reached the ticket window, Ramvilas discovered that he was thirty-seven rupees short of the fare. He was certain he had left home with the full amount. Where the money had fallen on the way, he never found out.

He told the ticket clerk, "Hold one seat for me. I'll borrow the money from someone and come back."

The clerk said, "The bus leaves in five minutes."

Ramvilas searched the crowd for a familiar face. There was no one. Kavita said nothing, but the fear of missing the examination was clear in her eyes.

At that moment an elderly woman standing behind them asked for two tickets at the window.

Ramvilas assumed someone was travelling with her. But the woman placed one of the tickets in Kavita's hand.

"Take it."

Ramvilas was flustered. "No, I'll pay the—"

The woman said, "When you have the money, don't let someone else's journey be interrupted."

Ramvilas asked her name. The woman said only, "If we keep accounts by name, the work becomes difficult."

She went and sat in another corner of the bus. When they reached Patna, she disappeared somewhere in the crowd. Ramvilas never saw her again.

Kavita was appointed through that examination. Later, Ramvilas tried many times to find the unknown woman, but he never found a clue.

"Since then," Ramvilas told the woman in seat twelve, "whenever I make a long journey and can afford it, I buy two tickets."

The woman remained silent for a long time.

"Do you find someone every time?"

"No."

"Then the second ticket?"

"Sometimes it remains empty."

"Money wasted?"

Ramvilas thought for a moment. "An empty seat and wasted money are not the same thing."

The bus stopped at a small roadside dhaba. Ramvilas bought tea. The woman asked for milk for the child, but she did not have a small note. When Ramvilas tried to offer money, she stopped him.

"The ticket was enough. I'll buy the milk."

She took coins from a small pocket inside her bag.

Ramvilas smiled. "All right."

When they reached Patna, he learned that the woman's name was Rekha Devi. The child's name was Anshu.

Before leaving for the hospital, Rekha said, "Give me your address. I'll send you the ticket money."

Ramvilas took a pen from his pocket. Rekha thought he was going to write his address.

Instead, on the back of the ticket he wrote just one line: "When you get the chance, don't let someone else's journey be interrupted."

He placed the ticket in Rekha's hand.

Rekha read it and smiled slightly, then lowered her eyes. "But this isn't an address."

"I didn't get an address that day either."

Rekha took the child's hand and walked towards the hospital.

Ramvilas stopped a rickshaw for the eye hospital.

As he sat down in the rickshaw, it occurred to him that seat twelve had not remained empty today.

For the evening journey home, he bought only one ticket.

The next month, when Ramvilas came to the ticket window again, Mahesh asked, "How many this time?"

Ramvilas held out a five-hundred-rupee note. "Two. Side by side."

Mahesh smiled again. "Someone travelling with you this time?"

Ramvilas looked at the faces in the crowd. "No one yet."

Story 22

The Bangle Box

Three days before she died, Malati Devi had placed a blue velvet box in Sumitra's hands. The box was light, but at that moment Sumitra was in no state to judge its weight.

Her mother had said only, "Open it seven days before Nandini's wedding."

Sumitra had asked, "What is inside?"

Malati Devi had smiled and said, "You'll know seven days before."

Twelve years had passed since then.

Nandini was now twenty-five, and her wedding was exactly the following Monday. The house was full of sacks of rice and dal, turmeric, invitation cards, relatives' phone calls, and bundles of clothes, all mingling into one another.

The blue box had remained wrapped in cloth on the upper shelf of Sumitra's cupboard.

During those twelve years Sumitra had taken it in her hands many times. There was no clear metallic clink from inside. Even so, she had always believed that this was her mother's bangle box, and therefore there must be bangles inside.

Their father, Rameshwar Jha, never asked about the box. Whenever the expenses of the wedding were discussed, he said only, "We will not take a loan. We will do only as much as we can afford."

Sumitra found the sentence a little harsh. It seemed to her that her father was more concerned with accounts than with the excitement of his daughter's wedding.

On the morning seven days before the wedding, Sumitra brought the box down from the cupboard. Nandini, their father and their maternal cousin Reena were in the room.

A red thread was tied around the box. The knot had grown hard with age.

Nandini laughed. "Didi, you really didn't open it all these years?"

"Ma said seven days before."

"You really are very obedient."

Sumitra cut the thread with scissors.

The lid opened.

There were no bangles inside.

No cotton either. Only many tiny folded slips of paper, one round brass token, and a narrow strip of old newspaper.

At first Nandini laughed, as though she thought it was a joke. Then she saw Sumitra's face and fell silent.

Sumitra opened one slip. At the top was written: "Harilal Jewellers — Deposit 250." The date was twelve years old.

A second: "Deposit 300."

A third: "Deposit 200."

There were twenty-three such receipts altogether. Sometimes the amount was two hundred, sometimes five hundred, sometimes only one hundred and fifty.

The brass token bore the raised number 47. On the back, in very small letters, was the name "Harilal."

Nandini asked, "What is all this?"

Sumitra could not answer.

Their father, Rameshwar Jha, was sitting near the door. There was no surprise on his face.

Sumitra immediately looked at him. "You know about this?"

Her father was silent for a while. Then he said, "Take the box to Harilal."

"Where are the bangles?"

"Go to Harilal."

Something grew hot inside Sumitra. A box preserved for twelve years, her mother's final instruction, and now only receipts.

"Why can't you tell me now?"

Her father lowered his eyes. "Some things become smaller when they are told. They are understood properly only when seen."

Sumitra did not like the answer.

That afternoon she took Nandini with her to the old market. Harilal Jewellers was now run by Harilal's son Manoj, but the elderly Harilal still sat on a wooden platform in front.

Sumitra placed the brass token before him.

Harilal took it in his hand and adjusted his spectacles. "Forty-seven."

He looked carefully at Sumitra. "Are you Malati's daughter?"

"Yes."

"The wedding has come at last?"

Nandini smiled. "Mine."

Harilal rose slowly. He opened an iron cupboard at the back. From among many packets he took out a small bundle wrapped in red cloth. In faded ink it was marked: "47 — Malati / Rameshwar."

Sumitra's eyes stopped on the second name.

Harilal opened the bundle. Inside were two simple gold bangles—neither very thick nor very thin. The workmanship was plain, with a small leaf-like engraving along the edges.

Nandini remained speechless.

Sumitra asked, "When were these made?"

Harilal took out an old ledger from behind him. "They were not made all at once. First came the deposits."

He opened a page. The amounts matched the receipts. Beside the first seven entries was written "Malati."

From the eighth entry onward, the name changed to "Rameshwar."

The date was two months after Malati Devi's death.

Sumitra placed a finger on the page. "Even after that?"

Harilal said, "Yes. Your father kept bringing whatever he could every month or two. Sometimes three hundred, sometimes one hundred. Two years passed when nothing came for as long as six months. Then one day he deposited one thousand."

Nandini asked softly, "When were the bangles completed?"

"Three years ago."

"Then why didn't he take them home?"

Harilal laughed. "Rameshwar Babu said that if he kept them at home, some emergency might remind him of them before the daughter's wedding. Let them stay here, he said. Seven days before the wedding, send the daughter with the token from the box."

Sumitra fell silent.

Several scenes from the past years came to her all at once—her father postponing the purchase of new sandals, repairing the old radio and using it again, removing two unnecessary dishes from the wedding menu, and saying again and again, "We will not take a loan."

Sumitra had taken all these things as small proofs of miserliness.

Harilal held the bangles against Nandini's wrist to judge the size. "Malati had left the original measurement. Later Rameshwar Babu said Nandini had slim wrists like her mother. Keep them slightly loose."

Nandini put on the bangles. They fit perfectly.

Sumitra's throat tightened, but she could not cry.

"Is any money still due?" she asked.

Harilal closed the ledger. "No. The final instalment was completed last Phagun."

"Last Phagun?"

"Yes. Rameshwar Babu brought it himself."

On the way home, Nandini did not put the bangles back in the box for a long time. She kept them on her wrists and looked out of the bus window.

Sumitra said, “Babu never told us anything.”

Nandini replied, “Ma didn't tell us everything either.”

“Both of them were very good at keeping secrets.”

Nandini laughed. “But they kept the accounts clear.”

When they reached home, their father was bargaining with the flower seller in the veranda.

“This many marigold garlands are too much,” he was saying. “Cut it by half. If you cover the entrance with flowers, people forget the people inside.”

Earlier, a sentence like this would have irritated Sumitra. Today she listened in silence.

Nandini went to her father. The bangles were on her wrists.

For a moment he looked at them, then turned his face back towards the flower seller. “Do they fit?”

Nandini said, “Perfectly.”

Her father only said, “Hmm.”

Sumitra placed the twenty-three receipts and the brass token before him.

Rameshwar Jha said, “Don't throw these away. Malati kept the first receipt with her own hands.”

“I won't throw them away.”

After a few moments Sumitra asked, “Even after the bangles were ready three years ago, why didn't you bring them home?”

Her father smiled faintly. “The box was to be opened seven days before.”

For the first time Sumitra understood that her mother's instruction had not been preserved by her mother alone.

On the morning of the wedding, Nandini was getting ready. Sumitra adjusted the bangles on her wrists.

Nandini asked softly, “Didi, should these be called Ma's bangles or Babu's?”

Closing the clasp, Sumitra said, “The box was Ma's. The instalments belonged to both of them. The bangles are yours.”

Nandini smiled.

Late that night, after the wedding crowd had thinned, Sumitra opened the blue box again. There were no bangles in it now. She arranged the twenty-three receipts in order of date. The brass token lay on top. The first seven receipts bore her mother's name; the rest her father's.

Before closing the lid, Sumitra looked at the box for a while. This time the box was empty, yet inside it lay twelve years of two signatures side by side.

Story 23

One Rupee Short

Girish Sah's grocery shop in the middle of Barhi market was not large enough for anyone to call it an establishment, but it was certainly old enough for three generations of customers to have rested their elbows on the same wooden counter.

Girish Sah was known for one habit: he allowed no looseness in accounts, not even by a paisa.

He often said, "A shop runs on trust, but trust stands on the feet of accounts."

At the left corner of the counter stood a small brass bowl holding one-, two- and five-rupee coins. Girish called it the change bowl.

That Monday morning the bowl was almost empty.

For the past two days there had been a shortage of coins in the market. Customers offered twenty instead of ten, fifty instead of twenty, and Girish kept saying, "We'll settle the one rupee later. I'm writing down the name."

Under the counter was a thin red ledger. On its cover was written: Change Due.

Many people did not even know the ledger existed. Whenever Girish owed a customer one or two rupees in change, he wrote down the name; whenever a customer bought on credit, that too was entered in the same ledger with a different mark.

Around noon, after school had let out, a boy of about twelve named Amar came to the shop.

One button of his shirt was missing, his schoolbag was old, and a thin line of sweat lay across his forehead. In his hand were two folded ten-rupee notes and a few coins.

"Girish Kaka," Amar said, "give me one thick notebook and a blue pen."

Girish took down a notebook hanging above. "How many pages?"

"The one Master Sahib told us to get—one hundred and sixty pages."

"This is eighteen rupees. The pen is eight. Twenty-six altogether."

Amar opened his fist. On the counter he placed two ten-rupee notes, one five-rupee coin, and a few smaller coins.

Girish counted them. Then counted again.

"Twenty-five."

Amar counted the coins too. "Ma gave me twenty-five only."

"Then you're one rupee short."

Amar looked at the notebook and the pen. "Can I give it tomorrow?"

Girish's hand moved by habit towards the red ledger beneath the counter, but he stopped himself.

He knew the condition of Amar's household. The boy's father worked as a labourer in Punjab and had not come home for three months. His mother, Phulkali Devi, did sewing in other people's houses.

Girish could easily have written down the one rupee. But at that hour five or six customers were standing in the shop.

One customer laughed and said, "What's one rupee worth accounting for, Girishji? He's a child."

At those words, something in Girish hardened in the opposite direction.

He thought: once people begin treating a shopkeeper's accounts as trivial, then slowly five rupees, ten rupees, fifty rupees—everything becomes nothing.

In a calm voice he said, "Child or adult, the price of an item is the price of the item."

Amar's face reddened slightly.

"Then leave the pen," he said.

"The notebook alone is eighteen. Seven rupees will remain."

For a moment Amar turned the pen in his hand. Its cap was blue, with a thin silver-coloured band around the middle.

"I need the pen," he said softly. "I'll take the notebook tomorrow."

Girish was surprised. "What will you do with the pen without the notebook?"

"There are a few pages left at the back of my old notebook."

"Then take the pen. Seventeen rupees will remain."

Amar took the pen, but looked once more at the notebook.

Girish returned seventeen rupees to him. There was no one-rupee coin in the change bowl, so he made up the amount with five- and two-rupee coins.

Amar put the money in his schoolbag and left.

The crowd of customers began moving again.

Girish forgot the matter—at least that was how it seemed to him.

At three in the afternoon Phulkali Devi herself came to the shop.

She carried an old cloth bag. "Half a kilo of rice, a quarter kilo of dal, and fifty grams of turmeric."

Girish weighed out the goods.

As Phulkali paid, she asked, "Did Amar come?"

"Yes. He took the pen."

Phulkali paused for a moment. "The notebook?"

"He was one rupee short. He said he'd take it tomorrow."

A tiny flash of surprise appeared in Phulkali's eyes, but she said nothing.

She picked up the bag and said, "All right."

Hearing that "all right" made Girish slightly uneasy.

He thought Phulkali could have said, "Write down the one rupee."

But she did not.

As she stepped out of the shop, Phulkali tightened the knot of her bag. Girish involuntarily looked at her hands. There were old needle marks on her fingers.

At five in the evening, schoolteacher Ramesh Jha came to the shop.

"Do you have the one-hundred-and-sixty-page notebooks?"

"Yes."

"Give me two. The children have started a new project."

While handing over the notebooks, Girish asked, "A project?"

"They have to write the history of the old village pond. Every child needs a separate notebook."

"Amar too?"

"Yes. He was especially excited. He said he would ask his maternal grandfather for old stories about the pond."

Girish said only, "Hmm."

Ramesh Jha left.

One notebook remained in the opened packet on the counter. Girish put it back on the shelf.

Evening deepened.

Girish had a fixed rule for closing the shop: first bring in the goods from the platform, then count the cash, then check the main ledger, and finally the change ledger.

That night, while matching the cash, he found a difference of three rupees.

He counted again. This time the difference was two rupees.

On the third count, the accounts matched.

He breathed in relief.

Then he opened the red Change Due ledger.

On the first page many old names had been crossed out. Beside some was written "to give," beside others "to receive."

He began entering the day's new items—Shambhu Sah: two rupees to give; Rita Devi: one rupee to receive; Mukhtar Ansari: three rupees to give.

As he turned the page, his eyes stopped on an old entry.

"Phulkali Devi — 1 rupee to give."

The date was five days old.

Girish frowned.

He remembered the incident.

Five days earlier Phulkali had bought half a kilo of flour and a bar of soap. The total was forty-nine rupees. She had given him a fifty-rupee note. The change bowl had been empty. Girish had said, "Take the one rupee later. I'm writing down your name."

Phulkali had laughed. "Come all the way to the shop again for one rupee?"

Girish had replied, "An account is an account."

And he really had written down her name.

For a long time Girish stared at that single line.

The sound of Amar's coins on the counter that afternoon returned to his mind.

"You're one rupee short."

He heard his own voice clearly.

Then the line in the red ledger: Phulkali Devi — 1 rupee to give.

Girish slowly sat down on the chair.

By the logic of accounts, Amar's purchase had not been incomplete. One rupee belonging to his household was already lying in this shop.

The shopkeeper owed the boy's family.

The first excuse that came to Girish's mind was that Amar did not know about it; Phulkali had not mentioned it either; the entry belonged to a different day.

But the excuse looked less clear than the red ink in the ledger.

He ran a finger along the corner of the page.

Then he took down a one-hundred-and-sixty-page notebook from the shelf.

He closed the shop, pulled the shutter halfway down, tucked the notebook under his arm, and set off towards Phulkali's house.

Her house was a ten-minute walk from Barhi market.

Twice on the way Girish thought: Amar will come tomorrow; I can give it then.

But it seemed to him that waiting until tomorrow would not delay the account—it would delay his own mind.

A small lamp was burning in front of Phulkali's house.

Amar lay on his stomach in the veranda, writing in his old notebook. The blue pen was in his hand.

On the last pages of the old notebook, he was searching for spaces between earlier writing and squeezing new lines into them.

The moment he saw Girish, he sat up. "Kaka?"

Phulkali came out from inside. "At this hour?"

Girish held the notebook out towards Amar. "This is yours."

Amar did not take it immediately. "I'll give the rupee tomorrow."

"You don't owe any rupee."

Phulkali looked at Girish's face.

Girish told them about the entry in the red ledger.

At first Phulkali tried to remember, then smiled faintly. "That one rupee? I had forgotten it completely."

"I hadn't forgotten," Girish said. "The ledger hadn't forgotten."

Amar still had not taken the notebook.

"So... this is from Ma's one rupee?"

"Yes. Your twenty-five, and the one I owed. Twenty-six complete."

A satisfaction came over Amar's face as though he had not been given a free notebook, but had found the correct place of his own account.

He took the notebook. "So I wasn't one rupee short?"

Girish's answer did not come at once.

Then he said, "No. I was the one who was one rupee short."

Phulkali burst out laughing. "A shopkeeper can be short too?"

Girish laughed as well. "If the ledger says so, one has to accept it."

Amar opened the new notebook. The first page was perfectly white.

With the blue pen he wrote the date at the top. Then the title: "The Pond of Our Village."

Girish stood watching for a few moments.

Phulkali asked, "Will you have tea?"

"No, I've left the shop half open."

"Then go. Otherwise someone may carry off the goods and the accounts will be thrown out again."

All three laughed.

Girish returned to the shop.

He raised the shutter, went inside, and opened the red ledger again.

He drew a straight line through the entry: "Phulkali Devi — 1 rupee to give."

Then, after thinking for a moment, he wrote below it: "Account complete."

His pen stopped.

After "Account complete," he added a small full stop.

The change bowl at the corner of the counter was still almost empty.

Girish looked at it and smiled.

For the first time he understood that an empty memory was more dangerous than an empty bowl.

The ledger was closed. The day's accounts were truly complete now.

Story 24

Photo Studio

Jyoti Photo Studio at Benta Chowk in Darbhanga had been there for thirty years. The blue signboard outside had faded in many places, but 'Passport Photos in Ten Minutes' could still be read in thick white letters.

Inside, the owner, Pankaj Jha, still kept the wooden counter from his father's time. Beneath the counter glass were dozens of small photographs—someone's school identity card, someone's job application, someone's pension papers, someone's passport.

In the age of mobile phones, the work of the studio had changed. Fewer large wedding albums were made now; more photographs were taken for Aadhaar cards, examinations, bank documents and passports.

Pankaj used to say that people generally came to a studio not for their face, but for some piece of paper.

At around half past ten that Thursday, an elderly couple came in.

The man's name was Aniruddh Jha. His wife was Shail Devi. Both were past seventy.

Aniruddh carried a brown cloth bag; Shail Devi held a small purse.

Pankaj pulled two chairs forward. 'Please sit. What would you like?'

Aniruddh said, 'Passport-size photographs. Separately.'

'How many copies?'

'Four each.'

Opening the computer, Pankaj asked, 'For passports?'

'No.'

'Visa?'

Shail Devi laughed. 'Where are you sending the two of us at this age?'

Pankaj smiled too. 'Then pension papers?'

Aniruddh said, 'Not for papers.'

Pankaj stopped asking questions. A photographer did not have the right to know every reason.

He pulled down the white backdrop at the rear. Aniruddh was seated first on the stool.

'Head a little straighter.'

Aniruddh straightened his head.

'Keep the glasses on?' Pankaj asked.

Aniruddh looked at Shail Devi.

Shail said, 'Keep them. Without the glasses, you don't look like yourself.'

Pankaj lowered the light slightly. 'There is glare on the lenses. I'll change the angle.'

There was a small old scar above Aniruddh's right eyebrow. Pankaj noticed it on the screen.

'Shall I soften this scar a little?'

Before Aniruddh could answer, Shail Devi said, 'No.'

'All right.'

'It has been with him for forty-five years,' Shail said. 'Let it remain in the photograph too.'

Aniruddh smiled. 'I fell off a bicycle. The story won't be written in the photograph.'

'If the scar stays, the story will be remembered,' Shail replied.

Pankaj raised the camera. 'Try to look natural. Not too serious.'

For a moment Aniruddh's face grew stiff, then relaxed. The shutter clicked.

Pankaj turned the screen towards them. 'Have a look.'

Aniruddh looked. 'Fine.'

Shail Devi leaned slightly forward. 'The eyes are right. Keep this one.'

Now Shail Devi sat down. She straightened the end of her sari. The vermilion in the parting of her hair was very faint.

Pankaj asked, 'Shall I fix this stray section of hair?'

'As much as can be done by hand. Not by computer,' Shail said.

Pankaj laughed. 'All right.'

From behind, Aniruddh said, 'The mole on the left cheek must stay.'

Shail turned at once. 'Where will the mole go?'

'These photographers make a great many things disappear.'

Pankaj said, 'Nothing disappears here unless someone asks for it.'

The shutter clicked.

Shail looked at the screen.

'The lines beneath my eyes show too much,' she said.

Pankaj asked, 'Shall I soften them a little?'

Shail was silent for two moments. Then she shook her head slightly. 'No. Let them stay.'

Aniruddh said softly, 'Let the photograph show the face that exists today.'

Hearing this, Pankaj looked again at the image on the screen.

Many customers said: remove the mark, brighten the complexion, fill in the hair, reduce the darkness under the eyes.

These two were worried about the opposite—that something might be removed.

Pankaj arranged four copies of each photograph. 'It will take twenty minutes.'

Aniruddh looked at his watch. 'We'll have tea and come back.'

They both went out.

While preparing the printer, Pankaj said to Deepak, 'Take out the photo paper.'

Deepak was in college and helped at the studio in the afternoons.

He looked at the elderly couple's pictures on the screen. 'Passport?'

'No.'

'Then?'

'They said it isn't for papers.'

Deepak laughed. 'What else is a passport-size photo for, apart from papers?'

Closing the printer tray, Pankaj said, 'Wait twenty minutes. I haven't understood either.'

The photographs came out of the printer.

Pankaj lifted each sheet and examined it in the light.

The lenses of Aniruddh's spectacles were clear. So was the scar above his eyebrow.

Shail Devi's mole, the fine lines beneath her eyes, the greying part of her hair—all remained in their places.

Technically, Pankaj did not find the photographs especially beautiful. But both faces looked as though they had not come to be made into photographs; they had come to have their presence recorded.

Twenty minutes later the couple returned.

Aniruddh carried two earthen tea cups. One was empty; a little tea remained in the other.

Shail Devi said, 'The tea across from your shop is still far too sweet.'

Pankaj cut the photographs into four-copy sets.

'Shall I write the names on the back?'

Aniruddh said at once, 'Yes.'

Shail added, 'And today's date with the name.'

Pankaj looked at her. 'The date?'

'Yes. The full date.'

Pankaj took a fine pen. On the back of the first set he wrote: 'Aniruddh Jha — 19 September 2026.'

On the second set: 'Shail Devi — 19 September 2026.'

Deepak was watching from behind the counter. His curiosity had grown.

Pankaj placed the two sets in separate white envelopes.

He held Aniruddh's envelope out towards Aniruddh.

Shail Devi extended her hand. 'Give that to me.'

Pankaj paused.

Then Aniruddh took the envelope containing Shail Devi's photographs.

Deepak's eyes widened a little.

Pankaj smiled. 'Now I understand. Photographs of each other.'

Aniruddh said, 'Yes.'

'Some special occasion?'

Shail Devi sat down again. 'Call it special, or call it ordinary.'

Aniruddh opened the brown bag. From it he took out an old plastic album.

The corners of the album were worn.

He opened the first page.

A black-and-white wedding photograph. Aniruddh thin, his hair thick; Shail Devi's face round and full of shyness.

On the second page was a group photograph with the children. On the third, a school function. On the fourth, a Chhath ghat.

In almost every photograph they were together, or among several other people.

Aniruddh said, 'After our marriage, very few photographs of us were taken separately.'

Shail Devi said, 'There are thousands of photographs on the mobile. But whose hand the phone will be in, who will know the password, which photograph is where—I don't understand any of that.'

Pankaj asked softly, 'So this is why?'

Shail Devi pointed to an empty sleeve in the album.

'Last month my cousin died,' she said. 'Her family kept searching for one clear, recent photograph of her alone. In every photograph someone or other was with her. In the end they cropped her face out of a fifteen-year-old group photograph.'

Pankaj fell silent.

Shail continued, 'I didn't like that. And it wasn't only about a photograph after death.'

Aniruddh looked at her.

Shail said, 'I thought—if I go first, which face of mine will this man look at? The one from our wedding? The one from forty years ago?'

Aniruddh smiled gently. 'In that photograph she wasn't even looking at me. She was looking at the camera.'

'And in your old photograph you look so serious, as if you're angry with someone.'

Deepak could not suppress his laughter.

Aniruddh laughed too.

Shail Devi tapped the envelope in her hand. 'I want the face I have today. The face I see every day now. With the glasses. With the scar.'

Putting Shail Devi's envelope into his pocket, Aniruddh said, 'And I want this one with the lines under the eyes.'

Pankaj understood that the photographs were not being made for death, but to preserve the present form of life.

He asked, 'Won't you take one photograph together?'

Aniruddh said, 'We have plenty together.'

Shail added, 'We have very few separately. One day, when one of us is left, that person should have the other's face alone.'

For a few moments there was silence near the counter.

Outside, a tempo horn sounded. A student waiting to have a photograph taken peered into the shop.

Aniruddh took out his wallet.

Pankaj told him the charge.

Shail Devi took one of the four photographs and slipped it into the transparent pocket of her purse.

Aniruddh's face was immediately visible in the small rectangle.

Aniruddh placed one photograph of Shail Devi inside his old diary.

The remaining photographs would stay in the album at home.

They both stood up.

At the door, Shail Devi turned and asked, 'You wrote the date clearly on the photographs, didn't you?'

'Yes.'

'The date is important. Later people keep guessing the age.'

Pankaj said, 'It is written clearly.'

They left.

Deepak immediately asked, 'Bhaiya, have customers like that ever come before?'

Pankaj said, 'No.'

'Wasn't it a little sad?'

Pankaj turned towards the computer. 'Did it seem sad to you?'

Deepak thought. 'At first. Not afterwards.'

Pankaj did not reply.

Throughout the afternoon many people came. One student for an admit-card photograph, one woman for a bank account, two young men for job applications.

As he photographed each of them, Pankaj kept remembering Aniruddh and Shail Devi's words.

In the evening, while closing the shop, he looked at the old photographs kept beneath the counter glass.

In one corner was a photograph of his own parents.

It was about eighteen years old. His father's hair was half black then; his mother did not wear glasses.

Pankaj took the photograph out.

His father was now seventy-five. His mother seventy-two. Both lived at home, only two kilometres from the studio.

Pankaj photographed dozens of faces every day. He did not have a photograph of his own parents as they looked today.

There must have been many pictures on the mobile, of course. At someone's birthday, during worship, with the grandchildren. But a separate, direct portrait, without decoration—he did not know whether there was one.

That night at dinner Pankaj asked his mother, 'Are you free on Sunday?'

Serving dal, his mother asked, 'Why?'

'We'll go to the studio.'

His father looked up from the newspaper. 'Work even on Sunday?'

'Not work.'

'Then?'

Pankaj said, 'I'll photograph both of you.'

His father laughed. 'After so many years, you finally remembered?'

Pankaj laughed too. 'Yes. A little late.'

On Sunday morning Jyoti Photo Studio opened half an hour earlier than usual.

When Deepak arrived, he saw Pankaj's father seated on the stool in front of the white backdrop.

His mother stood near the counter adjusting her sari.

Deepak began to pick up the camera, but Pankaj said, 'Father alone first.'

His father asked, 'Not both together?'

Straightening the backdrop, Pankaj said, 'Together afterwards. Separately first.'

He set the camera.

His father began to remove his glasses.

Pankaj stopped him. 'Keep them on. Without the glasses, you don't look like yourself.'

His mother laughed from behind.

Pankaj raised the camera to his eye.

Through the glass, his father's present face was clear—white hair, spectacles, and all the lines on his forehead.

He clicked the shutter.

Story 25

The Red Sweater

A little inside Station Road in Madhubani stood the small workshop of the Mithila Women's Weavers' Cooperative. As winter began, the place filled at once with the smell of wool, iron cupboards, measuring tapes, cardboard boxes and skeins of many colours.

Usha Devi was responsible for inspection at the cooperative. On her table that day lay a pile of twenty-seven sweaters. By evening they all had to be sent to different customers and to the shops of two schools.

She opened each sweater in turn, checked the stitching, counted the buttons, and measured chest and length with a tape.

"Number forty-two—correct."

Manju put a tick in the register.

"Forty-three?"

"Correct."

"Forty-four?"

Usha Devi snipped off a loose thread from inside the cuff. "Now it is correct."

A little before noon, her hand stopped on a deep red sweater. The colour was different from all the others—not bright vermilion, not maroon, but a deep red somewhere between the two. There were four black buttons in front, a simple round neck, and a small paper tag marked 47 inside the right chest.

Usha Devi measured the chest first. Correct.

She measured the length. Correct.

The right sleeve—twenty inches.

When she measured the left sleeve, her eyebrows rose.

Fourteen inches.

She placed the tape again.

Fourteen.

"Manju."

"Yes?"

"Look at the order slip for number forty-seven."

Manju took out the carbon copy kept inside the register. "Chest thirty-two, length twenty-two, sleeve twenty."

"Both sleeves?"

Manju gave a small laugh. "The slip only has one line for sleeve."

Usha Devi spread the sweater over the table. The right sleeve was full length; the left was plainly shorter.

"Who made this?"

From a machine in the corner, Geeta Mandal, wrapped in a grey shawl, looked up. "I did."

"Come here."

Geeta stopped the machine and came to the table.

Usha Devi laid the measuring tape along the left sleeve. "Look at this."

Geeta glanced once. "Yes."

"What do you mean, yes? It is six inches short."

"It isn't short."

"Manju, read the slip."

Manju read again, "Sleeve twenty."

Geeta said quietly, "The right one."

Usha Devi looked at her. "The slip says nothing about right and left."

Geeta straightened the left cuff with her fingers. "Even so, the measurement is not wrong."

Two women sitting at machines in the workshop stopped and began looking over. Usha Devi disliked a crowd gathering at such moments. In an even voice she said, "If it is wrong, we will call it wrong. Is there any red wool left?"

Manju looked towards the cupboard. "A little. The whole sleeve can be made again, though the dye lot may be slightly different."

Usha Devi turned to Geeta. "Unravel the left sleeve and remake it. The vehicle will come at four."

Geeta immediately picked up the sweater.

Usha Devi assumed she was taking it to unravel, but Geeta carried it not to her machine, but to the top of the wooden cupboard by the window.

"Open it up."

Geeta said, "Wait until three."

"Why?"

"The person whose sweater it is will come."

"And when the customer comes, we are going to show them a wrong sweater?"

"First we will have him try it on."

Usha Devi's voice hardened. "Geeta, the cooperative does not run on guesswork. The measurement is on the slip. The sleeve is six inches shorter than that. If something like this goes out, people will say the Mithila Women's Weavers' Cooperative supplies faulty goods."

Geeta remained silent for a moment before answering. Then she said, "It will not be opened before three."

Usha Devi felt both anger and surprise. Geeta had been with the cooperative for nine years. She was not argumentative. She rarely made mistakes, and when she did, she was usually the first to admit them.

"How are you so certain?" Usha Devi asked.

Geeta said only, "I took the measurement."

"Then why isn't it on the slip?"

This time Geeta looked at Manju. Manju immediately lowered her eyes.

Usha Devi noticed.

"Manju?"

Manju hesitated. "There was a lot of crowd that day."

"Which day?"

"The day we went to take measurements near the Saurath health camp. Seventeen orders came at once."

Usha Devi pulled the register towards herself. Against number forty-seven was written: Sulekha Devi. Beneath the customer's name: Chandan Kumar, age thirteen. A phone number. That was all.

"Was anything special written down?"

Manju turned the slip over. The back was blank.

Geeta said, "I remember."

Usha Devi looked at the red sweater. She believed in the necessity of rules. An institution cannot run on memory—she had said this sentence many times in meetings.

"Everyone remembers differently," she said. "Paper says the same thing every time."

Geeta answered quietly, "Sometimes paper does not record the whole thing."

Usha Devi said nothing.

She began inspecting the next sweater, but the red remained at the edge of her vision.

One o'clock came. The women opened their lunch boxes and began eating. Usha Devi ate her rotis sitting at the table. Manju sat opposite on a stool with a box of dal.

"Do you remember the day at Saurath?" Usha Devi suddenly asked.

Manju paused while tearing a roti. "A little."

"Number forty-seven?"

"Not by name."

"How does Geeta remember anything?"

Manju scratched her head. "She was taking measurements. I was writing the slips. There were too many people. The health camp, vaccination, eye

examination—all in the same field. Some people placed sweater orders. Some were from schools too."

"The red colour?"

Manju thought for a moment. "One child insisted on red. I remember that."

"Anything else?"

"That's all."

Usha Devi finished eating. Then she took number forty-seven's slip in her hand again. It had three lines: chest, length, sleeve.

For years she had been getting the same form printed. Child, old person, man, woman—the same three lines for everyone. Below them, colour. Then advance payment.

For the first time that day, the slip seemed very small to her.

At ten past two, the driver called. "Didi, not four. I'll reach by half past three."

Usha Devi looked at the clock.

The red sweater was still on top of the cupboard.

"Geeta," she said, "if the customer doesn't come, we'll open it at two forty-five."

Without stopping her machine, Geeta said, "They said three."

"The vehicle will come at half past three."

"This one isn't going in the vehicle."

"Then?"

"They will collect it themselves."

Usha Devi fell silent for a moment. The slip indeed said "Self collection," something she had not noticed earlier.

At two fifty-five a cycle-rickshaw bell rang outside.

Manju looked towards the door.

A woman entered first, about forty, a black shawl over her shoulders and a cloth bag in her hand. Behind her came a thin boy of thirteen or fourteen, wearing an old navy-blue sweater.

"Sulekha Devi?" Geeta asked, rising from her machine.

The woman smiled. "Yes. We're not late, are we?"

"No."

The boy came inside and looked around. His eyes went straight to the red sweater on top of the cupboard.

"Is that the one?" he asked.

Geeta smiled. "Yes, Chandan."

Usha Devi looked at the boy. Then her gaze stopped on the left side of his old navy sweater.

The right sleeve reached normally to his wrist. The left sleeve had been folded into a thick cuff a little below the elbow and fastened inside with a small safety pin.

Usha Devi's hand involuntarily rested on the measuring tape lying on the table.

Geeta took down the red sweater. "Try it on."

Chandan removed his old sweater. He needed no help. His left arm had ended a little below the elbow since birth. He had folded up the left sleeve of his shirt as well.

Usha Devi looked once at Geeta.

Geeta said nothing.

Chandan put on the red sweater—first his right hand through the full sleeve, then the left side. The short sleeve ended neatly in a cuff at the end of his left arm. No cloth hung loose. Nothing needed folding. No pin was required.

The boy walked to the small mirror hanging on the wall in front.

He looked first at the right side, then the left. Then he straightened both shoulders.

"Is it all right?" Sulekha Devi asked.

Chandan did not answer for a few moments. He touched the left cuff with his fingers.

"This is the first sweater whose sleeve I don't have to fold," he said.

Geeta smiled. "So the measurement was right?"

Still looking at himself in the mirror, Chandan said, "Very right."

The workshop fell completely silent.

Usha Devi remembered what she herself had said only a short while earlier: the measurement is on the slip.

She picked up the slip.

"Sulekha Devi," she asked, "did you tell us this that day?"

"Yes," Sulekha Devi said. "There was a lot of crowd. I said the left sleeve should be measured separately. Geeta Didi herself took the measurement. I thought it had been written on the slip."

Manju said softly, "I missed it."

Sulekha Devi looked at her. "It doesn't matter. The sweater has turned out right."

Usha Devi said at once, "It does matter. If Geeta hadn't been here today, I would have opened it and made it wrong again."

Geeta laughed. "Then Chandan would have had to fold the sleeve again."

Chandan laughed too.

Sulekha Devi took the remaining payment from her bag. Usha Devi made out the receipt. As she handed it over, she looked once more at the red sweater.

Its two sleeves no longer looked unequal to her. Each was complete in its own place.

Chandan put the old navy sweater into the bag. He removed the safety pin and gave it to his mother.

"Keep this," he said.

Sulekha Devi held the pin in her hand. "Why?"

Looking at the red sleeve, Chandan said, "I don't need it for this anymore."

The two of them left the workshop. The rickshaw was still waiting outside. As the deep red colour passed through the doorway into the sunlight, it appeared a little brighter.

The vehicle arrived at half past three. The remaining sweaters were packed into cardboard boxes and sent away.

As the workshop began to empty, Usha Devi stopped Manju.

"How many of the old order slips are left?"

"Two bundles."

"Don't throw them away. But from tomorrow we'll add one line by hand."

"What?"

Usha Devi took a blank slip. Beneath chest, length and sleeve, she drew a fourth line with her pen.

She wrote: "Special measurement / information given."

Manju read it. "Will we include this in the next printing?"

"Yes."

Geeta was covering her machine. Usha Devi looked at her.

"Geeta."

"Yes?"

"Today you were more correct than the form."

Geeta adjusted the shawl on her shoulder. "Now the form will become correct too."

Usha Devi fixed the blank slip in the register together with the old tag marked 47 from the red sweater.

The tag still carried only a number.

But beneath it, a new line had already been drawn.

Story 26

The Key

Almost all of Kamala Devi's belongings had been packed.

Two iron trunks, three cardboard boxes, the covered case of a sewing machine, four bundles of books, and the kitchen utensils in separate sacks.

Only one bamboo stool remained in the veranda, the one on which she had sat for fourteen years to drink tea in the evenings.

Harimohan Babu, the landlord, was now sitting on that stool.

Kamala stood before him holding a ring of keys.

"This is the main gate." She separated the first large key.

"This is the front room."

"This is the kitchen."

"This is the back door."

Harimohan Babu received them one by one into his palm.

There were four keys.

Kamala shook the ring again. One small brass-coloured key was tied with blue thread.

She paused slightly.

Harimohan Babu's eyes fell on it.

"That one too?" he asked.

Kamala turned the key between her fingers. "Yes. Usha Didi gave me this one."

Usha Devi had been Harimohan Babu's wife. She had died six years ago.

Harimohan Babu looked at the blue thread. "Which lock in my house does that open?"

Kamala did not answer at once.

Outside the veranda, the tempo driver was tightening the ropes. The new tenant's family was due to arrive by evening.

"The small room at the front," Kamala said softly.

Harimohan Babu raised his eyebrows. "The one whose door opens into the lane?"

"Yes."

"I thought that had been locked for years."

Kamala lowered her eyes. "It wasn't locked."

Harimohan Babu stood up.

Along the left side of the courtyard ran a narrow passage. At the end of it was a wooden door, barely two hand-spans wide, with a rusted little awning above and a padlock.

Harimohan Babu rarely went that way. His rooms were in the other part of the house.

Kamala inserted the blue-threaded key into the lock.

She turned it once.

The lock opened.

When the door was pushed inward, what came out was not the damp smell of a shut room, but the smell of chalk and old paper.

Harimohan Babu looked inside.

The room was not large. Along one wall were three low shelves. On them were books from Class Three through Class Ten, notebooks, old question papers, two dictionaries, a geometry box, and a globe from which half the colour had peeled away.

Four thin mats were folded on the floor.

A small blackboard hung on the wall. Written on it in chalk was: "Today, five o'clock — Mathematics practice."

The date was today's.

Harimohan Babu looked at Kamala's face.

"Classes were held here?"

"They are held here," Kamala said.

"Who teaches?"

Kamala smiled faintly. "Whoever knows something."

Harimohan Babu did not understand the answer.

Kamala took a thick notebook from one of the shelves. On the cover was written: "Evening Study."

The first page was very old. Its date was from fourteen years earlier.

Below it were five names: Rinku, Pinki, Sabita, Renu, Aarti.

Harimohan Babu placed a finger on the first name. "Rinku... isn't she Phulo Devi's daughter?"

"Yes."

"She works at a bank now."

"The same one."

On the following pages the names kept changing.

Beside some was written "Passed Class Ten," beside some "ITI," beside some "Nursing form," and beside others only a mark of attendance.

The handwriting changed from time to time.

Some pages were in Usha Devi's clear, rounded hand.

Some were Kamala's.

Many pages from the last year were in the quick, slightly slanted handwriting of a teenage girl named Rinki.

Harimohan Babu did not close the notebook.

"When did this begin?"

Kamala leaned against the doorframe.

"When I first came here, the front room had old sacks of paddy and a broken chair in it. One day Usha Didi saw Phulo Devi's daughter doing her homework on the veranda steps. There wasn't enough light in her house at night."

"Usha Didi had the room cleared. At first two girls sat here. Then four. Then people in the lane came to know."

Harimohan Babu kept listening.

"Didi used to say, better than letting a room stand empty is letting someone's book open inside it."

Kamala wiped the dust from a shelf with her finger.

"I was an assistant teacher at the school. Giving an hour in the evening wasn't difficult. Later the older girls began teaching the younger ones."

"After Usha died?" Harimohan Babu's voice grew softer.

"It remained closed for two days. On the third day the children came to the door at five o'clock."

Kamala laughed a little. "I opened the lock."

Harimohan Babu looked at the bulb on the wall. It was a new LED bulb.

"Electricity?"

"From the house meter."

Kamala quickly added, "I used to add a little to my rent for it. It had been that way since Usha Didi's time."

Harimohan Babu looked at her. "You never added anything to the rent."

Kamala fell silent.

"I paid the bill," Harimohan Babu said.

Kamala looked at him in surprise.

"You knew?"

Harimohan Babu looked at today's date on the blackboard.

"Not everything."

He turned the pages of the notebook.

"For a month after Usha died, I kept hearing children's voices from this side in the evenings. At first I thought they were playing in the lane."

He paused.

"One day the bulb fused."

Kamala said at once, "Yes. In the morning I found a box with a new bulb outside the door. I thought someone from Rinku's house had left it."

Harimohan Babu did not smile. He only said, "I left it."

For a long time Kamala said nothing.

Outside the room, the tempo driver called, "Maasi, where shall I put this box of books?"

Kamala called back, "At the back, on top of the trunk."

Then she turned to Harimohan Babu.

"Why did you never come inside?"

"It was Usha's work. Later it was yours."

"The house is yours."

"Every room belongs to the house. Not every task belongs to the owner."

Kamala placed the blue-threaded key on her palm.

"Now take this. The new tenants will come. I am moving two kilometres away to the government quarters."

Harimohan Babu did not take the key.

"Does anyone come at five?"

"Rinki is coming today. She is in Class Eleven. For three years she has been doing mathematics with the younger children."

"Rinki's house?"

"At the last turn in the lane. Her mother works in other people's homes."

Harimohan Babu brought the stool in from outside and placed it inside the room.

"Don't leave before five."

Kamala laughed. "The tempo driver won't wait for me."

"Let the luggage go. You can leave by rickshaw half an hour later."

For the first time that day, Kamala sat again on the stool.

The tempo left with the luggage. The veranda became empty.

The room that had been cleaned for the new tenant stood open. On the wall remained a pale square where Kamala's old calendar had hung.

At four fifty-five, the sound of slippers came from the lane.

Rinki arrived with three notebooks tucked under one arm. Two little girls followed her.

Seeing Kamala without her belongings, she stopped.

"Madam, have you already left?"

"Half," Kamala said.

Rinki did not understand.

Harimohan Babu stood at the doorway of the small room.

Kamala held out the blue-threaded key towards Rinki.

Rinki stepped back. "Me?"

"Yes."

"But this is a key to the house."

For the first time Harimohan Babu smiled faintly.

"I have received four keys to the house. This is the fifth."

Rinki took the key.

"I should keep it?"

Kamala said, "As long as someone younger than you keeps coming here at five."

Rinki tied the key by its blue thread to the ribbon of her notebook.

One of the little girls went inside and began wiping the old writing from the blackboard.

The other opened a mat.

Kamala stood up and put her bag over her shoulder.

Harimohan Babu walked with her as far as the main gate.

"There will be less space in the quarters," he said. "You could have left these books here."

Kamala said, "Half the books are still here."

Both turned and looked back.

The door of the little room stood open. Inside, Rinki sat with a notebook open. The two little girls were in front of her.

The old date on the blackboard had been erased.

Rinki was writing a new date.

Kamala stepped out through the gate.

Harimohan Babu closed the main gate, but left the small door into the lane open.

Story 27

Ten Minutes

At ten minutes past five in the evening, the clock at Darbhanga Junction showed five ten.

Lalita Devi stood near the stairs on Platform One and looked once more at her paper.

On the back, in blue ink, were written: "Platform 3, S-4, Seat 52."

She looked up at the electronic display. The letters were changing. An announcement came, but half the words dissolved into the iron roof, the voices of people, and the whistle of an engine.

Lalita Devi asked the tea seller beside her, "The train to Patna is on Platform Three?"

Without looking up, the tea seller said, "Yes, Three. Ten minutes left."

"Ten minutes?"

"Look at the clock."

Lalita Devi looked at the clock again.

In her hand was an old cloth bag containing a plastic file. Inside the file were the original residential certificate, a copy of the date-of-birth document, and two photographs.

Renu had told her three times on the phone, "Mausi, only the original residential certificate. I have everything else."

When leaving home, Lalita Devi had put the other papers in along with the certificate.

In matters like these, she did not trust the words "only this much."

She moved towards the stairs.

Just then a young man came quickly from behind and said, "Platform Three?"

Lalita Devi turned.

He carried a brown envelope in one hand and a black bag over his shoulder. Fine beads of sweat stood on his forehead.

"I'm going there too," Lalita said.

The young man looked at the clock. "The train leaves in ten minutes."

"Why is everyone repeating that to me?"

The young man laughed for the first time. "Perhaps because you walk slowly."

"Not slowly. My knee hurts."

His smile vanished at once. "Give me the bag."

"No, I'll carry it."

"You have to climb the stairs."

Lalita tightened her grip on the bag. "There are documents in it."

"I have documents in my hand too."

For a moment each looked at what the other was carrying.

Lalita handed him the bag.

"Name?" the young man asked.

"Of the bag?"

"Yours."

"Lalita Devi."

"I'm Shashank."

"Full name later. Platform Three first."

They began climbing the stairs.

The footbridge above was crowded. A family stood in the middle of the way with four bags. Two children clung to the railing and looked down at the engine.

Shashank went ahead, making a path. Lalita followed behind.

Halfway up the stairs, Lalita stopped to catch her breath.

"You go," she said. "I'll come."

Shashank stopped. "I also have to hand over a document. There is only one train."

"Then do your work first."

"The person I have to give it to has switched off the phone."

"Mine isn't connecting either."

They looked at each other again.

Shashank said, "Why do all phones stop working at railway stations at the same time?"

Lalita said, "People run. Perhaps the phones get tired."

Shashank burst out laughing.

As he laughed, his grip loosened and the brown envelope slipped between his fingers.

It fell near the railing.

Before Shashank could bend, a child's foot moved towards it.

Lalita did not carry a walking stick, but her right hand darted out and picked up the envelope.

"Laugh less when you're carrying documents," she said.

Shashank took the envelope. "Now the account is even. I carried your bag; you picked up my envelope."

"The account is not even yet."

Another announcement came: the train bound for Patna would depart from Platform Three at its scheduled time.

Shashank looked at the clock.

Five thirteen.

"Seven minutes," he said.

"Now you've started counting too?"

They crossed the bridge.

The crowd was denser on Platform Three. The train stood there. The coach numbers were visible at intervals along its length.

Lalita took a folded paper from the small pocket inside her blouse.

"S-4," she read. "Seat fifty-two."

Shashank did not look surprised, but immediately said, "I have to go towards the sleeper coaches too."

"What seat is your person on?"

"I don't know the seat."

"Then how will you find him?"

"I know the name."

"You'll find a coach by a name?"

"It would be easier if the phone connected."

Lalita held out her paper to him. "First find S-4. Once we reach there, you look for your person and I'll look for my girl."

"All right."

S-1 was behind them. They moved forward along the coaches.

Peanuts, water, tea, books, voices—everything moved together on the platform.

Lalita could not walk quickly. Shashank would go two steps ahead from time to time, then stop and let her catch up.

As they reached S-3, the train gave a slight jerk.

Lalita stopped short. "Has it started?"

"No. They must have coupled the engine."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

"Then why did you say it with such confidence?"

"You were frightened."

"I wasn't frightened. I only asked."

Shashank smiled.

S-4 was in front of them.

The clock showed five sixteen.

"Four minutes," Shashank said.

"Be quiet."

They climbed into the coach.

Inside, people were arranging their sheets, bottles and bags. Seat 52 was by the window.

The seat was empty.

Lalita stopped.

"Renu?" she called.

An elderly woman sitting opposite the window said, "That girl has gone to get water."

Shashank's face changed at once.

"What name did you say?"

Lalita looked at him. "Renu."

"Renu Kumari?"

"Yes."

"Belahi Girls' High School?"

Lalita narrowed her eyes. "How do you know her?"

Shashank raised the brown envelope.

"I've come from the school."

Lalita said nothing for a few moments.

"What's in that?"

"Her character certificate and the marksheet attested by the headmaster. The seal was put on this afternoon. Renu called at four to ask whether someone could bring them to the station."

Lalita opened her bag and took out the plastic file.

"She called me and said the original residential certificate had been left at home."

Shashank looked at the file, then at his own envelope.

"She told me she had everything else."

"She told me the same."

They did not laugh together.

The same realization came to both of them at once.

Everything else Renu needed was, in fact, lying in two different places.

One document at home.

One at the school.

And each of them had assumed the other document was already with her.

A whistle sounded outside.

The elderly woman said, "The train is about to leave."

Lalita turned towards the door. "Where has Renu gone?"

Just then a thin girl came hurrying down the aisle carrying two bottles of water.

"Mausi!"

Renu saw Lalita first, then Shashank.

"Shashank Sir?"

"Not Sir," Shashank said. "Clerk."

Renu laughed between breaths.

"Both of you?"

Lalita handed her the file. "Your 'everything else' was lying in quite a few places."

Shashank gave her the brown envelope. "Open this and check it now."

Renu sat down on the seat and opened both.

"Original residential certificate."

"Yes."

"Character certificate."

"Yes."

"Marksheet."

"Yes."

Renu suddenly fell silent.

"I need all three for verification in Patna tomorrow," she said softly.

Lalita said, "You told me about only one."

"I thought the school papers wouldn't be ready by evening."

Shashank said, "And I thought the document from home was already in your bag."

Renu pressed both sets of papers to her chest.

A second whistle sounded outside.

The guard raised the green flag.

Shashank said, "Now we're getting off."

Lalita turned too.

Renu caught her hand. "Mausi—"

"Nothing. Call when you reach."

Shashank stepped down from the coach. Lalita followed.

The train began to move slowly.

Renu came and stood at the doorway.

"I got both sets of papers!" she called, as though seeking confirmation once again.

Lalita raised her hand.

Shashank did too.

S-4 moved slowly ahead.

Then S-5, S-6.

At last the red guard's coach receded into the distance.

The crowd on the platform suddenly seemed a little thinner.

Lalita took a deep breath.

Shashank still had her bag hanging from his shoulder.

Lalita said, "My bag."

Shashank started. "Oh."

He took it off and gave it to her.

"Now the account is even," Shashank said.

Taking the bag, Lalita said, "No."

"What's left now?"

"You carried my bag. I picked up your envelope. You showed the way. I gave you the seat number. If we start settling accounts, ten minutes will pass."

Shashank looked at the clock.

Five twenty.

At that very moment, the minute hand of the station's large clock reached the four.

For a few moments both of them looked at it.

Lalita said, "Ten minutes is a very short time."

Shashank did not reply.

As they walked towards the bridge stairs, he looked at his empty hand, where the brown envelope had been only a short while earlier.

Lalita felt the light weight of her bag.

Both of them were walking slowly now.

Behind them, an announcement for the next train began on the platform.

Story 28

The Last Customer

On the old wooden sign outside Ramsevak Thakur's shop, faded blue letters read: "Ramsevak Hair Cutting."

The blue paint had worn away long ago in many places. Half the "r" in "Hair" had peeled off, and a black rain stain marked the final "g" of "Cutting."

That day, a sheet of white paper had been pasted beneath the sign:

"Last Day Today."

Ramsevak had not written it. Bhola, who ran the paan shop next door, had written it that morning with a thick sketch pen.

Ramsevak read it and said, "Why such big letters?"

Bhola laughed. "So people will understand."

"Those who need to understand will understand even without the paper."

Even so, he did not remove it.

The shop was thirty-nine years old. On one wall hung a large mirror. Beneath it was a narrow wooden shelf holding combs, scissors, a razor, brushes, a tin of powder, and small bottles.

In the middle stood a heavy iron barber's chair whose red cushion had worn through in several places. There was a ceiling fan, but its regulator acknowledged only two speeds: very fast and almost off.

Ramsevak's nephew Nandu had been packing things since morning.

"Kaka, shall we keep this old machine?" Nandu asked.

Ramsevak lifted his head and looked. It was a black electric clipper with a cord, now seldom used.

"No. Take whatever still works."

"Who will use a machine like this in my shop?"

"Then throw it away."

Winding the cord around the machine, Nandu said, "If I throw it away, you'll say again—it was from my time."

Ramsevak smiled. "Not everything from my time is worth preserving."

Nandu had his own new shop on Station Road: a glass door, two swivel chairs, bright lights, music controlled by a mobile phone. Its name was "New Look."

Ramsevak had been there twice. He liked the shop, though he found it too shiny.

"Shall I put this chair there?" Nandu asked, tapping the old iron chair.

"There isn't room."

"I'll make room."

"No. The landlord will keep it here. He said he'll decide about the old things later."

In fact, this row of the old market was to be demolished from the following week. The landlord had given all the tenants notice three months earlier. Ramsevak could have opened a small shop somewhere else if he wished, but he had chosen not to.

"Thirty-nine years is enough," he told everyone.

People did not believe him.

"If a barber stops working, what will he do?"

Ramsevak would say, "People will go on growing their hair. I'll keep watching."

By afternoon the number of customers was greater than on an ordinary day. Some came for a haircut, some for a shave, some simply to talk.

Some came even though they did not need a haircut.

Nagendra Babu, a retired postmaster, arrived at ten. His hair had been cut only the previous week.

"Even it out a little near the ears," he said.

Ramsevak looked. "It's already even."

"Still. A little."

Ramsevak moved the scissors twice.

Nagendra Babu looked in the mirror. "Now it's right."

As he paid, he said, "Don't consider this the last."

Ramsevak put the money in the drawer. "The hair will grow again, Babu. Only the shop won't be here."

At noon Bhola from the paan shop brought tea. Nandu continued separating empty boxes, old towels and spare bottles.

"Kaka, shall I pack everything?" Nandu asked.

"Not everything."

"What's left?"

Ramsevak set aside a black comb, a pair of round-tipped scissors, a small spray bottle and a white cloth on the shelf.

Nandu looked at them. "Who are these for?"

"Leave them."

"Is your last customer still to come?"

Ramsevak looked at the clock. "There is time yet."

Towards five in the evening people began coming again. Someone took a photograph. Someone shook Ramsevak's hand. At six forty-five, Sahdev Jha, a retired school headmaster, arrived.

"I am the last customer," he announced as soon as he reached the door.

Bhola from outside called, "It isn't seven yet."

Sitting in the chair, Sahdev Babu said, "Then cut mine slowly."

His haircut took twenty minutes. Then his beard was trimmed. At the end Ramsevak brushed the back of his neck.

Sahdev Babu stood up, looked at his head in the mirror and said, "I am the last customer of a thirty-nine-year-old shop. Write that down."

Bhola laughed. Nandu did too.

Ramsevak only said, "Seventy rupees."

"You charge even the last customer?"

"I charged the first one too."

Sahdev Babu put down seventy rupees and went out. The people standing outside teased him:

"Your name has entered history."

At seven fifteen the last ordinary customer left.

Nandu swept the floor. Small clumps of hair gathered to one side. Ramsevak washed the razor and put it in its box. He closed the powder tin. The bottles were wrapped in paper.

At seven forty-five Ramsevak pulled the shutter halfway down.

Bhola asked from outside, "That's it?"

"Not yet."

"Then what?"

Ramsevak did not answer.

Nandu looked again at the comb, scissors, spray bottle and white cloth still lying out.

"These four are still outside."

"Yes."

"Someone is coming?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"You'll see when he comes."

At eight five most shutters in the market had come down. The paan shop was still open, though there were few customers. A vegetable seller was beginning to turn his cart homeward.

Nandu looked at his phone. "Kaka, I have to go."

"Go."

"You'll be alone?"

"I'll close the shop."

Nandu went as far as the doorway, then stopped. "The customer who's coming—shall I cut his hair?"

Ramsevak said, "Sit."

Nandu sat again on the plastic stool.

At eight twelve, two pairs of feet stopped outside the half-lowered shutter.

A woman bent and looked in. With her was a boy of about twelve.

Seeing the shutter, the woman said, "Montu, the shop has closed. Come."

The boy immediately began to turn away.

Ramsevak called from inside, "Bindu! Here."

The woman bent again. "Kaka? I thought everything was closed."

"His chair is empty."

The boy looked through the half-open doorway. The shop did not have its usual crowd. The radio was off. The fan was off. Only one tube light was burning.

Ramsevak raised the shutter a little.

Montu came slowly inside.

He did not sit in the chair at once. First he looked at the comb on the shelf. Then the scissors. Then the spray bottle.

"Machine?" he asked.

"No," Ramsevak said.

"Radio?"

"No."

"Fan?"

"Slow, if you feel hot."

Montu sat in the chair.

Nandu remained silently on the stool.

Bindu said, "Kaka, even if you didn't do it today—tomorrow somewhere else—"

Montu immediately said, "No."

Bindu fell silent.

Ramsevak fastened the white cloth around his neck.

"Remember the order?" Ramsevak asked.

Montu looked at him in the mirror.

"Right side first."

"Then?"

"Left."

"Then?"

"Back."

"The top?"

Montu paused. "Last."

Ramsevak picked up the scissors.

Montu had first come to this shop about two years earlier. By then his mother Bindu had already tried three shops. In a crowd Montu would not remain seated in the chair. At the whirring sound of a clipper he would cover his ears and get up. Some people scolded him; others advised holding him down firmly.

On the first day Ramsevak had simply let him sit in the chair for five minutes. He had not cut his hair.

The second time he called them after the shop had closed.

Radio off. Fan slow. No machine. First he let Montu touch the comb. Then, from a distance, he made the scissors go "snip-snip" twice so the boy could hear the sound.

That day only the hair on the right side was cut.

The third time, the rest.

After a few months Montu began having his entire haircut done in one visit.

But the time remained the same—after the shop had emptied.

Nandu had not known any of this before.

He watched Montu in the mirror. Ramsevak moved the scissors very slowly. The comb once through the hair, the scissors twice. Then a pause.

Montu kept counting the four small scratches on the arm of the chair with his finger.

"One."

The comb.

"Two."

The scissors.

"Three."

The scissors again.

"Four."

Ramsevak stopped. "Right side done."

Montu gave a slight nod.

Nandu instinctively took his phone from his pocket, then immediately put it back.

The left side began.

Bindu stood near the door. Seventy rupees were already folded in her hand.

In the middle of the haircut a motorcycle passed outside, sounding its horn loudly. Montu's shoulders tightened.

Ramsevak stopped the scissors.

After a few moments Montu sat straight again.

"Now," he said.

Ramsevak resumed.

At eight forty-two the haircut was finished.

Ramsevak did not brush the back of Montu's neck. Montu disliked the brush. Instead, he removed the loose hair gently with a small towel.

"Mirror?" Ramsevak asked.

Montu first looked into the mirror in front of him. Then Ramsevak handed him the smaller mirror for the back.

Montu looked at the right, the left and the back.

"Fine."

At that one word, Bindu let out her breath.

She held out seventy rupees.

Ramsevak took the money.

Bindu was surprised. "Today is the last day. I thought—"

Ramsevak put the money in the drawer. "The rate doesn't change on the last day."

Bindu laughed.

Montu climbed down from the chair. At the doorway he turned back.

"Next time?"

Ramsevak remained silent for a few moments.

For the first time Nandu looked at Ramsevak as though he too needed the answer to that question.

Ramsevak picked up the black comb and the round-tipped scissors from the shelf. He wrapped both in the white cloth.

Then he placed the bundle in Nandu's hand.

Nandu stared. "For me?"

Ramsevak said, "Your shop closes at eight on Sundays?"

"Yes."

"One Sunday a month, at eight ten, keep the radio off."

Nandu looked at Montu.

Ramsevak continued, "No machine. Right side first, then left, then the back. The top last."

Montu kept looking at Nandu.

Nandu slowly repeated, "Right first. Then left. Then back. The top last."

Montu asked, "Fan?"

"Slow," Nandu said.

"Brush?"

Nandu looked at Ramsevak.

Ramsevak said, "No brush."

Nandu repeated, "No brush."

Montu thought for a moment. "Fine."

Bindu wiped her now-empty hand on the end of her sari.

"Come, Montu."

They went out.

The market was almost closed. Bhola at the paan shop was still watching from a distance.

He shouted, "Kaka, now truly the last?"

Ramsevak did not answer.

Nandu stood holding the small bundle wrapped in white cloth.

Ramsevak picked up the small spray bottle left on the shelf, poured the water into the drain outside, and put the bottle in his bag.

Then he opened the drawer.

The day's notes and coins lay inside. Sahdev Babu's seventy rupees were on top, Montu's seventy beneath them.

Ramsevak did not separate the two.

He closed the drawer.

For a moment he stood before the mirror. The chair was empty.

Nandu asked, "Shall we take down the sign?"

Ramsevak looked outside. The old wooden sign hung slightly crooked in the darkness. Beneath it the white sheet of paper was still pasted:

"Last Day Today."

Ramsevak said, "The landlord will take it down tomorrow."

He switched off the light.

The shutter came down slowly.

Outside, darkness settled over the shop, but the small bundle of white cloth in Nandu's hand remained clearly visible.

Story 29

The Broken Clock

The first time Madhavi took the old clock down into her hands, it seemed to her less a clock than some ancient stubbornness of the house.

A square wooden body. Varnish peeled away at the corners. A thin crack along the right side of the glass. Inside, two brass-coloured hands moved in the opposite direction from those of an ordinary clock.

Even the numerals were arranged in reverse order.

Twelve at the top, but one on the left and eleven on the right.

Madhavi laughed. "See? This is my broken clock."

Standing on a chair, Aniruddh took the clock from her.

"Broken?"

"Yes. It runs, but backwards."

"Then it isn't broken. It should be called mad."

"Babu says the same thing."

The room smelled of dust. Four thin bands of Magh sunlight fell through the window bars. For the past three months there had been talk of whitewashing the house after the wedding, but whitewashing was not the real reason the room was being cleared.

After Madhavi's marriage, her father was thinking of renting out the front room, and so the old belongings were being sorted.

This room had once belonged to Madhavi's grandmother, Janakdulari Devi.

Janakdulari Devi had been dead eleven years.

The bed had already been removed. The iron trunk had been shifted to the back storeroom. On the wall only two hooks, an old nail, and the clock remained.

Madhavi said, "Babu says to throw it away. I told him I'd have it repaired."

Aniruddh held the clock to his ear.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

The sound was clear.

For a few moments he stood silent, watching his own shadow fall across the opposite wall.

"The mechanism works."

"It tells time backwards."

"A watch repairer will look at it."

Madhavi ran a finger over the back of the clock. On the wood were very old letters written in white chalk: "J.D."

"Nani's name."

"Janakdulari Devi?"

"Yes."

Aniruddh wrapped the clock in a cloth.

Madhavi added, "Have it made straight. The numerals too. After the wedding we'll put it in the new house."

"Where?"

"In the study."

Aniruddh smiled. "The study is already ready?"

"The room is decided. The books will go later."

"And me?"

"You'll get whatever space remains after the books."

They both laughed.

Aniruddh did not put the clock in the storage box of his motorcycle. The box was too small. He placed it in a bag, hung the bag from the handlebar, and rode slowly towards the market.

Badri Sah's watch shop on Station Road in Madhubani was still there, though two letters had fallen from the word "Repairing" on the sign outside: "Badri Watch Repairing."

The shop was very small.

One glass cabinet.

Clocks on three walls.

On the table lay tiny screwdrivers, tweezers, a lens, a bottle of oil, and hands of different sizes.

Badri Sah was over seventy now. His son Pravin did most of the work, but Badri Sah still opened up the old wall clocks himself.

Aniruddh placed the clock on the table.

"This has to be made straight."

Badri Sah pushed his spectacles higher.

"Doesn't it run?"

"It runs. It runs backwards."

Badri Sah looked at the face of the clock.

His hand stopped midway.

"Where did you bring this from?"

Aniruddh gave the name of the village.

"Whose house?"

Aniruddh gave the name of Madhavi's father.

Badri Sah looked at the clock again.

"Janakdulari Devi's?"

Aniruddh was startled.

"You knew her?"

Badri Sah did not answer. He turned the clock over and saw the "J.D." on the wooden back.

"I made this."

"You?"

"Not made. Modified."

He called to Pravin, "Give me that old large screwdriver."

Pravin handed it to him and, glancing at the clock, laughed.

"That's the backwards clock."

Badri Sah looked at him. "Backwards is an easy word."

Four screws came out.

When the rear cover was removed, the metal mechanism inside became visible.

Badri Sah fitted the lens to his eye.

"The spring is fine."

He turned one wheel gently with a finger.

"The teeth are fine."

Then he said, "There is nothing wrong with this clock even now."

Aniruddh asked, "Then why do the hands move backwards?"

"Because that is how it was meant to move."

Aniruddh fell silent.

Badri Sah pushed his chair back.

"Before making it straight, there is something we need to see."

He told Pravin to mind the shop and stood up.

"Come."

"Where?"

"To their house."

Aniruddh thought Badri Sah was joking, but the old man took a key from the cabinet and stepped outside.

"Bring the clock."

They went on foot. The house was not very far.

Badri Sah spoke little on the way.

Only once did he ask, "Is Janakdulari Devi's room still as it was?"

"Almost empty."

"The mirror?"

"What mirror?"

This time Badri Sah looked at Aniruddh.

"Then half the story is still there."

When they reached the house, Madhavi's father, Shyamkant Jha, was sitting in the veranda warming himself in the sun.

Seeing Badri Sah, he stood up at once.

"Arre, Badriji?"

"After a long time."

Shyamkant's eyes fell on the clock in Aniruddh's hands.

"So it has reached your shop?"

Madhavi came out from inside.

"So quickly?"

Aniruddh said, "The clock went with me to be repaired. It has brought me back to study history."

Madhavi looked at Badri Sah.

"You know this clock?"

"A little."

Badri Sah went into the room.

He looked at the empty wall.

Then he pointed towards the corner opposite the window.

"Was there a cupboard here?"

Shyamkant said, "Yes. Nani's wooden cupboard. We put it in the small storeroom last year."

"And a mirror on it?"

Shyamkant fell silent.

Madhavi looked at his face.

"Babu?"

Shyamkant said softly, "Yes. A small square mirror."

"Where is it?"

"With the cupboard."

They all went to the small storeroom.

There, a tin trunk, two bamboo baskets, an old low wooden seat and the cupboard stood pressed close together.

On the cupboard door, beneath the dust, was a square mirror.

Badri Sah said, "Bring it out."

Aniruddh and Shyamkant shifted the cupboard.

The mirror showed clearly in the window light.

Badri Sah handed the clock to Madhavi.

"Hold it against that wall."

Madhavi held the clock near the old hook but did not hang it.

"Now look in the mirror."

Madhavi turned towards the mirror.

For a moment she said nothing.

In the mirror, the numerals on the clock were in their proper order.

One on the right.

Eleven on the left.

The hands appeared to move in the ordinary direction of a clock.

Aniruddh took out his mobile and checked the time.

In the mirror, the clock was only one minute behind the mobile.

Madhavi looked again at the actual clock.

There the hands moved backwards.

Then at the mirror.

There the time was completely ordinary.

"This..."

Badri Sah said, "It was made for the mirror."

Shyamkant stood holding the veranda doorframe.

Madhavi turned to her father.

"Why?"

The answer came not from Badri Sah but from Shyamkant.

"At one time the right side of your grandmother's body became very weak."

He did not say the word "paralysis." His voice remained entirely matter-of-fact.

"The bed was here. She could turn to the left, but it was difficult for her to look to the right. The clock was on the wall behind her head."

Slowly Madhavi began to understand the arrangement of the room.

Where the bed must have been.

Where the cupboard stood.

At what angle the mirror faced.

Shyamkant continued, "At first she kept asking the time again and again. When is the medicine? When is the radio programme? Has it become time for you to come home from school?"

Badri Sah smiled faintly.

"One day she called for me."

A trace of the old day came alive in his voice.

"She said, 'Badri, can you make a clock that runs straight in the mirror?'"

Aniruddh asked, "And you made one?"

"At first I said, 'Buy a new clock.' She said, 'What will a new clock do? I need the time in the mirror.'"

Madhavi's fingers rested motionless on the wooden case.

Badri Sah said, "I removed the old mechanism and fitted one that ran in the reverse direction. I changed the numeral strip too. Such parts were not easy to get in the market then. Twice I had to bring parts from Patna."

"So Nani kept reading the time?" Madhavi asked.

Shyamkant said, "Yes."

"Why don't I remember?"

"You were living in a hostel then. You came during holidays. To you it was simply the clock in Nani's room."

Madhavi kept looking at the mirror.

A blurred memory returned to her.

Nani sitting on the bed.

The radio news about to begin.

Nani glancing once into the mirror and saying, "It is five o'clock."

At the time Madhavi had thought her grandmother somehow knew the time by herself.

There had been no clock inside that memory.

Only Nani's certain voice.

Aniruddh asked, "Then it wouldn't be right to make it straight?"

Badri Sah said, "I can."

He took the clock in his hands.

"A normal mechanism can be fitted. The numeral strip can be changed. Two hours."

Madhavi did not answer immediately.

Shyamkant said, "But who will look at it through a mirror now?"

It was a practical question.

The clock's old use had ended.

Madhavi looked at the cracked glass.

"Can the glass be replaced?"

"Yes."

"The wood cleaned?"

"Yes."

"The mechanism?"

"This one still runs."

"Then don't change it."

Shyamkant looked at his daughter.

"You'll keep a backwards clock in your new house?"

Madhavi did not laugh.

"The new house will have a mirror too."

Aniruddh said, "The mirror has reached the study before the books."

Madhavi glared at him, but this time she could not hold back a smile.

Badri Sah wrapped the clock again in the cloth.

"I'll only replace the glass. Clean it. Oil it."

"And write one thing on the back."

"What?"

Madhavi thought for a moment.

"'Do not straighten it'?" Aniruddh suggested.

Madhavi shook her head.

"No. Why leave an order for someone who doesn't understand?"

Badri Sah waited.

Madhavi said, "Only write the date when you changed it, if you remember."

Badri Sah's face grew a little serious.

"I remember the date."

"After so many years?"

"Not every date. Some work remembers its own date."

The next evening Aniruddh brought the clock back.

The glass was new.

The wood was clean, but its old scratches had been left as they were.

On the back, Badri Sah had written in small letters:

"Modified for the mirror — 17 July 2001. Glass replaced — 19 September 2026."

Madhavi looked at the writing for a long time.

Then she hung the clock not in the room but in the veranda.

Shyamkant asked, "Here?"

"For now."

The clock went on turning backwards.

Anyone looking directly at it in the veranda would think it was wrong.

After dinner that night, Madhavi brought the mirror from the small storeroom. Not the entire cupboard—only the old square mirror.

Aniruddh had brought tools for removing the screws.

Together they fixed the mirror to the wall opposite the clock in the veranda.

Shyamkant sat in a chair and watched everything.

When the work was finished, Aniruddh looked at his mobile.

Eight eighteen.

Madhavi looked into the mirror.

The clock too showed eight eighteen.

Shyamkant looked directly at the clock.

Then at the mirror.

Then at the clock again.

For a long time he said nothing.

At last he rose to go inside.

At the doorway, without turning, he said, "Your nani used to listen to the nine o'clock news."

Madhavi looked at the clock in the mirror.

It was now eight nineteen.

She did not go to look for the radio in the veranda.

She simply pulled a chair in front of the mirror and sat down.

Aniruddh sat beside her.

On the wall itself, the clock went on running backwards.

In the mirror, time moved steadily forward.

Story 30

The Sweet Box

Seema Devi was more concerned about the box than about the taste of the sweets.

"Take an ordinary cardboard box," her daughter Mrinal said. "We'll eat the sweets, not the box."

Seema Devi kept looking at the glossy boxes arranged behind the shop's glass display. Red, golden, blue, deep green. Some had raised flowers, some fine latticework. In the middle was a rigid cream-coloured box with a golden border and a small clasp that looked like brass.

"How much is this one?"

The shopkeeper, Naresh Sah, said, "The sweets are separate. The box is on deposit. Leave three hundred rupees; return the box clean and you get the three hundred back."

Mrinal burst out laughing. "There. The matter is settled. Take an ordinary box."

Seema Devi gave her a look. "Everything seems simple to you."

The next day Anup's family was coming from Samastipur to meet Mrinal.

Seema Devi did not like the phrase 'coming to see her'; Mrinal had been teaching in a school for seven years, earned her own salary, and made her own decisions. Even so, in family conversation people still said, 'They are coming to see the girl.'

Mrinal had already made herself clear: no display, no expensive decoration, no piles of gifts. Tea, savouries, a little sweet. That was all.

Seema Devi agreed with her. But agreement and the fear lodged inside the heart are not the same thing.

"What do people notice first?" she asked quietly. "The house, the utensils, the serving, the box. They remember the taste of the sweets later."

Mrinal said, "Anyone who has come to inspect the box need not inspect me."

Naresh Sah suppressed a smile. "Didi, many people take this box on deposit. The occasion ends, the box comes back. Nobody is taking it home to build a cupboard."

Seema Devi looked once more at the cream-coloured box. "Pack one kilo of kaju barfi and half a kilo of peda in this."

Mrinal shook her head but said nothing.

Naresh Sah placed the box on the counter and wrote a small '17' with a black marker on its underside. Then he wrote 17 on a narrow slip of paper and handed it to Seema Devi.

"Return the box with this slip. Within seven days."

Seema Devi put the slip in her purse.

On the way home Mrinal said, "Ma, what if someone turns the box over tomorrow and reads the number?"

"Will people eat the sweets or turn the box over?"

"Hard to say."

Seema Devi laughed. "You find jokes only at my expense."

From morning the next day, the house was in a stir. Seema Devi changed the tablecloth twice. The first had a faint stain in one corner; the second was clean but faded. In the end she put the first one back and placed a flower vase over the stain.

Mrinal wore a simple blue cotton sari. Seema Devi said once, "You could wear the silk one."

"Is this a school function or an exhibition?"

"All right, all right."

At three in the afternoon Anup arrived with his father, Devkinandan Jha, his mother Usha Devi, and his younger sister Pooja. Anup did not work in a bank; he was in the accounts department of a private publishing firm in Patna. Mrinal had already laughed at the fact that both families had asked so plainly about professions during the very first phone conversation.

The meeting remained easy. Anup spoke little, but when Mrinal brought up the school library, he listened attentively. Pooja went as far as the kitchen and asked Seema Devi, "Aunty, I don't take sugar in tea." Seema Devi immediately made a separate cup.

Opening the sweet box on the table, Devkinandan Babu said, "I don't usually eat much kaju barfi, but today I'll have one."

A small wave of satisfaction rose inside Seema Devi. The cream-coloured box really did look beautiful. When the lid opened, the sweets sat in even rows. With its golden border, even the ordinary sitting room appeared a little more orderly, a little more prosperous.

Mrinal looked once at her mother's face. She said nothing.

The conversation went on for about an hour and a half. No decision was made then and there. As they were leaving, Usha Devi held Mrinal's hand and said, "We'll talk again on the phone. There is no need to hurry."

Seema Devi felt lighter. She liked that sentence: neither yes nor no, but respect.

As he was stepping outside, Devkinandan Babu turned back. "I'm taking the box with us. The children at home will see the sweets."

Seema Devi paused for a moment. She remembered the deposit slip. Then she quickly said, "Yes, yes, of course."

Mrinal smiled from behind the doorway.

The car left.

Seema Devi let out her breath. "See? They liked the box."

Mrinal said, "The sweets or the box?"

"Both."

"And now the three hundred?"

Seema Devi took the slip from her purse and looked at it. "The box will come back. They seem like decent people."

Mrinal laughed. "Ma, is this a marriage decision or box management?"

By six in the evening there had been no phone call. Seema Devi checked her mobile three times.

At seven, a message from Anup came to Mrinal: "Reached home. It was good meeting everyone. We'll talk calmly tomorrow."

Seema Devi read the message, then read it again.

At half past seven the sound of a motorcycle stopping came at the door.

Outside was not Anup but Devkinandan Babu. In his hand was the same cream-coloured sweet box.

Seema Devi's heart gave one hard thump.

"So soon?" she asked, opening the door.

Devkinandan Babu held out the box. "I came to return this."

Seema Devi's hand slowed involuntarily.

The box was almost empty. Two pedas remained inside.

"Did something go wrong?" escaped Seema Devi's mouth.

Devkinandan Babu looked startled. "Wrong?"

"No, I mean... you brought the box back so quickly..."

Mrinal came out from inside. One look at her mother's face and she understood.

Devkinandan Babu laughed. "Oh. You thought I had come to return the sweets?"

Embarrassed, Seema Devi said, "No, no, I..."

"I understand."

He turned the box over and showed her the underside. The number 17 was written there in black marker.

"The moment I saw this number, I recognized Naresh Sah's box."

Seema Devi was silent.

Devkinandan Babu took a folded slip from the pocket of his kurta, opened it, and placed it on the table. It read: "Deposit Box No. 23." The date was two months old.

"For my younger sister's granddaughter's birthday, I too took a box from the same shop. Three hundred rupees was worth saving, so I returned it the very next day."

Mrinal smiled.

Seema Devi still did not quite understand. "Then why bring the box all the way here at this hour?"

Devkinandan Babu said, "Naresh Sah closes his shop at eight. I thought, why should the box lie at our house until tomorrow? Your three hundred rupees would remain tied up. I was passing this way, so I brought it back."

Seema Devi's face grew warm. "For three hundred rupees, so much trouble..."

"Is three hundred rupees a small amount?" Devkinandan Babu asked in an easy voice. "It isn't small for me either."

For a few moments no one spoke.

Then Devkinandan Babu opened the lid and pointed to the two remaining pedas inside.

"We couldn't eat these two on the way. You keep them."

Seema Devi said, "No, no, take them for the children."

"There is plenty at home. And one more thing."

He ran a finger along the golden edge of the cream-coloured box. "Tomorrow, when we talk at home, we should also talk about expenses. If the marriage goes ahead, I would prefer that money not be wasted on decoration, packaging, boxes and such things. Let the food be good. Let what is worn be comfortable. As for what people will say—the accounting for that never ends."

For the first time Seema Devi looked directly at his face.

"Why are you saying this?"

Devkinandan Babu smiled again. "Because today I saw number seventeen in your house, and two months ago number twenty-three was in mine. It seems both families rent an expensive-looking box out of the same fear."

Mrinal burst out laughing.

Seema Devi could not hold back either.

"You will not tell Mrinal this," she said.

Mrinal was standing right in front of them. "Too late, Ma."

All three laughed.

Devkinandan Babu stood up. "Come, let us return the box to Naresh Sah. His closing time is near."

Seema Devi took the slip from her purse.

Mrinal said, "I'm coming too."

The three of them crossed the lane and reached the sweet shop. Naresh Sah had already lowered the shutter halfway.

"Ah, number seventeen back so soon?" he said with a laugh.

Devkinandan Babu replied, "How many days should a man keep someone else's box at home?"

Naresh Sah inspected the box. He saw the two pedas inside.

"These?"

Seema Devi said, "They do not come with the box."

Naresh Sah took the two pedas out onto a small paper plate, put the box away inside, and returned three hundred rupees to Seema Devi.

Seema Devi did not count the notes. She put them into her purse.

On the way back Mrinal broke one peda into three pieces.

"What is this?" Seema Devi asked.

"The box has gone back to the shop," Mrinal said. "I'm dividing these two pedas among the three of us."

Devkinandan Babu took his piece.

Seema Devi took hers too.

The streetlights had come on. The cream-coloured box remained inside the shop, waiting for some next occasion, but this time its golden border no longer seemed important to Seema Devi.

Story 31

The Small Advertisement

Nilesh Jha read the small-advertisements column in the newspaper for the fifth time.

The thought of writing "Work Wanted" had occurred to him before, but each time he had folded the paper again.

For six months he had been applying in different places. Schools, insurance offices, computer shops, the accounts section of a private hospital—wherever he heard there was a vacancy, he arrived with his résumé. The answer was usually the same: "We'll call."

The calls rarely came.

That Wednesday he had one hundred and seventy-eight rupees in his pocket.

As his mother left for the market that morning, she had said, "If you need anything for vegetables, tell me."

Nilesh had replied, "No, I have money."

In truth, saying "I have money" was easier than telling his mother the arithmetic of his pocket.

He had graduated from university. He could type in Hindi and English on a computer, write Maithili neatly, fill online forms, scan documents and combine PDFs. But none of these skills had yet given him the name of a job.

At noon he reached the office of Mithila Samachar on Station Road.

At a small table in front of the office, a young man named Rakesh was writing down advertisements.

"How many lines?" Rakesh asked.

Nilesh said, "Three."

"Commercial?"

"No. Small."

Rakesh pushed his spectacles up onto his forehead. "What do you want written?"

Nilesh took a sheet of paper from his pocket.

He had written:

"Applications, scholarship, pension, bank and school forms filled. Clear applications/letters written. Fee from Rs 50. Home service extra."

Rakesh read it. "Mobile number?"

Nilesh wrote it down.

Rakesh said, "The zero in this '50' is a little faint."

Nilesh ran the pen over it again.

"Now?"

"Fine."

The three-line advertisement cost one hundred and twenty rupees.

As he took the receipt, Nilesh wondered for a moment whether spending one hundred and twenty rupees on an advertisement was wise.

But the money had already crossed the counter.

When he returned home, fifty-eight rupees remained in his pocket.

His mother asked, "Did you eat anything?"

"Yes."

He lied.

The next morning the newspaper fell at the door as soon as seven struck.

Usually Nilesh looked first at the employment news. That day he opened the small-advertisements page directly.

His advertisement was at the bottom right.

The mobile number was correct.

The wording was almost correct.

But the fee had been printed as: "from Rs 5."

For a long time Nilesh stared at the blank space after the five where the zero should have been.

He folded the newspaper and immediately called Rakesh.

"Brother, the advertisement has been printed wrong."

"What's wrong?"

"Five instead of fifty."

There was the sound of paper being turned at the other end.

Rakesh was silent.

Then he said, "Yes. The zero got left out."

"Now what?"

"We'll print a correction free in the next issue."

"The next issue is Saturday."

"Yes."

Nilesh said, "And if someone comes before then with five rupees?"

Rakesh gave a small laugh. "You can tell them it's a printing mistake."

The call ended.

Nilesh threw the newspaper on the table.

His mother called from the kitchen, "What happened?"

"Nothing."

The first call came at seven minutes past eight.

"Nilesh Babu?"

"Yes."

"Do you fill pension forms?"

"Yes."

"How much do you charge?"

Nilesh looked at the newspaper.

"What kind of form is it?"

"Old-age pension. Four pages."

He wanted to say fifty.

What came out of his mouth was, "Whatever is printed in the newspaper."

"Five rupees?"

"Yes."

After the call ended, Nilesh ran a hand over his forehead.

By nine o'clock an elderly woman arrived.

Her name was Phoolkumari Devi.

In a plastic bag she carried a photocopy of her Aadhaar card, a bank passbook, a ration card, and a folded form.

Standing at the doorway, she asked, "Is this where forms are filled?"

Nilesh pulled a chair forward on the veranda.

"Sit."

Taking out the papers, Phoolkumari Devi said, "My son is in Delhi. At the panchayat they told me to fill it myself."

The first line of the form was: Name of Applicant.

Nilesh asked, "The same name that's on the Aadhaar card?"

"Yes."

He began writing.

At the date of birth, Phoolkumari Devi hesitated.

"Where is that written?"

Nilesh checked the Aadhaar card.

He filled in the bank account number.

He asked about annual income.

At the section about her husband, Phoolkumari Devi said softly, "He has been gone seven years."

Without looking up, Nilesh wrote "Late."

It took eleven minutes to fill the form.

At the end he showed her where a thumb impression was required instead of a signature, and which photocopies had to be attached.

Phoolkumari Devi took out a five-rupee coin.

Placing it on the table, she said, "The newspaper said five."

Nilesh looked at the coin.

"Yes."

He took the five rupees.

Phoolkumari Devi gathered her papers and left.

His mother had watched everything from inside the doorway.

She said, "Eleven minutes for five rupees?"

Nilesh said, "It's a printing mistake."

"Then why didn't you say fifty?"

"The newspaper says five."

His mother said nothing.

At twenty past ten the second customer came.

Mahendra Paswan, a mason.

He needed to renew his labour registration online.

"An OTP will come on your mobile," Nilesh said.

Mahendra took out an old phone.

The screen was cracked.

The network kept disappearing.

It took twenty-seven minutes to finish the work.

Mahendra gave him five rupees.

Then he asked, "Where can I get photocopies?"

Nilesh pointed out the shop at the turn in the road.

Mahendra said, "He charges twenty there. You charge five."

Nilesh did not smile.

By noon he had had four customers.

Twenty rupees in all.

Serving rice, his mother asked, "At this rate, when will the one hundred and twenty rupees for the advertisement come back?"

"In six days, if four people come every day."

"And your time?"

Nilesh had no answer.

After eating, he cut out the advertisement and placed it on the table.

With a red pen he wrote a "0" after the "5."

On the paper, the fee was once again fifty.

At three o'clock a teenage girl came.

Her name was Ruchi Kumari.

She had brought a scholarship form.

"Babuji is in the field," she said. "Ma told me to ask first whether you'll fill it for five."

Nilesh looked at the advertisement with the red zero.

"I will."

Ruchi sat down.

The form required the school's code.

Ruchi did not know it.

Nilesh opened the school's website.
The website would not load.
He searched for the headmaster's number.
The call did not connect.
Then he found the code in an old notice PDF.
Ruchi watched the screen in silence.
When the form was complete, she took out five rupees.
Not one five-rupee coin—two rupees, two rupees, one rupee.
Nilesh took the money.
Ruchi picked up the papers, then asked, "Will you do this work every day?"
"I don't know."
"My younger sister will have a form next month too."
She left.
By evening nine customers had come.
Forty-five rupees.
That night Nilesh took out a notebook and wrote down the account.
First customer — 11 minutes.
Second — 27 minutes.
Third — 8 minutes.
Fourth — 13 minutes.
Ruchi — 31 minutes.
Total time: three hours fifty-four minutes.
Total earnings: forty-five rupees.
Below the calculation he wrote: "Loss."
Then, after a while, he wrote another word: "Demand."
Both words remained on the same page.
The next morning someone knocked at the door before seven.
It was Mahendra Paswan.
He had brought two other labourers with him.
"These two need their renewals done too."
Nilesh looked at the clock.
"Now?"
Mahendra said, "We have to reach the worksite by eight."
Nilesh opened the table.
By the time all three forms were finished it was five past eight.
As he left, Mahendra placed fifteen rupees on the table.
Then he paused and added another ten.
Nilesh said, "This is extra."
Mahendra said, "Yesterday you saved me half an hour. Doesn't that count in those five rupees?"
"No, what is printed—"

"What is printed belongs to the newspaper. I have settled my own account."

He left.

At ten, Javed, who ran the photocopy shop at the turn in the road, came over.

"Your customers are coming to me for photocopies," he said.

Nilesh thought it was a complaint.

Javed said, "There's an empty corner in my shop. If you want, sit there for two hours in the evening. People can get forms filled and copies made in one place."

"Rent?"

"First see whether the work runs. My customers will increase too."

Nilesh looked at his face.

"Computer?"

"There's an old one. The internet is slow, but it works."

At noon Nilesh went to the Mithila Samachar office.

As soon as Rakesh saw him, he said, "Shall I put in the correction today? '50' instead of '5'?"

Nilesh took the clipped advertisement from his pocket.

The zero he had added in red pen was still there.

Rakesh took the paper.

"Fifty?"

Nilesh was silent for a few moments.

Then he drew a line through the red zero.

"No."

"Then?"

Nilesh asked for a fresh sheet of paper.

He wrote:

"Applications, scholarship, pension, bank and school forms filled. Simple forms Rs 5. Long/online work from Rs 20. Fee not compulsory for those unable to pay."

Rakesh kept reading.

"This has become too long," he said. "It'll take four lines."

"How much?"

"One hundred and sixty."

Nilesh laughed.

"Last time the advertisement was printed wrong because of your mistake."

Rakesh said at once, "The correction is free."

"This isn't a correction. It's a new advertisement."

Rakesh looked at him.

Then he pulled over the old receipt and wrote on the back: "Four lines — zero."

"This settles the mistake," he said.

Nilesh did not pick up the paper.

"On one condition."

"What?"

"This time read the figures aloud once."

Rakesh laughed.

"Simple forms five. Longer ones twenty."

"Fine."

The new advertisement appeared in Saturday's issue.

Four lines.

One line longer than the first advertisement.

But its space in the newspaper was still very small.

At five that evening Nilesh was sitting in a corner of Javed's shop.

Three forms lay on the table.

An elderly man had brought a bank nomination form.

A woman had her daughter's school-admission form.

A young man had opened employment registration on his mobile.

Changing paper in the printer, Javed asked, "Have you stopped looking for a job?"

Nilesh did not answer at once.

There were still two copies of his résumé in his pocket.

He took one out and put it in the table drawer.

"I haven't stopped," he said. "But for now, this work comes first."

The small newspaper clipping lay on the table.

The first advertisement.

The one in which the zero after fifty had been missing.

Nilesh did not throw it away.

He folded the paper and placed it on top of his résumé.

Story 32

The Blue Pen

"Whose signature is this?"

Vinod Jha, the clerk in the school office, asked with his finger resting at the bottom of the form.

Mamta stood before him. In her hand was a transparent file containing, in order, the scholarship-renewal certificate, a photocopy of the bank passbook, the caste certificate, and the previous year's marksheet.

She bent to look. At the lower right of the form, in blue ink, was written: "Phoolkumari Devi."

"My mother's," Mamta said.

Vinod Babu pushed his spectacles a little higher. "Your mother signs her name?"

"She does now."

"Now?"

Mamta understood that the question would not end there.

Vinod Babu took an old admission form from the file. A document from five years earlier.

In the box for the guardian's signature was a black-ink thumbprint. Beneath it, in someone else's hand, was written: "Phoolkumari Devi, Mother."

He took out another paper. An old bank verification document. There too was a thumbprint.

"A thumbprint here," he said. "A thumbprint here too. But this time there is a full signature."

"Yes."

"Did someone else write it for her?"

Mamta's face flushed at once. "No. Ma wrote it herself."

Vinod Babu did not make his voice harsh. "Look, I have to verify it. These are scholarship papers. The signature differs from the earlier record. Bring your mother once tomorrow."

Mamta remained silent for a few moments.

"She should leave the fieldwork and come?"

"It will take ten minutes."

"For ten minutes, half her day will be spoiled."

Vinod Babu put the papers back in the file. "I understand. But I am not authorized to approve it without verification."

Mamta took the file.

As she stepped out through the doorway, her eyes fell once more on the blue signature on the form.

The previous night, Phoolkumari Devi had taken five minutes over that signature.

First she had written "Phool." Then paused.

Then "kumari."

While writing "ri," the line had climbed a little upward. "Devi" had come out comparatively straight.

After writing it, she had looked at Mamta's face. "Is it right?"

Mamta had laughed. "Why are you looking at me? It's your name."

Phoolkumari had laughed too.

Then the nib had left a tiny blue dot beneath the signature. Mamta had tried to wipe it with a cloth, but her mother had stopped her.

"Leave it. People will know I wrote it myself."

They had both laughed at that.

Now the little blue dot did not seem funny to Mamta.

When she reached home, Phoolkumari was spreading a mat in the courtyard to dry paddy.

Mamta put the file on the wooden bench on the veranda.

"What happened?" her mother asked.

"We have to go to the school tomorrow."

"Why?"

"To show them your signature."

Phoolkumari's hands stopped at the corner of the mat. "Show them?"

"The old papers have your thumbprint, remember? They say this signature could have been written by someone else."

Phoolkumari kept looking at Mamta's face.

"You told them?"

"I told them you wrote it yourself."

"They didn't believe you?"

"They say they have to verify it."

Phoolkumari slowly let go of the mat. "All right. I'll go."

Mamta wanted to say, "No, I'll talk to them again"—but there was no shame on her mother's face. There was a little irritation, and behind it the same stubborn resolve Mamta had seen during the first days of the literacy class.

Six months earlier, an evening literacy class had begun in the back room of the panchayat building.

Phoolkumari had not gone the first day.

Nor the second.

On the third day, their neighbour Lalita had taken her by the hand and led her there.

"What use are letters to me at this age?" Phoolkumari had said.

Lalita had replied, "How old are letters?"

During the first week, Phoolkumari learned only to recognize her own name.

Then to write it.

Saraswati Didi had given everyone pencils. Phoolkumari wrote with a pencil for two days. On the third day, after returning home, she asked Mamta, "Do you have a blue pen?"

Mamta had taken three pens from her bag. One black, two blue.

"Which one?"

Phoolkumari chose the cheap blue pen. The five-rupee one.

"Pencil keeps getting erased," she had said. "If I write with a pen, it will remain."

From that day, the blue pen was hers.

Mamta would often tease her, "Ma, the ink will run out."

Phoolkumari would say, "Then I'll refill it. A name doesn't run out, does it?"

The next day, before going to the school, Phoolkumari bathed, put on a pale green sari, and placed her old literacy-class notebook in her bag.

Mamta asked, "Why the notebook?"

"If they say I can't write, I'll show them."

"They'll simply ask you to write there."

Phoolkumari put a hand inside her bag and felt for the blue pen. "Then I'll write."

By the time they reached the school, the morning prayer was over. Students were moving along the veranda towards their classrooms.

Mamta went into the office with her mother.

Seeing Phoolkumari, Vinod Babu pulled a chair forward. "Sit."

Phoolkumari did not sit. "I'm fine here."

Vinod Babu took out the previous day's form. "Did you make this signature?"

"Yes."

"Earlier you used a thumbprint?"

"Yes."

"And now you sign?"

"Now I have learned to write my name."

Vinod Babu pushed a blank sheet of paper towards her. "Write it once here."

Phoolkumari took the blue pen from her bag.

One side of the cap bore a small tooth mark. While practising, whenever she paused to think, she tended to bite the cap.

She placed the pen on the paper.

First she wrote "Phoolkumari."

"Phool" came out a little large.

"Ku" sat close together.

"Mari" was straighter this time than it had been the previous day.

Then: "Devi."

She lifted the pen.

Vinod Babu placed yesterday's signature and today's side by side and looked at them.

"They aren't exactly the same," he said.

Mamta spoke at once. "It's written by hand—how can it come out exactly the same?"

Phoolkumari looked at Mamta. "You keep quiet."

Then she looked at the papers in front of Vinod Babu.

"I'm not a machine, Babu," she said calmly. "Yesterday my hand was trembling a little. Today it came out better."

A faint smile appeared on Vinod Babu's face, but he immediately turned back to the file.

"My problem is not with your handwriting," he said. "The change has to be entered in the record. Otherwise it will raise a question during audit."

Phoolkumari took the notebook out of her bag.

"Enter it from this."

Vinod Babu took the notebook.

On the first page were large, crooked letters:

Phu

Phu

Phool

On the second page:

Phoolku

Phoolkumari

A few pages later came the full name.

In one place the "ku" in "Phoolkumari" was missing.

In another, the "v" in "Devi" had turned out almost reversed.

Then, page by page, the letters grew steadier.

On the final five pages, different dates were written. Beneath each: "Phoolkumari Devi."

Some signatures were large, some small.

But one thing was the same in all of them: the first stroke of the "Ph" leaned slightly to the left.

Vinod Babu looked through the notebook for a long time.

"How long have you been learning?"

"Six months."

"Where are the classes held?"

"At the panchayat building."

"Teacher?"

"Saraswati Devi. Everyone calls her Saraswati Didi."

Vinod Babu searched for something on the computer. Then he took out a register.

"For this, a declaration has to be written: previously thumbprint, now signature adopted."

Phoolkumari asked, "Should I write the declaration?"

"I'll write it. Can you read?"

Phoolkumari paused. "Not everything. Slowly."

Vinod Babu wrote one line: "I, Phoolkumari Devi, shall use my signature from this date onward."

He turned the paper and placed it before her.

Phoolkumari began reading word by word.

"I... Phool...kumari... Devi..."

"From this," Vinod Babu prompted gently.

"From this date... onward... my... signature..."

At the last word she stopped.

Mamta was about to help, but her mother stopped her with one hand.

Phoolkumari joined the letters slowly. "U-se... use... shall use."

"Yes," Vinod Babu said.

Phoolkumari picked up the blue pen.

This time the signature came out a little differently from the first two. The "D" in "Devi" was more open.

Vinod Babu looked at all three signatures.

Then he looked at the photocopy of the old thumbprint.

At the top of the file he wrote a brief note: "Guardian adopted signature after becoming literate; personally verified."

Beneath it, he signed his own name.

Mamta noticed that Vinod Babu's own signature was not exactly identical to the one on the previous page either.

She said nothing.

Vinod Babu stamped the scholarship form with the verification seal.

"Now the work is done."

Mamta let out her breath.

Phoolkumari was not looking at the form. She was looking at her notebook.

"Do you need to keep this notebook?" she asked.

"No, it belongs to you."

She immediately put it back in her bag.

At the doorway she turned once more.

"Babu, the bank has my thumbprint too."

"You can update your signature there as well."

"On the ration card?"

"The name need not be changed there, but wherever necessary, you can register your new signature."

Phoolkumari nodded.

Mamta laughed. "Now will we go round every office?"

"Wherever my thumbprint sits alone, my name will sit there too."

Vinod Babu laughed.

Leaving the school, the two of them took the road through the market.

The afternoon sun had grown sharp. Phoolkumari pulled the bag a little higher on her shoulder.

Mamta said, "Give me the pen. I have to write my history notes."

Phoolkumari took out the blue pen.

She looked at it for a few moments.

Then she put it back in the bag.

"You have two pens at home."

"What's so special about this pen?" Mamta teased.

Walking on, Phoolkumari said, "Nothing."

Two steps later she spoke again: "But this one is mine."

Mamta said nothing.

That evening, at the literacy class, Saraswati Didi opened the attendance register.

Earlier, beside Phoolkumari's name, a small box used to carry her thumbprint.

For six months now, a little space beside that mark had been left for her to practise her new signature.

That day Saraswati Didi pushed the register towards her.

Phoolkumari took out the blue pen.

The box for the thumbprint remained empty.

Beside it, she wrote her name:

Phoolkumari Devi.

Story 33

The Wooden Horse

Dharmanath Mistri was sweeping the dust in front of his shop when Sushila arrived with a wooden horse tied to the rear carrier of her bicycle.

At first glance, the horse looked less like a horse and more like a tired bundle of old paint.

Here and there on its body, layers of blue, green and red showed through. Half of the right ear was broken. The front rocking board was split along one side. The handle was loose and trembled when touched.

Sushila parked the bicycle and said, "Mistriji, can this be repaired?"

Dharmanath leaned the broom against the wall.

"It can be repaired. The question is whether it is worth repairing."

Sushila laughed. "It is worth it to me."

Dharmanath lifted the horse.

It was heavier than he expected.

"How old is it?"

"No one has an exact count."

"From your house?"

"No."

"Then?"

"From the centre."

Dharmanath looked at her.

"Which centre?"

"The anganwadi in Ward Seven."

Dharmanath looked at the horse again.

The anganwadi stood about half a kos from his shop. After the road was widened, the old building had been left a little behind the main road, and he rarely had reason to go that way now.

Sushila said, "Tomorrow is vaccination day. The children will come. That is why I brought it today."

Dharmanath pressed the broken rocking board with his finger.

"By tomorrow morning?"

"Before ten."

"It needs a new board. The handle has to be tightened. The ear too must be joined."

"Do whatever is necessary. But do not strip off all the paint."

Dharmanath raised his eyebrows.

"Not the paint?"

"No. The children know it in this form."

"With the paint peeled like this?"

"Yes."

Dharmanath found the request a little strange.

He had his own rule for repairing old wooden things. If the surface was badly worn, first scrape away the old paint, open the joints and tighten them again, then give the object a fresh coat. That made it look new. Customers were usually happiest that way.

Sushila was saying, "Just mend what is broken. Let whatever is old remain as old as it is."

"The ear?"

"Join the ear."

"Paint?"

"Match only the new part. Not the whole thing."

Dharmanath nodded.

"All right."

Sushila took a small paper from her bag.

"Payment will come from the centre's maintenance account. Make a bill."

"I will."

"Write the name: Anganwadi Centre Number Twenty-seven."

Dharmanath opened his old ledger.

"Repair of wooden horse."

He smiled as he wrote it.

It had been a long time since the words "wooden horse" had appeared in his ledger. Most of his work now involved doors, cots, windows, cupboards, bedsteads, plywood racks, and small repairs to modular kitchens.

After Sushila left, Dharmanath placed the horse on the worktable.

The rocking board had to come off first.

He picked up a screwdriver.

One screw turned. The second was stuck.

He applied oil.

Five minutes later he tried again.

The screw slowly came loose.

When the board came away, the wood beneath it was clearly visible for the first time.

Dharmanath's fingers stopped.

There were three thin bands of colour in the wood: yellow at the bottom, green above it, and then the present blue.

In a few places children had scratched marks with their nails or some pointed object.

"M."

"Ru."

A little star.

A round face.

In one place, only two straight lines.

Dharmanath smiled.

Marks like these appear on children's things by themselves.

He measured the old board and took out a thin strip of new sheesham wood.

As he began sawing, he remembered his father.

Jagdish Mistri used to hold down the end of a piece of wood with his left foot while sawing.

Dharmanath had never liked that method; he preferred clamps. His father would say, "Wood is understood through the hand, not through iron."

Dharmanath would reply, "If the hand gets cut, the wood will not pay for the treatment."

The two of them had laughed over that argument many times.

Jagdish Mistri had been dead twenty-two years.

The shop was the same, though a new tin awning now stood in front, an electric saw had come inside, and the old hammers were used less often.

Dharmanath cut the new board and rounded its edges.

Then he wiped the underside of the old horse with a dry cloth.

Black grime had collected in one corner.

He rubbed it lightly with sandpaper.

When the dirt came away, a small triangle appeared in the wood.

Dharmanath's hand stopped.

Inside the triangle were two very small cuts—one long, one thin.

He pulled a chair over and sat down.

The mark was extremely simple. No name. No year.

But Dharmanath recognized it.

Jagdish Mistri used to cut this same mark beneath the smaller things he made.

A triangle. Two lines inside.

His lazy way, he used to say, of writing "J" and "Mi."

Dharmanath turned the horse over and looked again.

The mark was unmistakably the same.

He went to the back of the shop, where old ledgers were kept in a tin trunk.

When he opened the trunk, the smell of paper rose from it.

Ledgers from 2011 to 2016 lay on top. Older ones were beneath them.

Dharmanath did not know the exact year.

He took out three ledgers.

1994.

1991.

1989.

His father's handwriting was small and slanted.

"Mohan Yadav — two cots."

"School — repair of four benches."

"Saraswati Puja stage boards."

Dharmanath kept turning the pages.

Near the bottom of one page was written: "Children's Centre — small tables 2, low stools 6, horse 1."

The amount was written beside it.

Dharmanath looked at the date.

17 July 1991.

For a long time he kept his finger on the line.

It seemed to Dharmanath that the "Children's Centre" must be today's anganwadi. It would have had another name then.

Beside the amount, his father had put a small circle. Dharmanath knew what that circle meant: payment received.

No story. No note. Only one line.

Dharmanath suddenly remembered seeing four or five wooden horses in one corner of the shop when he was a boy. His father had said, "For children."

This must have been one of them.

Dharmanath closed the ledger.

He did not go home for lunch. When his wife Vimala called, he said, "A job is stuck."

"How big a job?"

Dharmanath looked at the horse.

"Small."

Vimala laughed. "Small jobs take the most time."

"You are right."

He ended the call.

While fitting the new board, Dharmanath used the old screw holes. New holes might weaken the wood.

He opened the handle and replaced the nail inside.

For the right ear he chose a piece of old sal wood, not bright new timber. It would be easier to match the colour.

After shaping and joining the ear, he spent a long time smoothing the edges so the new part would not feel different to the hand.

Then came the question of paint again.

Painting the whole horse would have been easy.

But Sushila had forbidden it.

Dharmanath opened three small tins. Into the blue he mixed a little green until it resembled the old faded shade.

He painted only the new board and the ear.

The rest of the body remained as it was.

The repair was therefore not hidden, yet neither did it shout for attention.

By evening the horse stood again.

Dharmanath placed it on the floor and gave it a gentle push.

It rocked forward and back.

There was a little rasping sound.

He tightened it once more.

The second time there was no sound.

Before closing the shop, he looked once more at the triangular mark beneath the belly.

The sandpaper had cleared the dirt around it, but the mark itself remained untouched.

Dharmanath did not paint over it.

The next day Sushila arrived at twenty past nine.

Two women and three children were with her.

At the sight of the horse, one child ran forward.

"I'll sit first!"

Another immediately said, "You sat yesterday."

"Yesterday it was broken."

"Then the day before."

Sushila stopped them both. "Don't run inside the shop."

Dharmanath kept smiling.

Sushila shook the horse with her hand.

"The handle doesn't move now."

"New nail."

"The board?"

"New."

She bent and looked beneath it. "The colour matches too."

Dharmanath said, "I didn't repaint the whole thing."

"Good."

One of the women asked, "How much?"

Dharmanath opened the ledger.

"Four hundred and twenty."

Sushila signed the payment paper without bargaining.

"Give me a receipt."

Dharmanath wrote out the receipt.

Then, suddenly, he asked, "How long has this centre been here?"

Sushila thought for a moment. "Since before I was born."

"Had you seen this horse before?"

Sushila laughed. "I sat on it myself."

Dharmanath looked at her.

"Really?"

"My mother says I wouldn't leave the horse when it was time to go home. There's an old photograph at the centre too."

The woman beside her said, "Sushila is in the photograph hanging on the wall."

"How old is it?"

"Twenty-five or twenty-six years."

Dharmanath was silent for a few moments.

Then he turned the horse over and showed them the underside.

"Do you see this mark?"

Sushila bent down.

"The triangle?"

"It was my father's mark."

"Your father?"

"Jagdish Mistri."

Sushila's expression changed. "Oh! I've seen the name Jagdish in the centre's old register. There are some old papers about the building's stools and tables."

Dharmanath said, "It's in our ledger too—1991. One horse."

The youngest of the three children was not listening to Dharmanath at all. His whole attention was on the horse.

He asked, "Can I sit on it?"

Dharmanath set the horse upright.

"Gently at first."

The child climbed on.

The horse rocked.

He laughed.

The second child immediately said, "Now my turn."

Sushila looked at the clock. "We have to reach the centre. The vaccination team will arrive."

The women tried to lift the horse.

Dharmanath said, "I'll take it there."

"You?"

"Nothing will happen if the shop stays closed for ten minutes."

He put the horse on the small cart attached to his bicycle and took it to the centre.

The anganwadi building stood a little way in from the road. Letters, fruits, animals and numbers were painted on its walls. A small heap of shoes and slippers lay on the veranda.

Photographs hung on the wall inside.

Sushila took one down and showed it to Dharmanath.

The photograph had faded. Five children sat on the floor. In the middle was the same wooden horse.

The horse was yellow then.

One little girl held its handle.

Sushila pointed with her finger. "That is me."

Dharmanath looked at the photograph.

The shape of the horse was the same. The right ear was whole. The rocking board was thick. The paint shone.

In a corner of the wall behind it, a small wooden stool could also be seen.

Dharmanath felt that the stool too might have been made by his father.

He did not ask.

A worker put the horse back in its old place inside the veranda.

Soon children began to arrive.

One mother came holding a child's hand. A grandmother came with her granddaughter. Someone carried a vaccination card. Someone else asked where to queue for a nutrition packet.

The horse was immediately surrounded.

Sushila established an order. "One at a time."

Dharmanath stood near the doorway and watched.

While rocking, one child ran a finger over an old scratched star on the horse's body.

"Who made this?" he asked.

Sushila looked at Dharmanath.

The answer reached Dharmanath's lips: "My father."

But he paused.

Then he said, "A carpenter made it a long time ago."

The child asked another question. "Whose horse is it?"

This time Dharmanath did not answer at once.

He looked at Sushila.

Sushila smiled and said, "Whoever's turn it is."

Satisfied, the child began rocking again.

Dharmanath stepped outside.

On his way back to the shop, the 1991 page of his ledger kept returning to his mind.

One line: Children's Centre, one horse.

That was all.

More than three decades had gone unwritten after that one line, while children had continued adding their own small marks to the horse.

Back at the shop, Dharmanath opened the ledger.

Beside today's entry was written: "Anganwadi Centre Number Twenty-seven — repair of wooden horse — Rs 420."

He picked up his pen.

He felt like adding something.

Should he write: "Made by Father"?

Should he write: "1991"?

He thought for a few moments.

Then he added only two small words: "Running again."

He closed the ledger.

Story 34

The Sewing Machine

Shivnath Thakur was wiping the dust from the old signboard outside his shop when Naveen Jha arrived holding a pink card.

The faded letters on the board read: "Shivnath Tailors · Stitching to Measure · Established 1986."

"Kaka," Naveen said, holding out the card, "the Traders' Association is honouring you on Sunday evening."

Shivnath pushed his spectacles up his nose. "Me?"

"Forty years. In the same place. Everyone said it wouldn't be right to let a man like you pass without recognition."

Shivnath opened the card. Inside was printed: "In honour of four decades of outstanding tailoring service."

He read it, smiled faintly, and then looked inside the shop.

Behind the wooden table, an old black sewing machine sat under its cover. Its golden floral decoration had worn away long ago. The iron treadle was no longer shiny; years of use had polished it smooth.

Naveen pointed towards the machine. "We'll put this on the stage too. It'll look excellent in the photographs."

Shivnath said at once, "The machine will not go on the stage."

Naveen laughed. "Too heavy? Four men can carry it."

"It isn't heavy."

"Then?"

Shivnath folded the card and placed it on the counter. "The machine is not mine."

Naveen's laughter stopped.

He looked at the machine again.

A forty-year-old shop. Shivnath Thakur. Shivnath Tailors. Half the market had worn wedding kurtas, trousers, coats and school uniforms that had come from here. If the machine was not Shivnath's, whose was it?

"Is it rented?" Naveen asked.

"No."

"Then explain it later." Shivnath slipped the card into his pocket. "Right now this pair of trousers has to be delivered by evening."

Naveen decided it must be one of the old man's peculiar notions and left.

The shop was small, but its identity in the market was old and established.

At the front stood the platform where measurements were taken.

On the left was the long table for cutting cloth.

On the right were drawers for thread, buttons, zippers and tailor's chalk.

At the back there used to be a half-height wooden partition. Five years earlier, when it rotted, it had been removed.

The sewing machine had stood behind that partition.

Old customers had never paid much attention to the fact that Shivnath was usually visible at the front table—with the measuring tape around his neck, chalk in his hand, and the click of scissors beside him.

From behind came the steady burr and beat of the machine.

People assumed that a tailor must, naturally, be operating a sewing machine.

There had never seemed any reason to think more deeply about it.

That evening when Shivnath reached home, Savitri was shelling peas in the courtyard.

Her hair had turned completely white, but her fingers were still quick as they sorted the peas.

Shivnath handed her the pink card.

Savitri read it, then said, "That's good."

"Good?"

"Yes. If you sit in the same place for forty years, you ought to receive something for it."

Shivnath laughed. "Who was sitting?"

Savitri dropped another handful of peas into the bowl. "Don't start again."

"They want to take the machine onto the stage."

This time Savitri's hands stopped.

"The machine?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"They say it will look good in the photographs."

Savitri looked at the card again. "Take a photograph of the machine. What is that to me?"

Shivnath remained silent for a few moments.

"I told them the machine isn't mine."

Savitri looked up at him. "Leave all this now. What will people say?"

"For forty years people said whatever they said."

"What is the use now?"

Shivnath did not answer.

The next day a young man came to the shop to take photographs. The Traders' Association was preparing a poster.

"Kaka, sit beside the machine," he said.

Shivnath picked up the scissors. "Take the photograph with the scissors."

"But the sewing machine is the symbol."

"The symbol is fine. I would be sitting in the wrong place."

The photographer did not understand. In the end he photographed Shivnath cutting cloth.

On the poster appeared: "Shivnath Thakur: Four Decades of Trust."

The sewing machine could be seen blurred in the background.

On Friday, an old customer, Sahdev Mishra, saw the poster and came into the shop.

"Congratulations, Shivnathji! You stitched my wedding coat. It's still in my wardrobe."

Shivnath smiled. "I took the measurements."

"And the stitching was yours too."

Folding his measuring tape, Shivnath said, "Listen to that part on Sunday."

Sahdev laughed. "Have you prepared the speech already?"

"Not a speech. An account."

Shivnath's granddaughter Neera had come home from college that day. She was taking photographs of the shop on her mobile phone.

"Baba, how old is this machine?"

"One year younger than the shop."

"So thirty-nine years?"

"About that."

Neera lifted the machine cover. There was no dust. A faint smell of oil remained. A short length of blue thread was caught near the needle.

"Does it still work?"

"It does."

"Do you use it?"

Shivnath looked at Neera.

"I can sew a straight seam for about two handspans. After that I'll ruin the cloth."

Neera burst out laughing. Then her laughter slowly faded.

"Then...?"

Shivnath put the cover back over the machine. "Go home and ask your grandmother."

That evening Neera sat beside Savitri.

"Dadi, who used to sew all the clothes from the shop?"

Savitri did not answer immediately.

"Baba took the measurements," Neera said. "He did the cutting. The machine?"

Savitri smiled softly. "A machine doesn't run by itself."

"You?"

"For many years."

"How many?"

"Since before your father was little."

Neera fell silent.

Savitri began to tell her slowly.

Before marriage, she had learned sewing at her parents' home.

A year after their marriage, Shivnath had rented a small shop. He was good at taking measurements, cutting cloth and dealing with customers; his hand on the machine was heavy.

"In the first month he ruined two kurtas," Savitri said, laughing. "One sleeve here, the other somewhere else."

"So you started going to the shop?"

"Not to the front. I sat at the back."

"Why?"

Savitri looked towards the empty pea basket, as if the old partition were standing there.

"In those days there was a small child, the house, the kitchen. Many of the customers were men. It was easier to sit behind and sew. Slowly, that simply became the way things were."

"And only Baba's name was on the signboard?"

"The shop was in his name. No one ever asked."

"You didn't either?"

Savitri thought for a moment. "Not at first. Later it became a habit."

On Saturday Shivnath went to Rahim, the sign painter in the market.

"I need a small board painted."

Rahim took out a sheet of paper. "What should I write?"

Shivnath gave him two names.

Rahim looked up. "In this order?"

"Yes. Savitri first."

"Are you changing the name of the shop?"

"Not the name. I'm correcting the account."

Rahim asked nothing more.

On Sunday evening the plastic chairs in the market community hall were full.

Traders, customers, neighbours, and a few old acquaintances had gathered.

On the stage stood a flower garland, a certificate of honour, and a small brass lamp.

The sewing machine was not there.

Naveen leaned close to Shivnath and whispered, "You didn't bring it after all?"

"It will come."

"With whom?"

"With the person who ran it."

Again Naveen did not understand.

The programme began.

Two speakers talked about Shivnath's punctuality, his measurements, his ability to save cloth, and his honesty.

Sahdev Mishra said into the microphone, "He stitched my wedding coat."

Seated in front, Shivnath shifted slightly in his chair. Neera was watching his face.

Then the president of the association began reading the citation:

"For four decades of outstanding tailoring skill..."

Shivnath raised his hand.

"One minute."

Every eye turned towards him.

He went slowly onto the stage.

"I will accept the honour," he said, "but that line is wrong."

The president looked flustered. "What is wrong?"

"The tailoring skill is not mine."

A low murmur ran through the hall.

Shivnath took the microphone.

"I took the measurements. I cut the cloth. I listened to the customers' complaints. I counted the money. But the machine..."

He looked towards the doorway.

Neera rose and went outside.

A few moments later she returned with Savitri. Behind Savitri, Nandu and Rahim were carrying the old sewing machine.

Everyone turned to look.

Savitri's discomfort was plain on her face.

Shivnath said, "In these forty years, for every time I sat at that machine, she sat there ten times over."

No one laughed.

"There was a partition at the back of the shop. On this side of the partition was my name. On the other side was her work."

Sahdev Mishra sat straighter in his chair.

Shivnath continued, "Kurtas, trousers, school uniforms, blouses, pillow covers—the clean seams all of you believed came from Shivnath's hands were, in large part, Savitri's work."

Savitri said quietly, "What need was there to say so much?"

Holding the microphone, Shivnath looked at her.

"After forty years, there was a need."

The president looked at the citation.

"Then we will change the certificate."

Shivnath said, "Change the paper. But first do one thing."

Rahim unwrapped a small board from newspaper.

On a blue background, in white letters, it read:

"Savitri-Shivnath Tailoring House"

Below, in smaller letters:

"Measurement · Cutting · Stitching"

For a moment the hall was silent. Then came applause.

Savitri kept looking at the board.

"Why is my name first?" she asked Shivnath softly.

"The machine ran first. The scissors came after."

This time Savitri laughed.

Naveen placed the sewing machine to one side of the stage. The photographer got ready again.

"Now, Shivnath Kaka, shall you sit beside the machine?"

Shivnath said, "Will you still seat the wrong person there?"

A chair was given to Savitri.

She sat beside the machine. Shivnath stood next to her holding his scissors and measuring tape.

Neera stood behind them holding the signboard.

The photograph was taken.

For a moment the flash lit the black body of the old machine.

On Monday the shop opened again.

The old "Shivnath Tailors" board was taken down and placed against the inside wall. Behind it, a faded rectangular mark remained—the pale outline of four decades of dust.

The new board was hung outside.

The first customer was an elderly woman who had come to have the sleeves of a blouse loosened.

She read the board and paused.

"Oh! Savitri's name comes first!"

From behind the counter Shivnath said, "It has reached its proper place rather late."

Savitri was seated at the machine in the back.

"Do you still sew?" the elderly woman asked.

"A little," Savitri said. "Now Neera will learn."

Neera pulled a stool to the right side of the machine and sat down.

Savitri placed her hands over the cloth.

"Needle down first. Then press the treadle gently."

The machine began to run—burr... burr... tak.

At the front table Shivnath spread out a piece of cloth, took out the measuring tape, and drew the first line with chalk.

The shop began to work as it always had.

There was only one difference: outside, the signboard now carried two names, and inside, for the first time, the sound of the machine was no longer hidden behind only one of them.

Story 35

A Pair of Shoes

The women's college hostel was undergoing its year-end inspection.

The superintendent, Madhu Jha, was newly appointed. She had taken charge three months earlier, and this was the first time she was having a complete inventory made of the old storeroom, kitchen, study room, and the students' shared cupboards.

For two days Vimala Didi had been with her, reading out entries, taking out objects, and wiping away dust.

Vimala had worked as an attendant in the hostel for twenty-five years. Without consulting any register, she remembered whose bed had a loose leg, which window leaked during the rains, and which student did not drink milk at night.

After the thirtieth item, Madhu opened an old wooden cupboard.

On the upper shelf lay three umbrellas, a torn bag, two steel boxes, and a pair of black shoes.

Madhu stopped when she saw the shoes.

"Whose are these?"

Vimala bent to look. "Leave them where they are."

"Whose are they?"

"No one's."

Madhu read the line written in the inventory: "Black closed shoes, one pair, owner unknown."

"The rule says that property with an unknown owner is to be removed after six months," Madhu said. "These look much older than that."

The shoes were indeed old, though they did not look like something fit to be thrown away. The leather had softened in many places. A new black rubber piece had been fitted to the heel of the right shoe; the lace on the left was a slightly different shade. Even the inner soles were not the same colour.

Vimala said, "They are old, but they are not bad."

"The owner?"

"There is no name."

Madhu closed the register and looked at her. "There is no name, and there is no owner, are not the same thing."

Vimala smiled faintly. "With this pair, they are."

Madhu did not understand.

That evening a notice was pinned to the board:

"If the old black shoes kept in the hostel's shared cupboard are anyone's personal property, please contact the superintendent's office with proof by Friday. Thereafter they will be removed according to the rules."

A few students stopped to read the notice. Some laughed; some looked at one another. No one came to the office.

On Wednesday Madhu asked Vimala, "See? They belong to no one."

Vimala replied, "That is what I told you from the beginning."

"Then why object to removing them?"

"Wait until Friday."

At about seven on Thursday evening, quick footsteps sounded along the last veranda of the hostel. Nisha Jha, a third-year student, appeared at the office door carrying a transparent file.

"Ma'am, may I ask you something?"

"Ask."

Nisha hesitated. "The black shoes... have they been removed?"

Madhu pushed up her spectacles. "Are they yours?"

"No."

"Then?"

"I need them until Saturday."

"Why?"

"I have a scholarship interview in Darbhanga. The notice says: simple dress, closed shoes. I only have sandals. I called home, but they cannot send new shoes so quickly."

Madhu sat straighter in her chair. "How can I give you property whose owner is unknown?"

Nisha looked at Vimala, who was standing near the doorway holding a register.

Vimala said, "The owner is not unknown. The owner's house is simply very large."

Madhu frowned. "Another riddle?"

Nisha said softly, "Ma'am, these are not private shoes."

"Then why has the register said 'owner unknown' all these years?"

Vimala did not answer at once. She went to the cupboard and took out a small tin box that had been kept behind the shoes.

Inside the box were half a tin of black shoe polish, a small brush, two spare laces, and a thin notebook.

Madhu opened the notebook.

The first page was marked with the year 2014.

Below it were dates:

"12 August — taken."

"12 August evening — returned."

"3 November — taken."

"4 November — returned."

The next page was 2015. Then 2016. Some years had two entries, some five. There were almost no names anywhere.

"What is this?"

Vimala said, "The record of the shoes going out."

"To whom?"

"Whoever needed them."

Nisha stood silently.

Vimala pulled up a chair and sat down.

"Many years ago there was a student named Sulochana. In her final year she had to go to Patna for a job interview. For the first time in her life, she bought a pair of closed black shoes. She got the job. When she left the hostel, she did not take the shoes with her."

"Why?" Madhu asked.

"She said, 'There will be little occasion to wear them at home. Someone else here may need them next.' I told her to write her name on them. She refused. She said, 'If I write my name, people will think they are borrowed. Let them belong to everyone.'"

Madhu looked at the shoes.

Vimala continued, "In the first year two students wore them. Once a lace broke; the student brought them back with a new lace. Another time the heel wore down; someone had it repaired. Once the polish ran out, another student put in a new tin. Slowly a rule formed: take them, return them clean; if something breaks, get it repaired."

Madhu slipped her hand inside the left shoe. Along the edge of the sole were tiny stitches.

"This too?"

"The sole came loose one day before someone's interview. She had it stitched before returning them."

Nisha said softly, "I had heard about them from senior students. That's why I came to ask."

Madhu kept turning the pages of the notebook.

On one page, in red ink, there was only one sentence:

"Returning them is essential."

"Getting the job isn't essential?" Madhu asked.

Vimala laughed. "How would we enter that in the register?"

Madhu laughed too.

Then she became serious again. “But the rules?”

Vimala said, “If the rules require a name, write the hostel’s name.”

“Why wasn’t that done before?”

“No one asked before. The former superintendent understood the matter. The old line in the register simply remained.”

Madhu thought for a few moments. Then she turned to Nisha.

“Size?”

“Six.”

Vimala said at once, “The shoes are six too.”

Madhu opened the notebook and wrote a new line:

“Friday evening — Nisha Jha, for interview.”

Nisha looked surprised. “You’ll write my name?”

“This time we will. The item may be shared; the responsibility will not be unknown.”

Nisha nodded.

Vimala handed her the shoes. “Try them on.”

Nisha put them on at one side of the office. The left shoe was a little tight. She walked two steps, then turned back.

“They’re fine.”

“If they hurt your feet, don’t stuff them with paper and keep walking,” Vimala said. “There’s a thin insole in the box.”

Nisha laughed. “Didi, you remember every solution.”

“The shoes are old. The mistake need not be new.”

On Saturday morning Nisha left at half past six. The shoes had been polished. She wore a simple salwar-kurta and carried her file and a cloth bag.

Madhu watched from the veranda. At first Nisha’s steps were a little cautious; by the time she reached the gate, they had become natural.

Twice during the day Madhu opened the cupboard and looked at the empty space.

By afternoon she found her own behaviour ridiculous.

“It is only a pair of shoes,” she told herself.

But when Nisha had still not returned by seven in the evening, Madhu looked at the veranda clock three times.

At twenty past seven the gate opened. Nisha came in.

She carried the same transparent file in one hand and a paper bag containing the shoes under her arm. On her feet were her old sandals.

“The interview?” Madhu asked.

“It’s done.”

“How did it go?”

“The result will come later.”

She placed the bag on the table.

"Why did you take the shoes off already?"

"There was water on the road after I got off the bus. I thought it better not to wear them through the wet street."

Vimala opened the bag. The shoes were clean.

Beside her name in the notebook, Nisha wrote: "Returned."

Then she took a small packet from her pocket.

"What is this?"

"New laces. The old ones are still usable, but one end is beginning to fray. Keep these."

Madhu kept looking at her.

"I do not yet know whether I'll get the scholarship," Nisha said, "but the shoes have come back."

Vimala looked at Madhu.

The red line in the notebook had proved true again.

On Monday the hostel had its annual inspection.

Reading down the inventory, the inspector stopped at item forty-seven.

"Black closed shoes, one pair — owner unknown?"

Madhu said, "That is an old entry. It was awaiting correction."

"Has the owner been found?"

"No."

The inspector's pen stopped.

Madhu opened the next register. A new entry had already been made:

"Shared interview material — black shoes, size 6, one pair."

In the owner column was written: "Hostel — shared use."

The inspector looked up slightly. "Shared shoes?"

Madhu opened the tin box and showed him the notebook.

The inspector read two or three pages. He said nothing. Then, in the old inventory, he drew a line through "owner unknown" and wrote: "Transferred to shared materials."

The inspection moved on.

That afternoon Madhu took down her old notice from the board—the one warning that the shoes would be removed.

In its place she pinned a smaller new notice:

"Black shoes, size 6 — available for interviews/formal requirements. Enter your name at the office. Return them clean after use. If the laces, sole or heel break, have them repaired if possible."

Below it, Vimala added one line in her own handwriting:

"Returning them is essential."

Madhu read the line and laughed.

That evening a first-year student reading the notice asked, "Ma'am, whose are these shoes, after all?"

Madhu thought for a moment before answering.

"The register says they belong to the hostel."

The student asked again, "And actually?"

Madhu looked towards the cupboard. Inside, the black shoes rested with their new laces. The leather was old, but the pair was ready again.

"Actually," she said, "they belong to whoever needs them, and after that, to the next person who does."

The student read the notice once more.

The cupboard was closed. Inside it was a pair of shoes that belonged privately to no one, yet was useless to no one.

Story 36

The Lost Wallet

Raghuvir Mandal's bicycle-repair shop at the bus stand opened before anyone else's in the morning.

To call it a shop was generous: a small tin roof, a wooden table, an air pump, two spanners, and a few old tyres hanging at the back.

The buses began drawing crowds from seven, but Raghuvir arrived by half past six. At that hour the stand was only half awake: the tea seller blew into his stove, the sweeper worked with his broom, and drivers lifted engine covers to inspect them.

That Tuesday the ground was damp from the night's rain. Raghuvir was clearing water from in front of his shop when something brown glinted beneath the iron bench in the waiting area.

At first he thought it was a scrap of paper. When he bent and picked it up, it turned out to be a leather wallet.

The wallet was not wet. It must have survived the night beneath the bench.

Raghuvir looked around.

Only an elderly man sat in the waiting area with a newspaper open. Two drivers stood at the tea stall. No one seemed to be searching for a wallet.

Raghuvir weighed it in his hand. Something inside made it heavy.

He called to Munna, the tea seller. "Did you see anyone drop a wallet here?"

Munna shook his head. "No. Open it. There may be an identity card."

Raghuvir did not like opening another man's wallet. But finding its owner without looking inside would also be difficult.

He undid the button.

There was money inside: two five-hundred-rupee notes, three two-hundred-rupee notes, and some smaller notes. An old identity card was tucked into one compartment.

Raghuvir took out the identity card first.

"Devendra Sah — Conductor."

Below it were the name of a private bus service and the route: Madhubani-Fulparas.

As soon as Raghuvir read the name, he could picture the face. Devendra was the thin, dark conductor who spun his ticket-punch between his fingers while speaking.

Raghuvir often travelled to the weekly market on that bus on Wednesdays.

As he put the identity card back, his eyes fell on another compartment.

There was more paper there than money.

Small slips: the back of a cut ticket, the corner of a notebook page, the blank part of a medicine receipt. All folded.

One slip opened and fell out.

On it was written: "Shanti Devi — 8."

Raghuvir picked it up. Another said: "Karim Miyan — 5."

A third: "Ramchandra Master — 12."

Names and amounts. Nothing else.

Raghuvir frowned.

"Looks like a list of debts," Munna said, having come up behind him.

Raghuvir was about to close the wallet at once when familiar letters on the corner of one slip stopped him.

"Raghuvir Mandal — 6."

He read it twice.

Munna laughed. "Arre, your name is there too! Do you owe him money?"

Raghuvir said nothing.

He could not remember owing Devendra anything. On Devendra's bus he always paid cash for his ticket.

He had gone to the market the previous Wednesday too, but who remembers eight days later exactly how much fare he paid and how much change he received?

Raghuvir folded the slip again and returned it to the same compartment.

"I'll deposit the wallet at the office," he said.

The small bus-stand office was at the far end of the platform. Inside, Ramkishor Babu was writing out the timetable.

Raghuvir placed the wallet on the table. "Found it under the bench. The identity card says Devendra Sah."

Ramkishor Babu pushed his spectacles up. "The Madhubani-Fulparas conductor?"

"Yes."

"His bus comes at seven twenty-five. Leave it here. I'll give it to him."

Raghuvir withdrew his hand, then paused.

"Should we write a receipt?"

Ramkishor Babu smiled. "I'll write one. How much money is in it?"

Raghuvir said, "I didn't count it."

Ramkishor Babu reached to open the wallet, then stopped. "Then we'll count it in front of the owner. Fine."

Raghuvir returned to his shop.

By seven the bus stand was fully awake. Schoolchildren, men and women going to the market, baskets, bags, milk cans, bus horns — everything mingled together.

Raghuvir was pumping air into the rear tyre of a bicycle, but his mind kept returning to the slip: "Raghuvir Mandal — 6."

Six rupees.

Such a small amount was easy to forget.

But why had Devendra written down his name?

The seven twenty-five bus arrived five minutes late.

As soon as it stopped, the conductor did not call out as he usually did, "Fulparas, Ghoghardiha, move inside."

Devendra got down first and began looking at the ground.

He checked the first step of the bus, beside the wheel, then bent to look beneath the benches on the platform.

The driver told him, "Ask at the office."

Worry was plain on Devendra's face.

Raghuvir stopped pumping.

Devendra hurried towards the office.

A few moments later Ramkishor Babu's voice came from inside. "First tell me what the wallet looks like."

Devendra said, "Brown. The stitching is open at the right corner. Inside there is an identity card, money, and many slips."

Ramkishor Babu brought out the wallet.

Devendra seemed to get his breath back all at once.

After taking the wallet, he did not count the notes first.

He opened the paper compartment first.

He began moving the slips one by one with his finger.

Ramkishor Babu laughed. "Money later, slips first?"

Devendra said, "If the money is short or extra, I can work that out. If these slips were lost, I would forget whom I owe and how much."

Standing near the doorway, Raghuvir caught on that sentence.

He went inside.

"Whom you owe how much?"

Devendra recognized him at once. "Raghuvir Bhai, you?"

Ramkishor Babu said, "He is the one who found the wallet."

Devendra immediately folded both hands. "You have done me a great favour."

Raghuvir cut him off. "First tell me this: the people whose names are on those slips — do they owe you, or do you owe them?"

Devendra was silent for a moment, then understood that Raghuvir had seen the slips.

He smiled.

"I owe them."

The question remained on Raghuvir's face.

Devendra took out one slip: "Shanti Devi — 8."

"Yesterday evening she gave me a fifty-rupee note. The fare was forty-two. I had no change. I wrote eight on the back of the ticket, and also wrote her name for myself. Next time I see her, I'll return the eight."

Another slip: "Karim Miyan — 5."

"This is three days old. He doesn't travel every day, so I kept a separate slip."

Ramkishor Babu said, "But it is written on the ticket too, isn't it?"

Devendra nodded. "It is. But people throw tickets away, they get wet, or they forget. My memory will not be equally good every time either. So whenever I cannot return someone's change immediately, I write down the name."

Raghuvir said slowly, "So this is not a list of money people owe you..."

"It is a debt," Devendra said, "but in the opposite direction."

Ramkishor Babu laughed.

Raghuvir laughed too, but he remembered his own slip.

He asked, "Is there someone named Raghuvir Mandal too?"

Without searching, Devendra said, "Six rupees."

Raghuvir's smile vanished.

"You remember?"

"The Wednesday market run. You gave fifty. The fare was forty-four. I had only two two-rupee coins left. I told you I'd give the rest next Wednesday."

Raghuvir scratched his head.

Now he faintly remembered. The bus had been crowded; Devendra had said something while handing him the ticket. In his hurry to get down, Raghuvir had merely waved his hand.

"I had forgotten," Raghuvir said.

Devendra opened the coin compartment.

He took out three two-rupee coins and placed them on Raghuvir's palm.

Raghuvir drew his hand back. "Leave it for now. What are six rupees?"

Devendra placed the coins in his palm again. "Six may be small. The account is not."

Raghuvir was about to say something, but Devendra continued, "You returned my whole wallet. Why should I keep your six?"

Ramkishor Babu closed the receipt book lying on the table. "Both accounts are being settled in the same place."

Devendra began sorting the slips again.

Raghuvir noticed that some had red lines drawn through them.

"Why are these crossed out?"

"When I return someone's money, I cross the name out. In the evening, when I get home, I throw the slip away."

Devendra found the slip marked "Raghuvir Mandal — 6."

In front of Raghuvir, he drew a straight red line through it.

"Now it's settled."

At that moment a woman called from the bus door, "Devendra! You remember my eight rupees from yesterday, don't you?"

Without turning, Devendra said, "Shanti Devi, I remember. I'm coming."

He took eight rupees from the wallet.

Raghuvir smiled. "And if the slip had not been there?"

Fastening the wallet firmly, Devendra said, "Then someone's five, someone's eight, someone's twelve would dissolve into my memory. Small amounts are forgotten first."

"People forget too," Raghuvir said.

"That is why I write them down."

Devendra ran back to the bus. He put eight rupees in Shanti Devi's hand, punched a ticket, then stood by the door urging passengers farther inside.

Raghuvir returned to his shop.

The three two-rupee coins were still in his palm.

Munna the tea seller asked, "What happened? Was your name in his debt list?"

Raghuvir placed the coins on the table and coiled the air-pump hose.

"It was in a debt list," he said.

Munna widened his eyes. "You had to pay?"

Raghuvir laughed. "No. I had money to receive."

Before Munna could understand, the bus horn sounded.

Devendra raised a hand from the doorway towards Raghuvir. The wallet was safe in the inside pocket of his shirt.

The bus slowly left the stand.

Raghuvir picked up the six rupees from the table. It occurred to him that he had neither saved nor earned that amount; someone had simply remembered it on his behalf.

He dropped all three coins into the small box where he kept change.

They made three tin-tin sounds in the box.

At noon, when a schoolboy came to have air put into his bicycle tyre and paid with a five-rupee coin, Raghuvir did not have one rupee in change.

He turned the box over and looked. It contained only two-rupee coins.
The boy said, “I’ll take it tomorrow.”
Raghuvir tore a small piece from a sheet of paper on the table.
He asked the boy’s name and wrote: “Sonu — 1.”
The boy laughed. “You’re writing my name for one rupee?”
Raghuvir folded the slip and placed it beneath the change box.
“The money is small,” he said. “Remembering is not.”

Story 37

The Rented Room

Behind Sharda Devi's old two-storey house in Kadirabad, Darbhanga, there was a small room.

It was eight cubits long and six wide, with a green window, two wooden shelves set into the wall, an iron cot in one corner, and a hook behind the door.

Among girl students, the room in that house was well known. The rent was not very low, but by the standards of the market it was not high either.

Kiran Jha had been living there for eleven months.

She had come to Darbhanga from a village near Jhanjharpur and was preparing for teacher recruitment. Mornings in the library, afternoons at coaching, evenings studying in her room — eleven months had passed in that rhythm.

On the last Monday of Bhadra, she received her appointment letter.

She had to report on Saturday for training at a district school. Hostel accommodation was also available, so she had to give up the rented room.

Kiran had already paid the full month's rent on the first of the month. But she would have to leave on Thursday morning. Four days would still remain before the month ended.

She was not desperately short of money, but ahead lay the journey to the new place, the hostel deposit, and the cost of a few necessary things.

That evening she went to Sharda Devi.

Sharda Devi was sitting on the veranda, sorting paddy. Kiran said, "Mausi, I'll leave the room on Thursday."

Sharda Devi stopped her hands. "So soon?"

Kiran told her about the appointment letter.

Sharda Devi's face lit up. "That is good news. When are you leaving?"

"Thursday morning. Four days early."

Kiran paused. "What about those four days...?"

Sharda Devi placed the basket of paddy beside her. "I'll look at the register and tell you. We'll settle the account tomorrow evening."

The answer was perfectly ordinary, yet a small uncertainty rose in Kiran's mind.

"I'll look at the register and tell you" — what exactly did that mean? Would she get the money for four days back or not?

She returned to her room.

Outside the window, the leaves of the mango tree moved in the rainy-season wind. Her appointment letter lay on the table, but Kiran's attention kept returning to the rent calculation.

Four days were not much. Even so, she had already paid for the whole month.

She thought there was nothing wrong in asking.

She began packing. She divided her books into three piles: those she would take with her, those she would send home, and those she would give to the small library at the coaching centre.

While taking old papers down from the shelf, she remembered her first day.

Eleven months earlier she had reached Darbhanga in the evening. It had been agreed that the room would be available from the following day, because the previous tenant's month ran until that night.

But the previous tenant had left two days early.

Sharda Devi had given Kiran the key that very night.

Kiran had asked, "What about the money for tonight?"

Sharda Devi had said, "Tonight is already accounted for."

At the time Kiran had assumed it was simply the landlady's ordinary generosity.

The memory returned now, though its meaning was still not clear.

The next morning, while Kiran was wrapping utensils in old newspaper, two young women came into the back courtyard.

One held an admit card. The other seemed to be her sister.

"Mausi, can we get a room for one night?" the first young woman asked.

Sharda Devi said, "Everything is occupied right now."

"On the veranda?"

"Not on the veranda at night. There is Saraswati Niwas in the lane ahead. Ask there."

The two young women left.

Kiran watched from the window. She was a little surprised. If Sharda Devi had wanted, she could have charged them for the veranda or the empty room upstairs. But she never turned the house into a daily-rate lodging house.

That afternoon Sharda Devi came into Kiran's room.

"We'll settle the account tomorrow evening. We'll look at the key then too."

"All right."

Sharda Devi looked towards the corner of the wall. "Don't remove that hook. It was there before you came."

Kiran laughed. "I was wondering how it got so crooked."

"It is very old."

Sharda Devi left.

By Wednesday evening Kiran had packed everything: one shoulder bag, one suitcase, and two boxes of books.

At half past seven she went to the front room to settle the account.

That room was like Sharda Devi's small office: a table, an iron chest, a file of electricity bills, a bundle of rent receipts, and a thick register.

The register had a blue cover, its corners worn white.

Sharda Devi put on her spectacles and opened it.

Kiran sat opposite her.

The first pages carried the names of former tenants of the house. Dates, monthly rent, deposits, and key numbers were all written neatly.

Turning the pages, Sharda Devi came to Kiran's name.

"Kiran Jha. Arrived on the twenty-seventh of Ashwin. Regular rent: all months complete. Electricity: paid."

Kiran's attention went to a narrow column on the right-hand side of the register.

At the top of that column was written: "+ Days."

There were numbers beside several names.

"Rita — +2."

"Najma — +1."

"Pooja — +3."

"Sarita — +1."

Beside some names was zero.

At first Kiran thought these might be extra days charged for vacating the room late.

She asked, "What are these plus days?"

Sharda Devi looked at her over the top of her spectacles. "First let us settle your account."

She picked up the calculator.

"Monthly rent: twenty-one hundred. At thirty days, one day comes to seventy. Four days: two hundred and eighty."

Sharda Devi opened the chest and took out three hundred rupees.

Kiran immediately said, "I have twenty rupees in change."

"No. Listen first."

Sharda Devi placed the three hundred rupees on the table and turned the register towards Kiran.

"These + days are days for which a tenant has already paid, but leaves before the room is due to be vacated."

Kiran fell silent.

Sharda Devi put her finger on Rita's name. "Rita left two days early. I told her to take the money for those two days. She said no — if some girl comes to sit an examination and gets stranded for a night or two, let her stay during those days."

"So this is an account of donations?" Kiran asked.

Sharda Devi shook her head. "Call it a donation and the matter becomes heavy. It is simply an account of days whose rent has already been paid."

She pointed to another name. "Najma left one day. Pooja left three. If someone wants all her money back, I return it. Someone feels like leaving one day, someone two. I do not keep even a single day without asking."

Kiran kept looking at the register.

"And someone actually stays during these days?"

"Yes. Mostly girls who come to sit examinations. I check the admit card. Not more than one or two nights. Only when a room is vacant and there are days in the account."

"You don't take money?"

"How can I take rent twice for the same night?"

The sentence was so simple that Kiran had no immediate reply.

She remembered her own first night.

"When I first came... you told me, 'Tonight is already accounted for.'"

Sharda Devi smiled.

She turned back to an older page of the register.

"Look."

On that page was written: "Manjari Karn — +1."

Below it, in smaller letters: "Used by: Kiran Jha, teacher-exam preparation, 1 night."

Kiran's finger touched the paper almost without her realizing it.

"So my first night..."

"Was Manjari's unused day."

"Did she know me?"

"No."

"Then why the name?"

"The name is for the account. Nothing more."

Kiran read the register again.

Some lines had names of people who had used the days. Some were still blank.

Sharda Devi said, "Not every day gets used. If the time passes and no one comes, the day is finished. I do not carry that money into another month. Only the exact number of days the room was truly vacant."

Kiran liked that rule. There was no invisible charity box in the arrangement, no burden of favour upon anyone. Only a small accounting of time.

Sharda Devi pushed the three hundred rupees towards her again.

"Your four days. Two hundred and eighty. Give me twenty back."

Kiran looked at the notes.

She remembered the hostel deposit. The travel expense too.

She did not want to make an impulsive, emotional decision.

"May I take the money for three days?"

"Of course."

"Leave one day in the account."

Sharda Devi picked up her pen. "Certain?"

"Yes. One day. I need the money for the other three."

Without praise, without widening her smile, Sharda Devi wrote in the register: "Kiran Jha — +1."

Then she counted out two hundred and ten rupees and placed them on the table.

"This is for three days."

Kiran took the money.

She was glad she had taken back the three days she needed. She had left one day simply because one day was what she could afford to leave.

Just then a voice came from the outer gate.

"Mausi?"

Sharda Devi rose.

A middle-aged woman stood there with her daughter. The girl held a transparent file against her chest.

"Her examination is tomorrow morning," the woman said. "The train arrived very late. The rooms near the station are asking so much... if there is anything for one night..."

Sharda Devi first looked at the girl. "Do you have the admit card?"

The girl opened the file and showed her the paper.

Sharda Devi came back inside and looked at the register.

Kiran was still sitting in the chair.

Looking not at Kiran but at the register, Sharda Devi said, "There is one night."

Kiran felt a small jolt in her heart.

She had imagined that the one day she was leaving might someday be of use to someone.

She had not imagined that the very day would be standing at the door so soon.

The girl's mother asked, "How much?"

Sharda Devi said, "The rent for tonight has already been paid."

The woman looked startled. "By whom?"

Closing the register, Sharda Devi said, "By the room."

Kiran could not keep from smiling.

Sharda Devi looked at her but said nothing.

Kiran stood up. "I'll give you the key tomorrow morning."

"All right. Give it by seven so the room can be cleaned."

Early the next morning Kiran rose.

The cot was bare. The shelves were empty. Beside the window there was only a square of sunlight.

She swept the floor, wiped the table, and looked once more at the crooked hook behind the door.

She carried the suitcase outside and finally stood in the middle of the room.

In eleven months this small place had witnessed her studies, fever, rain, failed practice tests, and her appointment letter.

Kiran pulled the door shut.

Handing the key to Sharda Devi, she said, "The hook is still as it was."

Sharda Devi laughed. "Its account is not in the register."

In the courtyard, the student from the previous night — Sonam — sat reading her books. Her examination was at ten.

She greeted Kiran. Neither of them yet knew the other's name.

Kiran returned the greeting.

As she crossed the gate, it occurred to her that Manjari Karn too had probably never known her.

The rickshaw arrived.

Kiran loaded her luggage and sat down.

Sharda Devi went back inside and opened the blue register.

Opposite the line "Kiran Jha — +1," she wrote in small letters: "Used by: Sonam, teacher examination, 1 night."

Then she added the date.

After that day, Kiran's account stood at zero.

The room was rented again, but the rent for one night had not been charged twice.

Story 38

The Nameless Parcel

On the eastern side of the old pond in Benipatti, the yellow gate of Arun Jha's house could be recognized from a distance.

The paint had faded somewhat, but bus drivers and conductors still called that turn "the Yellow Gate."

Six weeks earlier, Arun's mother, Kaushalya Devi, had died. Since then the gate remained closed for most of the day.

When Kaushalya Devi was alive, she would place a bamboo stool just inside the gate at eight every morning and sit there.

Arun had often said, "Ma, sit inside on the veranda. Too much dust blows here."

Kaushalya Devi would reply, "There is a breeze here."

Arun had assumed that was the only reason.

That Tuesday, at about two in the afternoon, a horn sounded three times loudly at the gate.

Mamta came out from the kitchen.

An old blue-and-white bus stood on the road. For a while, the cloud of dust behind it hung in the air.

The conductor's assistant was lowering a large brown bundle from the roof.

"Kaki's house?" he asked, looking towards the gate.

Mamta was silent for a moment.

"Kaki is no longer here," she said softly.

The man's hands stopped. "Oh."

Then someone called from inside the bus, "Give it there. The house is the same."

The helper placed the bundle inside the gate.

"Who sent it?" Mamta asked.

"I don't know."

"The fare?"

"Paid."

"By whom?"

The man turned towards the bus. "It was put aboard at the stand. We were told: Kaki's house, Yellow Gate."

With that he ran back and climbed onto the bus.

The bus pulled away.

Mamta stood looking at the bundle.

In thick blue pen on the brown paper was written: "Kaki's house, Yellow Gate, near the old pond, Benipatti."

The sender's space was blank.

There was no phone number either.

Mamta called Arun from inside.

Arun had returned from the circle office and had just sat down to drink tea. He came out and turned the bundle over.

"No name?"

"No."

"No postal slip?"

"It came by bus."

Neelima too left her studies and came outside. She was in the final year of her undergraduate degree.

"Even Dadi's name isn't written," she said. "Only Kaki's house."

Arun frowned. "Should we open it?"

Mamta said, "The address is our house. If there are papers inside, perhaps we'll understand."

The bundle was not very heavy, but many things seemed to shift and rustle inside.

Arun brought scissors.

The string on top was cut.

When the brown paper was removed, an old plastic fertilizer sack appeared beneath it. It had been washed clean. Its mouth was tied firmly with cord.

Neelima tried to laugh. "This is exactly how Dadi used to tie things. She never threw anything away."

No one answered.

The cord was opened.

There were no gifts inside.

Instead there were twelve small bundles—some wrapped in newspaper, some in cloth, some in old medicine cartons.

A different name was written on each.

"Ramdulari Devi — Barha Tola."

"Najma Khatoon — behind the mosque."

"Amresh Paswan — beyond the canal."

"Sonu — Mahendra Sah's grandson."

"Lalita Mishra — North Orchard."

Arun read the names one by one.

"These are all local people," Mamta said.

"Then why was the parcel sent to our house?"

Neelima reached into the sack. At the bottom lay a folded sheet of paper.

She opened it.

Four lines were written on it:

"Heard that Kaki is no more. These things were still lying at the stand. They do not belong to one person, so no sender's name has been written. Give each bundle to the person whose name is on it. Two bundles have incomplete names—the rest will be found in Kaki's notebook."

There was no signature below.

Arun read the note again.

"Kaki's notebook?"

Mamta immediately looked towards Kaushalya Devi's room.

For six weeks the room had remained almost exactly as it was: the cot, the iron trunk, the small picture of God, the wall clock, and the wooden shelf beside the window.

Kaushalya Devi kept many papers: old electricity bills, seed receipts, medicine wrappers, temple-donation slips—all in separate folds.

Arun could not remember any notebook.

"Let's deliver the bundles with clear names first," Mamta said. "We'll look for the other two later."

Neelima picked up Ramdulari Devi's bundle.

"Shouldn't we open it?"

Arun said, "No. Whoever it belongs to will open it."

Ramdulari Devi lived two houses away.

The moment she saw the bundle, her face brightened.

"It has come now?"

Neelima looked surprised. "You knew about it?"

"My son had new lenses fitted for my spectacles in Darbhanga and sent them. He called three weeks ago and said he had given them to a busman."

"Why didn't you go and collect them?"

"Where would I go? He said it would reach Kaki's house."

Holding the bundle, Ramdulari Devi suddenly fell silent.

"I had forgotten that Kaushalya is now..."

The sentence remained unfinished.

Neelima returned home.

The second bundle was Najma Khatoon's. Inside it was a small belt for her sewing machine, sent by her brother from Madhubani.

The third bundle, for Amresh Paswan, contained two plastic covers for certificates.

The fourth was Sonu's mathematics practice book.

The fifth was the cuff of Lalita Mishra's blood-pressure monitor, which had been sent for repair.

By evening seven bundles had been delivered.

Almost everyone gave the same answer: "It had been given to the busman," "It was supposed to be dropped at Kaki's house," "Kaki would deliver it."

Arun could not believe that all this had been going on for so long.

"When did Ma do all this?"

Mamta looked at him. "When you were at the tehsil, I was in the kitchen, and Neelima was at college."

"But all day?"

"Not all day. At bus time."

Suddenly Neelima remembered a very old sound: two short horns on the road, then the knock of Dadi rising from her stool.

As a child she had thought Dadi hurried outside simply to watch the bus.

Sometimes Dadi would come inside carrying a small bundle wrapped in newspaper.

"Whose is it?" Neelima would ask.

"Someone's from the western hamlet."

Then Dadi would call some child and send it on.

No one in the household had ever discussed it.

Before darkness fell, five bundles remained.

Three had clear names. Two carried only clues.

On one was written: "Shambhu's mother, who lives behind the old school."

On the other: "The girl who comes to learn sewing on Wednesdays."

Arun did not laugh.

"This isn't an address. It's a riddle."

Mamta said, "For Kaushalya Ma, it would have been an address."

Neelima remembered the line in the note: it will be found in Kaki's notebook.

All three went into the room.

The iron trunk was opened.

Saris lay on top, then an old towel, a box of coins, another box of puja things.

No notebook.

They searched the shelf.

Electricity bills, medicine slips, ration papers.

Under the cot was a small tin box.

Inside were balls of wool, two old pairs of spectacles, a comb, needle and thread.

Neelima was disappointed.

"How did the person who wrote that note know there was a notebook?"

Arun said, "That means the people at the stand knew Ma well."

Mamta was wiping the window frame when she suddenly stopped.

"What is this?"

Between the wall below the window and the cot, a thin notebook had slipped down.

Nothing was written on the cover.

When they opened the first page, there was a date at the top.

Below it, three columns had been drawn by hand: "For whom," "What," "Delivered or not."

The first entry was seven years old.

"Mahendra Sah — medicine — delivered."

"Razia — school papers — delivered."

"Bindeshwar — key — delivered."

Page after page was filled with such small entries.

Many lines had a round mark beside them. Many had dates. Some said: "House locked," "Try again tomorrow," "Grandson collected."

Neelima slowly turned the pages.

It was not an account book.

No money was recorded in it. It was a memory of things that had reached their destination.

Here and there the names of buses appeared too: "Mithila," "Jai Ma," "Sugauna route," "Afternoon blue bus."

Arun asked, "All these years?"

Mamta said, "Ma still sat at the gate after I came here as a bride. There weren't even so many mobile phones then."

The handwriting on the final pages trembled slightly.

An entry from two months before her death read: "Ramdulari — spectacles — to arrive."

Below it: "Najma — machine belt — to arrive."

And then the two incomplete clues.

"Shambhu's mother — name: Devaki Devi."

"Wednesday sewing girl — Ruby Kumari, tenant in the red house to the west."

The addresses of the last two bundles had been found.

Arun sat for a long time holding the notebook.

"Ma never told me."

Mamta replied, "What was there to tell? People gave her things and she delivered them."

"It was a responsibility."

"Yes."

Neelima said, "And everyone trusted her."

That night the final two bundles were delivered.

Devaki Devi's bundle contained batteries for a hearing aid. Ruby's held two special sewing-machine presser feet sent by her instructor from Darbhanga.

When they returned home, the fertilizer sack lay empty.

But one object still remained at the bottom, something no one had noticed earlier.

An old cloth bag printed with yellow and green flowers.

Neelima picked it up.

"This is Dadi's."

Arun recognized it immediately. Whenever Kaushalya Devi went to the market, she carried that bag. Five years earlier Mamta had patched one corner with blue thread.

There was nothing inside it except half a broken pencil.

Mamta ran her finger over the patch.

"How did this reach the stand?"

Arun said, "We'll go and ask tomorrow."

The next morning Arun and Neelima went to the bus stand.

The counter for the afternoon blue bus was not a proper office: a tin awning beside a tea stall, one table, two benches.

A man of about sixty named Raghunandan sat at the counter.

Arun placed the bag on the table.

"Did you send that parcel?"

Raghunandan understood as soon as he saw the bag.

"Did it reach?"

"Yes. But why was there no sender's name?"

Raghunandan laughed. "Whose name should I have written?"

"The person who collected everything."

"I collected it, but the things weren't mine. Half came with different drivers, some were left by passengers, two came through another bus operator. Everyone said the same thing: drop it at Kaki's house."

"Did Ma come here?"

"Sometimes. Mostly we sent things with the bus."

"And the bag?"

Raghunandan looked at the patch.

"The last time she came."

Arun fell silent.

Raghunandan continued, "About two months ago. There were three bundles. Kaki said, 'Put them in the bag. My hands tremble.' I did. Then she sat on the bench for a while. When the bus was about to leave, she got up and went. The bag remained here."

"No one returned it?"

"I thought I would send it the next day with the busman. Then I heard she was ill. Then..."

The sentence stopped there.

Raghunandan scratched the corner of the table.

"The parcels kept accumulating. At first I thought the house was in mourning, so whom should I give them to? Then the old route storeroom had to be cleared. So I put everything into one sack and sent it."

Neelima asked, "How long had Dadi been doing this?"

Raghunandan leaned back in his chair.

"It's hard to say exactly how many years. Almost since this route began. Earlier the bus ran only twice a day. Many village homes had no road access. Someone would send medicine from town, someone papers, someone a key, someone a small machine part. If we wrote full addresses, the bus staff would have to go from house to house."

"So the Yellow Gate?"

"So Kaki."

"Why?"

Raghunandan answered at once.

"She did not forget names."

Then he thought for a moment and added, "And she never handed anything to the wrong person."

Neelima remembered the round marks in Dadi's notebook.

"Did she charge anything?"

Raghunandan made a face as though the question were odd.

"Kaki? No. The bus charged a fare if one had been fixed. Kaki's work was only to see that it reached the person."

Arun said softly, "We knew nothing about this."

Raghunandan looked at him.

"People inside a house often know less about what happens outside its gate."

He said it without sermon or reproach, as though stating an ordinary fact.

On the wall behind the counter hung several lengths of string from an old nail. Perhaps parcels had once been suspended there.

Arun picked up the cloth bag.

As they were about to leave, Raghunandan called, "One thing."

"Yes?"

"If small parcels come now, where should we drop them?"

Arun was about to answer, but Neelima spoke first.

"At the Yellow Gate."

Arun looked at his daughter.

Neelima added, "Call first. The name will be written clearly."

Raghunandan laughed. "Times have changed now."

Neelima laughed too. “So has the notebook.”

After returning home, she placed Kaushalya Devi’s thin notebook on the table.

The old pages remained exactly as they were.

On the final blank page, Neelima wrote the date.

Arun asked, “What are you writing?”

“Nothing yet. Only beginning.”

She drew three columns: “For whom,” “What,” “Delivered or not.”

Mamta watched from a distance and smiled.

Two days later, at noon, two short horn blasts sounded on the road again.

Neelima was reading a book on the veranda.

Without thinking, she got up and went towards the gate.

The blue bus stopped for a moment.

The helper held out a small bundle wrapped in newspaper through the window.

“Mahendra Sah — medicine.”

Neelima took the bundle.

“Did he phone?”

“Yes. The number is at the counter.”

The bus moved on.

Neelima came inside. She opened the notebook and made the first new entry: “Mahendra Sah — medicine.”

She left the “Delivered or not” box blank.

In the evening Mahendra Sah’s grandson came and collected the bundle.

Neelima placed a round mark in the box.

Arun was sitting in a chair on the veranda at the time.

The gate stood open.

The yellow panels moved slightly in the breeze.

For the first time Arun understood that the nameless parcel had not really been some secret gift from anyone.

It was the remainder of a route—a route along which people had entrusted one another with names even more than with objects.

Kaushalya Devi’s cloth bag now hung from a nail beside the window.

There was nothing inside it.

Looking at the empty bag, Neelima did not see absence. She saw space.

Story 39

Behind the Photograph

On the eastern wall of the sitting room in Vijaykant Jha's house, in the old quarter of Madhubani town, a broad black wooden frame had hung for fifty years.

Inside it was a black-and-white photograph: five adults, two children, and, in the middle, Gauri Devi in a white sari.

The photograph had no official name in the household. Everyone simply called it "the picture of everyone."

The family story was that it had been taken in 1971, when all four of Gauri Devi's children had gathered at the ancestral home at the same time.

Vijaykant had heard this since childhood.

"After that, everyone could never be together again," his mother, Sudha Devi, used to say.

And so the photograph seemed to carry more weight than an ordinary family picture.

Today was the first day of clearing out the house.

Vijaykant and his younger sister Meera had both arrived with their families.

Sudha Devi had died six months earlier. No one now lived in the ancestral house regularly.

The decision to sell it had come only after much thought.

The old bed, the brass water pot, two trunks, the bookcase—decisions about these were being made easily enough.

But discussion stalled at the photograph in the sitting room.

Meera said, "I'll take this."

Vijaykant immediately asked, "Why?"

"Ma used to say never throw it away."

"Who is talking about throwing it away? It can stay at my house too."

Meera looked at the frame.

"Where is there space in your house?"

Vijaykant laughed a little. "Space is made for a photograph."

His daughter Neha was closing a cardboard box and listening to them.

She said, "Let the original stay with one of you. I'll have a good scan made so everyone can have a copy."

Meera thought that reasonable.

"The frame has to be opened first," Neha added. "There is a haze trapped under the glass."

The wood at one lower corner of the frame was also beginning to split.

Vijaykant said, "Naresh Babu on Station Road still does old photographs. He can clean it."

That afternoon Neha and Meera took the picture to Naresh Photo Service.

The shop had become half photo studio and half mobile-print shop.

Behind the glass were passport photographs, enlarged wedding prints, and samples of restored old pictures.

Naresh Thakur was past seventy, but he still sat behind the counter himself.

Meera set the frame before him.

"We want this cleaned. Change the glass, and save the frame if it can be saved."

Naresh looked once at the picture from a distance.

"Very old."

"1971," Meera said at once.

Naresh pushed his spectacles up and looked again.

"Are you certain of the date?"

Meera smiled. "It's the most famous date in our family."

Naresh turned the frame over.

Thick brown paper had been pasted across the back, fixed around the edges with small nails.

"This paper will have to be cut," he said.

"Cut it."

With a small knife he lifted the edge of the paper.

A thin layer of dust rose.

When the backing board came free, Neha took out her phone to photograph it, but Naresh stopped her hand.

"One minute."

On the inside of the board, four separate numbers had been written in pencil:

127/B.

48/D.

301/A.

72/C.

Beside them were two small arrows in red pencil and one circled mark.

Meera asked, "What are these?"

Naresh did not answer.

He carefully lifted the photograph out of the frame.

On the back of the photographic paper were two faint stamps: "Sharda Art Studio, Madhubani" and "Re-touch."

Naresh's expression changed.

"This is work from Sharda Studio."

Neha asked, "Where was that studio?"

"Two lanes west of here. There is a cloth shop there now."

Meera said, "Did my grandfather have photographs taken there?"

"Many people did. But these numbers..."

Naresh placed a white light in front of the photograph.

He took out a lens and examined each face in turn.

Neha laughed. "What are you looking at like a detective?"

Naresh did not laugh.

"Not everyone in this picture sat before the camera at the same time."

Meera did not understand.

"What do you mean?"

"This is a composite photograph."

The sound of the shop's fan suddenly seemed much louder.

Neha was curious first. "The photographs were combined?"

"Yes. By the old method. Faces and bodies from different negatives were brought together into one frame."

Meera reached towards the photograph, then stopped.

"No. They were all photographed together. Everyone at home says so."

Naresh said softly, "Look."

He pointed towards the feet of the man standing at the left.

"Here the shadow falls to the right."

Then he showed the space beneath another woman's chair.

"Here the shadow is almost straight."

Then the edge of Gauri Devi's shoulder.

"This part has been retouched by hand. Behind the child too."

Neha looked very closely.

What had always seemed to her a single natural moment now began to show its fine joins.

The light on one child's kurta was slightly different from everyone else's.

The man on the right was looking half an inch above the camera.

Meera sat down on a chair.

"Then everyone wasn't together in 1971?"

Naresh shrugged.

"The photograph tells us only that one picture was made from four sources. I know nothing about what happened in the family."

Meera remained silent for a long time.

Neha understood that her mother's shock was not really about the photograph being false. It was about a very old sentence in the family breaking apart.

"Ma called this 'the picture of everyone,'" Meera said softly.

"She wasn't wrong about that either," Neha said.

Meera looked at her.

"But they weren't together."

"They are all in the photograph."

"That is a different thing."

Naresh turned the backing board over again and again.

"If the original job register survived, these numbers would explain it."

Neha asked, "Where would the register be?"

Naresh thought for a moment.

"The owner of Sharda Studio was Shashibhushan Lal. His son Arvind lives on Rajnagar Road now. I've heard he preserved a lot of old material."

Meera stood up at once.

"Give us the address."

Naresh said, "Leave the frame here first. It is not wise to carry the photograph around while it is open."

Neha photographed all four numbers clearly on her phone.

That evening they told Vijaykant what they had learned.

His first reaction was disbelief.

"Naresh Babu may have misunderstood."

Neha showed him the photograph on her phone.

"There are four numbers."

Vijaykant zoomed in on the digital photograph of the original.

"That could mean four copies were made."

Meera said, "Naresh Babu showed us the shadows."

"Family history doesn't change because of shadows."

The sentence came out a little harsh.

Meera fell silent.

That night, while clearing an old cupboard, Neha found a small album.

Its pages were black, and each photograph was held at the corners by paper triangles.

She turned the pages one by one.

At one place she stopped abruptly.

There was a separate photograph of Vijaykant's maternal uncle, Shyamohan, the man who stood on the right side of the group picture.

He was standing alone in some park in Calcutta.

The same striped bush shirt.

The same angle of the face.

Neha removed the photograph. On the back, in blue ink, was written: "Calcutta, 1969."

She hurried to Vijaykant.

"Look at this."

Vijaykant held the photograph and stared at it for a long time.

The Shyamohan in the group picture and the Shyamohan in the album were the same photograph—only the background had been changed.

There was little room left now for argument.

Meera asked quietly, "Will you still say they were all together in 1971?"

Vijaykant did not answer.

The next morning all three went to Arvind Lal's house.

It was an old single-storey house a little inside Rajnagar Road. Two closed enlargers and an iron cupboard stood on the veranda.

Arvind Lal was close to eighty.

As soon as he heard Naresh's name, he invited them inside.

Neha showed him the numbers on her phone.

Arvind first changed his spectacles.

"127/B... 48/D..."

He repeated the numbers slowly.

"This is my father's old numbering system."

Meera asked, "Do the registers still exist?"

Arvind laughed.

"In this house, the things that ought to have been thrown away are the things that have survived best."

From the bottom of the cupboard he took out three thick registers wrapped in cloth.

The first covered 1960 to 1967.

The second, 1968 to 1974.

The pages had yellowed; there were old termite marks along the edges.

Arvind began searching the serial numbers.

48/D appeared first.

"Shyamohan Jha — Calcutta — copy."

Neha looked at Vijaykant.

127/B — "Sarojini — Sitamarhi."

72/C — "Ramlochan — Janakpur."

301/A — "Gauri Devi with two children — home."

All four sources had different dates.

Meera sat gripping the edge of the chair.

"Is there an entry for the group picture?"

Arvind turned the pages forward.

About three months later they found a line:

"Gauri Devi Jha — four negatives combined into one family photograph — 12 × 16 — two copies."

Beside it was his father's small signature.

That was all.

No secret message.

No property, name, or dispute.

Just an ordinary studio order.

Meera kept reading the line.

"Two copies?"

Arvind said, "Yes. One probably for the house. The other may have gone to one of the children."

Vijaykant asked, "Do you remember anything about this job?"

Arvind shook his head.

"I was in college then. I used to sit in the shop with my father in the evenings. I don't remember every customer."

He paused.

"But composite family pictures were not unusual then. Families lived in different towns. Marriage, jobs, illness—it was difficult to gather everyone at one time. People brought separate photographs and asked us to make them into one."

Neha asked, "Was the aim to make it look as though everyone had actually sat together?"

"That was usually what people wanted."

Arvind looked again at the register.

"My father would match scale, direction of the eyes, chairs, background. Some errors always remained—shadows, light on clothing, height."

Vijaykant was very quiet.

Meera suddenly asked, "Did Gauri Devi herself have this photograph made?"

"The register names her as the customer."

At that answer Meera sat a little straighter.

On the drive home no one said much.

The afternoon sun lay across the roads of Madhubani.

Neha kept comparing the four source photographs on her phone.

Back at the house they opened the album again.

They had found Shyamohan's picture.

Soon they found Sarojini Mami's too: seated alone on a veranda in Sitamarhi. In the group picture her face, sari, and the position of her hands were exactly the same.

They never found Ramlochan Mama's source photograph.

The picture of Gauri Devi with the two children was inside a small envelope.

Now the construction of the group photograph was clear.

Vijaykant said slowly, "I remember Ma saying once that when this picture was made, Shyamohan was in Calcutta."

Meera looked at him immediately.

"Then why didn't you say so before?"

"Because I thought Ma was mixing up the date. Later we ourselves turned it into the story that everyone had gathered."

Meera was silent for a while.

"Did Ma ever say it was photographed with everyone together?"

Vijaykant thought.

"No. She only called it 'the picture of everyone.'"

Neha smiled.

"Then who told the lie?"

Brother and sister looked at one another.

Neither had an answer.

Perhaps the story had formed simply because it was more convenient for the family.

One photograph, one date, one gathering—that made memory neat and orderly.

Four towns, four photographs, four different times—that was a slightly harder story.

That evening Neha spread all the source photographs from the black album across the table.

The group picture was open on her phone in the middle.

She saw that in Gauri Devi's original photograph there had actually been empty space beside her.

When the group picture was made, Sarojini had been placed into that empty space.

Ramlochan on the other side.

Shyamohan a little higher and farther back.

Meera said softly, "Perhaps Dadi didn't like empty spaces in photographs."

For the first time a faint smile appeared on Vijaykant's face.

"Perhaps."

Neha said, "If everyone had been together, there would have been no need to make the photograph."

At that, both fell silent.

The value of the picture had not suddenly diminished.

Its meaning had changed.

It was no longer proof of a final gathering.

It was a solution created because gathering had not been possible.

The next day Naresh called from the shop.

"The photograph is clean. Shall I fit a new backing board?"

Meera said, "One minute. Don't throw away the old board from the back."

All three went to the shop.

Naresh had cleaned the photograph and placed it on thin acid-free paper.

The image was clearer than before.

The corners of Gauri Devi's eyes, Shyamohan's bush shirt, Sarojini's sari—all showed distinctly.

Meera said, "I want the old backing board."

Naresh gave it to her.

Neha laid transparent paper over the four pencilled numbers and copied them.

Then she took out a small sheet of paper.

Vijaykant asked, "What will you write?"

Neha said, "The truth."

Meera grew slightly cautious. "Not too much explanation. The next generation will invent another story."

Everyone laughed.

In the end they wrote three lines:

"This is not a photograph of a single moment."

"Four separate photographs were combined, at Gauri Devi's request, to make one family portrait."

"The original studio reference numbers are preserved behind it."

Neha added today's date.

Naresh fixed the note safely inside the new backing, without letting it touch the photograph.

The four numbers from the old board were preserved inside as well.

Meera asked, "Who will take the frame?"

Vijaykant paused before answering.

"You take the original."

Meera was surprised.

"And you?"

"I'll take the scan. More than the wall now, I want these four source photographs."

Neha laughed. "Yesterday you were arguing over the original."

Vijaykant said, "Yesterday I wanted one moment. Today I've found four times."

Meera took the frame in her hands.

As she left the shop, she looked once at the back of the photograph.

The new backing board was clean.

Inside it the four numbers from the old board were hidden, but now not like a concealed truth—like preserved evidence.

On the day the house was sold, the sitting-room wall stood empty.

The frame went with Meera.

Vijaykant had the four source photographs scanned separately and made a small album.

First page: Shyamohan — Calcutta.

Second: Sarojini — Sitamarhi.

Third: Gauri Devi with the children — Madhubani.

Ramlochan's source photograph had still not been found. Its place was left blank.

On the final page he placed a copy of the group photograph.

Neha asked, "Shall we fill this empty place?"

Vijaykant shook his head.

"No. If the photograph hasn't been found yet, let its place remain empty."

After a pause he added, "Dadi filled an empty space once. Now we'll keep this one visible."

A few weeks later Meera hung the photograph in her new house.

When a visitor asked, "When were they all photographed together?"

Meera no longer answered immediately, "1971."

She would look at the frame, smile, and say, "They weren't photographed together. They were made into one picture together."

And if the listener truly wanted to know, she would tell the story of the four towns.

The photograph was no longer the family's simplest memory.

But it had become the family's truest one.

Because what it preserved behind it was not the story of everyone once being together, but the desire not to leave one another's place empty even while living far apart.

Story 40

Two Lamps

The narrow lane running east from Madhubani's old bus stand was officially called 'Ward Seven, Sub-lane Three.' But everyone nearby simply called it Peepal Lane.

An old peepal tree stood midway down the lane, and just beyond it the road divided in two.

The path to the left was paved. The one to the right was unpaved, with a narrow open drain running through the middle, and farther on stood a small cluster of five houses.

Nayan's house was the second from the end of that right-hand path.

Eight days before Diwali, the streetlight on the pole at the turn went out.

For the first two nights people thought the bulb had burnt out. On the third night an electrician came, inspected the pole, shook the wire, and said, 'The upper joint has burnt. It can't be repaired without the municipality's vehicle.'

The vehicle had still not come.

By day the turn looked perfectly ordinary. At night the shops lit the paved road on the left, but the right-hand path vanished into darkness.

Twice the milkman had taken the wrong turn. Once Nayan's cousin had called and asked, 'I've reached the peepal tree. Which way now?'

Nayan had laughed and said, 'Turn where you can't see anything.'

But his mother, Renu Devi, had not liked the joke.

'Darkness should not be identified by more darkness,' she had said.

Nayan had kept the sentence in his mind.

On the morning of Diwali, the market was spread with stalls of clay lamps, coloured paper, sweets and flowers.

Nayan's mother gave him ten rupees.

'Bring two lamps,' she said, 'and if there is any money left, buy two handfuls of cotton too.'

Nayan asked, 'Only two?'

'We have less oil this year. If we decorate with too many lamps, they will all go out halfway through the night.'

Nayan closed his fist around the money and went to the market.

Near Peepal Chowk, an elderly potter woman sat on a mat with lamps arranged before her.

Her name was Mangala Devi. Everyone called her Mangala Kaki.

There were three kinds of lamps on the mat: plain round ones, ones whose rims had been pinched into flower shapes, and small four-spouted lamps coloured with red ochre.

Nayan pointed to the plain round lamps.

'How much?'

'Three rupees for two.'

Nayan handed over his ten-rupee note.

As Mangala Devi put two lamps into a small paper bag, she asked, 'Only two for Diwali?'

'Yes.'

'One by the tulsi plant and one at the threshold?'

Nayan shook his head.

'One at home. One at the turn.'

Mangala Devi's hand stopped.

'At the turn?'

'The light in our lane is broken.'

Kaki laughed. 'Will one lamp light the whole lane?'

'Not the whole lane. It only has to show the turn.'

Mangala Devi looked at his face for a moment. Then she placed two small wicks in the bag as well.

'Money for these wicks?' Nayan asked.

'No. They come with the lamps.'

'Ma told me to buy cotton.'

'Then buy cotton. These two wicks are from me.'

With the remaining seven rupees, Nayan bought cotton and a little oil and returned home.

Renu Devi looked into the bag and said, 'Good. We'll light both lamps this evening.'

Nayan said, 'I'm taking one outside.'

'Where?'

'To the turn by the peepal tree.'

Renu Devi looked at him. 'Why?'

'People can't see the right-hand path.'

'Who will notice one lamp among all the firecrackers?'

'Firecrackers don't burst all the time.'

Renu Devi said nothing.

She poured mustard oil into a small brass bowl.

'We won't divide it unequally,' she said. 'Half for the lamp at home, half for the lamp at the turn. It wouldn't be right to light our own lamp and leave the other one empty.'

Nayan smiled.

Evening was falling.

Rangoli, alpana and lamps began appearing at the thresholds of the houses in the lane. Some homes had strings of electric lights, some candles in the windows.

Nayan placed the first lamp on the threshold of his house. His mother straightened the wick, and Nayan struck a match.

A small flame rose.

He put the second lamp on an old metal plate and walked towards the turn by the peepal tree.

Renu Devi called after him, 'Don't put it beside the drain.'

'I won't.'

At the turn, one brick was missing from the corner of an old wall. Nayan placed the lamp in that hollow.

It was about two handspans above the ground, sheltered from the wind.

He lit the lamp.

For a few moments the flame trembled, then steadied.

Nayan stepped back five paces.

There was plenty of light on the paved road to the left. The right-hand path was still dark, but with the lamp burning in the corner of the wall, its entrance could now be seen clearly.

Nayan's neighbour, Ajay Kaka, passed carrying a box of firecrackers.

'Who put this here?'

'I did.'

'For worship?'

'No. For the road.'

Ajay Kaka laughed at first. Then he looked towards the right-hand turn.

'Good. At least no one will fall into the drain.'

He went on.

A little later two children came running with sparklers. One bent towards the lamp.

Nayan immediately said, 'Don't touch it. This isn't decoration.'

'Then what is it?'

'It shows the road.'

The children laughed and ran away.

By eight the wind had grown stronger.

From the house Nayan kept looking again and again towards the turn.

Once the flame grew very small. He ran out with the oil bottle.

There was still oil in the lamp, but the wick had drooped into it. Nayan lifted the wick a little with a twig.

Mangala Devi's stall was still open in the market then.

Most of her lamps had sold during the day, though about three dozen remained on the mat.

Her daughter-in-law Sulekha had brought her lunch in the afternoon and told her, 'Come home before nine tonight.'

Mangala Devi had thought she would pack up at eight, but at the last moment people kept stopping to buy more lamps.

At half past eight she packed the remaining lamps into a sack.

The main road was the easier way to the bus stand, but that night it was crowded with firecrackers, motorcycles and people.

A sweet seller told her, 'Kaki, cut through Peepal Lane. It comes straight out near the bus stand.'

Mangala Devi had taken that path two or three times by day, never at night.

She entered the lane with the sack tucked under her arm rather than balanced on her head.

The first stretch was bright. Lamps and electric strings outside the houses made the road easy to see.

Near the peepal tree the light suddenly diminished.

Ahead, the road divided in two.

Mangala Devi stopped.

On the paved path to the left she could see a white light in the distance. On the right, in the corner of a wall, burned a small lamp.

Behind that lamp, the edge of the right-hand path, the drain, and the raised bricks could be seen clearly.

Mangala Devi remembered the boy from that morning.

'One at home. One at the turn.'

She smiled softly.

The shortcut to the bus stand was on the right.

When she reached the lamp, she found Nayan standing against the wall, adjusting the wick.

Nayan recognized her.

'Kaki! Your stall was open till now?'

'I've just closed it.'

Mangala Devi looked at the lamp.

'Is this the second one?'

'Yes.'

'Did it light the whole lane?'

Nayan laughed. 'No. But you can see the turn.'

Mangala Devi laughed too.

'Tonight, that was enough for me.'

She hitched the sack a little higher under her arm and took the right-hand path.

Nayan watched until she reached the small exit leading towards the bus stand.

When he returned home, his mother asked, 'Who were you talking to?'

'The Kaki who sells lamps.'

'She came here?'

'Yes. She saw the turn.'

Renu Devi checked the oil in the first lamp at the threshold. Its flame was steady.

'And the second?'

'A little less.'

From the oil left in the bowl she poured one spoonful into Nayan's hand-held bottle.

'Take it.'

Nayan asked, 'What about the lamp at home?'

'It won't burn all night. It doesn't have to. It can burn as long as the oil lasts.'

Nayan went and added the oil at the turn.

At nine, Ajay Kaka stopped beside the lamp on his way home.

In his hand was a small bottle half full of mustard oil.

He said nothing. He simply poured a little oil into the lamp.

Ten minutes later, Veena Kaki from the neighbourhood came and left a new wick; the old one had grown very short.

Nayan saw both things from the window at home.

He wanted to go outside, but his mother stopped him.

'The lamp is no longer yours alone.'

'I bought it.'

'You bought it. But now everyone is putting oil into it.'

At half past ten, the first lamp at the threshold went out.

Nayan picked up the matches to relight it.

Renu Devi said, 'Leave it.'

'It's Diwali.'

'The house can be seen. The door can be seen. We are inside.'

She pointed towards the window.

The second lamp at the turn was still burning.

'The road there still needs to be seen.'

Nayan put the matches back.

The next morning he went to the turn.

The lamp had gone out. The oil was finished. Its rim was blackened.

But beside it lay three things: a small bottle with a little oil in it, two new wicks, and a flat piece of brick.

On the brick, in chalk, someone had written: 'Here until the light is repaired.'

The handwriting was Ajay Kaka's.

Nayan picked up the brick.

At that moment Mangala Devi was walking from the bus stand towards the market, again carrying an empty sack under her arm.

Nayan showed her the brick.

Mangala Devi read it and smiled.

'How many lamps do you need now?'

Nayan said, 'One.'

'For the house?'

'No. For the turn. Yesterday's home lamp is still there.'

Before even spreading out her mat, Mangala Devi took a plain lamp from her bag.

Nayan said at once, 'I'll pay.'

'You will.'

'How much?'

'Two were three rupees. One is one and a half.'

Nayan took a two-rupee coin from his pocket.

Mangala Devi began looking for a half-rupee coin, then laughed.

'Where will I find a half-rupee coin now?'

Nayan laughed too.

'Then keep two rupees.'

'The account will be wrong.'

Nayan remembered the two lamps from the previous day.

'Then take fifty paise less next time.'

Mangala Devi placed the lamp in his hand. 'All right. The account will remain.'

Three days later the municipal vehicle came.

The wire on the pole was replaced. That evening the streetlight came on again.

The turn was brighter than before.

Ajay Kaka bent to remove the piece of brick.

Nayan said, 'Leave it.'

'The light has been repaired.'

'Yes.'

'Then what use is the lamp?'

Nayan thought for a moment.

'The light may break again.'

Ajay Kaka laughed. 'That's a good answer.'

The brick remained where it was.

Before the next Diwali, the streetlight at the turn failed twice more.

Both times, by evening, someone or other placed a lamp in the corner of the wall.

Sometimes Ajay Kaka, sometimes Veena Kaki, sometimes Nayan.

Whenever Mangala Devi came to sell lamps at Peepal Chowk, she would glance towards the turn in the afternoon.

The following Diwali, Nayan came to her mat.

'Two lamps,' he said.

Without asking, Mangala Devi took out two plain lamps.

Then she smiled and asked, 'One for home, one for the turn?'

Nayan nodded.

This time, along with the wicks, Mangala Devi added a pinch of cotton wrapped in a small piece of paper.

Nayan asked, 'How much for this?'

'Let it remain in the account.'

'Whose account?'

Mangala Devi looked towards the turn.

'The account where everyone adds oil.'

Nayan carried the lamps away.

That evening the first lamp was lit at the threshold of his house.

The second was lit at the turn by the peepal tree.

This time the electric streetlight on the pole was working, so the second lamp was scarcely needed for illumination.

Even so, people noticed it as they passed the turn.

For by then it was no longer merely a remedy for darkness.

It had become a small sign that a public road does not belong to any one household.

As the night deepened, the lamp at the threshold went out first.

The lamp at the turn burned a little longer.

Someone had added oil again.

Story 41

The Last Row

Madhav had received the invitation card three days earlier.

Suresh Babu himself had come to Madhav's small electrical shop. In one hand he carried a card with a red border; in the other, a sheet showing the temporary decorations.

"Anjali's wedding is this Sunday," Suresh Babu said. "The card is for you, but there is also a job. The old wiring in the house will not carry so many strings of lights and lamps. Please have a look."

Madhav opened the card and read it. At the top were Anjali's name and the groom's; below, the time; and at the end: "With family, you are cordially invited."

He smiled. "Did you give me the invitation first, or the work first?"

Suresh Babu laughed too. "You are one of our own. The work account is separate, the invitation separate. We won't mix the two."

Madhav wrote down the estimate: wire, two MCBs, three temporary points, and the electrician's labour.

Suresh Babu did not bargain. He only said, "Don't forget to eat at the wedding."

On Sunday morning at nine, Madhav arrived with his assistant Bipin.

Above the courtyard, coloured light strings, bamboo poles, microphone cables, fans and the thick cable running towards the kitchen all passed between and across one another.

Within half an hour Madhav understood that until evening his work would not merely be to join wires, but to keep the wires from interfering with one another.

By noon he had divided the main supply into three lines: kitchen separate, wedding pavilion separate, outdoor lighting separate.

Madhav had also brought a clean kurta in his bag. His thought was that once the work settled in the evening, even if there was no time to bathe, he could at least change his shirt and sit down to eat.

From four o'clock onward calls began arriving about the wedding party's bus.

At five, the flower decorator added two extra strings of lights.

At twenty past five, the sound man plugged his amplifier into the same board that ran the kitchen motor.

Madhav pulled out the plug and shifted it to another line. "Nothing else goes on this board now."

The sound man said, "Only for two minutes."

"In two minutes a wire does not understand that there is a wedding."

By half past six the house was glowing.

From a distance Suresh Babu raised his hand as if asking: Everything all right?

Madhav gave him a thumbs-up.

Just then Suresh Babu's maternal uncle came over.

"Arre, Madhav! You're here too? Suresh was saying you are an old acquaintance."

"I'm an acquaintance, and an electrician too," Madhav said with a laugh.

The uncle knew nothing about the invitation card. He assumed Madhav had come only for the electrical work.

"He has hired the right man," he said. "All these wires make me nervous."

At seven, the first dining row sat down.

Vegetables, dal, pulao, curd and sweets began appearing on the leaf plates.

Madhav stood near the distribution board by the outer gate, checking the heat of the line.

Bipin asked, "Guruji, shall I go and eat?"

"You go first. I'll come in ten minutes."

Bipin went towards the row at the back where the workers were eating.

Madhav thought of taking the clean kurta out of his bag, but just then a fan in the wedding pavilion stopped.

The fan itself was not faulty. Its plug had been pressed behind a flower curtain and had slipped halfway out.

Madhav fixed it.

By the time he came back, it was eight.

The second dining row was getting up.

Suresh Babu's wife saw him from a distance.

"Madhav Bhai, have you eaten?"

"Not yet."

"Sit now. It will get more crowded later."

Madhav went to wash his hands.

He took the clean kurta out of his bag.

There was greasy black insulation tape on his shirt. He thought he should change.

Just then a voice came from inside the house:

"Madhavji! The light in the bride's room is flickering."

The kurta went back into the bag.

The fault in the bride's room was small: a cheap multi-plug was loose.

But the room was full of women, decoration wires and mobile chargers, so the job took time.

When Madhav came out, the wedding party had arrived.

After nine the dining rows were running continuously.

For the first time Madhav sat down in an empty place.

Two unfamiliar guests sat beside him.

The young man placing leaf plates looked at Madhav, then at the dust on his clothes, and asked, "Who are you with?"

Madhav did not understand the question. "With the family."

The young man asked again, "Are you a guest or one of the workers? The workers' row will be at the back."

Madhav's hand went instinctively to his pocket, where the folded invitation card lay.

He could have taken it out.

At that moment the microphone suddenly went dead.

Three people near the pavilion called his name at once.

Madhav got up.

Ten minutes later the microphone was working again.

But other people had taken the places in that dining row.

At half past ten Bipin found him.

"I've eaten. You?"

"Electricity has been eating me so far."

Bipin laughed. "The workers' row is being laid now."

Madhav went there.

Behind the kitchen, beside a bamboo enclosure, the generator operator, two young men from the flower decorator, the men carrying utensils, Bipin, and the other workers sat down together.

Madhav had barely put his hand to the leaf plate and sat when every light at the outer gate went out at once.

Someone shouted, "The wedding party is taking photographs—everything is dark outside!"

Madhav got up again.

This time the fault was not in the generator. It was in a wet wire the flower decorator had added later.

While removing it, Madhav felt a slight shock in his finger.

He did not swear. He only asked the flower decorator, "Why did you reconnect the wire I told you not to use?"

The decorator lowered his eyes.

At a quarter past eleven the outdoor lights became steady again.

The wedding rituals had begun in the pavilion.

The dining rows had thinned out.

Madhav returned behind the kitchen.

Most of the workers had already eaten and left.

A cook was gathering the remaining rice into a large pot.

"Food?" Madhav asked.

The cook recognized him. "You sat down twice and got up again. The vegetables are finished. There is dal, rice and a little pickle."

"That will do."

Madhav did not ask for a brass plate.

The cook served rice and dal on an old steel plate.

Madhav ate standing beside the kitchen wall.

He did not feel bad while eating. He was hungry, the rice was warm, and there was enough salt in the dal.

But the corner of the folded invitation in his pocket kept pressing against his stomach.

The next morning Madhav returned to collect the wires and settle the account.

The flowers from the night before had wilted in the courtyard.

The chairs were piled to one side.

Suresh Babu was on the veranda settling accounts with the caterer.

"There cannot have been four hundred and twenty-six dining places," Suresh Babu was saying. "My count is four hundred and eight. The workers were separate."

The caterer opened his ledger. "Workers: eighteen. Four hundred and eight plus eighteen is four hundred and twenty-six."

Suresh Babu said, "Why did you count Madhav among the workers? He was my guest."

A relative sitting nearby immediately said, "Guest? He ran around with wires all night. I never saw him in the guest rows."

The caterer ran a finger down the page. "My man said two meals for the electricians. One assistant ate. One plate went out late at night."

Madhav was standing on the veranda steps listening to all of it.

Seeing him, Suresh Babu fell silent.

"Arre, come. First, your account."

Madhav handed over his paper.

The amount for materials and labour was exactly what had been agreed three days earlier.

Without bargaining, Suresh Babu counted the money.

Then he took out an extra five-hundred-rupee note and held it out.

"Keep this. You had to run around a great deal last night."

Madhav did not take the note.

"I have received exactly what we agreed."

"Think of it as a tip."

"I did not do a tip's work. I did an electrician's work."

Suresh Babu looked slightly uncomfortable.

He asked quietly, "Did you at least get a proper meal?"

Madhav said, "The rice and dal were good."

The answer was so ordinary that Suresh Babu became even more uncomfortable.

As Madhav put the money into his pocket, the folded invitation card fell to the ground.

There was a black stain from insulation tape on its red border.

Suresh Babu picked it up.

He recognized the card he himself had given.

"You kept this in your pocket all night?"

"Yes. I thought I would change into my kurta in the evening and sit down to eat. I never got the chance."

Suresh Babu looked for a while at the line: "With family, you are cordially invited."

"You could have sat in the first dining row."

Madhav smiled. "I sat down twice."

"Then?"

"Once the microphone took me away. The second time, the lights at the gate."

Suresh Babu opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again.

The caterer was still sitting there with the ledger open.

He asked, "Should I enter Madhavji's meal under guests or under workers?"

For one moment there was no sound on the veranda.

Madhav signed the receipt for his wages.

Then he took the invitation card from Suresh Babu and folded the receipt inside it.

"Write it wherever your account balances," he said quietly. "I have received all the money due to me."

Madhav lifted his bag.

Bipin was outside tying up the remaining wires.

The two of them set off.

In daylight the strings of lights at the gate looked colourless.

The wires that had thrown the same coloured light over guests and workers alike the previous night were now being coiled into Madhav's bag.

In his pocket lay two papers together: an invitation and a wage receipt.

All night, people had kept giving him first one meaning and then the other.

Story 42

Four Cubits of Cloth

On the first Monday before school reopened, a sheet of paper came into Rama Devi's hands.

Neha took it out of her schoolbag and gave it to her. At the top was the school's name; below it, a list of books, notebooks and uniform materials for the new class.

Rama Devi first looked at the number of books, then stopped her finger at the line about the uniform.

"For two uniforms: four cubits of blue cloth," she read softly. "For two shirts: two cubits of white."

Neha said, "Teacher said to give the cloth for stitching this week."

Rama Devi folded the paper and placed it beside the stove.

It was the beginning of the month, but ration, school fees and medicine for her younger son Manu were already in the accounts. She had set money aside for the uniform, but shoes also had to come out of that same amount.

That afternoon she took Neha with her to the market.

At Badri Cloth Store, two rolls of the school's blue fabric were kept in the same cupboard. The colour was almost identical—a deep blue that caught a slightly pale sheen in sunlight.

Badri Sah opened the first roll.

"Forty-four inches wide. Eighty-six rupees a cubit."

Rama Devi raised her eyebrows slightly. "The other one?"

Badri Sah opened the second roll.

"Thirty-six inches. The cloth is fine, but the width is less. Seventy-two rupees a cubit."

Rama Devi rubbed both fabrics between her fingers. There did not seem much difference in thickness. The colour too matched the school sample.

"The list says four cubits," she said, taking out the paper. "Give me four cubits of the cheaper one."

Badri Sah said again, "It is narrower. It would be better to ask the tailor about the measurements first."

Rama Devi had already done the arithmetic.

Four cubits at seventy-two came to two hundred and eighty-eight rupees.

Four cubits at eighty-six came to three hundred and forty-four.

That left a difference of fifty-six rupees.

With fifty-six rupees she could buy half a strip of Manu's medicine and two notebooks for Neha.

"The school has said four cubits," she replied. "Surely the tailor does not know more than the school."

Badri Sah said nothing.

He measured out four cubits and cut the cloth.

On the receipt he wrote: "36 inches wide."

Rama Devi folded the receipt and tucked it inside the cloth.

Neha glanced once at the forty-four-inch roll, but said nothing.

In another lane of the market was Vimala Sewing House.

Vimala Devi had been stitching school uniforms for twenty years. Measuring tape, scissors and old paper patterns hung on the wall.

As soon as she opened the cloth, Vimala asked, "Two uniforms?"

"Yes. Four cubits, according to the school list."

Vimala lifted one edge, measured the width, then looked at Neha.

"Take Neha's measurements first," Rama Devi said. "Cut after that."

Vimala measured her shoulders, waist, uniform length and sleeves.

Then she spread the cloth on the table and placed two paper patterns over it.

One pattern fitted.

The second would not fit fully beside it.

Vimala turned it around. Even then its edge ran beyond the cloth.

"Two uniforms will not come out of four cubits of this cloth," Vimala said.

Rama Devi immediately took out the list.

"It says clearly here: four cubits."

"The length is four cubits," Vimala said, "but the width is thirty-six inches."

"Cloth is cloth."

Vimala did not laugh.

Nor did she pick up the scissors and start cutting.

She simply left the fabric spread on the table.

"I can make one," she said. "For the second you will need another cubit. There may be a little left over, but not enough for a full uniform."

Rama Devi's voice hardened. "Another cubit? Then why does the school write four cubits?"

"The school must be assuming wider cloth."

"Is every mother supposed to understand all this?"

Instead of answering, Vimala picked up another bundle lying near the doorway. Shakuntala Devi's name was written on it.

"This is also for a girl in Neha's class," Vimala said. "Four cubits too."

Rama Devi watched as she opened the bundle. The fabric was plainly wider.

Vimala placed the same two paper patterns on it.

This time they both fitted side by side, with a gap of about two fingers left between them.

Rama Devi was silent for a few moments.

"How much does that cloth cost?"

"I don't know. But it is forty-four inches wide."

Rama Devi folded her own cloth again.

She remembered Badri Sah's words: 'The width is less.'

At the time the sentence had sounded like a minor detail added after the price.

Now it stood in the middle of the entire calculation.

Neha asked softly, "Ma, shall we return the cloth?"

"Let us see."

The two of them went back to Badri Cloth Store.

Badri Sah looked at the receipt.

"The cloth hasn't been cut?"

"No. Only spread out on the tailor's table."

He checked the fabric.

There were two faint chalk marks from Vimala along one edge. Badri Sah brushed them away with his palm.

"It can be returned," he said.

The tightness inside Rama Devi eased a little. She had feared the shopkeeper would say that cut cloth could not be taken back.

"Give me four cubits of the wider one," she said.

Badri Sah began making a new bill.

"Four at eighty-six: three hundred and forty-four. You paid two hundred and eighty-eight. Fifty-six more."

Rama Devi paused while taking out the money.

"What if I had taken five cubits of the cheaper one?"

"Three hundred and sixty."

Rama Devi looked at him. "Then the cheaper cloth would have cost more in all?"

Badri Sah smiled.

"For two uniforms, yes. If you were making one, it would have been cheaper."

Neha laughed. "The price per cubit is lower, but you need more cloth."

Rama Devi paid the additional fifty-six rupees.

It felt as though there was no saving left, yet compared with buying a fifth cubit she had still saved sixteen rupees.

This saving did not look like the first calculation.

Just then Sarita Devi entered the shop holding the same school list.

"Give me four cubits of blue cloth," she said.

Badri Sah asked, "Thirty-six inches or forty-four?"

Sarita Devi looked startled. "Where does the list say that?"

The three of them looked at one another.

Badri Sah took the school's old sample from behind the cupboard.

"For three days I have been explaining this to everyone. Some hear the price and take the narrower cloth; some take the wider. Then the tailor sends them back."

"Then tell the school," Rama Devi said.

Badri Sah shrugged. "I am a shopkeeper. I do not write the school's list."

"Do the mothers write it?" Sarita Devi asked.

No one had an answer.

The following Wednesday there was a parents' meeting at the school.

The announced subjects were book distribution and the midday meal, but the uniform list came up first.

The headmistress, Sharda Jha, placed the printed list on the table.

"These quantities have been used for many years. Why is there a problem now?"

Someone at the back said, "There are two widths in the market now."

Another voice said, "The tailor is asking for one cubit more."

A third said, "The shopkeeper gives the narrow one because it is cheaper."

Badri Sah was not at the meeting. Neither was Vimala.

It was easy for all blame to travel towards people who were absent.

Rama Devi had been sitting quietly at first. Then she stood up.

"The shopkeeper did tell me the width," she said. "I counted the price; I did not understand the width. The tailor did not cut it—she showed me first. It is not one person's fault. The list gives only half the measurement."

The room became a little quieter.

The headmistress asked, "Half the measurement?"

Before Rama Devi could answer, Neha stood up beside her mother.

The children had been seated at the back for the parents' meeting.

"Teacher," she said hesitantly, "when we measure a rectangle in mathematics, we need both length and width, don't we?"

Some people laughed.

Sharda Jha did not.

She looked at the list.

Neha opened her notebook and drew two rectangles—both the same length, but one wide and one narrow.

"Both can be four cubits long," she said, "but they do not contain the same amount of cloth."

Sharda Jha pulled the notebook towards herself.

Mahendra Babu, the school's former storekeeper, was sitting at the back.

He said, "Earlier the rolls that came were usually forty-four inches wide. The list must have been made then."

"How many years ago?" the headmistress asked.

Mahendra Babu laughed. "Before my time."

This time the room laughed.

Sharda Jha ran her pen across the list.

"The width will be added in the next printing. For now, put it on the noticeboard."

A teacher asked, "Four cubits if the width is forty-four inches? And five cubits if it is thirty-six?"

Rama Devi said, "Ask the tailor for the exact quantities. Do not guess again."

Sharda Jha nodded.

"Right. We will ask Vimala Devi and the other tailors and write the correct measures."

The meeting moved back to books and meals, but Neha circled the two rectangles in her notebook.

Two days later, at Vimala Sewing House, the forty-four-inch cloth was spread across the table.

This time the two patterns fitted side by side.

Before lifting the scissors, Vimala said to Rama Devi, "See. The full four cubits are here."

"And the width?" Rama Devi asked.

Vimala smiled. "Now that is full too."

After giving her measurements, Neha sat in a corner and began doing her homework.

Vimala cut the cloth.

The strip left over was very small—just enough for the inside facing of a pocket and the underside of a collar.

Rama Devi picked up the little piece.

"Is this the saving?"

Vimala said, "This is leftover cloth. Saving is something else."

Rama Devi laughed. "I understand that now."

A week later Neha went to school with two new uniforms.

A new line had been written by hand on the noticeboard:

"For two uniforms, buy cloth according to its width: if the width is 44 inches, 4 cubits. For any other width, ask the tailor for the required amount."

Below the line someone had drawn, in pencil, two small rectangles—one wide, one narrow.

Neha smiled when she saw them.

That evening Rama Devi was putting the school list back into the cupboard.

At first she had seen only the words 'four cubits' on that sheet.

Now she understood that a measurement was not merely what the tape showed in one direction.

She took out the receipts.

The first said: "36 inches."

The second said: "44 inches."

She folded them together and placed them inside the school list.

If next year someone found that 'four cubits' seemed too much or too little, the reason would be there inside the paper as well.

Story 43

Shared Shade

On the footpath east of Madhubani's old bus stand, Ramsagar's cart was number seventeen and Nasima Khatoon's cart was number eighteen.

After a municipal survey, the ground allotted to each had been measured and marked with a red rectangle. Ramsagar's rectangle was six cubits long and four cubits wide; Nasima's was almost the same. Between them, a narrow strip a cubit and a half wide had been left for pedestrians.

Ramsagar sold bael sherbet, sattu and lemon water. Nasima kept cucumbers, lemons and a few fruits according to the season.

By the second week of Jyeshtha, the afternoon heat had become so fierce that it was difficult to hold the iron handle of a cart without a cloth.

Nasima kept laying a wet sack over the cucumbers she had arranged in the morning.

Ramsagar watched his slab of ice melt away by half the day.

Each cart had its own small umbrella, but once the round shade covered the cart, the vendor himself remained half in the sun. If a customer stood there, the shade had to be divided yet again.

One Monday, four municipal employees arrived in the market carrying folded green mesh, bamboo poles and a receipt book.

The young man walking in front called out, "Heat-relief scheme. One shade net for every two registered vendors."

Ramsagar took out his card. "Seventeen."

Nasima showed hers. "Eighteen."

The employee looked at both cards together. "Fine. You two are a pair."

Taking the green net into her hands, Nasima asked, "Only one net?"

"One for two carts. Eight by six. Hang it between you. A photograph will be uploaded. It says shared use."

Ramsagar laughed. "Even shade comes in pairs now?"

The employee laughed too. "The net is large. It will cover both of you."

They were also given two bamboo poles, but the poles were short. The employees advised them to use two old posts so that the net could be stretched properly.

There was an electricity pole behind the carts, but it stood outside Ramsagar's red boundary.

Behind Nasima's cart was the tin post of a tea stall, but it stood almost two cubits beyond her rectangle.

Ramsagar said, "Let us tie the bamboo to our own carts and raise the net above them."

Together they tied the ropes.

The green net stretched from one cart to the other.

Its shade also fell over the narrow pedestrian strip between them.

For the first time, both of them sat fully in the shade at noon.

Nasima removed the wet sack from the cucumbers. "They have given us something useful."

Ramsagar looked at the ice box. "Today it will last half an hour longer."

Two customers stood in the narrow strip between the carts and drank sherbet.

An elderly woman rested for a while beside Nasima's cart.

Under the green light filtering through the shade net, the colours of the market seemed altered.

At half past twelve, two municipal workers arrived on a motorcycle.

One carried a measuring tape; the other held a mobile phone.

First they read the cart numbers, then looked at the red lines, then raised their eyes to the net.

"Whose rope is this?"

Ramsagar said, "Mine and Nasima Sister's. The municipality gave us the net."

Standing on the pedestrian strip, the worker said, "Nothing may be hung over the pedestrian passage."

Nasima looked surprised. "There is nothing below. People are walking through."

"The overhead extension is also outside your allotted boundary."

Ramsagar pointed to a corner of the green net. "Your own people gave this to us today."

The worker said, "That is from the relief section. We inspect vending boundaries."

"But they gave one net for two carts. The carts are in separate rectangles. If one net has to cover both, it has to cross the space between."

Pulling out the measuring tape, the worker said, "My papers say that no bamboo, rope, awning, net or goods may extend beyond the allotted line."

He took a photograph with his phone.

Nasima asked quietly, "Then where are we supposed to hang a shared net?"

The worker replied, "Ask the relief section. I am here to record violations."

The second employee wrote on a narrow slip: "17/18 — net beyond boundary."

Below it was an instruction to remove it within twenty-four hours.

Ramsagar held the slip and looked at it for a while.

The municipal seal was printed at the top.

That evening, the two of them took the net down.

Nasima said, "Back to our own little umbrellas."

Folding the net, Ramsagar said, "Something given for two people cannot be used by even one."

The next morning the heat was harsher.

Ramsagar thought of a solution.

Instead of spreading the net fully, he folded it in half and tied it only within one allotted rectangle at a time.

"You keep it from ten to twelve," he told Nasima. "I'll take it from twelve to two. Then you again from two to four."

Nasima laughed. "Will the shade move according to the clock?"

"The papers watch the clock. The sun does not."

They began sliding the net back and forth by turns.

When it covered Nasima's cart, Ramsagar's ice melted faster.

When it covered Ramsagar's cart, Nasima's cucumbers began to soften.

At one in the afternoon the number of customers increased.

At that time it was Ramsagar's turn to have the net.

Nasima tilted her small umbrella to cover the cucumbers and stood herself in the sun.

Ramsagar said, "Move the net towards your side."

"No. It is your turn."

"I can buy more ice. If the cucumbers soften, customers will not buy them."

Nasima said nothing.

They shifted the net a little towards her.

Just then the relief team from the first day appeared at the eastern end of the market.

The young man took out his mobile phone from a distance and prepared to take a picture.

He stopped beside carts seventeen and eighteen.

"Why is the net only half spread?"

Ramsagar took out the notice. "If we spread it fully, it crosses the boundary."

The young man read the notice. His face changed.

"But under the scheme we have to show shared use. In the photograph both carts should be under the shade."

Nasima said, "If we hang it that way, there will be another photograph for this notice."

The young man was silent for a few moments.

Then he said, "My mobile form has three options: in use, not in use, damaged."

Ramsagar asked, "There is no fourth option — 'If used, it breaks the rules'?"

The young man did not smile. "No."

He entered something on his phone.

Nasima asked, "What did you write?"

"Shared use not verified."

"But the net is here."

"The net is here. But both of you are not under the shade together."

Ramsagar placed the second slip behind the first one.

The relief team left.

Sales were low that day.

Ramsagar bought ice twice.

Five kilos of Nasima's cucumbers remained unsold till evening; she took two kilos home.

The next day, both of them went to the municipal office.

A teenager named Bipin watched Ramsagar's cart, while Nasima's elder daughter watched hers.

The vending section was on the first floor of the office.

Ramsagar showed the notice about the net extending beyond the boundary.

The clerk opened a file and said, "No structure may extend beyond the marked line. This is an old instruction."

Nasima handed him the second slip. "This says we must use the shared net."

The clerk read it. "This is from the climate-relief cell. They sit downstairs in the new building."

Ramsagar asked, "Aren't both papers from the municipality?"

"They are. The sections are different."

"Then which one are we supposed to obey?"

The clerk pushed his chair back. "Ask for written clarification."

"From whom?"

"Submit an application to both sections."

They bought plain paper from the photocopy shop downstairs.

Ramsagar wrote the application; Nasima signed her name.

The first section stamped it as received.

The second section said, "Bring the vending section's remarks first."

Ramsagar went upstairs again.

It was one in the afternoon.

Their two carts were operating in the market without their owners.

At last an assistant wrote in pencil at the corner of the application: "Joint site inspection required."

"When?" Nasima asked.

"A team will be formed. You will receive a phone call."

They returned to the market.

Ramsagar's ice was almost gone.

Nasima's daughter had been wetting cloth again and again to keep the cucumbers covered.

The green government net lay folded beneath the cart.

No call came for three days.

Nor on the fourth.

On the fifth day Ramsagar brought an old bamboo mat from home.

He tied it at an angle entirely within his red rectangle.

Nasima had her old blue umbrella reinforced.

The green government net remained folded.

At noon the narrow strip between the carts was once again in full sun.

Customers stood only briefly, moving from one cart to the other.

Nasima said, "The shared shade exists on paper now."

Ramsagar replied, "On paper it will not cross the boundary."

At the end of that week, a new municipal poster was pasted on the wall of the bus stand:

"Protect Yourself from the Heat: Shade, Water, Rest."

Below the slogan was a photograph from the relief scheme showing two vendors smiling beneath a single green net.

Ramsagar looked at the poster, then at their folded net.

Nasima took the two notices out of her purse.

One said: "Remove net beyond boundary."

The other said: "Shared use not verified."

The same municipal emblem was printed at the top of both.

Nasima folded the slips again and put them back in her purse. "We'll see when the phone call comes."

Ramsagar kept stirring the sattu mixture.

The afternoon sun fell directly on the cubit-and-a-half strip between them.

The government net lay safely folded beneath the cart; according to the paperwork, it crossed no boundary and gave shade to no one.

Story 44

A Day's Leave

On the last day of the month, Sudha Jha took notes out of a small steel box and placed them on the dining table.

"Malti, three thousand four hundred and fifty for this month."

Malti Devi wiped her hands and looked at the notes.

Her monthly wage was three thousand six hundred.

"Why is it one hundred and fifty less?"

Sudha looked towards the calendar hanging on the wall.

"You did not come one day. The tenth."

Malti recognized the date at once. The tenth had been a Tuesday. That day there was a parents' meeting at her younger daughter Sonam's school.

"But I told you about that leave beforehand. You had said, 'Don't come on Tuesday; come on Sunday for the festival cleaning.'"

Sudha paused.

"I gave you leave, that is true. But did I ever say the leave would be paid?"

Malti's hands were still wet. She wiped them on the end of her sari.

"I was here for five hours on Sunday."

"That was festival cleaning."

"And Tuesday?"

"That was your leave."

Both statements were true. But once the two truths were separated from each other, the account changed.

Malti had worked in this house for seven years.

She came at seven every morning, washed utensils, swept and mopped, helped with the first kitchen work, gathered the clothes, and left by half past eight. After that she had three other houses to go to.

Sudha too had known her for seven years.

During illness she had sometimes given Malti money for medicines, clothes during festivals, and even old practice books when Sonam had examinations.

Perhaps for that reason, neither woman raised her voice in the argument.

Sudha counted the notes again.

"I keep the account from the calendar. If you do not come on a day, that day is deducted."

Malti went over to the calendar on the wall.

In the box for the tenth, Sudha had written in blue pen: "Malti absent — school."

The sixteenth was a Sunday. In that box, in red ink, she had written: "Festival cleaning — Malti, 7 a.m."

Both notes were in Sudha's handwriting.

Malti placed her finger first on the tenth, then on the sixteenth.

"Aren't these two halves of the same thing?"

Sudha said, "Sunday is not a regular working day."

"That is exactly what I am asking. It was not a regular day, yet I came. Where is that counted?"

Before Sudha could answer, the pressure cooker whistled in the kitchen.

She went to turn off the gas.

For a few moments the discussion remained suspended there.

Malti remembered that Sunday clearly.

Three days before the tenth, while washing utensils, she had said, "Didi, Sonam has a school meeting on Tuesday. I need one day's leave."

At the time Sudha had been making a cleaning list for before Diwali.

"Tuesday is fine. But can you come a little early on Sunday? The upper cupboards and windows have to be done."

Malti had said, "Sunday is my day off."

Sudha had laughed and said, "Then swap the day. Go to the school peacefully on Tuesday and give me Sunday instead."

The phrase "swap the day" had remained in Malti's ears.

In Sudha's mind, perhaps, "Tuesday leave" and "Sunday extra cleaning" had later become two separate things.

On Sunday Malti had stayed from seven until twenty past twelve.

Apart from the usual utensils and mopping, she had cleaned the window mesh, fans, upper cupboards, brass items in the prayer room, and the veranda wall.

Sudha had given her tea in between.

At nine she had said, "A lot of work has been done today."

Malti had replied, "I'm making up for Tuesday."

Sudha had answered only "Yes" or perhaps "All right." Neither woman now remembered clearly which.

The one hundred and fifty rupees at month's end rested on that blurred word.

Sudha returned from the kitchen.

Malti asked, "Did you pay me separately for Sunday's work?"

Sudha thought.

"No. Festival work like this happens sometimes within the monthly wage."

"Then why should Tuesday's leave be deducted?"

"Because you did not come that day."

Malti looked at the calendar again.

"And I came on Sunday, when I was not supposed to come. That is not added. One day I did not come, so that is counted; another day I was not supposed to come but did come, and that is not counted."

For the first time Sudha looked not at the notes on the table but at Malti's face.

Just then Sudha's daughter Rashmi came home from school.

She put her bag on a chair and asked, "What happened?"

Sudha said, "Nothing. It's an account matter."

Drinking water, Rashmi read the calendar on the wall.

"The tenth and the sixteenth?"

Sudha looked at her. "What do you remember?"

Rashmi said, "Malti Kaki was here on Sunday. My science chart was by the window, so I kept moving it out of her way."

Malti smiled. "I remember that too."

Rashmi pointed to the narrow strip of paper attached by a magnet below the calendar.

"Ma, you had made a list that day."

It was the Diwali cleaning list.

Sudha took down the strip.

At the top was written: "Sunday: Malti — windows/cupboards; in exchange for Tuesday."

The words "in exchange for Tuesday" were very small.

Sudha had probably written them herself while making the list, and later copied only "festival cleaning" onto the calendar.

Malti remained silent.

Sudha looked at the paper for a long time.

Then she added one hundred and fifty rupees to the pile of three thousand four hundred and fifty.

"The account is complete."

Malti did not pick up the notes immediately.

"I need the money, but next time let it be clear beforehand. Leave is one thing; swapping a day is another."

Sudha nodded.

She took out the wage register.

Until then, it had recorded only the date and "came/did not come."

On a new page Sudha made three small columns: "Regular day," "Approved leave," "Substitute day."

Malti read them.

"And extra work?"

Sudha drew a fourth column: "Extra work."

Rashmi laughed. "Now the calendar will become huge."

Malti said, "Let the calendar grow. The deduction should not shrink the truth."

All three laughed a little, though inside the laughter lay a month's worth of small, unwritten rules.

Malti tied the money into the end of her sari and left.

That evening Sudha's husband Arun returned home.

He saw the wage register lying open on the table.

"Why are there four different columns?"

Sudha told him what had happened.

Arun said casually, "So much accounting for one day's leave?"

Sudha looked at the calendar on the wall: on the tenth, "Malti absent"; on the sixteenth, "Festival cleaning."

"The leave was for one day," she said, "but the account involved two."

The next month there was another meeting at Sonam's school.

Three days beforehand Malti said, "Didi, I need Wednesday."

Sudha opened the register.

"Leave, or a substitute day?"

Malti thought for a moment.

"This time leave. No substitute day."

Sudha wrote Wednesday's date in the "Approved leave" column.

On the wall calendar too, she wrote the same words: "Approved leave."

One day had one name only.

This time there was no room in the account for it to acquire a second meaning.

Story 45

The Tin Trunk as Collateral

At the southern turn of Sakri market stood Nasim Ansari's bicycle-repair shop.

The shop was so small that if two bicycles were standing inside, Nasim had to turn his body sideways to reach his toolbox.

Yet for four months the thing taking up the most space inside had not been a bicycle, but an old green tin trunk.

Its paint had flaked away in patches. One corner was dented inward, a long scratch ran across the middle of the lid, and on the front, in white chalk, was written: "Govind — 370."

Nasim had retraced those words three times. Rain and dust had faded the first writing.

On the first Thursday of every month, Karim the scrap dealer made his round of the market with his handcart.

That day too he stopped in front of the shop.

Karim tapped the trunk with a finger. "Still lying here?"

"Still here."

"Sell it. It is empty tin. It won't weigh less than five kilos. I'll give you two hundred and eighty."

Tightening a nut with a spanner, Nasim said, "It is collateral."

Karim laughed. "Collateral for four months? Only if the man ever comes back."

Nasim did not answer.

Four months earlier, Govind Sada had come to the shop for the first time one afternoon.

The rear wheel of his bicycle had gone out of true, the chain was slipping off the teeth, and the brake cable was half frayed through.

Govind worked as a mason's helper. Every day he rode the bicycle to a warehouse under construction nearly seven kos from Sakri.

"Can it be repaired today?" he had asked.

Nasim spun the wheel and examined it.

"The axle will have to be changed, two spokes, the chain joint, the brake cable. It will be ready by evening."

"How much?"

Nasim added it up. "Six hundred and twenty."

Govind's face changed at once.

He had two hundred and fifty rupees in his pocket.

"I'll give the remaining three hundred and seventy tomorrow," he said.

Nasim had never seen him before.

"And if you don't come tomorrow?"

Still holding the bicycle handle, Govind thought for a while.

"If I leave the bicycle, I won't earn wages tomorrow. If I take the bicycle, why should you trust me?"

Nasim said nothing.

When Govind returned in the evening to collect the repaired bicycle, he had an old green tin trunk with him.

He had carried it on his head. A torn sack hung behind him.

He put the trunk down in front of the shop and opened the lid.

There was nothing inside.

"I took all the clothes out and put them in the sack," he said. "Keep this. When I pay the three hundred and seventy, I'll take it back."

Nasim burst out laughing.

"This tin trunk is security for three hundred and seventy rupees?"

Govind smiled a little too.

"I don't know what a scrap dealer would pay for it. But this is all I have that I can leave behind."

Nasim pressed down on the lid.

The lock worked, though Govind did not lock it. Putting a lock on an empty thing seemed ridiculous to him.

Nasim wrote in chalk across the front: "Govind — 370."

Govind rode away on the repaired bicycle.

Three days passed.

Seven days.

Govind did not return.

On the tenth day Nasim went to the lane in Sakri where Govind lived in one room with two other labourers.

The door stood open. The landlord was sweeping inside.

"They all left yesterday," the landlord said. "The contractor's work shifted towards Sitamarhi."

"Govind too?"

"He went with them."

Nasim returned.

During the first month the trunk stood against the wall inside the shop. Nasim kept old inner tubes on top of it.

In the second month there was pump rubber.

In the third, two broken bells and a cracked bicycle seat.

Slowly the trunk began to look less like collateral and more like a permanent fixture of the shop.

Nasim's son Danish said twice, "Abba, sell it. It is taking up space."

Nasim replied, "There is money outstanding against it. It would not be right to sell it without knowing what happened to the man."

Danish read the chalk writing on the front.

"Three hundred and seventy due. The scrap dealer will give two hundred and eighty. You would still make a loss."

"An account is not only that much," Nasim said.

But even as he said it, he himself could not have explained what the other part of the account was.

One rainy night water dripped through the roof of the shop.

A round stain formed on the lid of the trunk.

The next morning Nasim wiped it and put the trunk out in the sun.

Karim the scrap dealer saw it again that day.

"I won't give two hundred and eighty now. The rust is increasing."

"How much?"

"Two hundred and sixty."

Nasim pulled the trunk back inside.

By the end of the fourth month even Nasim had begun to wonder: if Govind never returned, how long should he keep this tin trunk?

There was no written paper for the collateral. No phone number. No address.

He opened the last page of his main ledger.

"Govind — 370 — tin trunk as collateral."

The date was four months old.

Nasim decided that when Karim came the following Thursday, he would ask once more.

He closed the ledger.

He resolved not to sell the trunk before the next Thursday.

The next Thursday Karim did not come.

But at about two in the afternoon Govind himself appeared.

At first Nasim did not recognize him.

Govind's beard had grown, his body was thinner, and he had a blue plastic sack tucked under his arm.

Behind him stood a woman and a girl of about eight. Both were carrying things.

Govind peered into the shop.

His first question was, "Is the trunk still here?"

Nasim put the spanner down on the table.

"It is."

Govind's face relaxed, as though he had been asking after a person's wellbeing.

He took folded notes from his pocket.

Three hundred-rupee notes, one fifty, one twenty.

"Three hundred and seventy."

Nasim counted the money.

"After four months."

Govind lowered his head.

"In between, I could not even gather the fare to come back. From Sitamarhi we went to Sheohar, then Muzaffarpur. Now I have found work on this side again."

Nasim removed the tubes lying on top of the trunk.

The green tin was fully visible again.

The woman stepped forward at once.

"This is the one."

The girl touched the dented corner.

"Ma, this mark is still here."

Nasim smiled.

"There was nothing inside. It wasn't hard to recognize."

The woman said, "We recognize it because it was empty. If it had been full, the things inside would have changed."

It took Nasim a moment to understand the sentence.

Govind opened the lid.

There truly was nothing inside: no clothes, no papers, no money.

Only a scrap of old newspaper stuck to the bottom and dust in one corner.

Nasim asked, "You came back all this way for an empty trunk like this?"

Govind did not laugh.

"The bicycle was for work. I sold it in Muzaffarpur. We needed bus fare and food for two days."

"You sold the bicycle?"

"Yes."

Nasim looked at the trunk almost involuntarily.

"You sold the bicycle, but came back to save the tin trunk?"

This time Govind's wife answered.

"A bicycle can be replaced. Replacing this trunk would not make things better."

She put the blue sack down on the ground.

It had been stitched in two places along the top.

"This tore in Sitamarhi. We got another sack in Sheohar. In Muzaffarpur the corners of the child's notebooks got bent. If we had had the trunk, everything would have stayed together."

Govind ran a hand along the inside of the trunk.

"Wherever we get a room, this is the first thing we put against the wall. Clothes and papers go inside. The stove tin goes on top, the child's schoolbag, sometimes plates. Then the room begins to feel like a room."

The girl interrupted, "I sit on it to study."

Her mother looked at her.

"You used to sit on it. For four months you have been studying on a sack."

The girl laughed.

Nasim noticed a strip of blue paint on one side of the trunk, a splash of white lime on another, and a half-erased "12" in black on the back.

Govind followed his gaze.

"Room number twelve, in Darbhanga. The blue paint is from the Pandaul site. This dent happened while unloading it from a truck."

"How many places has this thing travelled?" Nasim asked.

Govind began counting, then stopped halfway.

"What is the use of counting places? We have changed rooms more often."

His wife said, "We bought it second-hand in Begusarai after our marriage. It has been with us ever since. Sacks changed, buckets changed, mats changed. This did not."

There was no mystery in what she said.

No letter, jewellery or old photograph emerged from inside the trunk.

Yet for the first time Nasim understood that the empty object which had occupied a corner of his shop for four months was not actually empty.

Its usefulness was scattered across place after place.

Govind looked at his wife.

"Shall we pack everything into it here?"

"Yes. Carrying the sacks to the bus stand is difficult."

Nasim gave them an old cloth.

The woman wiped the dust from inside the trunk.

Then the sacks were opened.

Three sets of clothes, two aluminium plates, a steel tumbler, four of the girl's notebooks, a thin book, papers wrapped in plastic, packets of medicine, a small stove pump—one by one they settled into the trunk.

Nasim watched.

Things that had looked scattered between two torn sacks and one plastic bag fitted, within five minutes, into a single square tin trunk.

The girl put her schoolbag on top at the end.

The lid would not close.

Her mother took the schoolbag off and said, "You'll carry this under your arm."

The lid pressed shut.

Govind locked it.

Nasim wiped a damp cloth over the chalk words "Govind — 370."

The letters did not disappear completely the first time.

Govind said, "Leave it. I'll wash it when we reach home."

Nasim did not wipe it again.

He opened the ledger and drew a straight line beside Govind's name.

"Settled."

Govind did not ask for a receipt.

Even so, Nasim wrote on a small piece of paper: "Balance — zero."

The woman placed the paper on top of the locked trunk, then laughed.

"Now this paper will go inside too—but after we get onto the bus."

The three of them left the shop with their belongings.

Govind and his wife took one handle each.

The girl walked behind them with the schoolbag on her back.

At the turn in the road they found a handcart.

For thirty rupees they agreed on transport to the bus stand.

The tin trunk went onto the cart first. The blue sack was placed on top of it.

Karim the scrap dealer happened to be approaching from a distance.

When he saw the green trunk on the handcart, he stopped beside Nasim's shop.

"Oh, the man who left the collateral came back?"

"Yes."

"I had offered two hundred and sixty."

Nasim closed the ledger.

"He paid three hundred and seventy."

Karim laughed.

"For an empty tin trunk?"

Nasim looked towards the road.

At the bus stand Govind was checking the lock on the trunk once more.

The girl, tired, had sat down on top of it.

Karim shifted the weighing weights on his cart.

A little later the bus arrived.

The helper first lifted the tin trunk onto the roof, then the sack.

The ropes were tightened.

When the bus moved away, the green trunk remained steady on the roof while the sacks behind it swayed lightly.

Nasim went back inside the shop.

Where the trunk had stood for four months, a clean square remained in the dust.

Story 46

Half a Sack

It was the last week of Agahan.

The paddy from the western field at Ratanpur had been cut, threshed, and spread in the threshing yard for the past three days.

As soon as the sun came up, Ramlochan Yadav began turning the paddy with his two sons.

The night dew had dampened the top layer slightly, but the grain underneath was warm and dry.

The field belonged to Shashibhushan Jha.

Ramlochan cultivated it on a sharecropping arrangement.

The cost of seed, fertilizer, irrigation and harvesting had been shared equally by both sides.

The understanding had been clear from the beginning: the harvest would be divided half and half.

Because that understanding was clear, there had been no serious dispute for the past three years.

At ten o'clock Shashibhushan Jha arrived.

With him came his grandson Aditya, two empty bullock carts, and Tulsi Sah with his old balance scale and brass weights.

In the village, it was usually Tulsi who did the weighing of paddy.

Looking at the threshing yard from a distance, Shashibhushan said, "The yield is good this year."

Ramlochan dusted his hands and replied, "Better than last year. But the eastern corner held too much water."

"Even there the grain looks full."

"Yes, the grain survived."

The conversation was easy.

The difficulty had not yet appeared anywhere.

The sacks began to be filled and weighed.

The first weighed forty-one kilos two hundred grams.

Tulsi Sah marked it with chalk: "1."

The second weighed forty kilos eight hundred grams.

He marked it: "2."

The rule they adopted was simple: odd-numbered sacks would go on Shashibhushan's cart, even-numbered sacks into Ramlochan's pile.

Next time, the order would be reversed so that lighter and heavier sacks fell to both sides by turns.

Tulsi Sah said, "If we divide by weight rather than by number, we'll total it at the end."

Shashibhushan agreed.

Ramlochan did too.

Until noon the needle of the balance kept rising and falling.

Aditya recorded every weight in a notebook.

Ramlochan's son stitched the mouths of the sacks.

At one point Tulsi Sah joked, "It is easy to say half and half. Making it half takes the whole day."

No one laughed, but no one took offence either.

After noon, grey clouds appeared in the eastern sky.

Looking up, Ramlochan said, "It may rain tonight."

Shashibhushan signalled to the cart drivers to hurry.

"Then let us take everything away today."

The number of sacks grew.

At one point Aditya added the figures and said, "So far both sides are about nine hundred and ninety-six kilos—almost equal."

Tulsi Sah looked at his notebook.

"Not almost. One side is nine hundred and ninety-six kilos four hundred grams; the other is nine hundred and ninety-six kilos two hundred."

Aditya smiled. "Do we really have to write two hundred grams too?"

Tulsi Sah said, "Leave out the small things in an account and they become large at the end."

Hearing that, Ramlochan looked for a moment at Tulsi's balance.

Before evening, the main heap was almost finished.

At the end, a small pile of paddy remained on the bamboo mat.

It was not enough to fill a whole sack.

Ramlochan's younger son Pappu held open a sack while Tulsi Sah filled it.

It came a little over half full.

The weight was thirty-two kilos six hundred grams.

Aditya wrote in the notebook: "Final — 32.6."

Shashibhushan said casually, "Divide it equally: sixteen kilos three hundred each."

Ramlochan did not answer at once.

He opened the sack, took out a handful of paddy, and rubbed the grains between his fingers.

"This is from the eastern edge."

"So?" Shashibhushan asked.

"It is a little damp."

Shashibhushan took a handful too.

"It is paddy. Water is not dripping from it."

Ramlochan said, "When it dries, the weight will fall."

"Both shares will be equally damp. What difference does half and half make?"

Ramlochan looked at the sack.

"The difference is this: your share will go home on the cart today. Mine will remain here. I do not have space at home to store so many sacks; I will sell mine to the mill tomorrow. The mill will deduct for moisture."

Shashibhushan's face changed slightly.

"The paddy stored at my house will dry too."

"It will. But you are not going to sell it now."

Aditya stopped writing.

Steadying the beam of the scale, Tulsi Sah asked, "Then what do you want, Ramlochan?"

"Let us dry this half sack first. Tomorrow we will weigh it and divide it."

Shashibhushan immediately said, "All the other sacks are leaving today. For half a sack, another cart tomorrow, another guard, another weighing?"

Ramlochan said, "The cart is yours, the guarding mine. But how do we decide the share of dry grain from the weight of wet grain?"

"Both of you will get equal amounts."

"Equal today. What about tomorrow?"

For a moment everyone was silent.

The clouds had grown darker.

Tulsi Sah opened the sack and poured the paddy back onto the mat.

"First let us see how damp it is."

He had no instrument.

He bit down on a few grains, then nodded.

"It is wetter than the upper pile. It came from the eastern edge, so that is natural."

Shashibhushan said, "Then let us deduct three kilos. Call it twenty-nine kilos six hundred. Divide that."

Ramlochan did not laugh.

"Why three kilos? Why not two? Why not five?"

Shashibhushan's voice hardened slightly.

"Are we going to open a laboratory for every matter?"

Ramlochan remained calm.

"No. But whatever weight disappears—whose share should it disappear from on a guess?"

Aditya quietly closed the notebook.

It seemed to him that the dispute was about thirty-two kilos, but the matter was becoming larger than thirty-two kilos.

Shashibhushan looked around the threshing yard.

Then suddenly he asked, "Were all the other sacks equally wet or dry?"

Before Tulsi Sah could reply, Ramlochan said, "No. The middle of the heap was dry. Some sacks from the edges were a little heavier."

"Then why did you not say so earlier?"

"The sacks were going alternately to both sides. I thought the difference would be shared."

Aditya opened the notebook again.

"Shall we check by the order?"

He began reading weights from the first page.

"Forty-one point two, forty point eight, forty-two point one, forty-one point seven..."

Tulsi Sah stopped him.

"Weight alone will not tell us. We did not mark which sacks came from the edge."

Ramlochan's elder son Bhola said, "The sacks with black mud stains must be from the eastern pile."

Everyone began checking the sacks on the cart and in Ramlochan's pile.

Some bore black stains; others did not.

They counted.

Shashibhushan's share had eleven stained sacks.

Ramlochan's had thirteen.

Aditya said at once, "Then Ramlochan Kaka got more of the damp sacks."

Shashibhushan stopped him.

"A stain does not prove the weight was from moisture."

Ramlochan agreed.

"You are right. A stain is not proof."

That agreement did not reduce the dispute; it made it more difficult.

Tulsi Sah sat down beside the scale.

"You called me here to divide half a sack. Now it seems even reweighing the whole threshing yard would not settle everything."

Lightning flashed inside the clouds, though the thunder was still far away.

Pulling his towel tighter over his shoulder, Shashibhushan said, "Do one thing. Let Ramlochan keep the half sack. Tomorrow when he sells it to the mill, he can give me half the money according to the weight he gets there."

Ramlochan immediately shook his head.

"The mill will deduct for price and for moisture. Then the share of half a sack of grain will become money. And if the market price rises or falls tomorrow?"

"Then you suggest something."

Ramlochan fell silent.

His wife Kaushalya arrived from a distance carrying tea.

Hearing the argument, she set the cups down on the ground.

"So much over half a sack?" she asked.

Ramlochan said, "Not over half a sack. Over what we mean by half."

Kaushalya said nothing.

She looked at the paddy on the mat, then at the clouds.

Drinking his tea, Tulsi Sah said, "There is one solution. Leave this paddy spread on the mat here. Stretch a tarpaulin over it. Tomorrow, when the sun comes out, dry it, weigh it, and then divide it. Ramlochan will guard it; Shashibhushan will provide the tarpaulin. Whatever the weight loses by tomorrow, both sides will see it together."

Shashibhushan asked, "Tulsi, will you come again?"

"I will. But the weighing fee for a second day will be separate."

For the first time, a faint smile appeared on Ramlochan's face.

"Then the cost of fairness is half and half too."

Shashibhushan smiled as well.

"On that point there is no dispute."

Aditya wrote the final line in the notebook:

"32.6 kilos — decision tomorrow."

The tarpaulin was stretched.

The carts left.

In the threshing yard remained half a sack of paddy, one mat, and Ramlochan's family.

It did rain a little that night.

For a long time drops pattered on the tarpaulin.

Ramlochan got up twice to check the edges.

The next morning the sky was clear.

The paddy was spread out.

Until noon, Kaushalya and Bhola kept turning it by turns.

Tulsi Sah arrived at two.

Shashibhushan and Aditya came too.

The paddy was filled into the sack again.

The weight was twenty-eight kilos nine hundred grams.

Aditya was startled.

"It has lost three kilos seven hundred grams!"

Tulsi Sah said, "Not all of that is water. Some dust, some husk, a few grains left on the mat. But you can see the difference."

Shashibhushan looked at the grain.

"If we had taken sixteen kilos three hundred each yesterday, today that would have been about fourteen and a half kilos each."

Ramlochan said, "For both sides."

"Yes. For both sides."

Tulsi Sah divided twenty-eight kilos nine hundred grams by two.

Fourteen kilos four hundred and fifty grams each.

There was no fifty-gram brass weight.

The smallest weight was one hundred grams.

Tulsi Sah laughed.

"Now shall we get stuck over fifty grams?"

Aditya laughed too.

Ramlochan took a handful of paddy and placed it on one pan of the scale.

The beam tipped slightly.

Shashibhushan placed a handful on the other.

The beam came almost level again.

Tulsi Sah said, "Enough. That is it."

Two small sacks were tied.

As Shashibhushan was placing his sack on the cart, Aditya asked quietly, "Dada, yesterday the forty-six sacks we divided all had different amounts of moisture. What about that?"

Shashibhushan stopped.

Ramlochan heard him too.

For a few moments no one answered.

Wrapping the balance beam in cloth, Tulsi Sah said, "For all those sacks, we left fairness to the trust that they were being given alternately."

Aditya asked, "And is trust more accurate than weighing?"

Tulsi Sah replied, "Not more or less accurate. Without trust, we would have to divide all that grain grain by grain again."

Shashibhushan climbed onto the cart.

"Yesterday's half sack taught me that equal shares are not made by the balance alone."

Ramlochan said, "Nor by trust alone. When a difference becomes visible, it must be questioned."

The cart moved away.

Ramlochan lifted his sack of fourteen kilos four hundred and fifty grams and started towards home.

A few grains were still scattered over the mat in the threshing yard.

Kaushalya swept them into one place.

They amounted to barely more than a handful.
She called to Ramlochan, "Whose share is this?"
Ramlochan turned back.
Then he laughed and said, "This time, the chickens'."
Kaushalya scattered the grains before the chickens in the courtyard.
The balance had gone.
For the first time, no needle moved in the threshing yard.

Story 47

The Other Door

From half past seven in the morning, two signboards stood in front of the main entrance of Asha Health Centre.

The first, in blue letters, said: "Regular Patients — Main Entrance."

The second, in green, said: "Free Health Camp — Other Door."

An arrow on the green board pointed towards a narrow lane along the right side of the building.

The lane curved around to the rear courtyard, where a temporary registration table, three benches and two medicine boxes had been set up.

It was the centre's foundation day.

The local traders' association had paid for the medicines, four doctors had agreed to conduct free examinations until two in the afternoon, and an advertisement had appeared in the newspaper: "Health for All."

Neelam Jha arrived at seven as a volunteer.

She was an undergraduate student and the niece of Dr Prabhakar, the owner of the health centre.

Her job was to distribute camp slips, keep the queue orderly, and guide elderly patients to the correct room.

The first time Neelam read the board saying "Other Door," she paused.

"Why from the back?" she asked the manager, Arun Babu.

Counting a bundle of papers, Arun Babu said, "The crowds must remain separate. The regular patients already have appointments in the main waiting room."

"But the doctors are the same?"

"The doctors are the same. Registration is separate."

"Water?"

"There is an earthen pot at the back."

Neelam looked through the glass of the main hall.

Cool air moved inside, a digital queue number glowed on the wall, and a water cooler stood in one corner.

In the rear courtyard, half the shade came from a bamboo canopy.

Arun Babu understood her look.

"It is a one-day camp. Everyone will be examined and everyone will get medicine. That is what matters."

By eight, people began arriving.

Sita Devi from Ratanpur came first. She had pain in her knees. Reading the green sign, she turned into the lane on the right.

Then came an elderly couple: the husband complaining of breathlessness, the wife needing an eye examination.

Neelam wrote serial numbers on the slips: 1, 2, 3...

By half past eight, the rear courtyard was full.

Twelve people could sit on the three benches. The rest stood along the wall.

Meanwhile regular patients kept arriving through the main entrance.

Some had prior appointments, some had come to show test reports.

At the main registration desk they received white slips; the camp patients received green ones.

Both kinds of slip bore the same name of the health centre.

The difference was only the colour and the box for the fee.

On the green slip, that box was blank.

At nine, the first doctor arrived: Dr Neha Mishra.

She entered through the main door, put down her bag, then went to the room assigned to the camp at the back.

The first ten patients were examined.

Blood pressure was measured. Some were sent to the laboratory in the main building for blood-sugar tests.

Neelam noticed that to reach the laboratory, a camp patient had to come out again through the same narrow lane and then enter the small corridor beside the main entrance.

"Why not go straight through the inside door?" Sita Devi asked.

Neelam searched for an answer.

An assistant said, "That is the regular section."

Sita Devi said nothing.

Leaning on her walking stick, she took the lane again.

At ten the sun grew strong.

The shade of the canopy at the back began to shrink.

Neelam thought of bringing two plastic chairs from the main waiting room, but Arun Babu stopped her.

"Those chairs are for patients with appointments."

"Elderly people are standing here."

"Bring stools from the storeroom."

There were five stools in the storeroom.

One had a shaky leg.

Neelam wiped them and set them out.

By eleven, the camp numbers had crossed seventy.

At that time only seven patients were sitting in the main waiting room.

Neelam looked once more through the glass.

Cool air. Empty chairs. Chilled water.

At the back, an elderly woman was wiping her face with a towel.

"Daughter, where is the water?"

Neelam pointed towards the earthen pot.

The water was finished.

She filled two bottles from the main hall and brought them out.

Arun Babu said nothing, though his face suggested that this was an exception, not the rule.

At half past eleven the sky suddenly turned grey.

Wind rose.

The two signboards in front of the main entrance began rocking back and forth.

Ramdin, who handled cleaning and small chores, ran over and picked them both up.

"It is going to rain," he said. "I'll keep them inside."

Ten minutes later a few drops fell and then stopped.

Meanwhile Neelam had taken a patient to the laboratory.

Ramdin began mopping the main floor.

The job of putting the boards back outside fell to Rohit, a new volunteer.

He switched their positions.

The blue board now pointed towards the lane on the right: "Regular Patients — Main Entrance."

The green board pointed directly towards the glass doors: "Free Health Camp — Other Door."

The words "Other Door" now stood directly in front of the main entrance.

The arrow pointed straight inside.

Rohit did not notice the mistake.

His job was only to stand the boards up again.

For the first five minutes, nothing happened.

Then Saroja Devi from Bharwara read the green board and walked in through the main entrance.

She had the old advertisement for the free camp in her hand.

At the main registration desk she asked, "The free examination is here?"

Swati, who was sitting at the main desk, looked at the board for a moment.

Outside, the green arrow pointed inward.

"Do you have a slip?"

"No."

Swati looked for Neelam but could not see her.

Then she took out a green slip and wrote Saroja Devi's name on it.

Saroja Devi sat down in the glass-walled waiting room.

Four more people came in behind her.

Within ten minutes, eleven patients with green slips were sitting in the main hall.

Some drank water from the cooler. Some watched the digital queue display.

At that moment Manoj Agrawal, a cloth merchant from town, arrived for his regular check-up.

His appointment was for twelve.

Following the arrow on the blue sign, he turned into the lane on the right.

He reached the rear courtyard and looked for the registration desk.

"My appointment is at twelve," he said.

Volunteer Bablu looked at the white slip in his hand.

"You are a regular patient?"

"Yes."

"Then... the board points this way."

Manoj Agrawal looked around: bamboo canopy, stools, medicine boxes, a crowd holding green slips.

"Where is Dr Neha?"

"Inside, in the other room."

"Why have I been sent here?"

Before Bablu could answer, another regular patient, Jagdish Babu, a retired bank manager, came through the lane.

He too was holding a white slip.

The two men looked at each other.

Jagdish Babu said, "Is the main entrance closed?"

"No."

"Then why were we sent here?"

Bablu explained about the board.

Jagdish Babu became irritated.

"I paid and took an appointment, and now I am supposed to stand here in the sun?"

At that very moment Sita Devi, returning from the laboratory, heard the sentence.

She said nothing.

She only tightened her grip on her walking stick.

At five past twelve, Neelam returned to the main hall.

She stopped when she saw the scene.

People with green slips were inside the glass waiting room.

People with white slips were in the rear courtyard.

Arun Babu arrived too.

"What has happened here?"

Rohit ran outside.

The moment he saw the boards, his face fell.

"I switched their places."

Arun Babu said at once, "Put them right! Quickly!"

Neelam asked, "First, where do we send the patients who are already here?"

"Send everyone to the section they belong to."

"But the doctors are already seeing slips from both sides."

"The crowds have become mixed."

The crowds had indeed become mixed, but the examinations had not stopped.

Swati had already sent three patients with green slips to the doctor according to their numbers.

At the back, Bablu had already measured Manoj Agrawal's blood pressure.

No machine had failed.

No paper had been lost.

People had merely reached the correct work through the wrong door.

Arun Babu came into the main hall.

"Camp patients, please go to the back. Regular patients, sit here."

Saroja Devi stood up.

She was holding a small bottle of water, half full.

She asked Neelam, "Had I been sitting in the wrong place?"

Neelam said, "The board was wrong."

"But the chair was fine."

Neelam had no answer.

Returning towards the rear courtyard, Sita Devi passed Manoj Agrawal, who was now going towards an empty chair in the main waiting room.

Sita Devi asked softly, "Was the sun too strong there?"

Manoj looked at her.

There was no mockery in the question, only a direct inquiry.

He said, "Yes. A little."

Sita Devi nodded.

"For me too."

They went their separate ways.

The boards were put back in their old positions.

Green arrow to the right.

Blue arrow straight ahead.

But traces of the half-hour's confusion remained.

Two green slips had been left on chairs in the main hall.

A white slip lay pressed beneath something on the rear table.

During the short lunch break, Dr Neha Mishra asked Arun Babu, "Why are two entrances necessary?"

Arun Babu said, "For orderly management."

"For half an hour just now, everything ran in reverse. What broke?"

"The regular patients were inconvenienced."

"And the camp patients?"

Arun Babu did not answer.

Neelam was beside them counting slips.

She did not raise her head.

After a while Arun Babu said, "The main waiting room has limited space. Paying patients come with appointments. We have to provide them comfort."

Dr Neha asked, "And the camp patients do not give time?"

"They do not pay a fee."

As soon as the sentence came out, Arun Babu fell silent.

The counting of slips in Neelam's hands stopped at that point.

Dr Neha said nothing.

She closed her lunch box and walked towards the rear courtyard.

By one in the afternoon, the sun was even stronger.

Dr Neha asked for ten chairs from the main hall to be sent to the back.

The extra twenty bottles kept beside the water cooler were sent there too.

Arun Babu did not object.

With fewer chairs in the main hall, two regular patients had to stand.

Ten minutes later, empty chairs became available again.

The camp ended at two.

A total of one hundred and twenty-seven patients had been examined.

The regular department had continued running as well.

In the evening the staff were adding up the registration slips.

A representative of the traders' association arrived.

He wanted a photograph for the newspaper.

"A photograph with a crowd will look good," he said.

The photographer suggested that everyone stand together in front of the main glass entrance.

Arun Babu moved the blue signboard for the main entrance slightly aside so that the name of the health centre would be clearly visible in the photograph.

Neelam picked up the green board too.

"Where should I put this?"

"Outside the photograph," Arun Babu said.

The photographer arranged patients, doctors, volunteers and organizers together.

Some held green slips, some white; in the photograph the colours of the slips were not visible.

The next day the photograph appeared in the newspaper.

The caption read: "Equal healthcare for patients of all sections at Asha Health Centre."

Neelam cut out the newspaper item and pinned it to the office noticeboard.

Beside it hung the preparation list for the next month's camp.

The third line on the list said: "Place the Free Health Camp signboard in front of the other door on time."

Neelam stood for a long time looking at the two pieces of paper together.

Then, with her pen, she made a small question mark beside that line on the preparation list.

She did not tear the paper.

She did not erase the rule.

Only the question mark remained beside the line—exactly where, for half an hour the previous day, the difference between the two doors had disappeared.

Story 48

Five Chairs

Just before the rains began, five red plastic chairs were placed in a straight line in the school courtyard.

The chairs were not new.

Two had fine cracks in their backrests; the right leg of one splayed slightly outward.

But a white towel had been draped over each chair, and a small paper label was pinned on top.

The first said: "Chairperson."

The second: "Chief Guest."

The remaining three: "Honoured Guest."

Straightening the chairs, headmaster Ramakant Jha said, "Keep all five in front. They should show clearly in the photograph."

Secretary Nandkishor stood holding the attendance register.

"More than sixty people have been told to come. Where will they sit?"

Ramakant looked towards two long benches beside the veranda.

"There are benches. There are mats too. It is a village meeting; people will manage."

The public meeting that day was to decide whether the school's old storeroom should be turned into a community reading room.

The storeroom had been almost empty for five years.

Apart from a broken table, old maps and bundles of leftover examination paper, there was little inside.

Village students wanted a place where they could study in the evenings.

Some people had proposed keeping newspapers, old books and magazines for competitive examinations there.

But there were many questions.

Who would keep the key?

Who would pay for the electricity?

Would books be allowed to go home?

Would the room be only for students, or for the whole village?

The invitation said three in the afternoon.

People began arriving from half past two.

Sangeeta, a Class Ten student, came first.

She carried an application signed by seven students.

Then Phulo Devi arrived.

Her son was in Class Twelve, and five people lived in a single room at home.

By three, both benches were full.

Children, parents, shopkeepers, teachers and several elderly people sat on the mats.

The five red chairs were still empty.

Nandkishor looked at the clock.

"Has the chairperson called?"

Ramakant said, "He is on the way."

"The chief guest?"

"He has left the block office."

"And the other three?"

Ramakant looked at the labels on the chairs.

"They will come."

At a quarter past three, the wind changed.

The leaves of the peepal tree in front of the school suddenly flashed pale on their undersides.

The sky to the east grew black.

Looking out from the veranda, Phulo Devi said, "The rain has reached us."

Someone laughed.

"The reading room is about to face its first examination."

The laughter did not last long.

First five large drops struck the dusty courtyard.

Then came a sound as if a thousand pebbles had fallen at once on the school's tin roof.

People sitting on the mats got up and ran towards the veranda.

Nandkishor tucked the attendance register under his arm.

The children began folding the mats.

Ramakant's first glance went to the five red chairs.

"Bring these inside! Quickly!"

Two students lifted them.

The veranda was already crowded.

When the five chairs were brought in, they occupied almost half the front space.

Sangeeta pressed her application to her chest and edged towards the wall.

Phulo Devi stood by the doorframe.

An elderly man, Jagdish Kaka, who had been sitting on a bench because of pain in his knees, had to stand in the crowd.

Four children squeezed onto his bench.

Nandkishor said, "Shall we give one chair to Kaka?"

Ramakant immediately looked at all five labels.

"No. These are for the front. The honoured guests may arrive at any moment."

Jagdish Kaka heard him but said nothing.

He remained standing, holding the window frame.

The rain grew heavier.

Within fifteen minutes the courtyard was shining with water.

Water reached the first step, then flowed away.

Watching the crowd on the veranda, Sangeeta said softly, "How will so many people sit in the reading room?"

Her classmate Neeraj said, "Let it be made first."

A phone rang.

It was the chairperson's driver.

Water had risen over the small bridge on the road; the car was taking another route.

Five minutes later a second call came.

The chief guest had not yet left the block headquarters.

He would start when the rain eased.

Nandkishor looked at the five chairs.

"Shall we begin the meeting?"

Ramakant thought for a moment.

"Ten more minutes."

In the left corner of the veranda the roof began to leak.

First one drop, then a steady stream.

Two of the red chairs stood directly beneath it.

Ramakant himself ran over.

"Move these two this way!"

People shifted again.

All five chairs were now placed in a row in the driest middle section of the veranda.

A wall was behind Phulo Devi; chair backs were in front of her.

She shifted half a step to the right.

The lower edge of her sari was already wet.

A teenager said quietly to his friend, "The chairs must not get wet."

His friend did not laugh.

There was little room for laughter in the crowd.

At a quarter to four, assistant teacher Arun opened the old storeroom and dragged out a wooden table.

As soon as the door opened, the stale smell inside reached the veranda.

Sangeeta peered in.

"Sir, is this where the reading room will be?"

Arun said, "If everyone agrees."

"There is space."

"There is space. Making the rules for using it will be the difficult part."

The proposal was made to place the papers on the table and begin the meeting.

Nandkishor said, "If the chairperson does not arrive, let us choose a temporary chairperson."

A voice from the back said, "First let people sit down."

Ramakant looked around.

There was no space on the benches.

Half the mats were wet.

The five red chairs were empty.

For a moment his eyes rested on them.

Then he said, "If the honoured guests arrive, people will have to get up again. Let everyone stand for a little while."

This time Jagdish Kaka spoke.

"I have already had enough practice getting up."

A small smile appeared on several faces, but it was swallowed at once by the noise of the rain.

The meeting began.

Sangeeta read the application.

"We want a place to study from five to eight in the evening after school hours. Not everyone has a separate place at home."

Phulo Devi said, "If the electricity bill rises, we will contribute what we can every month. But do not keep the room locked against the children."

Shopkeeper Shambhu asked, "Will books be allowed to go home, or must they be read here?"

Arun said, "Let the reading room begin first. A register can be made for the books."

Still holding the window frame, Jagdish Kaka said, "Instead of throwing newspapers away after one day, they can be kept here. I buy two newspapers every day."

A woman said, "If the key stays only at the school, it will be locked again on holidays."

From the other side came a suggestion: one key with the headmaster, another with the secretary of the women's group.

Gradually the discussion became clearer.

The five empty chairs remained in front of everyone.

By four, the rain had eased a little.

The phone rang again.

The chairperson's car had been unable to cross the bridge and had turned back.

The chief guest sent a message from his office: because of the weather, he would not be able to attend the programme.

Of the remaining three, one phone was switched off, one person was out of town, and from the third person's house came the message: "We will see when the rain stops."

Nandkishor read the messages and fell silent.

Ramakant looked at the five chairs.

"Now?" Jagdish Kaka asked.

Before Ramakant could answer, Nandkishor removed the label from one chair.

"We are no longer waiting for the honoured guests."

He pushed the chair towards Jagdish Kaka.

Kaka did not sit.

"Why?"

"More than half the meeting is over now. I can remain standing."

Nandkishor pushed a second chair towards Phulo Devi.

She too refused at first.

"I am fine."

Ramakant said, "Sit. Why should it remain empty?"

Phulo Devi sat down hesitantly.

Her wet sari left a dark mark on the red seat.

One by one, the labels were removed from all five chairs.

Two chairs went to elderly people, one to Phulo Devi, one to Nandkishor, and on the fifth they spread out the proposed list of books.

The veranda did not suddenly become larger, but the line of people loosened.

Neeraj asked, "How many chairs will there be in the reading room?"

Arun replied, "There are ten old tables and chairs on the inventory. We can repair them."

Looking at the five red chairs, Shambhu asked, "Will these five ever remain empty too?"

No one answered.

Ramakant remained bent over the book list.

The meeting ended at five.

The resolution was written down:

The storeroom would be cleaned.

Two old cupboards would be repaired.

The reading room would remain open from five to eight in the evening.

There would be no fee for students.

A voluntary monthly contribution box would be kept for electricity expenses.

Two copies of the key would be made.

The rain had almost stopped.

Small streams of water ran across the courtyard.

People began leaving for home.

Some carried their slippers in their hands.

Some wrapped their book bags in cloth.

Phulo Devi stood up.

The mark from her wet sari remained on the red chair.

She tried to wipe it with the towel.

Nandkishor stopped her.

"Leave it. It will dry."

Ramakant counted the five chairs again.

"All here?"

"All five."

Two students carried them into the storeroom.

Sangeeta followed.

Inside, the chairs were stacked one over another beside the broken table and the dust-covered cupboard.

She asked, "Sir, when do we start cleaning?"

Arun said, "From Sunday."

"We'll come."

Coming down from the veranda, Jagdish Kaka said, "Those chairs had quite a busy day."

Shambhu laughed.

"Less sitting, more protecting."

Ramakant smiled too, but said nothing.

Before closing the attendance register, Nandkishor began writing a short account of the meeting on the last page.

"Members present — sixty-two."

"Honoured guests absent due to weather."

"Decision — community reading room to be established."

He was about to write something under "Seating arrangement," then his pen paused.

Outside, Phulo Devi was crossing a small stream of water on her way home.

Jagdish Kaka was probing the depth ahead of his feet with his walking stick.

Sangeeta and Neeraj had opened the storeroom window to let the stale air out.

In one corner of the room, the five red chairs were stacked one over another.

Four were almost dry.

One still bore the faint mark of a wet sari.

At last Nandkishor wrote: "Meeting concluded."

He left the space for "Seating arrangement" blank.

Story 49

The Washerman's Mark

As soon as Prabha Devi opened the bundle of clothes, she counted the saris first.

One, two, three, four, five.

She counted again.

One, two, three, four, five.

Standing on the veranda, Bhola Rajak had set his bamboo basket down on the ground.

His fourteen-year-old son Chhotan was with him, crossing the returned clothes off in a notebook.

Prabha Devi opened the fifth sari once more.

A yellow cotton one with a black border.

One with red flowers.

One with a fine green stripe.

Two old everyday saris.

The purple Banarasi was not there.

"One sari is missing."

Bhola immediately looked at the notebook.

"You gave seventeen pieces in all."

"Not seventeen. Eighteen."

"The notebook says seventeen."

Prabha Devi's voice hardened.

"So whatever is written in the notebook becomes the truth?"

Chhotan's pen stopped.

Three days later, Prabha Devi's younger sister's daughter was to be married.

The house was already full of turmeric preparations, oil, invitation cards, sweet boxes and the coming and going of relatives.

The purple Banarasi sari had been given to Prabha Devi by her mother.

She wore it very rarely.

She had planned to wear it at this wedding, and clearly remembered putting it with the other clothes to be ironed.

"Bhola, I placed that sari there with my own hands."

Bhola opened the notebook and held the page before her.

"Look: five saris, four blouses, three kurtas, two dhotis, two sheets, one shawl. Seventeen in all."

"There were six saris."

"I wrote five."

"Then you wrote it wrong."

"I counted them on your veranda when I collected them."

At that moment Prabha Devi's neighbour Shashikala came in through the gate.

"What happened?"

Without lowering her voice, Prabha Devi said, "An expensive sari has not come back."

Shashikala looked at Bhola.

"Which sari?"

"A purple Banarasi. With gold zari."

The atmosphere on the veranda changed at once.

Chhotan did not close the notebook, but his finger froze on the page.

Bhola said, "If that sari had come to me, it would have a mark."

"Where will you look for a mark on a sari that is missing?" Prabha Devi said.

"We use one mark for all clothes in a particular batch. Your household's old mark is different; each new batch has its own mark."

He picked up the yellow cotton sari and turned over the inner edge.

Near the fall were two tiny blue dots and, beside them, a thin crooked line.

"This is the mark for this batch."

Prabha Devi was losing patience.

"What does showing me a mark on a sari that is here prove about the one that is missing?"

Before Bhola could answer, two more people had stopped at the gate.

In a wedding house, even a small voice travels quickly outside.

Someone asked, "How much did it cost?"

Prabha Devi said, "Leave the price. My mother gave it to me."

After that sentence, the matter was no longer merely about a piece of cloth.

Bhola ran a hand through the inside of his basket to show it was empty.

"I have none of your clothes left with me."

"Then where did the sari go?"

"I do not know."

"If you do not know, who will?"

Bhola was silent for a few moments.

Then he said, "All I know is that I took seventeen pieces and returned seventeen."

Shashikala said softly, "Look once more in the house."

Prabha Devi turned towards her.

"There is a wedding in this house. Would I not know where I kept my mother's sari?"

Shashikala fell silent.

Someone standing outside the gate said, "Expensive clothes should be entered separately."

Another voice said, "I never give silk to a washerman at all."

Bhola did not look in that direction.

He closed the notebook.

"Prabha Didi, if you wish, come and search my house. The baskets, bamboo racks, clothes room—everything."

"I am not going to search anyone's house."

"Then what should I do?"

Prabha Devi did not answer at once.

Anger, the rush of the wedding, and her mother's sari all stood together on her face.

At last she said, "Find the sari first. We will talk after that."

Bhola lifted the basket.

Chhotan tucked the notebook under his arm.

They began walking towards the gate.

At the gate Bhola turned once.

"I will check the clothes room again by this evening."

Prabha Devi said nothing.

By noon that day the story had crossed two lanes.

One relative had been planning to send clothes to Bhola for ironing, but said, "Not now. Let the wedding pass."

A woman from the neighbourhood took her own bundle to another ironer.

That evening Bhola really did search his small clothes room twice.

His wife Nirmala took down the hanging clothes and counted them.

Chhotan emptied the sacks and checked them.

The purple Banarasi was nowhere.

"Was the notebook right?" Nirmala asked.

"Seventeen."

"Then?"

Bhola opened the notebook and looked at the page again.

"Then seventeen."

Nirmala watched his face.

"People do not read the page."

Bhola said, "People read the story."

The next morning Prabha Devi sat down to separate the clothes for the wedding.

She needed the golden blouse she meant to wear with the purple sari.

The blouse was not in the upper shelf of the cupboard.

She took out a box from the lower shelf.

It was not there either.

Then she remembered that the fall of the sari had come loose at one place the previous week.

She had thought she would keep the sari aside and get the fall stitched by the seamstress before giving it to the washerman.

The thought came like lightning, but she did not want to accept it immediately.

Beside the kitchen was a small room where the sewing box, old curtains, extra pillows and wedding decorations were kept.

Prabha Devi went straight there.

On top of a wooden chest lay a white cloth bag.

Its mouth was half open.

Her hand trembled slightly.

Inside was the golden blouse.

Beneath it, folded, lay the purple Banarasi sari.

For a long time Prabha Devi did not lift it.

Her daughter Neha, standing behind her, asked, "Ma?"

Prabha Devi slowly picked up the sari.

One corner of the fall was indeed loose.

That was why she had kept the cloth aside.

"How did this come here?" Neha asked.

Prabha Devi did not answer.

She opened the sari and looked at the inner edge.

Near the old part of the fall was a small black-ink mark: one dot, one straight line, then half a circle.

She remembered the two blue dots Bhola had shown her the day before.

Neha brought one of the returned cotton saris.

Inside it the two blue dots and crooked line were clear.

The two marks were different.

Prabha Devi remembered that the old black mark was from the washing done the previous Phagun.

Bhola changed the mark with every batch so that old clothes from the same household would not get mixed with a new batch.

The purple sari had no mark from the current batch at all.

Neha said nothing.

Prabha Devi herself said, "When I made the bundle, I put in five saris."

"But when you were counting?"

"In my mind I counted this one too."

Neha folded the sari again.

"Then Bhola Kaka was right."

In Prabha Devi's mind returned the veranda of the previous day, the people standing outside the gate, Shashikala's silence, and the voice saying 'expensive cloth.'

She did not put the sari back into the bag.

Holding it in her hands, she went straight to Bhola's house.

Bhola was heating a coal iron in the courtyard.

When he saw Prabha Devi, he did not get up.

He simply rested his hand on the lid of the iron and waited.

Prabha Devi opened the sari in front of him.

"I found it."

Bhola looked at the mark.

"This is an old mark."

"Yes."

"It did not come in this batch."

"Yes."

Bhola said nothing more.

For Prabha Devi, his silence was harder than a scolding.

"It was my mistake."

Turning the coal in the iron, Bhola said, "All right."

Prabha Devi opened her purse.

"For the trouble you went through—"

Bhola immediately raised a hand.

"Not money."

"Then?"

"Nothing."

Prabha Devi was about to breathe in relief when Bhola spoke again.

"There is one thing."

"Say it."

"Where the accusation was made yesterday, the correction should be made there too."

Prabha Devi looked at him.

Bhola did not raise his voice.

"If you tell me in my house that a mistake was made, my house will know. The lane will not."

Prabha Devi closed her purse.

"All right."

That evening there were people again on the veranda of the wedding house.

This time Prabha Devi herself spoke loudly enough for Shashikala, the neighbours, two relatives, and even the paan seller outside the gate to hear.

"The purple sari was here in the house. I had put it aside and forgotten. Bhola took only seventeen pieces. The accusation was my mistake."

Someone said, "At least it was found—that is the main thing."

Someone laughed. "These things happen in a wedding house."

Only Shashikala looked towards Bhola, who was standing near the gate delivering a bundle.

Bhola said nothing.

The correction was made, but the matter did not end there.

Two days later, the same neighbour who had taken her bundle to another ironer came to Bhola.

"Next time I'll give it to you again. That day I got a little frightened."

Bhola said, "All right."

"Write expensive clothes separately."

"I already do."

The woman gave a slightly awkward laugh.

"Yes, yes. Now I understand."

On the wedding day Prabha Devi wore the same purple Banarasi sari.

Neha had stitched the fall the previous night.

Bhola had ironed the sari too.

This time Prabha Devi had handed it to him herself, and instead of counting aloud she had checked every item against the notebook.

Bhola put a new small mark for that batch on the inner edge.

The wedding passed.

The lane returned to its usual rhythm.

A week later a new customer came to Bhola with five pieces of clothing: two shirts, a pyjama, a sheet and a silk sari.

Separating the sari, he said, "Take a little care with this. I heard that last week—"

He did not finish the sentence.

Bhola looked at him once, then opened the notebook.

"Five in all."

"Yes, five."

Bhola made a very small blue mark on the inner edge of the cloth.

The mark was so small that it could not be seen from a distance.

But the other mark that had been made in the lane required no one to turn a piece of cloth inside out in order to see it.

Story 50

Hours of Wages

At the gate of a four-storey building under construction on the outskirts of Laheriasarai, a round clock hung on the wall.

A fine dust of cement always settled on its glass, but the black hands could be seen clearly from a distance.

Directly beneath the clock stood the watchman Kailash's table.

For safety, he entered in a thick notebook the time of every worker who crossed the gate: name, time of entry, time of exit.

That notebook was not used to calculate wages.

Its purpose was to show how many people were inside the building and whom to look for in case of an accident or inspection.

The attendance for wages was recorded inside, beside the tool store.

Before eight in the morning the workers crossed the gate, then formed a line in front of the small storeroom.

One needed a spade, another a mortar pan, another a chisel and hammer; those going to the upper floors needed safety belts and ropes.

Naresh Lal, the store clerk, counted out the tools and at that same moment wrote the time beside each name on the attendance sheet.

"Seven fifty-eight?" Budhan Paswan asked one day.

Naresh Lal looked not at the clock but at the line and said, "You crossed the gate at seven fifty-eight. Attendance was marked at eight five. Spade number five and mortar pan eighteen."

Budhan did not pay much attention to it then.

Seven minutes did not seem like anything important.

He had been working at that construction site for seven months.

The work was regular: measuring sand and cement, mixing mortar, sending filled pans upward, bringing empty pans back down.

In the evening the process ran in reverse.

When the five o'clock bell rang, the work teams cleaned their tools, scraped hardened mortar from the pans, coiled ropes, and returned everything to the store after it had been counted.

On the attendance sheet, the exit time was written as five o'clock because "work ended at five."

But the workers usually crossed the gate at five ten, five twelve, sometimes five fifteen.

That difference too did not seem important to anyone.

After all, people were merely returning tools before going home.

On the last Saturday of the month, wages were being distributed.

On Naresh Lal's table lay a blue ledger, a bundle of attendance sheets and envelopes of cash.

When Budhan's turn came, the clerk looked at the ledger.

Four hundred and twenty-five rupees had been deducted.

Budhan thought there must be some outstanding advance.

"What is the deduction for?"

"Short time."

"Which day?"

"Not a day. The minutes have been added together. Five hours and forty minutes short over the month."

Budhan did not laugh.

"I did not miss even half a day."

Naresh Lal pulled out the sheets.

"Look here: eight five to five. Here: eight seven to five. Here: eight three to five."

"When did I cross the gate?"

"The gate register is not the wage register."

"Then when do wages begin?"

Naresh Lal looked towards the tool room.

"When you receive your tools and work begins."

"Standing in the line is not work?"

The clerk became slightly uncomfortable.

People were waiting behind Budhan.

"The rule is the same for everyone."

Budhan took the envelope and moved aside.

Karim Miyan had three hundred and ten rupees deducted.

Sarita Devi, two hundred and sixty.

Rampukar, around four hundred.

No one had been absent for half a day, yet everyone had "short minutes."

Karim Miyan said, "A minute is small until it turns into money."

That evening, after collecting their wages, everyone came out.

Kailash kept writing exit times in the gate register.

Budhan found his own name.

That day: entry, 7:52. Exit, 5:13.

He remembered the attendance sheet: 8:05 to 5:00.

Thirteen minutes in the morning.

Thirteen minutes in the evening.

"Kailash Kaka," he asked, "do you fill this register every day?"

"When I am on the gate, yes. If it is the other shift, Shambhu writes it."

"Are the old pages still here?"

"Six months are bound together. They may be asked for during a safety inspection."

Budhan said nothing.

On Monday he deliberately crossed the gate at seven fifty.

Kailash wrote: 7:50.

There were already eleven people in front of the tool room.

Naresh Lal was issuing equipment alone.

One spade had a loose tooth and had to be replaced.

The buckle of one safety belt jammed.

When Budhan's turn came, the clock showed eight four.

The attendance sheet recorded 8:04.

He took his spade.

"I have been inside for fourteen minutes."

Naresh Lal said, "But you received the tool only now."

"You are the one issuing the tools."

Naresh Lal did not answer.

The line behind him kept growing.

At noon Budhan told Karim Miyan, Sarita and Rampukar what he had noticed.

On an empty cement sack Rampukar drew two lines with a piece of charcoal: "Gate / Attendance."

"Shall we start writing down the times from tomorrow?"

Karim Miyan said, "They are already written at the gate."

"Then we only have to look at the sheets."

For the next three days everyone remembered their times.

Gate 7:48, attendance 8:02.

Gate 7:55, attendance 8:07.

Gate 7:51, attendance 8:01.

In the evening the sheets closed at five.

The gate times were 5:11, 5:09, 5:14.

Sometimes the gap was smaller, sometimes larger.

But the direction was always the same: in the morning the wage sheet began late; in the evening it stopped early.

Sarita said, "We arrive on time and become late while standing in the attendance line?"

Karim Miyan did not laugh.

"Do we make the line, or does the store?"

On the fourth evening one mortar pan was reported missing.

Everyone was held back.

At last the pan was found in a corner of the third floor.

By the time they crossed the gate, it was five twenty-two.

On the attendance sheet, the exit time for that day was still 5:00.

Rampukar said, "During those twenty-two minutes, was I on my way home?"

Naresh Lal said, "Searching for the pan is a separate matter."

"Whose pan was it?"

"The construction company's."

"Who searched for it?"

The clerk fell silent.

At the end of that week, five workers went to the contractor, Vinod Sah.

Vinod Sah was sitting on a plastic chair looking at building plans.

Budhan placed the gate register and the attendance sheets for two or three dates in front of him.

"This is the safety register," Vinod Sah said.

"Yes. But the people are the same," Budhan replied.

On one date: gate 7:52, attendance 8:05; exit sheet 5:00, gate 5:13.

On another: 7:50, 8:04; then 5:00, 5:11.

Vinod Sah said, "How can anyone work before receiving tools?"

Sarita asked, "Whose arrangement is the line for receiving tools?"

"The construction site's."

"Then whose time is the time spent in that line?"

Vinod Sah looked at the papers again.

Karim Miyan said, "In the evening too, washing, counting and returning the tools are required by the construction site."

"That is necessary for safety."

"Then why is necessary time outside wage time?"

The discussion did not turn into a quarrel.

No one raised a voice.

The papers were lying in front of them, and because of the papers everyone had to keep his sentences short.

Vinod Sah called Naresh Lal.

"Since when has attendance been recorded like this?"

"As I was instructed: entry when the tools are issued, exit at five."

"Only one person distributes tools in the morning?"

"Yes."

"How many workers?"

"Sometimes twenty, sometimes thirty."

After a few moments Vinod Sah said, "Recheck this month's account."

Rampukar began copying dates from the gate register.

Kailash opened the old pages.

The attendance sheets were placed beside them.

In just the first three days, Budhan's total difference came to thirty-eight minutes.

In ten days, more than two hours.

When all twenty-six days were added up, of Budhan's five hours and forty minutes of 'short time,' four hours and fifty-seven minutes turned out to be time spent waiting for tools or returning and cleaning them.

The rest was genuine lateness: one day because the bus was late, another because he left early for the hospital.

Everyone's figures were different.

But the list ran to four pages.

When the figures for all seventeen regular workers were added, a few minutes at a time had become many dozens of hours.

Looking at the calculations, Vinod Sah said, "So much time was not visible in the main structure of the work."

Budhan replied, "When the structure is being built, the line is not visible."

This time Vinod Sah did not smile.

Two days later, the portion of the deductions created by this process was returned to the workers.

Where there had been genuine lateness, those deductions remained.

No one shouted slogans of victory.

People counted the money, put it in their pockets, and went back up to work.

The following Monday there was a new arrangement in front of the tool store.

The entry time in Kailash's gate register would now count as the start of attendance.

In the evening, the time of crossing the gate would be the exit time.

A second person was also assigned to the store so that the line would remain shorter.

At the top of the new sheet, Naresh Lal wrote in red ink: "According to gate time."

Budhan read it.

"And the old sheets?"

Naresh Lal let out a small breath.

"All the bundles from the old months are in the storeroom."

Beside the gate, two old bundles really were lying tied with string.

On top was written: "Month Closed."

It was eight o'clock.

All the workers were inside.

The tool line was still moving.

But this time the minutes on the clock did not have to stand in the queue before they could reach the wage sheet.

Story 51

The Red Seal

Shakuntala Devi held a blue paper folder in her hand.

One corner of the folder had swollen a little from rainwater, but she had wrapped the papers inside it three times in cloth: a copy of her Aadhaar card, a copy of the bank passbook, her husband Shambhunath's death certificate, an income certificate, two photographs, and the application form.

Her turn came at the window of the block service counter.

The young man seated behind the desk turned the papers over one by one.

"Everything is here," he said.

Shakuntala Devi's face brightened slightly.

The young man stopped his finger on the last page.

"There is no red seal."

Shakuntala Devi leaned forward a little so that she could hear properly.

"Which seal?"

"The red seal for local verification. It is written in the list."

He pointed to the notice hanging beside him.

At the top, in large letters, it said: "District Destitute Pension Assistance: Required Documents."

At the end of the seventh line, in small letters, were the words: "Local verification — with red seal."

Shakuntala Devi could not read.

The young man read the line aloud to her.

"Where do I get it?"

"From the village office."

"I have brought the income certificate from there."

"The seal is still required separately."

Behind her, the next person at the window cleared his throat, ready to push his papers forward.

Shakuntala Devi gathered up the blue folder.

"It cannot be submitted today?"

The young man shook his head.

"Bring it with the seal."

There were only three direct vehicles a day from the block office to her village.

The afternoon one had already left.

She walked as far as the market and caught a shared vehicle in the evening.

By the time she reached home, darkness had fallen.

The next morning she went to the village office.

Secretary Naresh Jha first looked at the income certificate, then at the application.

"I have already signed the verification here," he said.

"They want a red seal."

"Red?"

Naresh Jha picked up the round office seal kept at the corner of the desk.

He opened the ink pad.

The ink inside was blue.

"This is the seal of my office."

"Then where will I get the red one?"

"Changing the colour does not change the authority of a seal."

Shakuntala Devi remained silent.

Naresh Jha searched for the information booklet, but he did not have the new pension list.

He said, "Bring me a copy of that list. I will look at it."

A copy of the list could be bought for five rupees from a photocopy shop outside the block office.

The next day Shakuntala Devi took the vehicle again.

This time there was less crowd at the pension window.

She asked for a copy of the list hanging beside it.

The young man said, "You will get it outside."

At the photocopy shop outside, the owner took out the page.

"Five rupees."

Shakuntala Devi gave him a ten-rupee note.

As he returned the change, the shopkeeper asked, "For the red seal?"

She looked surprised.

"How did you know?"

"A lot of people have been taking this page this month."

"Where is the seal put?"

The shopkeeper shrugged.

"Some say the panchayat, some say the circle office. My work is only to make copies."

Shakuntala Devi folded the page and put it in the blue folder.

She did not try to submit the application again that day.

First she had to take the list to the village office.

On the way back, she had to break a fifty-rupee note for the fare.

Counting the coins left in her pocket, for the first time she wondered how much she had already spent simply in applying for the pension.

After reaching home, she took out an old medicine envelope.

On its back, she had her granddaughter Payal write:

"First trip — forty."

"Second trip — forty."

"Photocopy — five."

Payal asked, "Why are you keeping this account?"

Shakuntala Devi said, "I want to see how much the pension eats before it even begins."

The next day Naresh Jha read the photocopied list.

"It really does say 'red seal' here," he said.

"Then?"

Naresh Jha looked again at his blue office seal.

"I can buy red ink and stamp it, but what if the rule does not require my seal at all?"

"The block office says it does."

"Then ask them whose seal."

Weariness settled over Shakuntala Devi's face.

"I asked them. They said the village office."

Naresh Jha thought for a while.

At last he signed beside the verification line once more and stamped it with the blue office seal.

"This is my valid seal. Red ink is not my rule."

"Will they accept it?"

"They should."

"And if they do not?"

Naresh Jha did not answer.

For the third time Shakuntala Devi reached the block office.

That day the first young man was not at the window.

A middle-aged woman was seated there.

Her nameplate said: Reeta Kumari.

Reeta examined the papers.

Her finger stopped on the blue seal.

"A red seal is required."

Shakuntala Devi was ready this time.

"This is the actual seal of the village office. Their ink is blue."

"The list says red."

"Whose red?"

Reeta looked at the page.

"I am telling you what the instructions say."

"Whose seal do the instructions say?"

Reeta became slightly uncomfortable.

She took a thin file from the cupboard behind her, but the queue was growing.

"There is no time now. The assistant officer will be here next Tuesday. Ask him."

"Take the application today. I will get the seal added later."

"We cannot accept an incomplete application."

"Are my papers complete or not?"

Reeta said, "Without the red seal, they are not complete."

Shakuntala Devi gathered the blue folder again.

Outside, she took out the medicine envelope.

This time Payal was not with her.

Shakuntala Devi could write numbers herself, though not letters.

Below the earlier "40," she wrote another "40."

Then she wrote ten rupees for tea.

She did not particularly want tea, but she had eaten nothing since morning and there was time before the next vehicle.

At the tea stall, an elderly man asked, "Paperwork?"

Shakuntala Devi said, "Seal work."

The old man laughed.

"Work involving a seal is never only about the seal."

Shakuntala Devi did not laugh at that sentence.

On Tuesday she went again.

Eight people were standing outside the assistant officer's room.

It took an hour to get inside.

The officer looked at the page, the list, and the blue seal from the village office.

"This is blue."

Shakuntala Devi asked, "Should I change the colour?"

The officer looked at her.

There was no mockery in the question.

"No. Changing the colour will not solve it."

"Then whose red seal?"

The officer rang the bell.

A clerk came in from outside.

"Where does the red seal for the pension application come from?" the officer asked.

The clerk answered at once, "After local verification."

"By whom?"

The clerk paused.

"The village office... perhaps."

Shakuntala Devi heard the uncertainty in the answer.

The officer said, "Bring the old circular."

The clerk left and returned much later carrying two thick bundles.

One bundle held more dust than paper; the other, more paper than dust.

Just then a young records assistant entered the room.

Her name was Sujata.

She placed the bundles on the table and began searching through the pages.

"Which year?"

The clerk told her, "The first year after the new scheme began."

Sujata checked the index and opened a page from the middle.

"Here is the list of attachments required from the applicant," she said.

Everyone leaned closer.

The line was read item by item: identity, bank details, death certificate, income, residence, photograph.

There was no mention of a red seal.

The clerk said, "Look at the next page."

The next page was headed: "Office Procedure."

Sujata put her finger on the relevant line and read:

"After receipt of a complete application, the receiving counter will register the application number, affix the red receipt seal, and send it to the verification section."

For a few moments there was no sound in the room.

Shakuntala Devi did not understand every word.

She asked only, "Was I supposed to get the seal, or were you?"

Sujata looked at her.

"The office was."

Reeta was called in.

She arrived carrying the list that had been posted outside.

The officer placed the two pages side by side.

On the locally typed checklist, the phrase "local verification" and the next office instruction, "red seal," had been joined into the same line.

Sujata said, "It looks as though when the list was typed, the page break was joined incorrectly."

Reeta said quietly, "We have all been checking from this list."

The officer asked, "How many applications were sent back?"

No one answered.

Shakuntala Devi took out the medicine envelope.

"I have come four times."

The officer looked at the paper in her hand.

"What is that?"

"Expenses."

"How much?"

Shakuntala Devi could not add the figures herself.

Sujata took the envelope.

She added the fares, photocopying, tea, and one shared-vehicle journey.

"Two hundred and thirty-five rupees."

Shakuntala Devi said, "I also lost one day's weeding in the field. That is not written here."

The room fell silent again.

The officer handed the application to Reeta.

"Receive it."

Reeta picked up a round stamp from the right-hand corner of her desk.

She opened a red ink pad.

For the first time Shakuntala Devi saw the seal.

It had been lying from the first day inside the same window from which she had repeatedly been sent away.

Reeta pressed the stamp into the ink, placed it on the application, and pushed down firmly once.

Thump.

"Received."

An application number was written down.

Sujata handed Shakuntala Devi a receipt.

"Keep this safely. Your application has been submitted."

Shakuntala Devi put the receipt into the blue folder.

Then she put the medicine envelope inside as well.

"Is there any fee for this?" she asked.

"No," Reeta said.

Shakuntala Devi looked at her for a few moments.

"Not here," she said.

Reeta did not reply.

Outside, the old list was being taken down from the noticeboard.

Sujata crossed out the seventh line in red pen and carried the page towards the copying section to prepare a corrected version.

Shakuntala Devi walked down the stairs.

This time she was no longer carrying the search for that red seal in her hands.

Before catching the vehicle home, she stopped in the market for five minutes.

She bought two notebooks for Payal.

The shopkeeper asked, "Did the pension work get done?"

"They accepted the application."

"Did you find the red seal?"

Shakuntala Devi gave a faint smile.

"I found it. It was on their own desk."

When she reached home, Payal opened the medicine envelope.

She looked at the numbers and asked, "Is the account closed now?"

Placing the blue folder on top of the cupboard, Shakuntala Devi said, "No. When the first pension comes, we will see how much is left."

Payal took a red pen and drew a line beneath the figures on the envelope.

Above the line were the numbers for the journey expenses.

Below it, there was still empty space.

Story 52

The Shared Ridge

It was the last week of Bhadau.

After three days of rain, the sun had come out properly for the first time.

In the fields towards Bisfi, the paddy leaves were shining, and here and there the doob grass, motha and soft growth on the ridges looked like green strips.

Gopal Yadav was cutting grass on the southern ridge of his field with a sickle.

His cow had been tied in the cowshed for the past two days.

Because of the wet paths, it had not been able to go out to graze.

Gopal thought that if he cut the grass from the ridge and took it home, there would be fodder until evening.

He had cut three swathes when Raghunandan Mishra called out from the field to the east:

"Gopal Bhaiya, stop your hand there."

Gopal stopped the sickle in mid-air.

"Why?"

Raghunandan stepped carefully between the rows of paddy and came up to the ridge.

The lower edge of his dhoti was smeared with mud.

"That grass is on my side."

At first Gopal thought Raghunandan was joking.

"Does grass also look which side it is growing on?"

There was no smile on Raghunandan's face.

"The ridge falls within my holding in the land record."

Gopal tightened his grip on the sickle.

"The ridge is on the boundary. Half mine, half yours."

"Have you looked at the papers?"

"I have papers at home too."

For a few moments both were silent.

A small heap of cut grass lay between them.

Raghunandan bent down and lifted a handful of doob grass.

"Last year too you cut from here."

Gopal said, "Last year you did not say anything."

"If I said nothing, did the right change?"

This time Gopal's voice hardened.

"If we are going to talk about rights, let us measure the ridge half and half."

Raghunandan looked straight at him.

"Let us measure it."

By noon the matter had travelled from the fields into the village.

It was the kind of village where, if two people raised their voices over a field ridge, by evening five people had produced old maps, seven had produced old quarrels, and ten had produced their own opinions.

Over tea at Ramphal Sah's shop, someone said, "It is only grass. Divide it."

Another said, "Whoever has the ridge in his holding owns the grass."

A third held that "Doob belongs to no one; whoever has the cow gets the grass."

Ramphal Sah laughed.

"Then call the cows to the panchayat."

The shop burst into laughter, but neither Gopal nor Raghunandan laughed.

The next morning a surveyor was called.

Kamlesh Paswan arrived with an old measuring tape, two bamboo pegs and a small red cloth bag.

Gopal had brought a copy of his khatiyan.

Raghunandan had brought his jamabandi papers too.

Kamlesh examined both sets of papers, then went towards the ridge.

The ridge was not straight.

In some places it was a cubit and a half wide; elsewhere less than a cubit.

At one point an old rat hole had collapsed.

At another, thick reed-like grass roots were holding the earth together.

Kamlesh said, "A boundary line looks straight on paper. In a field, soil breathes."

Gopal said, "Measure it straight."

Raghunandan added, "And write down where each person's part ends."

Kamlesh stretched the tape.

It took two hours.

At last small bamboo pegs were driven into the ground at three places.

According to the line, most of the ridge did indeed fall on Raghunandan's side of the recorded holding.

Gopal's face fell.

Raghunandan immediately said, "Then the matter of the grass is clear."

Brushing soil from the peg, Kamlesh said, "The boundary is clear. I am not deciding the grass."

"The ridge is mine, so the grass is mine," Raghunandan said.

Gopal replied, "Fine. Then maintaining the ridge is yours too."

Raghunandan paused.

"Where did maintenance come from?"

"Whoever owns the ridge owns its soil, its grass, and its repairs."

Kamlesh looked from one to the other but said nothing.

That afternoon Raghunandan had the grass cut from the part of the ridge he considered his.

His grandson Sonu wielded the sickle.

The grass was cut close to the ground so that tender new shoots would come quickly.

Gopal kept spreading fertilizer in his own field at a distance.

He did not go near them even once.

Three days later it was time for water to be released into the canal.

From the village's small irrigation channel, the water first reached the eastern corner of Gopal's field.

Then, through two small openings made along the top of the ridge, it was let by turns into the two fields.

For years this sequence had been supervised by old Ramcharit Mahato.

Ramcharit was nearly eighty.

His eyesight was dim, but he could still understand the movement of water from the trembling of leaves.

That evening he came towards the fields, leaning on his stick.

Gopal was opening the small gate of the channel.

Raghunandan arrived too, carrying a spade.

Ramcharit asked, "Who takes the first water?"

Gopal said, "It is my turn."

Raghunandan immediately said, "Last time you took the first turn too, but at midnight the water entered my side as well."

Gopal raised his eyes.

"It did not enter. It seeped through the ridge."

Ramcharit planted his stick on the ridge and stood as if listening.

"Seeped?"

"Yes."

Raghunandan said, "It is fine now."

The water slowly reached the edge of the field from the channel.

Gopal opened his small inlet.

The water spread between the rows of paddy.

For the first half hour everything was fine.

Then, on the part of the ridge where the grass had been cut close to the roots, the soil began to shine wet.

Ramcharit noticed it from a distance.

"Put a spade there."

Raghunandan said, "It is nothing."

Ramcharit said again, "Put a spade there."

This time a thin stream emerged from behind the ridge.

First as thick as one finger.

Then two.

Raghunandan ran over and pressed the earth down with the spade.

Instead of stopping the water in his own field, Gopal stood watching the leak.

Within moments, a small section of the ridge collapsed inward with a soft crumbling sound.

Water rushed towards Raghunandan's field.

"Shut it!" Raghunandan shouted.

Gopal ran towards the mouth of the channel.

Ramcharit sat on the ridge and began pressing the wet earth with his hands.

Within ten minutes the water was stopped.

But one strip of Gopal's field had already drained halfway, while too much water had collected in the lower corner of Raghunandan's.

Sonu brought sacks and straw from home.

People from both families began filling soil.

Without saying anything, Gopal cut earth from a dry corner of his own field and brought it over.

Raghunandan looked at him for a moment.

Then he took hold of the sack.

By nightfall the ridge was standing again.

Ramcharit's feet were caked with mud.

He asked, "Was the grass cut close to the ground?"

Raghunandan did not answer.

Sonu said, "I cut it. Dada told me to cut low so it would grow again quickly."

Ramcharit ran his hand over the mound of earth.

"The roots were holding the soil."

Raghunandan's face tightened.

"Then should we not cut the grass?"

"Cut it. But do not scalp the ridge."

Gopal was quietly washing his spade.

Ramcharit looked at him.

"You were wrong too."

Gopal looked surprised.

"What did I do?"

"Three days ago you said, 'Whoever owns the ridge owns the repairs.'"

Gopal opened his mouth to answer, then closed it.

Ramcharit said, "A boundary exists on paper. Water does not read paper."

The next morning Ramcharit opened an old wooden trunk in his house.

Inside were not land documents but an old irrigation register—pages from notebooks, some in blue ink, some in pencil, some with only dates and names.

Ramcharit's father used to record turns for the irrigation channel.

Later Ramcharit himself had begun writing them.

He carried the notebook to Gopal's veranda.

Raghunandan was called too.

The pages had turned yellow.

In one place it said:

"Bhadau Shukla 5 — Gopal's father first turn. Mishraji second turn. Soil on the middle ridge from both households."

On another page:

"Agahan 12 — Mishraji first turn. Yadavji second turn. Southern opening of ridge closed by Yadavji."

There were more pages.

The years changed, the names changed, but one thing appeared again and again: soil for the ridge from both households; one would open the ridge inlet and the other would close it.

Raghunandan pulled the notebook towards himself.

"This is not a document of ownership."

Ramcharit said, "No."

Gopal said without smiling, "Then it is a document of use."

Ramcharit nodded.

"And of responsibility."

Raghunandan turned the pages.

On one old entry was his father's signature.

"Ridge private boundary. Water-control shared."

Four words.

Raghunandan kept his finger on that line for a long time.

Gopal said, "The surveyor was not wrong."

"No."

"Most of the ridge lies in your holding."

"Yes."

"But the work of holding back the water belongs to both of us."

Raghunandan replied, "Yes."

Ramcharit closed the notebook.

That afternoon both men went to the fields again.

The section repaired the previous day was still soft.

Gopal brought two baskets of sticky clay from his field.

Raghunandan brought straw and old sacks.

Together they packed the ridge.

When Sonu began cutting the remaining grass with the sickle, Raghunandan stopped him.

"Cut from the top. Leave the roots."

Gopal said, "And half for my cow."

Sonu looked at both men.

For the first time, a faint smile appeared on Raghunandan's face.

"Half the grass? Shall we call the surveyor again?"

Gopal smiled too.

"No. The measuring tape does not work on grass."

The grass was divided into two heaps, but not measured.

One heap received a little more, the other a little less.

No one counted again.

A week later it was time to irrigate once more.

This time the first water belonged to Raghunandan's field.

Gopal himself came to press earth over the southern opening of the ridge.

Raghunandan opened the irrigation channel.

The water reached the ridge and seemed to pause, as if looking in two directions, then flowed along the intended path.

Ramcharit sat at a distance on a bamboo stool.

The old irrigation register was not in his lap.

The notebook was at home.

This time no one needed it.

On his way back in the evening, Gopal saw fresh doob beginning to grow on the ridge.

He did not take out his sickle.

Raghunandan looked at it too.

Neither man said anything.

The ridge was still a boundary.

But more important than the grass growing on that boundary was the soil that kept the water of the two fields from overwhelming one another—and, at the same time, bound both men to the same responsibility.

Story 53

A Plate of Rice

A little away from the bus stand, beside the old post office, stood Janak Bhojanalaya.

The name was grand; the establishment was small.

Inside were eight tables and sixteen benches, a glass case at the front holding onions and lemons, and two stoves in the kitchen at the back.

The owner, Jagdish Sah, rose at five every morning.

By seven, after the rice had been washed, the lentils sorted and the vegetables arranged for cutting, the first pot would be on the fire.

His wife, Kamala Devi, managed the kitchen.

Before leaving for school, their son Neeraj filled the water drum.

Their daughter Poonam, on her way to college, counted the change in the cash box.

The midday plate cost sixty rupees.

Rice, dal, one vegetable and pickle.

For five rupees more, an egg; for ten more, fish curry.

The customers included bus conductors, rickshaw pullers, painters, daily-wage labourers, nearby small shopkeepers, and now and then an office clerk.

Under the front counter Jagdish kept a thick notebook.

On its cover, in blue ink, was written: "Due."

Inside were names and amounts.

"Ramesh the painter — 180."

"Salim the conductor — 120."

"Bachchu the mason — 300."

"Devu the rickshaw puller — 60."

Against some names was a red line; against others, a mark showing part payment.

Jagdish was not the sort of man who would go to someone's house in the evening for a single rupee of debt.

His rule was simple: "Pay when you can, but your name will remain written down."

The difficulty was that over the past two months, "when you can" had moved farther and farther away.

One Monday morning, as rice merchant Murli Sah unloaded a sack, he said, "The last two sacks have not been fully paid for."

Jagdish said, "I'll pay this evening."

"Not this evening. Give me half now. I too have to settle payment at the wholesale market."

Jagdish opened the cash box.

There were one thousand three hundred and seventy rupees inside.

He owed Murli two thousand eight hundred.

"Take one thousand. The rest tomorrow."

Murli Sah did not glare at him.

He only said, "I have a notebook too, Jagdishji."

The sentence pricked Jagdish slightly.

Murli unloaded the rice and left.

Jagdish took out his own dues notebook and began adding.

The total was four thousand nine hundred and twenty rupees.

He added again.

The amount was the same.

As she salted the vegetables, Kamala Devi asked, "What are you looking at?"

"People eat now and pay later."

"Everyone pays."

"They do, but my rice sacks want cash now."

Kamala said nothing.

By noon Jagdish had made up his mind.

On a piece of cardboard he wrote in large letters: "NO CREDIT FROM TODAY."

Below it, in smaller letters: "Please do not mind the inconvenience."

The board was hung above the counter.

The first customer to read it laughed.

"Kaka, is this written for me?"

It was Devu the rickshaw puller, who had sixty rupees outstanding.

Jagdish said, "It is for everyone."

Devu searched his pockets.

He found thirty rupees.

"Will I get half a plate?"

Jagdish tried to laugh, but no laugh came.

"If I give half the rice and charge half the price, the dal and vegetable account will go wrong."

Devu looked at the board for a while.

"Then I'll have tea and biscuits."

He left.

For a moment Jagdish felt like calling after him, "Sit down. Pay tomorrow."

But the board was hanging above his head.

Between twelve and two, all the tables were usually full.

That day two tables remained empty.

Ramesh the painter came as far as the entrance, read the board, and did not come inside.

Salim the conductor gave a hundred-rupee note, ate a sixty-rupee plate, and asked for the remaining forty to be adjusted against his old debt.

Jagdish said, "No new credit."

Salim smiled.

"This isn't new. I'm reducing the old account."

Jagdish opened the red notebook and deducted forty.

At the end of the day the cash box held two hundred rupees more than on an ordinary day.

Jagdish felt satisfied.

But one pot of rice was left in the kitchen.

Kamala Devi said, "Fewer people came today."

"They will understand from tomorrow."

"What about the leftover rice?"

"Take it home. We'll all eat it tonight."

That was what usually happened.

Whatever was left became the family's evening meal.

Sometimes dal was cooked separately at home, but most often the household ate from the food prepared at the bhojanalaya.

Jagdish had never treated this as a separate question in the shop accounts.

The bhojanalaya was his, the house was his.

One stove, one rice.

For three days the board remained hanging.

No new debt was added.

Five hundred and seventy rupees of old debt also came back.

Jagdish grew more encouraged.

On the fourth day he gave Murli Sah another thousand.

Murli said, "You are on the right path."

Jagdish felt pleased inside.

That evening Poonam returned from college and sat at the counter.

She studied accountancy, so her father sometimes asked her to count the cash.

Poonam asked, "Have you entered this week's purchases?"

"Everything."

"Rice?"

"Two sacks."

"Dal?"

"Forty-five kilos."

"Oil?"

"Thirty-six litres."

Poonam opened an old register in which daily sales were recorded.

She added the total plates sold over five days, keeping fish, eggs and tea separate.

Then she subtracted the purchases.

After a while her brow tightened.

"Babu, the account still does not match."

Jagdish looked towards the board.

"Credit is closed."

"Credit is closed, but the shortage is not."

"How much?"

"About five hundred in five days."

Jagdish immediately pulled the notebook towards himself.

"How can that be? I count the cash myself."

Poonam said, "I'm not saying cash is being stolen. I am comparing stock cost with sales."

Kamala Devi had been listening from the kitchen.

She came out.

"Perhaps we used more oil."

Poonam shook her head.

"Oil can vary a little. Five hundred is not that small."

Jagdish grew uneasy.

He began to suspect that some employee might be taking supplies home.

In the kitchen there were only Kamala and one cook, Ramcharit.

Ramcharit had been with them for fifteen years.

Even the thought of suspecting him made Jagdish uncomfortable.

Poonam took a pencil and began asking questions.

"How many plates were prepared yesterday?"

"About seventy."

"Sold?"

"The register says fifty-six."

"The remaining fourteen?"

"Some rice was left, and the staff ate some."

"Do you record the staff plates?"

"Those are part of their wages."

"Then where is their number recorded?"

Jagdish was silent.

Poonam asked again, "And what you take home?"

Kamala Devi said, "Whose account would that go into? It is our own house."

Poonam smiled slightly.

"The house is ours, but the rice comes from Murli Sah's sacks."

Jagdish remembered Murli's sentence: "I have a notebook too."

Poonam began estimating the previous five days.

There were four people at home: Jagdish, Kamala, Poonam and Neeraj.

Ramcharit and one helper ate at the bhojanalaya.

Sometimes Jagdish also ate a full plate at noon; sometimes only rice and dal.

"Four evening plates at home, over five days, makes twenty," Poonam said.

"At sixty rupees each that would be twelve hundred, but at cost it is roughly four hundred and fifty to five hundred."

Kamala Devi laughed.

"So now even eating our own food has become credit?"

Poonam laughed too.

"Not credit. But it is outside the ledger."

Jagdish kept looking at the board: "NO CREDIT."

For the first time it occurred to him that the board was meant for people outside, while the shortage could also be coming from inside.

That night the family ate leftover rice from the bhojanalaya with potato and pointed gourd, and dal.

Kamala Devi served the plates.

Usually Jagdish ate without thinking.

Today, before the first mouthful, he asked, "Will Poonam record these four plates?"

Neeraj laughed.

"Babu, shall I become a customer of the hotel from tomorrow?"

Jagdish laughed too.

"Not a customer. But rice does not come out of thin air."

The next morning Poonam made a new page in the register.

Three columns: "Cash," "Credit," "Home/Staff."

The word "Home" looked strange to Jagdish.

"What is the use of this?"

"At least we will know how much is prepared, how much is sold, how much we eat, and how much is left."

"And credit?"

Poonam shrugged.

"Credit is one difficulty. Things outside the ledger are another."

That afternoon Devu the rickshaw puller came again.

He had sixty rupees in his hand.

"Kaka, the earlier sixty later. Today is cash."

Jagdish served him a plate.

Devu sat down.

A little later Ramesh the painter stood outside.

He had forty rupees.

He read the board and began to turn away.

Jagdish called, "Ramesh!"

Ramesh stopped.

Jagdish thought for a moment.

In the old way he could have said, "Sit down, pay later."

But that sentence would reopen the same unlimited notebook.

He said, "Give forty. I'll write twenty as due. But no more than one new plate of credit at a time."

Ramesh looked at the board.

"It says credit is closed."

Jagdish looked up.

The board really was still hanging there.

He climbed onto a stool, took it down, and on the blank reverse wrote a new sentence:

"Nothing Without Entry in the Ledger."

Ramesh read it and laughed.

"That sounds even stricter."

"Not stricter. Clearer."

Jagdish entered Ramesh's twenty rupees under credit.

Then he looked at the "Home/Staff" column on the new page Poonam had made.

At noon Jagdish himself ate one plate of rice.

When he finished, Poonam lifted her pencil.

"Babu — one?"

Jagdish said, "Write it."

"Which column?"

"Home."

Kamala Devi smiled from behind them.

By evening the new page showed twelve cash plates, two on credit, three for staff, and five for home.

At night the cash matched.

The stock estimate too came a little closer than the day before.

Jagdish was not surprised.

Cash had not suddenly increased.

The debt to Murli Sah had not disappeared.

The customers' difficulties had not been solved either.

Only a few things that had previously been nameless had acquired names.

A week later, while unloading rice, Murli Sah read the new board.

"'Nothing Without Entry in the Ledger,'" he read aloud. "Like my notebook."

Jagdish laughed.

"Yes. Now I understand."

Murli asked, "Credit has started again?"

"Within limits."

"And the household?"

Jagdish looked surprised.

"Who told you about the household?"

Murli Sah laughed.

"Who needs to tell a person who runs a small shop? The house eats first; the account wakes up later."

Jagdish did not answer.

Before closing the bhojanalaya that night, Poonam wrote the final line for the day.

"Home — four plates."

Jagdish looked at the page.

Once he had thought that 'due' meant only the money that people outside owed him.

Now cash, credit, staff and home were all on the same sheet.

He closed the ledger.

From the kitchen Kamala Devi called, "There is rice left. Shall we take it home?"

Jagdish said, "Take it."

Then, after a pause, he added, "Four plates are written down, aren't they?"

Poonam smiled.

"Yes."

Jagdish switched off the light.

In the darkness the new board above the counter could no longer be read, but in the ledger every plate from the day was now visible.

Story 54

The Rented Cart

Every morning at half past five, Sarita Devi reached Bhola Sah's courtyard.

Calling it a courtyard was perhaps too generous.

It was the open space between three rooms where, at night, eight handcarts stood one behind another, their noses almost touching.

One had new wheels, another a bent handle, another old stains of turmeric, coriander or fish on its plank.

Sarita's cart was number five.

A small white "5" was painted on its right wheel.

Bhola Sah would take down the ledger hanging from a nail in the wall, write the name against the date, and collect the day's rent of seventy rupees.

The rule was said to be very simple: "If you take a cart, seventy rupees for the day."

There was no column in the ledger for what time the cart was taken or what time it was returned.

Sarita usually brought it back between six and seven in the evening.

Sometimes, if the vegetables sold early, she returned it at three.

Bhola Sah never asked who owned the remaining hours of the day.

Sarita had never asked either.

On that Wednesday in Ashadh, the sky had already sunk low by morning.

Sarita took out cart number five and headed towards the wholesale market.

She bought one sack of potatoes, a basket of brinjals, okra, bitter gourds, tomatoes and coriander.

By seven, the rain began.

First a fine drizzle.

Then heavy sheets.

Sarita stretched an old blue tarpaulin over the cart.

There were three small holes in it.

She moved the tomato basket away from beneath them, but slanting rain still reached the brinjals.

By ten o'clock she had sold only eighty-eight rupees' worth of vegetables.

There were few people on the road.

Whoever came out hurried under an umbrella and did not want to stop to choose vegetables.

At eleven Sarita turned the cart around.

Not towards home, but straight to Bhola Sah's courtyard.

Bhola Sah was sitting on the veranda removing a wheel from cart number seven.

Sarita pushed number five inside.

Bhola Sah looked up.

"Back so early?"

"The road is empty."

"The vegetables?"

"More than half are left."

Bhola Sah lifted the tarpaulin and looked at the wet baskets.

"The coriander will not last till night."

Sarita took forty rupees out of her bag.

"It did not run even half a day. Keep forty."

Bhola Sah did not take the money.

"The day's rent is seventy."

"Where did the day go?"

"Into the rain."

"Then collect it from the rain."

Bhola Sah smiled, but did not extend his hand.

"The cart was reserved for you from the morning."

"I have returned it now."

"You have returned it, that is fine. But the rule for a day is the rule for a day."

The words sounded harsh to Sarita.

She was in a position to pay seventy rupees, but her mind resisted.

"I'll give it in the evening," she said, and began unloading the remaining vegetables.

Bhola Sah said nothing.

The rain continued until afternoon.

At home Sarita separated the wet coriander, wiped the tomatoes, and sold the brinjals to a neighbour at a lower price.

At four the rain stopped.

At five her younger son Sonu said, "Ma, my wooden box was left under the cart."

The box held two old scale weights and some paper bags.

Sarita said, "Come, we'll get it."

The two reached Bhola Sah's courtyard.

Cart number five was not there.

At first Sarita thought Bhola Sah had moved it farther inside.

"Where is number five?" she asked.

Bhola Sah's son Munna said, "Chhotelal took it."

"Which Chhotelal?"

"The man who roasts maize. He is going to the bus stand for the evening crowd."

For a few moments Sarita stared at Munna's face.

"For how much?"

Before Munna could answer, Bhola Sah came out.

"Thirty rupees," he said. "For three or four hours."

Sarita asked slowly, "Then how much rent did number five earn today?"

Bhola Sah understood the question, but took a moment before replying.

"Your seventy. His thirty."

"A hundred rupees from the same cart on the same day?"

"His was for the evening."

"Was the evening not included in my seventy?"

Bhola Sah frowned.

"You returned it."

"Was the rent for a day or by the hour?"

"For the day."

"Then does a day include the evening or not?"

Munna slowly slipped inside.

Bhola Sah took out the ledger.

Against Sarita's name was written "70."

Below it, beside Chhotelal's name, "30."

Sarita placed her finger on the page.

"One day. One cart. Two rents."

Bhola Sah said, "If the cart had stood idle, the thirty would not have come."

"I am already paying the rent for it to stand idle, am I not?"

After that question, for a while the only sound on the veranda was water dripping from the roof.

Bhola Sah was not a hard man.

But he did not like seeing a rule that had run for years suddenly stand before him as a question.

"Do you want me not to give it to Chhotelal?"

"No. I want my day not to be sold a second time."

Bhola Sah closed the ledger.

"Tomorrow all the renters will be here. We will talk then."

Sarita took the box and went home.

That night, more than the seventy rupees, it was the unused time of cart number five that troubled her.

She thought: if she had kept the cart standing uselessly at her own gate, Bhola Sah could not have earned the extra thirty.

She had returned it early, so the cart had been used again.

But who had received the benefit of her returning it early?

The next morning the rain had stopped.

All eight regular renters gathered in the courtyard.

Chhotelal came too, because the matter of number five could not be complete without his name.

Bhola Sah opened the ledger.

Sarita said, "Make the rule clear. If seventy rupees is the rent for the day, then the day is mine. If the rent is by hours or by shifts, there should be a separate entry for that."

Rahim, who sold fruit, said, "I often return my cart at two. Is it given to someone else later?"

Bhola Sah said, "Sometimes."

"Then why is 'sometimes' never written in my ledger?"

Parvati, another vegetable seller, laughed.

"I always thought the cart was mine until night."

Bhola Sah said, "Will you keep it at home overnight?"

"No. But what are the seventy rupees for?"

Chhotelal had been silent.

At last he said, "Thirty seemed fair to me. I needed the cart for three hours."

Sarita looked at him.

"I have no objection to your thirty. My objection is to my seventy."

Kailash, who sold eggs, pulled the ledger towards himself.

"Write the time."

Bhola Sah said, "Am I to sit writing times every day?"

Kailash replied, "If you write the money, write the time too."

For a long while they added, subtracted and argued.

The full day would be seventy rupees.

The morning shift—from five in the morning to one in the afternoon—forty.

The evening shift—from one to nine at night—thirty.

But one question remained.

If someone took the cart for the full day and returned it at noon, should the rent be seventy or forty?

Bhola Sah said, "I had reserved it for the whole day. How could I know beforehand whether an evening customer would come?"

Sarita accepted that point.

"If no one takes it in the evening, seventy. If it is rented again, count my rent as the morning forty."

Rahim asked, "Then the owner still gets seventy—forty and thirty?"

"Yes," Sarita said. "The day is not sold twice. The time is sold in two shifts."

Bhola Sah looked at the ledger for a long while.

"And if someone returns it at three?"

Parvati said, "Then the quarrel starts again."

Everyone laughed.

In the end the rental rule did not become very legalistic.

There were simply three columns: "Full Day," "Morning," "Evening."

Below them was one short line:

"If a cart taken for the full day is rented again in the evening, the first rental will be counted as the morning shift."

Bhola Sah reopened Wednesday's page.

He crossed out the "70" beside Sarita's name and wrote "40."

The "30" beside Chhotelal's name remained as it was.

Sarita received thirty rupees back.

Thirty rupees was not a very large sum.

But that day the crossed-out "70" in the ledger felt weightier than the money itself.

Sarita kept cart number five for the full day that day.

There was no rain.

Sales were good.

She returned it at six in the evening and paid seventy.

Nothing unusual happened for the next three days.

On the fourth day, by noon almost all Sarita's vegetables had sold.

Only two kilos of potatoes and some chillies remained.

Earlier, on a day like this, she would slowly wheel the cart through the lanes until evening, thinking that she had already paid for the whole day.

This time she went straight to Bhola Sah's courtyard.

"Does anyone want it for the evening?"

Bhola Sah said, "Chhotelal has asked."

Sarita pushed the cart inside.

"Then write morning."

Bhola Sah looked at the clock.

"Twelve forty-five."

"Before one."

In the ledger he wrote: "Morning — 40."

Thirty rupees remained in Sarita's hand.

At five that evening, returning home from the market, Sarita reached the bus stand.

Chhotelal was roasting maize on cart number five.

On the plank were a charcoal stove and small containers of lemon, salt and chilli.

From a distance Chhotelal called, "Your cart."

Sarita replied, "Yours for the evening."

The white "5" on the right wheel was the same.

By the end of the month Bhola Sah's ledger had changed.

Beside some names was written "Full Day," beside others "Morning," beside others "Evening."

On some days the same cart number appeared on two lines, but when those two lines were added together, the total never exceeded seventy.

At first Bhola Sah found it troublesome.

So many times to ask the time, so many times to change the shift entry.

But gradually he noticed another benefit.

Earlier, renters whose vegetables sold early would still keep wheeling the empty cart around because they had paid for the whole day.

Now they returned it sooner.

Two or three new sellers became regular evening renters.

The carts were used more, but the same stretch of time was never entered as rent twice.

One day Munna, adding the ledger, said, "Babu, the rent this month is a little higher than last month."

Bhola Sah asked, "How?"

"Earlier the carts often stood idle in the evening. Now the shifts are running."

Bhola Sah looked at the page with Sarita's name.

That month she had three mornings, twenty-three full days, and four days of rain or leave.

Munna asked, "Changing the rule did not cause a loss?"

Bhola Sah said, "The day did not become shorter. Only the entry became correct."

That evening Sarita came to return cart number five.

Showing her the ledger, Bhola Sah asked, "Going early to the wholesale market tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Chhotelal has asked for number five in the evening."

Sarita smiled.

"If my vegetables sell, the evening is his."

"And if they do not?"

"Then the full day is mine."

Bhola Sah did not write anything yet beside "5."

Earlier, the moment the cart was taken, the whole day was sold in the ledger.

Now the day retained the possibility of becoming two parts.

The next morning number five rolled out onto the road again.

The same four wheels, the same plank, the same white numeral.

Only the ledger had changed—and once the ledger changed, for the first time even unused time acquired a visible value.

Story 55

Three Glasses of Water

In the waiting room of a small private clinic in Laheriasarai, the water dispenser stood to the right of the door.

Above the machine, in blue letters, was written: "Purified Water Free for Patients and Attendants."

Below it, in slightly smaller letters, was another line: "Twenty-Rupee Deposit for Steel Glass. Money Refunded on Return of Glass."

Seema Devi had read the first line from a distance.

She read the second only when her mother, Jagdamba Devi, asked for water.

Jagdamba Devi had been at the clinic for the past two hours: first registration, then tests, then waiting for the doctor.

Seema's ten-year-old son Neeraj was with her too.

School was closed, and there was no one at home with whom she could leave him.

"Ma, will you drink some water?" Seema asked.

Jagdamba Devi nodded.

Neeraj said at once, "Me too."

Seema searched her bag for the empty bottle.

She had filled it at home, but it had been finished halfway through the bus journey.

A young man sat beside the water counter.

In front of him were a small box of round red tokens and a receipt book.

Seema said, "We need three glasses of water."

The young man took out three red tokens.

"Sixty rupees deposit."

Seema paused.

"It says the water is free."

"The water is free. The deposit is for the glass."

"For three glasses?"

"Twenty each."

Seema opened her purse.

Inside were one hundred-rupee note, two ten-rupee notes and some coins.

Before leaving home that morning, she had calculated carefully.

The bus fare for coming had already been paid.

She needed seventy-two rupees for the journey back.

She had kept a little loose money for tea, water or some unexpected expense.

The registration fee had already been paid.

"Can we take one glass and drink from it one after another?" Seema asked.

The young man pointed to two baskets kept beside the machine.

One was marked "Washed," the other "Used."

"Once a glass has been used, it cannot be given again without washing. You can take one, return it, take the token, then take another."

Seema looked at the clock.

There was no certainty when the doctor would call their number.

"Then Ma will drink first."

She paid twenty rupees.

The young man gave her one red token and a glass.

Jagdamba Devi drank slowly.

She stopped halfway through the glass.

"Enough?" Seema asked.

"A little more later."

All this while Neeraj kept looking towards the water machine.

"Ma, I'm very thirsty."

Seema put the first glass into the used basket and returned the token.

"Can I get the second glass with this token?"

The young man said, "Yes, but the first deposit is still open. The glass has been returned and you have the token. The money for the token will be refunded at the accounts counter."

Seema did not understand.

"The twenty rupees won't be returned here?"

"No. I do not keep the money. The deposit is paid at the accounts counter."

Seema looked at the receipt.

The receipt for the twenty rupees the young man had taken had in fact been printed from the machine at the adjacent accounts counter.

The water counter issued only the token.

"Then for the second glass I must pay another twenty?"

"If you have not yet taken the refund for the first token, yes. Otherwise, go to the accounts counter, get the refund, then come back."

There were seven people in the queue at the accounts counter.

Seema looked at Neeraj's face.

She took out two ten-rupee notes and paid.

Neeraj drank water and returned the glass.

A second red token came into Seema's fist.

Seema herself had not yet had any water.

It was hot.

The fan was running in the waiting room, but the door opened again and again, letting the hot air from outside enter.

Jagdamba Devi said, "You drink too."

"I'll drink later."

"Later you will have to stand in the queue again."

Seema did not laugh.

She opened her purse again.

Breaking the hundred-rupee note, she paid a third twenty-rupee deposit.

A third glass came into her hand.

She drank more than half of it in one breath.

After returning the glass, she had three red tokens in her palm.

Sixty rupees of her money had now become tokens.

Just then a voice called from inside:

"Slip number one hundred and seventeen!"

Seema's slip was one hundred and seventeen.

Supporting her mother, she stood up.

Neeraj picked up the bag.

"We'll collect the money for the tokens later," Seema said.

The young man at the water counter nodded.

They spent fifteen minutes in the doctor's room.

When they came out, Seema put the prescription in her bag.

She planned to buy the medicines from the shop near home because the shop there also gave them on credit.

The clock now showed one twenty.

Seema had to catch the direct bus at one forty-five.

If she missed it, the next direct bus was at four.

In between she would have to take a tempo to the market crossing and then another bus.

Holding the three red tokens, she went to the accounts counter.

There were now five people in the queue.

Ten minutes later her turn came.

She slid the tokens beneath the glass partition.

"Three glasses. Sixty rupees refund."

The woman at the accounts counter looked at the tokens, then at the clock.

"Deposit refunds after two o'clock."

Seema thought she had perhaps heard wrongly.

"I have returned the glasses. I have the tokens."

"Yes. But deposit refunds are made after two."

"Why?"

"Cash reconciliation is done from one to two. During that time we issue new receipts only; no refunds."

"I have a bus to catch."

From behind the glass, the woman pointed to a small notice.

It really did say: "Deposit Refunds: 10–1 and 2–5."

Seema looked at the clock.

It was one thirty-two.

"If I had come eight minutes earlier, I would have got it?"

"How would I know when you joined the queue?"

The answer belonged to the rule, not to an argument.

Even so, Seema's face grew hot.

"I drank the water just now. I returned the glasses just now. Why must I get my money an hour later?"

"I do not make the rules."

Jagdamba Devi sat down on a chair behind her.

Neeraj stood beside her.

Seema moved a little aside.

She opened her purse and counted again.

Fifty rupees and some coins.

The direct bus fare for three people was seventy-two.

The sixty rupees were hers, but they were not in her hand.

Jagdamba Devi asked, "How long?"

"Until two."

"The bus?"

"One forty-five."

Her mother said nothing.

Neeraj said, "What if I had not drunk the water?"

Seema looked at him immediately.

"Don't say that."

But the sentence had already been spoken.

In the waiting room, a family was buying bottled water.

The shopkeeper took twenty rupees and handed over a bottle.

No token.

No queue.

Seema looked that way for a moment.

Neeraj asked softly, "Would buying a bottle have been cheaper?"

Seema calculated.

One large bottle for all three might have cost twenty or thirty rupees.

But she did not answer.

The water was free.

At one forty, Seema went back to the accounts counter.

"I will take the sixty rupees at two, but I will miss my bus. Is there any way?"

This time the woman at the counter spoke more gently.

"Even five minutes early, I cannot reopen refunds. The cash is being counted."

"Can I leave the tokens and send someone tomorrow?"

"The receipt is in your name. You or an authorised person."

"I live thirty-five kilometres away."

The woman fell silent.

Seema looked at the clock.

She decided to let the bus go.

At one forty-five, the horn of the bus sounded from the road outside.

Neeraj looked through the window.

"Our bus?"

Seema said, "Yes."

At two the accounts counter reopened.

Seema was first in line.

Her sixty rupees were returned against the three tokens.

The woman counted the notes three times before handing them over.

"Account complete."

Seema took the notes.

Outside, she caught a tempo.

For three people it cost thirty rupees to the market crossing.

From there, the second bus cost eighteen rupees more than the direct bus would have.

By the time they reached home, it was evening.

That night Seema opened her small expense notebook.

She recorded every journey: bus, clinic, medicine, tea—how much money had gone where.

She wrote:

"Glass deposit — 60. Refunded — 60."

She paused.

Under it she wrote:

"Bus missed. Extra fare — 48."

Neeraj was studying beside her.

He asked, "Then was the water free, or did it cost forty-eight rupees?"

Seema stopped her pen.

"The water was free."

"Then the forty-eight?"

"Not the price of the water. The price of time."

Neeraj understood some of it and some he did not.

Two weeks later Seema received a call from the clinic.

"Did you write something in the suggestion book on your last visit?"

Seema remembered.

When collecting the deposit at two, she had written one line:

"Do not suspend refunding money at a time when a returned glass has just been handed back."

The caller was the manager.

He asked, "Was there some difficulty in returning the glass?"

"Not with the glass. With the money."

Seema told him the whole story.

Halfway through, the manager said, "But the deposit was refunded in full?"

Seema did not interrupt him.

She let him finish the sentence.

"—so there was no monetary loss?" the manager asked.

Seema said, "Not in the deposit account. There was in the account of getting home."

For a few moments there was silence on the phone.

Seema added, "For someone who has more money in their purse, this is only one hour. For me, in that one hour those sixty rupees were the bus fare."

The manager said only, "All right."

Seema did not expect anything to change.

Three months later Jagdamba Devi had to visit the same clinic again.

This time Seema brought two bottles of water from home.

When they entered the waiting room, she looked instinctively towards the water counter.

The blue sign was still there: "Water Free."

The line below it had changed.

"Glass deposit: twenty rupees. Return the glass; refund immediately here."

There was now a small cash box at the water counter.

The receipt machine from the accounts desk was no longer involved.

The tokens were still red.

Seema left the bottles in her bag.

Jagdamba Devi said, "Shall I drink some water?"

Seema took one glass.

She paid twenty rupees.

Her mother drank.

The glass was returned.

The twenty rupees came back there and then.

Neeraj was not with them this time.

Seema put the note back in her purse.

The whole exchange had perhaps not taken even a minute.

She read the blue sign once more.

The water had been free before as well.

The only thing that had changed was that between the returning money and the returning person, there were no longer two counters and an hour.

Story 56

The Line for a Name

On the veranda of Belahi Middle School, the relief register hung from a rope against a damp wall.

It consisted of four pages.

Across the top, in large letters, was written: “Flood Camp: Members Present by Household.”

Below were the household number, the name of the head of the household, and the number of members.

Manjari Devi stood beside the second page with her mother-in-law, Devaki Devi.

Devaki Devi ran her finger down the lines until she found: “Raghunath Mandal.”

There were four boxes in that row.

In the first: Raghunath Mandal.

In the second: Devaki Devi.

In the third: Ramesh Mandal.

The fourth box was blank.

Devaki Devi read it again.

“Where has your name gone?”

Manjari let go of the rope holding the edge of the page.

“It should have been here.”

“After Ramesh?”

“Yes.”

Inside the veranda, people were receiving small packets of flattened rice, jaggery, candles and matches.

The number of people written on a family slip determined the quantity issued.

This was not a permanent assistance scheme.

It was a temporary distribution arranged jointly by the block administration, the school and the local committee for the first three days of the flood.

Raghunath Mandal’s slip said three.

There were four people in the household.

Manjari had married into this family six months earlier.

Two weeks after the wedding, beside her name in her parental household register at Satlakha, someone had written in red ink: "Transferred."

Ramesh had submitted an application to add her name at her marital home in Belahi.

At the time, the village employee had said, "It will be added in the regular revision."

Ramesh had thought: what difference can two or three months make?

The difference appeared when the Kamla River rose overnight, crossed the courtyard, and reached the rooms.

The first boat had brought all four of them—Raghunath Mandal, Devaki Devi, Ramesh and Manjari—to the middle school.

The young boatman had written all four names in his register.

But the relief register had been prepared not from the boat register, but from the household register.

Manjari said to Devaki Devi, "Take the slip. I'll ask."

Naresh Babu was seated at the distribution table.

In front of him lay three ledgers, a red pen and a counting stamp.

Manjari placed the three-person slip before him.

"There are four of us in the household."

Naresh Babu looked at the slip.

"The list says three."

"My name has been left out."

"The list was made from what is in the household register."

Manjari took a transparent pouch from her bag.

Inside were a copy of her marriage registration, the transfer slip, and the receipt for the application to add her name in Belahi.

Naresh Babu examined the receipt.

"The application has been made. The name has not yet been added."

"Then am I here or not?"

Naresh Babu raised his head.

"You are here. On paper, you are not here yet."

An old man standing behind her tried to laugh at the sentence, but the laugh did not come out.

Manjari too said nothing.

Naresh Babu said, "Show it at the records table. If they make a correction, I will change the count."

The records table was at the other end of the veranda.

There Ganesh Babu was spreading old newspapers to dry damp papers.

Manjari placed the receipt before him.

"My application to add my name is under this number."

Ganesh Babu searched for the number.

He opened a thick register.

He found the page for Raghunath Mandal's household.

After the three names there really was an empty line.

At the left of that blank line, in small pencil writing, were the words: "New member — Application 178."

The space for the name was blank.

Manjari kept looking at that empty space.

"My name can be written here."

Ganesh Babu took a pen in his hand, then stopped.

"I am not authorised to make an interim change in the permanent register. The application will be entered in the next regular revision."

"Will the flood wait for the regular revision?"

Ganesh Babu was silent for a few moments.

"No."

"Then who is this blank line for?"

"For the application."

"And me?"

Ganesh Babu did not close the register.

"I understand your difficulty. But I cannot change the permanent register now."

By then Manjari's mother-in-law had reached the table.

She was holding the packet issued for three people.

Devaki Devi said, "Whatever is here, we will divide into four. Why are you running around for a name?"

Manjari said softly, "Flattened rice can be divided into four. A name cannot."

Devaki Devi looked at her face.

"The name will be added later."

"The water did not come later."

Outside the veranda, the rain grew heavier again.

The school field was under knee-deep water.

Manjari looked once more at the page of the register.

The blank line was still there, with its pencil note.

Ganesh Babu said, "Can you show the register entry from your parental home?"

"I have a copy."

Manjari handed him the transfer slip.

It carried the old household number from Satlakha and a date below it.

Ganesh Babu read: "Name removed: Manjari Kumari. Reason: transferred after marriage."

"Your name is no longer there?"

"No."

"Here the application exists, but the name does not."

"Yes."

"Then on paper you are somewhere in between."

Manjari said, "I am not somewhere in between. I am at home."

Ganesh Babu fell silent again.

By afternoon three more cases of the same kind had appeared.

An elderly man's name was still attached to his old house, though the river had cut that house away and he now lived with his son.

A labourer's family had returned from a brick kiln the previous month, but two children had not yet been added to the household register.

For one newborn, the space for the name contained only the word "infant."

Ganesh Babu kept the papers for all these cases separately.

Manjari returned to the schoolroom where her mother-in-law was sitting.

Raghunath Mandal was dividing the flattened rice into four small piles.

Of the three pieces of jaggery issued for three people, Devaki Devi broke one again to make four shares.

Ramesh said, "I won't eat. Let three people eat."

Manjari immediately pushed one pile towards him.

"My name is missing. Why should your hunger be missing?"

Ramesh smiled, but kept looking at the empty side of the packet.

In the evening the boatman himself came to the school.

He had come to reconcile the numbers—how many people had been brought by boat and how many were still in the camp.

His name was Shambhu.

While checking his register, Ganesh Babu suddenly stopped.

"How many people were in the boat for Raghunath Mandal's household?"

Shambhu turned the pages.

"Four."

"Names?"

Shambhu read: "Raghunath Mandal, Devaki Devi, Ramesh Mandal, Manjari Devi."

Ganesh Babu looked at Manjari.

Manjari said nothing.

Shambhu asked, "Is something wrong?"

Ganesh Babu said, "Three in the household register. Four in the boat register."

Shambhu replied matter-of-factly, "A boat counts people, not household registers."

This time Ganesh Babu gave a faint smile.

"That is exactly the point."

He called Naresh Babu over.

Three registers were placed on the table: the household register, the boat register and the relief register.

Naresh Babu said, "We cannot alter the permanent household register. The relief list is copied from it."

Ganesh Babu asked, "Is the relief list itself a permanent register?"

"No."

"Then can we make a separate register of the people actually present in the camp?"

Naresh Babu read the heading printed on the paper: "Members Present by Household."

"Members present..." he repeated softly.

Shambhu pushed his boat register forward.

"Everyone I brought was present."

Ganesh Babu took out a blank notebook.

On the first page he wrote: "Temporary Camp Attendance Register — Not a Revision of the Permanent Household Register."

Below it he made three columns: "Name," "Basis of Presence in Camp," "Status in Permanent Register."

The first name was Manjari Devi.

In the second column: "Boat Register — Entry 26."

In the third: "Application 178 to add name to household register — pending."

Ganesh Babu held the pen out to Manjari.

"Sign here."

Manjari signed beneath her name.

Naresh Babu crossed out the three on the old relief slip and wrote four.

Beside the corrected number he put his small signature.

Devaki Devi looked at the slip.

"Four now?"

"Four for this camp."

"And the household register?"

"That will be done in the next revision."

Devaki Devi said, "Three registers for one name."

Ganesh Babu replied, "One register moved ahead of time, another stayed behind it. For the days in between, we had to make a third."

Manjari folded the slip and put it in her bag.

The rain did not stop that night.

But as new people arrived at the camp, their names began to be entered first in the boat register and then in the temporary attendance register.

Within two days the new register contained eighteen names.

For some, the permanent list still showed an old household; for some, a child's name was pending; for others, the papers had dissolved in floodwater.

No one was treated as a permanent household member merely because of the temporary entry.

It recorded only that on a certain day a certain person was present in a certain camp, and the basis on which that presence was established.

Manjari's name remained on the first line.

On the fifth day the water began to recede.

On the tenth day Raghunath Mandal's family returned home.

There was silt in the courtyard.

The cots were put out in the sun to dry.

Two sacks of grain had spoiled.

Life returned to the small calculations of the household.

The transfer slip went back into the iron trunk.

The relief slip was put there with it.

Manjari's name was still not in the permanent household register.

Three weeks later notice came for the regular revision.

Ramesh and Manjari went to the village office.

Ganesh Babu opened the same thick register.

On Raghunath Mandal's page, after the three old names, the same blank line remained.

The pencil note "New member — Application 178" had faded slightly.

With a blue pen Ganesh Babu wrote: "Manjari Devi."

In the relationship column he wrote: "Daughter-in-law."

He entered the date.

He took Manjari's signature.

Ramesh said, "Now it is right."

Manjari kept looking at the page.

"Yes. Now it is right."

Outside, the school veranda had long since dried.

The relief table had been removed.

The Temporary Camp Attendance Register had been tied up and placed in an office cupboard.

On the first line of that register, Manjari's name had been written from the days of the flood.

Her name entered the permanent household register only after the water had receded long before.

Story 57

The Crop Sample

The gate of the Barhi paddy procurement centre had opened before seven in the morning.

In the December fog, bullock carts, small tractors and handcarts were entering one after another.

On a bamboo board to the right of the gate, a sheet of paper was pinned:

"First registration, then inspection, then weighing."

Kiran Devi had come to the centre for the third time with her fourteen sacks of paddy.

On the previous two occasions her crop had been purchased without any difficulty.

This time a new long brass sampling probe lay on the inspection table.

Its front end was narrow and pointed; at the back was a small tube.

Inspection assistant Nandkishor stopped the first sack.

He pushed the probe into the middle of the sack, twisted it slightly, then pulled it out.

A small stream of paddy fell from the tube into a brass bowl.

Kiran watched.

The second sack.

Then the third.

From each sack, roughly a quarter of a handful of grain fell into the bowl.

From time to time Nandkishor pressed the grains between his fingers.

"The moisture seems fine," he said.

Kiran asked, "Will this paddy go back into the sack?"

Without looking up, Nandkishor replied, "No. It is the sample."

"Then where does it go?"

"For testing."

Kiran moved on.

At the time the matter did not seem particularly important.

All fourteen sacks passed under the probe.

Then the sacks went to the weighing table.

Each weight was written down.

Numbers were marked on the sacks in blue chalk.

She received her slip.

Putting it into her bag, she moved towards the line for payment processing.

Behind her, Harinarayan Yadav had reached the inspection table with nine sacks.

When grain from his first sack fell into the bowl, he laughed and said, "If this much comes out in testing, the birds at the centre will grow fat."

Nandkishor laughed too.

"The birds won't eat it, Kaka. It is testing grain."

"And while you go on testing, where does the grain end up?"

"In the sample bucket."

Nandkishor pointed to a blue bucket under the table.

It was half full.

Standing in the payment line, Kiran looked again at the bucket.

Not that many people had arrived yet that morning.

Still, half a bucket.

Kamala Devi, standing ahead of her, was folding her slip.

Kiran asked, "How many sacks did you bring?"

"Eleven."

"They took a sample from every sack?"

"Yes."

Kamala Devi looked at her with mild surprise.

"Why?"

"Nothing. I am just looking."

The payment itself was not going to be made immediately.

Slips were being deposited and names entered for bank payment.

Kiran went outside and sat near the tea seller.

The sun was beginning to rise through the fog.

By ten o'clock the centre courtyard was full of sacks.

When the blue bucket beside the inspection table filled, Nandkishor lifted it and carried it into the room at the back.

Kiran stood up almost without thinking.

She did not go as far as the room, but the open doorway gave a clear view inside.

Nandkishor was pouring the paddy from the bucket into a white sack.

In black letters the sack was marked: "Sample Residue."

The question rose again in Kiran's mind.

She went to the inspection table.

"Whose white sack is that?"

Nandkishor said, "The centre's."

"The paddy?"

"From the samples."

"Whose samples?"

For the first time Nandkishor paused.

"Everyone's."

Kiran said, "Then how is the sack the centre's?"

Nandkishor smiled.

"If all are the parents, is the child the centre's?"

People standing nearby laughed.

Kiran smiled too.

"I am not joking. I want to understand."

By then the centre's accounts assistant, Shashibhushan, had also come over.

He said, "The sample is taken for testing. It is a very small amount."

Kiran asked, "Does weighing happen first or sampling first?"

"Sampling first. That way the quality of the grain can be judged properly."

"Then the sacks are weighed?"

"Yes."

"Then the grain that has gone into the sample is not included in the weight on the farmer's slip?"

Shashibhushan was silent for a moment.

"It is a very small amount."

Kiran said, "I understand that it is small. What I do not understand is whose it is."

Harinarayan Yadav left his sacks and came over.

"Now I understand the question too."

Shashibhushan said, "Only a few grams come out of each sack. It is not right to stop the work over this."

Kiran replied, "Do not stop the work. Just show the account."

"What account?"

"Is sampling the centre's work or the farmer's?"

"It is the centre's inspection."

"Then why is the paddy used for the inspection left outside the farmer's recorded weight?"

A few more people gathered in the courtyard.

No one spoke loudly.

The question was small, but the answer was not equally simple.

The centre supervisor, Rampravesh Babu, was informed.

He came to the inspection table carrying a thick register.

"What happened?"

Shashibhushan explained briefly.

Rampravesh Babu looked at Kiran.

"You do not want to give a sample?"

"I will. How can the centre buy without testing?"

"Then?"

"I will give the sample, but its weight should exist in someone's account too."

Rampravesh Babu said, "All the farmers' samples get mixed later. Returning each one separately is not possible."

"I am not asking for it to be returned."

"Then?"

Kiran did not pick up the probe lying on the table. She only pointed towards it.

"This testing tool belongs to the centre."

"Yes."

"The bowl belongs to the centre."

"Yes."

"The moisture meter belongs to the centre."

"Yes."

"Then why is the cost of the paddy taken out for testing silently excluded from the farmer's weight?"

Rampravesh Babu opened the register.

It had columns for purchase weight, moisture, impurities, rate and total amount.

There was no column called "sample."

He turned the page.

There was none there either.

Shashibhushan said quietly, "The rule says a sample has to be taken. There is no separate weight column for it."

Harinarayan said, "So if there is no column for something, the thing does not exist?"

Rampravesh Babu did not signal him to keep quiet.

He asked Nandkishor, "About how much comes out of one sack?"

"It is not always the same. It depends on the grain and the probe. Twenty to twenty-five grams, sometimes more."

"How many sacks have been tested today?"

Nandkishor checked the register.

"Two hundred and twelve."

Kiran looked at the blue bucket.

Rampravesh Babu looked too.

"Weigh the white sack."

Nandkishor went inside.

The white sack was brought out.

It was not full; a great deal of space remained at the top.

It was placed on a small scale.

The needle stopped near four kilos eight hundred grams.

No one said anything.

Rampravesh Babu said, "This belongs to all the farmers. Fine."

Kiran said, "And now it is impossible to know how much belonged to each farmer."

"Yes."

"Then when the samples were mixed, the owner's name disappeared."

Shashibhushan said, "Keeping a separate account for such a small portion would be difficult."

Kiran took out her slip.

"Do not keep separate accounts. Change the order."

"What order?"

"Weigh first. Then take the sample."

For a few moments the courtyard was silent.

Rampravesh Babu said, "Then a little less paddy than the slip shows will reach the centre's store."

"Because the centre is doing the testing."

"You mean the weight of the sample should be treated as the centre's testing expense?"

"I am only asking one thing: whose cost is the test?"

Harinarayan wiped his forehead with the end of his dhoti.

"If weighing happens first, I get a slip for my full weight. The sample taken afterward goes into the centre's inspection."

Kamala Devi too came away from the line.

"And if you return the sample to the farmer's sack, will that spoil the purpose of the test?"

Nandkishor said, "After all the samples are mixed, returning them would not be right. We would not know whose grain went into whose sack."

"Then do not return it," Kamala Devi said. "Just record the weight first."

Rampravesh Babu did not decide immediately.

He looked at the distance from the inspection table to the weighing table.

There were about twenty cubits between them.

Until then, sacks were inspected first, then weighed, then stitched.

If the order were reversed, the sacks would be weighed first, then inspected, then stitched.

Rampravesh Babu called over a warehouse employee.

"Try it with twenty sacks today."

"Now?"

"Now."

The next farmer's five sacks went first to the weighing table.

The weights were recorded.

Then the sacks came to the inspection table.

The probe went in.

Paddy fell into the bowl.

The sacks went for stitching.

Shashibhushan matched the slips with the warehouse register.

The five sacks were complete.

Then the next seven.

Then eight.

Twenty sacks were completed.

The inspection had taken out slightly less than half a kilo of paddy in all.

Rampravesh Babu said, "This half kilo will now be treated as the centre's inspection sample."

Shashibhushan asked, "The warehouse account?"

"Make a separate column: 'Inspection Sample.'"

"There is no such column in the prescribed register."

"Add an extra page. Do not deduct it from the purchase weight."

Kiran said nothing.

She only kept looking at her old slip.

Rampravesh Babu said, "We cannot reweigh the farmers whose sacks were already inspected today."

Kiran nodded.

"What happened today has happened. From the next sack onward, let the order be right."

Rampravesh Babu had the board at the gate taken down.

The old paper said: "First registration, then inspection, then weighing."

With a black pen he exchanged the positions of "inspection" and "weighing."

The new line read: "First registration, then weighing, then inspection."

The handwriting was not neat, but the order was clear.

After noon, the centre began moving quickly again.

Kiran was preparing to leave with her payment slip.

At that moment Nandkishor brought out a new white sack.

Instead of the old label "Sample Residue," this one was marked:

"Inspection Sample — Centre."

The date was written below.

On the extra page, Shashibhushan made the first entry.

"Inspection Sample: Centre's Expense."

Harinarayan read it and said, "Now the child has found a father."

People laughed.

Nandkishor did too.

Kiran said, "Not a father. It has found an expense column."

By evening, one hundred and seventy-seven sacks had been purchased under the new order.

No separate deduction for sampling was made from anyone's weighed quantity.

Inspection continued exactly as before.

The moisture meter kept showing its numbers as before.

The probe kept entering the body of each sack as before.

The only change was that the grain emerging from the probe now fell into the bowl after the farmer's weight had already been recorded.

Three days later Kiran came to the centre again.

Her neighbour's paddy was to be sold.

A new clean notice had been posted at the gate:

"Registration → Weighing → Inspection → Stitching."

Behind the inspection table stood three small white sacks in order.

Each was marked with a date and the words "Centre Inspection Sample."

Shashibhushan was filling in the new column in the register.

Kiran asked, "Was it difficult?"

"A little on the first day."

"And now?"

"Now people are getting used to it."

"The warehouse account?"

"Testing expense separate. Purchase weight separate."

Kiran looked at the probe lying on the table.

It was the same old probe.

The same bowl.

The same scale.

The paddy still came out by the handful in exactly the same way.

The only difference was that the handful now fell on the other side of the weighing.

Story 58

The Small Awning

For five years, Mamta Devi had been living as a tenant in the rear portion of an old two-storey house in Laheriasarai, Darbhanga.

Along with her room, she had a small kitchen, a narrow veranda and an iron door opening into the courtyard.

There had originally been nothing directly above the door.

In summer, that meant little.

In the rains, it meant a great deal.

Water from the edge of the roof fell directly in front of the doorway, and when the wind was strong, half of it splashed inside.

For the first two monsoons Mamta managed with buckets, old sacks and a mop.

In the third year she slipped.

That day she had turned near the doorway carrying a pot of milk.

Her foot landed on a mossy brick and her body struck the wall beside her.

The pot was saved, but her elbow hurt for two weeks.

After that Mamta said to her husband Vinod, "We need some kind of cover here."

Vinod was an electrician.

He was out all day and usually did small repairs at home on Sundays.

He measured the wall.

"It will not project more than two cubits," he said.

"Just enough to protect the doorway."

Shambhu, a tinsmith from the neighbouring lane, was called.

He brought an old but sturdy strip of blue sheet metal.

Two iron brackets, four screws, a narrow gutter and the sheet—that was all it took to make the awning.

Water stopped falling directly before the door and began running into the old drain on the right.

Mamta paid the cost.

At the time, the landlord, Shivkant Jha, was living in Madhubani with his younger son.

His elder daughter Kalpana came once a month to collect the rent.

The awning was installed.

One monsoon passed, then another.

For Mamta, the blue sheet gradually became like a part of the house.

In the morning the milkman would set his vessel beneath it.

The children put on their shoes there before leaving for school.

Sometimes a bag of vegetables would hang there for two minutes to keep it out of the rain.

Even so, the awning was not large.

If two people stood beneath it together, one person's shoulder remained outside.

In Jeth of the fifth year, Shivkant Jha returned to live permanently in the house.

He was close to seventy.

The upper floor was empty, so he began inspecting the paint, drains, electrical wires and cracks in the walls one by one.

One morning his eyes went to the space above Mamta's door.

He stopped.

"Whose tin sheet is this?"

Mamta was wringing clothes in the courtyard.

"I had it put up."

"With whose permission?"

The question was not loud, but it was direct.

Mamta put the clothes back in the bucket.

"Rainwater used to come inside. You were not living here then."

"Did you tell Kalpana?"

Mamta thought for a moment.

"She saw it. She did not stop us."

Shivkant went up to the wall.

Where the iron bracket had been fixed with screws, a fine line showed at the edge of the plaster.

He touched it with his finger.

"Look at this. The wall is cracked."

When Vinod returned that evening, the matter came up again.

Shivkant said, "If every tenant starts drilling into the walls as they please, how will the house survive?"

Vinod remained calm.

"There are only four screw holes. Shambhu filled around them with mortar when he fitted it."

"Four today. Tomorrow someone else will make six. A third person will fasten a pipe. There has to be one rule."

Vinod did not immediately find an answer.

The house was not his.

Nor was the wall.

Shivkant said again, "Have it removed on Sunday. I will get the plaster repaired."

Mamta looked towards the kitchen door.

"The rains are about to begin."

"I am having the roof drain cleaned. Water will not fall there."

"What about the rain that blows in with the wind?"

Shivkant was silent for a moment.

"A house cannot run forever on little awnings. It needs proper repair."

Mamta did not think the sentence was wrong.

But she also remembered that for the past two monsoons, without any proper repair, that small awning had kept the house usable.

On Sunday Shambhu came.

He put oil on the screw heads.

The first screw came out easily.

The second was stuck.

Shambhu said, "Didi, if we remove it carefully, the sheet will survive. You can use it somewhere else later."

Shivkant stood on the veranda.

"The sheet is hers. The wall is mine. Save both."

Mamta said nothing to that.

Shambhu removed two brackets, but the work was not completed by evening.

One side of the sheet was tied up temporarily with a rope.

"I'll take it down completely tomorrow morning," Shambhu said.

At ten that night, the wind changed.

First lightning flashed in the distance.

Then rain suddenly began so heavily that the house opposite blurred from sight.

Mamta had already shut the door.

Five minutes later the first splash landed on the kitchen floor.

She quickly pulled out an old sack.

Because the sheet had been tied halfway up, the roof water was not falling directly at the doorway as before, but wind-driven rain was slanting in.

Vinod went outside.

There was not knee-deep water in the courtyard, but the drain was full.

The mouth of the narrow drain that had for years caught the water on the right side of the awning was blocked with leaves.

Vinod took a short piece of bamboo and cleared them away.

The water rushed out.

Just then Shivkant's voice came from the upper veranda.

"Vinod!"

"Yes!"

"Water is coming into the rear room."

The rear room was Shivkant's storeroom.

It was built beside Mamta's kitchen, on the other side of the same outer wall.

Vinod went with a torch.

Dark wet lines were climbing the lower portion of the wall.

An old wooden chest stood in one corner.

The floor beneath it was wet.

Shivkant moved the chest aside.

"Why from here?"

Vinod inspected the outside wall.

Where Mamta's small awning had previously projected, the plaster was relatively dry.

Where the sheet had been raised that day, rain was beating against the wall.

Not runoff from the roof—the wind was driving the rain sideways.

The water was running down and collecting near the foundation.

Shivkant moved the torch beam across the wall.

On the old white plaster two colours were clearly visible: one pale, one dark.

Vinod said, "Look. Where the awning used to be, the wall is less wet."

Shivkant did not agree immediately.

"One night proves nothing."

"That is true."

"Water may also be entering through the screw holes."

"That may be true too."

For a few moments both men simply watched the rain.

It showed no sign of easing.

At last Shivkant said, "Move the chest up. Tomorrow I'll call a mason."

The next morning the courtyard was full of moss, leaves and broken flowers.

Shambhu did not come.

The rain had held up another job of his.

Shivkant called Jagdish, a mason.

Jagdish first examined the wet wall from inside, then went outside.

He bent down and inspected the first four courses of brick.

At one place the mortar had crumbled away.

At another there was a dark stain showing that water had stood there.

He examined the awning brackets too.

"The screws are not wrong, but the filling around them was not done properly," he said.

Shivkant asked, "Should the awning be removed or not?"

Jagdish did not laugh.

He measured the edge of the sheet, the drain and the way the wall met them.

"This sheet keeps water off. But it is not a permanent solution for the house."

Mamta stood by the doorway.

"Then?"

"We will refill the mortar at the bottom of the wall. Above, we will make an edge to throw water away from the wall. The screw holes will be sealed properly. And if the awning remains, its slope must be corrected towards the drain."

Shivkant said, "My fear is that tomorrow every tenant will start attaching something or other."

Putting his hammer back into his bag, Jagdish said, "Then make a rule for additions. Rain does not come after reading rules."

Vinod smiled slightly at that sentence.

Shivkant did not.

By afternoon, the lower mortar had been opened up.

While scraping away the old damp portion, Jagdish stopped at one place.

"Look at this."

There was an old fine crack in the brick joint.

The crack was not new.

The dust and blackness inside showed that it had been receiving water for years.

Mamta asked, "From my screws?"

Jagdish shook his head.

"The screws are above. This crack below is old."

Shivkant stood silently beside the wall.

He knew the history of his old house better than Mamta did, but no one fully knew the history inside the wall.

That evening Shambhu arrived.

"Shall I remove it?"

Shivkant said, "Not yet."

Shambhu looked at Vinod.

Vinod said nothing.

Shivkant pointed towards the sheet.

"First put it back properly. Fill the mortar well around the screws. Keep the mouth of the drain open. Give it a little more slope."

Mamta asked, "And the plan to remove it?"

"We will see later."

That answer was not a victory.

Mamta had not expected one.

Two days later Shivkant brought a notebook.

On the cover he wrote: "House Repairs and Additions."

On the first page he made three headings:

"House Structure."

"Tenant's Property."

"Shared Maintenance."

Shivkant called Vinod.

"Whose property is this awning?"

"The tin sheet is mine," Vinod said.

"The wall?"

"Yours."

"The drain?"

Vinod thought for a moment.

"The house's."

"Who will clean it?"

From inside, Mamta said, "Whoever sees the leaves will remove them."

For the first time Shivkant smiled.

"How do I write that in the register?"

Mamta came outside.

"The drain belongs to the house. The leaves belong to everyone."

Shambhu burst out laughing.

Shivkant wrote: "Drain — shared cleaning."

In the line for the awning he wrote:

"Tin sheet belongs to tenant; additions only with landlord's permission; sealing around screw points and external wall repair are landlord's responsibility."

Vinod read it.

"If we leave the house?"

"You may remove the sheet. I will have the holes filled, provided ordinary removal does not damage the wall."

"If you want the awning removed?"

Shivkant paused.

"Not before the rains. And I will record the reason."

To Mamta, the notebook mattered more than the awning in that answer.

The awning projected only two cubits.

The three headings in the notebook could extend much farther.

The following week heavy rain came again.

This time the sheet was fully in place.

Water drummed on its blue surface and fell towards the drain.

The kitchen doorway remained dry.

So did the wall of the adjoining storeroom.

Shivkant came twice with a torch to inspect it.

The third time Mamta said, "Still checking?"

"The house is old. Checking is not a bad thing."

He bent down and removed two leaves from the mouth of the drain.

Mamta said nothing.

After the rain stopped, two children stood beneath the awning putting on their shoes.

Shivkant did not move them away.

He only ran his hand over the lower part of the wall.

The plaster was dry.

Then he looked up at the sheet.

The small awning still belonged to Mamta.

The wall still belonged to Shivkant.

But the rain that fell between those two things that night had made it difficult to write everything under only one person's name.

Story 59

The Bar of Soap

At a women's hostel in Darbhanga, soap was distributed on the first Saturday of every month.

The rule was very old.

One student, one bar of bathing soap.

The hostel had twenty-four rooms.

Almost every room housed two students.

So for Kusum Jha, the store clerk, the arithmetic was very simple: twenty-four rooms, two students in each, forty-eight bars in all.

The monthly requisition was prepared on that basis.

The supplies arrived on that basis.

And on distribution day, twenty-four small paper packets were made, with two bars in each.

Kusum liked the arrangement.

Write the room number on the packet, take a signature, work finished.

This month too, at ten in the morning, a long table was set up on the hostel veranda.

Four boxes of soap stood on it.

Twelve bars in each box.

Four boxes—forty-eight.

Kusum opened the boxes and arranged the bars in order.

Every bar, wrapped in pink paper, was the same size.

Beside them lay the open distribution register.

The first line read: Room 1.

The last: Room 24.

The superintendent, Kaushalya Devi, sat on a chair.

She lowered her glasses slightly on her nose and looked at the register.

"Begin."

The representative from Room 1 came forward.

She took two bars.

She signed.

Room 2.

Two bars.

Signature.

Room 3.

In this way the line moved forward.

Kusum had no worry about the count.

There were exactly as many bars in the boxes as there were in the register.

Ranjana from Room 5 came.

She turned away carrying two bars in one hand.

A student standing behind her laughed.

"Taking two at once?"

Ranjana laughed too.

"There are two of us in my room."

"Where is the other one?"

"She has a fever. She's in bed."

The matter ended there.

No one knew then that, a little later, those same two bars would become a subject of discussion again.

By noon, supplies had been distributed to twenty-three rooms.

Only two bars remained on the table.

Kusum turned the page of the register.

"Room twenty-four."

Three students came forward.

The first was Prabha.

The second, Sonali.

The third, Meenakshi.

Kusum stopped her hand.

"Three of you?"

Prabha said, "Yes."

"In this room?"

"Yes."

Kusum looked at the register.

It contained only the number: 24.

No names.

Only the room number and a blank space for a signature.

"There are two bars."

Prabha thought Kusum was joking.

"There are three of us."

"The register provides for two."

Meenakshi said softly, "I came here ten days ago."

Kusum looked at her.

"Where were you before?"

"I am a new admission. There was no space, so a third cot was put in this room."

Kaushalya Devi rose from her chair.

"Are the supplies short?"

Putting the two bars on the table, Kusum said, "By one bar."

The voices of the students standing on the veranda grew a little quieter.

Someone said, "Someone must have received extra."

Another voice said, "Forty-eight came, didn't they?"

Kusum answered at once, "Four boxes. Twelve each. I counted them myself."

"Then where did one bar go?"

After that question, everyone's eyes began moving towards one another's hands, bags and rooms.

Ranjana was standing at the other end of the veranda.

Someone said quietly, "I saw Ranjana take two at once."

Ranjana heard it.

She immediately came forward.

"Neelima is in my room too. She has a fever."

"I only said I saw you take two."

"If the rule says two are due, does taking two become theft?"

The veranda fell silent again.

Kaushalya Devi raised her hand.

"No one's bag will be checked. No one's room will be searched."

She turned towards Kusum.

"Look at the papers first."

Kusum did not like that suggestion.

She trusted her count.

Even so, she took the storeroom key and went inside.

A little later she returned carrying three papers.

The first was the goods receipt.

Four boxes of bathing soap.

Twelve bars in each.

Total: forty-eight.

The second was the monthly requisition.

On it was Kusum's own handwriting:

"24 rooms × 2 = 48."

The third was the distribution register.

Room 1 through Room 24.

Kaushalya Devi placed all three papers together on the table.

"Bring the residents' register."

Kusum went inside again.

This time she returned with a thick register.

That register contained names.

Room 1—two names.

Room 2—two names.

And so on.

At Room 24 there were three names.

Prabha Kumari.

Sonali Jha.

Meenakshi Yadav.

Beside Meenakshi's name, in blue ink, was written: "Admission: 10 days ago."

Kaushalya Devi put her finger on the line.

"How many residents in all?"

Before answering, Kusum began counting the register.

One, two, three...

Some of the students also began counting silently along with her.

At last Kusum said, "Forty-nine."

Kaushalya Devi lifted the requisition.

"How many bars of soap were requested?"

"Forty-eight."

"Why?"

Kusum looked at the paper.

"Twenty-four rooms... two each."

"But how many students?"

"Forty-nine."

For a few moments no one spoke.

The two bars were still lying on the table.

Meenakshi stood beside them.

Kaushalya Devi said slowly, "No bar of soap has gone missing."

Ranjana looked towards Kusum.

Kusum looked at Meenakshi's name.

Meenakshi kept looking at the requisition lying on the table.

There had never been any space on that paper for her name.

Prabha said, "Then the three of us can share the two bars. It will be corrected next month."

Meenakshi said at once, "I still have some of my old bar left. I do not need one today."

Kaushalya Devi shook her head.

"This is not about one bar of soap."

She placed her finger on the requisition.

"The point is that our calculation counts rooms, not people."

Kusum became slightly uncomfortable.

"It has been done this way for years."

"For years, perhaps every room had two students."

"Most of the time."

"Monthly supplies cannot be distributed on the strength of 'most of the time.'"

This time none of the students laughed.

Kaushalya Devi turned towards Ranjana.

"Your name being raised in the middle of this was not right."

Ranjana replied, "It was not just one person who raised it. Everyone thought someone had taken extra."

"Why did they think that?"

"Because the paper said the supplies were complete."

Kaushalya Devi said, "And the paper was incomplete."

Kusum pulled the distribution register towards herself.

It had twenty-four lines.

Twenty-four lines for forty-nine people.

For the first time, she saw the difference so clearly on paper.

"We will make a new register," she said.

Kaushalya Devi asked, "How?"

Kusum thought for a moment.

"The room number will remain, but there will be one line for each student."

"And the requisition?"

"The resident count will be checked one day before distribution."

"New admissions?"

"Added."

"Those who leave?"

"Removed."

"Three students in one room?"

This time Kusum smiled.

"Three lines."

The atmosphere on the veranda lightened slightly.

Meenakshi smiled too.

But the immediate problem on the table remained unchanged: two bars, three students.

Kaushalya Devi took out a small expense slip from the hostel office.

"One bar will be purchased today from the local cooperative shop."

Kusum asked, "Under whose name?"

Kaushalya Devi said, "Hostel supply correction. Not anyone's private donation."

Meenakshi liked that.

She did not want charity.

She only wanted the item that everyone was entitled to under the rule.

In the afternoon, an employee brought one bar of soap from the cooperative shop.

Kusum attached its receipt to the requisition.

Then she prepared the first sample page of the new distribution register.

The first column: serial number.

The second: student's name.

The third: room number.

The fourth: item.

The fifth: signature.

Kusum wrote Meenakshi's name.

Serial number 49.

Room 24.

Bathing soap — 1.

Meenakshi signed.

Passing along the veranda, Ranjana stopped.

She looked at the register.

"Where is my name?"

Kusum turned to the first page.

"Serial number 9."

Ranjana said, "And Neelima?"

"10."

"Then if I carry two bars away in one hand now?"

For the first time, Kusum smiled openly.

"There will be two marks beside two names. Then no one will suspect anything."

One day before the next month's distribution, Kaushalya Devi herself checked the residents' register.

By then one student had completed her examination and left the hostel.

Another new student had arrived.

The total was again forty-nine.

But on the requisition Kusum did not write "24 × 2."

She wrote: "Active residents: 49."

A list of names was attached below it.

On Saturday the same long table was again set up on the veranda.

Again, bars of soap wrapped in pink paper were arranged in rows.

This time, before counting the soap, Kusum counted the lines.

From one to forty-nine.

Then she counted the bars.

From one to forty-nine.

Meenakshi now came as the representative for Room 24.

Kusum did not simply hand her three bars together.

She read all three names.

Prabha—one.

Sonali—one.

Meenakshi—one.

Meenakshi put all three bars into her bag.

Kusum marked three separate lines.

At the end, no bar remained on the table.

No one was short of a bar either.

As Superintendent Kaushalya Devi closed the register, she looked for a moment at the final page.

Something more important than the number of soap bars was written there.

Forty-nine names.

The previous month, no bar of soap had gone missing.

What had been missing was one line in the count for one student.

Story 60

Outside the Accounts

It was the final night of the autumn fair.

For six days, two long rows of bamboo stalls, tarpaulins, yellow bulbs and coloured pennants had filled the field.

Now, after ten at night, the lights were going out one by one.

The last customer came to Ramlochan Sah's spice stall at nine fifty-five.

He bought half a kilo of roasted cumin, two packets of coriander and a small box of chilli powder.

After the customer left, Ramlochan closed the lid of the wooden chest.

"Sales are over now," he said.

His daughter Sushma laughed.

"That is the first time in six days you have said that on time."

"Today even the customers agreed."

Maya Devi was gathering the empty sacks kept at the back.

The colour of spices had settled into her fingers.

Niranjan took down the small signboard from the bamboo post: "Ramlochan Spice Store."

As soon as the sign came down, the stall looked a little smaller.

Beside them was Karim Ansari's stall selling dry fruits and savoury mixtures.

He was still adding his accounts.

Karim's two assistants were tying up boxes of goods.

A young night watchman sat outside on a bench.

Ramlochan took out his blue ledger.

The sales for the six days were written on separate pages.

First day: seven thousand three hundred and fifty.

Second day: six thousand nine hundred.

Third day: eight thousand one hundred and twenty.

The amounts for the final three days had also been added.

Sushma did not take out a calculator.

She preferred adding on paper.

"Forty-six thousand two hundred and forty in all," she said.

Ramlochan turned to the expenses page.

Goods purchased — thirty-one thousand eight hundred.

Fair fee — one thousand five hundred.

Electricity — four hundred and twenty.

Transport — one thousand two hundred and sixty.

Paper, string and bags — four hundred and eighty.

Tea, water and small miscellaneous expenses — three hundred and sixty.

Ramlochan added them.

"Thirty-five thousand eight hundred and twenty."

Sushma immediately said, "Then nine thousand four hundred and twenty remains."

Ramlochan's face brightened.

"Not bad this time."

Karim Ansari heard him.

"I will not have that much left," he said, closing his own ledger.

Ramlochan smiled.

"Your stall was larger than mine."

"It was larger, and so were the expenses."

Karim opened his ledger again.

"Two assistants — three thousand six hundred. Night watchman — nine hundred. Loading and unloading on the first and last days — eight hundred. Wages for two women at home who packed the savoury mixture — one thousand and twenty."

Ramlochan laughed.

"Did you run a business or distribute wages?"

Karim laughed too.

"If the shop cannot run without someone, that person's name enters the expenses."

Before answering, Ramlochan looked at Maya Devi's hands.

She was folding an empty sack.

Sushma said nothing.

An announcement came from the fair committee:

"Traders wishing to have their deposits refunded must clean their spaces and have the bamboo and tarpaulins removed by eight tomorrow morning. If rubbish remains, cleaning charges will be deducted from the deposit."

Ramlochan raised his head.

"Eight in the morning?"

Niranjan said, "Then we won't get home early tonight."

"We won't take down the tarpaulin now. There will be dew at night. We'll do it in the morning."

Maya Devi asked, "And the night watch?"

"Niranjan and I will take turns staying awake."

From the next stall Karim Ansari said, "My watchman can keep an eye on both stalls if you like."

Ramlochan waved a hand.

"No, no. We have our own people."

Karim looked at him for a moment, then smiled.

"All right."

At half past ten, Maya Devi and Sushma left for home.

Maya Devi carried three small boxes of leftover spices.

She could not simply leave them as they were after reaching home.

The chilli and coriander had to be separated and wrapped again in cloth to protect them from moisture.

Ramlochan remained at the field.

Niranjan stayed awake until midnight.

At one, he lay down on the bench.

Ramlochan then sat up.

Most of the bulbs in the field had gone dark.

In the distance, the tea seller was still washing his last kettle.

Karim's watchman walked between three rows of stalls.

Every now and then he looked towards Ramlochan too.

At half past two Ramlochan's eyes closed.

At three a dog tried to enter the stall, sniffing at the sacks.

Ramlochan woke up.

He lifted the sacks higher.

At five in the morning Niranjan got up.

"Babu, did you sleep?"

"As much as necessary."

The two began taking down the tarpaulin.

The damp ropes had gone stiff.

While untying the bamboo knots, the skin beside one of Ramlochan's fingernails scraped off.

At six Karim's two assistants arrived.

Within ten minutes his tarpaulin was down and the boxes had been loaded onto a cart.

Ramlochan and Niranjan were still separating the bamboo poles.

Karim told one of his assistants, "Load two of Ramlochanji's boxes as well."

Ramlochan immediately said, "No, no. We'll manage."

The assistant stopped.

Niranjan was breathing a little heavily.

At half past six Maya Devi and Sushma returned to the field.

Maya Devi had brought a broom, an old cloth and two empty tins from home.

Ramlochan asked, "Did you take care of the leftover spices last night?"

"Yes. I opened all three boxes again. Two packets had picked up moisture, so I changed them."

"How long did it take?"

Maya Devi looked at him.

"I did not look at the clock."

Sushma said, "It was twelve ten when I went to sleep."

Ramlochan fell silent.

By seven the space was almost empty.

The tarpaulin had been folded.

The bamboo had been deposited in the committee's pile.

Torn paper, empty spice packets, bits of string, dust and leaves had been swept together.

A committee employee came over.

He inspected the ground.

"Fine. The full deposit will be returned."

Ramlochan collected the five-hundred-rupee deposit.

Sushma smiled.

"Will we add this five hundred to the profit?"

"The deposit was our own money. It is not profit."

"If we had not cleaned, it would have been deducted."

"Even so, it was our own money."

"I was only asking."

Ramlochan did not understand the tone of her question.

Before leaving the field, they stopped at the fair committee table, where priority forms for next year were being distributed.

A trader who had vacated the space according to the rules this year would have the first right to request the same location at the next fair.

Ramlochan took a form.

Name, type of stall, space number and fair fee were ordinary questions.

Near the bottom were two boxes:

"Total persons working."

"Persons employed for wages."

Ramlochan wrote "1" in the first box.

Sushma looked at the form.

"One?"

"The shop is mine."

"Were you the only person working for six days?"

Ramlochan stopped his pen.

Sushma said, "You are the owner. The question is not asking who owns it. It is asking how many people worked."

Niranjan laughed.

"Then will my name go in too?"

"Did you stand night watch?"

"Yes."

"Did you lift the sacks?"

"Yes."

"Then?"

Maya Devi leaned the broom against the wall.

"What will happen if my name is written?"

Sushma said, "Nothing. But writing only one when four worked is not right either."

Ramlochan crossed out the "1" and wrote "4."

In the second box—"Persons employed for wages"—he wrote zero.

Taking the form, the employee asked, "Four people worked, but the number employed for wages is only zero?"

Ramlochan said, "They were family."

The employee nodded matter-of-factly.

There was nothing unusual in that answer to him.

After reaching home, Ramlochan bathed first.

Maya Devi put rice on the stove.

Sushma took out the blue ledger again and placed it on the table.

While eating, Ramlochan asked, "Accounts again?"

"The final account."

"Nine thousand four hundred and twenty. We added it yesterday."

"That was the cash account."

Ramlochan put his spoon down on the plate.

"A business runs on the cash account."

"Yes."

Sushma did not argue.

She reminded him of the page in Karim Ansari's ledger where wages had been entered.

"Babu, if Niranjan Bhaiya had not lifted the sacks, how much would you have paid someone to do the loading?"

"For two rounds... four or five hundred."

"Night watch?"

Ramlochan did not answer.

Niranjan said, "Karim Chacha paid nine hundred."

Sushma looked at Maya Devi.

"Packing the packets at home?"

Maya Devi said at once, "That was work for our own household. How can its money be counted?"

"I am not saying money has to be paid."

"Then?"

"If you had not done it, would Babu have had to hire someone?"

Ramlochan said quietly, "He would."

Maya Devi lifted the lid from the rice pot.

Steam rose.

"Then write it down," she said. "But do not turn it into a debt against me."

Everyone laughed.

Ramlochan laughed too.

"If I start paying your wages, the shop will close."

Maya Devi replied, "The shop will not close. The mouth of your profit will only become smaller."

This time the laughter lasted a little longer.

Then Sushma took a blank sheet of paper.

At the top she wrote: "Cash Expenses at the Fair."

Below it she copied all the amounts from the ledger.

On a second page she wrote: "Labour Outside the Accounts."

Ramlochan frowned.

"That title is too heavy."

"Then give it a lighter one."

Niranjan said, "Household work?"

Maya Devi said, "Household work for the fair."

Sushma wrote that.

First line: sorting spices.

Second: weighing and making packets.

Third: making the name-board.

Fourth: loading the goods at dawn.

Fifth: night watch.

Sixth: cleaning and packing up on the final day.

Seventh: securing the leftover stock again at home.

Ramlochan kept looking at the list.

"Was Sushma involved in all this too?"

Maya Devi asked, "Whose handwriting was on the name-board?"

Ramlochan looked at Sushma.

Sushma laughed.

"Did you think it was printed?"

"I had not noticed."

"That is exactly what the account is about."

This time Ramlochan did not laugh.

He pulled the blue ledger towards himself.

Beside the figure nine thousand four hundred and twenty he had earlier written only: "Profit."

He did not strike out the word "Profit."

He added two words beside it: "Cash Surplus."

Then at the bottom of the page he wrote:

"Family labour: no cash expense, but labour was performed."

Sushma read it.

Ramlochan asked, "Is this right?"

"More right than before."

In the afternoon Karim Ansari came to collect some remaining sacks.

Ramlochan asked him to stay for tea.

Karim asked, "What did the final profit come to?"

Ramlochan opened the blue ledger.

"Cash surplus: nine thousand four hundred and twenty."

Karim smiled.

"Yesterday it was profit. Today it has become cash surplus?"

"The profit is still there."

"Then?"

Ramlochan showed him the second line.

Karim read:

"Family labour: no cash expense, but labour was performed."

He remained silent for a few moments.

Then he said, "In my ledger wages were written, so all our names entered automatically. In your ledger no money went out, so the names did not enter either."

Maya Devi came from inside carrying tea.

"Have the names entered now or not?"

Karim laughed.

"Now they have."

A week later was the final day to submit the priority form for next year at the fair committee office.

Ramlochan looked at the form once more.

"Total persons working — 4."

"Persons employed for wages — 0."

This time the two numbers did not seem contradictory to him.

In small letters along the blank margin of the form, he wrote:

"Family helpers — 3."

Taking the form, the employee said, "There was no need to write that separately."

Ramlochan replied, "There was for me."

The employee said nothing.

He placed the form on the pile.

After returning home, Ramlochan went to put the blue ledger in the cupboard.

For the first time, he did not close it immediately.

He opened the page again.

"Cash surplus — nine thousand four hundred and twenty."

Below it, the list of household labour.

Both entries were on the same page.

Not a single rupee had disappeared from the cash box.

But the profit figure no longer stood alone.

Story 61

The Wall's Second Birth

There were still ten days before the rains were due, yet the southern wall of Ramdulari Devi's house had already begun to give off the smell of damp earth.

Two rows of roof tiles had already been taken down.

Old bamboo, broken tiles and heaps of earth lay in the courtyard.

The mason, Chandeshwar, pressed his palm against the lower part of the wall, then brushed the crumbling earth from his fingers.

"We will replace the roofing above. But if we do not remove the plaster from this side, it will swell again in the first heavy rain."

Anupama turned towards the wall at once.

There was an old painting on it.

A large lotus occupied the centre; around it were fish, birds, bamboo sections, the sun and moon, vines and leaves, with the empty spaces filled by diagonal lines.

The colours were no longer as bright as they once had been.

In some places the ochre had faded; elsewhere the black outlines had turned grey.

Even so, the painting filled the entire wall so completely that anyone entering the veranda looked there first.

Anupama had seen this painting since childhood.

Her grandmother, Ramdulari Devi, had made it eighteen years earlier, when Anupama's maternal cousin was married.

Anupama had been five then.

She did not remember the painting being made, but she remembered the finished wall: the eyes of the fish, the round dot at the heart of the lotus, and the two small birds in the right-hand corner.

"You will remove the plaster?" Anupama asked.

Chandeshwar said, "If we leave it as it is, the earth underneath will not hold. Putting fresh colour on top will not make the wall healthy."

Anupama looked towards her grandmother.

Ramdulari Devi was taking water from an earthen pot and setting it beside the tulsi altar.

In an ordinary voice she said, "If it has to come off, let it come off."

The answer hurt Anupama more than if a piece of the painting itself had fallen.

"You made it."

"Yes."

"It has been here for so many years."

"Yes."

"And you are saying, remove it?"

Ramdulari Devi covered the mouth of the earthen pot.

"Which should be saved first, the wall or the painting?"

Anupama did not answer.

She was studying art history at college in Patna.

During the past two years she had read a great deal about museums, archives, conservation, acidity in paper and the deterioration of pigments.

As soon as she came to the village, she had photographed this wall from different angles.

She had shown the photographs to friends at college.

One professor had told her that proper documentation of old examples of domestic wall painting was very important.

Anupama felt that her grandmother did not understand the value of what she herself had created.

After dinner that night, Anupama went back to the wall.

By the light of her phone she took photographs of the whole wall, the lotus, the fish, the birds, the bamboo and the border.

With a small measuring tape she noted the dimensions.

In a notebook she sketched where the crack in the right-hand corner began.

Ramdulari Devi watched from a cot on the veranda.

"Will so many photographs make the wall heavier?" she asked with a laugh.

Anupama did not laugh.

"If I do not photograph it, nothing will remain."

"Does everything have to remain?"

"This is an old thing."

"Does something become worth preserving merely because it is old?"

Anupama lowered the phone.

"This is not an ordinary thing."

Ramdulari Devi was silent for a moment.

Then she rose and came to the wall.

She put her finger on a small vine in the left-hand corner.

"Do you see this?"

"Yes."

"It was not there at first."

"What?"

"When I first painted this, there was a straight bamboo in this corner. Two years later the mud cracked. The crack ran through the bamboo. So I added this vine to cover it."

Anupama went closer.

The black line of the vine was indeed slightly thicker than the rest of the painting.

Ramdulari Devi pointed to a fish on the right.

"This fish used to face the other way. One year the plaster came off in the rain, so I painted it again."

"Then this is not the original painting?" Anupama asked without meaning to.

Ramdulari Devi smiled.

"Where will you find the original?"

Anupama fell silent.

"When I painted it the first time," Ramdulari Devi said, "my mother had shown me an older design. I did not copy it exactly either. The wall of this house was different. The window was different. The wedding was at a different time. My hand was different."

"But this painting has its own history."

"It does. So take photographs. Write down the measurements. Keep whatever you want to remember. But history does not mean allowing the wall to rot."

The next day Anupama brought transparent paper, thick paper and black pens from Madhubani.

She asked Chandeshwar to wait two days.

She did not try to make an exact replica of the whole painting.

Instead she traced the principal forms separately: the lotus, the fish, the birds, the bamboo joins, and the three patterns used in the border.

She named the photographs by date.

In her notebook she wrote down how the colours appeared at that moment.

From time to time Ramdulari Devi corrected her.

"There were four lines here, not three."

"But now only three can be seen."

"One has worn away."

"Then should I write three or four?"

"Write three for what you see. Write separately what I remember."

For the first time that day Anupama smiled.

"Two truths?"

"Two reports. Do not put the burden of truth on me."

At noon, twelve-year-old Gudiya from the neighbouring house came over.

Looking at Anupama's sheets, she asked, "Didi, will you take the painting off and put it onto paper?"

"No. I am only keeping its traces on paper."

"Then will the wall become empty?"

Before Anupama could answer, Ramdulari Devi said, "For a few days."

Gudiya looked at the birds in the painting.

"Will these birds be in the new one?"

"We'll see," Ramdulari Devi said.

Anupama looked at her.

"In the new one?"

"If the wall is plastered again, will we leave it empty?"

Until then Anupama had thought her grandmother was in favour of erasing the old painting.

A sudden question came to her: was her grandmother unwilling to preserve the old painting, or had she already begun thinking about the new one?

On the third morning Chandeshwar began work.

The first blow did not come from a hammer but from a thin iron scraper.

The crumbling plaster at the bottom of the wall fell away in strips.

Anupama stood there.

She knew it was necessary, yet when the tail of the first fish disappeared, her throat went dry.

Ramdulari Devi sat on the veranda cleaning makhana.

"Aren't you watching?" Anupama asked.

"Will watching stop the scraper?"

"No."

"Then let it do its work."

By noon half the lotus was gone.

By evening the whole wall had returned to the colour of raw earth.

Only in one upper corner remained a faint dark stain from the old border.

Anupama opened the old photographs on her phone.

On the screen the painting was whole.

In front of her the wall was empty.

The two sights were so different that for a few moments she could not decide which one felt more real.

From behind her Ramdulari Devi said, "Rain cannot reach a photograph."

Anupama turned.

"That is both its advantage and its loss," her grandmother added.

The new plaster took three days.

The smell of fresh mud and cow dung filled the house.

Chandeshwar smoothed the surface and left it to dry.

Each day Anupama watched the damp wall slowly grow lighter.

On the fourth day Ramdulari Devi brought out small containers.

Soot black, ochre, green, yellow, rice paste.

Some colours were made at home, some bought in the market.

Anupama asked, "I can open the photographs and show where each colour was in the old painting."

Ramdulari Devi said, "We will look at the photographs later."

"You will not make it exactly the same?"

"Why?"

Anupama searched for an answer.

"So that the old form survives."

"The old form is in the photographs. The new wall will have new work."

Ramdulari Devi held out a thin bamboo pen towards Anupama.

"Draw the first line."

Anupama stared at her.

"Me?"

"I have watched you count lines for so many days. Now make one."

"I'll make a mistake."

"A wall is not a notebook whose page you can tear out. If you make a mistake, another line will grow around it."

Anupama took the bamboo pen.

She did not have the courage to draw the first line in the middle of the wall.

She chose the lower left corner and made a small leaf.

The leaf came out slightly more crooked than she had expected.

Ramdulari Devi drew two fine lines around it.

The crookedness became part of the form.

"Whose line is this now?" Anupama asked.

"Yours."

"And the other two?"

"Mine."

"Then whose leaf is it?"

Ramdulari Devi smiled again.

"The wall's."

The whole painting was not completed that day.

Only the central lotus, four fish, the sun and moon, and half the border took shape.

The next day Gudiya came and looked for the old birds.

"The birds are not here yet," Anupama said.

Gudiya's face fell.

Ramdulari Devi asked, "Which birds do you want?"

"The two that looked towards each other."

"Then make them."

Gudiya laughed first, then grew frightened.

"I cannot."

"Do you draw them on paper?"

"Yes."

"The wall will not quarrel with paper."

With a small black line Gudiya drew the body of a bird.

Her bird was larger than the old one and had a shorter tail.

Anupama opened the photograph to compare them, then closed the phone again.

By the third day the painting was almost full.

Anupama had left one corner empty.

Ramdulari Devi asked, "What will go here?"

Anupama thought for a while.

"A girl sitting with an open book."

"That was not in the old one."

"No."

"Then?"

Anupama looked into her grandmother's eyes.

There was no prohibition there.

"It will be there this time," Anupama said.

She drew a small figure: a girl seated on the ground, an open book in her lap.

Ramdulari Devi added two leaves behind her and a small bird above.

"Is that you?" Gudiya asked.

Anupama said, "Not necessarily."

Ramdulari Devi said, "Whoever reads it may think it is herself."

After the painting was finished, Anupama chose one of the old photographs to have printed.

On the back she wrote the dates: when the old wall had been documented, and when its plaster had been removed.

She photographed the new painting too, but did not have it printed immediately that day.

That evening the first light rain fell.

Water sounded on the new roofing.

The southern wall did not become damp.

The air coming through the open veranda carried the smell of earth and rice paste.

Sitting on a cot, Anupama looked at the old painting on her phone.

On the screen, the old lotus, the old birds, and the vine that had covered the crack were all still there.

Then she switched off the phone and looked at the new wall before her.

The old vine was not in the new painting.

In its place was the girl with the open book.

The old pair of birds had not returned in the same form; there was Gudiya's larger-bodied bird.

Even the lotus had a different number of petals.

Ramdulari Devi was putting away the colour containers.

Anupama asked, "Nani, if the wall has to be plastered again next time, will this disappear too?"

"It is a wall," Ramdulari Devi said. "Someday."

"Then photographs again?"

"Take them."

"And another new painting?"

Ramdulari Devi closed the lid of a colour container.

"If there is someone left who will draw a line."

Anupama said nothing.

She stood up and went to the wall.

Along the lower border was a small empty space that her eye had missed throughout the day.

She picked up the bamboo pen.

This time she did not open the photograph.

Story 62

Thread in Two Shades

When the morning light fell straight in through the eastern window of the weaving room, Neera's eyes stopped at the middle of the cloth on the loom.

She had been at the loom until night.

Eighteen cubits of cloth had been woven: a muted blue, with fine white stripes running through it and a narrow band of black thread along both edges.

Until the previous evening, it had all seemed the same colour.

In the eastern light, however, the blue after the ninth cubit looked slightly deeper.

The difference was so slight that it could have been dismissed as shadow, yet clear enough that once seen, the eye kept returning to it.

Neera lifted the length of cloth and carried it into the courtyard.

"Ma!" she called.

Savitri Devi was unwinding thread beside the kitchen.

"What happened?"

"Look at this."

Neera did not place the cloth on the ground.

She spread it across two low stools so that dust would not touch it.

Savitri Devi first looked from one side, then from the other.

Then she ran her hand over the middle of the cloth, as though colour might be understood through the fingers.

"The shade has changed," she said.

Neera asked at once, "Why did we not see it yesterday?"

"Yesterday it was evening. How would this difference show under the yellow light inside?"

"But the thread was supposed to be the same colour."

Savitri Devi did not answer.

She went back into the weaving room and began looking at the empty bobbins stacked in the corner.

Neera followed.

About a month earlier, twelve bobbins of muted blue thread had come from a thread shop in Darbhanga.

The first seven bobbins had been in one cardboard box; the remaining five came in a second consignment.

The shopkeeper had written the same colour name on both: "Blue-34."

Two of the empty bobbins still had small paper slips tied to them.

One was dated "12 Jeth."

The other, "28 Jeth."

Savitri Devi placed both bobbins in the light from the window.

Neera remained silent for a few moments.

The few strands caught inside the first bobbin were a slightly greyer blue.

The thread in the second was a little bluer.

"Same number," Neera said.

"One number," Savitri Devi replied. "Two dye lots."

"The shopkeeper did not write that."

"And I did not ask."

At this answer Neera looked at her mother.

She had expected Savitri Devi to leave the mistake entirely at the shopkeeper's door.

Instead, Savitri Devi picked up the two bobbins and placed them on the table beside the register.

Neera looked again at the cloth.

"The trader is coming tomorrow."

"Yes."

"He asked for all twenty cubits in exactly the same shade."

"Yes."

"Then?"

Savitri Devi sat on a low stool.

"First let us find exactly where the change begins."

Neera brought a measuring tape.

They began measuring from the start of the cloth.

Seven cubits, eight, nine.

At nine cubits and three fingers, the faint boundary of the change in shade could be seen.

Neera placed a small piece of paper there.

"This must be where the second consignment began," she said.

Savitri Devi opened the old register hanging beside the loom.

It recorded the date, colour of thread, width of the border, total length of cloth and customer's name.

But there was no separate column for the dye lot.

Neera kept turning the pages.

"How many times might this have happened before?"

"If the difference was small, perhaps we never noticed."

"Shall we dye the whole cloth again?"

Savitri Devi raised her head.

"All of it?"

"Yes. We could dye it a deeper blue. Then both parts would become one colour."

"Can you be certain they would become exactly the same?"

Neera stopped.

Savitri Devi said, "The dyer can tell us whether another dyeing would erase this first difference or create a second one. But I know one thing: the customer asked for Blue-34. We would be giving him another colour."

"Then shall we cut off the first nine cubits?"

"Cutting it will not erase the problem. It will only move the place where it appears."

Neera said irritably, "But if we give the cloth like this, he will say the quality is poor."

Savitri Devi looked at the cloth for a while.

"If he wants one exact shade, then for him this cloth is poor."

Neera fell silent.

She had not expected that sentence.

She had imagined that her mother might call the difference in shade beautiful simply because the cloth was handmade.

Savitri Devi added, "Not every mistake in something handmade becomes a virtue."

For a while the courtyard held only the faint sound of air moving through the unfinished warp on the loom.

Neera asked, "Then what do we do?"

"We tell him what is there."

"Only that?"

"Have we ever done even that properly before?"

Savitri Devi opened a blank page in the register.

At the top she wrote: "Dye Lot."

Below it she made two entries.

The first: 12 Jeth.

The second: 28 Jeth.

Neera measured again with the tape.

"First section: nine cubits, three fingers. Second section: eight cubits, five fingers."

"Write it."

Neera wrote the measurements.

Savitri Devi took a small piece of black thread and tied a tiny knot at the edge of the cloth, exactly where the shade changed.

The knot was not in the usable part of the cloth; it sat only between two threads projecting beyond the border.

"What is that?" Neera asked.

"A marker. Next time, when we look at the register, we will know that the lot changed here."

"Will we show it to the customer too?"

"Why not?"

Neera did not smile.

All she could see in her mind was the trader's face the next day.

The trader was Madhukant Sah, who bought handwoven cloth for a shop in town.

Three months earlier he had chosen a sample in this colour.

His order was for twenty cubits.

Savitri Devi and Neera had completed the first eighteen cubits; two cubits remained to be woven that day.

Neera asked, "Which thread do we use for the remaining two cubits now?"

"The second lot."

"Then the difference will grow longer."

"No. The same shade will continue. But the customer's order will still not have been fulfilled, because he wanted one shade throughout."

"What if he refuses even the eighteen cubits?"

"Then he refuses."

It was not easy for Savitri Devi to say that.

Neera knew it.

Three weeks of labour, the cost of the thread and the household electricity had gone into the cloth.

Even so, her mother did not close the register.

She said, "Call the shopkeeper. Ask whether any Blue-34 remains from the 12 Jeth lot."

Neera called.

The shopkeeper searched through his papers for a long time.

At last he said that the old lot was finished.

All the current stock was from 28 Jeth or later.

"Then that is the end of it," Neera said after putting down the phone.

"Not the end," Savitri Devi said. "Now we make a rule."

By noon they had woven the remaining two cubits.

The loom moved with the same rhythm as before, but Neera's eyes kept returning to the small black knot at the edge.

In the evening she folded the cloth.

This time she did not tie on a single slip as usual.

She made two.

On the first she wrote: "Blue-34 / 12 Jeth lot / 9 cubits 3 fingers."

On the second: "Blue-34 / 28 Jeth lot / 10 cubits 5 fingers."

Between the two slips she wrote: "One length of cloth — note difference in shade."

Madhukant Sah came the next day.

As soon as he opened the cloth, he first looked at the weave, measured the border, and rubbed the thread between his fingers.

His eye did not immediately catch the colour difference.

Neera could have remained silent.

Savitri Devi said, "The dye lot changes after nine cubits."

Madhukant Sah spread out the cloth again.

There was no eastern morning light now; it was afternoon.

He found the black knot, then compared the blue on either side.

"Yes," he said. "There is a difference."

Neera's hand remained still on the register.

"I wanted one shade throughout," Madhukant Sah said.

"We know," Savitri Devi replied.

"Then I will not take the whole order."

"All right."

Madhukant Sah looked again at the first section.

"The nine-cubit section is close to the old sample. I can take that. I may look at the other section another time for a different use."

For the first time Neera let out the breath she had been holding.

Savitri Devi's expression did not change.

The original order had been for twenty cubits.

That day they were paid only for nine cubits and three fingers.

The remaining cloth stayed at home.

After Madhukant Sah left, Neera said, "If we had not told him, perhaps he would have taken the whole length."

Savitri Devi opened the register.

"Perhaps."

"We suffered a loss."

"We did."

"Then you are not upset?"

Savitri Devi looked at Neera.

"I am upset. But changing the name of a loss does not make the loss disappear."

She began writing four rules on a blank page.

First: whenever new thread of the same colour arrives, ask for the date and dye lot.

Second: if an old lot and a new lot are joined in one length of cloth, place a small marker on the edge.

Third: record in the register the measurement at the point where the colour changes.

Fourth: if the order requires one exact shade, consult the customer before beginning a new lot.

Neera read them.

"None of this makes the colour the same."

"No."

"Then how does it improve the quality?"

Savitri Devi placed the two empty bobbins beside the register.

"One part of quality is the colour. Another part is knowing where the colour changed."

A few days later, two small table runners were made from the remaining cloth of the 28 Jeth lot.

Whether they sold or not was entered in the register later.

But the new rule began that very day.

The next month Blue-34 arrived again.

Neera opened the box.

At first glance the colour looked the same.

Before placing the bobbin on the loom, she searched for the paper slip.

This time the shopkeeper had written the lot number.

Neera entered the date in the register, wrote the lot number, and cut two fingers' length of thread from the remaining old bobbin.

She tied it to the corner of the page.

Beside it she tied two fingers' length from the new lot.

Savitri Devi watched from a distance.

"Same colour?" she asked.

Neera held both threads up to the light.

"Same name," she said. "Different lot."

Then she tied a small marker at the edge of the loom.

This time the marker had not been added after a defect was discovered.

Story 63

The Orchard Path

The orchard came to Shashidhar Jha after his father's death.

His name had already been on the papers, but paper and orchard were not the same thing—he understood that within the first month.

The orchard lay half a kos east of the house.

There were mango, litchi and jackfruit trees, two jamun trees, and here and there old guava trees.

The young trees needed no introduction.

The old ones looked as though they had witnessed more days than the people of the household.

While his father was alive, Shashidhar went to the orchard only when there were too few hands at mango-picking time.

Now fruit, wages, guarding, drains and pruning all entered his accounts.

In the first week he walked through the orchard with his younger brother Neelambar and his daughter Anvita.

Anvita studied while living in the village and, during holidays, helped her father keep the accounts.

An old path ran through the middle of the orchard.

Calling it a path was itself a little generous.

In places it was two cubits wide, elsewhere one and a half.

At one point it curved right around a mango tree, then turned left near a cluster of litchi trees.

In one place it bent so sharply that anyone standing ahead would think someone had made the turn for no reason.

Neelambar stopped there.

"This path ought to be straightened," he said.

Shashidhar looked at the ground.

"What do we gain by making it straight?"

"A cart will pass easily. Bringing manure will be easier. Taking fruit out will be easier. And nearly half a kathha of land will be freed."

Anvita laughed.

"Straightening a path saves land?"

"A crooked path eats land," Neelambar said. "Draw it on paper and you will see."

Anvita really did take out her notebook.

She drew a rough map of the orchard—round dots for trees, a crooked line for the path.

Neelambar joined two points with a straight line.

"See? Half the distance."

Shashidhar kept looking at the notebook.

On paper, the old line of the path looked awkward.

That evening they discussed the matter at home.

Shashidhar's mother, Sharda Devi, sat beside the stove.

She was close to eighty, yet she still remembered which tree in the orchard had been planted in which year.

Neelambar said, "Ma, why did Babu keep the path so crooked?"

Without raising her head, Sharda Devi said, "Did Babu make the path?"

"Then?"

"The path was there before Babu."

"Who made it?"

Sharda Devi did not laugh.

"Whoever walked it."

Neelambar and Shashidhar looked at each other.

"We are thinking of straightening it."

"Do it."

The answer was so easy that Shashidhar was surprised.

"You have no objection?"

"The land is yours. You will walk the path."

Anvita asked, "But why is it crooked?"

This time Sharda Devi thought for a moment.

"Have you ever walked it in the rains?"

"No."

"Then leave it until the rains."

Neelambar said, "We cannot build the path during the rains."

"Then build it before the rains. Look afterward."

His mother's words sounded like a riddle to Shashidhar.

But he had little time.

Two days later, two labourers were called.

Two bamboo pegs were driven into the ground and a straight string was stretched from the western gate of the orchard to the fruit shed in the east.

The string crossed the old path at four places.

At the first crossing, some grass was scraped away.

At the second, a small rise in the earth was cut down.

At the third, the ground was levelled two cubits away from a mango tree.

At the fourth, an old litchi root had risen above the surface.

The labourer stopped his spade.

"Shall I cut this root?"

Shashidhar answered at once, "No."

Neelambar looked at the string.

"We can put a little soil over it."

Anvita said, "Then the straight line will bend again."

For a few moments all three looked at the root.

In the end the path was shifted half a cubit to the right.

"Straight enough to be called straight," Neelambar said with a smile.

The new path was completed in three days.

Parts of the old crooked path were covered with grass and leaves so that people would use the new one.

When a fruit cart travelled along the new path for the first time, Neelambar seemed to have been right.

Two people took it all the way to the gate without having to lift it.

Shashidhar said, "This is better."

Anvita wrote in the register: "Inner path levelled — three days' labour."

During all this, Sharda Devi did not go to the orchard.

The first rain of Ashadh came at night.

It was not heavy.

For two hours there was a steady sound on the roof, then it stopped.

In the morning Shashidhar went to the orchard.

A little water had collected at the western end of the new path.

"It is only the first rain," he thought.

Two days later came the second rain.

This time it lasted from afternoon until evening.

On the third day Anvita went to the orchard and, even from the gate, noticed that the colour of the soil had changed.

A thin channel had formed down the middle of the new path.

Where the rise in the ground had been cut away, water had run straight downhill.

Near the mango tree, where the path had shifted half a cubit to the right, the water had curled towards the roots and washed the soil away.

Two fine roots were now visible above the ground.

Anvita called her father.

Shashidhar came and silently bent down to touch the soil.

Neelambar arrived too.

"We will fill in more soil," he said.

Anvita looked towards the old path.

The grass there was wet, but the soil had not washed away.

Before reaching the mango tree, the old path curved left, climbed slightly, then descended gently near the litchis.

"This path goes straight downhill," Anvita said.

Neelambar asked, "So?"

"So does the water."

Shashidhar raised his head.

That evening Sharda Devi went to the orchard herself.

She walked slowly with a stick.

Anvita was with her.

As soon as Sharda Devi saw the channel on the new path, she stopped.

"There used to be a mound of earth here," she said.

"We had it levelled," Shashidhar replied.

"Why?"

"For the cart."

Sharda Devi said nothing.

She began walking along the old path.

Near a mango tree she stopped.

"Here your grandfather used to say, 'The roots are high—no spade.'"

Farther on, near the litchis:

"In the rains the water used to run east here. That is why the path turned left."

Anvita asked, "Did anyone measure and build this path?"

"No."

"Then how did all this take shape?"

Sharda Devi placed the tip of her stick on the grass.

"In Jeth people walked where the ground was dry. In the rains they walked where there was less water. When they saw roots, they went around them. When a bullock cart got stuck, it went by another side. Year after year, the path kept taking its own measure."

Neelambar stood a little distance away listening.

"But what about the cart?" he asked.

Sharda Devi replied, "Was the cart made for the path, or the path for the cart?"

Neelambar laughed.

"Ma, do not become so philosophical."

Sharda Devi smiled too.

"I am not philosophical. My knees hurt. My feet slip on a straight slope."

Everyone laughed.

But after the next rain, the matter was no longer funny.

There was heavy rain in the night.

By morning, near the mango tree, a strip of soil a hand's breadth wide had been washed away from one side of the new path.

Standing there, Anvita looked towards the old path.

Leaves had caught there.

The small roots of the grass held the soil.

The water had turned once to the right, once to the left, and thinned out as it went.

Shashidhar said, "Close the new path."

Neelambar did not agree immediately.

"It will become difficult to take the fruit out."

"Then we need a separate solution for the fruit."

The three walked around the outer edge of the orchard.

Along the northern boundary the ground was mostly level, though there was more scrub.

Anvita said, "Why must the cart use the inner path at all?"

Neelambar replied, "The outer side is longer."

"But there are fewer tree roots."

Two days later Shashidhar had the scrub cleared along that boundary.

A new broad route for carts was made around the outer edge of the orchard —slightly longer, but level.

Grass was allowed to grow again on the newly cut straight inner path.

The traces of the old crooked path were reopened.

Anvita began that work not with a spade, but with small bamboo pegs.

Where the old path was still clear, no peg was needed.

Where the new levelling had erased the old line, Sharda Devi guided them:

"A little left here."

"Turn around the jackfruit root here."

"Leave the rise in the ground here."

Anvita drew the map again in her notebook.

This time she did not think the crooked line looked awkward.

Beside it she wrote small notes:

"Root above ground."

"Water east."

"Gentler slope."

"Old rise."

Neelambar looked at the notebook.

"We no longer save half the distance," he said.

Anvita replied, "We saved half the soil."

Neelambar said, "That calculation will be hard to prove."

"Then the rain proved it."

Shashidhar stopped both of them.

"Accounts later. Cover the roots first."

Around the exposed mango roots they laid soil, dry leaves and a layer of grass.

At two places along the newly cut straight section, they made small cross-drains so that the water would not gather into one channel.

Sharda Devi watched the work.

Shashidhar asked, "Did Babu make all these arrangements?"

"Some Babu, some his father, and some perhaps the water made for itself."

Anvita said at once, "The water too?"

Sharda Devi laughed.

"All right—some of it the water. There is no need to find an owner for everything."

By the end of Sawan, the old path had become clear again.

Schoolchildren did not use it.

Nor was it a public village road.

It was the orchard's own inner path—for inspecting fruit, touching the trees, keeping watch, and moving from one side to the other.

The cart used the outer route.

Now and then Neelambar muttered, "Three minutes longer."

But no one suggested straightening the old path again.

In Kartik, Anvita made a clean copy of the map.

At the top she wrote: "Inner Orchard Path — where possible, do not cut across the old line."

Below it she added four points:

"No spade towards exposed roots."

"No straight cutting down a slope."

"Inspect the soil after rain."

"Carts by the outer route."

Shashidhar read the paper.

"Whose rules are these?"

Anvita said, "Not mine. I wrote what we understood."

Sharda Devi put on her glasses to look at the map.

She ran her finger along the crooked line.

Anvita asked, "Have I drawn it correctly?"

Sharda Devi said, "A path is never completely correct on paper."

"Then?"

"Keep walking it and keep looking."

Anvita folded the map and placed it in the register.

Who knew whether that page would be opened again in the next monsoon.

But the path was already there in the orchard—crooked, slightly uneven, turning around the roots of trees.

This time, its crookedness no longer looked like unfinished work waiting to be corrected, but like knowledge still waiting to be read.

Story 64

The Nameless Picture

For three years, the old northern veranda of the school had stood half empty.

There had once been two Class Seven rooms there.

After a new building was constructed, one of the old rooms became a library and the wall of the other was knocked down to widen the veranda.

The broad wall was coated in white limewash, but rain and dust had left grey streaks along its lower part.

When the school reopened after the Ashadh holidays, Urmila Jha, who taught art, looked at the wall and said to Headmistress Shailaja Devi, "If the children's work were here, the place would feel alive."

Shailaja Devi measured the wall with her eyes.

"Will the colour last?"

"It is an inner veranda. It will."

"Then make it before the exhibition this year."

The school's annual exhibition was held at the end of Bhadav.

Science models, clay objects, sewing, paintings, collections of old papers—every class contributed something.

Urmila Jha asked the Class Nine students to propose designs for a mural.

Some drew flowers.

Some drew the school building.

Some drew a river.

Some drew a child reading an open book.

On a long sheet of paper, Manjari Karn had drawn only shadows: the shadow of a tree, two windows, and an empty space between them.

Renu Jha added, with a fine blue line in one corner, a small puddle left by rain.

Urmila Jha asked, "Why are both of you working on the same sheet?"

Manjari said, "I had drawn the shadows. Renu said there was too much empty space."

Renu laughed.

"When I added the puddle, she asked why there was no sky in the water."

"Then who drew the sky?"

"No one yet."

Urmila Jha looked at the sheet again.

"The two of you will paint the wall."

The girls looked at one another.

Manjari's hand was quick with line.

She could turn the branch of a tree across paper in a single breath.

Her patience broke quickly when it came to filling colour.

Renu loved mixing colours, shifting shade, keeping fine differences inside a single colour.

But before drawing the first line, she took out the measuring tape again and again.

Urmila Jha said, "That is precisely why both of you."

The next day the two sat on the veranda for an hour to decide what the wall should contain.

School had ended.

The field was empty.

Bird calls came from the trees to the east.

Manjari said, "If we paint the school, we will paint the building. If we paint the building, we will end up making another wall on this wall."

Renu said, "Then not the building."

"What?"

"What lives here."

"People?"

"People can be there, but if we paint everyone's face, half the school will still be left out."

They fell silent again.

Just then Kamala Devi, the library attendant, came out carrying two broken cane stools.

She said, "Are you talking about the picture? Paint the morning light that falls in this veranda. By noon it has shifted away."

Manjari looked at the wall.

A square of light from a window was indeed falling obliquely across the floor.

Renu took out her measuring tape.

Manjari burst out laughing.

"You are going to measure the light?"

"I'll measure it now. Tomorrow at the same time we'll see where it is."

For the next three days the two came to the veranda at the same time.

The square patch of light on the floor changed slightly each day.

The mural took shape from that moving light.

On the left side of the wall would be the shadow of a tree.

In the middle, an open field of light.

On the right, two windows.

Below, a small gathering of water in which one square window would appear upside down.

No person would be shown in full.

Only a few signs of presence:

three pairs of slippers kept in one corner,

an open book,

half of a rope swing visible at the edge,

and a broom leaning against the wall.

Urmila Jha looked at the design.

"Title?"

Manjari asked, "Of the picture?"

"Yes."

Renu said, "Light on the Veranda?"

Manjari shook her head.

"Too direct."

Kamala Devi was listening from behind them.

She said, "Give it a name later. Paint it first. The work will tell you its own name."

On the day the wall was cleaned, four Class Nine students wiped off the old dust.

A fresh thin coat of limewash was applied.

After it had dried for two days, Urmila Jha had a broad frame marked in charcoal.

Manjari drew the first line.

The main branch of the tree reached halfway across the wall.

Standing a little distance away, Renu said, "The shadow is becoming too heavy here."

Manjari stepped back and looked.

"Shall I cut it?"

Renu ran her finger along the charcoal line.

"Do not cut it. Leave openings of light between it."

Manjari left the space of two leaves open inside the branch.

The next day they mixed the colours.

Renu was making a muted green.

Manjari kept saying, "A little more yellow."

When more yellow was added, Renu said, "Now it is too much."

They kept changing the colour in a small bowl.

By noon not a single large section had been completed.

Urmila Jha asked, "Are you making colours or a picture?"

Renu replied, "With a colour that does not fit, the picture will certainly be finished quickly."

Manjari said at once, "A wrong colour."

Renu looked at her.

"All right—a wrong colour."

Three days later the shadow of the tree was complete.

On the fourth day Manjari did not come to school.

There were guests at her house.

Working alone, Renu filled the darkness inside the windows.

When Manjari came the next day, she saw a thin white line between the panes.

"What is this?"

"Light on the glass."

"It was not in my design."

Renu paused.

"Shall I remove it?"

Manjari went up to the wall and looked.

"No. It makes the window seem open."

That day Manjari changed the square reflection of the window in the water.

Renu asked, "Why did you move it from where I measured it?"

"It was right on the wall. In the water it looked too straight."

Renu took two steps back.

"All right."

The work continued in this manner.

Where one drew a line, the other changed the colour.

Where one laid colour, the other created an empty space.

Sometimes after discussion.

Sometimes without any discussion.

One day Urmila Jha asked jokingly, "How much of this picture belongs to each of you?"

Manjari said, "Shall we measure the wall and divide it?"

Renu added, "Three cubits on the left hers, three cubits on the right mine?"

"And the middle?" Urmila Jha asked.

Both answered at once, "The school's."

Everyone laughed.

The mural was finished four days before the exhibition.

On the final day only the small patch of water below remained.

Manjari wanted the shadow of a bird there.

Renu said, "If a bird is reflected in the water, there has to be a bird above."

"But the sky is not visible above."

"Then leave it."

Manjari put the brush down.

The water remained empty.

When the painting was complete, Urmila Jha asked, "Now the title?"

Looking at the wall, Renu said, "Empty Water."

Manjari said, "If people hear that title, they will start looking for the water."

Kamala Devi was passing by again.

She said, "To me it looks like 'Before Noon.'"

Both girls stopped.

Renu smiled.

"That is right."

On a small card below the mural they wrote: "Before Noon."

Every item in the exhibition had to be entered in a register.

The school's old exhibition register was a thick book bound in green cloth.

The first page bore the year 1987.

Through the book were different colours of ink, different handwriting, and pages whose corners had been folded.

That year the task of filling the register had been given to Manoj Mishra, the librarian.

In order, he recorded the class, the name of the exhibit, the medium, the artist's name and the date of the exhibition.

Manjari and Renu came to have the mural entered.

Manoj Mishra asked, "Title?"

Renu said, "Before Noon."

"That is the title of the picture. Artist's name?"

"Both of us."

Manoj Mishra stopped his pen.

Opposite "Artist's Name" there was one thin line.

After it came one small box for "Class" and another for "Serial Number."

He said, "Write the name of the main artist first. I'll put the second name in the remarks."

Manjari did not answer immediately.

Renu bent over to look at the page.

"Who is the main artist?"

Manoj Mishra said casually, "The one who made the original design."

Manjari said, "I made the first design, but where did that design remain unchanged in the finished picture?"

"Then the one who did more of the colour work."

Renu said, "I mixed most of the colours, but Manjari changed them in half the places."

Manoj Mishra became slightly impatient.

"Write both names on the same line."

Manjari looked at the line.

"Whose first?"

"Either one."

Renu said, "Then the name written first will still seem like the main one."

"Then put them in alphabetical order."

Manjari laughed.

"Does M come before R, or R before M?"

Manoj Mishra smiled too.

"You are making the register harder than the work itself."

Urmila Jha entered the library just then with some exhibition papers.

Manoj Mishra explained the problem.

Urmila Jha looked at the page.

"Write both names."

Renu said, "I have no objection to writing the names."

"Then?"

"I object to making one of us the artist and the other a remark."

Manjari said quietly, "Even if both names go on one line, where will we write how the work was actually made?"

Before answering, Urmila Jha began turning the older pages of the register.

On one page, opposite a clay model of a village, four names had been written in very small letters; the last name climbed out beyond the line.

On another page, opposite "Paper Bridge," there was one name, and in the remarks was written: "Assistance: Class Eight."

Urmila Jha said, "This problem has existed before."

Manoj Mishra said, "Perhaps when the register was made, it assumed one exhibit meant one student."

Renu asked, "And now?"

For a few moments no one spoke.

Urmila Jha said, "This time leave the line blank. In the remarks write: joint work; names on the next page."

Manoj Mishra said, "Then the register will remain incomplete."

Manjari kept looking at the thin line on the page.

"The register is incomplete already."

Manoj Mishra looked at her.

The sentence was sharp, but Manjari's voice was not.

Urmila Jha said, "All right. Leave it blank. But write the reason."

The line for "Artist's Name" remained blank.

In the remarks Manoj Mishra wrote:

"Joint mural by two students; the present register has no separate provision for recording shared roles."

Then, at the top of the next blank page, both names were written.

Below them went a short description: design, colour, altered lines, final work—all with shared participation.

Manjari said, "Here you have divided the roles again."

Renu looked at her.

Manoj Mishra asked, "Then what should I write?"

Both girls thought for a moment.

Renu said, "Write: the work changed hands alternately."

Manoj Mishra smiled.

"That will be a first in this register."

On exhibition day people stopped again and again in front of the mural.

Some looked at the shadow of the tree.

Some at the square in the water.

Some asked why there were no faces.

An elderly parent said, "This is a school. Where are the children?"

Renu replied, "Look at the slippers."

The man saw the three pairs of slippers.

"Then the children have gone inside?"

Manjari said, "Wherever you want them to have gone."

The man laughed.

The title of the picture was written below the wall, but the artists' names were not.

Two or three people asked.

The students answered, "Manjari and Renu."

One parent asked, "Why are the names not written?"

Manjari replied, "We are looking for space in the register."

The parent thought it was a joke.

He laughed and moved on.

The day after the exhibition ended, Shailaja Devi was checking the register.

She stopped at the blank line.

"Why is this empty?"

Manoj Mishra told her the whole story.

At first Shailaja Devi said, "What was difficult about writing two names?"

Urmila Jha, who was there, showed her the older pages of the register.

"Two names are not difficult. The problem is that this box assumes one work has one artist. Group work is increasing—in science, clay, painting, everywhere."

Shailaja Devi turned the pages.

"Should we buy a new register?"

Manoj Mishra said, "This one is not even half full."

"Then?"

Outside on the veranda, Renu and Manjari were putting away paint tins.

They did not know about the discussion.

Three days later Shailaja Devi called both of them to the office.

The exhibition register lay open on the table.

She asked, "Tell me again why you left the line blank."

Manjari looked at Renu.

Renu said, "If we chose one name, it would reduce the other person's work."

"And if both names were written?"

Manjari said, "They can be written. But the register still asks: who is the artist? Where are the roles? What if three people work together?"

Shailaja Devi was quiet for a few moments.

Then she showed them the old page with four names against the clay village.

"What each of these four did, no one knows now."

Manoj Mishra said, "It was not recorded at the time."

"We will not guess now," Shailaja Devi said.

She did not close the register.

"The history of the old work is whatever has survived. For new work, we will use a new method."

The following week the school clerk printed a thin supplementary sheet.

At the top it read: "Exhibition Record — Supplementary Sheet."

Instead of the old single box for "Artist's Name," it had two fields:

"Creators"

and

"Role / Remarks."

There was a separate place for the class to be entered collectively.

The serial-number box was removed; if needed, a number could be written beside a name.

Manoj Mishra inserted the supplementary sheet after the relevant page in the old register.

The first entry was "Before Noon."

"Creators — Manjari Karn, Renu Jha."

"Role / Remarks — Joint design, colour and revisions; roles changed hands alternately during the work."

Manoj Mishra read it out and asked, "Is this right now?"

Renu said, "Now the register is not lying."

Manjari added, "And the names have survived."

Urmila Jha asked, "Was it necessary for the names to survive?"

Manjari thought for a moment before replying.

"A picture can remain without a name. But there is no need to erase the names of the people who made the work."

Shailaja Devi, who was standing at the door listening, said, "We will not write that sentence in the register."

Everyone laughed.

A new small label was made beneath the mural.

This time, under the title, it read:

"Creators: Manjari Karn and Renu Jha."

Manjari looked at the label.

"Why is my name first?"

Renu replied immediately, "M comes before R alphabetically."

Both burst out laughing.

Urmila Jha said, "Next time we will need a separate register for disputes about alphabetical order."

By Kartik the paint had dried and become part of the wall.

Children passing through the veranda stopped pausing in front of it; things seen every day quickly become things of the house.

But one day three Class Seven students came to the library carrying a small drainage model made of earth and bamboo.

Manoj Mishra opened the supplementary sheet.

"Creators?"

The three gave their names.

"Roles?"

One boy said, "I cut the bamboo."

The second said, "I packed the earth."

The third remained silent for a while.

"I broke it twice."

Manoj Mishra laughed.

"Is that a role too?"

The boy was serious.

"If I had not broken it, the water would not have flowed."

Under "Role / Remarks," Manoj Mishra wrote:

"All three participated in improving the design."

On the veranda wall, "Before Noon" remained as it was.

That same day, returning from class, Manjari and Renu saw the three new names on the supplementary sheet.

Renu said, "Our blank line has been filled."

Manjari shook her head.

"No. That line is still blank."

"Then?"

Manjari opened the old register and showed her.

"It is necessary for this to remain blank. Otherwise it will look as though everything was already right before."

Renu did not put her finger on the page.

She only looked.

The old line was indeed blank.

Below it was the note.

On the next page were their two names.

After that came the new format.

Outside on the veranda, the real midday light had already moved beyond the square of brightness painted on the mural.

The painted light remained where it was.

They were not the same.

One was a mark of a moment; the other was time still moving.

The blank line in the register was like that too.

Nothing had been written there.

Yet because of that, a great deal could be read.

Story 65

The Seven-Minute Voice

At the top of the first page of Saurabh's notebook, in black ink, were the words: "Seven Minutes."

Below them were seven small circles.

Beside the first circle: "Did Ma eat?"

Beside the second: "Maths Question 37."

Beside the third: "Oil for Nani's knees."

Beside the fourth: "School excursion."

Beside the fifth: "My new shoes."

Beside the sixth: "Did it rain in Patna today?"

The seventh circle was blank.

Saurabh had made the notebook himself.

No teacher had told him to do it.

It was not homework.

It was simply that his mother, Rama Devi, usually spoke to him on the phone for about seven minutes.

Rama Devi worked in the accounts section of a book-distribution warehouse in Patna.

Her evening shift ended at eight.

It took five minutes to walk from the warehouse to the bus stop, and the bus towards the village usually arrived at eight twelve.

That short stretch between eight five and eight twelve had become the most solid part of Saurabh's day.

The phone rang at eight five, six, or seven.

"Yes, tell me."

That was all Rama Devi would say.

Saurabh began with the first circle.

"Did you eat?"

"I had flattened rice and curd at the warehouse. You?"

"Nani gave me rice."

Second circle.

"How do I do the division in Maths Question Thirty-seven?"

"I do not have the notebook in front of me. Divide first by the smaller number."

"That does not work."

"Then ask Master Saheb tomorrow. I will not guess from here."

Third circle.

"Nani said the oil is finished."

"Get it tomorrow from Ramnaresh's shop. There is money in the tin."

By the time they reached the fourth circle, the first horn of the bus could usually be heard on the other end of the call.

"Quickly, tell me. The bus has come."

Then Saurabh shortened his questions.

"Can I go on the excursion?"

"Where?"

"Rajnagar."

"How much money?"

"Two hundred."

"All right. Tell Nani to give it."

The fifth circle was often left out.

Sometimes the sixth too.

The seventh had remained blank from the beginning.

After the call ended, Saurabh drew a small arrow beside any question left unanswered and carried it over to the next day's page.

Some questions travelled for three days.

"Shoes" — Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday.

"Science chart" — Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday.

"Why did Deepak take my pen?" began on Wednesday's page, but by Friday Saurabh had worked out the answer himself.

Deepak had not stolen the pen.

During play, Saurabh himself had left it on Deepak's notebook.

That question was crossed out.

Rama Devi was pleased with this system of the notebook.

One night she said, "You write your questions down, so nothing gets missed on the phone."

Saurabh looked at the notebook and smiled.

In fact, a great deal was missed.

That day, on his way home from school, he had found an old brass-coloured button half-buried in the earth.

He wanted to know whether shirts from his mother's childhood had buttons like that.

But in which circle should he write the question?

Food, studies, Nani, money, school—where did a button belong among these?

Beside the seventh blank circle he wrote: "Button."

When the call came, there were already four necessary things to discuss first.

The bus arrived earlier than expected.

"Tomorrow," Rama Devi said.

The next day the button gave way to Nani's medicine.

On the third day, the school fee.

On the fourth, Rama Devi herself said in a tired voice, "The warehouse count went wrong today and my head is aching. If there is something necessary, say it."

Saurabh erased the arrow he had drawn beside "Button."

He pressed the button between the pages of the notebook.

In this way the seventh circle slowly became a home for different things:

the string of a half-torn kite,

a yellow bird seen beside the pond,

two lines of dialogue he had been given in the school play,

a word from one of Nani's old stories,

and the question of whether his mother truly liked tea without sugar, or drank it that way only to save money.

Sometimes he left the seventh circle blank.

Sometimes he wrote only one word beside it:

"Nothing."

Rama Devi came home four or five times a year.

But this time she had been unable to come for five months in a row.

A new accounting system had started at the warehouse, two employees had left, and demand for books had risen before Diwali.

On the phone Rama Devi kept saying, "I will definitely come in the last week of Kartik."

Saurabh wrote the date at the back of the notebook.

Until then he had counted only questions.

Now he began counting days as well.

A week before she was due to return, Rama Devi asked, "What should I bring when I come?"

Saurabh had a separate list for that in his notebook:

a geometry box,

blue socks,

a storybook,

a cord for Nani's spectacles.

He read out the list.

Before ending the call, Rama Devi laughed and asked, "Anything else?"

Saurabh looked at the seventh circle.

Beside it was written: "Many things."

"No," he said. "That is all."

Rama Devi reached home on Saturday afternoon.

When Saurabh returned from school, her iron trunk lay open in the courtyard.

Nani was taking out the clothes one by one and holding them to the sun.

Rama Devi sat on the veranda peeling potatoes.

Saurabh stood at the gate for two moments.

For so many days he had met his mother's voice every day on the phone that the sudden sight of her body sitting before him seemed slightly unfamiliar.

As soon as Rama Devi saw him, she dropped the potato and stood up.

"Why have you become so thin?"

Saurabh laughed.

"You could not see me on the phone."

Rama Devi touched his head.

"How was I supposed to see your head over the phone?"

Nani said, "Wash your hands and face first. The two of you have started your story right at the gate."

Saurabh went inside.

That evening there was plenty of talk in the house:

neighbours, the warehouse, Patna, school, fields, uncle, Diwali, new clothes.

But Saurabh's "many things" did not appear anywhere among those conversations.

After dinner he took his notebook and sat beside his mother.

"What is that?" Rama Devi asked.

"The Seven-Minute Notebook."

"Let me see."

Saurabh did not hand it over immediately.

"I will ask first."

"Ask."

He opened an old page.

"Did shirts in your childhood have brass-coloured buttons?"

For a moment Rama Devi looked at him.

"Why suddenly?"

Saurabh took the old button from between the pages.

"I found it on the road."

Rama Devi placed the button on her palm.

"Not on my shirts. But your Nana had a coat with buttons like this. I remember—"

Saurabh interrupted at once.

"Do you remember it clearly?"

Rama Devi laughed.

"Clearly? No. The memory is not clear. When Nana comes home, we will ask him."

Saurabh opened another old page.

"I saw a yellow bird. Long beak. What is it called?"

"Am I a bird book?"

"You know everything."

"Who told you that?"

Saurabh smiled.

Third question.

"Do you really like tea without sugar, or are you saving money?"

Rama Devi burst out laughing.

"You have kept this question for five months?"

"Three months."

"Answer: at first I was saving money. Now tea with sugar tastes too sweet."

Saurabh put a small mark in the notebook.

Rama Devi noticed.

"Are there so many old questions?"

"A lot."

"Will you ask all of them today?"

"Yes."

Ten minutes later Rama Devi leaned her back against the wall.

Twenty minutes later the pace of Saurabh's questions slowed.

After half an hour, three pages of the notebook had been crossed through.

"Now?" Rama Devi asked.

Saurabh turned a page.

"That is all."

"All?"

"For today."

Rama Devi looked at the clock.

"It is only nine."

On the phone, by nine o'clock they would both already have reached their own places.

Saurabh would have closed the notebook.

Rama Devi would have been looking for a seat on the bus.

Now time lay open.

No horn.

No "quickly, tell me."

Even so, both fell silent.

Nani was putting away utensils in the kitchen.

Outside, the wind moved through the bamboo leaves.

Rama Devi asked, "Everything all right at school?"

"Yes."

"No quarrel with Deepak?"

"No."

"Maths?"

"Fine."

"Then?"

"What?"

"Say something."

Saurabh laughed, but said nothing.

Rama Devi laughed too.

"On the phone you do not let me speak during those seven minutes."

"There is less time there."

"Here there is more."

Saurabh did not answer.

For two days the same thing returned in small forms.

In the morning Rama Devi sat with him over tea.

"What are you thinking?"

"Nothing."

At noon, while putting away his books, she asked, "Have you read this story?"

"Yes."

"How is it?"

"Fine."

In the evening they walked towards the fields.

"Is this embankment new?"

"Yes."

"When was it made?"

"In Bhadav."

Rama Devi said with mild irritation, "It was easier to talk to you on the phone."

For the first time Saurabh looked directly at her.

"On the phone there were questions."

"There are no questions here?"

"There are. But not every question is for asking."

Rama Devi fell silent.

That night the electricity went out.

Nani lit a lantern and placed it on the veranda.

It was hot inside the house, so all three sat outdoors.

Rama Devi had a basket of pea pods in her lap.

She was shelling them for the next day's vegetable.

Without being asked, Saurabh sat beside her and pulled over another empty plate.

For a while there was only the soft sound of pods splitting open.

One pod held five peas.

Another held two.

A third held three very small ones.

Saurabh placed one tiny pea on his palm and said, "If this is planted, will it grow into a plant?"

Rama Devi looked at the pea.

"It may. It may not. We would have to see whether it has dried out."

Saurabh set it aside.

Silence again.

After a while the sound of a distant train came.

Rama Devi said, "At night, behind my room in Patna, I hear trains like that."

Saurabh asked, "How many times?"

"I have never counted."

"Why did you never tell me before?"

Rama Devi's hands stopped.

"Where was the time on the phone to tell you about trains?"

Saurabh said nothing.

Rama Devi began shelling peas again.

"In the beginning, when I heard trains at night, they made me think of home," she said softly.

Saurabh's hands stopped too.

That sentence could not fit inside any of the circles in the Seven-Minute Notebook.

He did not ask, "Why home?"

He did not ask, "How much did you miss it?"

He did not ask, "Did you cry?"

He simply remained sitting beside her.

The distant sound of the train faded.

Nani lowered the lantern wick a little.

Rama Devi spoke again.

"One night the rain was so heavy I could not leave the warehouse. I missed the bus. I could not call you. The next day you told me you had fallen asleep."

Saurabh remembered.

That night he had watched the phone until half past nine.

In his notebook he had written: "Why no call?"

The next day Rama Devi had said only, "It was raining."

Saurabh thought of looking for that page in the notebook, then let the thought go.

"I fell asleep late," he said now.

Rama Devi looked at him.

"But you told me you had already gone to sleep."

"I did."

"Why?"

Saurabh kept breaking the stems from the pea pods.

"There were only seven minutes on the phone."

Rama Devi did not smile.

She only nodded.

A little later Saurabh went to his basket and brought out the old brass-coloured button.

By then the button no longer lived in the notebook; it stayed in his pencil box.

"Does this look like the button from Nana's coat?"

"I do not know."

"Then keep it."

"Why?"

"So there will be something from home in your room."

Rama Devi did not take the button.

"You keep it. My room is not short of things from home."

"What is there?"

"Your photograph, the tin of makhana Nani gave me, an old key from this house, and the paper boat you made last year."

Saurabh was surprised.

"You still have that boat?"

"Yes."

"It must have got wet."

"It does not rain inside my room."

Both laughed.

After a while all the pea pods were finished.

Still, neither of them got up.

The electricity had not yet returned.

There was the yellow light of the lantern on the veranda, darkness outside, and now and then the sound of crickets.

Saurabh suddenly understood that being silent was also something one could do.

On the phone, silence consumed time.

Here, silence made time.

During the next three days, Rama Devi and Saurabh did not have any great conversations.

They went to the market together.

One day, while hanging clothes to dry, Rama Devi told Saurabh about a strange habit of one of her colleagues at the warehouse.

Returning from school, Saurabh simply said—without first turning it into a question—that a crow had flown away from the playground carrying a red ribbon.

Rama Devi asked, "Where did it take it?"

"I do not know."

"Did you follow it?"

"A little way."

"Why?"

"To see."

That was all.

And the conversation was complete.

Rama Devi's leave was for seven days.

On the morning of the eighth day she had to return to Patna.

That night Saurabh opened his notebook.

For the previous seven days he had not made a single new "Seven Minutes" page.

On a blank page he wrote the date.

Below it he drew seven circles.

He left the first six blank.

Beside the seventh he wrote: "Silence."

Then, after thinking a little, he crossed out "Silence."

In its place he wrote: "Together."

In the morning Rama Devi left.

Two days later, at six minutes past eight in the evening, the phone rang.

Saurabh already had the notebook open.

"Yes, tell me," Rama Devi's voice said.

Behind her came the sounds of vehicles at the bus stop.

Saurabh looked at the first circle.

Blank.

The second.

Blank.

The third.

Blank.

"What happened?" Rama Devi asked. "No questions today?"

"There is one."

"Tell me."

"Did you hear the train today?"

For a few moments there was no answer from the other end of the phone.

Saurabh did not look at the clock.

Rama Devi did not speak at once either.

Somewhere in the distance a horn sounded.

Then Rama Devi said, "Not yet. But it may come."

Saurabh said, "All right."

Both remained silent for a while.

In that silence were the sounds of buses, Nani's cough on the village veranda, and one shared night stretched between two places farther than seven minutes could measure.

The horn sounded a second time.

Rama Devi said, "The bus has come."

Saurabh replied, "Yes. Go."

Before the call ended, Rama Devi said, "If I hear the train tomorrow, I'll tell you."

Saurabh drew no arrow in the seventh circle.

He left the page open.

Story 66

The Earthen Bowl

When the call came from Darbhanga, Deepak was sitting beside the potter's wheel, counting the unfired bowls.

Under the thatched roof, thirty-two bowls were drying in three rows.

Some had mouths a little wider, some bodies a little fuller, some bases narrower.

All were made from the same clay, but none was an exact copy of another.

On the phone, Arunesh, the manager of a new restaurant in town, said, "I need one hundred bowls. Handmade. But all exactly the same size."

Deepak fell silent at the first order he had ever received on such a scale.

"One hundred?"

"Yes. For serving dal and vegetables. I'll send a sample tomorrow. Make them all like the sample."

After the call ended, Deepak remained for a long while with the mobile in his hand.

Ramcharan the potter kept the wheel turning.

Between his hands, a lump of clay slowly took the shape of a bowl.

Deepak said, "Dada, we have an order for a hundred bowls."

Ramcharan's fingers did not stop.

"How much time?"

"Three weeks."

"We have clay."

"But there is one condition."

Ramcharan opened the mouth of the bowl a little wider.

"Tell me."

"They want every one exactly the same size."

This time the wheel slowed.

Ramcharan placed the newly made bowl on the plank and, while washing his hands, asked, "Exactly the same?"

"His own words."

Ramcharan looked towards the thirty-two drying bowls.

"Then why did he ask for handmade?"

Deepak did not laugh.

"Handmade things are in demand in town. But on the table they want everything to look the same."

"They want the hand, but not the mark of the hand?"

Deepak did not answer.

It was a large order.

For two months they had been postponing the repair of the old kiln.

The western side of the roof also needed replacing.

The money from a hundred bowls could pay for both.

The next day the sample arrived in a box.

It was not earthenware but a white ceramic bowl made in a mould.

Its mouth was perfectly round, the rim equally thick all around, and the base so level that it did not rock even slightly when placed on a board.

Inside the box, a sheet of paper listed the measurements: width of the mouth, height, diameter of the base.

Deepak took out a measuring tape and checked them all again.

Ramcharan held the sample for a while.

Then he ran a finger over its inner surface.

"It is beautiful," he said.

Deepak was surprised.

"Then we can make it?"

"This one has already been made."

"I mean—like this."

Ramcharan set the sample on the plank.

"We can make bowls like this. We cannot make this bowl."

Deepak understood that an argument was beginning.

"Dada, this time we will have to leave our own way aside. They have given measurements."

"Who told you to leave the measurements aside?"

"Then?"

"Make ten first. We will see."

That same day Deepak made his own preparations beside the wheel.

He cut a thin bamboo strip to measure the width of the mouth.

A second strip for the height.

A third for the diameter of the base.

He also brought out the old balance so that each lump of clay could be made nearly equal in weight.

Ramcharan watched from a distance.

Deepak asked, "Why did you never do all this before?"

"There was no need."

"Now there is."

"Then do it."

His grandfather's easy answer irritated Deepak slightly.

He felt that Ramcharan objected inwardly but simply refused to say so.

The first lump went onto the wheel.

Deepak opened the mouth, held the bamboo strip against it, pressed slightly, measured the height, then measured the base.

The bowl came out beautiful.

Then the second.

The third.

The fourth.

While making the fifth, his finger went a little too far inward.

The mouth matched the measurement, but the body curved inward slightly.

Deepak immediately set it aside.

Ramcharan asked, "Why?"

"The shape is different."

"Is it broken?"

"No."

"Then?"

"You remember the order, don't you?"

Ramcharan said nothing.

By evening Deepak had made fifteen bowls.

He set five aside.

Ten were within his chosen measurements.

Ramcharan picked up one of the five that had been rejected.

"This one can stay at home for curd."

Deepak said, "Dada, if five out of every fifteen are rejected, we will have to make a hundred and fifty to deliver a hundred."

"Then your hand will learn."

"We have only three weeks."

Ramcharan looked at him.

"In three weeks we will see whether time teaches the hand, or the hand teaches time."

Deepak did not laugh.

For the next three days, measurement ruled the workshop.

The clay lump on the balance.

The mouth gauge at the wheel.

The height strip.

The base circle.

Serial numbers on the drying boards.

Deepak made a register with blank lines numbered from 1 to 100.

Ramcharan kept making bowls too, but the bamboo strip repeatedly caught on his work.

One bowl's mouth was half a finger narrower than the measure.

Another was slightly taller.

Deepak set three aside.

At the fourth, Ramcharan stopped his hand.

"Even for such a small difference?"

"They said exactly the same."

"Where on the measuring strip is the word 'exactly' written?"

"On the paper."

"Will the paper eat from the bowl?"

Deepak grew annoyed, but kept his voice low.

"The restaurant people will accept the goods according to that paper."

Ramcharan put his fourth bowl on a separate plank.

"Fine. This one is mine."

That evening, when Grandmother Janaki Devi saw the separate plank, she asked, "Has another shop opened?"

Deepak said, "These are outside the measurements."

Janaki Devi picked up one bowl and examined it.

"To me it looks all right inside and out."

"You are not the customer."

"That is true."

She put the bowl back.

"But will the customer eat the dal, or the bowl's measurements?"

Deepak said, "Both."

Ramcharan silently covered the clay.

The first twenty bowls dried and went into the kiln.

Deepak had been restless since morning on the day the kiln was opened.

He had watched unfired clay shrink in fire since childhood.

But this time shrinking was not merely the nature of clay; it was a risk to the order.

The bowls came out.

Their colour had deepened into terracotta.

Deepak measured the first.

The mouth was right.

The height was slightly less.

The second: mouth right, base slightly smaller.

The third: all three measurements almost right.

The fourth: the mouth a quarter of a finger too wide.

His head grew hot.

"Fire does not read measuring strips," Ramcharan said.

"Then the raw measurements will have to change."

"Change them."

Deepak set the five most similar bowls in one row.

From a distance they truly looked almost alike.

Ramcharan placed two of the older rejected bowls beside them.

Deepak at once reached out to remove them.

Ramcharan said, "Look at one thing."

"What?"

"Bring water."

Deepak was puzzled, but brought water from the earthen pitcher.

Ramcharan asked for the old brass cup used in the kitchen to measure dal.

For years Janaki Devi had used that cup to measure lentils, chickpeas and curd.

Ramcharan filled it to the brim and poured one measure into the first bowl.

Then a second.

The water stopped two fingers below the rim.

He poured two measures into the second bowl.

The water stopped one and a half fingers below.

Two measures into the third.

The water came almost to the rim.

Deepak bent closer.

Ramcharan said, "One shape, three stomachs."

Deepak immediately picked up one of the bowls he had rejected because its body seemed slightly fuller.

Two measures of water were poured into it.

The water stopped exactly where it had stopped in the first bowl.

Deepak tested five more.

Even where the external dimensions were close, the internal capacity was not the same.

Wall thickness, the rise inside the base, and shrinkage during drying all made a difference.

"But the customer gave outside measurements," Deepak said.

Ramcharan replied, "Have you understood what the customer needs the bowl to do?"

"For dal and vegetables."

"If one bowl holds less dal and another more, will identical appearance save him?"

Deepak remained silent.

That night he called Arunesh.

"I want to ask one thing. How much dal will you serve in each bowl?"

There was a pause at the other end.

"I use one ladle. Around two hundred and eighty millilitres. Why?"

Deepak said, "What is the capacity of the sample bowl?"

"I have never measured it exactly."

"Please measure it tomorrow and tell me."

Arunesh laughed.

"Did I order bowls or a mathematics lesson?"

Deepak laughed a little too.

"This time, both."

The answer came the next day.

Filled to the rim, the sample held three hundred and twenty millilitres.

In use, about two hundred and eighty millilitres would be served.

Deepak wrote it down.

Ramcharan said, "Now you have the measurement."

"What about the mouth and height?"

"Those remain too. But this is the first measurement."

Deepak did not find that easy to accept.

For three days he had treated outward sameness as the centre of the work.

Now his grandfather was not overturning the entire system Deepak had made; he was only shifting its centre.

Together they devised a new method.

The raw lumps of clay would be approximately the same weight.

The mouth width would stay within a set range.

The height too would stay within a range.

But the real test of a fired bowl would be its capacity.

Deepak checked the measure of the brass cup and brought a small steel measuring vessel so that equal amounts of water could be measured precisely.

Turning it in his hand, Ramcharan asked, "Will this sit on the wheel too?"

"No. After the bowls come out of the kiln."

"Then fine."

Deepak added a new column to the register: "Capacity."

Beside it: "Mouth," "Height," "Batch," "Kiln Date."

Ramcharan looked at the register.

"Will you write all this?"

"For the first hundred."

"And the second hundred?"

"Then we will see which writing is actually useful."

Ramcharan smiled.

"That is right."

In the next batch, the rhythm at the wheel changed.

Deepak no longer used the bamboo strip only as a final judge.

He felt the thickness of the clay with his fingers, watched the rise inside the base, and then checked the measurements.

Ramcharan too sometimes asked for the measuring strip.

One day the mouth of a bowl he made came out slightly below the permitted range.

Deepak said, "This one is out."

Ramcharan asked, "Capacity?"

"It is still unfired."

"Then punishment before the test?"

Deepak did not set the bowl aside.

"We'll see after the kiln."

Ramcharan merely said, "Hmm."

Three days later that same bowl proved correct in capacity, though its mouth was slightly below the measurement.

Deepak held it for a long time, looking at it.

Ramcharan asked, "What will you do?"

"Keep it in the sample group. Arunesh can see it himself."

The earlier Deepak would not have made that decision.

A week later Arunesh came to inspect the workshop.

Meena, the restaurant cook, came with him.

Thirty fired bowls stood in a row on the plank.

From a distance they looked like members of one family.

Up close, the differences were clear.

One rim opened slightly more.

One body was rounder.

On another, the terracotta colour at the base was darker from the fire.

After looking at the first three bowls, Arunesh frowned.

"I asked for the same size."

A tightness rose inside Deepak's chest.

Ramcharan said nothing.

Deepak said, "First, let me show you one test."

Meena asked, "What?"

Deepak filled the measuring vessel with two hundred and eighty millilitres of water and poured it into the first bowl.

The water stopped about one finger below the rim.

The second bowl—the same.

The third—the same.

The fourth, fifth, sixth—almost the same in each.

Meena took the measuring vessel herself.

She picked up one bowl from the middle of the row and filled it.

"This one looks smaller from outside," she said.

Deepak replied, "The space inside is the same."

Meena tested two or three more.

Arunesh took the white sample bowl out of its box.

Two hundred and eighty millilitres of water were poured into that as well.

The water rose to almost the same height.

This time Ramcharan spoke.

"Your sample gave us a measurement for the eye. Your kitchen needs a measurement for the stomach."

Arunesh looked at him.

"But if they look too different on the table, that will not be good either," he said.

Deepak opened the register.

"That is why we have kept the outer dimensions within limits too. Not identical. Among these thirty, the variation in the mouth is less than half a finger. The height variation is also within that range. Capacity is the main standard."

Meena said, "For me the capacity is important. If one ladle of dal looks the same in every bowl, serving becomes easy."

Arunesh turned one bowl in his hand.

Along its rim was a very faint mark left by finger pressure.

"Will marks like these remain?"

Ramcharan said, "Where a hand has touched, now and then they will."

"I need cleanliness."

"You will have cleanliness. We will not erase the hand."

Deepak looked at his grandfather.

His voice was not hard, but it was clear.

Arunesh set the bowl down again.

"I will take these thirty for a trial. We'll use them in the restaurant for two days. Then we will decide about the rest."

Deepak's stomach felt slightly hollow.

The order was still not fully secure.

The thirty bowls were wrapped separately in sacks and paper and sent away.

For two days the workshop waited for the phone.

Deepak kept making new bowls, but he stopped short of the target of one hundred.

Without Arunesh's answer, making the remaining seventy would be a risk.

Ramcharan continued working at his usual pace.

Deepak asked, "Aren't you worried?"

"I am."

"It doesn't show."

"Will showing worry make the bowls dry faster?"

Deepak laughed.

The call came two evenings later.

It was not Arunesh but Meena.

"Deepakji, there is one problem."

Deepak's smile vanished at once.

"What?"

"When we stack the bowls one inside another, some of them stick too tightly. In the kitchen we have to stack washed bowls quickly."

Deepak fell silent.

He had not thought of that.

"The capacity is right," Meena added. "Serving has become much easier. But control the slope between the base and the mouth a little, so they do not jam when one is placed inside another."

Deepak immediately opened the register.

"How much difference do you need?"

"I'll send you a short video. Watch it."

After the call ended, Deepak told Ramcharan.

Ramcharan suggested adding a third measurement: "nesting"—how far one bowl went into another when stacked, and where it stopped.

Deepak said, "Then that is again a measurement of form."

"A measurement of use," Ramcharan corrected him.

Those two words stayed in Deepak's mind.

Now "Nesting" was added beside "Capacity" in the register.

A small bamboo gauge was made.

It did not copy the outer body exactly.

It merely checked that the bowl's slope did not curve inward so much that it would jam inside another bowl.

Ramcharan made the gauge himself.

Deepak asked, "You don't like moulds."

"Not moulds for identical shape. This is a boundary for use."

Deepak looked at him for a few moments.

He was beginning to understand that his grandfather was not opposed to measurement.

He distinguished between measurement and imitation.

The remaining bowls were now made quickly, but not in the fear that had governed the first three days.

The raw lumps were nearly equal.

The mouths stayed within the range.

The heights stayed within the range.

The slope allowed easy stacking without sticking.

After firing, capacity was checked.

A bowl that was too high or too low in capacity received a black mark on its base and was separated from the restaurant batch.

A bowl slightly different in form, but correct in capacity and nesting, remained in the batch.

Deepak's "out" pile grew smaller.

Ramcharan's movements changed slightly too.

Before picking up a lump of clay, he began glancing towards the balance, though he did not weigh every piece.

One day Deepak joked, "Dada, now you are turning into a machine."

Ramcharan replied, "When the machine develops a backache like mine, I'll accept that."

Both laughed.

On the final morning of the third week, one hundred and eight fired bowls stood ready in the workshop.

Deepak checked the capacity of every one again.

One hundred and two fell within the chosen limit.

Six were high or low.

Of the one hundred and two, two still looked a little more different in form to him.

He looked at his grandfather.

Ramcharan asked, "Stomach?"

"Right."

"Nesting?"

"Right."

"Any breakage?"

"No."

"Then?"

Deepak placed the bowls in a row.

When the two differently shaped ones stood among the others, they did not look as different as they had when held alone.

"They stay," Deepak said.

Ramcharan said nothing.

He only put a tick beside those two serial numbers in the register.

Exactly one hundred bowls were selected for the restaurant.

Two more were added as spares in case any broke on the way.

Six were set aside for the house and the local shop.

This time Arunesh came himself with a vehicle.

Before loading, he looked over the hundred bowls.

"They do not look as identical as on the first day," he said.

The old tension stirred inside Deepak, but he opened the register.

"Not identical. The measurements of use are the same."

Meena was with him.

She stacked five bowls inside one another, then took them apart.

None stuck.

Deepak was about to demonstrate the water measure, but Meena raised her hand.

"We have already tested that."

Holding one bowl, Arunesh said, "We will have to change the paper for the next batch."

Deepak asked, "Which paper?"

"The order sheet. It currently says 'same size.' Those are not the right words."

Ramcharan stood behind them.

Arunesh said, "We will write: capacity suitable for serving 280 millilitres; mouth and height within the specified range; easy nesting in stacks; natural variations of handwork acceptable."

Deepak involuntarily looked towards his grandfather.

Ramcharan said only, "This time the paper is not eating from the bowl. It understands the work."

Arunesh did not understand the reference, but Deepak laughed.

After the vehicle left, the workshop felt unusually empty.

Only the six separated bowls, some raw clay and the old brass measuring cup remained on the plank.

Janaki Devi picked up one of the rejected bowls.

"This one for curd?"

Deepak checked its capacity.

"This one holds a little more."

"Why should I get less curd?"

Ramcharan laughed.

Deepak handed the bowl to his grandmother.

In the evening he sat down to put the register away.

On the first page were his old columns: mouth, height, base.

On later pages were capacity, batch, kiln date and nesting.

He looked at the serial numbers of the first five bowls he had rejected on the first day.

Two of them, if made now, could have entered the restaurant standard.

For a moment Deepak thought of crossing out the page, then did not.

In the corner he wrote:

"First measure: form. Later measure: use."

Ramcharan read it from behind him.

"Is that a rule?"

Deepak said, "No. A reminder."

Ramcharan sat down beside his old wheel.

"Then make a new bowl."

"The order is finished."

"We are short of bowls at home."

Deepak sat on the other side of the wheel.

He picked up a lump of clay.

The balance was in front of him.

So were the bamboo strips.

The brass cup stood on the plank.

He placed the lump on the balance, then removed a little clay.

Ramcharan asked, "Measurements even for a bowl for home?"

Deepak said, "Not capacity. Just to warm my hand."

The wheel began to turn.

The mouth of the first bowl opened.

One side was slightly higher, the other slightly lower.

Deepak raised a finger to even it out, then stopped.

He looked at the space inside, felt the thickness of the base, and slowed the wheel a little.

Ramcharan said nothing.

Deepak placed the bowl on the plank.

It was not exactly the same as another bowl.

But looking at it, Deepak's first question was no longer how closely its shape matched.

He did not even reach for the brass measuring cup.

It was a bowl for home.

Its use was already known.

Story 67

The Star on the Roof

As soon as the first star of evening appeared, Aditi would climb to the roof.

Her science teacher had given her the exercise:

for twenty days, at the same time, look at the sky in the same direction; write in a notebook what you can see, and also what you cannot see.

Aditi liked the second part of the exercise more.

Because sometimes what was absent from the sky said a great deal too:

there might be cloud, dust, too much moonlight, or clothes hung on the roof might have come in the way.

That last reason led to her first disagreement with her aunt, Manjula Devi.

Even calling it a disagreement was perhaps too strong.

Neither of them raised her voice.

But when Aditi reached the roof, the place on the western side where she usually opened her star chart was occupied by a yellow bedsheet stretched between four bamboo poles.

The sheet was not there to be washed, but to dry.

Around it, two saris, three salwar garments, children's clothes and a long white towel were taking the air.

In the middle of the roof, papads had been spread on four cotton cloths.

In one corner were two winnowing trays of wheat, which Manjula Devi was letting catch the light evening breeze.

Aditi stopped on the last step of the staircase.

Seeing her, her aunt said, "It will take a little time today. These clothes stayed half-dry under clouds all day."

Aditi looked towards the western sky.

The sun had set, but the twenty minutes of evening her teacher had specified had already begun.

"How long?" she asked.

"Let the clothes air for a while. I have to turn the papads too."

"My star will go lower by then."

Manjula Devi laughed.

"Will the star go lower, or will the earth turn?"

Aditi did not laugh.

She folded her star chart and went to the northern side of the roof.

There was a water tank there, and from behind it half the western sky was cut off.

She opened her notebook.

She wrote the date.

She wrote the time.

Then she wrote: "Western view obstructed."

After a pause, she added: "Cause: clothes."

From a distance Manjula Devi asked, "Will you write my name too?"

"No need."

"Then did the clothes hang themselves?"

Aditi looked at her.

Her aunt was smiling.

After the word "clothes," Aditi made a small pair of brackets and wrote: "household use."

Manjula Devi said nothing when she saw that.

Aditi was fifteen.

She lived in town with her parents, but that year she had come to the ancestral house for two months during the school summer holidays.

Her grandfather was no longer alive.

Her grandmother too had died the previous winter.

Now the large courtyard house was occupied by her uncle and aunt, their two young children, while Aditi's parents came and went during holidays and leave.

For Aditi, the roof was the most beloved place in the house.

At their house in town, there was little to see from the roof beyond a water tank, wires and the walls of neighbouring buildings.

Here there were trees all around, fields stretching into the distance, and as soon as night fell the sky opened so wide that for the first two days she felt as though the number of stars had increased.

She had decided to do her science teacher's exercise here.

But for Manjula Devi, the roof was not merely a place for looking at the sky.

In the mornings, paddy or wheat was spread there.

In the afternoons there were papads, badis, jars of pickle, sometimes clothes.

When the rains lingered nearby, every dry hour on the roof had a different value.

Aditi knew that value, but she did not accept it.

The next day she went up first.

Half an hour before sunset.

On the western side she laid out the star chart, her notebook and a small torch covered with red paper.

Her teacher had said that red light disturbed the eyes' adjustment to darkness less.

When Manjula Devi came up, she found Aditi spread out in the western corner.

She was carrying two baskets.

"The papads go here," she said.

Aditi looked up.

"I came first today."

"The papads have been here since yesterday."

"But right now they are in the baskets."

"They will dry only when I spread them."

Aditi was silent for a few moments.

So was Manjula Devi.

Then she carried the baskets to the eastern side.

Aditi said, "There is less sunlight there."

"What remains today will get enough."

"Then will the papads spoil?"

"No. They will only take a little longer."

Aditi felt something like victory, but she was not happy.

That evening her chart was clear.

Low in the west she saw a bright point that might have been a planet rather than a star.

She sketched its position in the notebook.

While coming down the stairs, she noticed the first trace of dew settling on the papads on the eastern side.

At that moment Manjula Devi was coming up.

She touched the papads and immediately began gathering the cloth.

Aditi asked, "Have they got wet?"

"Not wet. But the wind has turned."

"How did you know the wind had turned?"

"By the smell."

Aditi sniffed the air around her.

She could smell only earth, cloth and pickle spices.

"What smell?"

"Dampness from the pond side below."

The answer did not sound scientific to Aditi.

She asked, "Did you measure the humidity?"

Lifting the papads, Manjula Devi said, "I used my fingers."

Aditi said nothing more.

On the third day the wind had been strong since afternoon.

When Aditi went up at evening, the western side was clear for her star chart.

But five saris were flapping from a long rope across the middle of the roof.

Whenever the wind lifted a sari, the sky opened.

Then the sari fell and covered the stars again.

Aditi kept trying to catch one star.

She saw it three times; the fourth time a sari came between.

Annoyed, she reached to lower the rope.

Just then Manjula Devi's voice came from behind.

"Do not untie the knot."

Aditi stopped her hand.

"I'll lower it for five minutes."

"In five minutes the wind will throw the saris onto the floor."

"I'll hold them."

"Will you watch the sky or hold five saris?"

Aditi let go.

That night she wrote in her notebook:

"Visibility repeatedly obstructed: wind + saris."

Below that, in a little anger, she wrote:

"Stable observation difficult because the roof is shared."

She stopped at the next line.

Then she wrote:

"Need a solution."

The next morning she found Manjula Devi in the kitchen.

Her aunt was kneading flour.

Dal was cooking on the stove.

Aditi said directly, "I need the roof every evening from seven to eight."

Manjula Devi left the dough and looked at her.

"The whole roof?"

"At least the western half."

"Between seven and eight, the clothes are taken down, papads are gathered, pickle jars are brought in."

"Can't all that be done at six?"

"Why should I gather at five what has sunlight until six?"

Aditi had come prepared with an answer, but that question was not in her notebook.

"Then at eight?"

"By then the dew will settle."

"Then when am I supposed to do my work?"

Manjula Devi got up to wash her hands.

"That is my question too."

For a few moments they looked at each other.

Washing her hands from a lota, Manjula Devi said, "The roof is yours too, and mine too. But the sky decides the time—for your stars, and for my sunlight."

Aditi found the sentence half appealing and half inconvenient.

She said, "The stars appear at almost the same time every day."

"The sunlight is not the same every day."

"Then let us divide the time."

"Divide it."

"Seven to seven-thirty for me."

"Not on the days after rain."

"Why?"

"The clothes will take longer to dry."

"Then what kind of rule is a rule if it keeps changing?"

Manjula Devi smiled.

"The rules of the sky and the rules of a house are different."

Aditi was irritated again.

She left the kitchen.

At noon her uncle went to the market.

The younger children were doing their schoolwork.

Aditi went alone to the roof.

She measured it.

It was about thirty-two cubits long and twenty-four cubits wide.

There was a small drain on the western side, the stairwell on the east, and the tank to the north.

She drew a map of the roof in her notebook.

She needed an eight-cubit strip on the west.

Her aunt usually spread papads across the open middle section.

The clothesline ran north to south, cutting across the western view.

Aditi drew three possibilities.

First: run the clothesline east to west.

Second: after afternoon, shift the papads to the eastern side.

Third: keep the western strip clear from seven to seven-thirty.

She took the map to her aunt.

Manjula Devi was not looking that way; she was breaking the stems from chillies.

Aditi placed the paper before her.

"Look at this."

Manjula Devi did not wear glasses, but when reading small writing she held the paper farther away.

"Is this the tank?"

"Yes."

"So small?"

"It is small on the map."

"Where are my papads?"

"Here."

"And your star?"

Aditi put her finger on the open strip to the west.

Manjula Devi looked at the map for a while.

"If the rope is turned, the clothes will catch less wind."

"Why?"

"In this month the wind usually comes from the south-west."

Aditi immediately asked, "Usually?"

"Not every day."

"Is there any written measurement for that?"

Breaking chilli stems, Manjula Devi said, "If your grandmother were alive, you could ask her. She would say that before Ashadh the wind changes its gait three times."

"That is not a scientific measurement."

"Then measure it."

Aditi stopped.

"What?"

"The wind. Write it down every day. You write about stars—write about the wind too."

Aditi folded the paper.

That evening her aunt did not spread the papads in the west.

But the clothesline still ran in the same direction.

Aditi looked at it and said nothing.

In a new corner of her notebook she wrote:

"Wind: south-west, moderate."

From behind her Manjula Devi asked, "How do you know it is moderate?"

"According to me."

"Then that is scientific?"

Aditi laughed without meaning to.

It was the first time they had laughed together since the disagreement began.

For the next four days, the experiment continued.

At seven in the evening Aditi used the western strip.

Manjula Devi did her gathering-up in the middle and eastern parts of the roof.

If clothes still hung on the western rope, her aunt took half of them down before seven.

Aditi dealt with the rest after seven-thirty.

In return, Aditi began helping to gather the papads.

On the first day she stacked two papads on top of each other.

Manjula Devi separated them immediately.

"If you keep them like this, the steam will be trapped."

"Even after they are this dry?"

"Dry on the surface. Still a little soft inside."

Aditi held one papad to her ear, as if she might hear the dampness inside.

Her aunt laughed.

"Can you hear it?"

"No."

"Bend it with your fingers."

Aditi bent it lightly.

The papad did not break; it only curved a little.

"Now?"

"There is still moisture inside," Manjula Devi said.

Aditi could not resist the urge to write it down.

She added a small line:

"Papad: surface dry, slight moisture inside; bending test."

Manjula Devi looked at the notebook.

"Your papads have entered among the stars."

"The roof is shared."

As soon as Aditi heard herself say that, she was slightly surprised.

On the fifth day the sky was perfectly clear.

The evening wind had fallen still.

The clothes had dried in the afternoon.

The papads too had been gathered on time.

The entire western strip was empty.

Aditi sat with the red torch, star chart and notebook spread before her.

First she wrote the position of the moon.

Then she began searching for the shape of the Great Bear.

After a while Manjula Devi came up.

Her hands were empty.

Aditi asked, "No work today?"

"Today I came to look at your roof."

The sentence sounded odd to Aditi.

She shifted slightly to make room.

Manjula Devi sat on the floor, but held the chart upside down.

Aditi turned it around.

"Look at these seven stars. Four make something like a box, and three make a tail."

Manjula Devi looked at the sky.

"The one that is tilted a little?"

"Yes."

"I have been seeing that since childhood."

"Did you know its name?"

"No. My mother used to call them the Seven Sisters."

Aditi at once bent towards the notebook.

"Wait," Manjula Devi said. "Must everything be written down?"

Aditi stopped her hand.

"I'll write it later."

For a while the two simply watched the sky.

Manjula Devi pointed at one star.

"Why does that one look still?"

Aditi tried to explain the Pole Star, the turning of the earth, and how direction stays fixed—the way her teacher had explained it.

Manjula Devi listened carefully.

Then she said, "So old people must have watched the stars for direction."

"Yes."

"I watch the roof for sunlight. You watch the sky for direction."

"For stars."

"Stars give direction too, don't they?"

Aditi smiled.

"Sometimes."

That night Aditi wrote in her notebook:

"Observation: Great Bear clear. Pole Star shown."

Then, after a pause, she added:

"Kaki calls them the Seven Sisters."

The next afternoon clouds suddenly gathered.

From the courtyard Manjula Devi shouted, "Aditi, the roof!"

Aditi dropped her book and ran.

Wheat was spread upstairs.

There were two sheets of clothes.

Four jars of pickle.

The wind was strengthening.

Without argument they both went to work.

Aditi lifted the wheat cloth by all four corners and dragged it inside.

Manjula Devi carried the jars towards the staircase.

The first heavy drops struck the roof just as the last winnowing tray came in.

They stood in the stairwell catching their breath.

Aditi asked, "How did you know before it started?"

"The south-west wind suddenly turned cold."

"The smell?"

"That too."

Aditi put out her hand and caught a drop.

Manjula Devi asked, "Will you write it in your notebook?"

"I will."

"My name?"

Aditi laughed.

"This time I will."

The rain stopped half an hour later.

At night the sky opened again, but the roof was wet.

Aditi sat on the threshold of the stairwell and looked up at the sky.

Manjula Devi walked barefoot over the wet roof, checking where water had collected.

"Do not sit there," she said. "You will slip."

"I'll watch from here."

"Leave the stars for today."

"It is a twenty-day exercise."

Manjula Devi said nothing.

She went inside and brought an old bamboo stool.

"Sit on this."

Aditi sat on the stool.

Through breaks in the clouds, stars appeared and disappeared one after another.

In her notebook she wrote:

"Visibility unstable; clouds after rain."

Below it:

"Roof wet; stool used."

She did not write her aunt's name.

But in brackets she added: "assistance."

The days passed.

Aditi's notebook was no longer only a star notebook.

One page contained wind, another moonlight, a third the times at which the roof was used.

Sometimes she wrote:

"No papads today; western strip clear from 6:55."

Sometimes:

"Clothes remained late; observation from north side."

One day her aunt said, "The wind will change tomorrow. Let us see."

The next day the wind really did blow from the east.

Aditi asked, "How did you predict it?"

"I watched the clouds moving in the morning."

"Are you right every time?"

"No."

"Then why don't you write it down?"

Manjula Devi stopped while folding clothes.

"For whom would I write it?"

"For yourself."

"My work goes on without writing."

Aditi thought for a moment.

"My stars would go on just by looking too. The teacher gave me the notebook, so I write."

"Then your teacher did right. Writing lets yesterday's thing meet you today."

"Where will your yesterday's thing meet you?"

Manjula Devi did not answer.

The next morning Aditi brought a thin notebook from the market.

At the top she wrote: "Rooftop Routine."

Seeing it, Manjula Devi said, "I do not want homework."

"It is not homework. Write only when you feel like it."

"What?"

"How much sun, which way the wind came from, what was dried, when it was brought in."

"If I write all that, when will I do the work?"

"One line."

Manjula Devi put the notebook on a cupboard shelf.

For three days it remained empty.

On the fourth day Aditi saw thick handwriting on the first page:

"Strong sun in the morning. Clouds from east after noon. Badis kept out three hours longer."

Aditi said nothing.

She merely left the next page blank.

By the end of the week, both notebooks had begun to stay together on the roof.

Aditi wrote about stars.

Manjula Devi sometimes wrote one line about sunlight, sometimes two words about wind.

One night the electricity went out.

The village suddenly sank into darkness.

Apart from two or three distant houses with battery lamps, everything became dim.

Aditi ran to the roof.

The sky looked fuller than before.

She froze as soon as she looked up.

Where darkness usually seemed empty, faint stars had emerged everywhere.

Manjula Devi came up behind her.

"Your work has increased today."

"Yes."

"Mine has decreased. There is no light to inspect the clothes."

Aditi handed her the red torch.

"Take this."

Manjula Devi shone the red light on the clothes.

"This makes the clothes look red."

"Do not look at the colour. Touch and check the moisture."

Her aunt looked at her.

Aditi laughed at herself.

"The finger test."

Manjula Devi laughed too.

That night they worked in separate corners of the roof.

Manjula Devi gathered the clothes.

Aditi tried to count the stars, even though her teacher had clearly told her not to count them but to recognise patterns.

After gathering the clothes, her aunt came over.

"Where are the Seven Sisters today?"

Aditi searched the sky and showed her.

"And that bright one?"

"That may be a planet. I'll compare it with the chart tomorrow."

"Not a star?"

"Not everything that shines is a star."

Manjula Devi said softly, "Not everything spread on a roof is clothing either."

Aditi understood that her aunt was joking.

But she liked the sentence.

The last week of the holidays arrived.

Aditi's twenty-day exercise was complete, but she did not stop going to the roof.

One evening Manjula Devi asked, "Your school assignment is finished, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then why do you come every day?"

Aditi closed the notebook.

"It has become a habit."

"The stars?"

Aditi thought for a moment.

"The roof."

That evening the red glow in the west lingered for a long time.

There were no papads.

Only two sheets hung on the rope, and they were brought in by half past six.

Aditi and Manjula Devi sat in the middle of the roof.

Her aunt opened her "Rooftop Routine" notebook.

"Look. In these fifteen days, clouds came from the east after noon five times. Three times there was rain by evening."

Aditi looked at the notebook.

"You are making data."

"What is data?"

"Information about the same thing written down repeatedly."

"Then am I a scientist too?"

"A little."

"Why only a little?"

"Because the sample is small."

Manjula Devi laughed loudly.

"How large is your sample?"

"Twenty days."

"Then yours is small too."

Aditi had no answer.

Both kept laughing.

The next evening there was a new arrangement on the roof.

Her uncle fixed two small hooks so that part of the clothesline could be loosened and shifted towards the east when needed.

It was not a permanent solution.

Depending on the wind, the rope would return to its old direction.

But between seven and seven-thirty, when Aditi was observing, the eight-cubit strip on the west was usually clear.

In return, Aditi helped with the evening gathering-up.

No one wrote this arrangement as a rule and nailed it to a wall.

It continued because both of them kept watching the time.

One day Manjula Devi came up late.

Aditi was already on the roof.

The western strip was clear.

In the middle, the cloth of papads was still spread out.

The sun was setting.

Aditi could have begun her own work if she wanted.

She touched a papad.

There was still a little moisture inside.

She bent it to check.

It still flexed.

She brought the basket, but did not gather them.

Instead, she lifted the four corners of the cloth and changed the direction in which the air was reaching them.

When Manjula Devi came up, she asked, "The stars?"

"Five minutes later."

"Why?"

"These are not ready yet."

Manjula Devi touched one papad.

"You are right."

Aditi smiled.

"My finger test."

"Not mine. Yours now too."

Five minutes later the papads were gathered.

Aditi sat in the western strip.

Manjula Devi picked up the empty basket and started towards the stairs, then stopped.

"Can you see the Seven Sisters today?"

Aditi looked up.

"They will become clear in a little while."

Manjula Devi put the basket down and sat.

"Then I'll wait a little."

The sky slowly deepened.

First one star, then another, then the familiar pattern of seven emerged.

Aditi pointed out the direction with her finger.

This time Manjula Devi recognised it at once.

"There."

"Yes."

"And the Pole Star?"

Aditi joined two stars in her mind to estimate the direction, then pointed to a dim point farther away.

Manjula Devi looked at it for a long time.

"Something so dim gives direction?"

"It does."

"It is not only bright things that are useful."

Aditi said nothing.

She very much wanted to write that sentence in her notebook.

But she kept the notebook closed.

After a while Manjula Devi asked, "Will there be sun tomorrow morning?"

Aditi looked at the sky.

"I do not know."

"The clouds?"

"There are a few."

"The wind?"

Aditi raised her palm and felt it.

"South-west."

"Then your guess?"

Aditi smiled.

"I'll write it in the notebook tomorrow."

Manjula Devi smiled too.

From the courtyard below came a child's voice:

"Ma, the rice!"

Manjula Devi got up.

"Come on. Stars will not fill the stomach."

Aditi stood too.

Before going down, she looked once more at the roof.

The rope was tied loose towards the east.

The papad cloth was folded.

The western strip was empty.

The sky spread above that empty strip.

But Aditi now understood that the sky did not reveal itself only in empty space.

Sometimes its form opened between clothes, papads, wind, dew and baskets as well.

As they went down, Manjula Devi asked, "What time tomorrow?"

Aditi said, "First we'll check the papads. Then the stars."

Manjula Devi said, "And if there are clouds?"

Aditi stopped at the turn of the stairs and smiled.

"Then I'll write the clouds."

Story 68

The Thin Curtain

When a new person joins a household, the first thing to change is often not a room, but the route people take through the house.

Lalita understood what that meant on the third day after her wedding.

Amresh's home was an old house built around a square courtyard.

The kitchen was on the east, two rooms on the south, the grain room on the west, and a long veranda on the north.

At one end of the veranda was Amresh's room; at the other, the room of his grandmother, Saraswati Devi.

The veranda between them was also a passage through the house.

In the morning the milkman passed that way.

The children went out to school through it.

At noon the women sat there sorting paddy.

In the evening Babuji pulled out a cot and sat there.

Late into the night someone or other crossed it to fetch water, give medicine, or check a door.

Lalita liked the room.

It had two windows: one towards the courtyard, the other towards the bamboo grove.

There was an old wooden cupboard, a low stool, a small table, and a niche built into the wall.

But the moment the door was opened, the whole veranda could see inside.

For the first two days Lalita took this simply as the nature of the house.

On the third day, while she was changing clothes inside, seven-year-old Pihu came running along the veranda, stopped at the doorway and asked, "Kaki, have you seen my ribbon?"

Startled, Lalita pulled her sari end across herself.

"No."

Pihu ran away.

A little later Amresh came in.

Lalita said quietly, "If I keep the door shut, everyone in the house thinks I am upset."

Amresh did not laugh.

"Yes."

"If I leave it open, someone or other comes right in front of me."

"Yes."

"Is there no way between the two?"

Amresh looked at the doorway.

"Shall we hang a curtain?"

Lalita said nothing.

That evening Amresh brought a thick cloth curtain from the market.

It was a pale, dusty green, with small iron rings along the top.

As soon as the elder sister-in-law saw it, she said, "This will be good. There will be no need to keep the door closed all day."

Amresh stretched a rope between two pillars of the veranda.

The curtain was hung there.

The veranda was divided into two parts.

The curtain stood about three cubits in front of the room door.

Someone inside could change clothes, sit on the cot, or talk in privacy.

From outside, only the dull green surface of the curtain could be seen.

For the first time Lalita felt at ease.

That night she said to Amresh, "It was such a small thing, yet for three days I hesitated to say it."

Amresh replied, "The house is old. The need is new."

Both thought that was the whole problem.

The next morning, when Saraswati Devi opened the door of her room, it was darker inside than before.

Her room had no window of its own.

It once had.

Ten years earlier, when the neighbour built a new brick house on the northern side, a wall rose directly in front of the window.

A gap of half a cubit remained between them, but more air than light came through it.

The real light for Saraswati Devi's room came from the eastern end of the veranda.

In the morning, as the sun rose above the courtyard, a long white band of light formed across the veranda.

That band slowly shifted until it reached her doorway.

As the day advanced, even the inner wall of her room brightened from it.

The new curtain stood exactly across that path.

Saraswati Devi stood in her doorway for a while and looked.

Then she brought her low stool out from the room and placed it on the veranda.

Sitting there, she put on her glasses and began mending her tulsi-bead rosary.

On her way to the kitchen, Lalita saw her.

"Dadi, won't you sit inside?"

"The air is good here."

Lalita went on.

For two days she noticed nothing more.

On the third afternoon it rained.

The sky was grey, and even the veranda was dim.

Lalita went into Saraswati Devi's room to put away a bottle of oil.

Dadi was sitting on the cot, knotting a loose thread along the edge of an old cloth.

When Lalita entered, her eyes took a few moments to adjust.

"Dadi, shall I turn on the light?"

"In daytime?"

"It is dark."

Saraswati Devi bit off the thread with her teeth.

"It is a rainy day."

Lalita switched on the light.

In the yellow glow the room suddenly became clear.

Then her eyes went towards the doorway.

Directly outside it, the dull green curtain was fully drawn.

"Does this curtain stop the light?"

Saraswati Devi looked at her over her glasses.

"A little."

"A little?"

"On clear days some light comes from above too."

"But before?"

"Before, there was no curtain."

Lalita fell silent.

Saraswati Devi began threading the needle again.

"Let the curtain stay."

"Your room has become dark."

"Your room has gained privacy."

"I'll have the curtain removed."

Saraswati Devi stopped the needle.

"Why?"

"It blocks the light."

"So it must go?"

"What else?"

Saraswati Devi placed the needle on the cot.

"A new need came into the house, and a solution was found for it. That solution hurt another need. So should the first need be erased?"

Lalita did not answer.

"There are so many people in this house," Dadi said. "Privacy for a newly married couple is not a luxury."

Hearing her own difficulty spoken aloud by Dadi embarrassed Lalita and relieved her at the same time.

"But should you sit with the electric light on in daytime?"

"That is not right either."

"Then?"

"Then ask the curtain."

Lalita smiled.

"Will the curtain answer?"

"If it is cloth, it can be cut, folded or moved. If it were a wall, it would be harder."

That evening Lalita did not remove the curtain.

But for the first time she looked at it as a problem.

The curtain stretched about seven cubits from one end of the rope to the other.

There was a gap of three fingers between its top and the eaves, and it hung four fingers above the floor.

Air could pass through those two gaps, but not light.

When Amresh returned from work, Lalita said, "The curtain is not in the right place."

"Shall we hang it closer to the room door?"

"Then there will be less privacy."

"Farther from Dadi's door?"

"People walk through the veranda here. Move it too far and the passage will be blocked."

Amresh looked at the curtain.

"What if we leave it half open during the day?"

Lalita slid it halfway and looked.

Light reached Dadi's room, but from the courtyard Amresh's cot could be seen directly.

"No."

"Shall we cut away the upper half?"

"Then a standing person will be able to see inside from above."

"From below?"

"Pihu is below already."

Both laughed.

But no solution appeared.

The matter came up at the family meal the next day.

Babuji said, "Move Dadi to another room."

Saraswati Devi replied at once, "No."

"The southern room has a window."

"Then rearrange my medicines, trunk, shrine shelf—everything there again."

"We will."

"Why should I leave my own room?"

Babuji fell silent.

The elder sister-in-law said, "Make the curtain from thinner cloth."

Lalita liked the idea.

The next day she hung one of her old white cotton sheets on the rope to test it.

The room really did become brighter.

But in the evening, when a lamp was lit inside, the silhouettes of Lalita and Amresh were clearly visible from outside.

Pihu and her little brother Nanhku stopped while passing through the veranda.

"Kaki, your shadow has become huge!"

Lalita immediately switched off the light.

The sheet was taken down that night.

When Saraswati Devi heard what had happened, she laughed.

"Thin cloth is a friend of the day, not of the night."

The sentence stayed in Lalita's mind.

The next morning she hung the sheet again, but this time only as an experiment.

She wanted to see exactly where the sunlight came from.

At eight, light was on the eastern wall of the courtyard.

At half past eight it touched the first pillar of the veranda.

At nine the left edge of the curtain brightened.

At nine twenty the light fell on the middle portion of the curtain.

Lalita marked the floor with small pieces of chalk as the light moved.

Saraswati Devi sat in the doorway watching.

"What are you measuring?"

"Your light."

"Can light be measured?"

"For today."

By ten o'clock there were five chalk marks on the floor.

Lalita understood that the light reaching Dadi's room did not travel in a straight line.

As the sun climbed, its path shifted to the right.

Because the curtain covered the full width, it blocked every one of those paths.

If one section in the middle were removed, light could travel directly to Dadi's doorway for about an hour and a half.

But from that same opening, the inside of Amresh's room would also be visible.

Lalita stood in the courtyard and looked from different angles.

There was one position from which light could reach Dadi's doorway, but Amresh's cot could not be seen.

A pillar stood in between.

Lalita picked up the chalk again.

"Dadi, sit here."

"Why?"

"Look."

Saraswati Devi dragged her low stool to the chalk mark and sat.

Lalita folded the left half of the curtain and tucked it against the right.

"Light?"

"It is coming."

"Can you see inside from the courtyard?"

Saraswati Devi turned her neck and looked.

"The cot is visible."

The experiment failed again.

Lalita let the curtain fall.

That afternoon the elder sister-in-law was hanging saris on two ropes outside the veranda to dry.

One rope was in front, the other behind.

The saris were not all on the same line.

The clothes on the front rope left spaces between them, while those on the rear rope covered those spaces.

Lalita stood there watching for a while.

The kitchen inside could not be seen directly from the courtyard.

Yet light entered in broken pieces between the two ropes.

Suddenly she asked, "Bhabi, why are these two ropes at different distances?"

Her sister-in-law looked surprised.

"How would so many clothes fit on one rope?"

"No, I mean—why one in front and one behind?"

"Because that is where the pillars are. That is where we tied them."

Lalita went straight to the curtain.

Saraswati Devi was watching.

"What happened?"

"One curtain is too straight."

"Will you make the curtain crooked?"

"I'll make two."

That evening when Amresh returned, Lalita was sitting on the floor with two lines drawn in chalk.

One marked the place of the original curtain.

The second was about a cubit and a half behind it, closer to the door of Amresh's room.

"What is this?"

"Two curtains."

"If we hang both, it will become even darker."

"Not on the same line."

Lalita showed him with the chalk.

"The first panel from here to here. The second behind it from here to here. The gaps between them will not face each other directly."

Amresh looked for a while.

"From the courtyard, behind the first opening there will be the second curtain."

"Yes."

"And the light?"

"It can find a slanting path between them from above."

"At night?"

"At night we slide both so they overlap."

Amresh measured the pillars.

"Not ropes. We need two thin bamboo rods. The rings can slide along them."

From her doorway Saraswati Devi said, "Try it with cloth first. Cut bamboo later."

The next day two old sheets were chosen for the experiment.

One green, one white.

The elder sister-in-law used the sewing machine to make both into long narrow panels.

The first panel was hung on the front rope.

It covered the left half of the veranda.

The second panel was hung a cubit and a half behind it on another rope.

It covered the right half.

Seen from the courtyard, the two together formed a staggered screen.

There was a path between them for air and light, but no straight path for the eye.

Pihu was called for the test.

"Can you see Kaka's cot from here?"

Pihu looked from the left.

"No."

She went to the right.

"I can see the chair from here."

Lalita slid the second panel four fingers farther.

"Now?"

"No."

Nanhku crouched down near the floor to look.

The elder sister-in-law lightly smacked the top of his head.

"Is this the only work you have?"

Nanhku ran away laughing.

Saraswati Devi said, "It is necessary to test with a child's eyes. Grown people look only while standing."

By noon the two-panel screen had been adjusted.

But the real test came the next morning.

From eight o'clock Lalita sat in Dadi's room.

At first there was only a greyish light.

At half past eight, sunlight from the courtyard touched the veranda.

At nine, the edge of the first panel brightened.

At nine fifteen, the light found the slanting path between the two panels and touched the frame of Dadi's doorway.

Lalita stood up.

The white strip slowly moved inward.

First the floor.

Then the leg of the cot.

Then the wall opposite.

Saraswati Devi was untangling thread with her glasses on.

She took off her glasses and looked at the wall.

"Now?" Lalita asked.

"Now the day has come inside."

Lalita said nothing.

Saraswati Devi put her glasses back on.

The experiment seemed successful.

But in the evening another problem appeared.

Because the two panels stood on different lines, under the outside light at night one corner of the room could be seen through the slanting passage between them.

Amresh said, "A daytime solution is incomplete at night."

Lalita slid the second panel until it came in front of the first.

The two panels overlapped by four fingers.

Inside, there was complete privacy.

"Like this at night."

"And in the morning?"

"Back to the chalk marks."

She darkened two small marks on the floor.

The first: Day.

The second: Night.

Saraswati Devi watched.

"Will the curtain tell the time too?"

Lalita laughed.

"Someone or other will."

For three days the house used the arrangement this way.

In the morning Lalita or Amresh slid the panels to the daytime marks.

After noon, when the sun climbed overhead, if more privacy was needed, one panel was moved slightly again.

In the evening, before the lamps were lit, both panels came to the nighttime marks.

No one issued an order.

Slowly the household learned.

Sometimes, returning from school, Pihu would notice that the curtain was not at the daytime mark and ask, "Kaki, has night come already?"

Lalita would say, "No, the wind is strong."

Sometimes Saraswati Devi herself used the end of her walking stick to push a ring and move one panel two fingers.

"Dadi, you could have called me."

"The curtain belongs to my light too."

At that sentence Lalita looked at her.

Saraswati Devi went on untangling thread without smiling.

A few days later, they discussed cutting the new thick green curtain.

Amresh hesitated.

"It is new."

Lalita said, "Cloth is for work, not for remaining whole."

The elder sister-in-law brought out the sewing machine.

The curtain was not cut straight down the middle into two equal halves.

According to the measurements, one panel was made slightly wider, the other narrower.

The edges were doubled over and stitched.

Separate rings were fixed along the tops.

Amresh smoothed two thin bamboo rods and fitted them between the pillars—one in front, one behind.

Saraswati Devi took two small brass-coloured bells from her old trunk.

"What are these for?"

"Tie one to the last ring of each panel."

Lalita was surprised.

"They'll make a noise."

"Not much. If someone draws the curtain at night, the person inside will know."

Amresh shook one bell in his hand.

The sound was very soft.

One bell was attached to the edge of each curtain panel.

Now, when a panel moved by day, there was a faint chime.

When the curtains were closed at night, two chimes came together and stopped.

Lalita liked that sound.

A week later Amresh's maternal cousin arrived with his family.

The veranda filled with people.

Children ran about, women talked, men pulled out cots and sat.

Earlier, on such a day, Lalita would have kept the room door closed.

This time the door remained open.

The two daytime curtain panels stood in their places.

Inside, Lalita folded clothes on the table.

She could hear the voices outside and feel the air coming in, but everyone's eyes did not reach inside.

There was light in Saraswati Devi's room too.

Sitting beside Dadi and looking at old photographs, a cousin said, "Was there always this much light in this room?"

Saraswati Devi replied, "There was light. For a few days in between, the curtain ate it."

Lalita heard from the other end of the veranda.

Dadi added, "Then the curtain was taught its path."

Everyone laughed.

Lalita did too.

But that night, after the guests had gone to sleep, she said to Amresh, "Why didn't Dadi tell us earlier that her room had become dark?"

Amresh was quiet for a while.

"Perhaps she thought the curtain would be removed."

"She did not want it removed."

"That is why."

"Why did I not understand earlier either?"

"Because you needed your privacy."

Lalita touched the bell on the curtain.

"Is it wrong to see one's own need?"

"No."

"And to see someone else's need late?"

Amresh thought before answering.

"If it is late, what you do after seeing it matters more."

Lalita said nothing to that.

She slid both panels to the nighttime marks.

Chime.

Chime.

The two edges overlapped.

The following month the monsoon clouds thickened.

For three days the sun did not appear clearly.

Saraswati Devi's room became grey again.

The two-panel arrangement could not create sunlight.

Lalita switched on the light at noon.

"This time the curtain is not at fault," Dadi said.

"I know."

"Then why that face?"

"I thought the solution was complete."

Saraswati Devi laughed.

"In a house, complete solutions are rare."

"Then?"

"You have to keep adjusting them."

When the rain stopped, Amresh examined the old blocked window in the northern wall.

The gap from the neighbour's wall was small, but a little light opening could be made in the upper part.

Babuji asked a mason.

The mason said two upper bricks could be removed and a grille fitted; direct rain would not enter.

Saraswati Devi agreed.

"Because the curtain was made, we remembered the window," she said.

A few days later the small light opening was made.

It did not bring strong sunlight, but a steady grey light began entering.

Lalita thought perhaps the curtain arrangement would no longer be so necessary.

But the curtains remained as they were.

Because their work had not been only to save Dadi's light.

They had added a new manner of living to the movement of the house.

Before, the veranda had been only everyone's passage.

Now, within that passage, there was also an acknowledgement that in a shared house a person could have a right to privacy.

And also that making privacy did not require erasing someone else's air, light, passage or habit.

One Kartik morning Lalita woke a little late.

Amresh had already gone out.

The curtains were still fully closed in their nighttime position.

She looked at the clock.

The sun had risen.

Lalita got up quickly, but before she reached the doorway she heard a faint chime.

Chime.

Then another.

Saraswati Devi was using the end of her walking stick to slide the first panel towards its daytime mark.

From behind the curtain Lalita said, "Dadi, leave it. I'll do it."

"It is done."

"It is difficult for you."

"Pushing it two fingers is not difficult."

Through the slanting gap between the two panels Lalita saw her.

Saraswati Devi sat down on her low stool.

A little later the light climbed from the courtyard onto the veranda.

It touched the first bamboo rod.

It passed between the two panels.

Then it drew a thin white line across Dadi's threshold.

At that moment Pihu came running from the courtyard.

Reaching the curtain, she asked out of habit, "Kaki, may I come in?"

Lalita said, "Come."

Instead of lifting the edge of the curtain panel, Pihu began searching for the open passage between the two.

"Not through there," Lalita said. "Go around to the right."

Pihu went around to the right and came inside.

The line of light did not break.

Story 69

The Measure of Shade

It was the first week of Bhadav.

The old neem tree standing at the south-west corner of the school was still green, but on the wall beneath it a long crack showed as clearly as a fresh streak of light.

The crack had existed before.

For a long time the children had taken it simply for an old line in the wall.

But this time the line had grown from beneath the window to the corner of the frame.

At eight in the morning an engineer from the buildings department arrived.

With him were the headmistress, Sudha Jha, the science teacher, Nalini Kumari, and Ramcharit Kaka, the school attendant.

The engineer first measured the crack.

Then he bent outside the wall and examined the neem roots.

Two thick roots had passed beneath the cement drain and grown towards the wall's foundation.

The drain had risen in three places.

Ramcharit Kaka said, "These bulges were not here last year."

The engineer nodded.

He tested the wall joints with a small iron probe, then inspected the classroom from inside.

"Keep this classroom empty for now," he said.

Sudha Jha asked, "What if only the roots are cut?"

The engineer looked at the neem.

"If roots this thick are cut, there will be less certainty that the tree can remain standing safely. The wall will need separate repairs too. Have the tree and the building assessed together."

He did not order the tree to be cut immediately.

But by noon his words had spread through the school.

Madhura of Class Nine first heard that the neem was going to be cut down.

She left the science room and went straight to the tree.

Five children were already gathered there.

One touched the trunk.

Another looked upward.

Someone said, "They are going to cut such an old tree?"

Madhura looked at the crack in the wall.

For the first time she noticed that the distance between tree and wall really was very small.

There were not even four cubits between the trunk and the wall.

At noon the neem's shade reached across half the school veranda.

The earthen water pot was kept beneath it.

During the midday break the children sat there with their lunch boxes.

After examinations, the small assembly where results were announced was also held in that shade.

Madhura said, "We will not let them cut it."

Amar of Class Eight said at once, "We'll write a petition."

"To whom?"

"The headmistress."

"She wants the tree cut too."

No one remembered exactly who had first said that.

But within half an hour the sentence had become a truth in the school.

When Nalini Kumari entered Class Nine that afternoon, someone had already written on the blackboard:

"SAVE THE NEEM."

She erased nothing.

Opening her notebook, she said, "Today's lesson was supposed to be temperature. But first tell me this: when you say 'save the neem,' what do you want to save?"

Amar said, "The tree."

"What in the tree?"

"The tree itself."

The class laughed.

Amar grew annoyed.

Nalini Kumari did not laugh.

"The trunk?" she asked.

"Yes."

"The leaves?"

"Those too."

"The roots?"

No one answered.

"The shade?"

Several voices answered together, "Yes."

"The birds?"

"Yes."

"The coolness around the water pot?"

Madhura was slightly startled.

She had not thought of that before.

Nalini Kumari asked again, "And the wall of Class Seven?"

This time no one said yes.

Under "SAVE THE NEEM" on the blackboard she wrote four words:

"WHAT IS TO BE SAVED?"

Madhura raised her hand.

"If the wall is really unsafe, then the classroom has to be saved too."

"Right."

Amar said, "Another wall can be built. A neem this large cannot grow again quickly."

Nalini Kumari did not dismiss that either.

"That is also a valid question."

No decision was taken that day.

The next day a horticulture officer came from the district horticulture office.

His name was Shashibhushan Mandal.

He did not tap the trunk and stop there; he walked around the tree.

He examined the soil, the raised roots, the distance between trunk and wall, and the heavy branches above.

The engineer came again.

The two spoke for a long time.

The children watched from the windows.

At last the headmistress called two representatives from every class to the veranda.

Sudha Jha said clearly, "No work will be done without hearing what you have to say. But the findings of the inspection will not be hidden either."

The engineer showed them the crack in the wall.

"This is not merely a line in the plaster," he said.

The horticulture officer said, "It is difficult to say that the tree will remain safe if we simply cut the roots. Strong winds come through this place. Weakening a major root on one side may increase the risk."

Amar asked, "Can the tree be moved somewhere else?"

Shashibhushan Mandal looked at the trunk.

"A tree this large, this close to a building, with roots like these—it is not as simple in reality as it looks on paper."

"Then it has to be cut?" Madhura asked.

There was a short silence before the answer.

"In my assessment," the engineer said, "to make the building safe, this tree will have to be removed."

"Removed means cut," Amar said.

"For a tree of this size, yes."

Some of the children's faces fell.

Ramcharit Kaka stood beside a veranda pillar.

Madhura looked at him.

He had not worked at the school for forty-nine years, but he carried forty-nine years of the school's story in his memory.

His own service had begun thirty-five years earlier.

The neem had already been large then.

After the meeting Madhura went to him.

"Kaka, how old is this neem?"

Ramcharit Kaka smiled.

"Older than my job."

"Was it this large when you first came?"

"A little thinner. But it gave shade even then."

"Who planted it?"

"I do not know."

Madhura was surprised.

"No one in the school knows?"

"If it is in an old register, look there."

"You do not remember?"

"I can tell you what I saw. When I came here, it was already here."

Madhura found the answer disappointing.

She had wanted the tree to have a beautiful beginning-story.

A name.

Someone's hand.

Ramcharit Kaka understood from her face.

"Not finding a name does not make the tree less old," he said.

Two days later the children prepared a petition.

Three pages long.

Its title was:

"Request for the Preservation of the School's Old Neem Tree."

Madhura was part of the writing group.

The petition mentioned shade, birds, old assemblies, environment and memory.

At the end Amar added:

"A felled tree cannot be joined back together."

Everyone liked that line.

Sudha Jha read the entire petition.

Then she asked, "Have you read the wall inspection report?"

No one had.

"What the horticulture officer wrote?"

No.

"Then the petition says, 'The tree is completely safe.' Where did that statement come from?"

The class representatives were silent.

Amar said, "We thought..."

"Thinking and an inspection report are not the same thing."

Sudha Jha did not return the petition.

She gave them copies of both reports.

"Read them, then give me the petition again. Wanting to save the tree is not wrong. But if you erase the findings of the inspection, who will carry the weight of the tree you save?"

That night Madhura read the reports.

Some words were difficult.

She asked her father.

He was not a mason; he worked at the post office.

He did not understand everything either.

But one sentence was clear:

"The principal roots have entered the foundation zone of the wall; unilateral cutting of roots may affect the stability of the tree."

Madhura read the line in the petition again:

"The tree is completely safe."

She crossed it out in pencil.

The next day the group met again.

Amar was dissatisfied.

"If we keep crossing things out like this, the petition will become weak."

Madhura said, "A lie does not make it strong."

"Then write: cut the tree?"

"No."

"Then what?"

Madhura could not answer.

Just then Nalini Kumari entered the classroom.

In her hands were four thermometers, a long measuring tape and a small box of white chalk.

"The temperature lesson is still pending," she said.

Amar made a face.

"At a time like this?"

"At exactly this time."

She took them all to the neem.

It was ten twenty in the morning.

"For five days beginning today," Nalini Kumari said, "we will not measure arguments for or against the neem. We will measure what the tree does."

"The tree's work?"

"Yes. If you want to save something, understand not only its form, but its function."

She put a small chalk mark on the ground.

"The edge of the trunk's shade is here right now."

The measuring tape was stretched.

The outer edge of the shade was marked.

The time—10:20—was written down.

Two thermometers were placed in sunlight, two in shade.

The location of the water pot was marked.

The veranda steps where children sat were measured too.

Madhura drew a map in her notebook.

Amar asked, "Will this save the tree?"

Nalini Kumari said, "I do not know."

"Then?"

"If the tree is not saved, at least we will know what must not disappear with it."

That sentence sounded different to Madhura from every line in the petition.

At noon they measured again.

The shade had shifted and now covered half the water pot.

At one o'clock, during the midday break, measuring was difficult.

Small children stepped on the chalk lines.

Someone asked, "Is this a game?"

Madhura would answer, "A register of shade."

"Can shade be written in a register too?"

"Today it can."

At three the shade climbed the western wall.

Inside Class Seven the temperature was lower than in the sun outside, though less air entered because the cracked corner had been closed off.

Nalini Kumari had each measurement written separately.

On the second day the sky was cloudy.

Amar asked, "Where do we measure the shade today?"

"Wherever it can be seen. If it cannot be seen, write 'not visible.'"

"Leave it blank?"

"If you leave it blank, later it will look as though you forgot to measure. If you write 'not visible,' the condition of the day remains visible."

Madhura wrote that rule at the top of her notebook.

The third day was brightly sunny.

This time the younger children began watching the measurements themselves.

Pihani of Class Five said, "Now I understand why we eat our lunch boxes here."

"Why?"

"Because at one o'clock there is complete shade here."

"Did you not understand that before?"

"I did. But I had never measured it."

The temperature of the water pot was recorded too.

There was a difference between the water in the pot kept in shade and the water in a test pot placed in the sun.

The headmistress herself came once to look at the measurements.

She saw the curved chalk lines.

"The courtyard has turned into a drawing," she said.

Ramcharit Kaka replied, "The ground is showing where the tree goes during the day."

Madhura smiled.

By the fifth day there were five lines for each time across the courtyard.

Some overlapped.

Some were separate.

Nalini Kumari asked the children to copy all the lines onto a single map.

When the lines came together, they formed a strange shape.

The trunk was only a small point.

The shade was an area spreading around it through the day.

Madhura suddenly said, "We were looking only at the trunk."

Amar asked, "And now?"

"Now it seems that much of what we want to save is not the trunk at all."

Nalini Kumari said nothing.

She let the children finish the thought themselves.

Three places were specially marked on the map.

First: the shade used during midday meals.

Second: the shade over the water pot and the line where children came to drink.

Third: the shade falling on the western classroom wall in the afternoon.

The tree's use for birds was recorded separately.

The horticulture officer was called again.

The children showed him the map.

Shashibhushan Mandal studied the page for a long time.

"This is not a map of the tree," he said.

Amar replied at once, "Of the shade."

"Yes. And of its uses too."

Sudha Jha asked, "If removing this tree becomes certain, how can these uses be preserved?"

The question in the meeting had changed.

Before, it had been:

Should the tree be cut or not?

Now it was:

What must not be cut away along with the tree?

The existing repair plan for the school was brought out.

The cracked wall was to be rebuilt.

The drain would be remade too.

A narrow tin bicycle shelter had been proposed for the southern side of the courtyard.

Looking at the plan, Madhura asked, "Why is the shelter here?"

The headmistress said, "Because this space was already empty."

"According to the shade measurements, the children sit here at one o'clock."

"Then?"

"Can the bicycle shelter be shifted a little?"

The engineer looked at the measurements on the paper.

"It can be shifted. But the shelter was not designed for the children."

Nalini Kumari asked, "Can one structure do two jobs?"

The discussion began.

A tin roof would become hot at noon.

A fully permanent roof would cost more.

Bamboo used permanently would not last long enough.

At last the engineer suggested a simple solution:

the bicycle shelter could be moved west, and an open slatted strip added along its eastern side; instead of dense sheet metal above, there would be spaced battens and a wire framework for local vines.

Shashibhushan Mandal immediately said, "Choose the vine species carefully. Do not plant beside the wall in a way that creates another root problem."

Amar asked, "Will the place where the neem stood be left empty?"

"The old trunk area will remain open for repairing the wall," the engineer said.

"Then there will be no sign of the tree?"

Sudha Jha looked at Madhura.

"Is a sign necessary?"

Madhura's first impulse was to say yes.

Then she looked at the chalk lines all around.

"One sign in one place will not be enough," she said.

"Why?"

"Because the shade was not in one place."

Ramcharit Kaka laughed softly.

It was decided that no circular memorial would be made around the old trunk.

Instead, a "Shade Register" would be kept in the school archive, containing the map, times, temperatures, places of use, and the reasons for the repair.

The temporary chalk lines in the courtyard would be allowed to disappear with rain and footsteps.

They would not be made permanent with paint.

Amar was not satisfied with this decision.

"There should be something visible too," he said.

Madhura agreed with him on that.

But no one could agree on what.

Ramcharit Kaka said, "If you need something visible, write the measurements on the new shelter."

"Which measurements?"

"How much shade the children need."

Everyone fell silent at that.

The engineer wrote down the width of the slatted strip on the paper.

"This measurement comes not from the tree's trunk, but from the children's use," he said.

Madhura liked that.

The day for cutting was fixed for Sunday, when the school would be closed.

On Saturday evening the children were allowed to gather under the neem.

There was no ceremony.

No speech.

Anyone who wished could sit there for ten minutes.

Many children came.

One touched the trunk.

One picked up a leaf.

One took a photograph on a phone.

Amar thought of writing his name on the trunk, but Ramcharit Kaka stopped him.

"It has stood all these years without a name. Why give it a nameplate on its last evening?"

Amar lowered his hand.

Madhura sat on the veranda steps.

The sun was setting.

The shade slowly climbed the wall.

She did not open her notebook.

The five days of measurements were complete.

Ramcharit Kaka sat beside her.

"Kaka," Madhura asked, "are you sad?"

"I am."

"Even so, you did not oppose it."

"If I opposed it, would the crack close?"

"No."

"Would the tree remain standing safely?"

"I do not know."

"Nor do I. But it was necessary to have it inspected."

Madhura said, "People will say the school cut down the tree."

Ramcharit Kaka looked towards the last line of shade on the ground.

"They will. But you should also write what you measured before cutting it, why you measured it, and what you changed afterward."

"Won't that sound like a statement written only to defend ourselves?"

"If you write it only to defend yourselves, it will. If the next time someone plants a tree beside a wall they read this register, then it will be a lesson."

Madhura did not go to school on Sunday.

She deliberately stayed away.

Afraid she might hear the sound of the cutting from a distance, she shut the window and sat down to study.

Until noon she could not keep her mind on the book.

When she reached school on Monday, the south-west corner looked open.

More sky was visible.

So was the crack in the wall.

The neem was gone.

The earth where the trunk had stood had not yet been levelled; the roots still had to be removed.

Madhura did not stand there for long.

She went straight to the water pot.

It was in the sun.

For the first time, the sunlight in that place hurt her eyes.

Amar said, "See? Now do you understand?"

Madhura said, "Yes."

That day the water pot was moved inside the veranda.

At the midday meal the children searched for different corners.

A few Class Three children quarrelled over the thin shade on the steps.

Nalini Kumari said nothing.

She merely added one line to the Shade Register:

"First day after removal: water pot moved inside; lunch seating scattered."

Madhura asked, "Write this too?"

"This too."

The repairs began.

The weakened section of the old wall was opened.

The lower foundation was repaired.

The direction of the drain was altered slightly.

The posts of the new shelter were set outside the old root zone.

Every day the children watched the measurements.

One day Madhura noticed that the workers were bringing the eastern edge of the shelter two cubits inside the planned line.

She told the engineer.

"If it starts here, the place of the water pot will be in the sun at one o'clock."

The engineer took out the plan.

The workers were stopped.

"Your measurements have become useful," he said with a smile.

That was the first day Amar looked pleased while watching the repair work.

"So this is becoming the neem's shade?" he asked.

Madhura said, "No. It is being made from our measurements."

"What is the difference?"

"The neem's shade changed all day. This strip covers only the place where the need was greatest."

"Then it is less."

"Yes. And what is less is meant to grow as the new trees grow."

A place for planting was chosen along the north-east boundary of the school.

Before anything was planted, Shashibhushan Mandal showed the children the possible spread of a mature tree, the distance from the building, the drain and the path of overhead wires.

This time the question was not:

Which tree is beautiful?

The question was:

Where will this reach twenty years from now?

The children measured the ground with tapes.

Three separate places were chosen for local shade-giving trees.

Not a row of one species.

Not an imitation of the old form.

Madhura asked, "No neem among them?"

Shashibhushan Mandal said, "A neem can be planted, but this time at sufficient distance from the building. The issue is not opposition to neem. It is placement."

In the end, a safe distance along the northern boundary was measured for one neem too.

Madhura was silent for a while.

She liked the fact that no one needed to call the new neem the child of the old neem.

It would be its own tree.

Its own roots, its own shade, its own time.

There was no inauguration when the new shelter was completed.

At one in the afternoon the children simply sat beneath the strip on their own.

Sunlight fell through the slatted roof in thin square patches on the ground.

This was not like the neem's shade.

The neem's shade had moved with its leaves.

Here the lines were sharp.

At first Madhura found it slightly unfamiliar.

Then the wind blew.

A thin stem of the new vine tied above moved.

Its shadow drew a small crooked mark across the square lines.

Amar noticed.

"Was that in the measurement?"

Madhura laughed.

"No."

"Then is it wrong?"

"No. The measurement was a boundary, not the shape."

Amar said nothing to that.

In December the first copy of the Shade Register was bound into the school archive.

The first page did not contain a photograph of the old neem, but a map.

The second page contained a summary of the building inspection.

The third contained the five days of shade lines.

The fourth recorded what changed after the tree was removed.

The fifth recorded the measurements of the new shelter and the planting sites.

The final page was left blank.

Sudha Jha asked, "Why is this empty?"

Madhura said, "We will measure again after five years."

"What?"

"The shade of the new trees."

Ramcharit Kaka was there.

He said, "Then the register is not finished."

"No."

One winter afternoon in Magh, Madhura went to the shelter to drink water.

The winter sun was low.

At that hour the shade of the slatted shelter did not reach the water pot.

But in winter the need for it was smaller too.

Madhura suddenly remembered the measurements from those old five days.

She understood that what had been preserved was not the exact shape of the old neem's shade.

What had been preserved was the habit of measuring the need for shade.

She looked towards the north-east boundary.

The new saplings were still small.

Among them was the neem too.

No tree looked like the old neem.

Ramcharit Kaka was filling the water pot.

Madhura asked, "Kaka, how big will all these be after five years?"

"We will measure."

"You will not say beforehand?"

"If I say beforehand, it will be an estimate."

He put the lid back on the pot.

"Write the estimate separately in the register."

Madhura laughed.

She looked at the small board fixed to the shelter post.

No tree's name was written on it.

There were only three lines:

"Midday seating: 18 cubits."

"Shade for water pot: 6 cubits."

"Open strip to reduce heat on western wall: 11 cubits."

Below, in smaller letters, it said:

"Measurements to be taken again."

Madhura brushed the dust from the board with her hand.

She did not go towards the place where the old neem's trunk had stood.

She looked at the direction of the sun.

Then she looked at the new shade falling on the ground.

Story 70

The Lamps of Both Homes

It was the first week of Kartik.

One day before the school holidays, the art class was in progress.

The teacher told every child to draw "the lamp of my home" on a sheet of paper.

Some children drew doorways, some courtyards, some borders of flowers and leaves.

Twelve-year-old Anvi rested her pencil in the middle of the paper and fell silent.

She did not have only one home.

Her mother, Madhavi Jha, lived in half of Nani's house in the old quarter of town.

Her father, Nachiket Jha, lived in a new rented house behind the market, with his small bookshop on the ground floor.

Anvi spent alternate parts of the week in the two places.

The school register contained one address for her, but she had a toothbrush in two places, clothes in two places, two small piles of books, and two different windows beside which she slept at night.

"What happened?" the teacher asked, coming near her.

Anvi looked at the paper.

"I have two homes."

Without showing surprise, the teacher said, "Then draw two."

Anvi drew a straight line down the middle of the page.

On the left she drew a small section of the tiled roof at her mother's house, the tulsi altar and the veranda.

On the right she drew the narrow staircase of her father's house, the veranda above and the shutter of the bookshop below.

Her hand stopped again when she had to decide where the lamp should be.

She remembered the previous year's festival of lamps.

It had been the first festival after her mother and father began living in separate houses.

Both had said beforehand, "We will not let you feel that anything is missing."

The result was that the two houses had become almost copies of one another.

Her mother had made Anvi's favourite snack.

Her father had brought the same thing from the market that evening.

Her mother had bought seven earthen lamps.

Her father had bought seven too.

Her mother had given her a new kurti with a red border.

Her father had given her a shawl with a red border.

Both had asked, "Did you like it better here?"

Both times Anvi had answered, "Yes."

But that night, lying in bed, she had felt that the word "better" had turned into a rope stretched between the two houses, and she was standing in the middle of it.

This year, three days before the festival, her mother asked on the phone, "When will you come here to light the first lamp?"

Anvi said, "After the holidays begin."

"You will light the first lamp here, won't you?"

Her mother had spoken casually, as though she were only asking about the time.

Anvi could not say yes.

That same evening her father said, "This year light the first lamp on my veranda. Last year you went there first."

Anvi changed her answer there too.

"We'll see."

Now, on the drawing paper, she could not decide where the lamp belonged.

The teacher moved on.

At last Anvi drew a small empty circle near the doorway of the house on the left, and three small dots along the stairs of the house on the right.

She did not draw any flames.

The class ended.

On the way home her friend Gunjan looked at the drawing.

"Why haven't your lamps been lit?"

Folding the paper, Anvi said, "It is not time yet."

When she reached her mother's house, Nani, Sarojini Devi, was sorting makhana in the courtyard.

Madhavi was searching through a trunk on the veranda for an old brass lamp.

Anvi put down her schoolbag.

Madhavi took out the lamp and wiped it with a cloth.

"You used to like this one very much, remember?"

The lamp was small, with a broad mouth and a narrow pointed spout.

When she was little, Anvi had called it the "bird lamp."

"Yes."

"This year this one will be lit first."

Anvi looked towards Nani.

Sarojini Devi went on sorting the makhana.

"Nani," Anvi asked, "whose lamp is the first lamp?"

Sarojini Devi stopped her fingers.

"Whichever one is lit first."

Anvi did not laugh.

"I mean, of the house?"

"A household lamp belongs to the household."

"And if there are two homes?"

This time Sarojini Devi raised her head.

Madhavi too fell silent.

"Then there will be two lamps," Nani said.

Madhavi said softly, "But the festival's first lamp can be lit only once."

Separating a bad makhana from the basket, Sarojini Devi said, "The sun sets only once. It does not become dark in every house one after another."

Madhavi said nothing.

Anvi kept the sentence in her mind.

The next day she went to her father's house.

Nachiket was opening bundles of new books in the shop.

On the upstairs veranda stood two boxes of earthen lamps.

"So many?" Anvi asked.

"For the stairs, veranda, shop—everywhere."

"Last year there were seven."

"This year the place is larger."

Nachiket opened one box.

"I chose a separate lamp for you."

He showed her a small round lamp with a black line painted around the rim.

Anvi turned it in her hand.

"Will this be lit first?"

"If you want."

Anvi put the lamp back in the box.

"And if I don't want that?"

Nachiket hesitated.

"Then another one will be lit."

"I mean—why does the first one matter so much?"

Her father thought for a moment.

"Perhaps the first thing stays in the memory."

"The second stays too."

"It does."

Anvi sat down on the stairs.

Inside the shop was the smell of paper and new books.

"Last year you asked whether I liked it here better than at Ma's house."

Nachiket's hands stopped on the string of the bundle.

"Did I ask that?"

"Twice."

"I don't remember."

"I do."

Her father left the string and came to sit beside her.

"Did it make you feel bad?"

Anvi did not answer at once.

"I felt that if I said it was good here, then it would make things bad there."

Nachiket was silent for a long time.

A bicycle bell rang on the road below.

The milkman passed in front of the shop.

"I won't ask this year," Nachiket said.

Anvi replied, "Only not asking is not enough."

"What else?"

"Why is the same thing done in both places?"

"What?"

"Seven lamps. Red clothes. The same snack. The same time. The same talk."

A faint look of embarrassment passed over Nachiket's face, then he smiled.

"I thought familiar things would make you comfortable."

"Ma thought the same."

"Then were both of us wrong?"

Anvi shook her head.

"Not wrong. But the two homes started becoming one."

"Shouldn't that be good?"

"No. Because they are not one."

Nachiket said nothing to that.

Anvi went upstairs.

In one corner of the veranda stood her small table.

She took out the school drawing.

House on the left, house on the right, a line between them.

An empty circle and three dots on the stairs.

Beside the empty circle on the left she wrote in pencil: "Before darkness falls."

Beside the three dots on the right she wrote: "After the shop closes."

Then she put the drawing back in her bag.

On the third day, the festival cleaning was underway at her mother's house.
Madhavi was mixing rice paste for the old aripan designs.
Anvi swept the veranda.
The doorway frame was washed.
Madhavi asked, "Shall we make a large aripan this year?"
Anvi asked, "How large?"
"Across the whole courtyard."
"Babu made one last year too."
Madhavi's hand stopped.
"He did?"
"I asked him, so he did."
"Was it good?"
The moment the question came out, Madhavi closed her mouth.
Anvi looked at her.
Madhavi laughed.
"Comparison again."
"Yes."
"All right. That question is crossed out."
Anvi sat beside the bowl of rice paste.
"Ma, let me make one small aripan."
"Make it."
"Not across the whole courtyard."
"Then?"
Anvi pointed to the right-hand corner of the doorway.
"Here. Only the size of a palm."
Madhavi was surprised.
"So small?"
"Yes. One lamp beside it."
"Only one?"
"Not the first one. Just the lamp at this home's doorway."
Madhavi put down the bowl of rice paste.
"Does the word 'first' trouble you that much?"
Anvi said, "If one becomes first, the other is automatically pushed into second place."
Madhavi's eyes remained on Anvi for a few moments.
"I had not thought of it that way."
"I had."
Madhavi dipped her palm into the rice paste, then stopped.
"All right. One small aripan. You make it."
"And you?"
"I'll fill the border."

Anvi laughed.

From a distance Sarojini Devi said, "I'll put the dot in the middle."

All three laughed.

That evening Anvi phoned her father.

"Will there be something different at your house?"

"Different meaning?"

"Something that does not happen at Ma's house."

Nachiket said, "There is no courtyard at my place."

"Right."

"So we won't copy the aripan."

Anvi felt relieved.

"There are stairs."

"There are."

"Three turns."

"Yes."

"Three lamps at the three turns?"

Her father was silent for a while.

"From the bottom to the top?"

"Yes. After the shop closes."

"Why after?"

"Because the day changes in your house after the shop closes. At Ma's house everyone comes inside before darkness falls."

Nachiket said slowly, "All right."

"And not the same snack."

"Then what?"

"You decide."

"I have that right?"

"Yes. It is your home."

Nachiket laughed on the other end of the call.

"Then flattened rice and curd?"

Anvi laughed loudly.

"On festival night?"

"You said different."

"Not that different."

"Then makhana kheer?"

Anvi thought.

"All right."

"Will Ma make it?"

"No. You make it."

"Then it will be less a kheer and more an experiment."

"Accepted."

From morning on the festival day, calls from both homes began reaching Anvi.

First Mami asked, "Where will you be in the evening?"

"In both places."

"Which one first?"

Anvi said, "There is no first-place list."

Mami laughed, but did not ask again.

A little later her father's sister called.

"You'll do the night worship with your father, won't you?"

Anvi said, "I'll be with him at night. But I'll also be at Ma's house."

"Will you run between two houses on the same day?"

"I won't run. The times are different."

By noon Anvi understood that it was not only her parents; people around them too were accustomed to imagining a festival shut inside a single place.

She tore a page from her notebook.

At the top she wrote: "Today's Two Times."

First line:

"Before evening darkness falls: Ma's doorway."

Second line:

"After the shop closes: Babu's stairs."

She did not write exact clock times.

Her mother said, "Why not write five-thirty?"

Anvi replied, "The sun does not set by looking at a clock."

Sarojini Devi laughed.

Madhavi did too.

A little before evening, the bowl of rice paste was brought into the courtyard.

Anvi really did make an aripan no larger than a palm at the right-hand corner of the doorway.

First a small circle, four leaves around it, and Nani's dot in the centre.

Madhavi added two fine lines at the border.

"That's all?" Madhavi asked.

"That's all."

The rest of the courtyard was not empty.

That day lamps were to be placed separately near the old altar, the kitchen and the rooms.

But the lamp Anvi wanted to light with her own hand stood beside this small aripan.

Darkness began to fall slowly.

Madhavi poured the oil.

Sarojini Devi straightened the wick.

Anvi struck the match.

The flame trembled first, then steadied.

Madhavi seemed about to say something, but stopped.

Anvi understood that the word "first" had almost reached her mother's mouth.

Instead, her mother said only, "The doorway is visible now."

Anvi said, "Yes."

The three remained silent for a while.

There was no comparison in that silence.

A little later Anvi ate the first part of her meal.

Madhavi said, "Keep some hunger for Babu's place."

"There is a kheer experiment."

"Then certainly keep some."

Anvi did not take a bag.

She only put on a light warm kurta and carried the folded school drawing in her hand.

Madhavi came to the door to see her off.

"I won't phone," she said.

"Why?"

"Let the time there belong there."

Anvi touched her mother's hand.

"I'll call when I return."

"All right."

By the time she reached her father's shop, the night had deepened.

The shop was still open.

Two customers were looking at books.

Nachiket saw Anvi but did not look at the clock.

"You came?" was all he said.

"Yes."

On the first turn of the staircase, Anvi saw three empty earthen lamps.

One on the first turn, one on the second, one near the veranda above.

"No oil?"

"Waiting for you."

"Has the shop closed?"

"Not yet."

"Then not yet."

Nachiket smiled.

"The instruction will be obeyed."

Anvi went upstairs.

In the kitchen, milk had boiled over halfway.

The makhana in a pan had been roasted a little too much.

"Is this the beginning of the kheer?"
"Yes."
"If Ma saw this—"
Anvi stopped the sentence.
Nachiket said, "Comparison?"
"Yes."
"Don't."
"I was going to say that she lowers the flame first."
"That is useful information, not a competition."
Anvi laughed.
Together they wiped up the spilled milk.
Nachiket put the makhana on a lower flame.
A customer's voice came from downstairs.
He went back to the shop.
Anvi stood on the veranda and watched the road.
Far away, lamps were burning at different houses.
Some roofs glowed with strings of lights.
For one moment she wondered whether the lamp at her mother's doorway was still burning.
She took out her phone to ask for a photograph.
Then she put the phone away again.
Let the lamp there remain there.
About half an hour later Nachiket came upstairs.
"The last customer has gone."
Anvi looked towards the stairs.
"Now."
They both sat at the first turn.
Nachiket held a small bottle of oil.
Anvi poured oil into all three lamps.
Her father made the wicks.
"Which one first?" Nachiket asked without thinking.
Anvi looked at him.
Both were silent for a moment.
Her father slapped his own forehead lightly.
"First again!"
Anvi burst out laughing.
"From bottom to top."
"That is not first and second?"
"It is a path."
The lowest lamp was lit.
Then the one at the second turn.

Then the one above.

The three flames looked like three small pauses in the darkness of the staircase.

Standing below, Anvi looked upward.

"Now the staircase is visible."

Nachiket said, "Exactly Ma's sentence?"

Anvi was startled.

"How did you know?"

"A guess. A lamp's work is to make things visible too."

Anvi smiled.

Upstairs, the two ate the kheer.

It was a little thick, and some of the makhana was hard.

Nachiket asked, "How many marks?"

Anvi stopped her spoon.

"No marks."

"Right. Question crossed out."

"But next time roast the makhana less."

"Useful information?"

"Yes."

At nine that night Madhavi sent a message: "Reached?"

Anvi wrote back: "Yes."

Madhavi asked nothing more.

Anvi opened the school drawing.

In the empty circle at the left-hand house, she drew one small flame.

On the three dots along the stairs of the right-hand house, she drew three flames.

The straight line between the two houses now looked very hard.

She picked up an eraser.

She did not erase the entire line.

She erased only a two-finger-wide space in the middle.

The two houses remained separate on the paper, but a small open passage appeared between them.

"What is that?" Nachiket asked.

"A path."

"Joining the houses?"

Anvi shook her head.

"For me to walk through."

Nachiket looked at the drawing again.

"Right."

Anvi slept at her father's house that night.

There had been no plan to return to her mother's house the same night.

That too mattered to her: having two homes did not mean that she had to keep running back and forth on the same night.

In the morning she phoned her mother.

"Did the lamp at the doorway go out?"

Madhavi said, "When the oil ran out in the night."

"The aripan?"

"It is still there."

After a moment Madhavi asked, "The stair lamps?"

"All three burned."

"The kheer?"

Anvi laughed.

"Useful information has been given to Babu."

Madhavi laughed too.

"Good."

For a while both were silent.

Then Madhavi said, "Next year, can we change the place of this little aripan?"

"Why?"

"If the doorway is repaired?"

Anvi remembered Nani's words: houses do not become dark one after another.

She said, "We can change it. A tradition is not hammered into a place like a nail."

"Which book did you read that in?"

"None."

"Then write it down."

Anvi ended the call and opened her notebook.

On one page she wrote: "This year's two times."

Below it she made two lines.

"Ma's house — small aripan at the doorway, before darkness fell."

"Babu's house — three lamps on the stairs, after the shop closed."

Then, after thinking for a long time, she added a third line:

"It is not necessary that next year be exactly the same."

Nachiket came onto the veranda carrying tea.

"What are you writing?"

Anvi did not close the notebook.

"A festival register."

"Rules?"

"No. Memory."

"What is the difference?"

"A rule tells you to repeat. Memory only tells you what happened once."

Nachiket placed the tea cup on the table.

"That too is useful information."

Anvi laughed.

School reopened after the holidays.

The art teacher asked the class to take out their unfinished work again.

Anvi spread out her paper.

One flame at the left-hand house, three flames along the stairs on the right, and a small open path in the dividing line.

Gunjan looked at it.

"Your lamps are lit now?"

"Yes."

"Which home was better?"

Anvi looked at her.

Last year that question had tied a knot in her stomach.

This time she smiled.

"They were different."

"But which was better?"

Anvi picked up her pencil.

"That question does not find a place in my picture."

She completed the four leaves of the aripan beside the left-hand doorway.

She drew a fine line beneath the three lamps on the right-hand staircase.

She left the open path in the middle exactly as it was.

Story 71

The Veranda Lesson

It was an afternoon in Ashwin.

The rains had stopped, but here and there the bricks of the veranda still looked damp.

The veranda of the old headmaster's house had now become a place for reading twice a week.

His widowed sister, Surma Devi, who lived there, had said, "If books remain shut inside an empty room, what use are they?"

So on Tuesday and Friday evenings, five or seven schoolchildren came there and read aloud news, government notices, stories and small books to elderly women.

Some could not read small print even with spectacles.

Some recognised letters but tired along long lines.

Some came only to listen.

Surma Devi was always the first to spread out the low stools.

Phulkali Kaki came carrying a small winnowing tray of half-peeled makhana.

Jamuna Devi kept an old thread bag hanging from her shoulder.

Sakina Khatoon usually sat for half an hour before the evening namaz.

Among the children, Ragini read most clearly.

She was in Class Eight.

If she stumbled over a word, she did not guess immediately.

She paused and looked at the letters again.

Chetan was in Class Seven.

He did less reading and more counting of lines, writing dates, and making small marks in the margins.

That day Malati Teacher had sent a thin book from the school.

On its blue cover was written: "Fifty Years of Our Village."

The book had been printed five years earlier on the village foundation day.

Ragini ran a finger over the cover.

"Shall we read this today?"

Surma Devi said, "Read. Let us hear about our own village."

Chetan turned the pages.

The first chapter described the old pond.

The second, the founding of the school.

The third, the road, electricity and the market.

Everyone listened.

Here and there the older women made brief comments.

"This road used to be unpaved."

"The pond had another name earlier."

"The year is wrong here."

Chetan kept making notes in the margin of his notebook.

Ragini opened the fourth chapter.

Its title was: "The Year of the Great Flood."

She began to read.

"After continuous rain, three hamlets of the village were submerged. A relief centre was opened in the school building. The people of the village together arranged food, medicine and a safe place."

Phulkali Kaki's hand stopped over the tray of makhana.

"Read that again."

Ragini read it again.

"The people of the village together arranged food, medicine and a safe place."

Phulkali Kaki asked, "The people?"

Ragini looked at the book.

"That is what it says."

"Whose hands among the people?"

Chetan started to laugh, but Surma Devi looked at him.

He fell silent.

Ragini read the next line.

It named the president of the youth committee, the secretary, two ward representatives and five men who distributed relief.

Jamuna Devi asked quietly, "Did the food cook itself?"

Ragini did not close the book.

"Perhaps further on—"

She stopped herself immediately.

"Perhaps it is written further on."

She read two more pages.

There was mention of boats, government rice, medicine boxes and a visit by a block officer.

Nothing about who ran the kitchen, who dried the grain, or who changed the wet clothes of the children.

Phulkali Kaki put down her tray.

"I am not saying my name must be there."

Surma Devi asked, "Then?"

"I want the sentence to be complete."

Ragini kept looking at her.

Phulkali Kaki said, "When you read 'the people arranged food,' it sounds as though the food came out of the sack and fell straight onto the plate."

Sakina Khatoon smiled.

"Rice comes out of a sack. Cooked rice does not."

A light laugh passed through the veranda.

Ragini marked the place on the page with her fingernail.

"Then what should be written?"

Instead of answering, Phulkali Kaki asked, "First find out what happened."

Chetan immediately opened his notebook.

"I'll write."

Surma Devi stopped him.

"Listen first."

Chetan's pen stopped in the air.

Phulkali Kaki began, "The first stove was lit in the back room of the school."

Jamuna Devi interrupted at once.

"Not on the first day."

"The first evening."

"No, the second day."

"You had gone to your mother's house then."

"I went on the third day."

The two looked at one another.

Ragini understood that filling the blank space in the book would not be simple.

Malati Teacher was not on the veranda that day.

Ragini asked, "Shall we write both versions?"

Surma Devi said, "Write nothing yet. First ask about the things everyone remembers in the same way."

At the top of a page Chetan wrote: "Flood Year."

Below it he wrote two questions:

"Whose hands?"

"What work?"

Jamuna Devi asked, "Who gave you those questions?"

"All of you," Chetan said.

Phulkali Kaki picked up her tray again.

"Then ask."

Chetan asked, "Who lit the stove?"

Three voices rose almost together.

"Many people."

Chetan's head dropped.

"Again: the people."

Everyone laughed this time.

Surma Devi said, "Not names. Ask about the work."

Ragini understood.

"What work was done?"

Jamuna Devi began counting on her fingers.

"Wet firewood was separated."

Sakina Khatoon added, "Dry cow-dung cakes came from house to house."

Phulkali Kaki said, "The rice was sorted. The wet rice was separated."

Surma Devi said, "Thin khichdi for the children."

Sakina said, "Food without chilli for the old people."

Jamuna said, "The stove remained in the school for two days, then on the veranda."

Phulkali interrupted again.

"Three days."

This time Chetan wrote both versions separately.

"Two or three days — memories differ."

Surma Devi looked at his notebook.

"That is right."

Ragini asked, "If we are not certain, how can it go into a book?"

"Why must it go into the book?" Surma Devi asked.

"Then?"

"Let there be a paper beside the book."

Phulkali Kaki said, "Do not cut the old printed words. Put the omitted work beside them."

The next day at school, Ragini told Malati Teacher everything.

Malati Teacher turned the book over in her hands.

"This book was prepared by the history committee. The sources are listed at the end too."

Chetan asked, "Do the sources contain the women's names?"

Malati Teacher looked at the last two pages.

Minutes of meetings, government letters, the school register, the panchayat report, old newspapers.

"No."

Ragini said, "Then does that mean we should not accept what they say?"

"Not at all," Malati Teacher said. "Oral memory is also a source. But dates can slip in memory, sequences can change, and two people may remember the same event differently."

Chetan said, "I wrote 'two or three days.'"

Malati Teacher looked at his notebook.

"That is an honest line."

Ragini asked, "Can we make a supplement?"

Malati Teacher did not say yes immediately.

She thought for a while.

"If you make one, do not turn it into merely a list of names to be added."

"Why?"

"Because then the same problem returns. Whose name is remembered enters history; whose is not remembered is left outside again."

Ragini remembered Phulkali Kaki's sentence: the sentence should be complete.

She said, "Then write the work."

Malati Teacher drew five columns on the board.

First: "Printed sentence."

Second: "Omitted work."

Third: "Who said it."

Fourth: "Is there another basis?"

Fifth: "Doubt or disagreement."

Chetan smiled at the fifth column.

"Can 'do not know' be written in history too?"

"Where we do not know, it should be written."

That week, the reading on the veranda changed.

Earlier the children read and the elderly women listened.

Now one line was read, and then questions arose.

"The people of the village together..."

Surma Devi would say, "Stop. What work?"

"A relief centre was opened in the school..."

Jamuna Devi would ask, "Opened means what? Who opened the lock? Who cleaned the room? Where were the sacks kept?"

"Food supplies were arranged..."

Sakina Khatoon would say, "Food arriving is one thing; becoming fit to eat is another."

Ragini kept writing.

But on the second day a new difficulty arose.

Phulkali Kaki said that for the first three nights women had stayed at the school to look after the children.

Jamuna Devi said, "Not every night."

Sakina Khatoon said, "I stayed one night. After that I had goats at home."

Ragini asked, "Then how will the sentence be written?"

Surma Devi said, "Write only as much as is certain."

Chetan wrote:

"Some women stayed at the school for one or more nights to look after children and elderly people; the number is uncertain."

Phulkali Kaki listened as he read it aloud.

"My name is not there?"

Chetan looked alarmed.

"But you said names were not necessary."

Phulkali Kaki laughed.

"I was asking to see what you understood."

Chetan laughed too.

"The work first."

"Exactly."

In the third week Ragini and Chetan went to two houses each.

They did not ask for life stories.

They simply read the marked line from the book and asked:

"What work is missing from this sentence?"

Many answers were short.

"Sewing sacks."

"Spreading wet wheat to dry."

"Boiling well water and cooling it."

"Counting the names of small children."

"Keeping the stove fire alive through the night."

Many answers conflicted with one another.

One elderly woman said the medicines were kept in the eastern room of the school.

Another said the western room.

Chetan wrote both.

"Room uncertain."

At one house they found a paper in an old wooden chest.

Not in Surma Devi's house.

In Shyamkali Devi's.

The paper contained a credit account from thirty-five years earlier.

Ten seers of rice.

Four seers of lentils.

Salt.

Mustard oil.

Two names were written below.

One was that of a male shopkeeper.

The other:

"Rampari Devi."

Shyamkali Devi said, "Rampari was my mother-in-law."

Ragini grew excited.

"Then we have proof!"

When Malati Teacher saw the paper, she said, "We have support for one point: Rampari Devi took supplies. But this does not prove that she ran the entire kitchen."

Ragini felt slightly ashamed of her excitement.

Malati Teacher smiled.

"In history, do not make a small piece of paper larger than it is."

In the fourth column of the work sheet they wrote:

"Credit slip available."

The fifth column remained blank.

A few days later Shivnarayan Babu, an elderly member of the committee that had prepared the history book, came to the veranda.

He had heard that the children were 'correcting' the book.

He sat down with the book in his hands.

"What is wrong in it?"

Ragini did not answer immediately.

Phulkali Kaki said, "Call it an error, or call it an empty space."

Shivnarayan Babu adjusted his spectacles.

"We wrote it from the papers available to us at the time."

Malati Teacher said, "That may be exactly why work done outside the papers was omitted."

Shivnarayan Babu turned a page.

"But the committee members' names are here."

Jamuna Devi asked, "Did the committee members light the stoves?"

Shivnarayan Babu fell silent.

Phulkali Kaki rescued him.

"We are not saying you knowingly left us out."

Surma Devi added, "The work that produced papers entered the book. The work that happened day after day produced fewer papers."

Shivnarayan Babu slowly nodded.

"That is true."

The next day he brought his old file.

Three pages of relief-committee minutes.

A list of received supplies.

One medical slip.

An incomplete map.

Some dates on the work sheet became clearer.

Some confusion increased.

The meeting papers said the school relief centre began on Monday.

Phulkali Kaki remembered the stove burning from Sunday.

Chetan asked, "Which is correct?"

Shivnarayan Babu said, "It is possible the stove began earlier and the place received its official name as a centre later."

Malati Teacher said, "Then the two statements do not necessarily cancel each other."

Ragini wrote in the fifth column:

"Informal work may have begun before the official opening; oral memory and the meeting register give different dates."

After hearing the line, Phulkali Kaki said, "That language is too heavy."

Chetan laughed.

"You say it, then."

Phulkali Kaki thought.

"The paper says Monday. My memory says Sunday. Keep both."

Ragini crossed out the earlier line and wrote this simpler one.

Malati Teacher said nothing.

She only smiled.

The argument over the title of the supplementary booklet lasted even longer.

Chetan wanted: "The Missing History."

To Ragini, that sounded too much like an accusation.

Surma Devi suggested: "Talk from the Veranda."

Phulkali Kaki said, "Write the work, not the talk."

At last the cover read:

"WORK NOTES."

Below, in smaller letters:

"A supplement to be read with Fifty Years of Our Village."

Five rules were printed on the first page.

"This does not replace the original book."

"Anything found in only one memory is marked separately."

"Where memories differ, both or all versions are retained."

"Work before person; available names may be added in notes."

"What is not known will not be hidden by leaving a blank."

Chetan read the fifth rule and asked, "Leave it blank?"

Ragini said, "Not blank. Write 'not known.'"

Work Notes did not stop with the flood chapter.

Another chapter of the local history said:

"The village's first library was built with community help."

On the veranda the question arose:

"What work was that help?"

Surma Devi remembered that the bindings of the old books had been torn.

Three village women had sat at night and reinforced the bindings with strips of cloth.

Sakina Khatoon said, "I was not there, but my mother supplied thread."

No second written source was found.

The line in Work Notes became:

"Oral memory of repairs to old books; no second written document for this account has yet been found."

Chetan found the word 'independent' too heavy in an earlier draft.

He replaced it with:

"No other paper for this has yet been found."

Malati Teacher smiled again.

A third marked chapter said:

"During the drought year, the people of the village removed silt from the pond."

This time the work of men and women was remembered separately.

The men cut out the silt.

The women levelled the earth along the banks, brought water, and kept small children away from the pond.

One elderly woman said some women had also used spades.

Another said, "I did not see that."

Work Notes recorded:

"Some witnesses remember women using spades; not all witnesses agree."

Jamuna Devi listened to the sentence and said, "This time it is right."

"Why?" Ragini asked.

"Because it does not enlarge the story just to make us look heroic."

Phulkali Kaki added, "And it does not make us disappear either."

A small print run was made in the school computer room.

Twenty-four pages.

Ordinary paper.

A thin dusty-green cover.

Fifty copies in all.

The first copy came to the veranda.

Chetan smelled the cover.

"The smell of new paper."

Phulkali Kaki said, "The work is old."

Ragini placed the original book and the supplement together on a low stool.

"Which one shall we read first?"

Surma Devi said, "The original."

Ragini was surprised.

"Not Work Notes?"

"First hear the sentence. Only then will you understand what is missing inside it."

That evening the fourth chapter was opened again.

Ragini read:

"The people of the village together arranged food, medicine and a safe place."

This time she stopped on her own.

Chetan opened Work Notes.

He read:

"Omitted work: separating wet and dry grain; gathering cow-dung cakes and firewood; different food for children and elderly people; staying some nights to provide care; boiling and cooling well water."

Phulkali Kaki listened.

Chetan read the next line:

"Memories differ about the day the stove began: the paper says Monday; some memories say Sunday."

Shivnarayan Babu was also on the veranda that day.

He said softly, "This line has not made the book smaller."

Surma Devi said, "It has made more room beside the book."

Ragini liked the sentence.

She thought of writing it in her notebook, then did not.

Not every sentence had to be preserved.

When the reading ended, Malati Teacher looked at the last page.

It was almost blank.

At the top only one line had been printed:

"Some work is still missing."

Below it were twelve empty lines.

Chetan asked, "Why was this page left blank?"

Ragini said, "Because we do not know everything."

Phulkali Kaki added, "And because the next lesson is still left."

Two weeks later a new child came to the veranda.

Ritu of Class Six.

She was reading the original book for the first time.

When she reached the flood chapter, she read:

"The people of the village together..."

Then she stopped.

She looked at the older readers.

"Do I open Work Notes here?"

Surma Devi said, "First finish the sentence."

Ritu read it.

Then Chetan opened the supplement.

Listening, Ritu reached the final blank page.

She asked, "Who will write on these empty lines?"

"Whoever brings something after checking it," Ragini said.

At that moment Sakina Khatoon, who had been quiet for some time, spoke softly.

"I remember one thing."

Everyone turned towards her.

"On the second night of the flood, two girls took medicine in a small boat to the eastern hamlet."

Phulkali Kaki frowned.

"Two girls? I remember one."

Jamuna Devi said, "I was not at the school that night."

Chetan lifted his pen.

"What shall I write?"

Earlier his hand would have gone straight to the blank line.

This time he remembered the rule of the fifth column.

Ragini said, "For now, only the question."

On the first line of the final page Chetan wrote:

"Boat carrying medicine: one girl or two? To be checked."

Sakina Khatoon listened as the line was read aloud.

She nodded.

Phulkali Kaki picked up her tray of makhana again.

Ritu did not close the original book.

She left it open beside Work Notes.

The evening light on the veranda had grown dimmer.

There was no empty space between the two books.

Only one thin line remained for the next question.

Story 72

The Name on the Toy's Underside

A little away from the Bishanpur market, in a narrow lane, stood Madhav Toy House.

The word "shop" made people first look for a glass display case, but there was little glass here and much more wood.

To the right of the doorway hung horses; to the left, coloured birds.

On the long shelf inside stood small bullock carts, fish, spinning tops, pinwheels, winged toys, rattles and elephants on wheels.

The workshop was behind the shop.

Different sounds rose there all day:

the rasp of the plane,

the whisper of a fine saw,

the turning of the lathe,

the tap-tap of a small hammer on dry wood,

and the chime of a brass bowl in which colours were mixed.

A tin roof covered the workshop.

In the rains the noise grew louder, but the work did not stop.

The shop had been named after Madhav Jha, the grandfather of the family.

Madhav Jha was no longer alive, but his name continued to travel with every toy.

A small round stamp was pressed onto the bottom of each one:

"Madhav Toy House, Bishanpur."

Nothing more.

There was no sign of who had shaped it, who had painted it, who had fitted the wheels.

For the family, this had never been a question.

Harinarayan Jha, Madhav Jha's elder son, worked the lathe.

His younger brother Shambhunath cut the wood and brought out the form.

Harinarayan's wife, Kamala Devi, did the painting.

Shambhunath's wife, Ratna Devi, handled polishing, cords, wheels and small joints.

Sometimes one toy passed through four hands.

Sometimes one hand carried it from beginning to end.

If anyone asked, "Whose toy is this in your house?" Harinarayan's answer was always: "The house's."

Seventeen-year-old Ira used to like that answer.

She was Shambhunath's daughter.

After finishing school, she had begun sitting regularly in the workshop that year.

First she mixed colours, then learned to sand, and later began shaping the bodies of small birds and fish.

Her hand was still slow.

Harinarayan would say, "Wood does not tolerate haste."

Ira would laugh and reply, "My hand is still afraid of wood."

"Good if it is afraid. The hand that is not afraid at all makes the first mistake."

One day Ira made six small horses.

Their bodies were all to the same measurements, but the tilt of the ears differed slightly.

One horse held its head a little higher; another had a rounder back.

Kamala Devi gave them a yellow base coat.

Ratna Devi drew the black manes.

Before closing the shop that evening, Ira turned all six horses over.

The same round stamp was on the underside of each.

"Kaki," she asked Ratna Devi, "is there nowhere on these where my mark remains?"

Ratna Devi smiled.

"The crooked ears made by your hand are there."

Ira smiled too, but the question remained.

"If someone asks ten years from now who made this horse, then?"

"Why would anyone ask?"

"Suppose they do?"

Ratna Devi set one horse upright.

"Then say: Madhav Toy House."

"But Madhav Baba's hand is not in this."

"The name belongs to the house."

Ira fell silent.

The matter came up again over dinner that night.

Shambhunath said, "A workshop needs one name in order to run. If every artisan writes a separate name, what remains of the shop?"

Ira said, "Let the shop's name remain. Under it, in smaller letters, the maker's name can be there too."

Harinarayan stopped with a morsel of rice in his hand.

"And who is the maker?"

Ira did not answer.

Harinarayan began counting.

"Shambhu cut the wood, I turned it on the lathe, you shaped the ears, Kamala painted it, Ratna fitted the wheels. Shall we write five names now?"

Ira burst out laughing.

Harinarayan laughed too.

"See? The register will become bigger than the underside of the toy."

The matter ended there.

Three days later, at noon, an elderly man came to the shop.

With him was a girl of about seven.

She held a cloth bag pressed to her chest.

The old man introduced himself as Devkant Mishra.

"I have an old object to show you," he said.

From the bag came a small wooden bullock cart.

Most of its colour had worn away.

One wheel was detached, the axle was split in the middle, and one horn of the bullock was half broken.

On the underside, the faded round stamp could still be read:

"Madhav Toy House, Bishanpur."

Harinarayan took the cart in his hands.

"This is very old."

Devkant said, "About sixteen or seventeen years."

The girl interrupted, "It was Baba's."

Devkant placed a hand on her head.

"I bought it when my son was small. This is his daughter now. We found it in a trunk while cleaning the house. She refuses to let it go."

The girl kept looking at the broken wheel.

"Can it be repaired?" Devkant asked.

Harinarayan did not say yes immediately.

He examined the broken part of the axle closely.

With a fine pin he checked the depth of the hole.

He turned the wheel over and looked at the curve inside it.

Shambhunath came nearer too.

"This is the old style of axle," he said.

Harinarayan said, "Looks like mine."

Shambhunath shook his head.

"Your axles were never this thin."

"They used to be."

"How long ago?"

Instead of answering, Harinarayan turned the cart again.

Kamala Devi was studying the remaining flecks of colour.

"This red had mahua gum mixed into it," she said.

Ratna Devi replied, "We all used mahua gum."

"Not every year."

"When did we stop?"

Kamala Devi thought for a moment.

"When the yellow pigment changed."

"When did the yellow change?"

Now all four looked at one another.

For the first time Ira understood that repairing an old toy was not only a matter of joining the broken parts.

One also had to recognise the old habits of the hands that had made it.

Devkant asked, "Is there any difficulty?"

Harinarayan said, "No difficulty. But if a new wheel is made, we must understand the old axle measurements properly. We will not repaint the whole toy either. We will preserve what remains and repair only what is broken."

The girl said at once, "Do not make the whole thing new."

Everyone looked at her.

Pulling the cart towards herself, she said, "Baba says it used to look like this. If you make it completely new, it will not be Baba's one anymore."

A small brightness came into Harinarayan's eyes.

"You are right."

Devkant left the cart there and was asked to return after three days.

In the workshop the cart remained on a plank.

No one touched it immediately that day.

While putting away the work that evening, Ira turned it over again.

Around the round stamp there was only blank wood.

She said softly, "If there had been someone's mark on the underside?"

Harinarayan heard her.

"Then what?"

"Then first we would know whose hand made the axle. We could look for that year in the register."

From a distance Shambhunath said, "Where is the register from sixteen years ago?"

Ira fell silent.

It was true.

The old records were incomplete.

The workshop kept order accounts:

the shopkeeper's name, quantity, money, the date the goods were sent.

But not who did what work on which toy on which day.

The next day Harinarayan decided to take the old bullock cart apart.

The wheel was removed and the surviving half of the axle separated.

The colour inside the wood was examined.

Shambhunath said, "This is not sheesham. It is gamhar."

Harinarayan said at once, "Then it is not mine."

"Why?" Ira asked.

"At that time Shambhu used to make thin axles from gamhar more often."

Shambhunath laughed.

"I am still not certain."

Kamala Devi showed them a very fine red line inside the old wheel.

"I did not apply this colour."

"Which one?"

"I did not carry the colour this far inside. This bit of colour that has entered the wheel-hole—Ratna used to do that."

Ratna Devi was surprised.

"Me?"

"Yes. You had a little cotton-tipped stick."

Ratna Devi took the wheel.

She looked at it for some time.

"Possible," she said slowly. "But the cut of the horn is not Shambhu's."

"Then whose?" Ira asked.

Ratna Devi looked at Harinarayan.

Harinarayan laughed.

"Now do you understand? One toy does not accept one name."

This time Ira did not argue.

On a thin sheet of paper she made four boxes:

Wood / Form / Colour / Joint.

Below them she wrote:

"What seems likely."

Harinarayan read it.

"What is this?"

"Everything we are guessing before the repair."

"You will put guesses in a register?"

"So that later we do not call a guess a fact."

Harinarayan said nothing.

In the first box Ira wrote:

"Axle: gamhar; possibly Shambhunath."

In the second:

"Bullock horn: unclear."

In the third:

"Red colour entering the inner hole: possibly Ratna Devi's old method."

In the fourth:

"Wheel joint: Harinarayan or Shambhunath; not certain."

Kamala Devi read the page and said, "Where is my name?"

Ira laughed.

"You yourself are saying the colour is not yours."

Kamala Devi laughed too.

By noon the method of repair had been decided.

The new axle would be made to the old measurements, but the broken half would be preserved.

Instead of making only one new wheel and assuming the other was correct, the outer diameter of both wheels would be measured so the cart would not lean to one side.

The broken horn would not be restored to a completely new full length.

Only enough would be added to make the form legible, while the old break line remained slightly visible.

Colour would be applied only to the new join.

Ira wanted to make the axle.

Harinarayan asked, "On your first repair?"

"You keep watching."

"If I watch, how will the hand become yours?"

Ira smiled.

"That can go into the register too."

Harinarayan let her sit at the lathe.

A thin rod of gamhar began to spin.

Ira placed the chisel against it very slowly.

"A little outward," Harinarayan said.

Ira shifted her hand.

"Now?"

"Now it is yours."

The rod grew thinner.

It was compared with the old axle measurement.

The first time, it remained two fingers too thick.

Ira mounted it on the lathe again.

The second time the measurement matched.

When the axle came off, Ira scratched a small line at one end with her fingernail.

Harinarayan asked, "What is that?"

"My mark."

"A fingernail mark will disappear in three days."

"That is why I am thinking about something permanent."

That evening Ira took a scrap of wood.

On it she began trying small marks:

I, Ira, I.S., a leaf, two dots, a diagonal line.

Watching her, Shambhunath said, "More practice signing than making toys?"

Ira said, "A full name will not fit underneath."

"Why is a name needed?"

Ira looked towards the old bullock cart.

"Because today we cannot tell."

Shambhunath pulled up a chair and sat.

"What would change if we could tell?"

"Repairs would be easier to understand. If the artisan is still in the workshop, we can ask. If not, we can look in the register. Which paint, which wood, which joint—we may find some clues."

"Then a name alone is not enough."

Ira paused.

Shambhunath's question pushed her proposal beyond itself.

"The date too."

"And?"

Ira wrote another word on the paper:

"Work."

Shambhunath smiled.

"Now the underside really will become a register."

"Not everything underneath. A small mark underneath. The full account in a register."

Harinarayan had been listening from a distance.

He came closer.

"The shop stamp?"

"It stays."

"The artisan's mark?"

"It stays."

"Date?"

"A small number."

"Work?"

"In the register."

Harinarayan picked up the scrap of wood.

"If five artisans work on one toy, five marks?"

Ira was stuck again.

From inside, Ratna Devi said, "Record the hands where the work changes in the register. Why put every hand's mark on the underside?"

Ira turned towards her.

Ratna Devi set down the bowl of colour.

"Put one number on the underside. Against that number in the register, write every hand."

Harinarayan nodded at once.

"The number will eventually reach a thousand."

"Then?"

"Without a number, the register is useless."

Ira said, "Under the shop stamp, put the year and a serial number. In the register, against that number, write wood, form, colour, joint—and whoever did each."

Shambhunath added, "And if one artisan makes the whole thing alone, put that name on a single line."

For a few moments everyone was silent.

The proposal was no longer Ira's demand to put a single name on a toy.

It was beginning to become a memory for the workshop.

On the third day the bullock cart was ready.

The new axle was inside.

The new join had been lightly coloured close to the old red.

The line of the broken horn remained visible.

The wheels turned again.

Devkant returned, with the girl.

The first thing she did after taking the cart was spin the wheel.

Then she looked at the horn.

"You can see where it broke," she said.

Harinarayan's face tightened slightly.

Devkant asked the girl, "Does that look bad?"

She shook her head.

"No. Now I can tell where it had broken."

Ira watched her silently.

The girl turned the cart over.

"Was this round name underneath before too?"

"Yes," Devkant said. "That is how we knew to come here."

The sentence struck Ira deeply.

The old stamp had not been useless.

It had preserved the address of the house.

Its only limitation was that it carried no information about the hands inside the house.

Devkant paid.

Before leaving he asked, "If it breaks again?"

Harinarayan said, "Bring it back."

Ira said without thinking, "This time we will write down who made the axle."

Devkant laughed.

"Then there will be less argument next time."

Harinarayan laughed too.

That evening a new register was opened.

At the top of the first page was written:

"UNDERSIDE REGISTER."

Below it were five columns:

Serial Number / Date / Object / Work / Hand.

The first entry was the repair of the old bullock cart.

Ira wrote:

"72/1 — Bullock cart — Repair — Axle: Ira, under Harinarayan's supervision; colour-joint: Ratna; horn-joint: Shambhunath; original maker not known exactly."

Harinarayan read the last words.

"Was 'not known exactly' necessary?"

Ira said, "Most necessary."

"Why?"

"What we do not know should not be placed under someone's name."

Harinarayan slowly nodded.

The next question was how to mark the underside.

Having a new iron stamp made would be expensive.

Shambhunath suggested burning in a number with a small heated pin.

Ratna Devi said, "Burn the mark before painting, otherwise the paint will scorch."

Kamala Devi added, "And not so deep that it feels rough in a child's hand."

Ira practised on the underside of a leftover horse.

The first burn was too deep.

The second crooked.

The third clear, small and fine.

Harinarayan said, "A serial number is better than the first letter of the artisan's name."

Ira looked at him.

"You are still afraid of names?"

"Not afraid. I want to avoid comparison."

"What comparison?"

"A customer will say, 'I want only Ira's work,' or 'only Harinarayan's.' Then the fact that one toy may contain five hands will disappear again."

Ira thought for a while.

The concern was not unreasonable.

She said, "Let the serial number remain underneath and the names remain in the register. But if an artisan makes an entire object alone and wants to, they may add a small initial."

"If they want to?" Kamala Devi asked.

"Yes. Not compulsory."

Ratna Devi said, "Good. Some may want to preserve a name; some only the work."

The rules were written down.

First: the old round shop stamp would remain.

Second: the underside would carry a small date and serial number.

Third: the Underside Register would record names according to the work each hand did.

Fourth: a sole maker could add a small initial if they wished.

Fifth: on repaired objects, old marks would not be erased; a new repair number would be added separately.

Harinarayan smiled on reading the fifth rule.

"That little girl taught us this one."

The rules came into use the following week.

The first new toy was a fish made by Ira.

She chose the wood, shaped it, sanded it, asked Kamala Devi about the amount of colour, but applied the colour herself.

Ratna Devi only showed her how to tie the cord at the end; she did not touch the work.

Beneath the round stamp, a small mark was burned:

"26-07 / 01."

Ira looked at it for a while.

Harinarayan asked, "Initial?"

Ira still held the heated pin.

If she wished, she could burn in an "I."

After a little while she put the pin down.

"Not yet."

"Why?"

"My name is in the register."

There was a faint smile in Harinarayan's eyes.

The next day Shambhunath made a small bird entirely by himself.

The serial number was burned underneath.

He picked up the pin and burned a small "S" beside the number.

Ira saw him.

"You were the one asking why a name was needed."

Without looking up, Shambhunath said, "A mind can change."

"So quickly?"

"Wood does not tolerate haste. The mind sometimes does."

Everyone laughed.

Within a month, three pages of the Underside Register were filled.

The old register had spoken only of quantities and money.

The new one began to show the movement inside the workshop.

Sometimes four names stood beside one horse.

Sometimes only Ratna Devi beside a spinning top.

Sometimes:

"Colour — Kamala; correction — Ira."

Sometimes:

"Axle remade — Shambhunath."

Ira noticed something else.

Writing down names made mistakes harder to hide, but it did not make blame simple.

One day the cords on five fish loosened within two days.

The register was checked.

Ratna Devi had tied the cords, but Ira had made the holes in the wood.

Ratna Devi said, "The holes were too large."

Ira answered at once, "The cord was too thin."

The two remained silent for a few moments.

Harinarayan said, "The register is not a paper for finding the guilty person. It is a paper for understanding where the work changed."

Both the holes and the cord were changed.

There was no problem in the next batch.

That day Ira added a line in small letters at the top of the register:

"A name is not the answer; it is the place of the question."

Harinarayan read it and said, "That sounds very much like a book."

Ira laughed.

"Shall I erase it?"

"No. Leave it. It may be useful someday."

One autumn evening the market was crowded.

A woman came to the shop with two small children.

She was looking at four horses.

She turned one over.

"What is this number?"

Ira said, "The date it was made and the serial number."

"A responsibility mark for the shop?"

"No. A record of the work."

"What does that mean?"

Ira opened the register and showed her the entry for that number.

"Kaka cut the wood, I brought out the form, Ma applied the colour, Kaki fitted the wheels."

The woman looked slightly surprised.

"So many people in one small horse?"

From behind them Harinarayan said, "The horse is small. The hands are not."

The woman laughed.

She bought the horse.

For the first time Ira understood that the register was not only for future repairs.

It also made invisible work visible in the present.

But she did not want to turn that into a loud advertisement for the shop.

So no large sign appeared at the door saying, "See the artisans' names."

The small number remained underneath.

If someone asked, the register was opened.

If no one asked, the toy went home with its colour, its shape and its play.

Two months later Devkant returned.

This time the old bullock cart was not broken.

The girl came turning it in her hands.

"The wheels run well," she said from a distance.

Ira smiled.

Devkant chose a small fish to buy.

Out of habit the girl turned it over.

"There is a number on this."

"Yes."

"Whose?"

Ira opened the register.

Against that fish was written:

"Form: Ira; colour: Kamala; cord: Ratna."

The girl read it.

Then she asked, "Whose name is on the old cart?"

Ira opened the first page.

"The names from the repair are here. We do not know exactly who made it originally."

The girl thought for a while.

"Then is it nameless?"

Ira took the bullock cart in her hands.

The old round stamp was on the underside.

Beside it was the fine mark of the new repair number.

"Not completely nameless," Ira said. "It has the house's name. It has the names of the later work. Some names in between are not known to us."

"Then?"

Ira said, "Where we do not know, that place will remain blank."

Whether the girl was satisfied with that answer could not be read from her face.

Holding the fish in one hand and the cart in the other, she went out of the shop.

Evening was falling.

In the workshop, Harinarayan turned over the last horse of the day and burned its serial number onto the underside.

Ira watched from a distance.

Once she had thought that if her own name did not appear underneath, her work would be erased.

Now she understood that writing a name was not merely saying, "This is mine."

Sometimes a name said:

"This hand was here."

Sometimes:

"This work passed through here."

Sometimes:

"Begin understanding this mistake from here."

And sometimes a blank line said:

"Here, we do not know."

Ira picked up a newly made horse.

On the underside were the round shop stamp, the date and the serial number.

She took the thin heated pin in her hand.

For a few moments she thought.

Then, beside the number, she burned a very small "I."

Harinarayan saw it but said nothing.

Ira turned the horse upright.

From above, there was no sign anywhere.

The horse was simply a horse.

But if it ever returned to this workshop, its underside could be opened and its path read.

Story 73

The Broken Note

It had been drizzling since noon that day.

In the western room of the house, an old harmonium stood on a low wooden platform.

Its black polish had worn away long ago, the brass along its edges had gone dull, and though the leather on the left side was slightly torn, the bellows still worked properly.

But one note in the middle would not sound.

Whenever a finger pressed it, instead of a note there came from inside only a dry puff of air:

"Phuss."

Mrinalini pressed the key for the third time.

"Again the same," she said.

Her younger brother Nachiketa sat with the recording app open on his phone.

He looked up and said, "Play it once more."

Mrinalini pressed it again.

"Phuss."

Nachiketa stopped the recording.

"This will not work."

Janaki Devi, sitting on the cot, laughed.

"It seems to be working to me."

"Dadi, one note is missing."

"Not missing. It is sulking."

Mrinalini laughed.

"How will we record a song with a sulking note?"

Janaki Devi kept looking at the rain falling outside the window.

"The way a song is sung—with whatever is there."

It was not that simple.

Mrinalini had to return to Pune in three days.

For six months she had been away for training in sound archiving.

This time, when she came to the village, she had decided to record the five old songs that only her grandmother still remembered in full.

They were all songs connected with weddings, but they were not all of one kind.

One was sung before kanyadaan, one when the palanquin was lifted, one on a new bride's first morning, one at a brother's farewell, and one that Janaki Devi herself called "the middle song."

"Why the middle song?" Mrinalini had asked on the first day.

Janaki Devi had said, "Because people thought of it as both a beginning and an ending. The song lived in between."

Mrinalini had liked that answer very much.

She wanted to record all five songs.

The first four had been recorded over the previous two days.

The fifth remained.

And the fifth needed exactly that broken note.

The harmonium was not Janaki Devi's.

It had belonged to her elder sister-in-law, who had died many years earlier.

No one in the house played it regularly, but when the plan to record the songs was made, it had been brought down from a box in the upper hall.

The dust had been wiped away, the cloth covering changed, and oil applied to the bellows.

On the first day everything had seemed fine.

Today, just before the fifth song began, the middle Ma had fallen silent in the middle of playing.

Nachiketa said, "I called Mehta-ji in the market. He can come the day after tomorrow."

Mrinalini replied at once, "I leave the day after tomorrow."

"Stay one more day."

"Changing the ticket is not easy. It is the first session of the training."

Janaki Devi listened to both of them.

Then she asked, "Can the song not happen unless the harmonium is repaired?"

Mrinalini turned towards her.

"The song can happen, but the melody will be distorted."

"Is the melody so weak?"

"Not weak. But at one place it descends onto Ma. What will we do there?"

Janaki Devi held out her hand.

"Let me play first."

Mrinalini slid the harmonium towards the cot.

Janaki Devi worked the bellows.

Her left hand was still steady.

With the right she played Sa, Re, Ga, then the silent Ma, then Pa.

"Phuss."

She played it again.

"Phuss."

Nachiketa said, "See?"

Janaki Devi said, "I see."

She hummed the first line of the song.

The broken note did not occur in the first line.

Nor in the second.

At the end of the third line, the tune was supposed to descend and settle on that Ma.

Janaki Devi stopped her finger before it reached the note.

Then, skipping Ma, she descended straight to Ga.

The line of the song bent slightly.

Mrinalini said at once, "That became different."

"Yes."

"It is no longer the original tune."

"Yes."

"Then?"

Janaki Devi hummed the same line again.

This time, instead of descending to Ma, she lingered a little on the Pa above it, then came down to Ga.

"This?"

Mrinalini listened.

"A little better. But still not the original."

Janaki Devi stopped the bellows.

"Where do you want the original—in your ear, or on paper?"

Mrinalini did not answer.

Nachiketa was opening the list of the four songs already recorded on the phone.

Janaki Devi said again, "When I first learned this song, there was no harmonium."

"Then?"

"There was the mouth."

"Was the melody the same even then?"

"As far as I remember."

"Who did you learn it from?"

"From my mother. Before her—"

Janaki Devi stopped, then corrected herself.

"Before her, I do not know exactly."

Mrinalini smiled.

Her grandmother too had learned the habit of leaving a blank where a fact was not known.

"But the melody?"

"Melodies change as they travel."

"Then what should I write in the archive?"

"Write what was sung today."

"But today the harmonium is broken."

"Write that too."

After that sentence, only the sound of rain remained in the room.

Mrinalini went to the window.

Outside, water had collected around the tulsi altar.

The water falling from the edge of the roof was not even everywhere—thick in some places, thin in others.

She remembered her instructor from the training.

He often said: before removing a background sound from a recording, ask whether it is an obstruction or part of the context.

Mrinalini had written that sentence many times in her notebook.

But now the question was not in the background.

It was inside the melody itself.

One complete note was missing.

Nachiketa asked, "Can you alter the pitch on the phone and add the note later?"

Mrinalini replied immediately, "No."

"Why? It would become clean."

"I am not making the song. I am documenting it."

Janaki Devi laughed.

"And the one who documents is so afraid of cleaning?"

Mrinalini laughed too, but the question remained inside her.

She wanted her grandmother's song to survive as completely as possible.

It seemed wrong that the form of the song should change because of a broken instrument.

After noon the rain grew heavier.

Mehta-ji called again and said that water had risen near the bridge, so it would be difficult for him to come before the day after tomorrow.

Mrinalini ended the call.

"Now it is certain."

Nachiketa asked, "What?"

"Let us leave today's recording. Dadi can simply sing without the harmonium."

Janaki Devi said, "Why without the harmonium?"

"It is broken."

"One note is broken. What crime have all the others committed?"

Nachiketa burst out laughing.

Mrinalini did not.

"Dadi, if you change the song, later people will think the melody was like this."

"Who are these people?"

"Whoever listens."

"Will they read what you write too?"

"If I keep the description with it, they may."

"Then write: 'On this day one note of the harmonium would not sound.'"

"But the listener will hear the sound first."

"Good. Then they will hear its absence in the sound too."

"But you will leave out the note."

"I will not leave it out. I will move around it."

This time Janaki Devi's voice was not joking.

She pulled the harmonium towards herself again.

"Watch."

She sang the first line.

The bellows continued.

The second line.

The third line was now approaching Ma.

She held on Pa and lengthened the note slightly.

Then, instead of dropping straight to Ga, she circled down towards Re and came back to Ga.

The tune changed in such a way that the place of the missing note did not sound empty; a small curve had formed around it.

Mrinalini was startled.

"Again."

Janaki Devi sang again.

This time the curve was slightly different.

"Again."

On the third attempt it was different again.

Mrinalini said, "You are not singing it the same way each time."

"Why should I?"

"For the recording."

"Will the song hold its breath for the recording?"

Mrinalini fell silent.

Janaki Devi said, "Where Ma used to be, I am now looking for a path. How can a path become fixed the very first time?"

Mrinalini liked that sentence, but her working habit wanted a single take.

"Let us practise five or six times first."

"Let us."

That evening the front hall of the house became a small rehearsal room.

Nachiketa shut the window to reduce the sound of rain.

Janaki Devi immediately said, "Open it."

"The noise is coming in."

"So is the heat."

The window was opened again.

Mrinalini placed the phone a little away from the harmonium, pointed more towards her grandmother's mouth.

In the first rehearsal, Dadi stopped on the third line.

"No. That turn became too large."

The second time she shortened the line.

The third time a goat bleated outside in the middle.

Nachiketa stopped the phone.

Janaki Devi said, "Does the goat have no place in the archive either?"

"Dadi!"

Everyone laughed.

On the fourth attempt Mrinalini worked the bellows herself while Janaki Devi only sang.

Then it became clear that the problem was not only the broken Ma.

When the pressure of the bellows changed, the other notes too sometimes sounded thick, sometimes thin.

Janaki Devi said, "You are pumping the bellows in fear."

"I am not afraid."

"Your hand says you are."

She showed Mrinalini how to work the bellows—long, even, without a jerk.

"The note is broken, not the breath."

Mrinalini wrote that line in her notebook.

After dinner they practised again.

This time Janaki Devi tried another way.

When the place of the broken note approached, she stopped her hand on the harmonium, let her own voice rise slightly by itself, and then caught the instrument again.

Mrinalini said, "This is very clean."

"Must it be clean?"

"For listening."

"But this is farther from my earlier melody."

Both fell silent.

After a while Janaki Devi asked, "What are you trying to preserve—the song, or its measurements?"

Mrinalini searched for an answer.

"Both."

"Both do not always fit in the same box."

The next morning the rain had stopped.

Small pools of water lay in the courtyard.

Eastern light shone in them.

Mrinalini decided to record at seven in the morning.

At that hour fewer people in the house were talking, there was less noise from the road, and Janaki Devi's throat was less tired.

Nachiketa folded a piece of paper beneath one side of the low platform so the harmonium would not rock.

Mrinalini first began to record a short introduction.

"Date—"

Janaki Devi stopped her.

"Write the date later. First the song."

"Dadi, the description—"

"What?"

Mrinalini laughed.

"All right. The song first."

The phone began recording.

The first line was steady.

The second line was steady.

On the third line Janaki Devi did not choose any one of the forms from the rehearsals.

She paused on Pa, carried her voice down with her own throat, reached Ga without touching the broken Ma, then took a small breath.

There was a strange emptiness in that breath.

Mrinalini felt that she could hear the missing note—not sounding, yet its place was audible.

The song moved on.

The fourth line.

The fifth.

The final refrain.

Janaki Devi raised her hand and stopped the bellows.

For a few moments no one spoke.

Outside, drops of leftover rain kept falling from the roof:

tap, tap.

Nachiketa said softly, "Done?"

Mrinalini stopped the phone.

"Done."

Janaki Devi said, "Play it back."

The three listened.

In the first two lines the harmonium sounded full.

In the third came the turn of the voice, the small breath, and then the song continued.

Janaki Devi said, "Here I descended a little too soon."

Mrinalini was startled.

"Shall we do it again?"

"Why?"

"You yourself said you descended too soon."

"I did. But the song did not break."

Nachiketa said, "One more, a cleaner version, would be good."

Janaki Devi looked at him.

"Then the first one is unclean?"

Nachiketa fell silent.

Mrinalini laughed.

"Clean."

Janaki Devi said, "Then is the first one dirty?"

"No."

"Then?"

Nachiketa gave up and smiled.

"All right, Dadi."

Even so, Mrinalini made a second recording.

The second time Janaki Devi's turn was more measured.

The breath was less audible.

The dripping outside had stopped too.

Technically, the second recording was more polished.

Mrinalini kept both.

She named the files:

"middle_song_1"

and

"middle_song_2."

Janaki Devi asked, "Why one and two?"

"First and second."

"Does the broken note sound more in the first?"

"The note is absent from both."

"But its absence?"

Mrinalini listened to both again.

In the first recording, the breath and small instability in the third line truly made the space around the missing note more distinct.

The second recording was smoother, but less open.

She renamed the files.

The first:

"middle_song_broken_note."

The second:

"middle_song_second_take."

Janaki Devi said nothing.

Two days later Mehta-ji came.

The rain had lessened.

He had tied a small bag of tools to the rear carrier of his bicycle.

The harmonium was opened.

Inside, they found dust, the dried wing of a moth, and a thin piece of metal lodged near the reed.

Mehta-ji said, "The reed is stuck. It is not broken."

Nachiketa asked, "Can it be repaired?"

"Half an hour."

Janaki Devi sat there watching.

Mrinalini's bus was in the evening.

She had already packed her things, but stayed to see the harmonium repaired.

Mehta-ji cleaned the reed, removed the piece of metal, checked the airflow, then closed the case.

"Play."

Mrinalini pressed Ma.

A full note came out.

She pressed it again.

The note was steady.

Nachiketa picked up the phone at once.

"Dadi, now the old one."

Janaki Devi said, "Which old form?"

"The one from before."

"Before where?"

"The song as you learned it."

Janaki Devi pulled the harmonium towards herself.

She sang the first line.

The second.

On the third line, the melody now descended onto Ma.

The full note sounded.

For a moment Mrinalini felt as though a door had opened again.

This melody was familiar to her—from Dadi's humming, from weddings in childhood, from some distant blurred memory.

The song ended.

Nachiketa said happily, "That's it! Now it is right."

With her hand still on the harmonium, Janaki Devi asked, "Was yesterday wrong?"

Nachiketa did not answer immediately.

Mrinalini stopped the phone.

"No."

"Then how is this right?"

"This is closer to the older melody."

"Good."

Janaki Devi played Ma again.

The note came out clearly.

"And the path that formed yesterday?"

Mrinalini said, "That is different."

"Will it remain?"

"It will."

Nachiketa asked, "Why both? Choose one as the final version."

For the first time in all these days, Mrinalini answered without thinking.

"Why choose?"

She opened all three audio files on the phone.

First: the first take with the broken note.

Second: the second take from the same day.

Third: the older familiar melody after the harmonium was repaired.

Mrinalini opened a new register.

At the top she wrote:

"The Middle Song."

Below it, three lines.

Beside the first:

"The harmonium's middle Ma was stuck; the singer rerouted the melody; dripping from the roof after rain is audible."

Beside the second:

"Same day, second take; the turn is more stable."

Beside the third:

"After the reed was cleaned; Ma sounds again in the older familiar melody."

Janaki Devi read the register.

"'Older familiar' is right," she said. "Good that you did not write 'original.'"

Mrinalini asked, "Why such dislike for the word 'original'?"

Janaki Devi thought for a while.

"Because the moment people say 'original,' they begin to think everything else is an imitation."

"And if there really is one original?"

"Then look for it. But do not announce it before you find it."

Mrinalini closed the register.

Before leaving for the evening bus, she went to Dadi's room.

Janaki Devi sat by the window, untangling thread.

"Dadi, I will keep all three recordings together, not in separate groups."

"Keep them."

"And I will not delete the one with the broken note."

Janaki Devi looked up.

"Delete it?"

Mrinalini laughed.

"I will not."

"What did you find in that one?"

Mrinalini thought for a few moments.

"A melody that would never have formed if the instrument had been working."

Untangling a knot in the thread, Janaki Devi said, "Then keep it for that."

"And the older melody?"

"Why would you leave that out?"

"Both?"

"Both."

"Then which one will people learn next time?"

"Whichever serves them."

"So much freedom?"

Janaki Devi laughed.

"Is a song a prisoner?"

Before leaving for the bus stand, Mrinalini went once more to the western room.

The harmonium lay closed on the low platform.

She opened the lid and pressed the middle Ma once.

The note sounded clean.

After that clean note, she remembered yesterday's small breath—the empty space that had actually been audible.

Mrinalini took out her phone.

She placed all three recordings in a single group.

She named the group:

"The Middle Song — Three Paths."

Then she wrote the final line in her notebook:

"The instrument was repaired; the first melody was not erased."

Story 74

The River's Other Name

It was the last week of Bhadav.

A new district map had been hung in the school geography room.

Blue lines, black roads, small round dots, and the names of blocks in large letters.

For the first time, Nandini was looking for the name of her village on such a large map.

She found the village.

A thin blue line ran south of it.

Beside the line was written:

"Sirhani River."

Nandini read it twice.

"Sirhani?"

Urmila, sitting beside her, asked, "What happened?"

"Is this the name of our river?"

Urmila leaned towards the map.

"What else would it be?"

Nandini did not answer.

No one at home called the river Sirhani.

At this time of year, Dadi called it Patar Dhar—the Thin Stream.

In Ashadh, Babu called it Duimunhi—the Two-Mouthed.

Harilal Kaka, who rowed the boat at the ghat, called one bend Ghumni.

Until now Nandini had assumed these were names for different parts of the river.

The geography teacher, Mridula Jha, began the lesson.

"This week every student will make a small map of their village. Mark the road, school, pond, river, embankment—whatever is important."

On the board she wrote four things:

Place.

Direction.

Name.

Use.

"Take the name from the map. If you hear a different local form, you may record it separately in a note, but do not erase the official name."

Nandini raised her hand.

"Ma'am, what if there is more than one local name?"

Mridula Jha paused for a moment.

"First find out whether the names are truly different names, or names for different parts of the river."

"And what if the name changes when the season changes?"

A few children laughed.

Mridula Jha did not.

"Then write the season too. But do not turn something you have heard into a fact immediately. Record who told you, where you heard it, and when."

At the top of her notebook Nandini wrote:

"Sirhani River?"

She put in the question mark deliberately.

That evening, after returning home, she sat beside her grandmother.

Dadi, Kamala Devi, was sitting on the veranda picking husks from makhana.

Nandini asked, "Dadi, what is the name of our river?"

Without looking up, Kamala Devi said, "Now? Patar Dhar."

"Why now?"

Dadi raised her head.

"What do you mean?"

"A name should be one thing."

"According to whom?"

Nandini opened her notebook.

"The school map says Sirhani River."

Kamala Devi pushed the makhana kernels to one side.

"Yes, that will be its name on paper."

"Then why do you call it Patar Dhar?"

"Because now it is thin."

"In the rains?"

"Watch during the rains. The sandbank in the middle will go under, the current will split into two channels, and people will call it Duimunhi."

"Then when do you call it Sirhani?"

Kamala Devi thought.

"When the matter is on paper. Police station, circle office, school, land measurement. In household talk, you hear it less."

Nandini began to write.

"Patar Dhar — Bhadav?"

Dadi stopped her.

"Not every Bhadav. Watch how the water is moving."

"Then what should I write?"

"Write only what you understand. When the rains have lessened, and the main water is moving through one narrow course."

Nandini wrote:

"Patar Dhar — after the rains lessen; narrow main channel."

Then she asked, "Duimunhi?"

"Ask Harilal about that. He stays at the ghat all day."

After school the next day, Nandini and Urmila went towards the river.

To reach the ghat they had to cross paddy fields.

In some places water still shone beside the ridges.

From a distance the river truly looked thin.

Across the wide sand, the water flowed like one dark line.

Harilal Kaka had turned his boat upside down to dry.

Nandini opened her notebook.

"Kaka, what is the name of this river?"

Harilal laughed.

"Do you have an examination at school?"

"I am making a map."

"Then write Sirhani."

Nandini was a little surprised.

"You call it Sirhani?"

"That is what it is on paper."

"Duimunhi?"

Harilal brushed the mud from the belly of the boat with his fingers.

"That is not the river's name every day."

"Dadi said in the rains."

"Even in the rains, only above this ghat. See that sand mound over there?"

Nandini looked into the distance.

"Yes."

"When the water rises, that mound goes half under. The current passes on both sides of it. Then this place is Duimunhi. Later it becomes one channel again."

Nandini drew a line in her notebook.

"And Ghumni?"

This time Harilal pointed downstream.

"That bend."

"Not the river's name?"

"No. It is the name of the way the water moves at the bend. You need to know it when you take a boat through."

"Should I put it on the map?"

"If your map is a boatman's map, put it."

Nandini fell silent.

Harilal asked, "What kind of map are you making?"

For the first time, she could not answer the question.

A map for school.

But a school map for whose use?

On the way back, Urmila said, "Did you find the answer, or did the questions increase?"

Nandini looked at her notebook.

One official name, one seasonal form, one split in the current, one boatman's bend.

"The questions increased."

On the third day she went to the northern bank of the river, where there were vegetable fields.

Savita Kaki was cutting grass there.

Nandini asked, "What do you call this river?"

Savita Kaki said, "Which part?"

"The one in front of us."

"This is Sirhani."

Nandini felt relieved.

"And Patar Dhar?"

"That is farther down."

"Dadi calls this same river that."

Savita Kaki laughed.

"The channel visible from your grandmother's house is thin, so she will call it thin. Near my field the river is not so thin."

She took Nandini up onto a field ridge.

From there, the width of the water really did look different.

In one place sand lay exposed.

In another, water reached almost to the edge of the field.

Savita Kaki said, "It is easy to ask the river's name. If you do not ask the place, the answer will be only half."

Nandini wrote that sentence down.

The next day in class, all the students showed their rough maps.

Some had drawn their pond large, some the road.

Some had marked a temple, some an embankment.

On her map, Nandini had written "Sirhani River" above the main line of the river.

Beside it, with three small arrows, she had written:

"Patar Dhar — in some places, after the water falls."

"Duimunhi — near the upper sand mound, when the water rises."

"Ghumni — boatman's bend; movement of the current."

Mridula Jha looked at the map.

"This is better than before."

Nandini asked, "Then all three names are correct?"

"I will not use the word 'correct' yet."

"Why?"

"Because your three notes are not the same kind of thing. One is a seasonal form of the river. One is a division of the current at a particular place. One is a boatman's water-mark. If you call them all names of the river, you will misunderstand them again."

Nandini was disappointed.

"Then is my title wrong?"

"Your title is a question. Let the question remain."

In the corner of the map Mridula Jha wrote:

"Add time / place / use with a name."

That night Nandini sat down to redraw the school map.

Putting everything on one sheet filled the river with words on every side.

The line itself became hard to see.

She did not tear the page.

She put it above her head and kept thinking.

Her younger brother Neel looked at the pile of papers and asked, "Are all these the same river?"

"Yes."

"Then why so many maps?"

An idea came to Nandini.

From her drawing box she took out three thin transparent sheets.

At the bottom she placed the main map:

road, school, fields, the official river line, and "Sirhani River."

On the first transparent sheet she drew only the Patar Dhar of the time after the rains had lessened.

On the second, the sand mound and the two channels when the water rose.

On the third, Harilal's Ghumni bend, the ghat and the boat route.

At the top of each sheet, instead of a date, she wrote a time-or-use marker:

"After the rains lessen."

"When the water rises."

"Boatman's place."

Then she laid the sheets one over another.

One river appeared in four forms.

Neel kept lifting the first sheet and laying down the second.

"It looks as though the river is moving."

"The river does move."

"On a map?"

Nandini was quiet for a few moments.

"Less so on a map."

The next day Mridula Jha looked at the transparent sheets.

She lifted them one by one and held them against the light.

"Where did this idea come from?"

"Writing all the names on one sheet was becoming confusing."

"And now?"

"Now I understand that all the names are not alternatives for the same thing."

Mridula Jha nodded.

"Write that below the map."

Nandini wrote:

"Local names / markers are not substitutes for one another; some are linked to place, some to time, some to use."

On Saturday, the school held a small exhibition.

The students' maps were hung in the veranda.

Nandini's map was placed on a table instead of being hung, because the transparent sheets had to be lifted and replaced.

Her father was the first visitor.

Reading "Sirhani River," he said, "This time you have written it correctly."

Nandini did not laugh.

"Look at the sheets underneath."

Babu lifted the first.

"Patar Dhar."

The second.

"Duimunhi."

The third.

"Ghumni."

He said, "Why have you written Ghumni as the river's name?"

Nandini answered immediately, "It is not the river's name. It is the boatman's bend. That is why it is on a separate sheet."

Babu smiled slightly.

"Then all this asking did some good."

By noon many people had looked at the map.

Someone said, "Near us they call it Narkatahi."

Nandini did not pick up her pen immediately.

She asked, "Where?"

"Near the reeds to the east."

"All the time?"

"No, when the small channel runs that way."

"Who do you hear calling it that?"

The person thought.

"People in our hamlet."

On a separate slip Nandini wrote:

"Narkatahi — near the eastern reeds; when the small channel runs there; verification pending."

Urmila was standing beside her.

She said softly, "Earlier you would have added it to the map at once."

"Now there is still the place to ask about."

After noon the headmaster came.

With him was an employee from the block office who had come for an inspection of the school building.

Looking at the map, he asked, "Where is the official name?"

Nandini showed him the bottom sheet.

"Sirhani River."

"And all these others?"

"Local uses."

The employee said, "In disaster notices one name is necessary. Several names can create confusion."

Nandini hesitated before answering.

Mridula Jha said, "The official name has not been changed on this map. The other sheets are for understanding local markers."

The employee looked at the sheets again.

"Then write clearly at the top: official name separate; local use separate."

Nandini wrote the suggestion down at once.

It did not seem like opposition to her.

Instead, for the first time she understood that one name and another name could have different jobs.

In the evening the exhibition was packed away.

Mridula Jha stopped Nandini.

"Do you remember your first question?"

"Which name is right?"

"Yes."

"And the answer now?"

Gathering the map sheets, Nandini said, "For the map, Sirhani. The other names are incomplete without place and time."

"That is all?"

Nandini thought for a moment.

"And the name on a map cannot do every job either."

Mridula Jha smiled.

On Monday the geography worksheet was handed out again.

Earlier the question had read:

"Write the river's correct name."

Mridula Jha had changed it to:

"Write the name of the river given on the district map."

Below it she had added another line:

"If you find a local name or marker, record it separately with place / time / use."

No one in the class paid much attention to the change.

Nandini did.

In the corner of the worksheet she drew three tiny sheets.

On one she wrote:

"Patar."

On another:

"Duimunhi."

On the third:

"Ghumni."

Above them she drew one straight blue line and wrote:

"Sirhani River."

A few days later there was heavy rain at night.

In the morning Kamala Devi looked towards the river from the veranda and said, "Now go and see whether it has become Duimunhi."

Nandini picked up her notebook.

"First I will look as far as the sand mound."

Dadi laughed.

"Now you will verify what I say too?"

"Everyone's."

"Good."

The two set out towards the river by the path through the fields.

The sky was still grey.

From a distance the sound of the water was heavier than it had been the day before.

When they reached the sand mound, Nandini saw that the main current really was splitting into two.

She opened her notebook, but did not immediately write "Duimunhi."

First she wrote the place.

Then the day.

Then the condition of the water.

Only after that did she write the name.

Kamala Devi said nothing.

On the way back, the school roof could be seen in the distance.

Inside, on the district map hanging on the wall, the river was still a single blue line with a single name.

Nandini no longer thought that line was wrong.

She understood only this:

paper was doing its work, and the river its own.

Story 75

Two Kinds of Seed

Ashadh was drawing near, but the clouds that rose in the sky still thinned out by evening.

When Abhay returned from Darbhanga, a white sack was tied behind his bicycle.

As soon as he entered the courtyard, he opened the sack and placed it before his grandmother.

"This time we'll sow this seed," he said.

Janaki Devi was filling an earthen pitcher with water.

She bent to read the printing on the sack.

"Certified?"

"Yes. The people at the agricultural centre said the grains are uniform, the yield is good, and there is less disease."

Janaki Devi did not touch the sack.

"Then what about the old seed?"

Abhay looked towards a corner of the veranda.

On a bamboo platform stood two small earthen pots.

The mouth of one was tied with a red cloth; the other was empty.

"The old seed has too many broken grains," Abhay said. "How many times can we keep saving the same seed?"

"As long as it still does its work."

"The new seed will do more."

This time Janaki Devi smiled.

"Then explain it to me."

Abhay lifted the sack.

He began reading aloud: sowing time, spacing between plants, amount of fertiliser, protection from disease.

Dadi stopped him.

"What does it say for the Dihwala field?"

Abhay fell silent.

"Which one?"

"The raised land behind the bamboo."

Abhay laughed.

"Why would the name of a field be written on the sack?"

"Then for the Chaurwala field?"

"Dadi, the sack says the same thing for every field."

"Are all fields the same?"

Abhay did not answer.

The household had three main fields.

A small strip near the house, where water never stood for long.

The Chaurwala field to the south, where the soil stayed wet for a long time once the rains filled it.

And the Dihwala field behind the bamboo, where the topsoil began to crack after only two days of sun.

When Babuji was alive, the field names appeared more often in conversation than on paper.

"Plough Chaurwala first."

"Leave Dihwala for now."

"Raise the ridge on Ghar-lagawa."

To Abhay, all this seemed more like old habit than knowledge.

This time he had returned from a two-day camp at the agricultural centre.

His notebook was full of notes.

Seed selection, germination, spacing, nutrition.

He wanted farming to proceed by measurement, not by guesswork.

Dadi's earthen pot seemed to him the last sign of that old guesswork.

Janaki Devi put down the pitcher and climbed up to the bamboo platform.

She untied the red cloth.

Inside was old paddy seed—some grains long, some a little short, not even all the same colour.

"This is Lalchhar," she said.

"Even the name is one given at home."

"Does the name work in the field, or the grain?"

"The grain."

"Then talk about the grain."

Abhay put his hand into the pot.

He took a few grains onto his palm and examined them.

"These are not uniform."

"Yes."

"Then the crop will not be uniform either."

"Possibly."

"Then why do you want to save it?"

Janaki Devi did not answer immediately.

She reached towards the bottom of the pot and took out a small cloth bundle.

The bundle contained four handfuls of seed.
"Why is this separate?" Abhay asked.
"Last year Dihwala was sown late."
"So?"
"I saved seed from the plants that survived there."
Abhay looked again at the bundle.
"That is not proof."
"I am not calling it proof."
"Then?"
"I call it memory."
Abhay did not like that answer.
He took out his notebook.
"This time I will write everything down."
Janaki Devi said, "Write."
"The new seed goes into the main fields."
"Put it there."
"The old?"
"Keep it."
"How much?"
"As much as there is."
Abhay had expected Dadi to demand half a field again.
But she asked for nothing.
That confused him more.
Two days later the first good rain came.
The smell of wet earth filled the whole house.
Early in the morning Abhay went to inspect the Chaurwala field.
The soil was soft, and a thin layer of water shone over it.
He prepared a seedbed with the new certified seed.
The grains looked uniform.
The sprouts too came up at almost the same time.
Abhay went to look every morning.
On the seventh day he took Dadi with him.
"Look how even the plants are."
Janaki Devi bent to look.
"Good."
Her answer seemed too small to Abhay.
"The old seed never comes up this evenly."
"No."
"Then?"
"Then, for now, the new seed looks good."
"For now?"

"Yes, for now."

Abhay wanted to say something, but Dadi had begun studying the water in the field.

After the rain there were ten days of sun.

Chaurwala still held moisture.

Ghar-lagawa dried somewhat, but could still be worked.

The topsoil of Dihwala began hardening again.

Every evening Abhay watched the sky.

Clouds rose in the distance but did not reach the village.

On the twelfth day Dadi asked, "What will you do with Dihwala?"

"When it rains."

"And if the rain is late?"

"Then we will plant late."

"How large will the new-seed seedlings be by then?"

Abhay looked at his notebook.

He had not written that question down.

"I will transplant some into Ghar-lagawa," he said. "The rest are for Chaurwala."

"And Dihwala?"

Abhay was not angry, but his voice hardened.

"Dadi, why do you keep asking the same thing again and again?"

Janaki Devi remained calm.

"Because the field does not keep giving the same answer."

On the third evening, a little rain fell.

Not enough to soak Dihwala completely, but enough to soften the topsoil.

Janaki Devi brought out the red-cloth bundle.

Abhay saw it.

"Now?"

"There are four handfuls. We'll sow a small strip."

"In so little rain?"

"That is why."

"What if there is no more rain?"

"Then we'll write that it did not survive."

Abhay looked at his grandmother's face for a moment.

He had thought saving old seed was a matter of faith for her.

Now she was ready to test it.

He picked up the spade.

A small strip was prepared in the eastern corner of Dihwala.

No one divided half the field.

No one made two equal plots.

Only as much old seed was sown as the time and soil allowed.

In his notebook Abhay wrote:

"Dihwala, eastern corner, twelve days after first sowing."

Janaki Devi added, "Rain — light."

Abhay wrote it.

"Soil?"

"Soft on top; still dry inside."

"That too?"

"If you are going to write, why write only half?"

Abhay wrote it down.

There was no rain again the following week.

Not every grain of the old seed germinated.

Some places remained empty.

Abhay showed them to Dadi.

"See?"

Janaki Devi counted the empty spaces.

"Yes."

"There are not this many gaps in the new seedbed."

"Write that too."

Abhay wrote the numbers in his notebook.

That night a strong wind blew.

By dawn the clouds had thickened, and rain fell until noon.

The surviving shoots in the Dihwala strip stood upright again.

A few days later the new-seed seedlings were transplanted into Chaurwala and Ghar-lagawa.

The work went quickly.

The seedlings were almost the same height, the roots clean, the joints even.

Abhay was satisfied.

So was Dadi.

But Dadi did not announce her satisfaction.

She simply kept giving water to the women doing the transplanting.

By the middle of Sawan all three fields had turned green.

The old-seed plants in the eastern corner of Dihwala looked different.

Some were tall, some short.

When Abhay went there, he first counted the empty spaces.

Then he looked at the colour of the plants.

"Not very uniform," he said.

Janaki Devi had come there too.

"Who promised they would be uniform?"

"No one."

"Then why are you measuring them by that standard?"

Abhay did not laugh.

"Comparison is necessary."

"Make the comparison. But do not ask the same question of everything."

"What do you mean?"

Dadi pointed towards Chaurwala.

"Over there, ask how much yield it will give."

Then she pointed towards the Dihwala strip.

"Here, first ask whether it stayed standing after being sown this late and with so little water."

Abhay closed his notebook.

That night he opened it again.

At the top of a page he wrote:

"Name of seed."

Below it, two lines:

New certified seed.

Lalchhar.

Then he realised he was making the same old comparison again.

He did not tear the page out.

On the right he made four new columns:

Field.

Sowing time.

Water pattern.

What survived / what it gave.

The next day he showed it to Dadi.

Janaki Devi read it and asked, "Where is taste?"

Abhay smiled.

"Let the crop come first."

"Does the story of seed not reach the stomach?"

Abhay added a fifth column:

Rice / taste.

Dadi said, "Saved seed too."

"A sixth?"

"Yes."

"You will make this notebook larger than the field."

"A field is for one year. A notebook page can help next year too."

In Bhadav the water suddenly rose.

For two days water stood in Chaurwala.

Abhay worried.

The new plants were strong by then, but he went every day to inspect the ridges.

There was no such problem in the Dihwala strip.

The water there drained away overnight.

This time Dadi said nothing.

Abhay himself wrote in the notebook:

"Chaurwala: standing water for two days."

On another line:

"Dihwala: low water retention."

Beside it he made a small mark so he would remember later that this was a quality of the field, not of the seed.

That distinction had not occurred to him before.

In Ashwin the grain heads began to appear.

The heads on the new seed were full and even.

Abhay was pleased merely looking at them from a distance.

The Lalchhar strip in Dihwala was a little later.

The heads did not fill on the same day.

Some bent over, some still stood straight.

"The market people will make faces at this," Abhay said.

"The new one is for the market."

"Then who is this for?"

"First let it come home."

On harvest day the sacks of new paddy filled quickly.

The grain was clean.

Abhay weighed it and wrote the figure in his notebook.

Dadi was sitting nearby.

"Well?" she asked.

"The new one gave a good yield."

"Write it."

"I have."

"Lalchhar?"

"Its strip was small. A direct comparison would not be fair."

Janaki Devi smiled.

"This time you said that yourself."

Abhay laughed too.

The Lalchhar was harvested two days later.

The yield was lower, but not nothing.

On its line Abhay wrote:

"Late sowing, low water at the start, crop survived; yield not directly comparable with the new seed."

Dadi read it.

"You wrote a very long line."

"I will not write half the truth."

Janaki Devi said nothing.

After the paddy dried, the first rice cooked at home was from the new seed.

The grains swelled and remained separate; it looked good.
Abhay ate from his plate.
"It is good."
Dadi ate too.
"Yes."
The next day rice from Lalchhar was cooked.
The colour was slightly dull and the grains were not uniform.
As soon as the lid was lifted, the aroma was different.
Abhay took the first mouthful and fell silent.
Dadi did not ask.
After a while he said on his own, "This aroma was not in the new one."
"No."
"But the new one looks better for the market."
"Yes."
"Then both go into the notebook."
"Write them."
In the taste column Abhay wrote two separate sentences.
He did not write "good" or "bad."
Against the new seed:
"Grains swell, remain separate; aroma mild."
Against Lalchhar:
"Grains uneven; aroma strong; preferred more by people at home."
The following week Harinarayan Kaka from the village came.
He had already seen Abhay's fields.
"Tell me, which seed won?"
At first Abhay wanted to laugh.
In Jeth he could have answered that question at once.
Now he could not.
He asked, "What kind of field do you have?"
Harinarayan Kaka was surprised.
"What?"
"Low land where water stands, or raised?"
"Both."
"Will you sow on time, or is there a risk of delay?"
"The rain will decide that."
"Then how can I give you one name?"
Harinarayan Kaka looked towards Dadi.
Janaki Devi was sorting paddy.
She did not raise her head.
Abhay brought his notebook.

"Look. In Chaurwala the new seed did well. In late sowing at Dihwala, Lalchhar survived. They are not directly comparable. I will write it again next year."

"So you will keep both?"

"Yes."

"Which one more of?"

Abhay turned the page.

"First according to the field."

Harinarayan Kaka studied the page for a while.

"Will you give me a handful of the old one?"

This time Janaki Devi raised her head.

"We will give you seed. But with its story."

Kaka laughed.

"The seed's story?"

"If you do not say when it was sown, where it was sown, and how much water it received, you are giving only grain, not knowledge."

Abhay looked at Dadi.

He did not write that sentence in the notebook.

It seemed to him that some things had to enter practice before they entered a page.

At the end of Kartik came the day to separate seed for the next year.

Abhay brought two clean containers.

He began by writing only the name on the first, then stopped.

He cut a larger strip of paper.

On the container for the new certified seed he wrote:

"Chaurwala / transplanted on time / water-retaining / good yield."

On the Lalchhar container he wrote:

"Dihwala, eastern corner / late sowing / little water at the start / crop survived / strong aroma."

Janaki Devi kept reading.

"And if next year it turns out the other way around?"

Abhay said, "We'll add a new line."

"Erase the old one?"

"No. We'll write the year."

He added the year above both labels.

Then he wrote the amount of saved seed.

The Lalchhar container was small.

The new-seed container was large.

The two were placed beside each other on the bamboo platform.

For the first time Abhay noticed that Dadi had never kept the old seed in opposition to the new one.

She only did not want its place to become empty.
After dinner that night, Abhay opened his notebook again.
On the first page were still his old two lines:
New certified seed.
Lalchhar.
Above them he wrote:
"Question: Which seed is good?"
He held the pen still for a while.
Then after the question he drew a small arrow and wrote:
"Where? When?"
Janaki Devi was sitting on the veranda untangling thread.
Abhay showed her the page.
She read it.
"And water?"
Abhay burst out laughing.
"That is the third question."
He added:
"How much water?"
Dadi said, "And the eater?"
"A fourth?"
"In the end, does the notebook eat the rice or do people?"
Abhay added the fourth question too:
"For whom?"
The page was full.
The answer was still not complete.
On the bamboo platform the two containers stood quietly side by side.
To Abhay, that silence no longer felt like uncertainty.
It felt like room.

Story 76

The Leaf Inside the Book

During the last week of Bhadav, the windows of the town library remained open throughout the day.

The dampness of the rains had lessened somewhat, and the sunlight was not so harsh that old paper would immediately begin to warp.

This was the time of year when the library carried out its annual inspection for moisture, dust and insects left by the monsoon.

For the first time, Mrinal was helping with that work.

She had completed Class Twelve and was continuing her studies in town, and in the evenings she came to the library.

The librarian, Shashikala Devi, assigned her three cupboards:

old history, agriculture, and local society.

"Do not take out too many at once," Shashikala Devi said.

"Ten books at a time. Dust them. Check the pages. Note insects, dampness and torn edges separately."

Mrinal liked this work.

Books in order, pages clean, titles standing straight—these gave her a particular kind of satisfaction.

The first two days were easy.

Some pages had dust, some carried old library-stamp ink that had spread, and some bindings were loose.

On the third day she took a thick old book from the bottom shelf of the agriculture cupboard.

Its cover must once have been green, but it had now faded to a greyish brown.

As soon as she opened the book, a dried leaf fell from between the pages onto the floor.

The leaf was yellow-brown, its veins still clearly visible.

Mrinal bent and picked it up.

"Things like this should be taken out and thrown away first," she said to herself.

Under the pressed leaf there was a faint brown stain on the page.

She was carrying the leaf towards the wastebasket when Shashikala Devi noticed.

"Which page did it fall from?"

Mrinal stopped.

"Fifty-seven."

"Write that down first."

"The leaf too?"

"Yes. Record what you found. Whether it is discarded or kept can be decided later."

Mrinal found the instruction slightly unnecessary.

Even so, on the inspection sheet she wrote:

"Page 57: dried leaf; stain."

She turned the pages again.

In the margin of page sixty-nine, two lines had been written in pencil.

The handwriting was fine and slightly slanted.

"The pond water did not fall this low this year."

Below it, in another hand, someone had written:

"Which year? The year is not clear on the page."

Mrinal frowned.

"This should be cleaned."

Shashikala Devi came closer.

"Why?"

"Someone has written in the book."

"I can see that."

"Writing in library books is forbidden."

"It is forbidden now."

"Was it not forbidden earlier?"

Shashikala Devi looked at the book's old stamp.

"The rule on paper is very old. It was not followed in exactly the same way at all times."

Mrinal took out an eraser.

"The pencil is faint. It will come off."

Shashikala Devi stopped her hand.

"Not yet."

"We are cleaning the dust."

"Dust and writing are not the same thing."

Mrinal fell silent.

Shashikala Devi examined the stamp at the back of the book.

The accession number was very old.

The library had received the book from the private collection of a teacher in the town.

The year of donation was half erased.

"The note may have been written by the donor," Shashikala Devi said.

"Or by a reader."

Mrinal asked, "Then if we do not know whose it is, should we still keep it?"

"First we should know what it is."

That day, instead of ten books, only four were inspected.

Because Mrinal's eyes had begun to look more at the margins than at the dust.

In one book an old grocery list was trapped.

In another, half a railway ticket.

In a third, on page twelve, someone had written:

"Ask Babu about this."

On page eighty-one someone had drawn only three question marks.

Somewhere there was a round blue flower drawn by a child's pen.

Somewhere else, a telephone number.

Mrinal kept making a list of everything.

By evening, her first assumption—old books are dirty—had changed a little.

But another problem had become clear.

If every mark were preserved in the name of memory, the books themselves could be damaged.

The stain from the dried leaf was spreading.

In one book, the paper under a pressed flower had turned black.

A piece of old newspaper had begun sticking to a page.

The next day Mrinal showed all this to Shashikala Devi.

"If we keep everything, the book will not survive."

"You are right."

"Then shall we remove it?"

"Everything?"

Mrinal did not answer.

Shashikala Devi placed four things on the table:

the dried leaf, the railway ticket, the grocery list, and a thin slip of paper with two lines of verse written on it.

"Which of these is important?"

Mrinal picked up the leaf.

"This is damaging the book. It has to be removed."

"Does it have to be preserved?"

"I do not know."

"The railway ticket?"

"Perhaps it was used as a bookmark."

"The grocery list?"

"Nothing special."

"The poem?"

Mrinal read it.

The lines were ordinary.

There was neither an author's name nor a date.

"Perhaps someone used this as a bookmark too."

Shashikala Devi smiled.

"See? Something found inside an old book does not become history by itself."

"Then how do we decide?"

"That is what we have to understand."

That week Ramlochan Jha, an old member of the library, came in.

He was a retired headmaster and came twice a week to read newspapers.

Shashikala Devi showed him the pencilled note in the book.

Ramlochan Jha lowered his spectacles and examined the handwriting.

"This is not my handwriting," he said first.

Mrinal laughed.

"I had not even asked."

"When people see an old thing, their first instinct is to deny their own crime."

All three laughed.

Then Ramlochan Jha became serious.

"But the second line is interesting."

Mrinal read it aloud:

"Which year? The year is not clear on the page."

"Yes. The reader is demanding an accounting from the author."

"There is no name."

"Still, the question exists."

Mrinal asked, "If we erase this note, the book becomes clean."

Ramlochan Jha tilted the page towards the light.

"If you use an eraser, the pressure mark will remain."

Indeed, the paper beneath the pencil letters was slightly indented.

"Then it will be neither clean nor old," he said.

That sentence stayed with Mrinal.

That evening she took out three separate registers.

The first:

Condition of the book.

The second:

Separate objects found inside.

The third:

Writing in the margins.

Shashikala Devi asked, "Why three?"

"Because the three are not the same thing."

In the first register she wrote:

"Page 57: stain; leaf must be removed."

In the second:

"Dried leaf; page 57; date found."

In the third:

"Page 69; two separate pencil notes; words copied as exactly as possible."

Shashikala Devi said nothing.

Two days later the library committee met.

The main subject was repair of a leaking roof, but at the end Shashikala Devi raised the matter of the old books.

One committee member said, "A library keeps books, not piles of unnecessary paper."

Another said, "If someone has written in a book, they broke the rule. Erase it."

For the first time Mrinal spoke before the committee.

"Not everything has to be preserved."

Everyone looked at her.

"But before erasing something, we should know what we are erasing."

She showed them the stain from the dried leaf.

Then the note on page sixty-nine.

"If the leaf remains inside, it will damage the paper. It has to be removed. But if we throw it away without recording where it was, later no one will know why the stain existed."

"And the note?" a member asked.

"If it is already in an old book, do not immediately erase it. First make a photograph or copy, note the page number, and record whether it is ink or pencil."

"In every book?"

"Only where such marks are found."

The committee chair asked, "And what about people writing in books from now on?"

Mrinal had not prepared for that question.

How could old marks be preserved and new marks prevented at the same time?

Ramlochan Jha was sitting there.

He said, "Give paper beside the book."

"A bookmark?"

"No. For the reader's words."

Mrinal remembered the dried leaf.

"If loose slips are pressed inside the book again, we will have the same problem."

Shashikala Devi said, "Not inside the book."

There was silence around the table.

Slowly Mrinal began to see a method.

"A slip with the book's accession number and page number could be kept separately in a box."

"The reader writes, returns the book, and leaves the slip at the book desk?"

"Yes."

"Could another reader ask for the slips for that book?"

"Yes."

"Then the note has become separate from the book."

Ramlochan Jha said, "Separate, but not orphaned. The accession number is its thread."

The committee did not pass the rule immediately.

A three-week trial was agreed upon.

Mrinal and Shashikala Devi cut fifty small slips.

At the top were four fields:

Book number.

Page.

Date.

Reader's name — optional.

Below was an open space:

"Your comment / question."

The slips were plain grey-white.

Mrinal wanted different colours.

Shashikala Devi stopped her.

"Do not assign meanings through colour. Let the reader write what they want."

A second kind of thin envelope was made for old material found inside books.

Every envelope carried the book number, page where found, date found, and a short description of the object.

The dried leaf was removed from page fifty-seven and placed in one such envelope.

For a few days a thin blank sheet was left between the affected pages so the dampness of the stain would not increase.

The railway ticket was separated too.

There was a debate over the grocery list.

Mrinal asked, "Keep this?"

Shashikala Devi said, "First write the book number and page. Then we will look again after a month. Not everything has to be kept permanently."

Mrinal was slightly disappointed by this answer.

She had suddenly begun to feel an attachment to old objects.

Where earlier she had wanted to throw everything away, now she wanted to preserve everything.

Shashikala Devi understood the change.

"Both are easy extremes," she said.

"Erase everything, or preserve everything."

"The work in the middle is harder?"

"In the middle, you have to write down the reason."

Very few slips were filled during the first week of the trial.

People took books, read them, returned them.

Mrinal began to think the plan would remain only on paper.

On the third day, a college student filled out a slip.

The book was about local history.

For page 113, he wrote:

"The old course of the river is named here, but there is no map. Where can the map be found?"

Mrinal read the slip and showed it to Shashikala Devi.

"Should we answer?"

"The library is not an answer sheet."

"Then?"

"Keep the slip."

Two days later an elderly reader asked for the same book.

Mrinal showed him the slip.

He read page 113, then filled out another slip.

"The old course can be seen on the district archive map of 1964; the name is different."

Mrinal placed both slips in the same compartment under the same book number.

For the first time the system felt alive to her.

The slip was not an answer.

It was a path from one reader to another.

Meanwhile, inspection of the old books continued.

In one book someone had written "Not correct" in the margin thirty years earlier.

Mrinal copied the note.

Ramlochan Jha asked, "Does it say why it is not correct?"

"No."

"Then the note is incomplete."

Mrinal said, "Even so, it is a reader's mark."

"Yes. But do not turn the mark into evidence."

Because of this, a third rule was added:

Old marginal notes would be recorded as readers' statements, not as facts belonging to the book.

In another book they found a telephone number.

Mrinal picked up her mobile to photograph it, then stopped.

"Record this too?"

Shashikala Devi looked at the number.

"It may be personal. Do not copy the digits. Write only: 'telephone number written.'"

For the first time Mrinal understood that preservation did not mean reproducing everything exactly for public view.

For some things, only their existence would be recorded, not their content.

Some marginal replies would remain in the books; some only in copies.

Some pressed objects would go into separate envelopes; some would be destroyed because of insects or mould.

The decision was not the same every time.

But now the reason for the decision was written down.

Three weeks later the committee met again.

Mrinal took the box of slips with her.

Of fifty slips, seventeen had been filled.

Eight were only questions.

Five were disagreements.

Three pointed towards additional sources.

One slip said only:

"This page reminded me of my grandmother."

One committee member said, "That is not useful information."

Mrinal read the slip again.

"It is not a fact," she said.

"But it is a reader's response."

"Will you keep everything?"

Shashikala Devi answered, "As much as space and the rules allow. But categories will remain separate."

At last the new method was approved.

Marks found in old books would not immediately be erased.

First an inspection note would be made with the page reference.

Harmful pressed objects would be removed from the book.

Objects worth keeping would be placed in separately labelled envelopes.

New readers would not write in the books.

They would submit page-numbered slips at the book desk.

The slips would be kept in separate compartments according to accession number.

And useless, private or harmful material would be reviewed from time to time.

After the rules were written, Mrinal suggested the title:

"Reader-Slip Rules."

Shashikala Devi said, "Fine. But write the first line: 'Do not write in the book.'"

"After all this work, the same old rule again?"

"The rule may be old. Its reason is clearer now."

Mrinal laughed.

A month later, that first book was repaired.

Its binding was tightened.

The brown stain on page fifty-seven did not disappear completely.

The stain was now recorded in the book's damage note.

The dried leaf was in a separate envelope:

"Book 347 / Page 57 / Found in Bhadav."

The two pencilled notes on page sixty-nine remained in the book exactly as they were.

A copy of them had also been made on a separate sheet.

Mrinal was about to return the book to the shelf when she opened page sixty-nine once more.

The first reader had written:

"The pond water did not fall this low this year."

The second had asked:

"Which year? The year is not clear on the page."

Mrinal felt the question was still valid.

She took out a new reader slip for the book.

She wrote the accession number.

Page 69.

The date.

Then she held the pen still for a long time.

She did not know the answer to the old note.

At last she wrote:

"If anyone has a year-by-year record of this pond's water level, please inform the library."

She left the name field blank.

She did not put the slip inside the book.

She placed it in the book-desk compartment beside Book 347.

Two days later someone had written in small letters on the back of that slip:

"Check the municipality's old rainfall register."

Mrinal saw the line.

So did Shashikala Devi.

"What will you do now?" she asked.

Mrinal said, "First we will look for it."

"And if it is not found?"

"We will write on the slip: 'Not found.'"

Shashikala Devi smiled.

Mrinal looked towards the shelves.

From outside, the book looked cleaner than before.

There was no new writing on its pages.

But in the small compartment at the book desk, its reading was continuing to grow.

The old dried leaf was outside the book.

The new reader's slip was outside the book too.

Each was safe in its own place.

And the book, between them, was open again for reading.

Story 77

Shared Time on the Roof

It was the beginning of Kartik.

By seven in the morning, so many people gathered on the roof of the town's four-storey building that the courtyard below seemed empty.

The building bore the name "Sahaj Nivas," but the residents simply called it "the Four-Storey."

The roof was rectangular.

Two water tanks stood on the western side, four clotheslines on the east, five solar panels on the south, and an open strip on the north.

There was nothing in the middle.

Yet at different hours of the day, that empty middle belonged to different people.

In the morning Shyamnarayan Babu walked there.

His knees hurt.

The doctor had told him to walk twenty minutes on level ground.

The road below had vehicles, dust and stray dogs.

So he completed his twenty minutes on the roof.

By eight, Sushila Devi and Manjula Devi came up carrying clothes, sacks of makhana, papads and jars of pickle.

By ten, the sunlight shifted from behind the solar panels and fell across the open eastern side.

That was when the clothes were spread there.

At noon the roof stood deserted.

At four the children came up with a ball, skipping ropes, paper pinwheels and chalk.

After evening, two or three families came to walk.

For a long time this sequence continued like an unwritten rule.

The quarrel began after the solar panels were installed.

Earlier, the southern side of the roof had also been open.

To reduce the electricity bill, the building committee had five solar panels fitted there.

The panels stood slightly above the floor on iron frames.

A person could pass between them, but if a child's ball went underneath, it was difficult to retrieve.

The worker who cleaned the panels had said that at least one cubit of passage should be kept clear around them.

For the first two weeks everything went well.

In the third week Sushila Devi set up two new bamboo poles beside the eastern clotheslines.

"The southern space is gone," she said. "The clothes have to dry somewhere."

A new line was stretched between the bamboo poles.

Because of that line, Shyamnarayan Babu's walking circuit became smaller.

Earlier he had gone around the water tanks and made a full loop from east to south.

Now he had to bend to pass beneath the new line.

Twice his head brushed against a wet sheet.

On the third day he untied one end of the line and fastened it a little higher.

At noon Sushila Devi saw it and lowered it again.

"How am I supposed to lift the clothes that high?" she said.

The next morning Shyamnarayan Babu placed two pieces of brick beside the line.

A narrow passage formed between them.

That evening the children arranged those same bricks into a circle and made them the boundary of their game.

The following day the bricks were somewhere else again.

No one said anything.

But everyone understood that the roof had begun asking for separate marks.

The first unmistakable incident came when seven-year-old Neel crawled beneath the solar panels after his ball.

Ten-year-old Richa followed him.

Manjula Devi was upstairs gathering the clothes.

As soon as she saw them from a distance, she called out, "Do not go in there!"

Richa stopped.

Neel had already reached the ball.

When he stood up, his head narrowly missed the iron corner of a panel.

Manjula Devi caught his hand and brought him out.

"Will you split your head open for a ball?"

Neel said nothing.

By evening the matter had reached downstairs.

Neel's father, Arun, said, "If the children had a place of their own, why would they go under the panels?"

Sushila Devi immediately replied, "How can they have space? The clothesline area has been cut in half."

Shyamnarayan Babu said, "And the walking path has been cut in half too."

No one laughed.

Arun pointed towards the roof and said, "Then whose roof is it?"

The air changed as soon as the question was asked.

Every family in the Four-Storey paid a monthly maintenance charge.

On paper, the roof was a shared space.

But the word "shared" was simple only on paper.

On the roof its meaning got caught among clothes, knees, balls, sunlight, water and electricity.

The following Sunday morning a small meeting was held.

Hariprasad Chaudhary, the committee secretary, came with a notebook.

He said, "Divide the space. The dispute will end."

Arun said, "Give half the northern side to the children."

Sushila Devi said, "All the sunlight on the eastern side should be for clothes."

Shyamnarayan Babu said, "Leave a three-cubit walking path all around."

The company that serviced the solar panels had already asked for a southern service path.

Hariprasad drew a rectangular plan in his notebook.

As soon as he drew the first line, the problem began to show itself.

If half the eastern side became permanently the clothes area, there would be no sun there in the evening, while the children needed open space then.

If a three-cubit walking path were left all around, the middle would become too small for play.

If a permanent strip were set aside for the children, it would lie empty in the morning.

Rashmi sat near the mouth of the staircase, listening.

She was seventeen and studied in Class Twelve.

She had not come to speak in the meeting.

She had come with her mother, Manjula Devi, to take down clothes.

But the permanent lines being drawn in the notebook looked strange to her.

She did not come to the roof to study every day, but she did when examinations were near.

She knew that a place shaded in the morning could be in sharp sun by afternoon.

The shadow behind the solar panels too shifted like the hand of a clock.

Rashmi asked quietly, “Does the space stay the same all day?”
Hariprasad looked up.
“The roof?”
“The roof stays. But the space being used?”
Sushila Devi said, “Does space move?”
Rashmi did not answer immediately.
She looked towards the eastern clotheslines.
The morning sun was now beneath them.
The shadow of the southern solar panels stretched long towards the north.
“The shade moves,” she said.
Arun smiled and asked, “Will shade settle the quarrel?”
Rashmi had no immediate answer.
The meeting ended without a decision.
Hariprasad said they would discuss it again the following week.
That afternoon Rashmi went back to the roof.
She had chalk, a measuring tape and an old notebook.
Manjula Devi asked, “What are you measuring?”
“Not the roof. Time.”
Her mother laughed.
“Can time be measured with a tape?”
“I am trying to see.”
The next morning Rashmi returned at seven.
She placed a small chalk dot at the edge of the solar-panel shadow.
Another at ten.
A third at one.
A fourth at four.
A fifth at five.
She did not draw a complete line.
Only small dots, with the times written in her notebook.
On the second day she measured the shadow of the water tanks.
On the third, the sunlight under the clotheslines.
Neel asked, “Didi, are you making a game?”
“Not yet. I am measuring.”
“Can I help?”
Rashmi gave him a piece of chalk.
“At four o’clock, make a small circle wherever your ball keeps going.”
Neel made five circles.
“That many times?”
“Every time.”
Rashmi wrote in her notebook:
“Path of the ball.”

Richa was skipping rope.

She said, "My rope catches on the line."

Rashmi marked that place too.

While doing his morning walk, Shyamnarayan Babu stopped.

"These dots of yours fall in my circuit."

"The dots will not remain," Rashmi said.

"Then?"

"First I am trying to understand whose work goes where, and at what time."

Shyamnarayan Babu completed his twenty minutes and went towards the stairs.

As he left, he said, "At seven I do not go along the northern side. It is slippery then."

"Why?"

"Night dew."

Rashmi opened the notebook again and wrote:

"Northern strip wet in the morning."

In four days, two pages of the notebook were full.

Rashmi understood that the dispute was not simply about a shortage of floor space.

The problem was that everyone was taking the hour of their own need to mean the whole day.

To Sushila Devi, the eastern strip seemed to be a place for clothes because she saw it that way from ten to two.

To Shyamnarayan Babu, the open strip all around seemed to be a walking path because that was how he saw it in the morning.

To the children, the empty middle in the evening seemed to be a playground.

To the solar-panel worker, the narrow southern strip was a service path.

All four things were not true at the same time.

But they were true at different times.

The following Sunday the meeting was held again.

This time Rashmi sat with her notebook.

Hariprasad said, "Now let us settle the boundaries."

Rashmi said, "Let us settle the boundaries, but not make every boundary serve the same purpose all day."

She spread out the notebook.

On the first page was a simple plan of the roof.

On the second were five times:

seven in the morning, ten, one, four, five.

On the third were the different uses.

"From seven to eight," Rashmi said, "there are fewer clothes. A walking circuit can remain open all around."

Shyamnarayan Babu listened silently.

"From ten to two," she continued, "there is more sunlight in the east and the middle. No one plays then. The sunning area for clothes and grain can be larger."

Sushila Devi bent towards the notebook.

"And at four?"

"From four to six, the central portion is for play. Whatever clothes have dried should be gathered. Whatever has not dried can stay on the eastern lines, but the new line through the middle should be removed."

Sushila Devi frowned.

"Do the clothes dry by four every day?"

"No," Rashmi said. "That is why the original four eastern lines remain. Only the new bamboo line through the middle goes."

Arun asked, "The solar panels?"

"Their service path remains clear at all times."

"And the children?"

"No ball on the southern side."

Neel immediately said, "What if the ball goes there?"

Rashmi said, "Instead of a low rope on that side, we can tie a mesh so the ball cannot go underneath the panels."

Hariprasad ran a finger over the notebook.

"This has become a timetable."

"Not completely," Rashmi said.

"What else?"

"The shade will change. The timing will change in winter. It will change in summer. So we should not paint permanent lines on the floor."

Arun asked, "Then how will people remember?"

Rashmi took four small wooden plaques from her bag.

One said:

"WALKING."

The second:

"SUN."

The third:

"PLAY."

The fourth:

"SERVICE PATH — KEEP CLEAR."

"Whichever use applies at that time, hang that plaque near the stair entrance."

Sushila Devi said, "While spreading clothes, am I supposed to keep changing plaques too?"

Manjula Devi spoke for the first time.

"Why should changing the plaque be one person's job? Whoever comes up first can look."

Hariprasad said, "Let us try it for a week."

No one was very enthusiastic.

But no one openly opposed it either.

On the first day the rule nearly broke in the morning itself.

When Shyamnarayan Babu came up at seven, clothes washed the night before were still hanging on the eastern lines.

He called out, "Whose are these?"

No one answered from below.

By old habit, he felt like untying the line.

But the "WALKING" plaque hung by the mouth of the staircase.

He did not touch the line.

He made his circuit slightly smaller by moving inward.

At eight Sushila Devi came up.

She saw the clothes.

"Seema left them overnight," she said.

Seema lived on the third floor.

Sushila Devi called downstairs.

"These are your clothes. It is eight."

Seema came up and gathered them.

She looked annoyed, but said nothing.

On the second day Seema came up at seven fifty-five.

Shyamnarayan Babu was making his final circuit.

He did not look at the clock.

Seema stood beside the line.

Shyamnarayan Babu saw her and stopped walking five minutes early.

"My twenty minutes are not complete," he said with a laugh.

Seema smiled.

"Yesterday I took five minutes from you."

No meeting was held over those five minutes.

On the third day the afternoon wind was strong.

Two of Sushila Devi's sheets blew from the line and fell in the middle.

At one o'clock the "SUN" plaque was hanging.

There were no children.

Rashmi picked up the sheets and put them back on the line.

At four one sheet was still damp.

Neel came up with his ball.

He looked at the sheet, then at the "PLAY" plaque.

"Kaki, when will this come down?"

Sushila Devi touched the cloth with her fingers.

"Half an hour."

Neel did not go downstairs.

He went to the northern side and played with a paper spinner.

Half an hour later Sushila Devi gathered the sheet.

Neel took out the ball.

Rashmi wrote nothing in the notebook that day.

She understood that the half-hour of waiting had done more work than the written rule.

On the fourth day the problem appeared in another form.

Two workers came without notice to clean the solar panels.

It was afternoon.

Two mats of makhana were spread in the sunning area.

The workers needed the southern service path.

The makhana was not on the service path, but there was too little turning space to carry a bucket through.

Manjula Devi folded back one corner of a mat.

The workers passed.

As he left, one said, "Never close off this one-cubit path."

Hariprasad wrote that in the notebook.

"This is not a rule of time," he said.

Rashmi replied, "That is why its plaque says 'keep clear at all times.'"

On the fifth day the children quarrelled not over the ball but over skipping.

Richa said the middle strip was hers.

Neel said the play strip belonged to everyone.

"Then my rope will get tangled with his ball."

Rashmi was there.

She said, "Are we dividing the roof among four families, or among activities?"

Both fell silent.

"The play strip belongs to play. Even games can take turns."

Neel put the ball down and held the skipping rope for five minutes.

Richa jumped ten times, then handed the rope to Neel.

No one wrote a rule for it.

On the seventh day the meeting was held.

Hariprasad asked, "Will the arrangement work?"

Sushila Devi said, "In winter the sunlight comes later."

Rashmi said, "Then the times will change."

Shyamnarayan Babu said, "In the rains the clothes will stay up longer."

"Then the play strip will be a little smaller," Arun said.

Neel's face fell.

Looking at him, Arun added, "And once the rain stops, the roof will be more open for play."

Hariprasad crossed out the word "permanent" in the notebook.

He wrote:

"Measure again according to season."

Rashmi said, "That is the main thing about my rule."

"What?"

"The line belongs to the hour, not to the ground."

Hariprasad did not write that sentence down.

The notebook needed rules, not sentences.

Two weeks later the new bamboo clothesline through the middle was removed.

The original four eastern lines remained.

A narrow mesh was tied in front of the southern solar panels so balls could not roll underneath.

No permanent paint was put on the ground along the northern side.

Only a small peg for the four wooden plaques was fixed near the mouth of the staircase.

Sometimes "WALKING" hung there.

Sometimes "SUN."

In the evening, "PLAY."

"SERVICE PATH — KEEP CLEAR" never came down.

A month later the first heavy rain came.

All of Rashmi's chalk dots on the roof were washed away.

The little marks measuring the solar-panel shadows, the circles made by the ball, the mark for the dew-wet northern strip—all disappeared.

When Rashmi came up in the morning, the floor was washed clean.

For a moment she felt sad.

Four days of measurements had gone away not in dust, but in water.

Shyamnarayan Babu came up the stairs.

He looked at the ground.

"Your map is gone."

"Yes."

"Will you make it again?"

Before answering, Rashmi looked towards the eastern lines.

Seema was gathering her overnight clothes before eight.

Sushila Devi stood by the stair entrance, waiting for her to come down.

Below, Neel sat holding his ball.

He was not waiting for four o'clock; after the rain he was waiting for the ground to dry.

The southern service path was clear.

Manjula Devi was spreading a mat of makhana not in the middle, but in the small patch of eastern sun.

Rashmi said, "Not yet."

Shyamnarayan Babu began his circuit.

After ten minutes he stopped.

"The path comes a little farther inside today," he said.

Rainwater had collected on the northern side.

Without complaint he made his circle smaller.

Rashmi went to the mouth of the staircase.

The "WALKING" plaque hung on the peg.

Below it hung "SUN" and "PLAY."

Rashmi straightened "WALKING" with her hand.

Then she looked across the roof.

There was not a single permanent line on the ground.

Even so, everyone's path could be understood separately.

And as the day advanced, those paths would change again.

Story 78

The Unfinished Play

There were still eighteen days left before the annual theatre evening.

At one side of the school's largest room stood two bamboo poles, with an old white sheet stretched between them.

Seven students sat on a mat in front, each holding their own pages.

Malati Jha looked at the clock.

"Shall we begin?"

No one answered.

In the middle of the mat lay a thick notebook with a blue cover.

The notebook belonged to Shashank.

Until three days earlier, Shashank had been the loudest voice in that room.

He changed dialogues, showed how a character should walk, then crossed out lines he had written and wrote them again.

Today he was not in school.

He was no longer even in this town.

His father's work had suddenly been transferred to another town, and within two days the family had packed up and left.

Before leaving, Shashank had handed the notebook of the play to Malati Jha.

"Five scenes are complete," he had said. "I am writing the sixth."

"The ending?" Malati Jha had asked.

Shashank had laughed.

"That is exactly where I am stuck."

At the time everyone had taken it as an ordinary remark.

No one had imagined that three days later that stuck ending would occupy such a large space in the school.

The play was called "Evening at the Threshold."

The story was not very long.

Two sisters, an old house, the threshold between inside and outside, and the choice between leaving home to study in the city or staying in the village with their ageing mother.

The play moved around that decision.

Shashank had not turned the decision into a sermon.

One sister's wish to leave was not merely ambition; the other's wish to remain was not merely sacrifice.

Their work, fears, stubbornness and affection unfolded gradually through separate lines.

Jyoti played Anaya, the elder sister.

Ritu played Meera, the younger.

Deepak played the maternal uncle, who wanted the house sold.

Apoorv played the young neighbour who repeatedly brought news between the two sisters.

Neelima played the elderly mother.

And Renu handled the work behind the stage—chairs, lamp, curtain, entrance cues, everything.

The beginning of the sixth scene had also been written.

Evening.

A lamp on the veranda.

Meera inside.

Mother on the cot.

Anaya standing at the threshold with her bag beside her.

Apoorv enters from the path outside and says that the last bus to the city will leave in half an hour.

Up to this point everything was complete.

After that came five pages of dialogue.

The mother does not stop Anaya.

Meera does not ask her to stay, but places the household accounts notebook in her hand.

Anaya puts the notebook back on the table.

The uncle says that a decision made too late ceases to be a decision.

Apoorv says he can hear the bus horn outside.

Then came the final page.

On that page Shashank's handwriting was no longer as clear as before.

Two lines had been crossed out.

One line was only half written.

The last complete sentence was:

"Before crossing the threshold, Anaya turns back."

After that there were only three words:

"Meera looks at her..."

That was all.

Half the page below was blank.

The next page was blank too.

Everyone sitting on the mat kept looking at those three words.

Deepak broke the silence first.

"We can write from here."

Jyoti said at once, "Who will write it?"

"All of us."

"Inside Shashank's play?"

Deepak said, "Are we performing the play, or worshipping the notebook?"

Malati Jha said nothing.

Ritu pulled the notebook towards herself.

She read, "Meera looks at her. Then Anaya leaves to catch the bus. What is difficult about that?"

Jyoti looked at her.

"You think Anaya leaves?"

"Yes."

"I do not."

"You are playing Anaya, so you want her to stay."

Jyoti smiled.

"You are playing Meera, so you want her to leave?"

Ritu did not answer.

Deepak said, "Let us write two endings. We will keep whichever works better in rehearsal."

Renu was straightening the sheet used as the stage curtain.

From behind it she said, "Better for whom?"

Deepak turned.

"For everyone."

Renu said, "If everyone liked the same thing, we would not be arguing."

Apoorv laughed.

Malati Jha closed the notebook.

"Today we rehearse only up to Scene Five," she said.

"And Scene Six?" Deepak asked.

"Tomorrow."

"Will Shashank be back tomorrow?"

"No."

"Then?"

"Tomorrow, we will still be here."

That day rehearsal ended with the fifth scene.

On her way home, Jyoti looked once more at the blue notebook in Malati Jha's hand.

The notebook was closed, but she felt as though the half-page of blank space had spread beyond it.

The next day Malati Jha telephoned Shashank.

All the students were in the room.

They could not hear Shashank's voice, but they could hear Malati Jha's replies.

"Yes, I found the notebook."

"Yes, it is complete through the fifth."

"No, we have not added anything."

After a while she said, "Do you want to tell us the ending?"

There was a long silence.

Malati Jha only listened.

Then she said, "All right."

After she ended the call, Deepak asked, "What did he say?"

Malati Jha replied, "He had not settled on the ending either."

"Then we can write it."

"He did not say that."

"Then what?"

"He said: look for it on the stage. But do not add your lines to the pages I wrote and leave them under my name."

The room fell silent again.

Jyoti said softly, "That is fair."

Deepak was still dissatisfied.

"How are we supposed to look for it on the stage and not write it?"

While loosening the curtain rope, Renu said, "First let us walk it."

Malati Jha opened the blue notebook.

"Scene Six."

Everyone took their places.

The lamp was lit.

Neelima sat on the cot.

Ritu held the household notebook.

Jyoti stood at the threshold line with the bag beside her.

Apoorv acted as though he were entering from the road outside.

The dialogue began.

Line by line, up to the place everyone remembered.

"Before crossing the threshold, Anaya turns back."

Jyoti turned.

Ritu looked at her.

That was all.

Three moments.

Five moments.

From behind the stage Deepak whispered, "Go on."

Jyoti asked, "What?"

"Do something."

Jyoti picked up the bag.

She took one step outside.

Without thinking, Ritu stepped forward and caught her hand.

Jyoti stopped.

Malati Jha asked, "Would Meera do that?"

Ritu let go of the hand.

"I do not know."

"Again."

They played the scene again.

The final written sentence.

Jyoti turned back.

This time Ritu did not stand.

Jyoti put the bag down and sat beside the cot.

Deepak said, "That is it. That is the ending."

Jyoti stood up at once.

"Why?"

"Anaya stayed."

"Does sitting down mean she stayed?"

"Doesn't it?"

"She could stand up again ten minutes later."

Apoorv laughed.

Deepak became irritated.

"Then nothing is ever an ending."

Malati Jha said, "Sometimes sitting on a stage is not a decision. It is only sitting."

They played the scene a third time.

This time, after turning, Jyoti remained standing at the threshold.

Ritu put the notebook on the table.

Neelima closed her eyes.

Apoorv kept acting as though he were looking outside.

No one did anything.

From behind the stage Renu counted to five.

Then she dropped the curtain.

Deepak said, "But that remains unfinished."

From behind the curtain Renu replied, "So does the notebook."

The rehearsal did not end with that sentence.

Everyone began arguing again.

Apoorv wanted the sound of the bus fading into the distance in the last scene.

Ritu wanted the mother to speak Anaya's name for the first time.

Deepak wanted Anaya to say clearly, "I am going," or "I am staying."

Jyoti tried saying both lines aloud.

Both sounded external to her.

"In the first five scenes Anaya never says anything this directly," she said.

Malati Jha nodded in agreement.

"Then why suddenly give her the author's command in Scene Six?"

Deepak replied, "The audience should understand."

"Understand what?"

"The ending."

Renu sat down on the mat.

"I think I understand one thing," she said.

Everyone looked at her.

Renu rarely spoke much about the acting itself.

"Every time we get stuck, we return to the same sentence."

"Which one?"

Renu opened the notebook and read:

"Before crossing the threshold, Anaya turns back."

"And after that, something different happens every time."

"So?" Deepak asked.

"So perhaps what we should show is not an ending, but the turning back."

"Show the audience our rehearsal?"

"Not the whole rehearsal."

Renu stood and went to the stage.

She stood on the threshold mark.

"The same sentence. Then the first time, one possibility for five breaths. Lights out. Then the same sentence again. Then a second possibility."

Apoorv asked, "How many?"

"Only as many as we genuinely found in rehearsal, and kept short."

Malati Jha asked, "And dialogue?"

Renu shook her head.

"No new dialogue. We will not invent Shashank's lines."

Jyoti smiled faintly.

"Only the body?"

"Body, distance, position."

Ritu said, "Then Meera says nothing?"

"Shashank wrote nothing for her there."

The sentence made everyone slightly uncomfortable.

Deepak said, "But this is our play too. We are performing it."

For the first time in the argument, Malati Jha spoke clearly.

"Yes. That is why the stage exercise is yours. The original text is Shashank's. They are not the same thing."

On the board she wrote two lines:

Original text.

Stage exercise.

"If they coincide, good. If they differ, record the difference."

Deepak kept looking at the board.

"Then in the programme?"

"Original play — Shashank Mishra."

Malati Jha wrote a second line.

"Final stage exercise — School Theatre Group."

Ritu asked, "Will Shashank like that?"

"I will ask him again. But first we need to make our own boundary clear."

For the next four days they rehearsed only movement in the final scene.

In the first sequence Jyoti crossed the threshold.

She turned back.

Ritu looked at her.

For a few moments they looked at one another.

Then Jyoti walked out.

Ritu did not follow.

Lights out.

In the second sequence, after turning back, Jyoti put the bag down.

But she did not sit.

Ritu too did not move from her place.

The threshold between them remained empty.

Lights out.

In the third sequence, Jyoti came to the threshold with the bag still in her hand, turned back, then placed the bag in the middle of the threshold—not towards Meera.

She did not return inside, nor did she go outside.

Ritu did not come forward to pick up the bag.

The light slowly dimmed.

Deepak liked the third sequence least.

"That is no decision at all."

Jyoti asked, "Are the first two decisions?"

"In the first she leaves."

"She could come back after the scene ends."

"In the second she stays."

"She could pick up the bag again."

Deepak sat down holding his head.

"Your Anaya will never decide anything."

Jyoti laughed.

"Not mine. Shashank's."

Then she paused and added, "And perhaps Shashank's Anaya does not decide either."

On the fifth day Malati Jha spoke with Shashank again by telephone.

This time the students were outside.

When they returned, she said only:

"He says the separate credit is fine. Add nothing to the original notebook."

Deepak asked, "The three sequences?"

"He has not seen them."

"Then permission?"

Malati Jha said, "He gave permission for stage exploration. We never asked him for permission to choose an ending."

That made Deepak think again.

On the sixth day the programme sheet was prepared.

The title of the play at the top.

Shashank's name below it.

Then the names of the actors.

At the very bottom, in small letters, it said:

"The original manuscript is unfinished in the middle of the final scene. After the written text ends, this performance will show three silent stage explorations developed by the group. These exploratory sequences should not be treated as text by the original author."

Deepak read the line and said, "Is it necessary to write all this?"

Renu said, "If it was not necessary, why did we spend five days arguing?"

On the day of the theatre evening the school was noisy from morning.

Someone shook out the mat.

Someone tied the curtain to the bamboo poles.

Someone counted chairs.

Renu asked for a separate table for the blue notebook.

Apoorv asked, "Will the notebook be on stage?"

"In the final part."

"Why?"

"Where the written text stops, it should be clear that what follows is not an accidental omission by us."

Malati Jha said, "Do not turn the notebook into an object for display. Use it only to mark the boundary of the text."

So the notebook was placed at one corner of the stage where the light did not fall directly upon it.

By evening every chair was filled.

Some people stood at the back.

The first five scenes went by without any major mistake.

Jyoti's voice trembled once, but Ritu delivered the next line on time.

Deepak reversed two words in one dialogue, but the audience noticed nothing.

At Apoorv's entrance the curtain caught slightly; Renu freed it by hand.

Scene Six began.

The lamp on the veranda.

The cot.

The bag.

The threshold.

All the dialogue proceeded exactly as it was written in the notebook.

Anaya reached the threshold.

Jyoti turned back.

Ritu looked at her.

At that point Renu came forward from the side of the stage carrying the notebook.

She did not look at the audience.

Looking at the notebook, she read:

"Here the written text of the original manuscript ends."

A faint rustle passed through the hall.

Renu closed the notebook.

"Now, three brief stage explorations by the group."

The lights went out.

Then came back.

The first sequence.

Jyoti turned.

Ritu looked at her.

Jyoti walked out.

Ritu did not come as far as the threshold.

Darkness.

A few people in the audience began to applaud, but the lights came on again immediately.

Renu read the same original sentence once more:

"Before crossing the threshold, Anaya turns back."

The second sequence.

Jyoti put down the bag.

Ritu remained in her place.

The threshold between them stayed empty.

Darkness.

This time there was no applause.

For the third time Renu read the original sentence.

Jyoti turned back.

She placed the bag in the middle of the threshold.

She did not stand as though one foot belonged outside and one inside; she simply remained beside the threshold.

Ritu looked at the bag, then at Jyoti.

No one moved.

The light slowly faded.

This time full darkness fell.

For a few moments the hall remained silent.

Then applause began.

First from two people in the front row.

Then from the back.

Then from almost everyone.

After the curtain fell, Deepak's first question was, "Which one felt like the ending?"

Renu burst out laughing.

"Starting again?"

Deepak laughed too.

"Now we'll ask the audience."

Malati Jha stopped him.

"The play is over. Let them take their own thoughts home."

Behind the curtain Jyoti was picking up the bag.

Ritu said to her, "I liked the first one best."

"You still want Anaya to leave?"

"Yes."

"I like the second."

"Staying?"

"No. Pausing."

Ritu thought for a moment.

"Pausing and staying are different?"

"Maybe."

Ritu smiled.

"Do not let Malati Jha hear that."

Both laughed.

The audience was leaving.

Some students were discussing the first sequence.

Some the third.

An elderly parent came up to Malati Jha.

"I did not understand the ending," he said.

Malati Jha asked evenly, "Where?"

"At the end."

"The original text stops there."

"Then why did you not complete it?"

Before Malati Jha could answer, Deepak, who was standing nearby, said:

"We completed it many times. Not once were we certain the author would have written that."

The elderly parent looked at Deepak.

"Then you left it unfinished?"

Deepak thought for a moment before replying.

"The notebook is unfinished. The stage was not empty."

Malati Jha looked at him.

Deepak himself seemed surprised by his own sentence.

The next day chairs from the programme were being removed from the school.

Renu took the blue notebook to deposit it in the library.

Malati Jha went with her.

The librarian opened the register.

"The play notebook?"

"Yes."

"Complete?"

Renu and Malati Jha looked at one another.

Renu said, "Complete as far as the author wrote it."

The librarian pushed her glasses up.

Malati Jha took out three thin sheets of paper.

At the top of the three were written:

"Stage Exercise 1."

"Stage Exercise 2."

"Stage Exercise 3."

There was no dialogue on the sheets.

Only movement, distance, the position of the bag, and cues for the light to fade.

The librarian asked, "Shall I attach these to the notebook?"

Renu said immediately, "No."

Malati Jha smiled.

"In a separate envelope."

"Why?"

"These are not Shashank's pages."

The librarian placed all three sheets in a separate envelope.

On it she wrote:

"School Theatre Group: Final Stage Exercises."

Only Shashank's name had been on the blue notebook from the beginning.

It remained that way.

One month later Shashank sent a letter to an old friend at the school.

The letter was short.

About the play he wrote only two lines.

"I received the programme sheet. I liked that you did not complete my unfinished page and leave the addition under my name."

The second line said:

"Which of the three sequences I like best, I will not say yet."

After reading the letter Deepak said, "See? He likes one of them too."

Jyoti said, "Did he say that?"

"No. But he will."

Renu folded the letter.

"Let him."

Before the term ended, the theatre group went to the library once more.

The following year's new students wanted to read the play from that notebook.

One student asked, "Why are these three pages separate after the final scene?"

Renu, who was now moving into the next class, took out the envelope.

"They are not the ending of the notebook. They were our rehearsal."

"Can we make a fourth?"

Deepak looked at the student at once.

The old Deepak might have said, "Choose one of these three first."

This time he said nothing.

Renu said, "You can."

"Add it to the notebook?"

"No. On your own page."

The student walked away holding the envelope.

The blue notebook remained on the table.

Its last written sentence was unchanged:

"Before crossing the threshold, Anaya turns back."

After that:

"Meera looks at her..."

Then blank space.

Malati Jha looked at the page once more.

There were still no new words in that blank space.

But around it, three earlier stage explorations and the path towards a new fourth possibility had already opened.

Story 79

A Share of the Moon

It was the first evening of Bhadav.

The lane was so narrow that from the second-storey window of one house it seemed as though, if you stretched out your hand, you could touch the wall of the house opposite.

The real distance was a little greater, but as the houses rose upward they seemed to eat into one another's sky.

Among them were two rooftops—one to the east, one to the west.

Below them ran the lane; above them remained a narrow open gap.

At one particular hour in the evening, the moon descended into that gap.

Naina had first noticed this three years earlier.

She had been twelve then, while Ritu was gathering towels from the western roof.

"Look," Naina had said, "it is trapped between the two houses."

Ritu looked up.

"Not trapped," she said. "It is passing through here."

From that day, a small game began between them.

On evenings when the moon was visible, Naina would stand in the south-west corner of her roof.

Ritu would stand by the eastern parapet of hers.

Together they watched the moon's shape—how thin, how round, how yellow, how grey.

Naina made a notebook.

At the top she wrote:

"The Moon in the Gap."

Ritu said, "Is the gap on your roof or mine?"

"Between them."

"Then the notebook's name should be between them too."

"You write it."

On the second page Ritu wrote:

"Between the Two Rooftops."

Both names remained in the notebook.

It was not a regular ritual or a lesson.

Many days they forgot.

Many days there were clouds.

On some evenings the electricity went out and housework increased.

But whenever the moon came exactly into that narrow gap, one of them would call out:

"It has come today!"

Gradually the other people in the two houses became familiar with their game too.

Naina's grandmother, Vimla Devi, would say, "The moon is everywhere. Why do you two like only this little piece of it?"

Naina would answer, "Because this is where we can see it from."

When Ritu's father, Mahendra Sah, came up to his roof, he sometimes laughed and said, "Today the moon is more on our side."

Naina would reply at once, "The moon is not on your roof. It is above."

Mahendra Sah would laugh.

That year, in Jeth, the town's water supply changed.

Earlier water came twice a day, morning and evening.

Now sometimes it came for half an hour in the morning, sometimes at noon, sometimes after skipping a day.

The old water tank at Mahendra Sah's house was small.

There were four people in the household, and Ritu's aunt and her two children had also come upstairs for the holidays.

Twice the water ran out in the middle of cooking.

Mahendra Sah said, "We will have to get a larger tank."

No one in the house objected.

Ritu too said, "Get one. Then we will not have to run about with buckets in the morning."

A week later a large round black tank arrived.

Four people hauled it up to the roof with ropes.

The mason said that before making the permanent base, the empty tank would remain there for two days.

They would first check the wall beneath, the pipe distance, and the route for climbing up.

The tank was placed in exactly the south-eastern corner from which the open gap towards Naina's roof could be seen.

That evening Naina went upstairs with her notebook.

The sky was clear.

She stood in her usual place.

There was no gap.

Directly in front of her was only the round black body of the tank.

A thin edge of sky could be seen behind it, but the moon was nowhere visible.

Naina moved two steps to the right.

From there, the higher part of the parapet stood in the way.

She moved two steps left and the neighbour's stairwell blocked the view.

"Ritu!" she called.

Ritu came onto the other roof.

"What?"

"Where is the moon?"

Ritu looked up.

From her roof the moon was clearly visible to the left of the tank.

"Here."

"I cannot see it."

Ritu looked at the tank, then towards Naina's position.

"Oh."

For a while neither of them spoke.

Naina said, "Why did you put the tank there?"

Ritu became defensive at once.

"I did not put it there."

"It belongs to your house."

"And our house needs water."

"I am not stopping your water."

"Then?"

Naina closed the notebook.

"Nothing."

That evening, for the first time, the two went downstairs without saying, "How round is it today?"

The next day the matter did not remain between the children.

Vimla Devi was gathering clothes from the roof.

Looking at the tank, she said, "What new mountain has been raised here?"

Naina's mother, Mridula, did not laugh.

"The evening light has lessened a little from that side too."

"Tell Mahendra to move it slightly."

When Mridula saw Mahendra Sah in the lane below, she mentioned it.

At first Mahendra Sah answered casually.

"It has not even been fixed yet. But the mason says the pipe will run most easily from there."

Mridula said, "Could it be moved a little to the right?"

"The stairwell is on the right."

"To the left?"

"The open place for drying clothes is on the left. And we have to see where the supporting wall runs underneath."

The matter could have ended there.

But from above Vimla Devi called out, "We had only one little opening of sky from our roof. Will you close that too?"

Mahendra Sah looked up.

"Kaki, the tank is on my roof."

"Your roof—and the sky too?"

Two neighbours stopped in the lane.

Mahendra Sah's face hardened.

"I am not taking anyone's sky. I am putting up a water tank."

Mridula understood that the matter was worsening.

She said, "Kaki, leave it for now."

Vimla Devi gathered the clothes and went inside.

That evening Naina did not go to the roof.

Ritu did, but she did not call out.

On the third day the mason brought bricks for the permanent base.

Mahendra Sah was counting them below.

Ritu said quietly, "Babu, can the tank be shifted a little?"

"Why?"

"Naina's moon has been blocked."

Mahendra Sah laughed at first, but Ritu did not.

"The moon cannot be blocked."

"It cannot be seen from there."

"She can look from somewhere else on the roof."

"From somewhere else the parapet and stairwell get in the way."

Mahendra Sah kept looking at the pile of bricks.

"And if the house runs short of water?"

"I am not asking you to remove the tank."

"Then?"

Ritu did not answer.

That afternoon Ritu went to Naina's house.

It was the first time in three days.

Naina sat at her study table with a notebook open.

The Moon in the Gap lay beside it.

Ritu opened it.

On the previous month's page was a thin half-moon, then two nights of greater roundness, then a sign for cloud.

"How large is the tank?" Naina asked.

"I do not know."

The two went upstairs.

They brought a measuring tape.

They measured the width of the tank and compared its height with the mason's bamboo pole.

Naina said, "What if the tank were not here, but a little over there?"

"Babu says we have to check the line of the wall underneath."

"Then let us check first."

"How?"

Naina saw four thin bamboo poles lying in a corner of the roof.

"The tank is too heavy to keep dragging around. Let us make its size instead."

Ritu laughed.

"A bamboo tank?"

"We will not fill it with water. We only need to see."

By noon, using four bamboo poles, old rope and two thin sticks, the two girls had made a light frame roughly equal to the tank's height and width.

It was not round, but square.

When Vimla Devi came up, she asked, "Now a second tank?"

Naina said, "This one will hold the moon, not water."

Vimla Devi laughed.

The hardness of the past three days loosened a little.

The mason returned by evening.

At first he was surprised by the bamboo frame, then understood.

With his finger he pointed to three places on the roof floor.

"There is a wall underneath here. Here too. A large tank cannot stand in this middle portion. It is a matter of load."

Naina asked, "Of these two places, which one?"

"The first is easier for the pipe. For the second the pipe will have to turn a little, but it can be done. The route to the stairs must remain clear."

Mahendra Sah came up.

He saw the scene—his daughter, Naina from next door, the mason, the square bamboo frame.

"Is there a meeting going on here?"

Ritu said quietly, "We will watch for three evenings."

"What?"

"The frame at the first place, then the second. We will see from where the moon is visible."

Mahendra Sah was tired.

"Hold up the brickwork for three days?"

The mason said, "The base can be made tomorrow too. The tank is still empty."

Mahendra Sah looked towards Naina's roof.

Vimla Devi was standing there.

"Kaki, three days for the moon?"

This time Vimla Devi answered softly.

"The tank will stand there for water for a lifetime. Spend three days looking at the moon too."

An unwilling smile came to Mahendra Sah's face.

"All right."

On the first evening, the bamboo frame was placed where the tank currently stood.

Naina stood in her old position.

The moon disappeared completely behind the frame.

From her roof Ritu called, "Write it—first position, no."

In the notebook Naina wrote:

"First position: gap closed."

On the second evening the frame was moved to the right, leaving the necessary passage beside the stairwell.

The moon was visible in a narrow space between the frame and the stairwell, but Naina had to move away from the parapet to see it.

"Can you see it?" Ritu asked.

"Half the time."

"Half a moon?"

"No. Half my position is bad."

Both laughed.

On the third evening the frame was placed at the safe position on the left.

The pipe would have to be a little longer, but the stair route remained open.

The moon did not appear in the centre of the old gap; it appeared a little to the right.

Naina moved two steps.

This time the parapet was not in the way.

"Today?" Ritu called.

Naina raised her hands and made a circle.

"Whole."

Mahendra Sah too was on the roof.

He looked towards Naina's position, then at the bamboo frame, then at the old mouth of the pipe.

"It will take two extra cubits of pipe," he said.

The mason said, "It will."

"And the base?"

"There is a supporting wall below. It can stand there."

Mahendra Sah looked at Ritu.

"You left your studies for three days for this?"

Ritu said, "I studied later."

"What did you write in the notebook?"

Ritu asked Naina for the notebook and showed him the three lines.

First position — gap closed.

Second position — visible, but passage narrow.

Third position — view open, stair route open, pipe longer.

Mahendra Sah read the lines three times.

"The cost of the pipe is not written here."

Naina became embarrassed.

Mahendra Sah himself said, "Write it—two extra cubits of pipe."

Naina wrote it.

The next day the tank was moved to the third position.

Four people did the work together.

Even empty, the tank was not light.

The mason made the base, turned the pipe, and left a narrow route for climbing.

Vimla Devi watched from her roof.

When the work was finished, she called to Mahendra Sah.

"Yesterday I said a little too much."

Brushing the dust from his hands, Mahendra Sah replied, "And I put too much force into the words 'my roof.'"

Neither said anything more.

That evening the tank was half-filled for the first time.

Naina came to the roof.

Ritu was already standing there.

The moon was now a little to the right of its old place.

The gap too was no longer exactly as before—the curved black edge of the tank showed along one side.

Naina opened the notebook.

Ritu asked, "What will you write?"

Naina thought for a long time.

"The gap changed."

"And the moon?"

"It did not."

Ritu sat on her roof with her back against the parapet.

"Babu was saying—who has a share in the moon?"

Naina said, "No one."

"Then why so much quarrelling?"

Naina looked at the body of the tank in front of her.

"Not for the moon. For the place from which we see it."

Ritu thought for a moment.

"And whose is the place from which one sees?"

"Whoever leaves a little room for the other."

Ritu did not laugh at the answer.

The words sounded a little too large to her; Naina too did not immediately write them in the notebook.

A few days later Vimla Devi said the old bamboo frame could be taken apart.

Naina was untying the rope when Mahendra Sah said, "Leave one bamboo pole."

"Why?"

"I am thinking of putting up a new bar for drying clothes. Before I fix it, I will use this to see whether it blocks anyone's path, light or gap."

Ritu looked at her father.

"Three days again?"

"This time one evening will be enough."

Everyone laughed.

One day in the last week of Bhadav, the moon did not enter the gap.

Its course had risen higher.

Naina stood on the roof with the notebook.

Ritu said, "Empty today."

Naina did not draw a round mark on the page.

She wrote only the date, and beside it:

"Moon outside the gap."

A little later both girls went back to their work on their own roofs.

The black tank stood full.

Water was flowing down into the house.

The stair route was open.

So was the narrow strip of sky between the two houses.

And no one's name was written on that sky.

Story 80

The New Courtyard

Bhadav was drawing to a close, but the walls of the rehabilitation buildings still carried the smell of fresh limewash.

Four-storey blocks stood facing one another.

Between them lay a square paved space, with stairways, drains and small planting beds around it.

On paper it was called the "central open space."

The residents had given it no name.

They simply called it "the paved place in the middle."

Six months earlier, the flood had submerged thirteen houses in Piprahi Tola along with homes in two other hamlets.

When the water receded, many houses were no longer fit to repair.

Under the government rehabilitation scheme, the families were allotted space in these multi-storey buildings.

On paper, everyone's home was safer than before—a concrete roof, separate kitchen, tap, toilet and electricity.

Even so, during the first month Ramkali Devi kept saying, "We got a house, but where is the courtyard?"

At first her granddaughter Isha laughed at the question.

"Dadi, there is such a large space in the middle."

"There is space."

"Then?"

Ramkali Devi did not answer.

Isha was thirteen.

From the time of the flood she remembered very little clearly—only the sharp smell of the water, her mother's hand, and her father carrying sacks up a bamboo ladder.

Her memory of the old courtyard came in fragments.

In the morning Dadi sorted paddy there.

At noon Ma dried papads.

In the evening two neighbour women dragged out a cot and sat talking.

When rain came, everything rushed indoors at once.

No strip in the courtyard had labels saying "sitting," "play," "grain," or "path."

Yet everyone understood when and where each activity belonged.

In the new building Isha's family lived on the third floor.

Opening the door led to a veranda barely a cubit and a half wide, then the staircase.

Every morning Dadi brought a chair out onto the veranda, but if two people had to pass together, the chair had to be pulled back inside.

"Even to sit here, you have to keep calculating how much path to leave for people," she would say.

The paved place in the middle was not empty all day.

In the morning the milkman parked his bicycle there.

At noon the children played ball.

Sometimes someone left a motorcycle there for an hour or two.

In the evening a few women sat beside the planting beds.

But no one thought of the space as their own place.

As soon as their work was done, people climbed back up their own stairways.

One day, returning from school, Isha saw two small children drawing a house with chalk on the paved ground.

Four lines, one doorway, and a round hearth inside.

Two steps away, another child accidentally stepped on the drawing.

"Move!" the little girl shouted. "This is my courtyard!"

Isha stopped.

The girl was seven-year-old Neetu, who lived on the second floor.

"Courtyard?" Isha asked.

Neetu pointed to the chalk square.

"This."

"But this is inside the house."

"Then this outside part."

She added a half-circle in front of the square.

The other child stepped on it again.

Neetu caught the child's hand and moved it aside.

Isha did not laugh.

She remembered Dadi's question:

We got a house, but where is the courtyard?

That evening she told Ramkali Devi about Neetu's chalk courtyard.

Dadi asked, "How large was it?"

"Two cubits."

"Then Neetu's courtyard was smaller than my old courtyard."

"Much smaller."

"But she knew where it was."

Isha remained silent for a while after that answer.

The next day she called Neetu, Sajid, Pinky, Rahul and her younger brother Mohan into the middle space.

"Shall we make a courtyard?"

Mohan immediately asked, "Whose?"

Isha said, "That is what we are going to see."

The children gathered chalk.

Neetu made the first attempt.

She began drawing a large square in the middle.

Sajid stopped her.

"The ball goes through here."

Pinky said, "And my mother sits here in the evening."

Mohan added, "The milkman parks his bicycle here too."

Neetu stopped the chalk.

"Then where is the courtyard?"

Isha looked around.

Four stairways from the four buildings descended towards the central space.

She said, "Let one line come from each stairway."

"And in the middle?"

"Leave the middle empty for now."

The children understood it as a game.

From the eastern staircase, Neetu drew two leaves.

From the west, Sajid drew two curved lines like a fish tail.

From the north, Pinky joined five dots.

From the south, Mohan made a small crescent.

The lines grew towards one another, but a round space about a cubit wide remained empty in the centre.

"Shall we finish it?" Rahul asked.

Isha said, "Not yet."

The chalk lines remained visible on the paved floor until evening.

People paused as they came down the stairs.

Someone said, "A rangoli?"

Someone else, "Children's play."

When Ramkali Devi came downstairs, her eyes stopped on the empty circle in the middle.

"Why is this empty?"

Isha said, "If all the lines reach there, it will become one complete picture."

"Then make it."

"What form should we make?"

Dadi smiled faintly.

"Have you not found the answer to that?"

"No."

Ramkali Devi did not rub out a single chalk line with her foot.

She only looked at the narrow gap between the eastern staircase and the drawing.

"How will people walk through here?"

Isha understood that the question was not about the empty centre of the picture.

It was about the path.

That night the children gathered again.

Isha said, "We leave four paths open."

"Then the picture will remain broken," Neetu said.

"It will."

"A broken aripan?"

"An unfinished one."

Pinky did not like the word.

"Why should an aripan be unfinished?"

Isha did not answer.

The next morning Ramkali Devi mixed a little rice paste in her old brass bowl and came downstairs.

Isha was surprised.

"You will make it?"

"If it rains, the chalk will disappear."

"The rice paste will wash away too."

"Yes."

"Then?"

Dadi held the bowl out to Isha.

"One is less afraid to make something that can be washed away."

Isha took the bowl.

But Ramkali Devi laid down one condition.

"One hand will not make the whole picture."

"Why?"

"You asked whose courtyard it is. If one hand makes the whole thing, the answer will already be written."

That day the children sent word to families by all four staircases:

whoever could come downstairs in the evening would add only one small line.

No one would make a whole flower.

No one would erase someone else's line.

The circle in the middle would remain empty.

The four paths would remain open.

Seventeen people came the first evening.

Some from curiosity, some because the children insisted.

Ramkali Devi did not make the first line.

She gave the bowl to Neetu's mother, Renu Devi.

Renu Devi hesitantly placed two dots.

Then Sajid's father, Karim Mian, came.

He did not know how to make an aripan.

"What should I do?"

Isha said, "Draw a straight line."

Karim Mian laughed.

"That I do every day in masonry work."

He drew a short straight line.

Beside it Pinky's grandmother joined three dots.

Someone made a leaf, someone only a curve.

A small child dipped a finger in the paste and left a round print.

By dusk a picture had formed, but it had no single form.

Lines came in from four sides, the centre remained an empty circle, and four paths stayed open.

Neetu was slightly disappointed.

"It does not look like an aripan."

Ramkali Devi asked, "Like whose aripan?"

Neetu could not find an answer.

Two days later the use of the open space began to change.

Not because of the lines, but because of the people.

Those who had earlier gone straight upstairs after coming down now lingered for a while.

Someone sat on the edge of a planting bed.

Someone brought down a stool.

Someone stayed to watch the children play.

The children did not play ball in the empty central circle; they ran in the open outer strip because small children had begun sitting in a ring in the middle to play marbles.

The next day it was the opposite.

The middle remained empty while, in one outer corner, women cut vegetables and talked.

No rule had been written.

The uses kept changing by turn.

On the third evening, a resident named Dinesh Babu came downstairs and said, "This rice paste is getting on people's feet. The cleaner is complaining."

Isha immediately fell silent.

Renu Devi said, "He is right. The paste should not be on the walking path."

Dinesh Babu looked towards the central design.

"And will this be made every day?"

"Not every day," Ramkali Devi said.

"Then what is the use of all this?"

Before Ramkali Devi could answer, Isha said, "Are you asking the use of the picture, or the people?"

Dinesh Babu looked at her.

Isha felt that her voice had become too sharp.

She lowered it.

"We have kept all four paths open. The paste will not come onto the paths."

Dinesh Babu said, "If it stays clean, I have no objection."

The next evening the children used less rice paste.

The lines became thinner.

The four paths were widened to two cubits.

The empty central circle was made slightly larger too.

Isha wrote no measurements in her notebook.

She simply watched how people moved.

Within a week the paved middle space acquired a small name:

"the New Courtyard."

The children began saying it first.

"Meet in the New Courtyard this evening."

"The ball is near the New Courtyard."

"Dadi is sitting in the New Courtyard."

Gradually the adults began to say it too.

Ramkali Devi heard the name, but never repeated it on her own.

One day Isha asked, "You do not like it?"

"What?"

"The New Courtyard."

"The name is good."

"Then why do you not say it?"

Looking down from the window, Ramkali Devi said, "If a name is given too early, people begin to think the work is finished."

"Is the courtyard not finished?"

"We will see."

That week heavy rain came at night.

Water drummed on the roof of the new building.

When Isha went downstairs in the morning, almost all the rice-paste lines had washed away.

Here and there only white stains remained, or the pale circles of old dots.

Without the drawing, the empty middle and the four paths were simply the same-coloured paved floor again.

Neetu stopped on her way to school.

"It is all gone."

Isha looked for a while too.

"Yes."

"Will we make it again today?"

Isha said, "We'll see in the evening."

Rain stopped and started throughout the day.

By evening the sky had cleared, but the ground was still cool and damp.

Isha did not prepare a bowl of rice paste.

She simply went downstairs.

Neetu was already there.

Sajid came with a ball.

Pinky's grandmother brought a stool.

Karim Mian, returning from work, stopped in the middle.

Renu Devi brought puffed rice and chickpeas in two bowls.

Ramkali Devi slowly came down the stairs.

No one drew a line.

Even so, the four paths remained open on their own.

People sat more or less where they had sat the previous week.

The children played ball not in the centre, but in the open outer strip.

When a small child fell, people from three households stood up at once.

After a while Dinesh Babu came too.

Looking down, he said, "No picture today?"

Neetu answered sadly, "The rain washed it away."

Dinesh Babu looked around.

"Then the courtyard is gone?"

For the first time Ramkali Devi laughed.

"Does it look gone to you?"

Dinesh Babu did not answer.

In front of him Karim Mian was eating puffed rice.

Pinky's grandmother was undoing Neetu's braid and tying it again.

Mohan was running after the ball.

Two women were talking about clearing leaves from a blocked drain.

Suddenly Isha understood why Dadi had not repeated the new name too early.

As they went upstairs that night, she asked, "Now tell me—is it a courtyard?"

Ramkali Devi stopped at the turn of the staircase.

"Today it became one, a little."

"And tomorrow?"

"If people do not come tomorrow, it will not become one."

Isha said, “In the old house, the courtyard was always there.”

“The ground was always there.”

“And the courtyard?”

Holding the railing, Ramkali Devi climbed the next step.

“That too was made by people every day. I simply had not noticed it then.”

The next evening the children brought rice paste again.

This time they made no attempt to recover the old lines.

Neetu drew a small fish from the east.

Sajid made two leaves from the west.

Pinky placed five dots from the north.

Mohan drew a crooked line from the south, and everyone laughed when they saw it.

Isha again left the central circle empty.

Neetu asked, “Will we never fill the middle?”

Isha said, “It will be filled—sometimes with play, sometimes with conversation, sometimes by being left empty.”

Whether Neetu fully understood the answer or not, she did not say.

She merely added one dot to the tail of her fish.

The four paths remained open again.

This time something new happened.

Families who had not added a line before came too.

Shailaja Devi from the fourth floor drew only one small curve.

Elderly Naseem Chacha from the first floor could not draw a straight line because his fingers trembled.

His line wavered, but no one corrected it.

A newly married couple who had moved into the building three weeks earlier asked, “Where should we draw ours?”

Isha pointed around.

“Wherever there seems to be space.”

“Beside whose line?”

“Beside whichever one has room.”

Slowly the design filled, but it was never completed.

That became its rule:

not to be complete.

A month later, during the Durga Puja holidays, the building committee decided to install two permanent iron benches in the paved central space.

Dinesh Babu brought the proposal to Ramkali Devi.

“People will have somewhere to sit. It will be good.”

Ramkali Devi said, “A place to sit is needed.”

Isha was in front of them.

She did not interrupt.

Dadi asked, "Where will they go?"

Dinesh Babu pointed to two places near the middle on the paper.

Isha could not hold back.

"Children run through here."

"Then we will put them at the side."

"Women cut vegetables at the side."

Dinesh Babu laughed.

"Then shall we hang the benches in the air?"

Ramkali Devi said, "Put two heavy chairs there for two days and see."

"Chairs?"

"Place two heavy chairs wherever you are thinking of putting the benches. Watch how people move around them."

The idea seemed ordinary to Dinesh Babu, but he agreed.

At the first location, the chairs made it difficult for the milkman to turn his bicycle in the morning.

At the second, they cut across the children's running line in the evening.

At the third, beside the planting bed, Pinky's grandmother got shade and the path remained open.

In the end, the benches were installed there.

Isha told Dadi, "The four paths of the aripan even saved the bench place."

Ramkali Devi said, "Not the lines. The way people moved showed us."

At the beginning of winter, the use of the paved place changed again.

Older people began sitting in the morning sun.

At noon some families placed pickle jars at the side.

Darkness fell earlier in the evening, so the children's play grew shorter.

The aripan was no longer made every day.

Sometimes on Sundays, sometimes before a festival.

But the memory of the four paths remained.

If someone left a motorcycle in the centre overnight, the next day a child would say, "It is in the middle of the New Courtyard."

The motorcycle would be moved.

If someone wanted to leave a broken chair permanently beside the planting bed, Renu Devi would say, "Sit there if you like, but do not block the path."

This rule was not on paper.

No meeting had ever passed it.

One day at school Isha was asked to write ten lines on "My Home."

In the first two lines she described her room on the third floor.

In the third, the window.

In the fourth, the kitchen.

At the fifth line her pen stopped.

She wrote:

"In the middle of my home there is a courtyard that does not belong to any one house."

Then she crossed it out.

The word "my" did not seem right.

She wrote again:

"In the middle of our building there is a place that becomes a courtyard in the evening."

She liked that line.

At night she showed the notebook to Dadi.

Ramkali Devi read it and said, "And in the morning?"

"Sometimes a path, sometimes sunlight, sometimes empty."

"Then the line is right."

"Will you call it the New Courtyard now?"

Ramkali Devi closed the notebook.

"I will."

"Why now?"

"Because now the weight of the name is not resting on one picture."

Isha looked down.

That evening there were no rice-paste lines.

People were coming down the four stairways one after another.

In the paved middle space one child was playing marbles.

On the bench at the side two elderly people were sitting.

Near the planting bed Renu Devi and Shailaja Devi were talking.

The four paths were open.

The middle too was not completely filled.

Some space had to remain empty so that there would be room for the next person.

Looking down from above, Ramkali Devi said, "Look, the courtyard formed quickly today."

Isha asked, "Without the lines?"

"The lines were for learning."

"And the courtyard?"

Dadi said, "Now the people have learned."

Below, Mohan stopped the ball and looked up.

"Didi! Come!"

Isha closed the notebook and began going down the stairs.

When she reached the bottom, no one had made a separate place for her.

Even so, there was room.

Story 81

The Thirty-First Bed

On the gate of the night shelter built behind the bus stand, the words "Women's Shelter—30 Beds" were painted in white.

Champa Devi did not remember those thirty beds by looking at their numbers on paper. She remembered the sounds the beds made.

The right leg of bed number one was a little loose; it went ting-ting when someone sat on it. Bed number five had the lump of an old weld in its frame. While sweeping beneath number eleven, the thin edge of the iron would brush her hand. The mattress on number twenty-seven was the heaviest of all, because the cotton inside it had gathered to one side.

At that shelter, Champa worked from seven in the evening until ten at night, and from four in the morning until six. On paper, the six hours in between did not belong to her.

The contract said: sweep and mop in the evening, clean the toilets, take out the rubbish, dry the wet floor, then do the same work again in the morning.

The paper did not say where Champa's body was to be from ten at night until four in the morning.

On ordinary days there was no need for that question. Two lanes behind the shelter, Champa rented a small room with a tin roof. At ten at night she would lean the broom against the wall, wash her hands and feet, lock up, and go home. Before dawn, while it was still dark, she would return.

Bimla Devi, the shelter caretaker, would joke, "Your clock is better than mine."

Champa would say, "It isn't the clock. It's the stomach. If I'm late, they'll strike my name off next month."

Bimla would laugh, but both of them knew it was not entirely a joke.

One evening in Paush, a drizzle began in the afternoon. By eight at night the wind had grown fierce. Rain rattled on the tin roof of the bus stand as though many small pebbles were falling all at once.

That night all thirty beds in the shelter were occupied.

Among the women who came in, one had spent the whole day carrying sacks at the vegetable market, one had come with a sick relative at the

hospital, one had arrived to spend the night after missing her train, and one had been making that shelter her place for the night for months.

Bimla wrote names in the register, asked for identification where possible, and told each new arrival her bed number.

"Twenty-nine."

"Thirty."

When the last woman had been given number thirty, Bimla drew a thin line beneath the entries in the register.

At that moment Champa was pouring water over the toilet floor.

A little after nine, her neighbour called her mobile phone.

"Didi, the bamboo holding up your roof has fallen."

At first Champa did not understand.

"Which bamboo?"

"The one holding the tin. It has lifted in the wind. Water is getting inside. I've wedged a brick against the door from outside."

Champa set down the bucket in her hand where she stood.

"The trunk inside?"

"I put it up on the bed. But it would be difficult to sleep there now."

When the call ended, Champa stood for a few moments with the mobile phone still in her hand.

Bimla saw her face from a distance.

"Has something happened at home?"

Champa told her.

Bimla looked towards the gate. Outside, the rain was falling at a slant.

"The road will be bad too if you go now," Bimla said.

"Yes."

"Spend the night here."

The words came easily enough, but afterwards both their eyes went at once to the beds.

There was someone on every one of the thirty beds.

Bimla opened the register.

"The woman in number twelve has gone out for tea, but she'll come back. The woman in number twenty-four has left her bag on the bed. They're all occupied."

Champa said, "I don't need a bed. I'll spread a sheet in some corner."

Bimla looked up as though reading the rules board hanging on the wall beside the gate.

"The passage has to be kept clear. The fire-exit route must not be blocked."

"Then the storeroom?"

Both of them fell silent again.

The storeroom held an iron cupboard, brooms, mops, acidic cleaning fluid, boxes of soap, a can of phenyl, and an old broken chair.

Bimla said, "It isn't right to sleep in there."

Champa smiled. "I handle the things in that room all day. What will happen if I spend the night near them?"

"Holding them in your hands and sleeping with them beside your head are not the same thing."

By then Rampari Devi, who had bed number five, had heard them.

She sat up. "Champa, come here. The bed is wide. There's room for both of us."

Champa shook her head at once.

"No, Didi. You spend all day at the vegetable market. I won't take half your bed at night."

Rampari said, "What do I mind?"

"You may not mind. I do."

Rampari understood some of it and some she did not. She pulled the blanket over herself again.

At ten, Champa's evening shift ended on paper.

She washed her hands, wrung out the wet end of her sari, and sat on the narrow wooden bench beside the gate. During the day, the bench was used for visitors' bags.

Bimla said, "Shall I give you my chair?"

"You have to write in the register all night and watch the gate. The chair is yours."

Bimla gave her an old blanket.

Champa wrapped it around herself.

At eleven the wind grew stronger still. A thin stream of water was coming in beneath the door. Champa got up, folded a sack, and wedged it under the door.

At midnight someone went to the toilet. Champa got up again and wiped away the wet footprints.

Bimla said, "You're off duty now."

Wringing out the mop, Champa said, "If it stays wet, someone will fall."

"You're not an employee now. You're someone spending the night."

Champa laughed. "Which line of the register do I go in?"

Bimla did not answer.

At one in the morning, Champa dozed off sitting on the bench. Her legs hung halfway in the air. The blanket had slipped down to her knees.

Twice Bimla got up and adjusted the blanket. The third time she did not; she thought that if Champa woke, she would pick up the broom again.

At about half past three, a sharp smell came from the storeroom. The cap on a bottle of cleaning fluid had not been closed properly. Bimla set it upright.

Champa woke.

"What time is it?"

"Half an hour until your shift starts."

Champa stepped down from the bench. Her legs were numb. She held the wall and stood still for a moment.

"Skip the morning work today," Bimla said.

"If I skip it, the paper will mark me absent."

"I'll write that you were here all night."

Champa looked at her.

"Being here all night and being present for the morning shift are two different boxes."

Bimla said nothing.

At four, Champa picked up the broom.

By half past five the rain had stopped. The sky was grey. One by one, the women in the shelter began to rise. One folded her blanket, one searched for her mobile phone, one went outside for tea.

At six, just as Champa was sweeping one last time beneath the beds, a jeep stopped at the gate.

Bimla frowned. "So early?"

Three people came inside: a woman officer, a clerk, and a representative of the contracting agency.

The previous week there had been a complaint about wet blankets and a closed toilet at the night shelter. The inspection had been arranged without notice.

The officer asked first for the register.

"How many for the night?"

"Thirty," Bimla said.

"Beds?"

"Thirty."

"Staff?"

"Me, one night guard, and a cleaner in the evening and morning."

The officer turned a page.

"Where does the cleaner stay at night?"

Bimla opened her mouth to give the ordinary answer—"Home"—but after that night the word stuck.

At that moment Champa was picking up a wet piece of paper from beneath bed number twelve.

Bimla said, "On ordinary days she goes home."

"And last night?"

The contracting agency's representative spoke at once. "Her shift ends at ten."

The woman officer looked at him. "I didn't ask about her shift. I asked about the night."

There was silence for a few moments.

Bimla pointed to the bench.

"She spent the night there, sitting up. The roof of her room was damaged."

The officer went over to the bench. Directly behind it was the door to the storeroom. She looked at the bottles, the phenyl, the brooms inside.

"Here?"

Champa said, "All the beds were occupied."

"The floor?"

"We're not allowed to block the passage."

"The storeroom?"

"There are chemicals in there."

The contractor's representative said, "This was an unusual situation."

The officer said, "What do the rules provide for an unusual situation?"

No answer came.

She looked at the register again. There were thirty names on the residents' page. In the staff attendance register, Champa's evening signature was there, then a blank space for the morning signature. The six hours in between truly did not exist on paper.

The officer asked Champa, "Should your name have been entered in the residents' register?"

Champa said, "I didn't need a bed here. I needed a safe place for my body to be through the night."

"What is the difference?"

"A great deal. If I had taken a bed, there would have been one less for the person it was meant for. But if a worker has to remain here through the night, she needs a place too."

Rampari, who was folding the bedding on bed number five, called from behind, "I told her I'd give her half."

Without turning, Champa said, "Your whole bed is yours."

The officer looked once at Rampari, then wrote something in the register.

The contractor's representative asked, "What are you writing?"

The officer read it aloud. "Temporary staff rest beside cleaning-fluid storage —unsafe. No separate safe rest arrangement for staff at night."

The contractor's representative said, "But the cleaner is not night staff."

This time Champa looked at him.

The officer asked, "Was she inside the building last night?"

"Yes."

"Morning shift at four?"

"Yes."

"Then the question is not merely one of job title."

The inspection moved on. Blankets were opened, the toilets were examined, the fire-exit route was measured.

Champa returned to her broom.

By seven the officials had left.

Bimla was a little excited. "You'll see. Something will happen now."

Champa said, "Inspection papers see many things, and many things they don't."

"This time it has been written down."

"Let it stay written."

She set off for home.

The water in the lane was not up to her knees, but it reached her ankles. Half the tin roof of her room really had lifted away. Her neighbour had raised the trunk onto the bed.

For two days Champa slept on that neighbour's veranda. On the third day the bamboo was tied back into place.

At the shelter, the days began to run as before: thirty beds, thirty numbers, the evening broom, the morning broom.

The inspection was almost forgotten.

About twenty days later, one afternoon, a small handcart stopped at the shelter gate. Champa was not on shift then.

When she came in that evening, Bimla showed her something beside the gate.

An iron folding bed stood against the wall. It smelled of fresh paint.

Champa asked, "Where did this come from?"

"From the central store."

"For a resident?"

"No. The order says—for night staff or emergency staff rest. The number of residents remains thirty."

Champa unfolded the bed and looked at it. It was narrow, but sturdy.

On the side of one leg, a small number had been painted in white—31.

Champa touched the number with her finger.

"The thirty-first bed in a thirty-bed shelter."

Bimla laughed. "The inventory register won't accept anything without a number."

Champa said, "Then the bed has entered the count."

Bimla looked at her. "The person was already here."

Champa said nothing.

She folded the bed again and set it against the wall. She moved the storeroom brooms, mops, and cleaning fluids two arm's lengths away from it.

That night she did not need to sleep on bed 31.

At ten she locked up and went back to her room.

Behind her, inside the gate, stood the thirty residents' beds, each with its own number. Against the wall stood one more folding bed, which had come not from anyone's kindness, but because an omitted count had finally been noticed.

Story 82

The Back Staircase

At the front entrance of Amaltas Building, two things could be seen from a distance—the brass-coloured nameplate and the lift moving up and down behind the glass.

Toward the back lane stood another iron gate, on which small letters read: "Service Route."

Savita Devi had been reading those words for five years, but when she first came to the building for domestic work, she had not asked what they meant.

The guard had said, "Domestic workers, milk, deliveries, rubbish—all through here."

From then on, Savita's feet belonged to that route.

The back staircase went up seven floors. Between two floors was a small landing; in a corner of a landing there might be a pipe, somewhere an old paint bucket, somewhere a broken tub, somewhere a tied bundle of newspapers.

There was a handrail between the first and second floors. Between the second and third, the wall was bare. Near the fourth floor, a thin iron handrail appeared again, but one of its joints was loose.

The lighting was not the same everywhere either. On the ground floor and the second floor there was yellow light; on the third it was often out; on the fifth a little daylight came through a window, while at night it was almost dark.

Savita was not in the habit of counting the staircase's faults. When someone has to climb and descend the same way every day, the body remembers even its crookedness.

She knew that the fourth step on the third floor was slightly higher. Coming down from the fifth floor, her left hand had to touch the wall. Before the seventh, she had to keep her head clear of a sagging pipe.

The building's residents were almost entirely unaware of these details.

For them, the back staircase was simply "over there."

Beside the lift at the front hung a fire-safety map. Red arrows ran down from every floor toward a staircase. The map was neat, its square lines clear, the word "EXIT" in bold.

Savita had never studied the map closely, because her route was remembered not behind the map's glass but inside her body.

One Monday the building committee put up a notice: "Safety Inspection Wednesday."

For two days the glass at the main entrance was polished. The fire-hose cabinet received a fresh coat of red paint. The decorative planter in front of the lift was shifted a little.

Raghavendra Babu, the building committee's secretary, sent word to every flat that the inspection would be at ten on Wednesday and the corridors should be kept clear.

Savita heard about it at Archana Jha's home on the fifth floor.

"There's an inspection tomorrow," Archana Jha said. "Move those bags and things on the back route a little to one side."

Savita asked, "Whose bags?"

"How would I know? Someone must have left them there."

As Savita came down that day, she saw three empty water cans on the sixth-floor landing, an old shoe rack on the fourth, and an iron cot leaning against the wall on the second.

She took a cloth from her work bag and wiped away the dust, but she had no authority to move other people's things.

Downstairs, the guard Kailash was sitting at his post.

Savita said, "If there's an inspection, will they inspect the back staircase too?"

Kailash laughed. "They'll inspect the main stairs, the fire hose, the wiring and pipes. The back one is the service route."

"Does fire burn differently on the service route?"

Kailash laughed, then fell silent.

At ten on Wednesday the inspection took place. Two officers came. Raghavendra Babu, the treasurer, the caretaker, and two residents accompanied them.

Savita was washing dishes on the fourth floor at the time. She heard them moving along the main corridor—"Exit clear," "Lights fine," "Hose date," "Door width."

At around eleven, the inspection ended.

By one in the afternoon, the building had returned to its usual state.

The main entrance was quiet. Many residents were at work. A few elderly people were at home. Two children had returned from school. Women doing domestic work were on different floors. Delivery workers moved up and down. In the back lane, a young man collecting rubbish pushed his cart.

At that moment, Malati Devi on the fifth floor heard the sound of something falling near the back staircase.

A large sack of rice had rolled down half a step between the fourth and fifth floors and come to rest.

Naseem, the young man carrying the sack upstairs, had saved himself by catching hold of the wall.

Malati Devi came out.

"What happened?"

Catching his breath, Naseem said, "If there'd been a handrail, my hand would have found it. I can lift the sack again."

He tried to lift the sack. Savita was coming up from below just then. Together they put it on the landing.

Malati Devi said, "Why didn't you bring it up in the main lift?"

Naseem did not answer.

Savita said, "Goods come by the back route."

Malati Devi paused. "Even something this heavy?"

Naseem smiled. "Even when the goods are light, it's the same route."

No complaint was filed about this small incident. Naseem delivered the sack. Savita returned to her work.

But Malati Devi remembered the red arrows from the inspection.

That evening she asked Raghavendra Babu, "Was the back staircase inspected today?"

Raghavendra Babu said, "It isn't the main exit."

"But at noon half the building moves along that route."

"Half the building?"

"I mean the people."

Raghavendra Babu grew a little uneasy. "How many people?"

Malati Devi had no answer.

That question led to an unusual exercise the next day.

Raghavendra Babu took out the guard's register. The residents' names were not recorded in it; the names and times of outside visitors were. Many domestic workers had permanent identity cards, so their daily entries were not made consistently.

"Then I don't know exactly how many people are in the building at one in the afternoon," the treasurer said.

Kailash said, "We have the number of residents."

Savita was wringing out a mop near the gate. She said, "The number of residents and the number of people actually inside the building at that time are not the same thing."

Every eye turned toward her.

Raghavendra Babu asked, "Then how do we find out?"

Savita said, "Count them one day."

"Whom?"

"Every body that is inside."

The following Monday the building committee chose three times—seven in the morning, one in the afternoon, and eight at night.

It was not a census; there was no list of names either. Only the kinds of people present in the building at each time and their approximate numbers—residents, children, elderly people, domestic workers, delivery workers, repair workers, guards.

At seven in the morning there were more residents. Milk-delivery workers and rubbish collectors were there too.

At one in the afternoon the result was different.

Many residents with jobs were out. In the building were sixteen women doing domestic work, three meal-delivery workers, two repair workers, one rubbish collector, two guards, seven elderly people, four small children, and a few residents working from home.

Raghavendra Babu added the numbers on the sheet.

"That many people?"

Kailash said, "Today is a quiet day. On Tuesdays the ironing man comes too."

At eight at night the picture changed again.

For the first time, Raghavendra Babu understood that the building's "people" were not the same group all day long.

The next step was to measure the routes.

Savita, Kailash, Malati Devi, and the committee members went upstairs in two groups. One group took the main staircase, the other the back one.

The first problem with the back staircase appeared on the ground floor itself. The iron gate stayed open during the day, but after evening it was latched from inside so that "outsiders" could not enter from the back.

Kailash said, "When there's a need, I open it."

Savita asked, "Does need ask permission before it arrives?"

Kailash said nothing.

The second problem was the cot on the second floor. It was actually an old piece of furniture discarded by a resident, which the guards sometimes used for sitting.

The third problem was a dead light.

The fourth was the handrail, present only in broken sections.

The fifth was the three empty water cans kept between the fifth and sixth floors.

The sixth was the broken edge of a step. A fresh layer of cement had been put on it, but in the dark the difference in colour could not be seen.

Raghavendra Babu kept writing everything down.

By the time they reached the seventh floor, Malati Devi was panting.

She said, "I sometimes climb the main stairs as far as the fifth floor. Why does this route feel so different?"

Savita replied, "Your body has not memorised the measure of this route."

No one laughed at that sentence.

The committee met that same evening.

The first proposal was to remove the "Staff Only" sign from the back staircase.

Savita did not agree with the proposal.

"Will removing the sign make the light come on?"

Everyone was silent.

She continued, "I don't need the privilege of walking through the main door as proof of respect. The route I use every day because of my work should be safe."

Malati Devi said, "And so should the route that everyone may have to use in an emergency."

Then the discussion moved away from names and toward the work that had to be done.

It was decided that both staircases would undergo separate safety inspections. The question of whom each was meant for could come later; first there would be lighting, handrails, steps, clear landings, and a way to open the doors.

Every light on the back staircase was replaced within the week. The fifth-floor window was cleaned.

The gaps between the separate sections of handrail were filled in.

Private belongings kept on the landings were removed.

The broken edge of the step was levelled and given a pale white marking so that the change in level would be visible in the dark.

The latch on the back gate was altered so that it could be opened from inside without a key, while entry from outside remained under the guard's watch.

This point caused the greatest argument.

One resident said, "We need safety, but what if someone gets in from the back?"

Kailash replied, "We'll watch from outside. Why should people on the inside have to find us in order to get out?"

There was no joking in his voice this time.

Two weeks later there was another safety inspection.

This time the inspector himself said, "We'll inspect both staircases."

Without saying anything, Raghavendra Babu opened the back gate.

Savita was coming down from the seventh floor at that moment. She had an empty bucket in her hand.

On the third floor, her hand fell naturally on the new handrail.

She did not stop.

When she reached downstairs, she saw that a new sheet had been put up behind the glass beside the old fire-safety map.

The sheet did not contain the building's numbers at the three different times. There were no names either.

There were only two lines—Main Staircase, Back Staircase. Beside each were the same four words: "Lighting · Handrail · Clear · Open."

Savita read the sheet.

Kailash asked, "All right?"

Savita said, "We'll keep watching."

"What?"

"If a light goes out, then we check again."

Kailash laughed. "Isn't the inspection over?"

Savita lifted the bucket.

"How can the inspection of a route used every day ever be over?"

She turned toward the back staircase.

This time, at the turn on the second floor, she did not need to feel her way along the wall.

Story 83

The Night Slip

At the east gate of the district hospital, the main visitors' register closed as soon as the clock struck eight at night.

The closing of the register did not mean the gate was closed. A hospital is never completely closed at night.

Someone came carrying medicine, someone a patient's clothes, someone in response to a call for blood, someone from a distant village after hearing news. Sometimes a person came only to find out which ward their relative was in.

The employee at the main registration desk left at eight. After that, the gate depended on the security guards and the attendants running in and out.

Devanath was one of those night attendants.

His work was not to write things down. He carried supplies to the wards, returned empty wheelchairs, cleared the way for the night medicine trolley, sometimes took sheets as far as the mortuary—whatever work appeared before him.

But five years on the night shift had taught him another task: remembering when people arrived.

At first he kept it all in his head.

"The man with the red gamchha at five past ten."

"The woman with the glass box at ten twenty-seven."

"The one with two children before eleven."

By dawn, the number of such markers would have grown, and Devanath's mind would be as crowded as the hospital corridors.

One night two families began quarrelling outside the same ward door. Both said they had arrived first. The nurse asked, "Who was sent in first?"

Devanath remembered the faces, but not the time.

After that day, he began cutting little slips.

The slips were not made from new paper. Sheets left printed on one side in the daytime office, old lists, spoiled printouts—the blank sides that remained —Devanath cut them into squares and kept them in a tin box.

Date at the top. Serial number on the left. Time in the middle. Ward on the right.

A name only when two people arrived at the same time for the same patient.

He did not make a habit of writing telephone numbers.

"Why not that much?" the security guard Brijnandan once asked him.

Devanath said, "I need to count people through the night, not find their homes."

Brijnandan laughed.

Slowly, the slips became part of the night's work.

A visitor arrived. Devanath looked at the clock. Wrote the serial number. Wrote the ward. If the person was sent inside, he made a small mark in the corner of the slip. If told to wait, he drew an empty circle.

At dawn the slips were left on the registration desk.

Lalita Devi, who worked during the day, did not transfer every slip into the main register. If a permanent entry pass had been made for someone, she copied the name. She counted the remaining slips and wrote—"Night visitors: 17"—then put the slips into an old paper envelope.

"How many days do we keep these papers?" Devanath once asked.

Lalita Devi said, "Until the cupboard says enough."

It was not a rule, but much of the hospital's work ran on habit before it ran on rules.

The real use of the slips became clear when someone said at dawn, "I have been sitting here since eleven last night."

Devanath would look in the box.

"Serial twelve—11:18."

Someone would say, "The person who came after me was sent in first."

The slip would be checked. Sometimes that had indeed happened, because permission had come at once from one ward and not from another.

The slip made no decision. It merely kept the order from disappearing into the dark.

In the last week of Sawan, an inspection team came from the district office.

All day the medicine store, fire exits, wards and accounts were inspected. Around the change of the evening shift, the inspectors reached the east gate.

The registration desk was being closed. Lalita Devi was putting the register into the cupboard.

The chief inspector's eye fell on the tin box.

"What is this?"

Devanath opened the box.

Half-cut sheets, serial numbers, times, sometimes a ward number, sometimes a name.

The inspector picked up one slip.

"Is this part of the official register?"

No one answered.

Lalita Devi said, "For convenience at night..."

"On whose orders?"

Silence again.

The inspector looked at another slip. "This has a patient's ward and a visitor's name on it. Why is it in an open box?"

For the first time, Devanath looked at his slips through another pair of eyes.

The sheets that had seemed like order to him all night looked, in daylight, exactly like loose papers—someone's name, someone's ward, someone's time of arrival.

The inspector said, "Stop this from today. If a record is needed, make an approved register. No private papers."

Brijnandan glanced quietly at Devanath.

Devanath merely put the lid back on the box.

That night, for the first time in five years, no slips were made.

At ten ten, a young man arrived—Ward 6.

At ten sixteen, an elderly woman—Ward 3.

At ten twenty-five, two sisters—Ward 9.

Devanath looked at the clock, but his hand, after moving automatically toward his pocket, stopped.

"Serial number?" Brijnandan asked jokingly.

Devanath said, "Now the order is in my head."

"Will the inspector inspect your head?"

"A head doesn't sit in an open tin box."

Neither of them laughed.

For three nights, nothing much happened.

On the fourth night, at about half past ten, Nirmala Devi came to the east gate. She carried a cloth bag and a folded sheet of paper.

Her sister was admitted in Ward 5. During the day, the doctor had said that the old prescription from home should be shown to the night nurse, so it could be matched with the papers for the morning examination.

Nirmala Devi had taken the bus at half past nine.

Brijnandan stopped her at the gate.

"Night visiting hours are over."

Nirmala Devi showed him the folded paper. "I was told inside that it was important to deliver this."

Brijnandan tried to telephone the ward. The phone rang, but no one answered.

When Devanath reached them, Nirmala Devi said, "I have been here since around twenty or twenty-five past ten."

Brijnandan said, "It is only half past ten now. It must have been five or seven minutes."

Nirmala Devi immediately looked at the clock. "As soon as I got off the bus, I telephoned home. That was at ten twenty-two. It took two minutes to reach the gate."

Brijnandan's voice did not harden, but he did not give up his point. "In between, I was moving an ambulance. I don't remember exactly when you came."

Devanath's hand went toward his pocket again.

The pocket was empty.

At last the ward answered. Nirmala Devi's paper was sent inside. She was not.

The matter could have ended there.

But in the morning the ward in-charge asked, "When did the paper reach us last night?"

Brijnandan said, "Around ten forty."

Nirmala Devi, who had returned in the morning, said, "I was at the gate at ten twenty-four."

There was no entry for her in the main register at the registration desk, because she had never actually gone inside.

In the ward, the time when the paper arrived had been written down—10:47.

The time she reached the gate was written nowhere.

It was easy to conclude that someone was lying.

But Devanath could see that it was possible no one was lying.

One person remembered the time she got off the bus. Another remembered the interval in which he had been moving an ambulance. The ward had only the time the paper reached someone's hand.

There were three times. None was complete.

On the fourth day after the inspection team's order, the superintendent held a small meeting.

The chief inspector was present again.

Devanath was called as well.

The old tin box of slips was not on the table. Since the day of the inspection, it had been kept in a locked cupboard.

The superintendent asked, "Why did you start making the slips?"

Devanath said, "At night, the time when someone came used to disappear."

"And why the names?"

"When two people came at the same time for the same patient."

The inspector said, "But it was not right to write names on loose papers left in the open."

"It was not right," Devanath admitted.

The room was quiet for a moment.

The superintendent turned a pencil in his fingers for a while. Then he asked, "Did stopping the slips solve the problem?"

Lalita Devi said, "The papers ended. The problem did not."

The chief inspector looked at her.

Lalita Devi said slowly, "From eight at night until six in the morning, the main register is closed. During those hours, people who come to the main gate are formally recorded only if permission is given for them to go inside. Anyone who waits and then leaves never appears in the record."

The superintendent asked, "So should we write down full details for every visitor?"

Devanath answered at once, "No. We only need to know what time someone came, which ward they came for, and whether they went inside or waited."

The inspector added, "Names too should be kept to a minimum. If they are not necessary, do not write them. No telephone numbers. No loose papers left in the open."

No large decision was written at the end of the meeting.

Only a thin sample sheet for a new register was made.

Four columns—serial number, arrival time, ward/purpose, status.

Three small status marks—inside, waiting, returned.

If a name was necessary, there would be one final narrow column for it.

At night the register would remain inside the gate in a locked drawer.

In the morning Lalita Devi would match it with the main register. For anyone whose entry was formally recorded, the night serial number would be added in the margin of the main register. For anyone who waited and then left, only the count would remain in the day's tally.

Loose slips would be made only when a queue number had to be given—without names. At dawn they would be counted and destroyed.

Devanath read the sheet.

"Whose job is this register?"

The superintendent said, "Whoever is at the gate at night."

"Then this becomes extra work for me?"

A light laugh went around the room.

Devanath did not laugh.

The superintendent understood. "It will be added to the shift duty list. If it requires time, write that down too. Work cannot be done without time."

Devanath looked at the sheet again.

For the first time, he felt that his five years of unauthorised slips had not merely been given a legitimate name; the burden of the work had also been written into someone's responsibility.

The new register arrived three days later.

On the first night, an elderly man came at nine thirteen. Ward 2. He was not sent inside; the nurse said he should return in the morning.

Devanath filled in the first line.

Serial 1. 9:13. Ward 2. Returned.

The old man asked, "Will writing this mean I get to go in first in the morning?"

Devanath said, "No."

"Then what is the use?"

Devanath placed a finger on the page of the register.

"The fact that you came here tonight will not disappear by morning."

The old man looked at him for a moment, then nodded and left.

The night went on.

Serial 2. Serial 3. Serial 4.

At ten forty-eight Nirmala Devi came again. This time she had clothes for her sister.

Devanath wrote down the time.

Nirmala Devi smiled and asked, "Slips again?"

Devanath turned the register around to show her.

"Not slips. The night register."

Nirmala Devi asked, "Will you write my name?"

Writing the ward number, Devanath said, "There is no need yet."

He tore off a small queue slip kept beside the register. It bore only one number—7.

Nirmala Devi took the slip.

"How long will this survive?"

"Until morning."

"Then?"

"After that, what needs to remain will stay in the register. The paper that does not need to remain will not."

Nirmala Devi folded the number seven into her palm.

Outside the gate, the night was as dense as ever. Inside the hospital, people kept coming and going as before.

Devanath placed his pen on the next line.

This time he did not need to bind anyone's face into his memory.

Story 84

Two Buttons

On the western side of town, as evening fell in the back courtyard of an old wedding hall, two bundles of white kurtas were opened. At the front gate, strings of lights, electric garlands and an arch of flowers were being arranged; in the back courtyard, plates, glasses, drums of water and the serving staff's clothes were being counted.

Raghu, the contractor's assistant, was handing a kurta to each young man and writing down his name. His register had three columns—name, place of work, and whether the kurta was returned.

"Check the clothes properly," Raghu kept saying. "If there is a tear, a stain, or a broken button when it comes back, it will be deducted from your wages."

People took the clothes in hand, held them to their chests to judge the size, and changed at once. The wedding feast was about to begin. No one had the leisure to inspect every seam, every button, every edge of a kurta.

The kurta Suresh received had two buttons of different colours on the left cuff. The upper button was milky white, the lower one slightly yellowed. Suresh laughed and said, "This kurta has a history of its own."

Without looking up, Raghu said, "Not history. Clothes. Return it tonight."

Suresh was new to this work. He had come from the village to the city and unloaded sacks in a warehouse by day; at night, whenever he found the chance, he cleared plates at wedding feasts. His younger sister's school fee was due that very week, so the wages from this one night mattered to him.

He put on the kurta. The two differently coloured buttons on the left cuff caught his eye again. The thread of one button was a little loose. He thought of telling Raghu, but at that moment a shout came from the main kitchen —"Five men for water, over here!"—and everyone ran.

By nine at night the wedding hall was full. At first Suresh handed out glasses of water, then he cleared empty plates, and later he was stationed at the sweets table. The sleeve of the kurta kept brushing against the edge of the table. Once the loose cuff button caught on the corner of a plate. Suresh stopped his hand and carefully freed it. The button survived, but the thread loosened further.

He could not stop work then to look for needle and thread. He folded the cuff back and went on clearing plates.

At half past one, the first wave of guests began to thin. At two, sweeping and wiping began. At half past two, Raghu sat by the gate and opened the register for the return of the kurtas.

One by one, the men took off the clothes and handed them back. Raghu stretched each white kurta beneath the light, counted the buttons, checked for stains, then marked the name.

Suresh's turn came. Raghu held the kurta out. The moment his eyes fell on the left cuff, his brow tightened.

"One button is loose, one half broken. Forty rupees will be deducted."

Suresh started. "It was already like this. Look—the two buttons are not even the same colour."

Raghu said, "The condition in which it is returned is what gets recorded. Did you say anything when you took it?"

"Where was the time? But I did not break it."

Raghu rested his pen on the register and looked at him for a few moments. "If I accept your word, everyone else will also say it was already like that. How will the accounts work then?"

Suresh fell silent. He had no answer. He understood only this much: the cost of something that had come into his hands already damaged was being taken from his wages.

In the back room, Kamla Devi did the sewing. Her work was to mend the wedding hall's curtains, tablecloths and the servers' kurtas. At the end of the night she took home the pile of kurtas and brought them back repaired before the next engagement.

Raghu tossed Suresh's kurta into a separate pile. "This one goes to Kamla Didi."

Kamla Devi picked up the garment and examined the cuff. The moment she saw the two differently coloured buttons, her hand stopped.

"This again?"

Raghu asked, "What?"

"Nothing," she said, but she set the kurta apart in her lap.

Before dawn broke, after reaching home, Kamla Devi opened the bundle of repairs. She spread the kurta before her again. Inside the left cuff were two tiny knots of fine blue thread. Kamla Devi remembered—one knot she had made three weeks earlier, the other after the previous wedding.

She had her own method. When the same garment came back again and again, she left a small mark of coloured thread near an inner seam so she would know that work had been done there before. It was not a register; it was merely an aid to her memory.

She counted the thread knots. The buttons on the left cuff had already been replaced twice. This time the thread was loose again.

Kamla Devi opened the cuff and examined the cloth. The fault lay less in the button than in the old cuff band. Where the button was sewn, the cloth had become thin from the inside. A new button, sewn on tightly, lasted a few nights; then the thread pulled out together with the cloth.

She thought—how many workers' wages have the buttons on this kurta already eaten?

The next afternoon the wedding hall was preparing for another engagement. Kamla Devi brought in the repaired clothes, but she did not put that kurta into Raghu's pile.

"Look at this first," she said.

Raghu was busy. "Didi, people will start arriving again at five this evening. Everything is all right, isn't it?"

Kamla Devi turned the cuff inside out and showed him the blue knots. "I have changed the buttons here twice before. Now, for the third time, it has come loose again. The cloth has worn thin. Whoever wears it will not be at fault."

Raghu took the cuff in his hand. "Then change it."

"I will. But whose money will be deducted?"

Raghu said nothing.

Kamla Devi asked again, "Whose wages were cut the last two times?"

"I don't remember."

"In the register?"

Raghu opened the register. It contained only the names and a mark for 'clothes returned'. There was nothing about which number kurta it was, what condition it had been in when issued, or whose hands it had passed through before.

"See?" Kamla Devi said. "The garment comes back, the fault comes back, but the account catches only the worker's name."

Raghu grew uncomfortable. "Didi, do you know how many people there are? Fifty or sixty servers. If we write the story of every garment, the feast will be over before we finish."

Kamla Devi did not laugh. She looked at the lower inside edge of the kurta. "Don't write a story. Write a number."

With red thread she stitched a small '17' inside.

"What is that?"

"A garment number. From now on this is number seventeen. Four things in the register—whose hands it went into, any old defect when it was issued, any new defect when it was returned, and the date of repair. That's all."

Raghu shook his head. "You would need a person just to write all that."

Kamla Devi said, "And how many people does it take to deduct the price of the same button three times?"

At that moment Neeraj, the owner's younger brother, came in. He looked after the accounts and arranged temporary workers on wedding days. Raghu told him what they had been discussing. At first Neeraj laughed. "Change the whole system for two buttons?"

Kamla Devi put the kurta in his hands. "Not for two buttons. For money that has been deducted twice. So that we know before it is deducted a third time."

Neeraj examined the cuff. The cloth really had grown thin. He asked, "How can we prove that a deduction was made earlier for this same kurta?"

Kamla Devi showed him the blue knots. "They do not prove the deduction. They prove the repairs. The register of deductions ought to be with you."

For a while after that, the room was silent.

Neeraj asked Raghu for the old pages recording deductions. They contained brief entries on different dates—'button—20', 'cuff—40', 'stain—30'—but not which kurta they referred to. Beside one worker's name was 'button—20' from three weeks earlier; beside another was 'cuff—40' from the previous week. Whether both entries concerned this same kurta could not be known for certain.

Suresh had not yet been paid the forty rupees in question. Neeraj said, "Stop the deduction this time. First identify the garments."

Raghu did not agree at once. "Then what if someone really breaks a button tonight?"

"Then record the new defect," Neeraj said. "But also record the old defect when the garment is issued. No deduction without both."

Before five that evening, Kamla Devi and Raghu began stitching small cloth labels inside all the kurtas. Numbers from 1 to 48 were written on them. Some kurtas already had stains, some had frayed sleeve edges, some had buttons of different colours, and some were entirely sound.

At first Raghu remained irritated. But after ten or fifteen kurtas his hand found the rhythm. He made a small register—'number / condition at issue / condition at return / repair'. The worker's name was entered separately in the first column.

Kamla Devi strengthened the left cuff of kurta number seventeen by adding cloth from the inside. Then she sewed on two new buttons—deliberately not of the same colour. One milky white, one yellow.

Raghu asked, "You had two buttons of the same colour. Why make these different?"

Kamla Devi said, "If we erase the history, it will return as a fault again. Now that there is a register, these two buttons will remind me why the register was made."

That night kurta number seventeen went to a young man named Mahesh. For the first time, as Raghu handed out the garment, he said, "The left cuff has been repaired. The two buttons are different colours. This old condition is written in the register."

Mahesh looked at the kurta. "So when I return it, that won't be put on me?"

"Not the old defect. If there is a new one, we will see."

Mahesh laughed. "This is the first time I've heard the account when taking the clothes too."

The wedding feast ended. Kurta number seventeen came back in good order. Raghu wrote in the register—'no new defect.'

Two weeks later there was another wedding. This time 41 of the 48 kurtas were issued. Four were recorded as already stained at the time of issue, two were already under repair, and one was set aside as unfit for use.

At the end of the night, a fresh oil stain was found on one young man's kurta. Raghu did not immediately declare him at fault. They checked the issue entry—the garment had had no stain. The young man himself admitted that a pan had splashed near the kitchen. The cleaning cost was written down; the worker was spoken to; if a deduction was made, its reason was entered in the register.

Kamla Devi watched from a distance. The arrangement had not become just in a single night. Temporary workers still earned little, still stood until late, still feared losing work. But at least an old stain on a kurta no longer climbed onto a new man's body as an accusation.

At the end of the month Suresh came again asking for work. Raghu recognised his name. "That day the forty rupees were not deducted," he said.

Suresh smiled. "I got my money. But what happened to the two buttons?"

Raghu pulled kurta number seventeen from the bundle. The milky-white and yellow buttons were still on the left cuff. '17' was written on the strip inside.

"Here it is," Raghu said. "Now it has a name of its own."

Kamla Devi, who was sewing a torn tablecloth in the corner, looked up.

"Not a name," she said. "A number. The names belong to all those who wear it. The number does this much—it keeps the same fault from being placed again and again on a new name."

Suresh looked at the two buttons on the cuff. He remembered the night when he had fallen silent at the mention of forty rupees.

This time, before handing him the kurta, Raghu opened the register.

"Number seventeen. Left cuff repaired earlier. Two buttons of different colours. No new defect."

Suresh said, "Write—sound when issued."

Raghu wrote it down.

At the front gate of the wedding hall, the arch of flowers was shining again. In the back courtyard, the white kurtas kept passing from hand to hand. But now it was not only the garments that returned; their previous condition returned with them as well.

The two buttons were of different colours, but this time they were not a sign of error. They were a sign that when an object's history is written down, the burden of an old fault need not be placed again and again upon a worker's body.

Story 85

Rent for a Closed Window

The only window in the rented room had once looked out on the sky.

The sky was not very large. In front lay the landlord's courtyard, beyond it a tulsi altar, and above that, between two houses, a thin strip of blue. But for Sunayana, that was enough.

Sunayana did sewing. Inside the room were a small table, a hand-operated sewing machine, two boxes of thread, a packet of needles, and a notebook in which she wrote down clothing measurements.

In the morning, when light from the window fell on the table, she could thread a needle without a lamp. By afternoon the light reached the back wall. Toward evening its colour turned first yellow, then grey.

The room was both her home and her place of work.

The landlord, Shambhunath, lived with his family in the front part of the house. Sunayana had been renting a room toward the rear courtyard for two years.

The rent was not very low, but the market was nearby. Customers could leave a blouse, petticoat, or a child's kurta with her and return two days later.

Her relations with Shambhunath were not quarrelsome. On the first of each month, Sunayana paid the rent. Shambhunath wrote out a receipt.

One day before the rains, bricks were unloaded in the courtyard.

Sunayana asked, "Where will the bricks go?"

Shambhunath said, "I'm going to build a small storeroom at the back. The rice, oil tins, old cot—everything is clogging up the house."

Sunayana looked toward the window.

"Here?"

"A little way from the window. Don't worry."

On the first day, the foundation was dug. On the second, two courses of brick rose. On the third, the wall reached the lower edge of Sunayana's window.

That afternoon, while threading a needle, Sunayana missed the eye twice.

She laughed. She thought the fault was in her eyes.

On the fourth day, the wall rose halfway up the window.

On the fifth day, the blue strip of sky disappeared.

The window was open, but three arm-lengths away stood a bare brick wall without any opening. A little light trickled down from above. The air no longer came straight in; it struck the wall and turned upward.

For the first time, Sunayana lit the lamp during the day.

At half past twelve in the afternoon.

That felt strange to her. A lamp belonged to the night. In daylight, its flame announced that the room had changed.

That evening, Shambhunath was crossing the courtyard carrying a tin of kerosene.

Sunayana said, "Babu, the wall has come very close."

Shambhunath stopped.

"Let the roof go on. I'll leave a grille at the top."

"In front of the window?"

"It's a storeroom. No one will live there. Air will come in from above."

Sunayana said nothing.

That night she took out the rent receipt and looked at it. The paper said only—"one room." There was no mention of the window. No mention of light. Air, shade, heat—nothing.

The next day Sunayana opened the last page of her measurement notebook. At the top she wrote—"The Room's Day."

At seven in the morning she placed a needle on the table. She sat facing the window, not with her back to it.

She could thread white cotton through the needle without a lamp.

At eight as well.

At nine, for the first time, she had to bring it close to her eyes.

At ten, threading red cotton became difficult.

At eleven, she had to light the lamp.

She wrote—"Lamp from eleven o'clock."

On the second line, she hung a washed handkerchief near the window. Earlier, a handkerchief like that would dry by noon. That day, even at four in the afternoon, the corners were still damp.

She wrote—"Handkerchief: damp until four."

The third matter was oil. Every evening Sunayana filled the lamp with a small bowlful of oil. Now she had to light it from the afternoon itself. In three days, one extra bowlful of oil had been used.

She added the expense in the notebook.

Shambhunath's wife, Malati, saw this and asked, "What accounts are you writing?"

Sunayana said, "How much daytime is left in the room now."

Malati did not understand.

"Day lasts all day."

Sunayana pointed to the lamp.

"In my room, night begins at eleven."

Malati did not laugh.

She went and stood by the window. The roof had still not been put on the wall. A thin light remained above.

"Was it not like this before?"

"No."

"Shambhu said he would leave a grille at the top."

"The grille will be above. My table is below."

Malati was silent for a while. Then she said, "I'll tell him."

Two days later, a tin roof went up over the storeroom. A space one arm high had been left at the top for a grille, but that grille was above Sunayana's window.

The room became greyer still during the day.

This time Sunayana did not quarrel with Shambhunath. She held out the notebook.

"Look at this."

Shambhunath looked at the first page.

"What is this?"

"First week. Lamp at eleven. Second week—ten forty-five. After the roof went on—ten o'clock."

"Do you measure light by looking at a clock?"

"The needle measures it."

Shambhunath frowned.

Sunayana put the red thread and the needle in his hand.

"Sit here and thread it."

Shambhunath sat at the table. He held the needle. He brought the thread to its eye. He missed once. He missed a second time.

"My eyesight is weak," he said.

"My work is done with my eyes."

Sunayana showed him the second page.

"This is how long the handkerchief takes to dry. This is the expense for oil. I am not saying you should remove the storeroom. I am asking—whether the room I rented two years ago is still the same room now."

Shambhunath's face hardened slightly.

"The four walls are the same. The roof is the same. The door is the same."

"Then was the rent only for four walls?"

Hearing this, Malati, who was winnowing spices in the courtyard, stopped her hands.

Shambhunath said, "Are you asking for the rent to be reduced?"

Sunayana said, "First we need to understand what has happened."

"I built the storeroom on my own land."

"I am not talking about the land. I am talking about the daytime inside my room."

Shambhunath got up and left.

No decision was made that night.

For the next three days, Shambhunath spoke very little to Sunayana. The date for the rent was drawing near. In Sunayana's notebook, the cost of oil kept rising.

One evening Malati said, "Will you look for another room?"

Sunayana shook her head.

"I can look. But a room this close to the market is expensive. And I have settled this place with my own hands. Customers know the way here now."

"Shambhu is afraid that once the rent is reduced, it will never go back up."

"I am afraid too—that once the window's light is gone, the room's price will remain the same."

Malati said softly, "Then write down both fears."

Sunayana laughed at that.

The next day Malati brought an old notebook. Shambhunath sat down too.

Malati said, "The storeroom will not be removed. Sunayana is not leaving the house for now. So find the middle ground."

Shambhunath said, "There is a grille at the top."

Sunayana said, "The light from that grille does not reach the table."

Malati asked, "Could three courses of brick at the top of the wall be removed and the grille brought lower?"

Shambhunath answered at once, "There will be rice stored there. Water will get in."

Sunayana asked, "Is it necessary to remove the bricks?"

All three went to look at the storeroom.

No sacks of rice had yet arrived. On one side stood the old cot, two empty oil drums, and a box. The wall directly in front of the window was thick. There was a grille above, but under the roof the inside was dark.

Sunayana saw that there was no need to store any sack directly opposite the window. That part could remain as a passage.

"Does this wall need to be completely closed?" she asked.

Shambhunath said, "For security."

Malati looked up toward the grille.

"Bring the grille lower and put iron bars outside. Add a small awning above for the rain."

Shambhunath remained silent.

"The expense?"

Sunayana said, "I will not pay it. The storeroom is not mine."

Shambhunath did not like that.

"Then why should I do it?"

Sunayana opened her notebook.

"Because you do not charge rent for four walls. You charge rent for a room fit to live in. As long as the light has been reduced, I will pay a smaller part of the rent. When the grille is brought down and working light returns, I will pay the old rent."

Shambhunath narrowed his eyes.

"How much less?"

Sunayana had come prepared.

She showed him the cost of the oil.

"The oil costs this much. The loss of working time is separate. But I will not calculate every paisa. Five percent less from the monthly rent, until the window's light is put right."

Shambhunath objected at once, "Five percent is too much."

"Then you tell me."

"Two."

"Four."

"Three."

Malati intervened. "Write three, but write the date of the work too. From the day the grille is brought lower, the old rent."

Sunayana looked at Shambhunath.

After a long while, Shambhunath nodded.

In the notebook they wrote—"The storeroom wall has reduced the room's natural light. Until the correction is made, monthly rent reduced by three percent. Correction: in the upper part of the storeroom wall opposite the window, an open iron grille strip to be brought down lower, with a rain-shielding awning above. Old rent after the work is completed."

Sunayana added another line—"Whether the correction has worked will be accepted by both sides by seeing, in daylight, whether there is enough working light to thread a needle."

Shambhunath read it and smiled.

"So the needle is the judge?"

"No," Sunayana said, "it is the tool of my work."

For the first time, the amount written on the next rent receipt was slightly lower.

In the margin of that paper, Shambhunath wrote in small letters —"temporary light reduction."

Sunayana folded the receipt and placed it in her notebook.

The work on the grille did not happen at once. A mason was found two weeks later. Meanwhile, Sunayana continued lighting the lamp during the day.

One day a customer, Kamala Devi, asked, "Why is the lamp burning in daytime?"

Sunayana said, "The window is open, but the day is a little closed."

Kamala Devi did not understand, but she laughed.

Two weeks later, in the section of the storeroom directly opposite the window, a narrow grilled strip was made from high up down toward the window level. A small sloping awning was fitted outside so rainwater would not enter directly. The iron bars were strengthened from within.

On the second day after the work was finished, Shambhunath himself sat at Sunayana's table.

It was half past ten.

Sunayana had not lit the lamp.

She placed the red thread and needle before him.

This time Shambhunath threaded it on the first attempt.

"Now?"

Sunayana said, "Now a little of the day has come inside again."

She hung the handkerchief too. It dried after noon.

The oil expense returned to what it had been before.

The next month, the rent returned to its old amount.

While writing the receipt, Shambhunath asked, "Will you write this in the notebook too?"

"I will."

"What?"

"Three-percent reduction ended."

Both of them laughed.

Sunayana then said, "And one more thing."

"What now?"

"Next time, before raising any wall, we will put a chair in front of the window and sit there once."

Shambhunath said, "Shall I bring the needle too?"

"If it is needed."

The rains came. The storeroom filled with sacks of rice. Rain drummed on the awning over the grilled strip, but no water came inside. The full sky did not return to Sunayana's window. The blue strip was thinner than before.

But the light reached the table.

One evening, while turning the pages of her old notebook, Sunayana came to the page titled "The Room's Day." Lamp at eleven, ten forty-five, ten o'clock—all the times were written there. Beneath them were the oil expense,

the time the handkerchief took to dry, the three-percent reduction, and the date the grille was made.

She did not tear out the page.

Beside it she also kept the receipt whose margin bore the small words —"temporary light reduction."

The room's four walls were the same. The roof was the same. The door was the same.

But Sunayana now knew that the rent of a home is not merely a count of bricks.

Sometimes its reckoning begins with just enough light to thread a needle.

Story 86

The Brick Mark

Two slanting lines marked the corner of a wet brick.

Kaushalya recognized the mark from a distance.

Last year Raghuni had drawn those same two lines on the damp body of each brick with a small piece of wood. A brick would come out of the clay, the mould would open, Kaushalya would set it in a row in the sun, and Raghuni would score two slanting lines into one corner.

"So that our batch can be distinguished when they are counted," he would say.

To Kaushalya, the mark had never been a name. It was only a small sign of work—a way of recognizing their row among the thousand or two thousand bricks made in a day.

This year Raghuni was not there.

In Phagun a fever came on; within two days his body had grown terribly weak. There was the village medicine shop, the block hospital, a borrowed vehicle—everything was tried. In the first week of Chait, Raghuni died.

Kaushalya had thought the kiln would now remain only a memory. But by Jeth the grain at home was finished, her younger daughter's school fee was still unpaid, and the accounts from the previous season had not been settled. The clerk, Navalkishor, sent word twice: "Come and settle the account. Raghuni's old debt is still outstanding."

Kaushalya came to the kiln after the third message.

The kiln was as it had always been—red dust, the smell of soot, rows of unbaked bricks, puddles of water here and there, and smoke rising in the distance. Only for her had something changed. Every place where Raghuni's body had been present the year before now seemed empty.

Under the clerk's thatched shelter, two thick ledgers lay on an old wooden table. Navalkishor pushed his spectacles up his nose and opened a page.

"Two lines," he said. "Raghuni's mark. Look—an advance of eighteen thousand four hundred. It could not all be recovered by the end of last season."

Kaushalya looked at the page. In the space for the name was written 'Raghuni–Kaushalya'. Beside it were two slanting lines. Below were figures,

dates, deductions, then more figures. On some lines there were only numbers —no thumbprint, no signature.

"When was all this money taken?" Kaushalya asked.

Navalkishor ran a fingernail along the page. "If it is in the account, it must have been taken."

"I remember what I took. Five thousand in Jeth. Two thousand in Sawan for medicine. When were these three thousand taken?"

"Raghuni must have taken it."

"When?"

"The date is written."

"You wrote the date. Where is Raghuni's print?"

Navalkishor grew a little uncomfortable. "We do not take a print every time here. The mark itself is proof."

"These two lines?"

"Yes."

Kaushalya lifted her eyes from the page.

Just then a child came running in from outside and said, "Munshi-ji, please count Ramesar's row."

Navalkishor got up. Kaushalya too went outside.

The sun was fierce. Long rows of newly moulded wet bricks had been laid out. Ramesar and his wife, Panmati, were cutting clay and filling the moulds. Their two children were smoothing the earth around the raw bricks.

Kaushalya's gaze caught on one brick.

At its corner were two slanting lines.

Kaushalya looked at another brick. Two lines there as well. On a third too. The entire row bore the same mark.

She went over to Ramesar.

"Who puts this mark on them?"

Ramesar brushed the clay from his hands and said, "Munshi-ji gave us the old piece of wood. He said this would be the mark for this batch."

"The old piece of wood?"

Panmati picked up a small piece lying beside the raw bricks. Along one edge were two raised ridges. Pressed into the clay, they left the same sign.

Kaushalya took the piece of wood in her hand.

It was not the piece Raghuni had made. Someone must have made another after the earlier one broke. But the mark was the same.

Navalkishor was counting the row. "One thousand seven hundred and forty," he wrote in the child's notebook. "Two lines—Ramesar."

Kaushalya heard him.

"Munshi-ji," she said, "the two lines you just counted—whose are they?"

"Ramesar's."

"And in the ledger inside, whose are the two lines?"

Navalkishor looked at her. "In the old account, Raghuni's."

"Then how can the same mark sometimes be Ramesar and sometimes Raghuni?"

"The batch changes. The mark is only for identification."

Kaushalya said nothing. She handed the wooden piece back to Panmati.

She stayed at the kiln until noon. The clerk opened the ledger again.

"Look, the account has to be settled. If you work this season, it will gradually be deducted."

"Against which mark?" Kaushalya asked.

Navalkishor started.

"If I work, what mark will I get?"

"We'll give you a new one."

"The two lines belong to Ramesar now."

"Yes, this season."

"Then why does Raghuni's debt rest on those two lines?"

Navalkishor said nothing.

Kaushalya wiped the sweat from her forehead with the end of her sari. "When bricks are being counted, the mark belongs to this season's team. When money is being deducted, the same mark belongs to a dead man from last season. Why should one mark have two meanings?"

"That is how the accounts have always been kept."

"The accounts have always been kept that way—or the marks?"

Two labourers sitting nearby almost laughed, but when they saw Navalkishor's face they fell silent.

By evening the matter had spread through the kiln. It was nothing new to anyone that a family's account could continue with the family. What was new was that Kaushalya had seized upon the meaning of the mark.

She returned the next morning. This time she carried an old school notebook.

She sat beside the clerk's table and made two columns on the first page. On the left she wrote: "Work mark." On the right: "Money taken."

Navalkishor frowned. "What is this?"

"An attempt to understand your ledger."

In the left-hand column she wrote—

Two lines — previous season: Raghuni–Kaushalya.

Two lines — this season: Ramesar–Panmati.

Then in the right-hand column she wrote—

Five thousand — Kaushalya present.

Two thousand — for medicine.

Three thousand — no proof.

She put question marks before all the figures that followed.

"Erase the question marks," Navalkishor said.

"Show me the proof and I will erase them."

"You don't trust my ledger?"

"For me to trust a ledger, its meaning has to remain the same."

Navalkishor struck the table with his palm. "The kiln is not a court."

Kaushalya replied in an even voice, "Nor am I a court. I am only asking—are the two lines a person, or are they a batch?"

The owner, Jagmohan, happened to be at the kiln that day as well. He usually came in the evenings, but a trader was due to select a shipment of bricks. Navalkishor told him what had happened.

Jagmohan called Kaushalya over.

"Do you not have to pay the old debt?"

"I will pay what is mine. What Raghuni took, if there is proof, is a separate matter. But two lines are not a birthmark on my forehead."

Jagmohan tried to laugh. "Who said anything about a birthmark?"

"Then why are those lines on the new team's bricks?"

The owner's face grew somewhat serious. He looked at Navalkishor.

Navalkishor said, "The old mark was available, so I gave it to them. What difference does that make?"

Kaushalya answered at once, "Only this much: the people making the bricks have changed, but the person owing the debt has not. If the mark can change whenever it is convenient, how can it be proof of a debt?"

At that moment a man from the trader's party arrived while examining a row of bricks. The colour of one batch seemed slightly different to him.

"Who made these?" he asked.

Navalkishor pointed towards a distant row. "Two lines."

"What does two lines mean?"

Navalkishor paused for a moment. "Ramesar's team."

Kaushalya remained silent.

The trader's man asked, "Didn't the previous batch also have two lines?"

"That was last season."

"Then is the season written on the page?"

Navalkishor began turning the pages of the ledger. Some had dates; some did not.

For the first time, Jagmohan examined the ledger closely.

"Why is the same mark used again and again?"

"There are only so many marks," Navalkishor said. "Two lines, three dots, a circle, two crossed lines—that is about all. When a team changes, the marks are reused."

"Then add the date or batch number," the trader's man said matter-of-factly. "Otherwise, if a bad batch turns up, how will you know whom to hold responsible?"

Kaushalya watched the owner's face. The issue had moved now from a labourer's debt to the quality of an owner's goods. The question that had seemed light in her voice had suddenly acquired weight in its commercial form.

She did not find it funny. Nor did it make her sad. It only made an old truth clear again—the same fact does not weigh the same in everyone's hands.

That afternoon Jagmohan told Navalkishor to prepare four new pages.

First—season/batch number.

Second—production mark and the names of the current team.

Third—advance or money paid, with date.

Fourth—the recipient's signature or thumbprint.

Navalkishor said, "Who will write all this?"

Jagmohan replied, "You will. That is why you are the clerk."

The workers nearby laughed again. This time even Navalkishor smiled a little, though his smile showed more weariness at the extra work than defeat.

Kaushalya said, "And the old debt?"

Jagmohan pulled Raghuni's page towards him on the table. "Where there is a print, we will examine it. Where there are only figures, Navalkishor will explain the basis. Figures in Raghuni's name will not automatically be added to Kaushalya's new wages."

Navalkishor immediately said, "Malik—"

"If the ledger is clear, it is better for me as well."

Kaushalya did not feel as though she had won anything at that moment. Raghuni had not returned. The shortages at home had not ended. The genuine advances of five thousand and two thousand were still in the account. She still needed to work.

But one thing had changed—the two slanting lines were no longer stuck to her body.

She agreed to work at the kiln that season. Her new team consisted of herself and Dhanmanti, her nephew's wife. They were given a new mark—a small crescent. Beside it the batch number was written: "Jeth-3."

Taking the wooden marker in her hand, Kaushalya said, "If you give this mark to someone else next season, write the new season on the page."

Navalkishor said, "So now you'll become the clerk?"

"No. I'll only make bricks. The clerk will do the clerk's work properly."

Navalkishor laughed. "Your tongue has started running a great deal."

"Earlier my hands had more work to do in the clay."

Days passed. The rows of crescent-marked bricks grew longer. Each morning Kaushalya soaked the clay, filled the mould, smoothed the corners, and pressed in the little wooden marker. The sign was small, but now beside it there was a date, a batch number, and a current team.

Ramesar's two-line bricks dried as well. Often, as Kaushalya passed those rows, she would see the mark. For a moment she would remember Raghuni's hands. Then she would see Ramesar's bent back and Panmati's clay-smeared palms.

Slowly she understood: a mark could remain a memory, but it could not remain ownership.

At the end of the month the first new accounting was done. Navalkishor opened the production ledger.

"Jeth-3, crescent, Kaushalya–Dhanmanti—eighteen thousand two hundred bricks."

Then he opened the advance ledger.

"Kaushalya—two thousand, for school fees. Thumbprint."

Kaushalya listened as the entry was read out, then gave her print.

"The old account?" she asked.

Navalkishor opened another page. "Five thousand and two thousand—those two are accepted. No basis was found for the remaining three entries. The owner has struck them out."

Kaushalya remained silent for a few moments.

"What was genuinely Raghuni's will remain written?"

"It will. In his name. It will not enter your new wages automatically."

Kaushalya nodded. She did not hear complete justice in that answer. She heard only one clear line: this figure on this page belonged to this person, on this date. Another figure on another page belonged to another matter. Perhaps clear accounting began there.

Before the rains, a new storehouse was built at the kiln. Leftover bricks from different seasons were used in its lower wall.

One day Kaushalya stopped there to drink water. In the wall she saw a brick marked with two slanting lines. Beside it was another bearing a crescent.

The two marks were set into the same wall.

Kaushalya touched the brick with the two lines. She remembered Raghuni—squinting in the sun, brushing clay from his hands, saying, "So that our batch can be distinguished."

Her eyes filled with tears, but the mark no longer looked to her like a figure in a debt account.

It was only a sign of work from the previous season.

On another brick in the wall was the crescent—this season's.

Kaushalya did not touch it.

She knew that next year the crescent might pass into the hands of some other team.

The mark would remain on the brick.

But in the ledger, the date, the batch, and the person had to remain separate.

Otherwise, a small line in clay can slowly become such a shackle that an entire lifetime may be too little to break it.

Story 87

The Pocket Ledger

Turning out the pockets before washing clothes was the first rule of the laundry.

Jhunia Devi's hands were quick at this work, but quickness did not mean haste. She checked the left shirt pocket first, then the right, then the small inner pocket. Before putting her hand into a trouser pocket, she shook the garment so that the point of a pen or a key would not cut her thumb.

Kusum Laundry was not a very large place. At the front stood the counter where clothes were received, behind it the washing room, to one side a long ironing board, and against the wall a small iron cupboard.

Above the cupboard, in bold letters, was written—

"Write down whatever you find."

The rule had been made two years earlier.

Before that, coins found in pockets were sometimes left on the counter, keys were tied to the clothes with thread, slips of paper went through the wash with the garments, and sometimes people forgot which object belonged to whom.

Once a customer said there had been a five-hundred-rupee note in his trouser pocket. The clothes came back; the note did not.

For three days Ramakant Babu, the owner of the laundry, questioned everyone. No one admitted anything. There was proof on neither side. In the end, an equal amount was deducted from the wages of the four people who had sorted clothes that day.

That day Jhunia had said, "If we are to be responsible for whatever we find, then we should write it down too. Otherwise the pocket is the customer's and the blame is ours."

That was when the register began.

Its columns were simple—garment number, pocket, object found, quantity or identifying mark, time found, who found it, and into whose keeping it was placed.

If cash was found, the number of notes and the total amount were recorded. If keys were found: "brass—one," "iron—two." For coins, the total

amount. A bus ticket, a shop receipt, a medicine wrapper, a child's glass marble —everything was written down.

Within a few days the rule became everyone's habit.

Along with Jhunia, Sudha, Parveen, and Jagdish sorted the clothes. Each pair of eyes noticed different things. Sudha looked first at the stitching, Parveen at stains, Jagdish at buttons, Jhunia at pockets.

"Write down whatever you find" was no longer merely the owner's instruction to them. It became a wall of protection around them.

One evening three hundred-rupee notes came out of the inner pocket of a yellow shirt. Jhunia entered them in the register, showed them to Sudha, placed all three notes in a small envelope, and wrote the garment number on it.

Two days later the customer came to collect his clothes and said, "There was some money in the pocket."

Ramakant Babu, seated at the counter, opened the register.

"Three hundred?"

The customer thought for a moment, then said, "Yes, it must have been three hundred."

The envelope was brought out. The three notes were returned.

Jhunia watched from a distance. It seemed to her that the paper was small, but its voice was large.

Another time a customer began speaking loudly because he could not find the key that had been in his coat. The register said: "Right pocket, one iron key, blue thread, envelope 11."

The cupboard was opened. The key was found.

That day Ramakant Babu rested his hand on the register and said, "This is how people come to trust us."

Jhunia said inwardly, "And how we protect ourselves as well."

The trouble began with that same paper of trust.

It was a humid afternoon in Sawan. Few people were coming in from outside to leave clothes. Inside, the heat from the irons was intense. The fan was running, but all its air did was circle the smell of hot metal through the room.

Sudha placed a pair of grey trousers in front of Jhunia.

"Check the pockets."

Jhunia took two coins from the left pocket. The right pocket was empty. In the back pocket was a sheet of paper folded four times.

It was unopened, but the folds lay in such a way that two lines inside could be seen at the edge.

Jhunia carried it over to the register.

Sudha was doing the entries in the register at that time.

"What should I write?" Sudha asked.

"One sheet of paper."

Sudha picked it up. "There are many kinds of paper. Tomorrow someone may say it was a five-hundred-rupee voucher and that you wrote only 'paper.'"

She opened one fold.

Jhunia said at once, "Don't open it."

But one fold had already been opened.

At the top was a name—"Ma."

The first line below read: "I won't be able to send money this month."

Sudha stopped.

"Now what?"

Jhunia folded the paper again.

"One sheet of paper, folded four times, 'Ma' written at the top."

Sudha said, "The rule says—write down whatever you find."

"What we found is a piece of paper. Not what is inside it."

At this Ramakant Babu spoke from behind them. "Write it all down. Then there will be no dispute tomorrow."

Sudha read two lines and copied them into the register: "Ma—I won't be able to send money this month; lost my job at the hotel..."

Jhunia looked at her hand.

"Why so much?"

Ramakant Babu said, "For identification. There is a great deal of suspicion in our work. The clearer the record, the better."

Jhunia fell silent.

The paper was put into the envelope for garment number 418.

Until evening, the matter seemed finished.

The next day a young man came to collect the grey trousers. His name was Ravi. Garment number 418 was written on the laundry receipt.

Ravi was not a regular customer. For the past two months he had been working nights at a nearby eatery and studying during the day for competitive examinations. Sometimes he brought the clothes himself; sometimes his maternal cousin Dinesh, with whom he lived, dropped them off.

That day Dinesh was with Ravi.

Sudha was counting the clothes at the counter. Ramakant Babu looked at the register.

"There was a paper in one pair of trousers."

Ravi held out his hand at once. "Yes, give it to me."

Ramakant Babu asked for the envelope. While looking for it, Sudha read the entry in the register—

"Ma—I won't be able to send money this month; lost my job at the hotel..."

Dinesh turned to look at Ravi.

"You lost your job?"

Ravi's hand, which had been reaching for the envelope, stopped midway.

For a few moments the only sound in the laundry was the fan.

Ravi asked softly, "Why did you read this?"

Ramakant Babu said, "We have a rule that we record whatever is found in a pocket."

"Then write that a paper was found. Why write what was written on the paper?"

"For identification."

Ravi did not look at Dinesh.

"For identification, should what I wrote to my mother remain in everyone's register?"

Sudha said, "I wrote it according to the rule."

Ravi looked at her, but his voice was not harsh.

"I am not blaming you. I am only asking—do you need an account of what was in my pocket, or an account of my life?"

After he said this, Jhunia rose from beside the ironing board and came to the counter.

"I said the same thing yesterday."

Ramakant Babu grew a little uncomfortable. "Look, this register protects us from accusations of theft. Without details, later someone may say there were five thousand rupees inside the paper, or that it was some important document."

Ravi took the envelope containing his paper.

"If there were five thousand rupees, then five thousand rupees is a separate object. If it was a document, write 'document.' Why the sentences?"

Dinesh remained silent. He could see that his very presence had become an embarrassment for Ravi.

Ravi picked up his clothes and walked out.

Dinesh followed him.

The register remained open on the counter.

In that line, something Ravi had never chosen to tell was now part of the laundry's permanent writing.

Sudha capped her pen.

"Did I do wrong?"

Jhunia said, "You followed the rule. Now the question is about the rule."

Ramakant Babu said, "If we remove the rule, the accusations will return."

"Don't remove the rule," Jhunia said. "Set a boundary to the account."

That night, after the washing stopped, all four workers sat around the counter.

Jagdish kept turning the pages of the old register.

"Look how much is written here. 'Doctor's prescription—medicine three times a day.' 'Loan account—seven thousand.' 'School-fee receipt.' While saving people's belongings, we have been collecting their private matters."

Parveen placed her thumb on one line.

"Here it says, 'paper with mobile-phone number.' The whole number is written too."

Ramakant Babu pulled the register toward himself.

Before this, all those entries had looked like carefulness to him. That night, for the first time, he saw the other face of that carefulness.

"Then what should be written?"

Jhunia took a blank sheet of paper.

At the top she wrote four words: "Object, number, value, identifying mark."

"If cash is found, the total amount and the number of notes. If it is a key, the number and an outward identifying mark. Coins, ring, pen—whatever the object is. If a private paper is found, 'private paper—one.' That is all."

Sudha asked, "What if the paper itself is an identity card?"

Parveen said, "A name that is clearly visible on the outside can be used for identification without reading anything else. But not what is written inside."

Jagdish said, "And if a paper is folded, don't open it."

Ramakant Babu asked another question. "What if the customer says there was cash inside the paper?"

Jhunia said, "We do not open the paper. If there is cash hidden inside a fold, then we simply will not know. But write a rule for customers as well—do not leave cash or important objects in pockets. Our responsibility is to keep safe what we find, not to read people's minds."

The discussion went on for a long time.

In the end they did not make a new register. Five new columns were added to the old one—garment number, pocket, category of object, number/amount, envelope number.

A short rule was written below them—

"The text of private papers will not be copied."

Ramakant Babu said, "Cash will require two signatures."

Sudha added, "And a private paper goes at once into a small sealed envelope."

Parveen laughed. "Make sure you say 'sealed,' or Jagdish will open it again."

Jagdish said, "I only look to make sure the paper doesn't dissolve in the wash."

The laughter was brief, but it loosened some of the tension of the night.

One question still remained—Ravi's sentence in the old register.

"What do we do with this?" Sudha asked.

Ramakant Babu said, "It would not be right to tear a page out of the register."

Jhunia said, "Don't tear it. Cover the sentence, and write above it: 'Private text removed under the new rule'—with the date and two signatures."

Ramakant Babu thought for a while.

Then a thin strip of paper was cut and pasted over Ravi's private sentence. Above it they wrote: "Private text removed—date..."

Sudha and Ramakant Babu signed it.

Jhunia said, "And if someone asks later what was written there?"

"The answer will be: private matter. That is all," Ramakant Babu said.

The new rule took effect the very next day.

Its first test came with a blue shirt. In the pocket they found two five-rupee coins, a small key, and a folded paper.

Sudha picked up the paper as she would have before, but this time she did not open it.

In the register she wrote—

"Garment 431. Right pocket. Cash—10. Key—1. Private paper—1. Envelope —7."

Jhunia added the second signature.

The paper was sealed in envelope number seven.

In the evening the customer came. After taking his clothes, he said, "Did I leave a slip of paper in my pocket?"

Sudha checked the register. "One private paper. Envelope seven."

The envelope was returned.

The customer opened the paper, looked at it, then folded it at once and put it in his pocket.

No one asked what was written on it.

Two weeks later another suspicion of theft arose.

A customer said there had been two thousand rupees in the pocket of his kurta. The register said: "Cash—two thousand; four five-hundred-rupee notes; envelope 19; Jhunia/Parveen."

The envelope was opened. All four notes were safe.

The customer counted the money and said, "Correct."

Ramakant Babu looked at Jhunia.

The register was still protecting them.

The only difference was that now no one's private sentences were needed for that protection.

A month later Ravi came to the laundry again. This time he was alone. He carried three shirts and two pairs of trousers.

Sudha was a little hesitant as she counted the clothes.

Ravi himself said, "I have come back."

Ramakant Babu came out.

"That day..." he began.

Ravi did not stop him.

Ramakant Babu said, "The rule has changed."

He showed him the register—the column for private papers, the envelope number, and the sentence written below.

Ravi read: "The text of private papers will not be copied."

He did not close the register. For a few moments he kept looking through the older pages.

"My entry?"

Ramakant Babu opened the old page. A thin strip had been pasted over the sentence: "Private text removed under the new rule."

Ravi did not touch the strip with his hand.

"All right."

Jhunia called from behind them, "The paper was not torn out, but your words are no longer out in the open either."

Ravi looked at her. "And if I leave something in a pocket this time?"

Jhunia laughed. "The object will come back. The story will remain yours."

Ravi smiled a little too.

He handed over the clothes.

Jhunia checked the first pair of trousers. One coin. The other pocket was empty. In the back pocket of the second pair was a folded slip.

Sudha picked up the slip, but did not open it.

"Garment 487," she wrote. "Private paper—one. Envelope—12."

Ravi watched all this from the other side of the counter.

He did not say what was written on the slip.

No one asked.

On the old wall of the laundry, the bold words were still there: "Write down whatever you find."

One day Jhunia added another line beneath them in smaller letters—

"Not what is written on it."

From that day on, the pocket ledger kept account of objects, not minds.

Story 88

The Evening Chair

The green iron chair at the door of the pharmacy had a small sign tied to it —"For Customers."

The sign was white, the letters properly bold. It could be read even from a distance.

Govind saw it many times in the course of the day.

His place of work was exactly two arm's lengths behind that chair.

The shop opened at half past eight in the morning. Govind first opened the grille door, stood by the steps, cleared the way for the vehicle bringing medicine cartons, and kept watch over the people coming in and going out.

His shift lasted until nine at night.

The chair remained there all day.

Often empty.

Govind's feet were not empty of work all day.

Inside the shop were two medicine counters. A glass cabinet stood between them. To the right was a small blood-pressure machine. Outside, to the left of the steps, stood the green chair.

At first there had been no sign on the chair.

Two months earlier, an elderly customer had been left standing for a long time. After that, the shop owner, Umesh Babu, had said, "Keep one chair permanently for customers."

Seema, who worked at the medicine counter, wrote the words on thick paper and tied the sign to the chair.

Everyone had thought it a good idea that day.

Govind too had said, "Good. The elderly will be able to rest."

The next afternoon the shop was empty. The sun outside was fierce. After carrying five cartons of medicine inside, Govind sat on the chair for two moments.

Umesh Babu saw him from inside.

"Govind, that is for customers."

Govind stood up at once.

"Yes, Babu."

"There is a seat for you in the back room. You can go there during your break."

There was a seat in the back room, but the door could not be seen from there. Govind had a half-hour break. For the rest of the time, his place was at the door.

From that day on, Govind no longer needed to read the sign.

Even when the chair stood empty, he did not touch it.

Sometimes he shifted the weight of his right foot onto his left. Sometimes he raised his heel. Sometimes he rested a palm against the doorframe and let it take a little of his body's weight.

In the afternoon no one noticed any of this.

After five in the evening, before the clinic opposite closed, the crowd would grow.

That was when the green chair truly became busy.

One day Sharda Devi came and sat down. She had an old cloth bag in her hand and a doctor's prescription.

Seema said, "It will take ten minutes to prepare the medicine."

Sharda Devi sat on the chair.

Govind stood beside the doorway.

Ten minutes passed. Then fifteen. One box of medicine could not be found inside, so Seema was opening another cabinet.

Sharda Devi looked at Govind.

Govind bent one knee once, then straightened it again.

"Do your feet hurt?" Sharda Devi asked.

Govind laughed. "My work is to stand, Maai."

"Is your work to stand, or to keep watch?"

Govind did not answer.

Sharda Devi asked again, "How long have you been standing?"

"Since morning."

"In between?"

"There is a break."

Sharda Devi read the sign.

Just then Seema held out her medicine.

"Yours is ready."

Sharda Devi rose. She tucked the bag under her arm. Taking hold of the back of the chair, she pushed it two arm's lengths towards Govind.

"My work here is done. Now you sit for two minutes."

Govind's hand went instinctively to the back of the chair, then stopped.

"No, Maai. This is for customers."

Sharda Devi looked at the sign, then at the bag of medicine in her hand.

"Now that I have the medicine in my hand, am I no longer a customer?"

Govind laughed, but he did not sit.

From behind the medicine counter Umesh Babu said, "Maai, you sit. His rules are different."

"I don't need to sit now."

Sharda Devi left the chair where it was and walked out.

Govind moved it back to its old place.

The shop closed that evening, but Seema remembered the small incident.

The next afternoon the chair stood empty for three hours.

Govind did not sit on it even once during those three hours.

In the evening Sirchan Babu arrived, leaning on a stick. His medicine should have been ready, but one name the doctor had written was unclear. Seema was trying to telephone and ask.

Sirchan Babu sat on the chair.

Five minutes later the answer came.

He stood up, but did not leave.

"Govind, no one is sitting now. Sit down."

Govind gave the same answer again—"This is for customers."

Sirchan Babu read the sign.

"You work here, so you are not a customer. But were your knees made differently from a customer's knees?"

This time Umesh Babu said nothing.

Govind still did not sit.

Sirchan Babu placed his empty medicine bag on the chair.

"Until someone else comes, this bag is the customer. Sit and guard the bag."

Seema laughed. Govind grew embarrassed.

At last he sat on one edge of the chair for two minutes.

His eyes remained on the doorway.

A young man came in. Govind stood up at once.

The young man did not ask for the chair. He went straight to the medicine counter.

Sirchan Babu picked up his bag and said, "See? The chair was empty, and the work did not stop."

This time Umesh Babu said, "Two minutes one day, then half an hour every day. A rule is a rule."

Govind remained silent.

Without stopping her work on the prescription, Seema said only, "One must also remember what question a rule was made to answer."

Umesh Babu heard her, but did not reply.

Nothing changed for three days.

In the evenings the green chair passed among elderly customers. In the daytime it remained empty. Govind remained standing.

On the evening of the fourth day, it rained.

People crowded beneath the awning at the doorway. The chair came to stand in the middle of the passage.

At that moment a woman arrived, pushing her elderly father in a wheelchair.

The way through the doorway had become narrow because of the chair and the people.

Govind immediately picked up the green chair and put it against the wall, moved people aside, and cleared the middle passage.

The wheelchair went inside.

Umesh Babu said, "This is why we cannot keep more chairs at the door. The way gets blocked."

Sharda Devi had come again that evening for medicine. She saw everything.

"A chair that blocks the way is wrong," she said. "The need to sit is not wrong."

Umesh Babu remained silent.

Seema took out a measuring tape to measure the width of the doorway.

"A passage three arm's lengths wide can be kept clear in the middle at all times," she said. "There is empty space along this side of the wall."

"If we leave a chair there, it will be stolen at night," Umesh Babu said.

"Don't leave one there," Seema said. "A seat that folds against the wall could be made."

For the first time Govind spoke in the middle of the discussion—"Folded up in the daytime, opened when needed. The way would stay clear too."

Umesh Babu looked at him.

"You are having a great many ideas."

Govind fell silent.

Sharda Devi said, "Ideas come easily when the feet hurt."

This time Umesh Babu neither laughed nor grew annoyed.

After the shop closed that night, Seema drew a straight chalk line down the middle of the doorway.

"This is the passage," she said.

On the left wall she drew two small rectangles.

"These are the places for the seats."

Umesh Babu took the measuring tape and measured again. A wheelchair could pass. So could a trolley carrying cartons.

"How much will the blacksmith charge?" he asked.

Govind named a local blacksmith.

The next afternoon the blacksmith came. Two small seats were made by cutting an old thick plank. They were fixed to the wall with iron hinges. When not in use, they could be folded up flat against the wall.

Umesh Babu said, "Write that one is for customers and one for the guard."

Seema took out a sheet of paper, then stopped.

"The same problem again."

"What?"

"What if the customer's seat is empty and Govind is tired? What if Govind's seat is empty and two elderly customers arrive?"

Umesh Babu looked at the paper.

"Then what should we write?"

Seema said, "Nothing."

Govind said at once, "If there is no sign, people will quarrel."

Sharda Devi, who happened to have come again for medicine, heard this.

"Keep a sign," she said.

Everyone looked at her.

"Write—'Open a seat when needed. Fold it back when you get up.'"

Sirchan Babu too happened to come that evening. He said, "And keep the middle passage clear."

Seema wrote two lines.

"Open a seat when needed. Fold it back when you get up. Keep the middle passage clear."

Umesh Babu read the notice.

"Nothing about employees or customers?"

"No," Seema said.

Govind kept reading the notice.

The new arrangement began the next day.

In the morning the doorway was clear. Both seats were folded against the wall.

At ten an elderly man came. He opened one seat and sat. When he received his medicine, he got up and folded it back.

At half past one in the afternoon there were no customers in the shop. Govind opened one seat.

He sat.

For three minutes.

His eyes remained on the doorway. A medicine delivery vehicle arrived; he stood up at once, folded the seat, and cleared the way.

Umesh Babu watched from inside.

He said nothing.

In the evening there was a crowd. Both seats were open. Sharda Devi sat on one, Sirchan Babu on the other.

Govind stood.

Sharda Devi's medicine was ready first. She got up.

This time she did not push the chair towards Govind. The seat was fixed to the wall.

She said only, "It is empty."

Govind looked at the crowd. A pregnant woman was standing near the medicine counter.

Govind gestured towards the seat with his hand.

The woman sat down.

Sharda Devi smiled.

"You did right."

At seven the crowd thinned a little. The pregnant woman had left. So had Sirchan Babu.

One seat was empty.

Govind sat.

Umesh Babu came outside and looked at the chalk line through the doorway. Old rainwater had erased half of it.

"Draw the chalk line again," he told Seema.

Then he looked at Govind.

"Keep an eye on the passage."

"I will," Govind said.

"And if the crowd grows?"

"We'll see what is needed."

Umesh Babu nodded and went back inside.

The old green chair now stood inside beside the blood-pressure machine. Its "For Customers" sign had been removed.

The two small holes left by the sign remained in the back of the chair.

After a few days, two dots of rust appeared around the holes.

On the wall by the doorway, the two folding seats kept opening and closing again and again through the day.

Sometimes a customer sat there. Sometimes Govind. Sometimes Seema, for two moments, to set down a carton of medicine. Sometimes a child waiting for his grandmother's medicine.

The question of whom the chair belonged to slowly became pointless.

In the evening, only this was looked at—who was tired, who was waiting, and whether the middle passage was clear.

Story 89

The Fifth Bucket

It was the last week of Jeth. For three days, no water had come through the municipal tap.

The black tank on the roof of Sharda Sadan had fallen to less than half.

The building had four flats—two upstairs, two downstairs. Near the gate, behind the pump room, there was also a small room where the caretaker, Basudev, lived with his wife Sita and their twelve-year-old daughter Rupa.

On paper, that room was the "service room."

It was a place to live, but in the count of residents it had no number.

At six in the morning, Basudev checked the motor switch, then opened the lid of the roof tank and peered inside.

"We'll have to call for the tanker again today," he said as he came down.

The water rule at Sharda Sadan had been made the previous summer. When the tank ran low, the taps of the four flats were opened for fixed periods. Twelve minutes for the first flat, twelve for the second, twelve for the third, twelve for the fourth.

Besides those four periods, one red bucket was allowed to be filled twice for washing the stairs, the entrance, and the common toilet.

Painted on the bucket in white were the words—"Common Work."

Everyone called it the fifth bucket.

It belonged to no household.

It belonged to the building.

Basudev's morning work was to fill that bucket, wash the entrance, wipe the dust from the stairs, pour water near the rubbish bin, and clean the common toilet.

Sita had said many times, "Why is the red so bright? From far away it looks as though the building's water is in my hands."

Basudev would laugh.

"Not ours. The work's."

He had given that answer so many times that little by little it had settled inside him too.

Each of the four flats had its own blue container for storing water. In Basudev's room there was a small earthen pot and two old brass lotas.

On ordinary days, they fetched drinking and cooking water from the public tap in the lane.

That tap ran between five and six in the morning.

For three days, it too had been dry.

On the first day, Sita brought two pitchers from another lane.

On the second, she fetched water from the temple tap half a mile away.

On the third day, there was a queue at the temple tap too.

Rupa went carrying two small containers, but returned an hour and a half later empty-handed.

"The water ran out," she said.

Sita had half a lota of water left by the stove to wash the rice.

At that moment Basudev was wiping the entrance. The red bucket was half full.

Sita saw him from a distance.

"Give me two lotas from that."

Basudev stopped his hand.

"This is for the common work."

"Are our mouths less important than the common work?"

Basudev said nothing.

Sita herself went to the bucket. She filled two lotas. One she set aside for the rice, the other for Rupa to drink.

Just then Shashibhushan Babu saw them from the balcony of the second flat upstairs.

"Basudev!"

His voice was sharp.

Basudev looked up.

"Yes?"

"Why is the water from that red bucket going into your room?"

Sita stood still, the lota in her hand.

Shashibhushan Babu came down the stairs. In his hand was the small notebook in which the water account was kept.

"The rule is the same for everyone," he said. "The tank is low. What is meant for common cleaning must not go into a household."

Sita did not set the lota down.

"Is my home outside this building?"

"I didn't say that."

"Then where is water written for us?"

Shashibhushan Babu opened the notebook. There were four lines—Flat 1, Flat 2, Flat 3, Flat 4. Beneath them it said—Common work: two buckets.

Basudev too looked at the notebook.

His name was not on that page.

Nor Sita's.

Nor Rupa's.

But two buckets had been written down for Basudev's broom, mop, stairs and toilet.

Sita said quietly, "The water in my hands has been counted. My throat has not."

Shashibhushan Babu closed the notebook.

"Arguing won't make more water now. In the evening we'll all sit together and look at the account."

"The account is already here," Sita said. "Four homes, two buckets. Three bodies missing in between."

Carrying the lota, she went back toward the room.

With the water left in the red bucket, Basudev wiped half the entrance. He left the other half.

That day a thin layer of dust remained on the upper two steps of the staircase.

At noon the tanker came. The driver first asked for cash. The people in the four flats paid their shares. Basudev collected the money and gave it to the driver, held the pipe while the tank was filled, and shut the motor before it overflowed.

Rupa stood in the shade and watched.

The tank filled, but the rule did not change.

At seven that evening, the people from all four flats gathered in the small veranda by the entrance.

Shashibhushan Babu opened the notebook again.

"First understand this," he said. "The problem is that there is too little water. If we make rules out of emotion, there will be another quarrel."

Kiran Devi, who lived in the first downstairs flat, said, "Fine. But the count has to be complete."

"There are four flats."

"How many people?"

For a few moments, the question was followed by silence.

Eleven people lived in the four flats together.

Three lived behind the pump room.

Fourteen in all.

On paper, the water had four doors. In the building, there were fourteen bodies.

Naresh, from the fourth flat upstairs, said, "So now we divide it into fourteen shares? Children, old people, everyone equally?"

Kiran Devi said, "Before dividing anything, separate the work this time."

She pointed toward the red bucket.

"Whose two buckets are these?"

"For cleaning," Shashibhushan Babu said.

"Whose body does the cleaning?"

"Basudev's."

"Then the building gives water to his labour, but not to his life?"

Basudev grew uncomfortable. Hearing so many words spoken on his behalf felt good to him, but heavy too.

He said, "I don't want pity. I want a place in the rule."

Sita stood at the doorway of the room.

"And the common cleaning must not stop either," she said. "The dirt belongs to everyone."

At that, everyone looked toward her.

Shashibhushan Babu opened the notebook again.

"Then what is the solution?"

Basudev had not thought it through beforehand. But while wiping only half the entrance that morning, one thing had become clear to him.

"Keep two accounts separate," he said.

"Which two?"

"Water for bodies, and water for the building's work."

"Go on."

"The minimum needed for drinking, cooking and essential washing should be according to the number of people. We three are included in that. Water for wiping the stairs, the common toilet, the drain—that is a separate share for the work. If there is a shortage, the water for the work can be reduced, not the count of people."

Naresh said, "But if cleaning is reduced, the building will become dirty."

Sita replied at once, "Instead of washing the whole veranda every day, sweep it daily and wipe it with water every other day. Don't reduce the water for the toilet. Wash the drain only when needed."

Kiran Devi added, "Treat washing the balconies as private work. No common water for that."

Meera, from the third flat upstairs, said, "And washing cars is completely stopped for now."

Naresh fell silent. The car was his.

Rupa had been listening from a corner of the doorway.

She went inside and brought out an old sheet of paper.

"Babu, shall I write everyone's names?"

Basudev said, "Names aren't necessary. Write the numbers."

Rupa made two headings on the paper.

"Bodies."

"Work."

Under Bodies, she made fourteen little dots.

Under Work, she made three lines—not drinking; common toilet; stairs/veranda; drain.

Shashibhushan Babu laughed.

"Drinking isn't 'work'?"

Rupa said, "Drinking is under bodies."

For the first time, no one in the veranda laughed.

Everyone kept looking at her sheet of paper.

For the next half hour, they argued over quantities.

How much was the minimum?

Should cooking and drinking be counted separately or together?

How much for an infant?

When should clothes be washed?

The cleaning of the toilet could not be reduced.

The stairs did not have to be washed with water every day.

In the end, the decision was not a perfect calculation.

It was an order of priority.

First, the minimum for drinking and cooking.

After that, the common toilet.

Then essential household use.

Then the stairs and veranda.

Washing cars, decorative washing of courtyards, hosing dust away—stopped on days of shortage.

And most important of all—the three bodies behind the pump room were now part of the count.

Shashibhushan Babu drew a straight line through the old page's words "four flats."

Beneath it he wrote—"Residents: 14."

Then—"Common work: measured separately."

The red bucket would remain red.

But its meaning had changed.

The next morning Basudev filled the bucket.

Rupa asked, "Is this still the fifth bucket?"

Basudev said, "Yes. But not of a fifth household."

"Then whose?"

"Of the work that belongs to everyone."

Rupa lifted her small drinking lota.

"And this?"

"Yours. Because you are in the count."

Rupa burst out laughing.

"Fourteenth."

"Yes, fourteenth."

The public tap did not run that day either.

But Rupa did not go to the temple carrying empty containers.

The tank water had already been measured out. Sita washed the rice. Rupa drank. Basudev cleaned the common toilet.

The stairs were only swept.

At noon, one resident said, "No mopping today?"

Basudev said, "That is the order on shortage days."

The man looked at the steps. There was dust, but no filth.

"All right."

Two days later, the municipal tap ran for half an hour. The building breathed easier.

Then the question arose—now that the crisis was over, would the old rule return, or the new one?

Shashibhushan Babu said, "Now that the water has come, will fourteen bodies become twelve again?"

No one answered.

The old page was not torn out.

It remained in the register—four flats, two buckets.

On the next page—fourteen residents, common work separate.

The difference between those two pages was not only a difference in numbers.

The first page counted the building's doors.

The second counted the bodies living between those doors.

When Sawan came, the tank began to stay full. The red bucket was spoken of less often.

But Rupa drew a small line beneath its white lettering.

"Common Work" was still written there.

Below the line, in pencil, she wrote—"The people who do the work are counted too."

Basudev saw it.

"Who told you to write that?"

"No one."

"What if they erase it?"

Rupa shrugged.

"Let them. It will still be in the register."

In the evening light, the red bucket lay upside down in the corner of the staircase.

It was empty.

But because of that empty bucket, three bodies were no longer empty spaces on paper.

Story 90

The Discarded Identity Card

When the evening siren sounded at the packing factory in the Sonbarsa industrial belt, Chanda Devi picked up her cloth bag from beneath her table.

That day the siren sounded a little different from other days.

Work ended at five as usual, but for Chanda and the twelve others with her, the contract itself was ending that evening.

For three months they had counted soap boxes, folded paper, tied cartons and placed them on trolleys.

After three months, the factory's colours, smells and sounds had settled into their bodies.

The identity card she had received at the gate on the first day bore Chanda's small photograph, her name, her worker number and a red stripe.

The red stripe meant—contract worker.

The permanent workers' cards had blue stripes.

At the midday meal break, the difference in colour did not seem to mean much.

At the gate, its meaning was clear.

At ten past five, Kailash, the contractor's clerk, began collecting the red identity cards one by one.

With a small metal punch, he made a round hole in the right-hand corner of each card.

The moment the hole was punched, the card was considered inactive.

The punched identity cards kept dropping into a blue box beside the exit room.

Chanda handed over her card.

Kailash punched it.

The card fell into the box.

Without meaning to, Chanda looked inside.

Thirteen small photographs lay one over another.

Some faces were upside down, some upright.

Kailash said, “Come to the accounts office tomorrow at eleven for your final wages.”

Chanda asked, “What shall we show at the gate?”

Kailash laughed.

"Say your name. Everyone knows."

Ramavatar, standing behind her, said, "But you've thrown the identity cards into the scrap box."

"The cards became scrap, not the people," Kailash said.

Someone laughed softly.

At the time, the remark passed like a joke.

The next day Chanda reached the gate at five minutes to eleven.

Ramavatar, Sahdev, Reshma, Pavitri and the others were with her.

Rahim Mian, the guard, was standing at the gate.

He recognised Chanda's face.

For three months, the two had met at that same gate almost every day.

Chanda said, "We've been called to the accounts office for our final wages."

Rahim Mian folded his hands and, with a trace of embarrassment, asked, "Identity card?"

Chanda smiled.

"Yesterday, right in front of you, it was punched and dropped into the box."

Rahim Mian turned the pages of the register.

Against Chanda's name, in red ink, was written—contract ended.

"I can't let you in on the strength of this register," he said.

Ramavatar grew irritated.

"We worked inside until yesterday, and today we can't go in to collect our own wages?"

Rahim Mian kept his voice low.

"I didn't make the rule. You need an active identity card or a visitor's pass."

Reshma said, "Then give us a visitor's pass."

"The person you are going to meet has to authorise it from inside."

"The accounts office."

Rahim Mian picked up the telephone.

He dialled the accounts office.

It rang three times.

No one answered.

He dialled again.

This time someone picked up.

Rahim Mian explained the situation.

He listened for a while.

Then he said, "All right, but authorisation by name for each person?"

An answer came from the other end.

Rahim Mian put down the telephone.

"The accounts office says: come with the contractor's clerk. He will identify you."

Kailash had not yet arrived.

Chanda looked at the clock.

Twenty past eleven.

Final wages at the accounts office were to be paid from twelve.

Everyone stood in the small patch of shade outside the gate.

Meanwhile, permanent workers kept showing their identity cards and going in.

The gate opened as soon as a blue stripe appeared.

The people of the red stripe stood outside, but none of them had a red stripe in hand any longer.

At five minutes to twelve, Kailash arrived on a motorcycle.

He stopped when he saw the crowd.

"Why haven't you gone inside?"

Ramavatar replied, "Because you threw all our identities into the scrap box yesterday."

Kailash looked a little uneasy.

He went over to Rahim Mian.

"These were all my workers."

Rahim Mian said, "Were—that I know. But for today's entry, the register needs a basis."

"I'm telling you."

"And if you aren't here tomorrow?"

Kailash fell silent.

He wrote the names of all thirteen on a sheet of paper and signed it.

Rahim Mian went to the security officer's room.

He returned ten minutes later.

"For this once, you may go in as a group. But enter everyone's name in the gate register."

All thirteen went inside.

Another queue formed outside the accounts office.

Naval Kishore, the accounts clerk, called the names one by one.

"Worker number?"

Chanda said, "317."

"Identity card?"

Chanda looked at Naval Babu.

"It was punched and thrown into the scrap box."

Naval Babu frowned.

"Without the number, it is difficult to find the record."

"I just told you the number—317."

"Any proof?"

Chanda held out her service letter recording the end of the contract.

It carried her name and the period of work, but not her worker number.

Naval Babu kept turning the pages of the register.

At last he found the name.

"Give your thumb impression."

Chanda gave her impression.

Her wages were counted out.

She asked, "What if I hadn't remembered my worker number?"

Naval Babu said, "Then I would have searched by name."

"And if two people had the same name?"

Naval Babu paused.

"Then I would have asked the contractor."

Chanda folded the service letter and put it into her bag.

"My identity card had the number on it."

"Yes."

"And that identity card was punched and thrown away yesterday."

Naval Babu said nothing.

By one in the afternoon, not everyone had received their wages.

Two people's names had been entered in the register with different spellings by mistake.

One worker number had been duplicated.

One woman, Kamli, did not remember her number.

Kailash went out for lunch.

Kamli's wages remained on hold.

She sat on the veranda outside the accounts office, inside the gate.

At two, Kailash returned.

He identified Kamli.

She received her wages.

As they left through the gate, Rahim Mian wrote the time beside each name.

Chanda watched.

"A name is needed to enter, a name is needed to leave, a number is needed for wages," she said, "but the paper that had both the name and the number was thrown away first."

Rahim Mian did not laugh.

"The gate rule says—when the contract ends, the identity card becomes inactive."

"The accounts office rule says—when the contract ends, come back for final wages."

"Yes."

"The two rules don't speak to each other."

Rahim Mian closed the register.

"That is true."

Three weeks later, another contract ended.

This time there were twenty-four workers.

In the evening, when identity cards were being collected, Kailash again took out the punch.

But a new stack lay on Rahim Mian's table at the gate.

Small slips of white paper.

At the top was printed—"Settlement Slip."

Below were five boxes—worker number, name, contractor, date, accounts office.

On the right, in red letters, was written—"Gate to accounts office only; valid for one day; surrender on exit."

Kailash took the first identity card.

He wrote the worker number on the slip.

He wrote the name.

He punched the identity card.

The punched card fell into the scrap box.

The slip went into the worker's hand.

Rahim Mian entered the serial number of that slip in his gate register.

The next day the workers came to the gate.

None of them had an active identity card.

But no one had to depend on the guard's memory to prove, "I was working here until yesterday."

The slip carried the name.

It carried the worker number.

It stated the room they were to go to.

The time of entry was written at the gate.

At the accounts office, the slip was checked, the number matched with the register, the thumb impression taken, and the wages paid.

On the way out, the slip was surrendered at the gate.

At the end of the day, the collected slips and the settlement entries in the accounts register were matched against each other.

A few months later, Chanda was passing through the industrial belt on some other errand.

She saw the gate of the old factory.

The blue scrap box was still there.

A worker was handing his red identity card to Kailash.

There came the small sound of the punch.

Click.

The card fell into the box.

At once, a white settlement slip went into the worker's hand.

Chanda stopped and watched for a moment.

Rahim Mian recognised her.

He raised a hand from inside the gate.

Chanda raised hers too.

In the blue box, an old identity card could become scrap.

But the final dues attached to the work recorded on that card did not become scrap.

The work could come to an end.

The accounting still had to be completed.

Story 91

Half a Signature

The rains had withdrawn, but the roof of the town's old grain warehouse was still leaking.

The warehouse no longer stored grain; it was now a storehouse for the municipal council's tools and old tables and chairs.

A twenty-day contract had been awarded to repair that roof.

The contractor, Harihar Sah, had engaged twelve daily-wage labourers and four craftsmen.

Jagarnath the mason was one of the four.

He laid bricks, mixed lime, straightened the edges of tin sheets, and by evening scraped the mortar stuck to his palms with his fingernails before going home.

His wage was seven hundred and twenty rupees a day.

On Saturday evening, the accounts for all seven days were settled together.

An old table stood on the front veranda of the warehouse.

Cash lay on one side of the table, a thick register on the other, with a red stamp and neatly cut small slips between them.

The young man who distributed the money was named Nandu.

Nandu was the contractor's nephew and was only just learning the work of keeping accounts.

He called out names rapidly, turned the register around, pointed with a finger to the signature box, and counted out the money.

On the first Saturday Jagarnath wrote his full name: "Jagarnath Paswan."

On the second Saturday too.

On the third Saturday, when he reached the register, his finger stopped.

That week, work had been done on six of the seven days.

On one day, heavy rain had made it impossible to climb onto the roof.

Jagarnath had already added up his wages in his head.

For six days: four thousand three hundred and twenty rupees.

Nandu placed four thousand two hundred rupees on the table.

"Why is one hundred and twenty short?" Jagarnath asked.

Nandu looked at the register.

"Tool loss."

"Which tool?"

"It is written here."

"I can see what is written. Which tool?"

Nandu turned to the next page, then came back to the first.

"The deduction has come from above."

Jagarnath turned the register towards himself.

He was not a very fast reader.

He could read figures well.

He understood words connected with work too.

Small print took him time to read.

Opposite his name in the register, separate boxes had been filled for days, rate, total wages, deduction, and amount payable.

In the deduction box it said: "Tool loss 120."

At the end of that same line was an empty space for his signature.

"I bring my own tools from home," Jagarnath said.

"The contractor's ropes and hammers are issued to everyone," Nandu said.

"Did anything break in my hands?"

"I don't know. Sign first, then ask Harihar Babu."

The queue behind them was growing.

Someone was anxious to catch a bus.

Someone wanted to get to the market.

Someone was counting the money needed for medicine they had been told to buy at home.

"Jagarnath da, just sign," Sadanand called from behind. "I'm getting late too."

Jagarnath picked up the pen.

He began to write his name.

"Jag..."

He stopped there.

Nandu looked up.

"What happened?"

"Give me my slip first."

"You get the slip after taking the money."

"Does the slip show this one hundred and twenty?"

"It should."

"Not 'should'. Show me."

Nandu began searching through the small slips for his name.

He found Jagarnath's slip.

It showed six days, the rate, total wages, and amount payable.

Against deduction there was only "120".

There was no reason.

Jagarnath took the slip in his hand.

"It does not say 'tool loss' here."

Nandu grew a little irritated.

"It's written in the register, isn't it?"

"The register will stay with you. What will stay with me?"

For a few moments, silence spread across the veranda.

Jagarnath looked at the half-written name before him.

The ink was drying.

Nandu looked at it too.

"What do we do with this?"

"Nothing yet. I'll finish it after I understand what I'm signing."

For the first time, Nandu did not laugh.

He turned the register back towards himself.

"Money cannot be paid against an incomplete signature."

Jagarnath said quietly, "Then what is understood from a complete signature?"

"That you received the money."

"Only that?"

"What else?"

"Then why is my signature under the box for the deduction?"

Nandu had no answer.

He called the contractor, Harihar Sah.

Harihar Sah was counting new tin sheets behind the roof.

He came over, looked at the register, and saw Jagarnath's half-written name.

"What new method is this?"

Jagarnath held out the slip.

"Explain to me which tool my one hundred and twenty rupees were deducted for."

Harihar Sah looked at the register.

"Two hammers went missing that day."

"Which day?"

"Tuesday."

"On Tuesday I was on the roof all day. The hammers were with the team on the ground."

"Then the loss must have been shared among everyone. There were twelve people; a little from each."

Jagarnath looked at the register again.

Sadanand's line also said "Tool loss 120".

So did Paras's.

The same was written against Rehana, who worked mortar along the edge of the tin sheets.

Jagarnath asked, "How much did the two hammers cost?"

Harihar Sah said, "That account is separate."

"If you took one hundred and twenty from each of us, that is one thousand four hundred and forty from twelve people."

The people standing behind now began wanting to see their own lines in the register.

Nandu put his hand over it.

"Don't all bend over it at once."

Rehana said, "Give me my slip first."

Sadanand said, "Mine too."

The queue that ten minutes earlier had been impatient to hurry home now stopped around the table.

Harihar Sah's voice hardened.

"Everyone will get their money. Why so much argument over one register?"

Jagarnath said, "The argument is not over the register. It is over what is being accepted beneath my name."

Harihar Sah placed a finger on the half-written "Jag..."

"Finish it."

"Show me the full account first."

"You don't trust me?"

Jagarnath thought for a moment.

"A register is not made for trust. It is made so that even if trust breaks, the facts can still be seen."

At those words, Nandu looked fully at Jagarnath for the first time.

Harihar Sah pulled up a chair and sat down.

"All right. Two hammers were missing. The burden was divided among everyone."

Rehana asked, "Why should the burden fall on me for tools I never even touched?"

"They were the team's tools."

"Then were they counted out in front of the team?"

No answer came.

Jagarnath turned his slip over.

The back was blank.

He said to Nandu, "Write here: two hammers missing; one hundred and twenty charged to each of twelve workers."

Nandu looked at Harihar Sah.

Harihar Sah said, "There is no need to write so much."

"Then what is the need for my signature?" Jagarnath asked.

Silence again.

Just then Anamika Jha, a junior engineer with the municipal council, came onto the veranda.

She had come to record the evening measurement of the work.

Seeing the crowd, she asked, "Are wages being distributed, or is this a meeting?"

Harihar Sah tried to make the matter sound small.

"Nothing much. One worker is stuck over a deduction."

Anamika looked at the register.

"Is the reason for the deduction written?"

"It says tool loss."

"Is there a register showing whose responsibility the tools were, when they went missing, and what they cost?"

Harihar Sah's expression changed slightly.

"It will be in the warehouse account."

"And on the worker's slip?"

Nandu showed her Jagarnath's slip.

Anamika said, "There is no reason written here."

Harihar Sah said at once, "Engineer madam, this is an account between me and the workers."

Anamika replied evenly, "The account is yours. But I measure this work. From tomorrow, I can require the count of tools issued and returned to be written down before work begins as well."

She did not close the register.

She only looked at Jagarnath's half-signature.

"Why isn't this complete?"

Jagarnath said, "I am reading."

Anamika did not smile.

She only said, "Read it through."

Then she went to the back to take the work measurements.

Those two words remained on the veranda: "Read it through."

It was not the first time Jagarnath had been reading.

But it was the first time the time he needed to read had not been treated as smaller than the queue's delay, the owner's impatience, or the speed of paying wages.

Nandu took out all the workers' slips and laid them on the table.

On Jagarnath's slip the reason was written: "Tool loss - two hammers."

Jagarnath asked, "Cost?"

Harihar Sah said, "We'll look at the purchase receipt tomorrow."

"Then how can there be a deduction today?"

Harihar Sah closed his eyes and sat for a moment.

Then he said to Nandu, "Don't hold back this one hundred and twenty today. Pay the full wage. We'll examine the tool account separately."

Nandu counted out four thousand three hundred and twenty.

Jagarnath did not take the money into his hand.

First, the deduction box on the slip was struck through and a zero was written in it.

Nandu put his initials beside the correction.

Only then did Jagarnath turn the register towards himself.

The half-written "Jag..." was still there.

Nandu asked, "Shall you complete the name now?"

Jagarnath smiled a little.

"If I complete it after that half-name, it will look as though I wrote it all at once."

"Then?"

Anamika was returning in the distance.

Jagarnath said, "Beside the unfinished part, write small: 'Stopped while reading the account.' Then I'll sign in full in a new box."

Harihar Sah said at once, "That will spoil the register."

For the first time, Nandu did not obey him.

In small letters beside it he wrote: "First entry incomplete; signature after correction of the entry."

He added the date.

Harihar Sah watched.

Jagarnath wrote his full name in the next empty space.

This time, slowly.

"Jagarnath Paswan."

Then he counted the money.

Rehana read her slip.

Sadanand read his.

Paras, who could not read, said to Nandu, "Read my slip aloud to me."

Nandu read it.

First the name.

Then the days.

Then the rate.

Then the total wages.

Then the deduction.

Then the amount payable.

That evening, for the first time, distributing the wages took half an hour longer.

Someone missed a bus.

Sadanand grumbled.

But by the next Saturday, things had changed a little.

The slips were placed on the table before the money.

On every slip, if the deduction box was empty, a "0" had been written in it.

Where there was a deduction, the reason was written somewhat more clearly, not in just two words.

"Advance - 500, dated..."

"Absent days - 1."

"Tool loss" appeared on no one's line.

A separate small register had been started for the warehouse tools.

In the morning, whichever team took ropes, hammers, chisels, or a ladder had the count recorded.

In the evening, the count was taken again when the tools were returned.

A week later, a chisel really did go missing.

This time Harihar Sah did not immediately order a deduction from wages.

First the tool register was checked.

The chisel had been issued in the name of another team.

The next day it was found in the earth beside a drain.

Nandu laughed and said, "If we'd deducted as before, would it have been one hundred and twenty from everyone again?"

Harihar Sah stared at him.

Then he himself burst out laughing.

"Keep quiet."

On the nineteenth day of the job, the final edge of the roof was being secured.

Jagarnath had an old chisel in his hand.

The number 7 had been painted in white on its handle.

That evening Nandu wrote in the tool register: "7 returned."

Jagarnath said, "See? Now even the tool has a name of its own."

Nandu said, "Because of you, I've ended up with two extra registers."

"Not because of me. What used to be wrongly mixed together in one register can now be seen separately."

On the twentieth day, the final wages were distributed.

The table on the veranda was still the same.

So was the red stamp.

But a new rule had been posted on a sheet of paper:

"Read or have the slip read to you first. Understand the reason for any deduction. Only then take the wages and give your signature or thumbprint."

Paras could not read the whole notice.

He had Jagarnath read it to him.

Then he said, "Why wasn't this the rule before?"

Jagarnath did not answer.

He looked at the register.

The page from the third week was still in the middle of it.

The unfinished "Jag..." looked like a small ink stain.

Beside it was Nandu's brief note.

That page had not been torn out.

The ink had not been erased.

There had also been a proposal to start a new register, but Nandu had refused.

"This page will stay," he had said. "Otherwise it will look as though the rule had always been like this."

Jagarnath said nothing to that.

He folded his final slip and put it in the inside pocket of his kurta.

He took the full wages in his hand.

He wrote his full name.

As he went out through the gate, he touched his pocket once.

The slip was inside.

The name was complete.

But what remained with him most strongly was the half-written name.

Because sometimes the right to write the whole truth begins at the point where a person can stop in time.

Story 92

The Locked Chest

On the western side of the district bus stand stood a small room, on whose door faded blue letters read—Lost Property.

Inside the door were two iron cupboards, a table, three sacks and an old wooden chest. Iron bands ran across the top of the chest, and there were two locks on it.

Throughout the year, whatever was found on a bus, in the waiting hall, near the ticket window or around the tea stalls was first entered in the register and then placed in a cupboard or in the chest.

Malti had not been given a key to the chest.

She was a temporary assistant. On paper, her work was to wipe the objects clean, tie serial-number slips to them, lift the sacks, and place the articles on the table when the committee sat.

The key remained with Ramanath, the permanent clerk.

Malti had no key, but she remembered the faces of the objects.

She knew where the umbrella with the red handle had been found. She remembered under which bus the child's single shoe with the yellow strap had lain. She even remembered the small name scratched on the lunchbox with the broken handle.

Sometimes Ramanath would laugh and say, "There is more stuff in your head than in the chest."

Malti would reply, "The chest stays shut. The head stays open."

In the last week of Paush came the day for preparing the year-end inventory.

Since morning, a thin strip of sunlight had fallen outside the room. The table was pulled out for the committee. Devkinandan came from the accounts office. Harishankar, the store assistant, came. Chandramohan, the stand in-charge, sat down with his thick register.

Ramanath opened the first lock.

The second lock stuck a little. Malti brought a small bottle of oil. After two drops, the key turned.

The lid rose.

The smell of old cloth, iron rust and damp shut-in paper came out all at once.

Chandramohan said, "Make a list of the things whose time has expired. Keep what can be sold separate from what is useless."

Devkinandan straightened his sheet of paper.

"Call out the serial numbers."

Ramanath lifted the objects one by one.

One hundred twenty-seven—blue umbrella, three ribs broken.

One hundred twenty-eight—old sweater, left sleeve torn.

One hundred twenty-nine—steel lunchbox, without lid.

One hundred thirty—child's white shoe, only one.

Devkinandan kept making three columns—sale, donation, scrap.

Malti cut slips and placed them with the objects.

After a while Ramanath lifted a grimy cloth bag from the bottom of the chest.

The bag was heavy.

As soon as it was placed on the table, iron clinked inside.

"One hundred forty-one," Ramanath read. "Found under the rear seat of bus number thirty-two. Date—eight months ago."

Harishankar opened the knot.

Inside were a mason's trowel, a small hammer, a plumb line, two chisels, an iron measuring tape and a thin wooden strip.

"Tools," Devkinandan said. "For sale."

Malti reached to lift the bag, but at that moment a small piece of paper slipped from an inner fold of the cloth.

Ramanath picked it up.

It was an old identity card. The edges were worn, the photograph faded. At the top was the name of a construction contractor. Below was the worker's name—Ramvriksh Sada.

On the back, a village address had been written in blue ink.

Devkinandan looked at the identity card and pointed towards the pile of tools.

"The card is expired. Look at the date. Three years old."

Malti asked, "The card is old; should we assume the address is old too?"

Devkinandan said, "The rule applies to the article. Eight months have passed. The owner did not come."

Malti left the bag of tools on the table.

"How much is the card worth?"

"Worth?"

"At auction."

Devkinandan laughed. "What value can a piece of paper have?"

Malti picked up the trowel. Its edge was worn, but the handle was smooth.

"And this?"

Harishankar said, "It is iron. It will fetch something."

Malti said quietly, "The paper may have no selling value. But it may have value in getting the things back."

For a few moments there was silence at the table.

Chandramohan said, "We have not sat here to change the rules. Continue the inventory."

The work resumed.

One hundred forty-two—wooden toy.

One hundred forty-three—old spectacle case.

One hundred forty-four—half a notebook, no name.

Malti's eyes kept returning to the bag of tools.

Tea came at noon. The committee moved back from the table for a while.

Malti was dusting the inside of the chest. At the bottom she found a small photograph stuck there.

There were five people in the photograph. No names. On the back were only the words: "Sawan, first day of work on the bridge."

She gave the photograph to Ramanath.

Ramanath asked, "Which serial number does this belong to?"

They could not tell. It had probably fallen from some paper or wallet.

Devkinandan said, "Scrap."

For the first time Malti spoke sharply. "Sell the photograph?"

"Not sell it. Throw it away."

"Why?"

"No owner. No value. No identification."

Malti looked at the five faces in the photograph.

"No identification—that is true. But does that make it only paper?"

Chandramohan looked at her.

"Malti, your job is to help with the inventory."

"I am helping."

She placed the photograph at one corner of the table.

By afternoon the committee had made three piles.

Articles fit for sale.

Clothes fit for donation.

Scrap.

The bag of tools was in the first pile.

The old identity card was at the edge of the scrap pile.

The photograph was there too.

For two minutes Malti stood looking at the two piles.

Then she picked up the identity card and placed it on top of the bag of tools.

Devkinandan said at once, "Why are you separating it?"

"These two were found together."

"So?"

"So until we are certain the card is useless, the owner of the tools is not unknown."

Devkinandan tapped his pen on the paper.

"No one came in eight months."

Malti asked, "Did anyone send word?"

No answer came.

Ramanath turned the pages of the register. He found the entry for serial number 141.

"Found—bus thirty-two, rear seat. Bag. Tools inside. That is all."

"The paper was not recorded?" Malti asked.

"It may not have been noticed then."

"The address was not recorded?"

"No."

Malti read the address on the back of the identity card. The village was thirty or thirty-five kos from the bus stand, but bus number thirty-two went in that direction.

Ramanath understood it too.

He said, "Narayan, the old conductor on number thirty-two, is still on the same route."

Chandramohan grew a little uneasy.

"I cannot put bus employees to a private search."

Malti said, "Not a private search. One notice can be sent by post."

Devkinandan laughed. "And under which account will the postage be paid?"

This time Ramanath spoke.

"The lost-property branch has a postage account."

Devkinandan fell silent.

Chandramohan ran a finger along the empty margin of the register.

"All right. One notice. We will not hold up the sale list because of this. Keep the bag's serial number separate. Seven days."

Malti said nothing.

She merely lifted the bag of tools from the sale pile and placed it under the table.

The photograph was still at the edge of the scrap pile.

Malti did not pick it up.

She knew that not every object could be returned.

By evening the inventory was complete.

Lines were drawn on the table sheet—article, status, route of disposal.

In the first line Devkinandan wrote—sale/donation.

In the second Ramanath added—identifiable paper/address clue: notice first.

Malti asked what the third line would be called.

Chandramohan said, "Scrap."

Malti looked towards the photograph.

"Not all scrap is the same."

"Then what should we write?"

Malti thought for a moment.

"Personal tokens—not for sale."

Devkinandan frowned.

"Photographs, letters, private papers?"

"Yes. When their time is over, whatever the rule says may be done. But not in the auction pile."

Chandramohan did not approve it at once.

He said, "We need written orders from above for that."

Malti nodded.

"Then for now write—decision pending."

Ramanath wrote those words in the register.

Three days later the letter was sent.

On the sixth day no one came.

On the seventh afternoon bus number thirty-two entered the stand.

Malti was outside gathering the sacks.

A thin man got down from the bus. A gamchha lay over his shoulder and there was mud on his feet. He did not go straight to the lost-property room. He first made inquiries at the information desk.

A little later Ramanath brought him over.

"Name?"

"Ramvriksh Sada."

"What was in the bag?"

Without pausing to think, Ramvriksh said, "One trowel, a small hammer, two chisels, a plumb line, a tape, a thin strip. Red thread was tied below the hammer handle. Two nails are driven into the trowel handle."

Ramanath opened the bag.

There really was a fine knot of red thread below the hammer handle.

There were two nails in the trowel handle.

Chandramohan showed him the identity card.

Ramvriksh did not smile.

He held the card in his hand and looked at it for a long time.

"This is from an old job," he said. "The contract has changed now."

"The address?"

"The village is the same."

"Why did you not come for eight months?"

Ramvriksh's face tightened a little.

"I did not think I had left it on the bus. I thought it had stayed at the building where I was working. I searched twice. Then I borrowed new tools and took another job. I paid more in interest on that loan than the price of this bag."

Malti remained silent.

Chandramohan carried out the formal verification: name, address, description of the bag.

Ramvriksh gave his thumb impression.

The bag went into his hands.

He took the identity card as well.

As he was leaving, he asked Malti, "Did you send the letter?"

Malti said, "It went from the bus stand."

Ramvriksh asked nothing more.

He pressed the handle of the trowel, as though checking an old companion.

Then he disappeared into the crowd at the bus stand.

That evening Chandramohan called Ramanath.

"Make a new set of categories."

Ramanath asked, "Three?"

"Three."

First—ordinary articles: after the prescribed period, sale, donation or disposal according to the rules.

Second—articles with identifiable papers or address clues: make a reasonable attempt to return them before disposal.

Third—private letters, photographs or such personal tokens as should not be turned into market goods: keep separately in a sealed envelope; decision according to written rules.

Malti was listening.

She asked, "Why are the tools in the second category?"

Chandramohan said, "Not because they are tools. Because of the address clue."

Malti nodded.

"Right."

That small "right" mattered.

For she did not want pity to take the place of a rule.

If some tools were found tomorrow without a name or address, they could not be held forever merely because their owner might be poor.

But if a clue for returning something lay inside the chest, looking at that clue ought to be part of the work.

A week later a reply came from above. The instruction was approved that private identity papers and personal photographs should not be put in the ordinary auction pile; a separate method of disposal would be written.

Ramanath opened a new disposal register.

On the first page he wrote three headings.

That day Malti wiped the inside of the chest again.

The chest was almost empty.

Only a child's single shoe remained in one corner.

No name. No address. No mate.

Malti took it in her hand.

After a few moments she put it back in the chest.

Its fate too would be decided on the next disposal day.

Not every object could be saved.

Nor was it necessary that every object be sold.

The difference was not only one of value.

The difference was whether an object still showed a road by which it might reach someone.

In the evening Ramanath closed the lid of the chest.

The first lock clicked shut.

The second lock clicked shut.

From outside Malti looked at the faded blue words—Lost Property.

It seemed to her that the chest had been closed before and was still closed now.

But between its inside and the world outside, a new line had opened.

Story 93

Light for Rent

As evening fell, a night market sprang up opposite the town's old grain warehouse.

By day there were trucks and sacks there; after five in the evening came folding iron carts, cloth awnings, bamboo poles and coils of wire.

The market ran until eleven at night.

The municipal council had installed four bright lamps along the passage through the middle of the market.

There were also small individual electricity connection points for the carts.

Any vendor who used a lamp, fan or other small appliance on a cart had to pay the same electricity charge night after night.

The amount was not very large.

But it was the same.

For the past two months, that word—"same"—had been troubling Saroja Devi.

Her cart sold glass bangles, inexpensive earrings, combs, ribbons and hair ties for girls.

She reached the market at half past six in the evening, because she could come only after finishing the day's work at home.

Her cart had just one nine-watt bulb.

After ten, when customers thinned out, she switched it off and packed her goods by the light from the central passage.

Beside her, Naseem's tea cart operated from five until eleven.

He needed two bulbs, a fan and a small electric water-heating appliance.

On the other side, coloured string lights glowed on Lalan Sah's toy cart from evening until closing.

All three carts paid the same nightly electricity charge.

At first Saroja said nothing about it.

She thought—the amount is small; why invite trouble?

But in the last week of Bhadau, the council posted a new rate.

The old twelve rupees became eighteen rupees a night.

The notice gave the reason as: "Increase in electricity tariff and maintenance costs."

Bhola, the market watchman, read the notice aloud.

Naseem said, "Eighteen is fine. The fan runs, the lights run."

Lalan Sah said, "Fine for me too."

Saroja asked, "Why is it fine for me too?"

Bhola laughed.

"Doesn't your bulb run on electricity?"

"It does."

"Then the charge is for electricity too."

Saroja did not reply.

That night she made a new line at the back of her old account book.

"Light switched on—6:42."

At five minutes past ten she wrote: "Light switched off—10:05."

The next night she wrote it again.

And the third night too.

She was not preparing any learned calculation.

She was merely putting down on paper what her own eyes had seen.

After eight nights, the lines had filled a page.

Sometimes three hours and twenty minutes.

Sometimes two hours and fifty-five minutes.

One rainy night no customers came, and the bulb burned for only an hour.

Yet on all eight nights she paid eighteen rupees each time.

On the ninth night, Saroja showed the book to Bhola when he came to collect the electricity charge.

Bhola laughed at first.

"Who's going to count all these minutes?"

Saroja said, "I am counting them."

"The council doesn't calculate by the minute."

"I'm not making the council's bill. I'm asking—why should a bulb that burned for three hours and one that burned for six cost the same?"

Bhola kept the register tucked under his arm.

"That's the rule."

"And the reason for the rule?"

Bhola pointed at the board again.

"Electricity tariff and maintenance."

Saroja said, "Two things are written there. Electricity is one thing, maintenance another. Shouldn't their accounts be separate too?"

Bhola had no answer to that question.

He entered eighteen in the register, took the money and moved on.

The matter might have ended there.

But the next night Naseem asked to see Saroja's notebook.

"Let me see. Do you really write down the minutes?"

Saroja handed it to him.

Naseem turned the pages.

"Mine never runs for less than six hours."

Lalan Sah overheard.

"Then you should pay more."

Naseem laughed.

"If I pay more, do your coloured lights get to shine for free?"

Lalan Sah's face tightened.

Saroja said at once, "I'm not asking to increase anyone's payment."

"Then what?"

"I want to understand how eighteen is arrived at."

Questions like that spread quickly through a market.

Within two days someone had decided that electricity would now be counted minute by minute.

Someone said, "Saroja Devi will put a clock on every cart."

Someone said, "Customers will run away while we're busy switching lights off."

Someone said, "Anyone with a fan will pay double."

Saroja argued with none of them.

She kept writing down only the use of her own bulb.

Three days later the market supervisor, Raghunath Mishra, summoned her.

Raghunath Mishra was a man of sixty.

He had overseen the market's arrangements since its first year.

Half the market called him "Mishraji"; the other half simply "Babu".

He placed Saroja's notebook on the table and asked, "Are you the one spreading this?"

Saroja said, "I wrote the notebook. I did not spread the rumours."

Raghunath Mishra had also called Naseem and Lalan Sah.

Naseem sat half on a chair; Lalan stood.

Raghunath Mishra said, "Look, maintaining connection points, replacing wires, repairing broken lights, the main panel, the safety breakers—all of that costs money. It isn't only your nine-watt bulb."

Saroja nodded.

"I'm not objecting to any of that."

"Then what is the problem?"

"How much of the cost is for all that, and how much is for the electricity I actually use—why are both in the same line?"

Raghunath Mishra was silent for a moment.

Lalan Sah said, "By that logic, customers see my coloured lights and the whole market benefits from the brightness. Others benefit too."

Naseem replied at once, "And customers who drink my tea and water linger at other carts too."

Raghunath Mishra raised a hand.

"Don't turn the market into a village council."

Saroja smiled.

"Can an account be made without one?"

Raghunath Mishra looked at her, then opened the notebook.

"What do you want?"

Saroja did not answer at once.

"I'm not asking for a charge by the minute."

Naseem looked startled.

"Then why did you write all this down?"

"So it can be seen that the usage is not the same."

"Then?"

"First see what all is included in this one equal charge."

Raghunath Mishra leaned back against the chair.

The discussion did not end that day, but for the first time eighteen rupees ceased to be a complete truth.

The next evening Chhotan Jha, the council electrician, came to the market.

People in the market saw him connecting wires often; they rarely heard him talk about accounts.

Raghunath Mishra called him to the table and asked, "What is inside this eighteen rupees?"

Chhotan Jha said, "I don't know the rate. I look after the wiring."

"Then tell us the cost of the wiring."

Chhotan Jha laughed.

"You can't count the cost of the wire by the night."

"Why not?"

"The main cable was installed once. There is one panel. The safety breaker watches the total load. A bulb burning for three hours does not make the wire three hours old."

Saroja said, "That is why I say the two things are different."

Chhotan Jha looked at her.

Raghunath Mishra explained the whole matter.

After thinking a little, Chhotan Jha said, "Without individual meters, measuring exact units is difficult."

Lalan Sah said, "Install them."

Chhotan Jha laughed.

"When you hear the price of an individual meter, you'll sell your coloured lights."

A few people laughed.

Saroja did not.

She asked, "Then only by the hour?"

"Hours still don't give the full account. Nine watts and sixty watts are not the same. A fan is different. A water heater is different."

Naseem looked toward his cart.

"Then mine is much more?"

Chhotan Jha said, "Your electricity consumption is higher. But the cable, panel and repairs are shared by everyone."

Raghunath Mishra tapped a finger on the table.

"Then calculating eighteen is not merely difficult; it is impossible."

Chhotan Jha said, "Exact calculation is expensive. Fair calculation is a different matter."

It was hard to tell whether Raghunath Mishra disliked that sentence or liked it very much.

He said, "Tomorrow, make a sample from ten carts."

Ten carts were chosen.

Saroja's one bulb.

Naseem's two bulbs, fan and water heater.

Lalan's three strings of coloured lights.

Two clothing carts with two bulbs each.

A fruit seller who used only the light from the central passage.

A toy repairer who ran a small fan.

A spice cart that switched its light off at nine.

A cobbler who lit an extra lamp when he had a customer.

And a sweets cart whose lighting was very bright.

Chhotan Jha noted the rated load of the appliances.

Saroja supplied her record of times.

For two nights Bhola made the rounds every half hour to see which lights were on.

On the third night Bhola grew irritated.

"Am I supposed to guard the market or count bulbs?"

Raghunath Mishra said, "That is exactly why this is an experiment."

On the fourth night it rained.

Half the market remained empty.

Naseem's fan did not run.

Lalan lit only half his coloured lights.

Saroja switched her bulb off at eight.

But all four lamps in the central passage burned the whole night.

The market's main safety lights could not be switched off.

The fifth night was very crowded.

The sweets seller added an extra light.

Naseem repeatedly ran the water-heating appliance.

At 8:40 p.m. the main safety breaker tripped.

The entire market went dark at once.

For a few moments only the glow of mobile phones flickered.

Lalan Sah shouted, "There is a child with my customer—nobody move a cart!"

Chhotan Jha ran to the panel.

Five minutes later the lights in the central passage came back on.

The cart connections were restored gradually.

This time Chhotan Jha stopped Naseem's water heater.

"The load limit was exceeded."

Naseem said, "I pay for it."

Chhotan Jha replied, "You pay, but the capacity of the wire does not increase when it sees your money."

That night Saroja wrote a new word beside the time in her notebook: "Blackout—8:40 to 8:45."

The next day they prepared a sample calculation.

The first proposal was: the more hours connected, the more the charge.

Chhotan Jha rejected it.

"The load differs."

The second proposal was: appliance load multiplied by time.

Raghunath Mishra rejected it.

"We would need a separate person just to keep this account."

The third proposal was the old method: the same charge for everyone.

Saroja closed the notebook.

"Then were these five nights of work useless?"

Raghunath Mishra said, "Not useless. We learned at least this much: precision can itself become an expense."

Naseem said, "Then a middle path?"

Instead of answering, Raghunath Mishra looked toward Saroja.

"You started this. Now you tell us."

Saroja closed the notebook and placed it on the table.

"I don't want an account by the minute."

Lalan Sah said, "You said that before too."

"Yes. Now I understand why."

Chhotan Jha pulled his chair closer.

Saroja said, "The problem isn't whether eighteen is too little or too much. The problem is that even if I don't switch on my bulb, I still have to pay for a private connection."

Raghunath Mishra raised an eyebrow.

"And the central lighting?"

"That belongs to everyone. Let everyone pay for it. But charge me for my cart's connection only when I take it."

Silence fell around the table.

Naseem said slowly, "Then everyone who takes a connection pays the same?"

Saroja said, "Up to a fixed limit. If you cross the limit, the connection should not run at all."

Chhotan Jha lifted his head at once.

"That makes sense."

Naseem asked, "And my water-heating appliance?"

Chhotan Jha looked at him.

"It is too heavy for the market's ordinary connection. Paying more does not make the wire thicker."

Naseem seemed about to say something, then fell silent.

Raghunath Mishra said, "Then that appliance is banned?"

Chhotan Jha said, "Banned on the market connection. You already use gas for making tea."

Naseem made a face.

"The electric appliance was convenient."

Saroja said, "Convenience and entitlement are not the same thing."

Naseem looked at her for a moment, then laughed.

"Today you are making a great many rules."

"I'm not making rules. I'm looking at limits."

Chhotan Jha pulled a sheet of paper toward him.

The market's electrical panel had a separate small breaker for each cart connection.

Until then, all the breakers had been switched on together at five in the evening.

Chhotan Jha said, "There is no need to switch all of them on. Open only the breaker for a vendor who wants a private connection."

Bhola asked, "Am I supposed to stand beside the panel all day?"

"Switch it on once and turn it off at closing."

"What if someone wants a connection midway through the evening?"

"Enter it in the register, then switch it on."

Raghunath Mishra said, "And the payment?"

Chhotan Jha replied, "If someone takes a private connection, charge the private-connection fee. If not, no fee."

"Whether it is used for three hours or six?"

"Within that limit, the same. We are not metering units; we are making a safe connection available."

Saroja nodded slowly.

She did not see perfect justice in that answer.

But for the first time the thing she was paying for had a clear name.

Raghunath Mishra said, "And the four lamps in the middle?"

"They are not private connections. Put their cost under the market's common arrangements."

The fruit seller, who had been standing behind them listening to the meeting, said at once, "Then I won't pay the private electricity charge?"

"Not if you do not take a connection on your own cart."

He was delighted.

Lalan Sah asked, "Can I connect all three strings of coloured lights?"

Chhotan Jha said, "As long as they remain within the prescribed limit. Cross it and the safety breaker will trip by itself."

Lalan Sah asked, "How will I know the limit?"

"Register the name and load of the appliance beforehand. Ask before adding a new appliance."

Naseem looked again at his appliance.

"Will mine be written down as prohibited?"

Chhotan Jha said, "Not on the market's ordinary line. It is not an insult; it is the limit of the wire."

This time Naseem did not argue.

The next problem was trust.

What if someone did not pay for a private connection and quietly attached a wire anyway?

Bhola said, "There are fifty carts at night. Are we supposed to keep inspecting every wire?"

Chhotan Jha opened the panel.

"If the breaker for a number is off, that cart's connection is dead. Attaching a wire will do nothing."

Bhola asked, "What if someone switches the breaker on himself?"

"The panel is locked."

Raghunath Mishra tapped a finger on the table.

"Then the register will record who takes a private connection, not their minutes."

Saroja said, "Yes."

"And the cost of the common lighting?"

"Write it separately. Show it to everyone."

Raghunath Mishra smiled.

"Your notebook has made my register longer."

Saroja said, "If the lines increase, the arguments will decrease."

Chhotan Jha laughed.

The new arrangement could not be put into effect in a single day.

First, the numbers on the main panel had to be matched with the cart numbers.

Three connections turned out to be crossed.

When the breaker for cart seventeen was opened, electricity reached cart eighteen.

Bhola said, "Until now we switched them all on together, so no one ever noticed."

Chhotan Jha checked the wiring for two evenings.

Then each connection point received a small number plate.

The register got two separate columns: "Common Market" and "Private Connection".

The charge for common market lighting appeared as a separate line on the cart-rent receipt.

The names of those taking private connections were entered in the nightly register.

The time at which a breaker was switched on was also recorded, but the charge was not calculated by the minute.

The time was written only to show that the connection had actually been opened.

On the first trial night Saroja did not take a private connection.

She moved her cart a little closer to one of the lamps in the central passage.

The light was not quite sufficient.

Green bangles showed clearly, but deep blue and black looked almost alike.

A customer asked for blue bangles and picked up black ones.

Saroja smiled.

"Wait. Today I don't have my own light."

She carried the bangles beneath the central light.

The customer chose the correct colour.

By the end of the evening Saroja understood that a private connection was not merely a luxury.

The second night she went to Bhola.

"Cart fourteen—switch on the connection."

Bhola entered it in the register.

He unlocked the panel.

He raised breaker number fourteen.

Saroja's bulb came on.

That night she paid the full private-connection charge.

On the third night it rained.

Half the market remained empty.

Saroja did not take a private connection.

The fourth night was crowded with customers.

She took the connection.

On the fifth night, work at home delayed her and she arrived at eight.

She asked Bhola, "Even now, the full charge?"

Bhola said, "Yes. The connection is charged for being available for the night, not by the hour."

Saroja made a face.

"Then injustice again?"

Bhola laughed.

"Take out your notebook."

Saroja laughed too.

She did not take the connection.

She worked for an hour and a half under the common light and went home.

Because that choice now existed, some vendors changed their old habits.

The fruit seller had never taken a private connection; now the electricity charge disappeared from his receipt.

A bookseller began taking a connection only on Saturdays and Sundays, when the crowd was larger.

Lalan Sah took one every day because the coloured lights were part of his cart's identity.

Naseem also took one every day, but the electric water heater was gone.

He went back to using a small gas stove.

The first week he grumbled about it.

The second week he said, "At least the breaker doesn't trip now."

Chhotan Jha replied, "That too is part of the account."

In the middle of the month a new difficulty appeared.

On days when they did not take a connection, some people began drawing a thin wire from a neighbour's connection.

Raghunath Mishra was annoyed.

Saroja said, "There is an empty space in the rule."

"What are we supposed to do—guard every cart?"

Chhotan Jha said, "If sharing is completely banned, even helping a neighbour becomes an offence."

Naseem said, "Then allow shared connections."

Lalan Sah asked, "Who pays?"

Saroja replied, "Whoever's numbered breaker is switched on."

"Whether the other person pays half is between the two of them."

Raghunath Mishra thought about it.

"But the load limit?"

Chhotan Jha said, "The limit on one connection remains the same. If two carts share it, they must stay within that same limit."

A line was added to the new rule: one private connection may be shared with a neighbouring cart, but the safety limit must not be exceeded, and responsibility remains with the original connection holder.

That led some vendors to pair up.

Saroja did not make such a pair.

Sometimes she needed her own bulb; sometimes she did not.

At the end of the month Raghunath Mishra spread all the registers on the table.

There had been fewer nights with private connections than before.

Total private electricity consumption had also fallen.

But that was not the main thing.

For the first time the council receipt had two separate lines: common market lighting and private cart connection.

Raghunath Mishra said, "The total of the two lines is not very far from the old average."

Saroja asked, "Then the council has not suffered a loss?"

"Not yet. We will look again after three months."

"And if there is a loss?"

"The rate will change, but the reasons will remain separately visible."

Naseem asked, "I take a connection every day. I still pay more than Saroja."

Saroja said, "You take it on more nights."

"But on one night I use it for six hours; sometimes you use yours for three."

Saroja fell silent.

That question had not been settled.

She said, "Yes. That difference still remains."

Raghunath Mishra said, "Without individual meters, an exact account of it is difficult."

Naseem smiled.

"Then Saroja Devi has won only half a victory?"

Saroja laughed.

"Was I fighting a war?"

"You wrote down minutes for eight nights."

"The minutes showed me that usage was not equal. But that does not mean justice exists only in a clock."

Chhotan Jha said, "And justice for the wire?"

Saroja said, "You look after that."

The meeting ended in laughter.

That night Saroja opened her old notebook.

The first eight pages were filled with switch-on and switch-off times.

On the pages after that, some days said "connection taken" and some "not taken".

On the last line she wrote: "Minutes opened the question; choice opened the way."

Then she paused.

She crossed out the word "way" and wrote "space".

She did not like grand sentences.

She put the notebook back in her bag.

At half past six in the evening the market was opening.

All four lamps in the central passage were already lit.

Saroja went to Bhola.

"Switch on fourteen today."

Bhola entered her name in the register.

He opened the panel and raised breaker number fourteen.

Saroja's bulb came on.

Light fell across the bangles.

Beside her, the fruit seller arranged his cart without a private connection.

Naseem's light was on, and so was the small blue flame of his gas stove.

Lalan's coloured string lights still shone brighter than everything else.

No one was counting anyone else's minutes.

At 10:15 p.m., Saroja saw no customers.

She switched off the bulb.

Bhola did not turn off the panel then; under the rule, all breakers would be switched off at the end of the night.

As she tied up her bag, Saroja thought for a moment that even today she would pay for a five-hour private connection though her bulb had burned for less than four hours.

It did not seem perfectly equal to her.

But if tomorrow she did not want a private connection, she would not have to pay for one.

It was a small difference.

For now, it was enough for her.

When the market was closing, Bhola was locking the panel.

Saroja watched from a distance.

Earlier, every numbered connection had been switched on together.

Now some were on and some remained off.

The four lamps in the middle still burned the same for everyone.

Private light was now rented, but at least it had its own door.

Story 94

The Small Lock

On the eastern side of the town stood a five-storey building called "Madhavi Apartments."

The building was not very new, but neither was it so old that the paint on its walls had forgotten its first colour.

The main gate gleamed.

The mirror inside the lift was wiped twice a day.

To the right of the gate was a small glass-doored room for keeping parcels and deliveries.

To the left was the service entrance, through which domestic workers, the milkman, the waste collector, and repair workers went inside.

Just inside the service entrance, twelve small iron lockers were fixed along the wall.

Each locker stood a little above knee height.

Numbers had been painted above them in white—1 through 12.

The women who worked in the flats kept their small belongings in those lockers.

Someone's old slippers.

Someone's raincoat.

Someone's spare scarf.

Someone's tea leaves.

Someone's house key.

Someone's wages for the day.

Someone's child's school notice.

The building had installed those lockers two years earlier.

Before that, the women used to leave their bags in a corner of the staircase or beneath the guard's desk.

Once, two bags had been exchanged by mistake.

After that, the residents' committee had said in a meeting, "Belongings should be kept in an orderly way."

Twelve lockers were installed.

The lockers belonged to the building.

The women had put their own locks on them.

The locks were small.

Most were brass or cheap steel.

One had a red thread tied around it.

Another had a dab of red paint.

Another had no mark at all.

Muniya Devi's locker was number seven.

Her lock was blue, though half the paint had worn away.

Her son had once bought that lock for the chain of an old bicycle.

The bicycle chain broke; the lock survived.

Muniya put it on the locker instead.

Muniya worked in four flats in the building.

She arrived at half past six in the morning.

First, sweeping and mopping on the third floor.

Then the preliminary kitchen work on the fifth.

Then dishes on the second floor.

Finally, cleaning the room of an elderly couple on the first.

At about one in the afternoon, she left the building.

In the evening she returned for an hour and a half in one flat.

The locker by the service entrance was her small place in the middle of the day.

She left her rainwear there in the morning.

When she went home in the afternoon, she left her work slippers in the locker.

Sometimes, if she could not take her wages home at once, she put the money in an old tin inside the locker and took it out in the evening.

She did not need a very large locker.

What she needed was for the key to be in her own hand when the locker was opened.

Ashok Babu, the building manager, rarely spoke about those lockers.

He had many responsibilities.

The pump.

The lift.

Parcels and deliveries.

Monthly dues.

Security at the gate.

The water tank on the roof.

The shared electricity account.

And the residents' complaints.

Ashok Babu was not stern by nature.

But he liked order.

He trusted what was written in a register.

There was a separate register for the key to the parcel room.

There was another register for opening the roof gate.

Emergency keys to the residents' private storerooms were kept in a sealed box.

The rules for opening that box were posted on the wall.

Flat number.

Reason for opening.

Time.

Resident present, or written permission from the resident.

Manager's signature.

And then the time the key was returned.

Muniya had seen that register many times.

Once, the lock of Suchitra Didi's storeroom on the fifth floor had jammed from the inside.

Before opening the sealed key box, Ashok Babu had called her on the phone.

Muniya had been mopping nearby at the time.

She had seen that even taking out a key was recorded like an event.

Muniya had liked that.

Opening someone's lock was not treated as an ordinary thing.

One Monday, a small commotion arose in the building.

A newly married couple lived on the fourth floor.

The woman's name was Rashmi.

That afternoon, one earring from a small pair of gold earrings belonging to Rashmi could not be found.

Rashmi first searched her room.

She lifted the pillows.

She shook out the sheet.

She checked the bathroom.

She opened the drawer of the dressing table.

She turned the laundry basket upside down.

One earring was in the box.

The other was not.

She called her husband.

Her husband said, "It will be somewhere in the house."

Rashmi searched again.

The earring was small.

There was not much gold in it.

But her mother had given it to her at the time of her wedding.

For that reason, its value was not merely its market value.

Two people had come to work in Rashmi's home that morning.

Muniya, for sweeping and mopping.
Reena, for the dishes.
The milkman had come only as far as the door.
A parcel had also arrived, but the delivery person had not gone inside.
At four in the afternoon, Rashmi went to the management office.
Ashok Babu was looking through a register.
Rashmi said, "I am not accusing anyone."
Ashok Babu nodded.
"I understand."
"But the earring was in the house."
"Until what time did you see it?"
"I cannot say the exact time."
"Who all came into the house today?"
Rashmi gave the names.
Ashok Babu checked the visitors' register.
"Muniya and Reena come every day."
"Yes. I am saying that I am not naming anyone."
"All right. Search the house once more first."
"I have already searched three times."
Ashok Babu thought for a moment.
Then he called Suresh, the guard at the gate.
Suresh came.
"Is the camera at the service entrance working?"
"Yes, Babu."
"Check the afternoon footage."
The camera showed people coming and going.
But not what happened inside the flats.
Muniya had entered at half past six.
At ten minutes past eight she had left the fourth floor and gone to the fifth.
Reena had arrived around nine.
She too had done her work in the usual order and left.
Nothing unusual appeared.
Rashmi said, "The camera cannot show what happened inside the house."
Ashok Babu said, "That is true."
Just then Devesh Babu, the committee secretary, arrived as well.
Rashmi's husband had called him.
Devesh Babu listened to the matter.
For a while, everyone remained silent.
Then, looking towards the service entrance, Devesh Babu said, "Could the lockers there be checked once?"
Ashok Babu also looked in that direction.

Rashmi immediately said, "I did not say that everyone's lockers should be opened."

Devesh Babu said, "Is there any other way?"

Rashmi fell silent.

Ashok Babu stood up.

The twelve lockers stood in a row by the service entrance.

At that evening hour, two women were opening their lockers and taking out their things.

One locker was empty.

The owners of three lockers were working in the building at that moment.

Ashok Babu ran a hand over the lockers.

"Is there a second key for these?"

Suresh said, "A master key was made a long time ago."

"Where is it?"

Suresh pointed to the upper drawer in the guardroom.

There were three keys on one ring.

A thin strip of paper was tied to one of them—"belongings lockers."

Ashok Babu took the key in his hand.

Devesh Babu said, "Let us open them all and check. Then the matter will be over."

Rashmi said again, "I do not like the idea that everyone's belongings should be opened because of me."

A little uneasy, Devesh Babu said, "But if we do not open them, the suspicion will remain."

Ashok Babu said, "We will open each locker in front of its owner."

The matter stopped there for the moment.

It was decided that as many locker owners as could come would be called at six that evening.

The remaining lockers would be checked the next morning.

Suresh took out the list of names.

Locker number seven—Muniya Devi.

Muniya was outside the building at that time.

Suresh called her.

"Muniya Didi, please come a little before six this evening."

"Why?"

Suresh paused for a moment.

"We have to look at the locker."

"Whose?"

"Everyone's."

"Why?"

"Something has gone missing."

Muniya understood that there was something more inside the word "something."

She said, "I will be coming at quarter to six anyway."

"All right."

After the call ended, Muniya thought of her blue lock.

There was nothing stolen inside her locker.

That was not what frightened her.

But there were things in the locker that she did not want opened out in front of everyone.

There were three thousand rupees in an old cloth pouch.

She had kept the money for her daughter's examination fee the following week.

In an envelope was a notice from the landlord raising the rent, about which she planned to ask her brother's advice.

A small bottle of pain oil.

Two old photographs.

A key.

And a clean sari, kept there in case she was suddenly needed for some ritual work in one of the homes and had to change.

None of those things was a crime.

Even so, she did not want them spread out before everyone.

At quarter to six, Muniya reached the building.

Five women were already standing by the service entrance.

Reena.

Jyoti.

Sakina.

Parvati.

Kamla.

Suresh had placed the register on the desk.

The master key lay beside it.

Muniya asked, "What has gone missing?"

Suresh said quietly, "An earring from the fourth floor."

Reena immediately said, "Was my name mentioned too?"

"No one's name was mentioned."

"Then why all the lockers?"

Suresh searched for an answer.

Kamla said, "Open them. There is nothing in mine."

Jyoti said, "Nothing in mine either."

Sakina remained silent.

Muniya looked at the lockers.

Then at the master key lying on the guard's desk.

She asked, "When was this key used before?"

Suresh said, "Many times. If someone forgets her own key."

"Where is it written down?"

"What?"

"Whose locker was opened, and when."

Suresh laughed a little.

"There is hardly going to be a register for such small lockers."

Muniya said nothing.

Ashok Babu arrived.

Devesh Babu was with him.

Rashmi stood a little distance away as well.

Ashok Babu said, "Look, let us not make this into a big matter. One thing has gone missing. The lockers will be opened in front of everyone and checked. If nothing is found, the matter ends."

Muniya asked, "Whose locker first?"

Ashok Babu looked at the list.

"Number one."

Number one belonged to Parvati.

Parvati took out her key.

"Shall I open it myself?"

Ashok Babu said, "Yes. You open it first."

Parvati opened the lock.

Inside were a cloth bag, slippers, a bottle of oil, and two steel containers.

Devesh Babu stepped slightly forward.

Parvati took out the bag and placed it on the table.

Muniya watched.

Ashok Babu said, "Show the containers too."

Parvati opened the first container.

Roasted gram.

The other held sattu.

Devesh Babu immediately said, "Enough. All right."

Parvati put everything back inside.

She locked the locker again.

The second locker was Jyoti's.

Taking out her key, Jyoti said, "There are only clothes in mine."

She opened it.

Two garments, a small pouch, a broken comb.

Ashok Babu looked towards the pouch.

Jyoti opened it herself.

There were coins inside.

Then Muniya asked, "Where will it be written that this checking is taking place?"

Devesh Babu said, "What is there to write?"

"That the locker was opened."

"It is being opened in front of everyone."

"At what time?"

Devesh Babu grew a little irritated.

"Muniya, why are you making this difficult?"

Muniya looked at him.

"I am not making it difficult. I am asking."

Ashok Babu intervened. "What do you want?"

Muniya gestured towards the parcel room by the service entrance.

"When we take the key to that room, we write it in a register."

Ashok Babu said, "That is a different matter."

"Why is it different?"

"The residents' parcels are kept there."

"Our belongings are kept here."

Ashok Babu fell silent.

Muniya continued, "When the master key to the private storerooms upstairs is taken out, the reason is written down."

Devesh Babu said, "Those are the flat owners' property."

Muniya placed a hand on her locker.

"This locker belongs to the building. Whose are the things inside it?"

No answer came at once.

Rashmi, who had been standing at a distance, came a little closer.

She said, "The things inside are theirs."

Devesh Babu looked at her.

Rashmi said, "I want my earring. But the answer to this question is clear."

Ashok Babu lifted the master key.

Then he placed it back on the table.

"All right. I will make a register."

Devesh Babu said, "Now?"

"Yes, now."

Ashok Babu brought a blank sheet of paper from his office.

At the top he wrote—"Interim Register for Opening Belongings Lockers."

Below it he made columns.

Locker number.

Owner's name.

Reason for opening.

Time.

Owner present—yes/no.

Which key was used.

Time closed after inspection.

Owner's signature or thumb impression.

Manager/witness signature.

Devesh Babu looked at the page.

"Is all this necessary?"

Ashok Babu said, "If we are going to write it, why write only half of it?"

Muniya said nothing.

Jyoti's locker was closed again.

Ashok Babu entered it in the register.

Parvati's locker had already been opened.

Its entry was filled in afterwards.

Parvati put her thumb impression.

Ashok Babu did not guess the time.

Suresh checked the camera and said, "Six seven."

That exact time was written down.

Then Reena opened her locker.

Inside Reena's was a thin bag containing two saris, a small umbrella, a tin of betel nut, and a paper envelope.

Devesh Babu looked towards the envelope.

Reena placed her hand over it.

"This is a private paper."

Devesh Babu said, "The earring could be inside an envelope too."

Reena's face tightened.

Before Muniya could say anything, Rashmi spoke.

"Shake the envelope. If there is no sound of metal, there is no need to open it."

Ashok Babu said, "Right."

Reena shook the envelope.

There was no sound.

It was not opened.

The register recorded—"Visual inspection; sealed private paper not opened."

Devesh Babu smiled slightly.

"Now the register is making decisions too?"

Ashok Babu said, "The register is only recording what happened."

One by one, the lockers were opened.

One locker held rainwear.

Another, a packet of henna.

Another, a household ration slip.

Another, a child's lunchbox.

Another, coins.

Another, a spare blouse.

Another, a small hearing aid.

The earring was nowhere.

At six thirty-four, it was number seven's turn.

Muniya put the key into the blue lock.

Before opening it, she asked, "I am opening it myself. Will my name still go into the register?"

Ashok Babu said, "Yes. The reason is the same."

Muniya opened the lock.

The door stuck a little.

She lifted it and pulled.

The old tin, the sari, the paper envelope, and the cloth pouch inside came into view.

Ashok Babu asked, "The pouch?"

Muniya took it out.

"There is money in it."

Devesh Babu started to say something, then stopped.

Ashok Babu said, "We are looking for an earring, not counting money."

Muniya opened the mouth of the pouch only enough for the notes inside to be visible and for it to be clear that there was no earring.

Then she closed it again.

The envelope was not opened.

The sari was lifted.

Beneath it were the bottle of pain oil and two photographs.

For a moment, Muniya's hand paused over the photographs.

Ashok Babu immediately looked away.

"That is enough."

Muniya put the things back inside.

She fastened the blue lock.

The time was entered in the register.

Muniya did not usually sign her name in one flowing hand.

She wrote it letter by letter.

"Mu—ni—ya."

No thumb impression was taken after that.

Her written name was considered enough.

Locker number eight belonged to Sakina.

Sakina had remained silent until then.

She took out her key, then stopped.

"There is medicine in my locker."

Ashok Babu said, "Open it."

"I will not open the medicine box."

"What if the small earring is in there?"

Sakina said plainly, "It is not. But if there is to be an inspection, it will be in front of me and not before I have read the paper."

She picked up the register.

She read it slowly.

Then she opened the lock.

The medicine box was not transparent.

Ashok Babu said, "Lift the box."

Sakina lifted it.

"Does it need to be opened?"

Rashmi spoke again. "No."

This time Devesh Babu did not object.

The remaining lockers were opened as well.

The earring was not found.

At seven five, the last line on the page was filled in.

Ten of the twelve lockers had been opened.

The owners of two lockers were not available that day.

Ashok Babu said, "Tomorrow morning, in front of them."

Devesh Babu asked, "Can we not open them now with the master key?"

Ashok Babu did not fold the page.

He kept it flat.

"If we have just adopted the rule that a locker is to be opened in front of its owner, why break it for two lockers now?"

Devesh Babu remained silent.

In a tired voice Rashmi said, "I am sorry everyone has had to go through this trouble."

Reena said, "Your belonging is missing. It has to be searched for."

After a moment, Muniya added, "Searching and opening someone's belongings—both are necessary matters. There should simply be an account of both."

Rashmi nodded.

The earring was not found that night.

The next morning, the two remaining lockers were opened in front of their owners.

Nothing was found there either.

The suspicion about the earring did not end.

But the suspicion over the lockers was emptied out.

Ashok Babu checked the camera timings again.

A repairman had come to Rashmi's flat two days earlier, but whether the earring had still been there at that time was not clear.

Rashmi continued searching her home.

Three days passed.

The building's daily work returned to its usual rhythm.

Muniya came in the morning.

She opened the blue lock.

She put away her rainwear.

She took out her work slippers.

Then she closed the lock again.

But now a new, thin register lay on the desk by the service entrance.

Ashok Babu gave the interim page a permanent form.

At the top he wrote—"Private Belongings Locker Access Register."

The word "employee" was not used.

Nor was the word "resident."

The rules occupied four lines.

If the owner opens the locker with her own key, it is ordinary use; no register entry is required.

If management uses the master key, the reason, time, and witness must be recorded.

If a locker is opened for inspection, the owner must be present unless there is an emergency.

A sealed private paper or container may be opened only after a clear reason has been recorded.

Devesh Babu read the rules.

He said, "Has this not become too formal?"

Ashok Babu replied, "The key was already formal. Only the paper was missing."

Devesh Babu laughed.

"All right."

After that, Ashok Babu also took out the register for the private storerooms upstairs.

Both registers were kept in the same cupboard.

The only difference was their size.

The upstairs register was thick.

The service-locker register was thin.

A week later, news came of Rashmi's earring.

It was not in her flat. It was found in the sari box at her parents' home.

When Rashmi visited her parents for the first time after the wedding, she opened an old sari and saw the earring.

She remembered that the previous week she had worn the same pair at a family function.

On returning, she had removed one and put it into her purse; the other had caught in a fold of the sari.

When she returned to Madhavi Apartments, Rashmi went straight to the management office.

Ashok Babu was checking the pump account.

Rashmi quietly placed a small box on the table.

"You found it?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"At my parents' home."

Ashok Babu looked at her for a moment.

Then he said, "Good."

Rashmi said, "Should we tell everyone?"

"We must tell those whose lockers were opened."

That evening, Ashok Babu posted a small notice by the service entrance.

"The missing earring has been found. No related item was found during the inspection of the belongings lockers."

Below it was the date.

And the signature.

Muniya read the notice.

So did Reena.

Sakina stood reading it for a little longer.

Reena said, "So all that drama was for nothing?"

Opening her lock, Muniya said, "For the earring, yes."

"And the register?"

Muniya put her rainwear inside the locker.

"That perhaps was not for nothing."

Reena said nothing.

Two weeks later, one morning, Sakina forgot her locker key at home.

She needed the work sari kept inside.

Earlier, in such a situation, Suresh would have taken out the master key and simply opened the locker.

That day Suresh took out the key.

Then he stopped.

He opened the register on the desk.

"Sakina Didi, look at the time."

Sakina looked at the clock.

"Seven twenty-three."

Suresh wrote it down.

"Reason—owner forgot her own key."

Sakina laughed.

"For this too?"
Suresh said, "A rule is a rule every time."
Ashok Babu was listening from a distance.
He said nothing.
Sakina's locker was opened with the master key.
She took out the sari.
The locker was closed again.
Suresh recorded the time the key was returned.
Sakina wrote her name.
At that moment, Muniya was opening her own blue lock.
The lock was as small as before.
The blue paint had worn away a little more.
The master key was still on the same ring.
The difference was that now the sound of its turning was no longer alone.
A line in the register opened with it.

Story 95

Two Minutes Late

For Nawal, who delivered evening meals, two minutes was a very small amount of time.

On a clock, two minutes could pass in the blink of an eye.

But in the accounts of the "Door-Platter" meal service, those two minutes had a value of their own.

If a delivery ran more than two minutes beyond the appointed time, twenty rupees were deducted from the delivery fee.

Nawal did not argue against this rule.

He knew that delays happened for many reasons.

Sometimes the box came out of the kitchen late.

Sometimes rain blocked the road.

Sometimes the customer's house number was written incompletely.

And sometimes a building gate consumed more time in paperwork than the meal itself.

On the western side of the town stood an eight-storey building called "Sahaj Niwas."

Nawal delivered food there two or three times a week on average.

The gate was wide, but the way inside was narrow.

To the right stood the guard's desk.

A thick register lay on the desk.

Beside the register was a brass-coloured bell.

Above, on the wall, hung a round clock.

A fine crack ran across the clock's glass.

The guard, Ganesh Yadav, read the time through that crack.

Ganeshji's duty was to record the names of those who came, their time of arrival, whom they were visiting, and the time they left.

The building rule required meal-delivery workers to leave their motorcycles outside.

They had to show identification at the gate.

They could enter only after permission came from the customer.

After eight at night, a service worker was not allowed to ride the lift alone.

A resident had to accompany the worker, or the food had to be handed over downstairs.

The building's security committee had made this rule.

Nawal knew the rule.

So whenever an order for Sahaj Niwas appeared, he allowed an extra five or seven minutes in his mind.

That Tuesday evening, he had three boxes in his bag.

The first two were on the way.

The third was for Room 604 on the sixth floor of Sahaj Niwas.

The customer's name was Mrinalini Jha.

The meal-service slip gave the scheduled delivery time as 8:18 p.m.

Nawal left the kitchen at 7:49.

He delivered the first meal at 7:56.

The second at 8:05.

The third address was about two kilometres away.

He did not keep looking at the clock on his mobile phone.

He disliked checking the time while riding.

After crossing one junction, he stopped his motorcycle by the roadside and looked at the phone screen.

8:12.

Six minutes remained.

He reached the gate of Sahaj Niwas at eight fifteen and a few seconds.

His phone showed 8:15.

Nawal parked the motorcycle outside.

He slung the bag over his shoulder.

Ganeshji turned the register towards himself.

"Whom are you going to?"

"Six-oh-four. Mrinalini Jha."

"Name?"

"Nawal Kumar."

Ganeshji looked at the wall clock.

It showed 8:17.

In the register he wrote—8:17.

Nawal raised his eyes to the clock.

"My clock says fifteen."

Ganeshji laughed.

"My clock belongs to the building."

Nawal smiled a little too.

"My clock belongs to the food."

Ganeshji rang the customer's room.

There was no answer the first time.

The second time, Mrinalini's voice came through.

"Who is it?"

"Food."

"Send it up."

Ganeshji said, "After eight, the rule is that you must come down or send someone with him."

There was a brief silence at the other end.

"I'm washing my hands. Two minutes."

Ganeshji put down the receiver.

Nawal remained standing beside the desk.

The smell of hot spices drifted from his bag.

The wall clock reached 8:18.

Nawal's phone showed 8:16.

He opened the order on the screen.

It said—"Scheduled arrival: 8:18."

A small circle below was slowly filling in.

Nawal asked Ganeshji, "Will it count as delivered downstairs?"

Ganeshji said, "When the customer takes it."

"I have reached the gate."

"In my rules that is arrival, not receipt of food."

Having each said his piece, the two fell silent.

A few moments later, the numbers on the lift display began to descend from above.

8.

7.

6.

Then it stopped at 6.

Nawal looked at the wall clock.

8:19.

His phone showed 8:17.

The lift moved again.

According to the building clock, Mrinalini came downstairs at 8:20.

Her mobile phone was in her hand.

She said, "It's very late."

Nawal handed her the box.

"I reached the gate at fifteen."

Mrinalini looked at her phone screen.

Her phone showed 8:19.

"I have only just received the message saying you've arrived."

Nawal showed her his screen.

It showed 8:18.

Mrinalini's screen showed 8:19.

Ganeshji's wall clock showed 8:21.

All three were standing in the same place.

All three times were different.

Mrinalini said, "The food is getting cold."

Nawal said, "If I'm marked two minutes late, twenty rupees will be deducted."

Mrinalini replied, "How am I to know how long you have been at the gate?"

Ganeshji tapped the register.

"It says here—seventeen."

Nawal said, "My phone says fifteen."

Mrinalini showed her screen.

"My message came at nineteen."

Which time was true was a question no clock could answer at that moment.

Mrinalini took the food and went upstairs.

Nawal marked it "delivered."

At once, a small red line appeared on the screen—"2 minutes late."

For Nawal, that line was worth twenty rupees.

For Ganeshji, that line concerned something outside the building.

For Mrinalini, it confirmed the time she had spent waiting.

Nawal left for his next order.

When he returned to the kitchen at half past ten that night, the accounts were checked.

He had made eight deliveries that day.

Seven were on time.

One was two minutes late.

Twenty rupees were deducted.

Nawal told Saroj, who supervised the kitchen, "At Sahaj Niwas I was on time."

Saroj looked at the slip.

"The customer received it around nineteen or twenty."

"I reached the gate at fifteen."

"Proof?"

Nawal opened the location history on his phone.

It showed that he had stopped in front of the building at 8:15:42.

Saroj did not look at the register.

"The service is complete when the food reaches the customer."

Nawal said, "The building does not allow me to go inside."

Saroj thought for a moment.

"Then the customer can come downstairs."

"That took four minutes."
"You could call beforehand."
"While riding a motorcycle?"
Saroj fell silent.
She did not immediately return the twenty rupees.
"Tomorrow I'll understand the building's rule."
The next day Saroj went to Sahaj Niwas.
It was afternoon.
Ganeshji was writing in the register.
Saroj asked for the entry recording Nawal's arrival.
Ganeshji opened the page.
"Eight seventeen."
Saroj looked at her own watch.
The building clock was one minute and fifty-six seconds ahead of hers.
She smiled.
"This clock is fast."
Ganeshji said, "How far ahead?"
"Almost two minutes."
"Could be."
"Then the time in the register?"
"I write what I see on the wall."
"Whose responsibility is it to set the clock right?"
Ganeshji scratched his head.
"When the repairman comes."
Saroj asked, "Why can't food-delivery workers go inside at night?"
Ganeshji showed her the notice of rules.
"After eight, a service worker cannot go upstairs alone."
"It takes time for the customer to come down."
"My responsibility is security."
"And the meal service's time?"
"That is your rule."
Ganeshji did not say this rudely.
It was as though someone had hung the keys to two separate cupboards on two separate hooks.
Saroj met the building manager, Basant Chaudhary.
Basant Babu listened to the rule.
"Security cannot be reduced."
"I am not saying it should be."
"Then what is the problem?"
Saroj handed him a sheet on which three times were written.
8:15:42 — Nawal's location history.

8:17 — the gate register.

8:19 — the customer notification.

Below that, the customer's receipt time, around 8:20.

Basant Babu looked at the paper.

"These are not the same time."

Saroj said, "They are not the same event either."

Basant Babu looked up.

"What do you mean?"

"First—reaching the building. Second—entry in the gate register. Third—the food reaching the customer's hand."

"That is only natural."

"The penalty treats them as one time."

Basant Babu looked at the paper again.

This time he saw more than minutes in its lines.

"Do you want us to send the food-delivery workers straight upstairs?"

"No."

"Then how is the customer's waiting time to be reduced?"

"I don't know the answer to that yet."

Saroj admitted it.

The matter did not end there.

Three days later, Mrinalini herself came to the manager's office.

She had come to give notice of the monthly residents' meeting.

Quite casually, Basant Babu asked, "Was the food very late that day?"

Mrinalini said, "It felt late to me."

"The guard says the young man had arrived earlier."

"It took me time to come downstairs."

"When did you receive the notification?"

Mrinalini checked the old message on her phone.

"Eight nineteen."

"He was near the building at fifteen minutes and twenty-two seconds past eight."

Mrinalini looked startled.

"Then where did the four minutes go?"

It was the first time the question had come from the customer's mouth.

Ganeshji was called.

He came with the register.

"I wrote seventeen."

Mrinalini heard about the wall clock.

"Then your seventeen was really fifteen?"

Ganeshji said, "I wrote what the clock showed."

Basant Babu said, "There was not one single person's mistake."

Mrinalini asked, "Then whose were the four minutes?"

Basant Babu did not answer.

The matter was raised at the residents' meeting that day.

Someone said the delivery workers should not be sent upstairs.

Someone asked how elderly people were supposed to come downstairs.

Someone said customers should already be waiting at the gate.

Someone said the service should decide when food counted as delivered.

Ganeshji had placed the register on the table.

Saroj had also been invited.

Nawal had been called as well, but he was out on a delivery.

When the meeting began, the first argument was about the clock.

One resident compared his watch with the building clock.

The difference was two minutes and five seconds.

Another found a difference of two minutes and nine seconds.

Someone said, "First fix the clock."

Basant Babu immediately told them to have the clock taken down for repair.

But Saroj said, "Even if the clock is correct, the three times will not become one."

Everyone looked at her.

She opened the paper with the three lines again.

"Reaching the gate from the road is one event."

"Receiving permission in the register is another."

"The food reaching the customer's hand is the third."

"Even if every clock shows the same second, these three will still remain separate."

Mrinalini nodded slowly.

An elderly resident, Harinarayan Mishra, said, "It takes me ten minutes to get downstairs. Does that make the delivery worker guilty?"

A young resident said, "But the service says 'to the door.'"

Saroj replied, "Our service would go to the door if the building allowed it."

Basant Babu said, "The building will not abandon its security rule."

Ganeshji added, "Nor its register."

Mrinalini said, "And my waiting time is not false either."

At that one sentence the meeting grew a little quieter.

All three sides were defending their own clocks, yet none of the three was lying.

The problem was not the truth of the clocks, but placing the responsibility of one clock upon another.

Basant Babu said, "Then where do we consider the handover to take place?"

Everyone began speaking again.

Outside the main gate?

At the guard's desk?

Near the lift?

At the room door?

Saroj said, "Make the first handover point the place a delivery worker can reach without any additional permission from the building."

Ganeshji looked in front of the desk.

To the left of it, under the awning, there was about six feet of empty space.

Two flowerpots had stood there before.

Even in the rain the spot stayed dry.

It did not block the way to the lift.

It was inside the gate, but before the boundary of the residents' area.

Basant Babu said, "Here?"

Ganeshji got up and went there.

"Standing here, the register is visible."

Mrinalini said, "The customer can come down here."

Harinarayan Mishra said, "And if I cannot come down?"

Basant Babu said, "For you, with permission, the guard can send it upstairs with someone, as under the old rule."

Saroj said, "In that situation, record the time separately."

The meeting did not make a permanent rule at once.

A one-week trial was agreed upon.

A white line was painted beneath the awning.

A small table was placed inside it.

On the wall they wrote—"Food Handover Point."

Below it were two lines.

"Gate arrival."

"Customer receipt."

Two new columns were also added to Ganeshji's register.

The old "arrival" entry was not removed.

Beside it they added "handover notification."

The meal service added to its own rules: in buildings where service workers are not allowed upstairs, arrival at the designated handover point will count as the time limit.

The customer's mobile screen would separately record the receipt time.

No time was erased.

They simply wrote which event each time referred to.

On the first evening of the trial, Nawal reached Sahaj Niwas again.

This time the order was for Room 302.

The scheduled time was 7:42.

At the gate, Nawal's phone showed 7:39.

The newly corrected building clock also showed 7:39.

Ganeshji laughed.

"Today the two agree."

Nawal said, "Let us see how long the friendship lasts."

Ganeshji wrote 7:39 in the register.

He rang the customer.

"The food is at the handover point."

The customer came down three minutes later.

The receipt time was recorded as 7:42.

Both times were correct.

The next day, food for an elderly resident went upstairs with the guard.

Gate arrival: 8:11.

Upstairs receipt: 8:17.

The six minutes in between were recorded as the building's process.

No deduction was made from Nawal's delivery fee.

Nor did the customer's waiting time disappear from the register.

On the third day, one customer did not come downstairs for five minutes.

Under the service rule, the food had reached the handover point on time.

Later the customer complained that the food had become a little cold.

The complaint was not dismissed.

It was recorded in a separate column—"receipt delay."

Seeing this, Mrinalini said, "Now the customer will be trapped in the register too."

Ganeshji smiled.

"The register is not meant to trap anyone. It is meant to separate the times."

Mrinalini asked, "Then what about my four minutes that day?"

Ganeshji opened the old page.

"That day there was only one column."

"And now?"

"Now there are two."

A week later the residents' meeting met again.

The trial page recorded a total of twenty-seven meals.

In thirteen cases, the customer came downstairs within two minutes.

In eight, it took three to five minutes.

In four, the food had to be taken upstairs with the guard for an elderly or unwell resident.

In two, permission from the customer came late.

No security rule had been broken.

The meal service's two-minute penalty applied only when the delivery worker reached the handover point after the scheduled time.

Saroj returned Nawal's old twenty rupees.

Looking at the money, Nawal said, "All those meetings for this?"

Saroj said, "Not for your twenty rupees."

"Then?"

"To make it clear whose next twenty rupees it will be."

Nawal put the money in his pocket.

He did not dance with joy.

Twenty rupees was not a small sum for him, but the whole matter had grown larger than he was.

That evening he again had an order for Sahaj Niwas.

This time it was for Mrinalini Jha.

Nawal reached the gate at 8:16.

The scheduled time was 8:18.

Ganeshji wrote 8:16 in the register.

The box was placed at the handover point.

The bell was rung.

From upstairs Mrinalini said, "I'm coming."

Nawal adjusted the strap of his bag.

His next order was far away.

He said to Ganeshji, "May I go?"

Ganeshji said, "You have completed your time."

Nawal left.

Mrinalini came downstairs three minutes later.

Ganeshji handed her the box.

"Eight nineteen," he said.

Mrinalini looked at her mobile phone.

"Mine also says nineteen."

Ganeshji looked at the building clock.

It too showed 8:19.

By coincidence, all three clocks agreed at that moment.

Mrinalini laughed.

"So today there is no quarrel."

Ganeshji wrote the receipt time in the register.

"The quarrel was not in the clocks."

Mrinalini asked, "Then where was it?"

Ganeshji placed the tip of his pen between the two lines.

"Here. In between."

Mrinalini took the box and walked towards the lift.

By then Nawal had already gone out through the gate.

The register carried two times for the same meal.

Two minutes was still two minutes.

But now it was no longer automatically one person's fault.

Story 96

The Weighing of Wet Paddy

In the first week of Agahan, the paddy fields looked not like gold, but like wet yellow.

It had rained three days earlier.

The soil was still soft beneath the feet when one stepped on the field bund.

Once the harvesting began, the stalks of paddy were cut with toothed sickles, small bundles were made, and by noon a yellow heap had risen along one side of the field.

Phulmati Devi was not the oldest in that group, but whenever the matter of accounts arose, everyone looked toward her.

She was not very quick at writing.

She could write her name, village, numbers and dates.

The rest of an account she understood through grain, measures, sacks and days.

The owner of that field was Ramlochan Jha.

In the village people did not call him a harsh man.

Nor was his name commonly associated with complaints of withholding wages.

Before harvesting began, he told all the labourers plainly, "The wage for a day is eighteen kilos of paddy. It will be weighed out in the evening."

Phulmati said nothing that day.

It had been eighteen kilos the previous year too.

She still remembered one sack from the previous year.

After reaching home, that sack had been spread out in the courtyard for two days.

On the third day, when the grain was put back into the sack, the sack felt lighter.

Her younger son Chandan had said, "Mother, perhaps they gave you less at the weighing."

Phulmati had scolded her son then.

"Do not blame anyone without seeing."

The matter had ended there.

But the memory of the sack having grown lighter had not ended.

This year, on the evening of the first day of harvesting, a scale was set up on the threshing ground.

Not the old iron balance with two pans.

It was a square, battery-powered weighing machine.

The clerk, Devkant, placed each sack on it, read the number, and wrote the weight beside the name in the ledger.

The first labourer's sack showed 18.10.

Devkant took out a little paddy.

It became 18.00.

The second sack was 17.85.

He added another handful of paddy.

18.00.

The numbers kept becoming equal.

Then came Phulmati's turn.

When her sack was lifted, it felt cold from underneath.

She put her hand inside.

There was moisture among the grains in the middle.

Devkant said, "Take your hand out. It will disturb the weighing."

Phulmati withdrew her hand.

The machine showed 18.20.

Devkant removed two handfuls and looked again.

18.00.

"Take it."

Phulmati did not lift the sack.

She asked, "Write the date on this."

Devkant looked at her.

"Why?"

"Just write it—the date of today."

"The date is in the ledger."

"On the sack too."

Devkant laughed.

"Is the paddy going to run away somewhere?"

Phulmati smiled a little too.

"Not the paddy. The matter runs away."

A little way off, Ramlochan was having his own share piled up.

Hearing the voices, he came over.

"What happened?"

Devkant said, "Phulmati wants the date written on the sack."

Ramlochan said, "Write it. What is there in that?"

Devkant picked up the blue chalk lying on the threshing-ground table.

On the sack he wrote—"Agahan 5."

Phulmati said again, "Write 'wet' too."

This time Devkant's hand stopped.

"What?"

"Wet paddy."

"All the paddy is wet."

"Then what harm is there in writing it?"

Ramlochan looked at her more closely.

"Do you suspect something?"

Phulmati immediately shook her head.

"Not suspicion. Condition."

"What is the difference?"

"Suspicion is about a person. Condition is about the paddy."

For a few moments, amid the noise of the threshing ground, those words sounded distinct.

Ramlochan said, "Write it, Devkant."

Under the date, Devkant wrote in small letters—"Wet."

Phulmati lifted the sack.

That night she did not take the paddy home.

All the labourers' sacks were kept in the veranda of the threshing ground.

At dawn the labourers returned to the field.

The sun came out well on the second day.

Ramlochan's household began spreading the owner's paddy thinly over the cleared middle of the threshing ground.

The grain was turned again and again with a long bamboo rake with teeth.

The labourers' sacks remained closed in the veranda.

When Phulmati came at noon to drink water, she saw that her sack had become even damper at the bottom.

She dragged the sack outside.

Devkant said, "Do not open it now. Everyone's sacks will get mixed up."

Phulmati pointed to the date written on the sack.

"My sack is marked."

"Even so."

"If it stays shut inside, how will it dry?"

Before Devkant could answer, Ramlochan came over.

He said, "Take the wage sacks home. I cannot take responsibility for drying them here."

The statement was not unreasonable.

The threshing ground belonged to the owner.

The wages had already been paid.

Phulmati put the sack back inside.

"I will take it in the evening."

The harvesting went on as usual that day.

After noon the clouds gathered again.

It did not rain, but the air grew more humid.

The evening paddy was wetter than on the first day.

Again, the scale kept being brought to 18.00.

On her second sack Phulmati had this written as well—"Agahan 6, evening, wet."

This time Devkant wrote it without asking.

Ramsagar from the group laughed and said, "From tomorrow we should have a birth register written on the sacks too."

Phulmati said, "I will not write it on your sack."

Ramsagar hoisted his sack onto his shoulder.

"I received eighteen kilos. That is enough."

Phulmati said nothing.

On the third day the harvesting continued for only half the day.

After noon the labourers began taking home the sacks from the previous two days.

Phulmati put the first sack back on the scale.

Devkant immediately said, "Why weigh it again now?"

The machine showed 17.25.

Phulmati put the second sack on it.

17.60.

Ramsagar was standing nearby.

He immediately said, "See! It was short."

Phulmati stopped him.

"No. Earlier it was eighteen."

"Then now?"

"It dried."

Ramsagar pressed the sack with his hand.

"Then did I receive eighteen, or seventeen?"

Phulmati did not answer.

The question was no longer hers alone.

Devkant opened the ledger.

"It is clearly written here—eighteen."

Phulmati said, "At that time it was eighteen."

"Then the account is correct."

"I am saying the account is not false."

Devkant's voice softened.

"Then what is the dispute about?"

Phulmati pointed toward the owner's paddy spread out to dry.

"When will that paddy be weighed?"

Ramlochan answered, "After it has dried completely."

"Why?"

"Wet paddy cannot be stored in the granary."

"And will it be sold after drying too?"

"Yes."

Phulmati placed her hand on the word "Wet" written on her sack.

"Then my eighteen is wet. Your account is dry."

Ramlochan said, "Your wage was said to be eighteen kilos. I gave you eighteen."

"That is correct."

"Then?"

"Was the meaning of eighteen also stated?"

Ramlochan fell silent.

Phulmati spoke again, "Wet eighteen or dry eighteen?"

Ramsagar interrupted, "It should be dry."

Phulmati looked at him.

"Listen first."

There was calculation, not displeasure, on Ramlochan's face.

He said, "If I give everyone eighteen kilos dry, the wage will increase."

Phulmati said, "Will it increase, or become clear?"

Devkant closed the ledger.

"Why was this not raised earlier?"

Phulmati looked at the date on the sack.

"Last year I did not understand."

"And now you understand?"

"Now the sack wrote it down."

Ramlochan laughed a little.

"A sack does not write."

Phulmati laughed too.

"True. The weighing wrote it."

Work resumed half an hour late that day.

No decision was reached.

The labourers took their sacks home.

Phulmati spread both sacks separately in the courtyard at home.

The date on the first sack could still be read.

On the second, the chalk had faded a little.

Chandan asked, "Why is 'wet' written here?"

Phulmati said, "So that we remember a number alone is not the whole matter."

Chandan did not quite understand the answer.

He pressed a grain between his teeth.

"It is still soft."

"Let it dry."

When Phulmati reached the threshing ground the next morning, she saw a man sitting amid Ramlochan's spread-out paddy with a small instrument.

He was a representative of a local paddy buyer.

He took handfuls of grain from different places, put them into a small box, and looked at the number on the instrument.

Ramlochan asked, "How much?"

The man said, "Still too high. Dry it again until evening."

"The vehicle will come tomorrow."

"Then separate the thin upper layer."

Phulmati stood some distance away listening.

She did not go closer.

The labourers' work was in the field.

When she came at noon to drink water, she saw the small instrument lying on the table.

Devkant was there.

Phulmati asked, "Does this measure the water in the paddy?"

Devkant said, "Moisture."

"Was my sack measured yesterday?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Who will go to so much trouble for wage paddy?"

Phulmati set the water cup down.

"So water has no value in a small sack, but it has value in a large heap?"

Devkant did not become irritated.

He picked up the instrument.

"It is not possible to measure every sack. The instrument belongs to the buyer. He measures for his own purchase."

"I am not asking for the instrument."

"Then what?"

"One rule."

"What rule?"

"If the weighing is wet, weigh both shares wet. If it is dry, weigh both shares dry."

Devkant said, "The owner's share is large. It is first made into a heap, then dried, then weighed. The labourers need their wages every day."

"They do need them every day."

"Then how can both be weighed at the same time?"

Phulmati thought for a moment.

"When the heap is divided, weigh and record the owner's share wet too."

Devkant frowned.

"Weigh the whole heap every day?"

"When the paddy from that day is taken out, the wage share is separated from it, is it not?"

"Yes."

"Then count the owner's remaining share at the same time too. Later write the dry weight in a separate ledger."

Devkant did not answer immediately.

Phulmati picked up the water cup.

"I have to go back to the field now."

She left.

That evening Devkant told Ramlochan about it.

At first Ramlochan laughed.

"If we keep weighing my paddy every day, it will be midnight."

Devkant said, "She is not asking for every sack to be weighed one by one. She says the condition of the heap from which the wages are taken should be recorded."

"Will writing the condition make the weights equal?"

"No."

"Then what is the benefit?"

Devkant opened a blank page of the ledger.

"The benefit may be that later a wet figure and a dry figure will not be treated as though they were the same thing."

Ramlochan looked at the page.

"You have taken a liking to the idea?"

Devkant said, "I need a line to write in. Liking can come later."

Ramlochan smiled.

"That is why clerks are dangerous."

"Only when the line is left blank."

Both of them laughed.

But there was still no decision.

The fifth day was the last large field of the harvest.

Everyone reached the field before sunrise.

The paddy was heavy.

Dew still clung to the lower part of the stalks.

By noon three heaps had formed on the threshing ground.

One heap was of the drier paddy cut in the morning.

The second was from noon.

The third was paddy from the lower part of the field and was wetter.

Ordinarily Devkant would have mixed all three together.

That day Phulmati said, "Let them stay separate."

Ramsagar asked, "Another experiment?"

Phulmati said, "Not an experiment. What the eyes can see."

Ramlochan was there too.

He said, "All right. Let all three remain separate."

When wages were distributed in the evening, the first four sacks were filled from the morning heap.

The next four from the noon heap.

The last four from the damp heap.

Every sack was 18.00.

Ramsagar pressed his sack and said, "Mine is wetter."

Budhni Devi, the labourer beside him, said, "The number is the same."

"Will you eat the water?"

Budhni said, "We will dry the paddy."

"When it dries, it will become less."

Phulmati said nothing.

This time she did not need to raise the question.

Ramlochan had small slips placed beside the three heaps.

"Morning."

"Noon."

"Lower field—damp."

Devkant also made three entries in the ledger.

He asked, "Shall we keep the owner's share separate according to these three heaps today as well?"

Ramlochan thought for a moment and said, "Keep it separate."

The decision caused no great upheaval.

Only three extra tarpaulins were needed on the threshing ground.

Ramlochan's younger brother became annoyed.

"If we keep everything separate like this, the work will go on all night."

Ramlochan said, "Let us see for one day."

The labourers' sacks went away.

The owner's three heaps were spread separately.

The next day the sun was strong.

By noon the grain in all three heaps had begun to rattle almost alike.

The paddy buyer's representative came again.

He took samples from all three.

The morning heap became suitable first.

The noon heap a little later.

The paddy from the lower field needed more sun.

For the first time Ramlochan noticed that the wage sacks from all three heaps had been exactly 18.00 the previous evening, but the three kinds of paddy had not been in the same condition.

He did not call Phulmati.

First he said to Devkant, "Can we get yesterday's labourers' sacks again?"

Devkant laughed.

"Half of them have reached home."

"Then how do we compare?"

"The two sacks in the veranda belong to Ramsagar and Budhni. Both will take them today."

Ramlochan said, "Weigh them."

Ramsagar's sack, filled from the damp heap, showed 16.90.

Budhni's, filled from the morning heap, showed 17.40.

Ramsagar immediately said, "See!"

Ramlochan looked at him.

"Yesterday both were eighteen."

"Then why is mine half a kilo less?"

Devkant said, "Your paddy was wetter."

Ramsagar looked at Phulmati.

Phulmati said, "Now we understand that within eighteen, the share of water can also be different."

Ramlochan placed a hand on the ledger.

"Then what do we do? Dry every sack before giving it? Will the labourers wait three days?"

Budhni said, "I cannot. We need paddy at home."

Ramsagar too said, "I have to take mine today."

Phulmati said, "I do not want to wait either."

Ramlochan asked, "Then your one rule?"

Phulmati looked at the three heaps on the threshing ground.

"Decide the weighing point beforehand."

"Say it."

"Before the harvesting begins, write whether the wage is based on fresh wet weight or dry weight."

Ramlochan said, "For this year, take it as fresh weight."

"Then in the first account, treat the owner's share from that day as fresh weight too."

"I will weigh it again later for sale."

"Do so. But that should be a second account."

Devkant drew the ledger toward himself.

Phulmati continued, "In the first ledger write the total fresh paddy, how much of it went as wages, and how much remained as the owner's share. Along with the date and condition."

Ramlochan asked, "Weigh the whole fresh heap?"

Devkant interrupted, "It is not as though every bit goes into the granary in sacks. I can write a total for every ten sacks. At the end of the day it can be added up."

Ramlochan looked at him.

"You had the solution ready already?"

Devkant said, "It came when I looked at the ledger."

Ramsagar said, "I want eighteen kilos dry."

Phulmati turned toward him.

"You can say that before next year."

"This year?"

"This year we will make clear the meaning of what was already settled. If we change the rate midway, there will be another dispute."

Ramsagar fell silent.

Phulmati had not taken the owner's side.

She was accepting the limit of what she herself had said.

Perhaps for that reason, Ramlochan listened fully for the first time.

He said, "This year the wage will be by fresh weight. But the date and 'wet' will be written on the sacks. And the day's first weighing of the total paddy will also be recorded in that same condition."

Devkant added, "The later dry weight in a separate ledger."

"Yes."

Budhni asked, "And if one day the paddy is very wet?"

Before Ramlochan could answer, Phulmati said, "Then that day the matter will be settled again beforehand."

Ramlochan said, "Very wet paddy will not be given as wages. It will first be spread in the shade once."

Ramsagar asked, "What is the measure of 'very'?"

Everyone laughed.

Ramlochan too.

"Now you want the instrument?"

Ramsagar said, "No, but tomorrow Phulmati Didi will say a word alone is not the whole matter."

Phulmati smiled.

"You are learning."

That evening Devkant made a new page.

At the top he wrote—"Harvest Paddy—First Weighing."

Below it were five fields.

Date.

Field/heap.

Condition.

Wage paddy.

Owner's remaining paddy.

At the top of a second page he wrote—"Dry/Sale Weight."

Ramlochan said, "With so many ledgers we will become less farmers and more clerks."

Devkant said, "The two figures were already there. Now only their names have been separated."

Phulmati was standing there.

She read the ledger.

The word "condition" seemed a little difficult to her.

She said, "In this field write 'wet/dry' clearly."

Devkant did not strike out "condition."

In brackets he added—"wet/dry."

Phulmati nodded.

The next day was the first test of the new rule.

The field was small.

The paddy reached the threshing ground all at once.

By evening a total of twenty-four sacks had been filled.

Devkant first counted all the sacks.

Two sacks at a time were checked on the scale, but in the end every sack was recorded at its own actual weight.

Four sacks were separated for wages.

The remaining twenty were the owner's share.

In the ledger the first weight of all of them was recorded as wet.

Phulmati's sack was stopped at 18.00.

Devkant picked up the chalk.

"Date?"

Phulmati said, "Write it."

"Wet?"

"Write it."

He wrote it.

This time it was not only the labourer's name that was written on the sack.

The same date and "Wet" were also written in chalk on the owner's first five sacks.

Ramlochan's brother again asked, "Why all this on the owner's sacks?"

Ramlochan answered, "So that tomorrow, after seeing the dry weight, I do not say that yesterday there had been only this much."

His brother said nothing.

At dawn the owner's sacks were opened and the paddy spread out.

The labourers took their sacks home.

Two days later the dried paddy was weighed again.

Devkant wrote the new figures in the second ledger.

Those figures made it appear that the owner's paddy had diminished.

Ramlochan joked, "Look, my paddy has been stolen."

Devkant said, "The water went."

At that time Phulmati had come to bind the remaining straw in the field.

She heard them.

"Write the thief's name in the ledger."

Ramlochan laughed.

"Water?"

"Yes. But do not send it to jail."

Laughter rose across the threshing ground.

The matter became light, but the account no longer felt heavy.

On the final day of harvesting the labourers' wages were being distributed.

Ramsagar took his sack and picked up the chalk himself.

He wrote—"Agahan 12, evening, wet."

The letters were crooked.

Phulmati looked at them.

"The 'jh' in 'saanjh' is backwards."

Ramsagar said, "Will the paddy understand?"

Phulmati laughed.

"Not the paddy. You have to understand."

Budhni had only the date written on her sack.

Devkant asked, "Not 'wet'?"

Budhni said, "Write it. Otherwise my daughter-in-law at home will ask why the sack became lighter."

The sun was setting.

On one side of the threshing ground the owner's remaining paddy lay spread out.

On the other, the labourers were lifting their sacks onto their shoulders.

The scale stood in between.

Before closing the ledger, Ramlochan looked back and forth at the first and second pages.

The first page held the wet weights.

The second held the dry ones.

Both were correct.

Both were different.

Phulmati lifted her last sack onto her shoulder.

The chalk writing brushed her cheek and left a small white streak of dust.

Devkant said, "Phulmati, what is written on the sack will wash away in the rain."

Phulmati looked toward the ledger.

"That is why it is written there too."

She walked away.

There was a date on the sack.

Beside the date was one small word—"Wet."

Eighteen kilos was still written as eighteen.

The difference was that now the number also carried the moment at which it had been measured.

Story 97

The Empty Plate

On the outskirts of Madhubani, the kitchen behind the wedding pavilion had been hot since evening.

In front were coloured lights, garlands of flowers, and the sound of music.

At the back were three large hearths, two gas stoves, twelve cauldrons, and blue drums of water.

Malti Devi stood in the middle of the kitchen.

A large ladle was in her hand.

Her sari-end was tied firmly over her head.

She kept an eye on both the fire and the clock.

There were seventeen people in her team that day.

Four cooks.

Six servers.

Three dishwashers.

Two water carriers.

One person to tend the wood and coal.

And Malti herself.

The catering sheet listed five hundred guests.

Malti had asked, "Where is the number of the people who are working?"

Naresh Babu, who was overseeing the arrangements, had laughed.

"You are all in the kitchen. How could there be any shortage of food?"

Malti asked again, "Where is the count?"

"We'll eat at the end."

The answer was not new to her.

She had heard that sentence many times at wedding feasts.

"We'll eat at the end."

Meaning, after all the guests had eaten.

Meaning, whatever remained.

Meaning, no one would count beforehand how much would remain.

Malti did not argue.

She closed the spice box and turned back towards the cauldrons.

At seven in the evening, the first line of guests reached the food tables.

In front, there were separate counters for chaat, sweets, rice, dal, vegetables, puris, and curd.

Behind them, work in the kitchen quickened.

"Two cauldrons of dal to the front."

"Fifty more puris."

"Open the third pot of rice."

"The curd is running low."

The calls rose again and again.

Malti watched the people in her team.

Ganesh was frying puris.

Jamuna Devi was tending the vegetable cauldron.

Chhotu was filling the water drums.

Ramesh was washing dishes.

Phulkumari was carrying plates to the servers.

No one had sat down.

It was eight at night.

Malti said to Ganesh, "Eat something now."

Ganesh looked towards the fire under the hearth.

"Who will fry the puris now?"

"Jamuna will watch them for ten minutes."

From a distance Jamuna said, "If I leave the vegetables, they'll burn."

Ganesh laughed.

"We'll eat at the end."

Malti looked at his face.

The same sentence again.

This time from a worker's mouth.

Habits do not belong only to owners.

Sometimes the rule of deprivation makes a home in the worker's mouth as well.

By half past eight, the number of guests had risen.

Two buses had arrived outside at the same time.

Naresh Babu came running in.

"Malti ji, make sure the rice does not run short."

"How many more people?"

"About a hundred and fifty."

Malti calculated at once.

"That takes us beyond the five hundred we were told."

"That happens at weddings."

"It does."

She went back to work.

By ten, the first rush had thinned.

Malti picked up an empty plate.
"Ganesh, eat now."
Ganesh went to wash his hands.
Just then Naresh Babu came running in again.
"Don't eat yet. Two vehicles from the groom's side are still on the way."
Ganesh wiped his hands and returned to the hearth.
The plate remained in Malti's hand.
She turned it upside down and set it to one side.
At eleven, the last group from the groom's side arrived.
By then the dough for puris was running low.
One cauldron of vegetables was empty.
Three cans of curd were finished.
There was still dal.
There was rice too.
Among the sweets, only boondi remained.
Naresh Babu said, "Manage with whatever is left."
Malti replied, "We will."
Up to that point, no one in her team had eaten a full meal.
Chhotu saw two puris fall to the ground.
He picked them up and set them aside.
Malti saw him.
"Don't eat those."
Chhotu said, "I won't throw them away."
"Don't throw them away. But that is not your meal."
Chhotu fell silent.
By midnight, the number of guests had dwindled.
Malti said, "Now everyone wash your hands."
Nine of the seventeen gathered to one side first.
Phulkumari handed out plates.
There was dal.
There was rice.
There was boondi.
At the bottom of the vegetable cauldron there was gravy, but very few pieces.
The puris were finished.
The curd was finished.
The salad was finished.
Ganesh took rice on his plate.
He took dal.
He took one ladle of vegetable gravy.
He laughed.

"So this is my wedding feast."

Malti did not laugh.

Jamuna Devi stood holding an empty plate.

She served Chhotu first.

Then Ramesh.

When she went to put rice on her own plate, the pot was empty.

Phulkumari said, "There are still two handfuls."

Jamuna stopped her hand.

"Leave it. I'll drink water."

Malti held out her own plate to her.

"Take mine."

Jamuna shook her head.

"You have been standing all day too."

Naresh Babu arrived in the middle of this small dispute.

There was a box of sweets in his hand.

"This is left. Share it."

Malti looked at the box.

"How many?"

"Ten or twelve pieces."

"There are seventeen of us."

"Then take half each."

Naresh Babu said it quite naturally.

He thought he had offered a solution.

Malti did not take the box.

"The problem is not the sweets."

Naresh Babu stopped.

"Then what is it?"

"Where was our people's food counted?"

"But this much food was made. The number of guests increased."

"The guests increased. But the seventeen of us were here from the beginning."

Naresh Babu was silent for a moment.

"If we set food aside for you, someone will say the cooks hid food for themselves."

Malti said, "Not hidden separately. Counted beforehand."

"Why make a distinction?"

"Not a distinction. A count."

Before Naresh Babu could answer, a shout came from the front.

"We're running short of tea!"

He ran off again.

By half past one, the wedding pavilion was nearly empty.

There was a heap of dishes in the kitchen.

After drinking water, Jamuna began sorting the dishes again.

Malti looked at her empty plate.

Before the plate could go into the pile for washing, she picked it up.

She hung it from a hook.

Ganesh asked, "Why are you doing that?"

Malti said, "It will be shown in tomorrow's account."

"Can an empty plate be part of an account too?"

"If someone was responsible for filling it, then yes."

The work ended at three in the morning.

The wage register lay before Naresh Babu.

Seventeen names.

Seventeen signatures or thumbprints.

Malti placed a hand on the register.

"Write one thing."

Naresh Babu was tired.

"What now?"

"At the next feast: kitchen workers' meals—seventeen."

"Today's matter in the register for the next feast?"

"We learn from today."

Naresh Babu lifted his pen, then stopped.

"Who will pay for the food?"

Malti said, "It belongs in the wedding feast account of whoever is holding the wedding."

"Then the contract cost will rise."

"Seventeen people work all day. Why should the cost of their food be outside the contract?"

Naresh Babu leaned back in his chair.

"How much food should be set aside?"

"As much as is needed for seventeen people."

"Who will measure the quantity?"

"The person who measures for five hundred can measure for seventeen as well."

"And if someone eats once early and then eats again?"

Ganesh was listening from a distance.

He burst out laughing.

"So I'll be watched more closely than the guests."

Malti glared at him.

Ganesh fell silent.

Naresh Babu smiled a little too.

The tension eased.

Malti said, "There is no need to write names. Write the total number."

"And when will they eat?"

"That too must be thought through."

Naresh Babu said, "If everyone sits at once, the work will stop."

"Not everyone at once."

"Then?"

"In three batches."

Malti picked up a piece of chalk from the floor.

She drew three lines on the kitchen wall.

First—the cooks and water carriers who can be relieved in rotation.

Second—half the servers.

Third—the people remaining.

"In every batch, two or three people will stay at the hearths and serving stations."

Naresh Babu looked at the wall.

"Will all this be possible in the middle of a wedding?"

"If it is written down beforehand."

"And where will the separate food be kept?"

Malti pointed towards one corner of the kitchen.

Two medium-sized covered cauldrons stood empty there.

"In these."

Naresh Babu said at once, "Then people will say—the cooks took out the best vegetables for themselves first."

Malti replied, "Then take a counted portion from whatever is cooked for the guests. Do not cook separately."

"When should it be taken out?"

"Just before serving begins."

"In whose presence?"

Malti thought for a moment.

"In the presence of the person keeping the arrangements register."

For the first time, Naresh Babu was listening with full attention.

Malti continued, "A label will go on the cauldron—'Workers' meal, number seventeen.' And the time on the lid."

"And if the food for the guests runs short?"

"Then make fresh food as you did today when the guest count rose. Taking back the workers' share is not the solution."

Naresh Babu gave no direct answer.

In the blank margin of the register he wrote—

"Workers' meal—number beforehand."

Malti looked at it.

"Not 'kitchen workers'. Write 'working people'. There are lighting workers, cleaners, gatekeepers too."

Naresh Babu stopped his pen.

That had not occurred to him before.

"They are all from different contracts."

"Hunger is not on a separate contract."

Naresh Babu wrote again—

"Working people—total number."

This time Malti said nothing.

The air before dawn was entering the kitchen.

The empty plate hanging from the hook swayed gently.

Two weeks later there was another wedding in the same family.

This time it was the bride's cousin.

The venue was different.

Naresh Babu was again in charge of the arrangements.

Malti's team was called again.

Before work began, Naresh Babu arrived carrying a thin register.

"Let's count today."

Malti did not laugh.

Seriously, she began counting not names but numbers.

Kitchen—eighteen.

Servers—twelve.

Dishes—five.

Water—three.

Cleaning—four.

Lights and wiring—two.

Gate and vehicle parking—three.

Total: forty-seven.

Naresh Babu was startled.

"So many?"

Malti said, "Five hundred guests are counted. Why not forty-seven working people?"

Naresh Babu wrote 47 in the register.

Then he asked, "The same food for all of them?"

Malti said, "The main meal being served to the guests."

The young man handling the lights was listening from a distance.

He said, "My shift will run late."

Malti asked, "Can you eat in the first batch?"

"I'll have to watch the wiring until half past seven."

"Then the second."

The gatekeeper said, "I cannot leave my post."

Naresh Babu said, "Your plate will be covered and sent to the gate."

Malti looked at him.

What until yesterday had been only a kitchen arrangement was now spreading across the whole workplace.

At noon, the quantities for the main meal were measured.

Naresh Babu was present himself.

Malti said, "Before the guests are served, take out the share for the working people."

An assistant asked, "Won't that be called stealing?"

Naresh Babu replied, "It is written in the register."

Malti said nothing.

It struck her that justice often needs not a moral speech first, but a line on paper.

At seven in the evening, five minutes before the first serving began, two medium cauldrons were set aside.

One held rice.

One held the measured share of dal and vegetables.

Raw dough for the puris was weighed separately.

A small pot of curd.

Pieces counted out from the sweet box according to the number.

A label was attached—

"Workers' meal—47."

Below it, the time—

"6:55 p.m."

Malti read the label.

"No one's name."

Naresh Babu said, "The number is enough."

Ten people sat in the first batch.

Ganesh was still at the hearth.

Jamuna Devi was in the first batch.

When she sat down with her plate, Malti looked at her.

Malti remembered the empty plate from the previous wedding.

Jamuna took rice.

She took dal.

She took vegetables.

Laughing, she said, "Not just gravy today."

Malti said, "Eat slowly."

"How much time?"

"Twelve minutes."

"Slowly in twelve minutes?"

Both of them laughed.

After twelve minutes, the first batch got up.

The second batch sat down.

The work did not stop.

There was a crowd at the serving tables, but half the servers remained there.

The hearths were burning in the kitchen.

Water was being filled.

Dishes were being washed.

And of the forty-seven people, some were eating in turn.

At nine, a problem arose.

The number of people from the groom's side again exceeded the estimate.

Naresh Babu came quickly.

"Malti ji, the vegetables will run short."

Malti looked at the cauldrons.

"Put on a fresh cauldron."

"How long?"

"Thirty-five minutes."

"What do we serve immediately?"

"There is dal and rice. There is another vegetable dish for now."

Naresh Babu looked towards the covered cauldron where the workers' food was kept.

His gaze rested there for a moment.

Malti saw it.

She said nothing.

Naresh Babu himself looked away.

"Put on a fresh cauldron."

It was a small moment.

There was no speech.

There was no argument.

But the arrangement made after the previous wedding was tested in that moment.

The workers' meal did not become the first reserve for making up a shortage for the guests.

By ten, the new vegetables were ready.

The crowd slowly thinned.

In the third batch, a covered plate was sent to the gatekeeper.

When the young lighting worker returned after checking the wires, his portion was still being kept warm.

The four women cleaners sat down late.

One of them, Rekha Devi, asked, "Will the cost of this food be deducted from our wages?"

Naresh Babu was there.

He replied at once, "No."

Rekha asked again, "What if the contractor deducts it?"

Naresh Babu opened the register.

"It is written here—host's feast expense."

Rekha looked at the register.

She could not read all the letters.

Malti read the line aloud to her.

Rekha nodded.

"All right."

She began to eat.

At half past eleven, Malti took her own plate.

This time she was not the last.

Ganesh was sitting opposite her.

He said, "Malti Didi, where is the empty plate now?"

Malti looked towards the hook in the kitchen.

There was no plate hanging there.

She said, "There is nothing wrong with a plate being empty."

Ganesh did not understand.

"Then?"

"An empty plate should not mean that no one ever counted its share."

Ganesh went on eating, mixing his dal into the rice.

After the night ended, Naresh Babu checked the register.

Working people—47.

Meals taken—46.

One gatekeeper had gone home midway.

His covered plate remained.

Naresh Babu asked, "What about this one plate?"

Malti said, "Now this is truly leftover food."

"Give it to someone?"

"If it is safe, it can be given wherever the rules permit. But first write—one person did not take the meal."

Naresh Babu wrote it down.

"Is so much accounting necessary?"

Malti said, "If you do not write it, next time the difference between 47 and 46 will again be put on someone's head."

Naresh Babu laughed.

"You'll put everything into the register."

Malti smiled too.

"Not everything. Only what keeps disappearing."

By dawn, the washing of dishes was finished.

The plates set aside for forty-seven people were washed and stacked upside down in one pile.

One plate still stood apart from that pile.

The plate that had been covered for the gatekeeper and left unused.

Malti removed its cover.

The food had passed the time for which it could be kept safely.

She set it aside according to the rules.

The plate was washed.

It became empty.

Malti put it with the other plates.

This time, the plate was not empty because the food had run out.

It was empty only because the person meant to use it had left.

Its number was still recorded in the register.

The plate was empty.

The count was not.

Story 98

The Three-Rupee Receipt

On the eastern side of Darbhanga's district bus stand stood a public toilet.

Above the doorway, blue letters on a white strip read: "Usage fee: 3 rupees."

The strip was new.

The table below it was old.

At one corner of the table lay a serial-numbered receipt book, at the other a small iron cash box, and in the middle an empty plate for counting coins.

Saroj Devi's shift ran from five in the morning until two in the afternoon.

She issued receipts, took money, mopped the floor, and if the tap stopped working, she also opened the lid of the tank inside.

On paper, her post was "attendant."

In the course of a day, four or five different jobs fitted inside that one word.

Before the first morning bus arrived, she wiped the table and opened the receipt book.

She entered the serial number of the first receipt in the register.

That day, the number was 4821.

Opening the cash box, she untied sixty rupees in change from a knot in the end of her sari.

Two ten-rupee notes, four five-rupee coins, and the rest in twos and ones.

Those sixty rupees were her own.

The contractor did not provide change.

"You can take it back out at the end of the day," Ramesh Babu from the accounts room used to say.

It was easy to say.

In the rush, which coin was hers and which belonged to the contractor was a calculation Saroj kept in her head.

At twenty past five, the first bus arrived.

The first passenger handed her three one-rupee coins.

Saroj tore off a receipt and held it out.

The passenger waved his hand.

"Don't need it."

Saroj set the receipt down on the table.

The next man gave her a five-rupee coin.

Saroj returned two rupees and offered him the receipt.

"Keep it."

"The money?"

"The receipt."

That receipt too remained lying on the table.

Within half an hour, eleven receipts had collected there.

A gust of air sent two of them to the floor.

Saroj bent and picked them up.

One had stuck beside a wet shoe.

She set it aside to dry.

By seven, the crowd had grown.

Afraid of missing their buses, people put coins on the table, ran inside, came out, and hurried back toward the buses.

"Take the receipt."

"Don't need it."

"Take the receipt."

"What will I do with a piece of paper?"

"You're supposed to take it."

"My bus will leave."

Some people took the receipt and threw it down beside the doorway.

Some left it on the table.

Some did not even look toward Saroj's outstretched hand.

At first, Saroj used to tear off a receipt for everyone.

Then one day, after seeing a sack of cleaning rubbish full of paper, the first contractor had told her, "Why tear a receipt for someone who won't take it? Save the paper."

From that day, Saroj had formed a habit.

If a user clearly said, "I don't need it," she took the money but did not tear off a receipt.

To her, the rule seemed like a way of saving paper.

No one had given her a written order.

No one had stopped her either.

And the work went on.

At two that Tuesday afternoon, when her shift ended, Saroj counted the money.

The total was eight hundred eighty-seven rupees.

She separated her own sixty rupees in change.

That left eight hundred twenty-seven.

At three rupees each, that accounted for two hundred seventy-five users, with two rupees left over.

Saroj counted again.

A coin had lodged in a groove in the table.

When she took it out, the total came to eight hundred twenty-eight.

Exactly two hundred seventy-six users.

The last receipt torn from the book bore the number 5068.

From 4821 through 5068, there were two hundred forty-eight receipts in all.

That meant the money of twenty-eight users had been taken without any receipt being recorded.

Saroj wrote in her notebook: "Receipt not taken—28."

She handed the money and the receipt book over in the accounts room.

Ramesh Babu counted the cash first.

Then he looked at the receipt numbers.

"Twenty-eight extra?"

"Yes. Twenty-eight people didn't take receipts."

"Then why didn't you tear off the receipts?"

Saroj paused.

"They don't take them. The old contractor had said to save paper."

Ramesh Babu scratched his head.

"The paper was saved, but where did the account go?"

Saroj showed him her notebook.

"It's written here."

Ramesh Babu looked at the line in the notebook.

"You wrote 28. How am I to know whether it was 28, or 18, or 38?"

Saroj did not answer.

Ramesh Babu counted the money again.

"Today extra money is being deposited, so no one will accuse you of stealing."

He paused for a moment.

"But if the arrangement stays like this, tomorrow the money could come up short. Then whose word will we believe?"

Saroj's face hardened.

"I do not take money out."

"I am not saying that you do."

"But the suspicion is the same."

Ramesh Babu was silent for a few moments.

"The suspicion is not about the person. It is about this arrangement. But when the arrangement is weak, the suspicion will fall on the person all the same."

The words lodged in Saroj's mind.

Even after she returned home that day, the receipt numbers remained with her—4821, 5068, twenty-eight.

That night, while she was cooking, her daughter asked, "Ma, are you counting coins?"

Saroj realized she had been moving her lips silently.

"No."

"Then what?"

"Paper."

The next day Saroj brought a small iron spike from home.

It had once been used for impaling old bills.

She placed a small block of wood at the right corner of the table and fixed the spike into it.

On a piece of paper she wrote: "Receipts not taken."

The first passenger of the morning paid three rupees.

Saroj tore off a receipt.

"Here."

"Don't need it."

Saroj impaled the receipt on the spike.

The second person did not take his either.

The second receipt went on top of the first.

By seven o'clock, twelve receipts were on the spike.

At eight, twenty-nine.

At ten, forty-seven.

Loose receipts no longer blew about on the table.

Saroj now tore off a receipt for every user, whether the person took it or not.

At the end of the shift, the serial count and the cash matched.

"Not taken"—seventy-one.

Ramesh Babu looked at the spike.

"What is this?"

"You had said the method was bad. This is the witness for those twenty-eight."

"Today it isn't twenty-eight. It's seventy-one."

"Then seventy-one."

Ramesh Babu counted the receipts.

"Seventy-one indeed."

Saroj said, "Now will anyone say I made up the number I wrote?"

Ramesh Babu smiled.

"Fewer people will say it now."

The spike became part of the routine.

Three days later, Shanti Devi of the second shift fixed a spike to her table as well.

She said, "My receipts used to go straight into the sweeping."

Saroj said, "The receipts went into the sweeping, but the suspicion stayed on my head."

Both women laughed.

For a week, the accounts remained clear.

At the end of each day, the last torn receipt number, the cash, and the spike —all three matched.

Saroj thought the problem had been solved.

But the problem was not as flat as a sheet of paper.

At noon on Saturday, the bus stand became unusually crowded.

Three buses arrived at once.

A line formed in front of the table.

A young man paid three rupees.

He did not take the receipt.

Saroj impaled his receipt on the spike.

A boy standing behind him glanced at the spike.

Saroj got up for two moments to check the water inside.

When she came back, the boy had one of the receipts from the spike in his hand.

"Where did you take that from?"

The boy started.

"It was lying right here."

"It was not lying there. It was on the spike."

"I thought it was waste paper."

He was trying to give the receipt to the person with him so that three rupees could be saved.

Saroj took the receipt back.

The elderly man with the boy said, "Let it go. It's only a matter of three rupees."

Saroj said, "It is a matter of three rupees, and that is why the account of three rupees will be spoiled."

The elderly man paid three rupees.

Saroj tore off a new receipt.

She marked the old one with a cancelling stroke of her pen and impaled it on the spike again.

From that day, the spike was moved behind the table.

But another difficulty appeared two days later.

Water from the tap dripped onto a receipt.

The paper softened and began to disintegrate.

Half the serial number was erased.

Saroj dried it.

Ramesh Babu saw it in the evening.

"Is this number 5783 or 5788?"

"5783."

"You remember it."

"Yes."

"And I?"

Saroj was silent.

The testimony of the spike too had come to depend on a person's memory.

The following week, an inspection team from the municipal body arrived.

Two officers inspected the toilet's cleanliness, water, and fee board.

The third officer's eye fell on the spike.

"What are all these?"

Ramesh Babu said proudly, "Receipts belonging to users who do not take them. For transparent accounting."

The officer pulled out a receipt and looked at it.

"Where in the rules is this spike mentioned?"

"It is not in the rules. It is a local arrangement."

"Fine. But what if the wind carries off five receipts?"

"It is kept behind the table now."

"What if someone removes one?"

"We keep watch."

"What if water falls on them?"

Saroj remembered the wet receipt.

The officer put the receipt back.

"This is a useful aid. But an employee's honesty should not have to hang only from this spike."

For the first time during the inspection, Saroj spoke.

"Then what should it hang on?"

The officer looked at her.

"That is something all of you will have to decide together."

The inspection team left.

Gathering up the papers, Ramesh Babu said, "More work again."

Saroj said, "My work has already increased. Now the paper work will increase for you."

Ramesh Babu did not laugh.

The next day, a new complication arose at the change of the afternoon shift.

Saroj's shift ended at two o'clock.

Shanti Devi arrived at two.

There was only one receipt book.

There was only one cash box as well.

At five past two, while Saroj was counting the money, a passenger placed three rupees on the table and went inside.

Saroj tore off a receipt.

Shanti asked, "Does that belong to your shift or mine?"

Saroj looked at the clock.

"Five past two."

"Then mine."

"But I took the money."

"And you tore the receipt."

The two women looked at each other.

Three rupees was a small amount.

The question was not small.

That day the accounts balanced, but the boundary between the shifts did not.

The next day Saroj made a sheet of paper.

At the top she wrote: "Shift Handover."

Below it, five lines.

"Opening receipt number."

"Closing receipt number."

"Cash."

"Change float."

"Signatures of both attendants."

Ramesh Babu looked at the sheet.

"If we write this much, the paperwork will grow."

"Do the lines belong to the users or to the accounts?"

"To both."

"Then reconcile five minutes before the shift changes."

"And the users?"

"The woman from the next shift will manage the table while the woman from the first shift counts the box."

Ramesh Babu turned the sheet this way and that.

"Why list the change separately?"

Saroj untied the knot in her sari.

She put sixty rupees on the table.

"Does this belong to the contractor?"

"No."

"Whose is it?"

"Mine."

Ramesh Babu was startled.

"You put your own money in the cash box?"

"How else do I take a three-rupee fee without change? People give ten-rupee notes, twenty-rupee notes."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"It had always been working, that is why."

"It had always been working"—those four words silenced both of them.

The spike had been working in the same way.

So had the habit of not tearing receipts.

So had the shift without reconciliation.

Where there was no system, workers kept filling the gaps with their own small arrangements.

Ramesh Babu counted the sixty rupees.

"From tomorrow, the contractor will provide the change."

"How much?"

"Ninety."

"Will it be written in the register?"

Ramesh Babu looked at Saroj.

"Yes, it will be written."

The new trial began the following Monday.

In the morning, a change pouch containing ninety rupees came from the accounts room.

The pouch bore the number C-3.

The register recorded: "Opening change: 90 rupees."

The opening number in the receipt book was 6121.

Saroj signed.

Ramesh Babu signed.

The rule was clear.

Whether or not the user took the receipt, a receipt would be torn off.

Receipts not taken would remain on the spike, but their number would be for information only.

The basic revenue calculation would come from the opening and closing serial numbers.

Ninety rupees in change would be separated from the cash.

The remaining money would be matched against the number of receipts.

At the change of shift, both attendants would check the numbers and the money together.

The spike was no longer the sole basis of proof.

Everything went smoothly until the afternoon on the first day.

Five minutes before two, Shanti arrived.

Saroj placed the receipt book in front of her.

Last receipt torn—6394.

Total receipts—two hundred seventy-four.

Expected amount—eight hundred twenty-two rupees.

Total in the cash box—nine hundred twelve.

Ninety set aside as change.

Balance—eight hundred twenty-two.

Shanti smiled.

"It matches."

There were sixty-two receipts on the spike.

Saroj asked, "Do we count these?"

Shanti said, "Write 'Not taken—62.' But we won't reconcile the money from that."

Saroj entered it on the line.

Both women signed.

The first day's trial was successful.

On the second day, a new problem appeared.

A passenger gave her twenty rupees.

Saroj returned seventeen.

The passenger left.

Ten minutes later Saroj noticed that a two-rupee coin was missing from the change pouch.

She strained her memory.

Could she have returned nineteen instead of seventeen?

Her heart gave a jolt.

Earlier, something like this would have thrown the entire day's account out of balance at the end.

This time she immediately wrote in the register: "Possible change error: 2 rupees, 8:35."

She told Ramesh Babu.

At ten o'clock, the same passenger returned to the bus stand.

From a distance he called, "Didi, you gave me two rupees too much."

He placed the coin on the table.

Saroj did not strike out the line in the register.

Beside it she wrote: "Returned, 10:02."

Ramesh Babu saw it.

"You wrote down even such a small thing?"

Saroj said, "If I had not, by evening those two rupees would have become a question about someone's character."

Ramesh Babu gave no answer.

On the third day, the same municipal officer returned for an inspection.

He first looked at the fee board.

Then the register.

Then the change pouch.

Then the spike.

"The spike is still here?"

Saroj said, "Yes. It shows that people still do not take their receipts."

"But the accounting?"

Ramesh Babu showed him the new register.

The officer read the opening number.

He read the closing number.

He checked the cash.

He saw that the change was separate.

He saw the two signatures at shift handover.

"Who made this?"

Ramesh Babu pointed toward Saroj.

Saroj said, "First I made the spike. The paper came later."

The officer said, "There was nothing wrong with the spike."

Saroj replied, "But it was incomplete."

The officer nodded.

After a week's trial, the new system was made permanent.

The accounts room had a printed register prepared.

It had separate boxes for the opening and closing receipt numbers.

A separate one for the change float.

A separate one for cash deposited.

Space for two signatures at shift handover.

There was also a small box for the number of "Receipts not taken."

Beneath that box, in fine print, it said: "For information; not the basis of revenue reconciliation."

Saroj read that line twice.

She liked it.

The spike was not removed.

But its responsibility had changed.

Now it was a record of people's habit.

It was no longer the only testimony to an attendant's honesty.

On the last Friday of the month, the morning rush was heavy again.

A middle-aged passenger put three coins on the table.

Saroj tore off a receipt and held it out.

"Don't need it."

Saroj offered it once more.

"Take it, if you want."

"No. I'll throw it away."

Saroj impaled the receipt on the spike.

The passenger went inside.

At two in the afternoon, the shift changed.

Opening number—7401.

Closing number—7613.

A total of two hundred thirteen receipts.

Six hundred thirty-nine rupees.

The box contained seven hundred twenty-nine including change.

Ninety was set aside.

Balance—six hundred thirty-nine.

Shanti said, "It matches."

Saroj counted the spike.

Fifty-one receipts.

In the register she wrote: "Not taken—51."

Both women signed.

Saroj began removing the receipts from the spike and putting them into the day's envelope.

One receipt slipped from her hand and fell to the floor.

Earlier, when a receipt fell like that, she would become anxious at once.

This time she bent down calmly.

She picked up the receipt.

She put it in the envelope.

On the table, the last line of the register had already been filled in.

"It matches."

Story 99

The Last Light

The clock at the town bus stand showed twenty past ten at night.

The last bus, the one scheduled for ten fifteen, had already passed through the gate.

Its red rear light flashed once at the distant bend and vanished.

The crowd on the platforms thinned at once.

The voices in front of the shops subsided.

The public-address system fell silent.

But the bus stand was not empty.

Kamli Devi stood on the third platform with a broom in her hand.

She did not do the main cleaning through the day; she did it after the last bus.

It was hard to sweep while the crowd was still there.

Scraps of paper, tea cartons, betel wrappers, water bottles and dust all revealed themselves at once after the buses were gone.

Near the gate, Shyama Devi's little tea stall was still open.

She was putting out the stove.

Two kettles had been turned upside down to dry.

She was measuring the leftover milk and pouring it into a small pot.

A passenger sat on the stone bench.

The jeep for his next village had not yet arrived.

Raghunath, the night watchman, was bent over the register.

He wrote down the time of the last bus.

"10:15 — departure."

Just below that line stood an old rule.

"Switch off the main lights ten minutes after the last bus departs."

Raghunath looked at the clock.

Ten twenty-five.

He went towards the switch box.

Kamli stopped sweeping and said, "Raghu-bhaiya, five minutes more."

Raghunath stopped his hand.

"The rule says ten minutes."

"What sort of rule sends my eyes home along with the bus?"

Raghunath did not laugh.

He had not made the rule.

He merely operated the switches.

"Orders from above say to save electricity."

Kamli said, "Save it. But how am I to sweep in the dark?"

Raghunath said, "The gate light will remain on."

Kamli looked towards the third platform.

The single yellow light at the gate could not cast enough light that far.

Raghunath pressed two switches.

Six of the eight tube lights on the platforms went out at once.

The light beneath the roof thinned.

The shape of the bus stand changed in that very instant.

The paper that had looked white before now turned grey.

The patches of water that had shone before now merged with the colour of the floor.

Kamli swept more slowly.

From her stall Shyama called out, "Leave one light on here."

Raghunath said, "The stall has to close anyway."

Shyama replied, "The work of closing does not finish by itself when the light goes out."

Raghunath said nothing more.

The passenger on the bench switched on the light of his mobile phone.

Kamli watched its streak of light move across the floor.

She stopped sweeping.

"Look, the man is sitting with his own light. Shall I tie a mobile phone to my broom too?"

Embarrassed, the passenger lowered his phone.

Raghunath switched one light back on.

"Only one."

Kamli said, "One will do for today's work."

Raghunath wrote nothing in the register.

He only looked at the time.

At ten thirty-seven, Kamli leaned her broom against the wall.

At ten forty, Shyama pulled down the tin shutter.

The passenger's jeep arrived at ten forty-five.

That day, apart from the gate light, all the main lights were switched off at ten forty-six.

The next day, Naresh Babu, who was in charge of the electrical room, asked Raghunath, "Why were they on thirteen minutes longer yesterday?"

Raghunath said, "The cleaning was still going on."

"You know the rule?"

"I know it."
"Then?"
Raghunath did not answer directly.
"I had left one light on."
Naresh Babu looked at the electricity register.
Only two things were written there.
Main lights on — 5:42 p.m.
Main lights off — 10:46 p.m.
He asked, "The last bus?"
"10:15."
"Then that is thirty-one minutes extra."
Raghunath said, "Not all the lights."
Naresh Babu looked again at the register.
There was no separate box in it for "all" and "one."
He said, "In the account, the main lights are simply the main lights."
Raghunath remained silent.
At noon Kamli went to the office to collect cleaning supplies.
Naresh Babu was sitting there.
He had already heard about the previous night.
He stopped Kamli.
"You have a complaint about the lights?"
Kamli said, "Not a complaint. My eyes need light."
"The electricity bill is rising."
"I do not know by how much."
"Then how can the rule be changed without an account?"
Kamli turned the new bamboo handle of her broom in her hand.
"Write down my account too."
"What account?"
"How long the work continues."
Naresh Babu smiled faintly.
"The working hours are in the contract."
"The contract says till ten at night."
"Your shift ends at ten?"
"On paper."
"In reality?"
Kamli said, "As long as the last bus is late, the rubbish is late."
For the first time Naresh Babu looked at her closely.
Kamli added, "If I sweep in the daytime, five people will dirty it again. Only after the last bus do I get the whole floor at once."
Naresh Babu said, "Proof of that?"
Kamli smiled.

"You want proof from a broom?"
Naresh Babu smiled too.
"If you want an account, you need paper."
Kamli said, "Then make the paper."
The matter ended there that day.
For three days the old rule continued.
Ten minutes after the last bus, the lights were reduced.
Sometimes Raghunath left one light on.
Sometimes, afraid of Naresh Babu, he did not.
Kamli changed the pace of her work according to the light.
While the light remained, she cleaned the third platform.
Once it went out, she moved to the area near the gate.
The rear corner she left for the next morning.
Shyama lit the small bulb in her own stall herself.
The electricity for that bulb went through her separate meter.
But the five-step stretch from the stall to the public tap remained dark.
One night, while filling water, she stumbled over an empty bucket.
The bucket rolled away with a clatter.
Nothing happened.
Shyama picked it up.
She said nothing to Raghunath.
The next night an elderly passenger asked the way to the toilet.
From the gate Raghunath pointed with his hand.
The old man walked in the wrong direction through the dark.
Kamli stopped him and showed him the right way.
The old man asked, "Why is there no light?"
Kamli replied, "The bus has gone."
The old man paused.
"But I am still walking."
The words stayed with Kamli all night.
The next afternoon the bus stand had its monthly cleanliness inspection.
Seema Jha, a junior officer from the municipal transport office, arrived.
She inspected the floor, the toilets, the tap, the rubbish bins and the exit route.
Kamli followed behind her.
At the back of the third platform, Seema Jha noticed a thin line of dust.
"Is the cleaning poor here?"
Kamli said, "At night the light is switched off too soon."
Naresh Babu was there as well.
He immediately said, "It is the electricity-saving rule."
Seema Jha asked, "At what time?"

"Ten minutes after the last bus."

"When does the cleaning end?"

Naresh Babu gave the time written in the contract.

Kamli gave the actual time.

The two times were different.

Seema Jha wrote something on the paper.

"Is anyone asking to keep the lights on all night?"

Kamli shook her head.

"No."

"Then what do you need?"

Kamli did not answer at once.

Raghunath stood some distance away.

Shyama's stall was closed, but she was inside washing the milk pot.

Kamli said, "When the bus leaves, the bus's work ends. Not all the work of the bus stand."

Seema Jha looked up from the paper.

"Then until what time?"

Kamli paused again.

"How can I say that from one day?"

Seema Jha looked at Naresh Babu.

"Write it down for a week and see."

Naresh Babu asked, "What should we write?"

Seema Jha said, "The finishing time of every task that continues after the bus has gone."

She drew five lines on the paper.

Last bus departure.

Cleaning finished.

Stall closed.

Last waiting passenger out.

Main lights reduced.

"And security?"

Raghunath asked.

Seema Jha said, "The gate security light is separate, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"That will remain on all night."

Naresh Babu said, "If all the platform lights stay on, the bill will rise."

Seema Jha replied, "Who said all the lights?"

She looked up at the roof.

The eight tube lights were controlled by three separate switches.

Two were for the gate route.

Three were for the middle section of the platforms.

Three were for the rear section.

Under the old practice, all three switches were turned on together in the evening.

At night, two switches were turned off together.

Seema Jha said, "First write down the times. Then we will see how much light is needed, and where."

The one-week trial began the following Monday.

Raghunath was given a new, thin register.

On the first night, the last bus left at 10:12.

Kamli finished cleaning at 10:34.

Shyama closed her stall at 10:29.

The last passenger left at 10:18.

The main lights were reduced at 10:36.

On the second night the bus left at 10:20.

That day a passenger from one of the buses had vomited.

Kamli had to wash the floor.

The cleaning ended at 10:52.

Shyama closed at 10:31.

The last passenger left at 10:26.

The lights were reduced at 10:54.

The third night was rainy.

The last bus left at 10:17.

Water was blowing onto the platform.

Kamli was drying the floor.

Shyama had pulled the tin shutter halfway down and was putting things away inside.

A student whose bus had left was waiting while calling his uncle.

Raghunath kept writing the times in the register.

The student left on a motorcycle at 10:46.

Shyama closed at 10:42.

Kamli finished sweeping and mopping at 10:58.

The lights were reduced at 11:00.

Naresh Babu looked at the register the next morning.

"For an hour?"

Raghunath said, "It rained last night."

"Forty-three minutes after the last bus."

"Yes."

"All the lights?"

"No."

This time Raghunath had written the details separately.

"Middle section — three lights. Gate — two. Rear — off."

Naresh Babu turned the register towards himself and looked at it.

"Who added this box?"

"I did."

"Why?"

"If I had not written it, all the lights would again be treated as the same."

Naresh Babu said nothing.

On the fourth night the cleaning finished early.

Bus 10:14.

Cleaning 10:28.

Stall 10:25.

Last passenger 10:19.

Middle lights off at 10:30.

On the fifth night a new problem arose.

The last bus left at 10:16.

Kamli had almost finished her work.

Just then, at 10:38, an outstation bus that was running late entered the bus stand.

That bus was to halt there for the night.

Its passengers got down.

Two families began looking for vehicles outside the gate.

A woman went to the toilet with her child.

Shyama half-opened her nearly closed stall again and gave them hot water.

Kamli had to sweep the platform again.

Raghunath looked at the first line in the register.

"Last bus departure — 10:16."

Below it he added a new line.

"Late arrival — 10:38."

Naresh Babu saw that line the next day.

"That wasn't in the rule."

Raghunath said, "The bus did not come after reading the rule."

Naresh Babu laughed.

"So now the bus is at fault too?"

Raghunath said, "No one is at fault. The times were different."

That night's cleaning ended at 11:02.

Shyama closed at 10:58.

The last passenger left at 11:06.

The work lights were reduced at 11:08.

On the sixth night the bus left on time.

Kamli's work ended at 10:32.

Shyama at 10:27.

There were no passengers.

Work lights 10:34.
The seventh night was completely quiet.
Bus 10:13.
Cleaning 10:30.
Stall 10:26.
Last passenger 10:15.
Work lights 10:32.
On the morning of the eighth day, all the times were totalled.
Seema Jha came again.
Naresh Babu brought the thick electricity register.
Raghunath brought the thin night register.
Kamli stood some distance away with her broom.
Shyama too had been called.
Seema Jha first read the times for the seven days.
"On average, how long did the cleaning continue after the last bus?"
Naresh Babu took out a calculator.
Kamli said, "Whatever the calculator says."
Naresh Babu added the figures.
"About thirty-two minutes."
"The stall?"
"About twenty to twenty-five."
"The last passenger?"
"Not the same every day."
Seema Jha said, "And the electricity?"
Naresh Babu said, "If all eight lights had stayed on, it would have been more."
"Did they?"
"No. Three or five."
"Then the difference?"
Naresh Babu looked at his calculation.
"Not as much as it had seemed before."
Kamli asked, "How much?"
Naresh Babu told her the figure.
Kamli understood some of it and some she did not.
She understood only this much: the matter was not impossible.
Seema Jha got up to inspect the switch box.
None of the three switches had a label above it.
One had a soot mark.
The second had a white scratch.
A red thread was tied around the third.
Raghunath said, "I know which is which."

Seema Jha said, "And when Raghunath is on leave?"

Everyone fell silent.

That day three small labels were made.

"Gate/Exit."

"Work Route."

"Rear Platform."

Naresh Babu asked, "Which is the work route?"

Seema Jha said, "The route from the gate to the toilet, the tap, the stall and the broom store."

Kamli interjected, "Half of the third platform too."

Seema Jha asked, "Why?"

"The rubbish bin is there."

The label was changed.

"Work Route/Rubbish Bin."

A new two-week trial was fixed.

The rule was simple.

Five minutes after the last bus left, the extra lights on the rear platform would be switched off.

The work-route lights would remain on until the recorded work was finished.

The gate/exit security lights would remain on all night.

If a bus arrived late, Raghunath or the watchman on duty could switch the work-route lights back on.

The time of every switch change would be written in the register.

On the line for the last task, the person concerned would put a short signature or thumb impression.

Kamli said, "Do I have to sign every day?"

Seema Jha said, "If the lights depend on the time your work ends, it is better that your time be recorded by your own hand."

Kamli knew how to write her name.

She could write "Kamli."

On the first trial night she wrote 10:41.

Beside it she wrote "Kamli."

The letters were a little crooked.

Raghunath said, "Shall I write the time for you?"

Kamli said, "No. I have learned to read the clock."

Shyama wrote her time too.

Her letters were small.

Over the two weeks, the new rule revealed a few inconveniences as well.

One night Kamli wrote that her work was finished.

Five minutes later she remembered that a bucket had been left outside the broom store.

She went back inside.

By then the work-route lights had been switched off.

She said to Raghunath, "Turn them on again."

Raghunath did.

A second time was added to the register.

Kamli said, "I signed too soon."

Raghunath replied, "That is what the register is for. Strike out the mistake and write the new time."

He drew a thin line through the old time.

Beside it he wrote 10:47.

The next night Shyama closed her stall and left.

Kamli's work was still going on.

Shyama came back.

"The milk can is still inside."

She unlocked the stall.

Raghunath looked at the register.

Shyama laughed.

"Write my time again too?"

Kamli said, "The milk counts as work as well."

All three laughed.

But the time was written down.

On the third night, an employee from the electrical room said, "So much writing just for the lights?"

Naresh Babu was there.

He replied, "Earlier there was only one line, but that one line was measuring the wrong thing."

The employee asked, "Wrong?"

Naresh Babu said, "The bus's work. Not the bus stand's."

Kamli was listening from a distance.

She said nothing.

After two weeks, the electricity charges were compared.

The extra use was far less than keeping the lights on all night as before.

It was slightly more than under the old rule.

Naresh Babu said, "So electricity is saved and the work gets done too."

Seema Jha said, "It is not ideal. But it is workable."

Raghunath asked, "Permanent?"

Seema Jha said, "For three months first. Then we will review it."

The rule board was written again.

The old line was not erased.

A thin line was drawn through it.

Below it came the new lines.

"Reduce the extra lights after the last bus."

"Keep the work-route lights on until the last recorded task is complete."

"Gate/exit security lights remain on all night."

"For a late arrival or necessary work, the work lights may be switched on again."

Kamli read the board.

Her eyes stopped at "last recorded task."

She said to Raghunath, "So now the bus is not named?"

Raghunath said, "The bus is named above. The work is named below."

Kamli said, "Good."

A month passed.

The rule gradually became ordinary.

At first people talked whenever the lights changed.

Now Raghunath wrote down the time and changed the switches.

Kamli filled in her line.

Shyama filled in hers.

Sometimes Raghunath wrote down the time of the last passenger.

Sometimes a passenger whose last bus had gone sat there for five minutes.

Sometimes for half an hour.

Sometimes a bus arrived late.

Sometimes nothing happened.

In the last week of the three months, an inspection team came from the transport office.

This time Seema Jha was not with them.

It was another officer.

He read the rule board.

He looked at the electricity register.

"Why does it say 'last task' here?"

Naresh Babu did not tell the whole story.

He took out the old seven-day trial register.

The officer looked through the times.

"Did electricity use increase?"

"A little."

"Lights all night?"

"No."

"Any security complaints?"

"None in the last three months."

"Cleaning?"

Kamli's contract-inspection scores were shown to him.

The old note about dust on the third platform had not been repeated later.
The officer closed the register.
"All right."
That was all he said.
The rule remained in place.
One winter night the bus stand emptied early again.
The last bus left at 10:11.
The wind was sharp.
Shyama closed her stall at 10:25.
One passenger left at 10:27.
Kamli kept sweeping the floor.
The extra lights on the rear platform had already been switched off.
The three work-route lights were still burning.
One light was not directly above Kamli, but a little ahead.
As she swept, she moved into its circle of light.
Then out of it.
Then into the next circle.
Raghunath sat near the gate with the register open.
At ten thirty-eight, Kamli emptied the rubbish bin.
At ten forty, she washed the broom.
At ten forty-two, she locked the store.
She came towards the gate.
Raghunath turned the register towards her.
Kamli wrote the time.
"10:42."
Below it, "Kamli."
Raghunath asked, "Everything done?"
Kamli looked back once.
The third platform was empty.
The tap was closed.
The rubbish bin was covered.
The broom was inside.
Shyama's shutter was down.
"Yes."
Raghunath pressed the work-route switch.
The three lights went out at once.
The two security lights at the gate were still burning.
Kamli tightened her shawl over her head.
As she crossed the gate, she said, "Now switch these off."
Raghunath said, "These stay on all night."
Kamli stopped outside the gate and looked back.

The bus stand was not completely dark.
Nor was it fully lit.
The light for the work that had ended had gone out.
The light for the route that was still open remained.
Kamli set off for home.
In the register, the line for the night's last task had been filled in.
"10:42 — Kamli."

Story 100

Outside the Count

The floodwater had receded, but its height still remained marked on the walls.

In some houses there was a brown line up to the waist, on some doorways up to the chest.

On some walls the mud had dried and cracked.

On others there were marks from new brooms.

In the town's last ward, sand had collected here and there along the lanes.

Shoes sank into that sand.

Pull a foot free, and a wet print remained behind.

That morning, the enumeration team went through the whole ward for the first time.

There were four people in the team.

Junior engineer Prabhakar Jha examined walls, roofs, and foundations.

Clerk Harinarayan carried the register.

Local worker Sunita identified people's homes.

And the newly appointed enumerator, Mrinalini, walked with a bundle of papers and two pencils.

The printed form in Mrinalini's hand had, as its first field, house number.

Second—owner's name.

Third—damage to the roof.

Fourth—damage to the wall.

Fifth—habitable or not.

At the bottom, in small type, there were two lines for remarks.

The form was small.

The ward was large.

The first house had no door.

A bamboo screen leaned to one side.

Sunita said, "This is Ramlochan Sahu's house."

Harinarayan wrote, "1. Ramlochan Sahu."

Prabhakar measured the wall.

"A serious crack on the right side."

Mrinalini looked at the roof.

Half the tiles had fallen.

Ramlochan Sahu was separating wheat from a soaked sack in the courtyard.

He said, "Look at the back room too."

The team went to the back.

There was mud on the room's floor.

A waterline ran three feet up the wall.

A small iron stove lay overturned in one corner.

Near the doorway, two children's wet books had been spread out in the sun.

Mrinalini asked, "Who used to live in this room?"

Ramlochan said, "A tenant."

"Name?"

"Ramesh Mandal."

"How many people?"

"He, his wife, two children."

"Where are they now?"

"On the school veranda."

Harinarayan looked up from the register.

"The owner's name has been written. Next."

Mrinalini looked at the form.

There was no field for Ramesh Mandal's name.

On the first remarks line she wrote, "Back room: Ramesh Mandal family, 4."

Harinarayan said, "If you put this much in the remarks, the space will run out."

Mrinalini smiled.

"There is space for now."

Half the front wall of the second house had fallen.

The owner lived away.

An elderly woman was washing utensils at the doorway.

Sunita said, "This is Kamala Devi. The owner's sister."

Harinarayan asked, "The owner's name?"

"Shivnarayan Chaudhary."

"Where is he?"

"Surat."

"Who lived in the house?" Mrinalini asked.

Kamala Devi shaded her eyes with her palm.

"I did. And two boys in the front room."

"Two boys?"

"They work in a sweet shop. Their village is in another district."

"Names?"

"One is Shambhu. The other, Mukesh or Mahesh... I don't know exactly."

A voice came from inside the doorway: "Mukesh."

A thin young man came out.

"I am Mukesh Paswan."

"The other?"

"Shambhu Yadav. He is drying his tools just now."

"Tools?"

"Not the shop's. My own bicycle-repair tools. I do another job at night."

Mukesh went inside and brought out a rusted spanner, a screwdriver, and a small hammer wrapped in cloth.

"All of these were submerged in the water."

Harinarayan said, "This survey is for recording damage to the house."

Mukesh fell silent.

He wrapped the tools in the cloth again.

Mrinalini asked, "Do you live in this house?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"Eight months."

On the second remarks line Mrinalini wrote, "Rented room: Mukesh Paswan, Shambhu Yadav; 2 residents."

The space was full.

When they reached the third house, Harinarayan laughed.

"Where will you write the remarks now?"

Mrinalini did not answer.

The owner's register listed the third house under the name of Manorama Devi.

The house had four rooms.

In one, Manorama Devi lived with her granddaughter.

In the second lived Naseema Khatoon, who did sewing work.

In the third lived Kailash and Phulo, a couple who carried bricks.

The fourth room had been empty before the flood.

On the night the water rose, five neighbours had taken shelter in the empty room.

Mrinalini began asking each name.

Harinarayan said quietly, "Those who took shelter are not residents of this house."

"Right."

"Then don't write them."

"We'll record the permanent residents separately."

Mrinalini took a blank sheet from her bag.

At the top she wrote, "House 3 — Residents there."

First line—Manorama Devi, granddaughter Rinku.

Second—Naseema Khatoon, daughter Gulnaz.

Third—Kailash Sada, Phulo Devi, one child.

Below that she wrote separately, "Temporary shelter on the night of the flood: 5; not included in this resident count."

Prabhakar returned after measuring the wall.

He saw the blank sheet.

"What form is this?"

"None."

"Then?"

"I am writing down how many families were living inside the house."

Prabhakar was silent for a few moments.

"Compensation will not be decided from this paper."

"I am not writing a decision."

"People will think that if their names are written, they will get money."

Mrinalini nodded.

"That is why we will tell everyone this is only an enumeration."

Manorama Devi had been listening from a distance.

She said, "I understand that writing my name does not mean I will get money. But if my name itself is not written, who will know where I am?"

No one answered.

The team moved on.

Lane after lane.

Door after door.

The number of houses on the forms kept growing.

So did Mrinalini's blank sheets.

House 4—one owner-family.

House 5—owner away; three tenant families.

House 6—shop below, owner upstairs; watchman's room at the back.

House 7—one widow, one student tenant.

House 8—two brothers as owners, but separate kitchens; with an elderly uncle.

House 9—four seasonal labourers in one room.

House 10—closed.

"Closed" was easy to write.

Mrinalini looked through the crack in the doorway.

An overturned bucket on the floor.

A clothesline on the wall.

An earthen stove in the corner.

Sunita asked the neighbour.

"Who used to live here?"

"Three sisters. They work as cleaners at the hospital."

"Where have they gone?"

"To a relative's house after the water rose."

"The owner?"

"In Darbhanga town."

Harinarayan searched for the owner's name in his register.

"Jagdish Mishra."

Mrinalini wrote, "House 10: three sisters residing; names to be verified."

Harinarayan said, "What is the use of writing it without names?"

"At least we will not say the house was empty."

By noon, twenty-six houses had been counted.

The team sat on the school veranda.

A relief kitchen was operating there.

Steam rose from the rice.

People stood in line holding plates.

Mrinalini spread her papers on the ground.

Harinarayan opened the main register.

"Twenty-six houses."

Prabhakar said, "Eight severe, eleven moderate, seven light."

Mrinalini counted her lines.

"Thirty-two families."

Harinarayan looked startled.

"Thirty-two in twenty-six houses?"

"Yes."

"People?"

"One hundred and four. Some names still need verification."

Sunita said, "And we haven't even covered half the ward yet."

Prabhakar kept drinking water.

Mrinalini lifted the main form.

"On these twenty-six pages, how many signs are there of those one hundred and four people?"

Harinarayan replied, "The form is not for counting people."

"Right."

"It is a structural-damage form."

"Right."

"Then why are we trying to read both things together?"

Mrinalini folded the paper.

"Because in the relief room, people ask the questions, not walls."

Prabhakar smiled faintly.

"Don't say that sentence in front of an officer."

"Why?"

"He will say—even walls, after all, are for people."

Everyone laughed.

The laughter was brief.

The line for rice moved forward.

At that moment a child came and stood near Mrinalini's papers.

He had a soaked school identity card in his hand.

The photograph inside the plastic had blurred.

The child asked, "Is my name written?"

Mrinalini asked, "What's your name?"

"Sonu."

"Full name?"

"Sonu Kumar."

"Home?"

The child pointed toward the main road.

"The one with the red door."

Sunita understood.

"House five."

Mrinalini looked at the blank sheet.

House five listed three tenant families, but not the child's name.

Only the names of the heads of families and the number of members.

Mrinalini said, "Your family has been counted."

The child asked again, "Me?"

Mrinalini paused for a moment.

"Yes, you too."

The child walked away.

At the top of the blank sheet, Mrinalini added a new heading: "Number of family members."

Not everyone's names.

The number clearly.

After noon, the team went to the lower part of the ward.

The water had receded later there.

The mud was still wet.

A piece of plastic was caught on a bamboo pole.

"12" had been written in white chalk on the door of one house.

Prabhakar said, "House twelve."

Sunita stopped him.

"No, twelve is the old municipal number. In our count this will now be twenty-seven."

Harinarayan laughed.

"One house, two numbers."

Mrinalini said, "And now we'll see how many counts are inside it."

The owner of the house was Vasudev Mahato.

He was shovelling mud out of his courtyard.

Prabhakar asked, "How high did the water rise?"
Vasudev put his hand on the wall.
"Up to here."
"The roof?"
"Fine."
"The foundation?"
"Settled a little at the back."
Harinarayan wrote the owner's name.
Mrinalini asked, "Who lived there?"
Vasudev began counting.
"Me, my wife, my younger son."
"And?"
"Sarita in the front room."
"Sarita?"
"She does domestic work. With two daughters."
"And?"
Vasudev looked toward the back.
"Ramvriksh used to live near the storehouse."
"Used to?"
"I haven't seen him since the night of the flood."
Mrinalini was not startled.
"Where did he go?"
"He is sometimes seen at the school. Perhaps in the relief camp."
"Family?"
"Alone."
"Work?"
"With a mason."
Mrinalini wrote.
House 27.
Owner-family—3.
Tenant Sarita Devi—3.
Resident Ramvriksh Sada—1, present location pending verification.
Total—7.
Vasudev looked at the paper.
"Ramvriksh too has been written down?"
"Yes."
"He has no papers or anything."
"We are not distributing identity cards right now."
"Then?"
"We are writing down who used to live here."
Vasudev rested the mud-filled shovel on the ground.

"That's right. His trunk is still there."

A thin tin trunk lay near the storehouse.

Mud had caked onto the lock.

On top of the trunk, the letters "Ra" could be seen in white paint.

Mrinalini did not open the trunk.

She only wrote, "Evidence of residence available."

Harinarayan was watching from a distance.

"Now even a trunk will become a witness?"

Mrinalini said, "Even if there is no name, at least there is some sign."

By the end of the day, thirty-seven houses had been counted.

The main register contained the names of thirty-seven owners.

Mrinalini's separate sheets listed sixty-one families.

A total of one hundred and seventy-three people.

The names or present locations of eleven people still awaited verification.

Seven families were in houses whose owners did not live in the ward.

Nine families were tenants.

Four groups were labourers sharing a single room.

Two elderly people were listed as part of an owner's family but kept separate kitchens.

Harinarayan counted the figures again.

"Thirty-seven houses. Sixty-one families."

He scratched his head.

"If this register goes up to the office, it will raise a lot of questions."

Mrinalini said, "If it doesn't, the people will become fewer."

Prabhakar gathered the papers.

"Tomorrow there is a review at the block office. We'll see there."

The next day, nine teams sat in the review room.

A map hung on the wall.

Tea on the table.

The smell of wet shoes.

Block officer Anil Kumar asked each team for its figures in turn.

"Ward one?"

"Forty-two structures."

"Ward two?"

"Forty-nine."

"Ward three?"

"Thirty-seven," Prabhakar said.

Anil Kumar wrote it down.

"Severe?"

"Twelve."

"Moderate?"

"Sixteen."

"Light?"

"Nine."

Then Prabhakar said, "There is one additional list."

Anil Kumar looked up.

"What list?"

Mrinalini placed the bundle of blank sheets in front of him.

"Of the people who were living there."

The room fell silent.

Anil Kumar read the first page.

"This is not on the form."

"No."

"Why was it made?"

"Because in thirty-seven houses we found sixty-one families."

Two people in the room looked at each other.

Anil Kumar read the papers again.

"This cannot become a compensation-eligibility list."

"I haven't written that it is."

"Was that explained to the people?"

"Everyone who asked was told that this is only a resident count. No promise of money or eligibility."

Anil Kumar looked toward Harinarayan.

"You were present?"

"Yes."

"Were people confused?"

Harinarayan thought for a moment.

"Some people asked. But Mrinalini kept explaining it clearly."

Anil Kumar's finger stopped on one line of the paper.

"'Evidence of residence available'—what is this?"

Mrinalini told him about Ramvriksh's trunk.

"The person was not found. The owner says he lived there. His trunk is still there. It is marked as pending verification."

Anil Kumar turned the page.

"'Three sisters, names pending verification.'"

"Information from a neighbour."

"So the list is not fully reliable."

"That is why it says pending verification."

The room fell silent again.

Rekha Devi, supervisor of another team, said, "In my ward too, one house has five tenant families. The main form carried only the owner's name."

A member of a third team said, “I have a group of brick-kiln labourers. There is no owner's house, only huts. Which category do I put them in?”

Anil Kumar leaned back in his chair.

“We are mixing two things right now—structural damage and affected people.”

Prabhakar said, “That is what it seems to me as well.”

“But the form sent from above is for structures.”

Mrinalini said, “Then let the structural form remain as it is. A separate supplementary register can be made.”

“On what basis?”

“Information about residents. The level of verification can be marked separately.”

Anil Kumar did not agree at once.

He picked up his tea.

After a sip, he looked at the papers again.

“If a separate register is made, three things must be clear.”

Mrinalini picked up her pencil.

“First—this is not an approval of compensation.”

She wrote it down.

“Second—this register will not decide the rights of either the house owner or the resident.”

She wrote that down.

“Third—one person must not be counted in two places.”

“Right.”

Rekha Devi said, “One fourth point—people who took temporary shelter should not be mixed with permanent residents.”

“Right.”

Harinarayan said, “And if a name cannot be found?”

Anil Kumar said, “Write the number, write the source, write pending verification. Do not turn an estimate into a confirmed fact.”

Mrinalini wrote four headings.

In the room, the old printed form lay beside the blank sheets.

Anil Kumar said, “By this evening, make a one-page supplementary format. Tomorrow all teams will try it.”

Mrinalini asked, “Will it be sent upward?”

“First we'll look at the figures.”

“And compensation?”

Anil Kumar answered plainly.

“That is a separate decision under the rules. This register does not promise it.”

“Right.”

"But we need to know the number of affected people."

That sentence was not written on the paper.

But everyone heard it.

That evening four people kept working on the layout of the supplementary page.

At the top, the heading: "Damaged Site: Resident Details."

First field—house number.

Second—name or identification of family/group.

Third—number of members.

Fourth—basis of residence: owner/tenant/service room/shared/other.

Fifth—present location.

Sixth—source of information.

Seventh—verified/pending verification.

At the bottom, in bold, they wrote, "These details do not in themselves create a right to compensation."

Harinarayan read it.

"Will people understand the word 'in themselves'?"

Sunita said, "In the field we will say it plainly."

Mrinalini added another line below: "Having a name recorded is not a promise of receiving money."

Harinarayan laughed.

"They will understand that."

On the third day, the team went back into the ward.

This time they had the supplementary page along with the main form.

At house one, Ramlochan Sahu was outside.

Ramesh Mandal had also returned from the relief school.

Mrinalini said, "Yesterday I wrote your name in the remarks. Today there is a separate resident register."

Ramesh asked, "Will I get anything from this?"

"I am not promising anything right now."

"Then why the name?"

"So that it is not recorded that only the owner of this house was affected."

Ramesh looked at Mrinalini for a few moments.

Then he said, "All right. Write four people."

"You, your wife, two children?"

"Yes."

"Where are you now?"

"School veranda. We probably won't sleep here tonight."

"Why?"

Ramlochan said from the side, "The back wall is still wet. It isn't fit to live in."

Prabhakar nodded.

"That is also written on the main form."

Mrinalini wrote the present location on the supplementary page.

Owner and tenant now appeared on separate lines beneath the same house number.

Ramlochan looked at the paper.

"Now it shows that I wasn't living in the house alone."

Ramesh smiled.

"You weren't living alone before the flood either."

Ramlochan laughed too.

The matter ended there.

The three sisters had returned to house ten.

Their names were Sangita, Rekha, and Pramila.

All three worked as cleaners at the hospital.

Pramila said, "Our belongings were lost in the water, but the house is not ours."

Mrinalini said, "Ownership of the house is one field. Residents are another."

"Money?"

"No promise."

"All right."

Sangita opened her wet iron trunk.

Inside were clothes, an old hospital identity card, a small image of a deity, and strips of medicine.

She said, "Do all these have to be written down?"

"No. Only that you lived here, the number of members, and your present location."

Sangita closed the trunk.

"Then that's fine."

Ramvriksh was found at house twenty-seven.

He was living under a tarpaulin in one corner of the school grounds.

Sunita brought him along.

As soon as Ramvriksh saw his tin trunk, he touched the lock.

"I thought the water had carried it away."

Vasudev said, "I lifted it and put it on bricks."

Ramvriksh said nothing.

Mrinalini asked, "How long have you been living here?"

"Two years."

"Rent?"

"Not cash. I watch the storehouse at night, and get the room in return."

Mrinalini looked at the field for basis of residence.

"Service room."

Ramvriksh asked, "So I'm not a tenant?"

"We're writing the arrangement as you describe it. Is 'service room' right?"

"Right."

"Where are you now?"

"School grounds."

"Members?"

"One."

Mrinalini marked him as verified.

Yesterday's "pending verification" was crossed out.

Ramvriksh asked, "How much damage did you write for my home?"

Prabhakar said, "The rear part of this house is in the moderate-damage category."

"My room?"

Prabhakar looked at the paper.

"Not fit to live in until it dries and is inspected."

Ramvriksh nodded.

He tried to open the lock on his trunk.

The lock was jammed with mud.

Vasudev went to fetch oil.

The team moved on.

For four days the supplementary register was filled in.

Ward one: forty-two structures, seventy families.

Ward two: forty-nine structures, seventy-four families.

Ward three: thirty-seven structures, sixty-one families.

Ward four: seventy-two structures, seventy-nine families.

In some wards the difference was small.

In some it was large.

Especially in lanes where rooms were rented out, labourers lived behind shops, or several kitchens operated within one courtyard.

At the block office, two figures were written beside the map.

"Damaged structures: 200."

"Recorded affected families/groups: 284."

Below them: "Preliminary; verification continuing."

In red ink Anil Kumar wrote, "Not a compensation list."

No one objected.

Because now the two numbers each had their own meaning.

A week later, an inspection team came from the district.

They examined the main forms.

The supplementary register too.

One officer asked, “On whose orders were these additional details collected?”

Anil Kumar said, “The need arose in the field.”

“It isn't on the state form.”

“The original form has not been changed.”

“Then what is this used for?”

“To reconcile numbers for relief sites, temporary shelter, water, sanitation, and family contact.”

The officer turned the pages.

“Compensation?”

“Separate rules.”

“List of those eligible for assistance?”

“Separate verification.”

“Then fine. Keep the heading clear.”

Mrinalini was listening from a distance.

The matter ended there.

No grand order came.

No applause.

The supplementary register simply became one new page in the bundle of registers.

Two weeks after the flood, the water had dried completely.

The sand in the lanes was swept to the sides.

Some houses had begun to receive a coat of limewash.

Some doorways were still crooked.

On her final verification round, Mrinalini went to house five.

The red door was half open.

Sonu was outside drying his notebook.

The moment he saw Mrinalini, he asked, “Is my name written?”

Mrinalini laughed.

“Your family is written down. Four members.”

“Me?”

“You too, among those four.”

Sonu was not satisfied.

“Which one of the four am I?”

Mrinalini looked at the line bearing the head of the family's name.

“This register doesn't list every member by name.”

Sonu made a face.

Mrinalini took a small slip of paper from her pocket.

“Tell me your full name.”

“Sonu Kumar Paswan.”

On her personal work list she wrote, "House 5: child Sonu Kumar Paswan—member verification from school list."

"Now?" Sonu asked.

"Now your name will appear in the verification."

"Money?"

Mrinalini burst out laughing.

"You too with the same question?"

Sonu laughed as well.

"Everyone asks."

"My answer is the same—no promise."

Sonu turned the notebook over in the sun.

Mrinalini moved on.

In the ward's last lane, the wall of one house had been replastered.

The old waterline was hidden beneath the limewash.

The municipal chalk number still remained near the doorway.

"37."

Five people in the owner's family lived in that house.

Two tenant students lived in the back room.

Under a small lean-to, a woman who did sewing work lived with her daughter.

The main form said, "House 37. Owner: Devkinandan Jha. Moderate damage."

The supplementary page had three lines.

Owner-family—5.

Tenant students—2.

Service/work-room residents—2.

Total—9.

Mrinalini clipped the two pages together.

Harinarayan stood beside her.

He said, "So all thirty-seven houses are complete now?"

"Yes."

"Anything still pending verification?"

"The present locations of two families. The names have been confirmed."

Harinarayan closed the main register.

"On the first day I thought one name for one house was enough."

Mrinalini said, "Perhaps it was enough for a structure."

"Not for people."

Mrinalini did not answer.

A relief vehicle passed outside the lane.

A thin layer of dust rose.

The chalked "37" on the wall blurred, then came into view again.

Mrinalini looked at the last line of her supplementary page.

"Total residents — 9."

There were two counts for the same place.

Both were correct.

Both were different.

The flood had left its line on the wall.

The register was now leaving a line for the people who had lived within it as well.

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The Broken Clock · *The Star on the Roof* · *The Last Light*

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