

SHORT STORIES · MITHILA, VAJJI & ANGA

THE
HUNDRED-
STORY
TRILOGY



Three Hundred Selected Stories

STORIES 101 – 200

GAJENDRA THAKUR

THE HUNDRED-STORY TRILOGY

VOLUME II

Three Hundred Selected Stories

GAJENDRA THAKUR

The Hundred-Story Trilogy · Volume II

Gajendra Thakur

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ABOUT THIS COLLECTION

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 city, sorrow and joy, tradition and modernity, nature and society, women and men, childhood, old age, migration, 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.

Stories remain alive as long as people and language remain alive.

Gajendra Thakur

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STORY 101

Beyond the Embankment

Fourteen years had passed since New Bahuara was settled.

On government maps it was called “Rehabilitation Sector-3,” but people themselves called it New Bahuara.

Old Bahuara lay beyond the embankment.

In the rains, when the reservoir filled, it was hard even to look toward the old village.

In winter, as the water receded, a raised patch of earth appeared in the distance like an island, but the old path to it no longer existed.

The village shrine, too, had stood there.

Outsiders hearing “village shrine” imagined a large temple.

Old Bahuara had no such temple.

There was an old pakar tree, a mud platform beneath it, a small piece of black stone at the centre, and a single lamp burning at dusk.

That was all the shrine was.

There was no permanent priest.

The turn for lighting the lamp passed from house to house.

If one household ran short of oil, a neighbour supplied it.

If the family of a house was away, the next household lit the lamp, but in the register the turn remained recorded in the absent household’s name.

Devkali Devi remembered this better than anyone.

She was seventy-two.

In New Bahuara her house stood at the end of the third row.

In front were two flowerpots, a tulsi altar, and an old wooden seat beneath the bamboo.

Most evenings Devkali sat there, looking toward the embankment.

Her grandson Chandan would ask, “Grandmother, what do you see over there?”

Devkali would say, “What can no longer be seen.”

The answer never satisfied Chandan.

He had been born in New Bahuara itself.

Old Bahuara was a story to him.

One day a notice came from the panchayat.

A meeting would be held to decide how to use the public open ground in the middle of the rehabilitation settlement, lying vacant for years.

Sometimes children played gulli there, sometimes paddy was spread to dry, and sometimes rainwater pooled there during the monsoon.

At the meeting Raghunandan Jha proposed, "Let us build the village shrine."

A few people agreed at once.

"The old shrine has gone under water," someone said. "A new village is incomplete without a shrine."

From the second row Lalan Mahato said, "If it is built, it should be in the middle. Why in front of the first row?"

Raghunandan replied, "This is the middle."

"The patch in front of your house is the middle?"

Laughter rose, then died almost at once.

Some said the old shrine had stood near the Mahato quarter.

Others said its approach ran through the Brahmin quarter.

One elderly man claimed that the first lamp at the shrine had always been lit by members of his lineage.

At this Devkali spoke in the meeting for the first time.

"No. That is not right."

Every eye turned toward her.

Devkali said softly, "The first lamp belonged to no single lineage. There was a turn."

Raghunandan smiled. "Auntie, who can remember something that old?"

Devkali did not answer.

She rose and went home.

Chandan followed behind her.

At home Devkali brought down an old trunk kept atop the grain bin.

Inside were old marriage papers, two yellowing photographs, a copy of a field survey, and a thin register wrapped in cloth.

On its cover, in lampblack, were written the words: "Lamp Turns."

Chandan read it and stared in surprise.

"This belongs to the shrine?"

"Yes, to the shrine."

"How did it come to you?"

"Your grandfather kept the turn-list for five years. The day we left the village, all the papers were wet. He wrapped this book in that cloth and brought it with him."

Chandan turned the pages.

There were names.

No amounts of money.

The first page listed the names of forty-two households in order.

Against each name there was only a small mark—whether the lamp had been lit or not.

In one place it said, "Oil given by Sukni."
 Elsewhere: "Household away—the next turn lit the lamp."
 Between the names of two households, one line read: "Rain. Path closed.
 Lamp in the morning."
 Chandan said, "There is no sign here that any lineage had the first right."
 Devkali looked at him.
 "Ownership of the shrine did not lie in the lamp; it lay in the turn."
 The next day Chandan carried the register to the meeting.
 Devkali did not go.
 She said, "Show them the book. The rest is for all of you to decide."
 The register passed from hand to hand at the meeting.
 Raghunandan read the first page.
 His lineage stood seventh in the order.
 Lalan Mahato's grandfather was twelfth.
 Sukni of the Musahar quarter was fourteenth, with three notes beside her
 name recording oil supplied for other households.
 No donation amount appeared beside any name.
 No honorific.
 No "chief."
 Chandan said, "We can match the old turns with the numbers of the new
 houses."
 The meeting did not reach an answer at once.
 Of the forty-two families, eight no longer lived in New Bahuara.
 Some had moved to the city.
 In one family only a daughter survived, and she lived in another village.
 And New Bahuara now had seven families absent from the old village
 register—new households created by marriage, division of families, and later
 settlement.
 Raghunandan said, "Then how can the old register work now?"
 Chandan said, "The old register shows us the rule, not a final list of names."
 At that, a few people fell silent.
 Madhubala Devi, who had married into the new settlement, asked, "Will
 my household have a turn or not?"
 No one had an immediate answer.
 Lalan Mahato said, "If new households are not added, this shrine will be a
 memory, not a village."
 This time Raghunandan did not object.
 For three days Chandan and two school students matched the old names
 with the new house numbers.
 They prepared a file.
 First column—the name in the old register.
 Second—the present family.

Third—the new house number.

Fourth—blank if the old family was no longer there.

Fifth—newly added family.

Devkali looked over the file.

She asked, “Why have you not struck out the names that are vacant?”

Chandan said, “They will remain for remembrance.”

“And the turns?”

“The turns will belong to the living households.”

Devkali nodded.

Then another dispute arose: should a masonry temple be built on the open ground, or only a platform?

Raghunandan wanted a proper structure.

His argument was that the new village needed a “proper shrine.”

Devkali asked, “What does proper mean?”

“A roof, a door, an idol, an enclosure.”

“Did the old one have an enclosure?”

“No.”

“A door?”

“No door either.”

“Then why should the first thing in the new one be an enclosure?”

Raghunandan said nothing.

In the end it was decided that a low platform would be built in the middle of the open ground.

Around it would be an earthen ledge where people could sit.

No plaque bearing any household’s name would be put up.

There would be no donors’ list.

There would be a small place for the lamp.

The rest of the ground would remain the panchayat’s public open space.

On the first day of construction, someone proposed bringing earth from the old village for the platform.

Devkali refused again.

“Let that soil remain there.”

“Then how will the memory come here?” Chandan asked.

Devkali said, “Memory does not arrive in sacks.”

The platform was made from the soil of New Bahuara.

A new Lamp-Turn Register was prepared.

At the top of the first page they wrote: “Old order preserved in remembrance; present turns belong to all living households.”

The old forty-two names were copied onto a separate page.

After that, turns were assigned to all forty-nine households of New Bahuara.

The first turn fell to Madhubala Devi’s house.

No one had deliberately put her name first.

The list had been arranged by house number, and hers happened to be the smallest.

Madhubala felt awkward.

“But I never even saw Old Bahuara.”

Devkali said, “Does that make your turn any less?”

At dusk Madhubala came with her daughter Rani.

Rani poured oil into the lamp.

Madhubala lit the wick.

No conch shell was blown that day.

There was no inauguration.

Raghunandan came too, but gave no speech.

Lalan Mahato sat at one corner of the platform.

Chandan made the first mark in the new register.

Devkali sat a little way off on her wooden seat.

The flame of the lamp was very small.

Whenever the wind rose, Rani cupped her palm around it.

After a while Chandan went over to Devkali.

“Grandmother, is this the same shrine now?”

Devkali looked toward the black line of the embankment.

“No. Not the one from there.”

Chandan was puzzled.

“Then what is this?”

Devkali pointed to the register.

“Its place is over there.”

After a moment’s silence, she added—

“Here, our turn goes on.”

STORY 102

Vacant Post

The morning's first key was kept in the knot at the end of Jamuna Devi's sari.

It was the key to the Bellahi Health Centre.

The centre's gate opened by her hand a little before eight each morning.

Jamuna swept the veranda, opened the windows of two rooms, and wiped the wooden chair in the doctor's room with a cloth.

For five years that chair had stood almost always empty.

On the wall hung a brass-coloured sign that read: "Doctor."

Beneath it, the white strip meant for a name remained blank.

The building was not new.

Built nine years earlier, the centre stood between four villages and three hamlets.

For its first two years, a doctor had come three days a week.

Then he was transferred.

No one was posted in his place.

On paper the post was sanctioned; the building existed, there was a cupboard for medicines, an examination table, even an electric fan.

Only the doctor was missing.

On Tuesdays and Fridays, health assistant Savita Kumari came for the scheduled work of vaccinations, blood-pressure checks, and antenatal examinations.

She did whatever lay within her authority.

All other patients had to be sent to the block hospital.

It was eighteen kilometres away.

No bus went there directly.

First one took a shared vehicle to the crossroads, then another conveyance onward.

Besides the fare for the journey there and back, most people lost a day's wages.

Jamuna entered none of this arithmetic in any register.

But she remembered people's faces.

On Monday Sita Sada of Nadiyari hamlet had come complaining that her son's ear hurt.

Jamuna had told her, "There is no doctor today, sister."

Sita had asked, "Tomorrow?"

"Not tomorrow either."

“The day after?”

Jamuna had been unable to answer.

That day Sita had taken her son and set off toward the crossroads.

On Wednesday Ramlochan Mandal came with a swollen hand.

On Thursday Munni Khatoon came because her elderly mother-in-law was having difficulty breathing.

On Saturday Haricharan Paswan, who carried bricks for a living, came with pain in his lower back.

Jamuna had to point them all in the same direction.

Slowly, she acquired a strange habit.

Whenever someone came looking for a doctor and had to turn back, she tied a small knot at one end of an old length of rope.

The rope had originally been bought for hanging a curtain.

The curtain was never put up.

The rope lay in a corner of the storeroom.

Jamuna herself no longer remembered what had made her tie the first knot.

Perhaps it was the day an elderly farmer had changed vehicles twice to reach the hospital and had not managed to return until evening.

The knot had no official meaning.

No date.

No name.

No seal.

Only one person turned away.

Within a few months the knots had grown so dense along the rope that it was difficult to straighten.

Jamuna hung it from a nail at the back of the doctor's room.

One day Savita noticed it.

“What is this knotted rope?”

Jamuna said, “A road.”

Savita laughed.

“A road like this?”

“One knot for each person sent from here to there.”

Savita's laughter stopped.

She took the rope in her hands.

“How many knots are there?”

“I haven't counted.”

“Why don't you count them?”

Jamuna said, “Will counting fill the post?”

For a while neither of them spoke.

At the beginning of winter that year, word came that an inspection team from the district was due to visit.

As soon as the notice arrived, the building's broken doorframe was painted.

A fresh coat of limewash went onto the veranda wall.

The bottles in the medicine cupboard were arranged neatly.

Jamuna was told that the doctor's room must be kept especially clean.

At ten on the morning of the inspection, a young doctor arrived on a motorcycle.

Jamuna had never seen him before.

Savita said softly, "He is from the Sonapur centre. He will sit here today."

Jamuna nodded. "Yes, I understand."

The young doctor was courteous.

He sat in the chair, saw patients, listened to the complaints of two feverish children, and checked an elderly person's blood pressure.

Word spread that a doctor had arrived.

By noon the veranda was full.

Sita came again from Nadiyari hamlet, bringing her son.

The boy's ear was well now, but she had come to show the doctor her own headache.

She smiled when she saw him.

"Will you be staying here now?"

The doctor was silent for a moment.

Then he said, "I am here today for the inspection. My post is at Sonapur."

Sita's smile stopped where it was.

She made no reply.

She folded her prescription and tucked it into the end of her sari.

At around two o'clock, three motorcars stopped at the gate.

The inspection team had arrived.

The building was examined.

The cupboard was opened.

The fan was switched on.

In the doctor's room someone asked, "What is the patient load?"

The Sonapur doctor looked toward Savita.

Savita gave the figure.

An officer on the team noticed the blank name strip on the wall.

"Permanent post?"

Savita said, "Vacant for five years."

The officer turned a page.

"Has a proposal been sent?"

"Several times."

"I'll note it."

He said, "All right," and moved on to the next room.

Jamuna stood beside the door.

Her eyes went to the nail at the back.

The rope was not there.

While the building was being cleaned, an employee from the block office had had it put away in the storeroom. "This useless thing should not be left out in front."

The inspection ended.

The motorcars drove away.

The Sonapur doctor, too, left at three.

That evening Jamuna opened the storeroom.

The rope lay in the dust.

She picked it up and shook the dust from it.

The knots were exactly as they had been.

The next day the doctor's chair was empty again.

Sita did not come that morning.

Nor did Ramlochan.

But in the afternoon Phulo, an adolescent girl from Chamartoli, came with her little brother.

The boy had an old wound on his arm, and she wanted a doctor to look at it.

Jamuna told her the same thing again.

Phulo asked, "But he was here yesterday, wasn't he?"

Jamuna said, "Yesterday there was an inspection."

Phulo looked first at the chair, then at Jamuna.

"When will there be another inspection?"

The question brought both laughter and anger to Jamuna, but she did not laugh.

Phulo took her brother and went back.

Jamuna tied a new knot in the rope.

This time, after tying it, she did not hang the rope from the nail.

She wound it around a pillar of the veranda.

When Savita came on Tuesday, she saw the knotted rope in full view of everyone.

"Jamuna Didi, here now?"

"Why hide it from the people it is for?"

Savita did not answer.

Sita came in the afternoon.

She had never heard the story of the rope.

Jamuna explained it to her.

Touching one of the knots, Sita asked, "Which knot is from the time I brought my son?"

"I don't know."

"Then all these belong to all of us?"

"Yes, to everyone."

Sita said, "Count them."

That day the knots were counted for the first time.

One hundred and eighty-seven.

Savita said, "That cannot be the full number. You are not at the centre every day."

Jamuna said, "Then this is the minimum."

Sita repeated the word "minimum."

She liked the word because there was no exaggeration in it.

The following week people began telling their own experiences.

Someone said two days' wages had been lost.

Someone said that when no vehicle could be found, the patient had been taken on a bicycle.

Someone said that by the time they reached the block hospital, the queue had already closed.

Jamuna did not add every story to the rope.

She tied a knot only for those who came to the centre, found no doctor, and had to turn back.

The rule of the knots remained simple.

One turning back = one knot.

Name, caste, religion, age—the rope asked none of these things.

But how many times a person had been forced to turn back—that it recorded silently.

In the month of Magh, a public hearing was announced at the block headquarters.

The villagers decided that the matter of the health centre should be raised there.

Some spoke of writing an application.

Others of forming a delegation.

Sita said, "Applications have gone before."

Phulo, who was now in the tenth class at school, unwound the rope from the pillar and took it in her hands.

"This will go too."

Jamuna said at once, "It is not government property. Take it."

On the day of the public hearing, five women, four men, Phulo, and Jamuna went to the headquarters.

Savita did not go; that day she had vaccination work.

The rope would not fit inside Phulo's bag.

She carried it wound around the outside.

On the veranda at the headquarters, people stood waiting with different problems.

For one it was a pension, for another a land survey, for someone else the piped-water scheme.

When Bellahi's turn came, the officer asked, "Written application?"

Sita placed a copy of an earlier application before him.

Then Phulo laid the rope on the table.

The officer stared in surprise.

“Why is this rope on the table?”

Phulo looked toward Jamuna.

Jamuna said, “The distance of a vacant post.”

The officer did not understand.

Sita explained, “Each time a patient comes to the Bellahi centre, finds no doctor, and has to go elsewhere, we tie one knot.”

“How is this proof?”

Jamuna said calmly, “We have not brought it here calling it proof. This is our count. The proof that the post is vacant will be in your office.”

A few people on the veranda turned to look.

The officer lifted part of the rope in his hand.

“How many knots?”

Phulo said, “Two hundred and fourteen as of this morning.”

“Over how many days?”

“Less than six months.”

The officer wrote something down.

Jamuna watched his pen.

She was afraid another sheet of paper would be created and the matter would remain on the paper.

She said, “Until a permanent doctor comes, assign someone here for two fixed days each week. Not only on inspection days.”

Sita added at once, “And write the days on the wall.”

Phulo said, “And if the doctor does not come, that day will get a knot too.”

For the first time the officer smiled, but the people sitting before him did not.

His smile died of its own accord.

The officer said that a permanent appointment was not in his hands, but an interim arrangement could be made at block level.

No one trusted the promise at once.

They gathered up the rope again.

Three days passed.

Four days passed.

On the fifth day a two-page order arrived from the block office.

A visiting doctor’s duty at Bellahi was assigned for Mondays and Thursdays.

Two doctors’ names were listed at the bottom of the order.

Jamuna could not read the paper; Phulo read it aloud to her.

Sita asked, “How long will this continue?”

No one had an answer.

On Monday morning Jamuna opened the gate before eight, as always.

She swept the veranda.
She wiped the chair.
A copy of the new order was pinned to the wall.
Nine o'clock came.
The doctor did not.
Half past nine.

The rope was wound around the pillar.
Phulo arrived alone, without her brother.
She said, "Didi, a knot?"
Jamuna looked at the rope.
"Wait until ten."

Just before ten, the sound of a motorcycle was heard.
Dr Manish Kumar from the block hospital entered through the gate.
He had a small bag in one hand and a bottle of water in the other.
He apologised and said he had had a flat tyre on the way.
Jamuna simply opened the door for him.
The doctor sat in the chair.
The first patient was not Sita.

The first patient was Haricharan Paswan, who had come again about the pain in his lower back.

Jamuna went to the veranda pillar.
With a finger she touched the last knot in the rope.
Phulo asked, "Shall we untie it today?"
Jamuna did not nod.
"We will not untie the knots."
"Then what will we do?"
"The distance already travelled cannot be erased."
She pointed to the free end of the rope.
"Now we will see how many new knots appear."

The strip meant for the permanent doctor's name was still blank on the wall.

But beneath that blank strip, Monday and Thursday were written in clear letters.

Jamuna looked toward the chair.
Today the chair was not empty.
She left the rope around the pillar.

STORY 103

The Voice of the Land

The path from the Sada hamlet of Hariharpur to the main road was six cubits wide.

On paper, it had no name.

In the village everyone called it “the Middle Path.”

At dawn, women going to sell milk; by day, labourers bound for the fields; in the evening, children returning from school—all came and went along that path.

During the rains, when the pond overflowed, the path became even more important.

The low ground behind the hamlet would then lie knee-deep in water.

The Middle Path crossed the higher ground and led out to the main road.

One day in the month of Jeth, a pile of bricks appeared at the mouth of the path.

At first people assumed that someone was going to build a house.

The next day bamboo stakes were driven into the ground.

On the third day, mortar began to be mixed.

On the fourth, the mason stretched a line for raising a straight wall.

The owner of the land was Dhaneshwar Sah.

He had bought the adjoining field two years earlier.

After having a fresh survey carried out, he had been told that more than half of the Middle Path fell within his cadastral plot.

Dhaneshwar would say—

“I am enclosing my own land. I am not taking anyone else’s.”

The people of the hamlet would say—

“This land is a road.”

Dhaneshwar would reply—

“Show me the map.”

He had the map.

The hamlet had memory.

On the first day the wall rose only two cubits.

On the second day the women sat down in front of the bricks.

No one threw a brick.

No one spoiled the mortar.

They simply remained seated there.

The mason stopped work.

Dhaneshwar's younger brother Umakant said—

"It is not right to stop the work like this."

Jasoda Sada of the hamlet replied—

"If the path is stopped, our work will stop too."

Word reached the panchayat.

The village head said that before the quarrel grew worse, a hearing would be held at the spot itself.

The next morning the land surveyor, the panchayat secretary, people from both sides, and elderly residents from the surrounding area gathered there.

The surveyor unfolded the new map.

Its blue lines, red figures, and cadastral plot numbers were clear.

There was no separate marking for the Middle Path.

A photocopy of the old map had also been brought.

Its lines were faint.

The paper was torn in one place.

At the very point where the path curved, the colour on the map had also been rubbed away.

Dhaneshwar said—

"What more than this do you need?"

Jasoda said—

"Our feet."

A few people in the crowd laughed.

Jasoda did not.

The surveyor measured the land.

Four cubits of the path fell inside the line marked for the wall.

Only two cubits remained outside it.

Two people could pass one another through two cubits of space, but a bicycle, a load, or a cot carrying a sick person—none could pass with ease.

The panchayat secretary asked—

"Does anyone have any old evidence?"

No one did.

Then a frail voice came from the back of the crowd—

"Will no one ask about the well?"

Everyone turned.

Kusumi Sada stood there, leaning on a bamboo staff.

She was eighty-four.

Her hearing had weakened somewhat, but she spoke clearly.

Jasoda ran to bring a low wooden seat for her.

Kusumi did not sit.

She said—

"First I will look at the ground."

Slowly she walked up to the mason's line.

Then she left the line and went to the bend in the path.

There she began scratching the earth with the tip of her staff.

Dhaneshwar said—

“Grandmother, where is the well here now?”

Without looking at him, Kusumi replied—

“It is not here now. But it was.”

The surveyor asked—

“How long ago?”

Kusumi said—

“When I came to this village as a bride, its parapet stood as high as my waist.”

Someone exclaimed—

“That must have been sixty years ago!”

Kusumi said—

“Fifty-eight.”

Laughter rose again.

This time Kusumi smiled too.

“Two months after my first daughter was born, I filled a water-pot at this well for the first time. My daughter is fifty-seven now.”

The surveyor became more attentive.

He asked—

“What does the well have to do with the path?”

With her staff Kusumi drew a circle on the earth.

“The path was not straight before. It bent here to go around the well’s parapet.”

The new map showed no path, but the path on the ground did in fact make a slight curve at that very place.

The mason’s line was straight.

The path was not.

Dhaneshwar said—

“Even if there was an old well here, that does not make the land public.”

Kusumi looked at him.

“You are right. Not merely because of the well.”

For the first time, she sat on the low seat.

She held her staff between her knees.

“There was a survey. I saw it.”

The surveyor asked—

“Which survey?”

“When the northern stream changed its course. The field boundaries were marked out again.”

“How many years ago?”

Kusumi closed her eyes for a moment.

“The winter after the great flood. One year before Ramdev’s wedding. That wedding was the first time a Petromax lamp came to the village.”

Old Rameshar Yadav, standing in the crowd, said—

“Nineteen seventy-nine. Ramdev was married in eighty.”

Kusumi nodded.

“Yes, seventy-nine.”

The surveyor asked—

“Were you here when the survey was done?”

“All day.”

“Why?”

Kusumi narrowed her eyes slightly.

“I was working as a labourer. I held the stakes for the surveyors and stretched their measuring rope. They had hired me to carry water and mind the pegs.”

The present surveyor fell silent.

The measuring tape in his hand slackened a little.

Kusumi continued—

“That day the dispute was over this very thing. The owner of the eastern field said the path had entered his land. The owner of the western field said his boundary ridge had been cut. The survey was halted.”

Dhaneshwar’s father had been a boy then.

His uncle, Ramlakhan Sah, was present in the crowd.

Looking at him, Kusumi asked—

“Ramlakhan, were you there or not?”

Ramlakhan Sah remained silent for a long time.

Then he said—

“I was little. I had come with Father.”

Dhaneshwar turned towards him.

Ramlakhan lowered his eyes.

Kusumi said—

“It was decided that three cubits would be left from each field. The path would be six cubits wide. Because this was not merely a path to the fields. It carried people towards the well, the pond, the market, and the main road—towards all four directions.”

The panchayat secretary asked—

“Was this decision written down?”

Kusumi said—

“I could neither read nor write. I do not know whether it was written. But after the land was measured, boundary markers were set in the ground.”

The surveyor asked at once—

“Where are those markers?”

Kusumi stood up.

"They may not all have survived."

From the bend in the path, she walked seven paces east.

Then she stopped.

"There was one here."

A shallow trench had now been dug there for the foundation of the new brick wall.

A labourer's spade was brought.

After two or three spadefuls of earth were removed, fragments of old brick appeared.

Dhaneshwar said—

"Bricks can be found anywhere."

Kusumi replied—

"That is not the marker."

She walked another five paces south.

There was a thicket there.

It was cleared away.

The corner of a blackened stone showed beneath the earth.

The surveyor scraped the soil away with his hands.

An old boundary stone, about a cubit and a half long, emerged.

There were two chisel marks on its top.

One ran east-west.

The other north-south.

The crowd suddenly fell silent.

Kusumi was looking not at the stone, but at the path.

She said—

"The western side of this stone was the path. The eastern side was the field."

Dhaneshwar bent down and examined the stone.

His uncle Ramlakhan said softly—

"There was a stone like this at the corner of Father's field."

The surveyor unfolded the new map again.

He placed the old map beside it.

The measuring tape was stretched out.

The distance from the stone to the present boundary ridge was taken.

Then the other edge was measured.

The measurements matched.

The old width of six cubits for the path matched as well.

What the new map made appear to lie within a single cadastral plot in fact fell on the other side of the old boundary stone.

Dhaneshwar was silent.

Jasoda's eyes brightened, but she said nothing.

The surveyor asked Kusumi—

"Do you remember any other sign?"

Kusumi said—

“The well’s parapet.”

The earth was dug again at the bend in the path.

Not very deep.

About a foot below the surface, two old stones were found laid in a curve.

Black earth and lime still clung between them.

Ramlakhan Sah exclaimed—

“This must be part of that very well’s parapet.”

Kusumi looked at him.

“Your mother used to draw water from this well.”

Ramlakhan’s face changed.

“Yes.”

Having said that much, he fell silent.

The panchayat secretary began writing something on a sheet of paper.

Kusumi did not stop his hand.

But she said—

“Do not believe what I say merely because I am old.”

The surveyor looked up.

Kusumi said—

“Measure it. If what I have said is found in the earth, then believe it.”

After that one sentence, the nature of the hearing changed.

Until then, the two sides had been cutting across one another’s words.

Now everyone began looking at the earth, the bend, the stones, and the distances.

The surveyor compared the position of the stone with the faded line on the old map.

The circular mark in that faded place now seemed meaningful.

It might have marked the well.

The torn part of the map lay exactly along the old edge of the path.

A decision could not be made on conjecture.

So the surveyor asked that another old boundary marker be found.

This time Kusumi went west.

She stopped behind a house.

“There was a neem tree here. The tree was cut down, but the root should remain.”

The owner of the house gave his consent.

When the earth was opened, a thick neem root was found.

To the east of the root, a small stone had been set into the ground.

It bore the same kind of chisel marks.

The surveyor stretched out a long measuring tape.

A line was drawn between the two old stones.

That line ran alongside the edge of the Middle Path.

No one laughed now.
 At last Dhaneshwar said—
 “The papers for the land I bought show the boundary on this side.”
 The surveyor replied—
 “Your papers remain valid for examination. They will be checked separately.
 But at this spot both the old boundary and long-established usage are visible.”
 Dhaneshwar’s voice was no longer harsh.
 “And my loss?”
 The village head said—
 “Where the land is yours, your right over it will remain. But the path cannot
 be enclosed as though it were a field.”
 Sweat stood on Dhaneshwar’s forehead.
 He wiped it with his gamchha.
 “I will accept whatever the survey establishes.”
 No one in the hamlet applauded.
 Perhaps everyone was tired.
 Everyone understood that the decision was not yet complete.
 The surveyor began measuring again.
 Kusumi sat on the low seat and watched.
 At times she pointed towards a stone.
 At times she indicated the direction of an old boundary ridge.
 At times she said—
 “Pigeon peas used to grow here.”
 The surveyor would reply—
 “Not the crop. Tell me the boundary.”
 Laughing, Kusumi said—
 “I remember the boundary by the crop.”
 By noon the measurements were complete.
 The six-cubit path emerged almost along its old course.
 At one place it measured five cubits and eight fingerbreadths.
 At another, six cubits and two fingerbreadths.
 At the bend around the old well, it was wider still.
 The mason’s line for the wall was removed.
 The mason began shifting the pile of bricks two cubits east.
 Dhaneshwar himself drove bamboo stakes along the new line.
 Jasoda sat down beside Kusumi.
 “Grandmother, how did you remember so much?”
 Kusumi rested her chin on her staff.
 “When people have no papers, they have to remember places and events.”
 Jasoda fell silent.
 Kusumi added—

“But memory by itself can often deceive as well. That is why I said—dig the earth, measure it.”

By evening the foundation for the wall had been laid along the new line.

The Middle Path remained open.

The first boy to pass through with a bicycle glanced at the newly exposed top of the boundary stone.

He asked—

“What is this?”

Jasoda said—

“A boundary.”

The boy asked again—

“And this path?”

Kusumi, who had risen to return home, answered—

“A path.”

The boy stood waiting, hoping to hear something more.

But Kusumi walked away.

Her staff touched the earth first.

Then her foot came down.

Along the open path, the two sounds moved forward in turn.

STORY 104

Half a Samosa

The clock at the old town bus stand showed half past ten.

But in Jibachh's stomach, noon had arrived long before.

Baso sat beside him on the stone bench.

Again and again, both their eyes strayed towards Nandu Sah's frying pan.

Samosas hissed in the oil.

Jibachh shook out the pocket of his kurta.

Three rupees came out.

Baso untied the knot in his gamchha.

There were seven rupees in it.

Jibachh searched his other pocket once more.

He found a two-rupee coin.

Twelve rupees altogether.

Nandu Sah said—

“One samosa costs twelve.”

Baso looked at Jibachh.

Jibachh looked at Baso.

Then both looked again at the frying pan.

Jibachh asked—

“Twenty-four for two?”

Turning the tongs in his hand, Nandu Sah said—

“Mathematics has not changed yet.”

Baso burst out laughing.

Jibachh did not.

When one is hungry, mathematics becomes a very personal thing.

The two had been at the bus stand since early morning, hoping to find a day's work.

Yesterday Jibachh had found half a day's work carrying bricks.

Baso had returned empty-handed.

The day before that, Baso had earned and Jibachh had not.

That was why the accounting between them was simple.

Whoever found work also bought tea for the other.

Whoever did not find work remembered it for the next time.

There was no ledger.

No written debt.

Only memory.

And both their memories were remarkably sharp, especially where food was concerned.

Jibachh said—

“Let’s buy just one.”

Baso replied—

“Half each.”

Nandu Sah placed one samosa on a sheet of paper.

It was so hot that a round stain of oil immediately began spreading across the paper.

Jibachh said—

“Cut it through the middle.”

Nandu Sah gripped the samosa with the tongs.

With a small knife he tried to cut it exactly in half.

A samosa does not split exactly down the middle.

It has a will of its own.

The crust broke more on one side.

The potato filling fell towards the other.

In the end, two pieces lay on the paper.

One was tall and thin.

The other was lower, but plump and full.

The two friends fell silent.

Nandu Sah turned his tongs back towards the frying pan.

“Take them.”

Jibachh picked up the taller piece.

Baso took the fuller one.

For the space of two breaths, there was peace.

Then Jibachh said—

“Yours is bigger.”

Baso answered at once—

“Mine? Look at yours.”

“Yours has more potato.”

“Yours has more crust.”

“A samosa is made of potato.”

“Then eat plain potato. Why eat a samosa?”

Jibachh thought about that for a moment.

The argument was not weak.

But neither was hunger.

He put his piece back on the paper.

“Measure them.”

Baso put his down too.

Nandu Sah turned away and began straining tea.

He had understood that the matter was moving beyond the ordinary jurisdiction of a tea stall.

Jibachh placed the two pieces in a straight line.

His piece was taller.

Baso's was wider.

Baso said—

“See? The tip of yours goes farther.”

Jibachh said—

“Does the tip fill your stomach?”

“Without a tip, would a samosa remain a samosa?”

“And without potato?”

Both fell silent again.

In front of Nandu Sah's stall sat Phulo, the vegetable seller.

Laughing, she asked—

“What is this—a village council?”

Jibachh said—

“We want justice.”

Phulo pointed towards her weighing scales.

“Weigh them.”

The suggestion was so obvious that the two friends stared at each other.

How had such a simple solution occurred to no one earlier?

The two pieces were placed on separate sheets of paper.

Phulo wiped the two pans of her balance.

Jibachh's piece went into one pan.

Baso's into the other.

The pointer swung once to the right.

Then to the left.

Then trembled around the centre.

Phulo narrowed her eyes and looked closely.

“They're almost equal.”

Jibachh immediately said—

“Almost is not justice.”

Baso agreed—

“Exactly.”

Putting away her scales, Phulo said—

“Then go to a goldsmith. Have your samosa weighed there.”

The people sitting at the stall burst out laughing.

Jibachh and Baso did not.

The matter was serious.

Meanwhile, their eyes fell on the little mound of potato filling that had spilled onto the paper.

Pointing at it, Jibachh asked—

“Whose share is this?”

Baso said—

“Whichever piece it fell out of.”

“And how will we know that?”

“Ask the man who cut it.”

Both turned towards Nandu Sah.

Passing a glass of tea to a customer, Nandu Sah said—

“I cut a samosa. I did not draw up its genealogy.”

Laughter rose again in front of the stall.

This time Baso’s lips twitched.

Jibachh too could not suppress a smile.

But the dispute was not over.

The bus-stand clock showed ten forty-five.

Their samosa was beginning to grow cold.

Baso said—

“Let’s do one thing. We’ll exchange pieces.”

Jibachh immediately pulled his own piece back.

“Why exchange?”

“You think mine is bigger. I think yours is bigger. If we exchange, both of us will be satisfied.”

Jibachh shook his head.

“No. If yours really is bigger, I’ll end up taking more.”

“And if yours is bigger, I’ll end up taking more.”

They became trapped in each other’s reasoning.

At that moment Moti, who repaired bicycles, came over wiping his hands.

“What happened here?”

From a distance Phulo called out to him—

“Two friends are dividing a country inside one samosa.”

Moti looked at the two pieces.

“Cut each of them in half again.”

Jibachh’s eyes lit up.

Moti explained—

“Cut your piece into two, and his piece into two. Then combine one of yours with one of his to make one share. The remaining two pieces make the other share.”

Baso brightened.

“Now that is intelligence.”

Nandu Sah picked up the knife again.

At that very moment Jibachh stopped him.

“Wait.”

Everyone looked at him.

“How will the first piece be cut into two equal halves?”

Moti's mouth remained open.

Baso said softly—

"Another dispute."

Nandu Sah threw the knife down.

"From now on, samosas at my shop will be sold whole. The half-samosa service is closed."

A bus arrived at the stand.

Dust rose.

Some passengers got off.

Others climbed aboard.

The two friends remained standing there with their respective pieces in their hands.

A neatly dressed passenger asked Nandu Sah for two samosas.

He had been listening to the dispute.

Laughing, he said—

"I'll buy one more for you. You can each eat a whole samosa."

In a courteous voice Jibachh said—

"No, babu, thank you."

Baso added—

"The price of the samosa is not our problem."

The passenger raised his eyebrows.

Jibachh said—

"It is a question of equality."

For a few moments the passenger looked at both their faces.

Then, carrying his two samosas, he walked towards the bus.

Baso said quietly—

"He thought the two of us were mad."

Jibachh said—

"He is free to think so."

"But his samosas were hot."

"Don't talk about that."

They put their cold pieces back on the paper once more.

This time Nandu Sah himself came forward.

"Listen. Shall I separate the filling and divide it equally?"

Jibachh considered the proposal.

So did Baso.

Jibachh asked—

"And the crust?"

Nandu Sah closed his eyes.

Baso said—

"The crispness of the crust has a value of its own."

Nandu Sah opened his eyes.

“You two are less hungry than you are economists.”

Phulo bent over her basket of vegetables, laughing and laughing.

Tightening a nut on a bicycle, Moti said—

“Toss a coin.”

Jibachh said—

“A coin won’t tell us whether the shares are equal.”

Baso supported him.

“A coin will only decide who eats the larger share.”

Moti gave up and went away.

The clock struck eleven.

Neither of them had found work yet.

Now, between one argument and the next, hunger began sending messages from their stomachs.

Baso picked up his piece.

“Shall I take one bite?”

Jibachh was startled.

“Then the evidence will be destroyed.”

Baso put the piece back down.

“You’re right.”

The two remained seated, preserving the evidence in the face of hunger.

After a while Ramsevak, a mason’s foreman, came along that way.

He knew both of them.

“Jibachh! Baso! I need two labourers to unload bricks. Will you come?”

Both stood up at once.

Jibachh asked—

“How much will you pay?”

Ramsevak named the amount.

Baso immediately asked—

“The same for both of us?”

Ramsevak laughed, showing his teeth.

“The same for both. The work is the same too.”

Jibachh looked at Baso.

Baso looked at Jibachh.

The same thought came to both of them.

The samosa.

Ramsevak grew impatient.

“Come on, the vehicle is waiting.”

Jibachh picked up his piece.

Baso picked up his.

The two started walking.

After ten steps Baso stopped.

“Jibachh.”

“What?”

“If I eat my piece now, the dispute will end without a verdict.”

Jibachh stopped too.

Ramsevak struck his forehead with his palm.

“Eat the samosa and come on!”

Suddenly Jibachh burst out laughing.

Baso did too.

For the first time in all that while, both laughed freely.

Jibachh said—

“All right. No verdict today.”

Baso asked—

“Then what about justice?”

“Tomorrow we’ll get our wages. We’ll buy two samosas. Then we’ll compare them.”

With complete seriousness Baso said—

“Two samosas won’t be exactly the same size either.”

Jibachh burst out laughing again.

As they walked, each took a bite from his own piece.

It had gone cold.

But hunger had not diminished its taste.

After the first bite Jibachh said—

“Yours had more potato.”

With his mouth full Baso replied—

“Your crust was crisper.”

Ramsevak turned around and said—

“Starting again?”

Both answered together—

“No, now we are only stating facts.”

All afternoon they unloaded bricks.

From time to time the question of the samosa returned.

Jibachh would say—

“Weight is what matters.”

Baso would say—

“Who will weigh the share of taste?”

As work tired them out, the dispute grew smaller.

In the evening Ramsevak paid their wages.

Both counted their notes and coins.

The amounts were equal.

Jibachh said—

“Come on. Let’s go to Nandu’s.”

Baso understood.

They returned to the bus stand.

Nandu Sah saw them from a distance.

“What now?”

Jibachh placed the price of two samosas on the paper.

“Two.”

Nandu Sah took out two hot samosas.

One was a little longer.

The other was a little thicker.

He placed them on the paper between the two friends.

For a few moments there was silence.

Nandu Sah became wary.

Jibachh looked at the longer samosa.

Baso looked at the thicker one.

Then they looked at each other.

Nandu Sah slowly slid the knife farther away.

Baso said—

“First, one thing has to be settled.”

With a serious face Jibachh asked—

“Tell me. What?”

Baso pointed at the thicker samosa.

“Which one is bigger?”

Nandu Sah slammed the lid onto the frying pan so hard that Phulo burst out laughing again over her vegetable basket.

STORY 105

The Veranda University

East of the market, beside the old post office, stood a long veranda.

The room behind it had remained locked for years.

Once, Bisesar Babu had run a seed shop there.

Now the paint had peeled from the gate and half the lettering on the board had faded away, but the veranda remained.

Four young men gathered on that veranda every afternoon.

Nawal, Ramakant, Sadan and Parmanand.

Each had studied a different subject.

Their unemployment was the one subject they shared.

Nawal had studied history.

Ramakant, economics.

Sadan, science.

Parmanand, Maithili.

None of them had a job.

All four had plenty of time.

And so they had taken upon themselves the burden of setting the world right.

The first hour went to the national economy.

The second to village politics.

By the third, the discussion had travelled through rain, farming, cricket, education, marriage, bus fares, the river, the price of milk, and even the new thatch on Harinath's roof next door.

One day Bisesar Babu came to look at the old signboard of his shop.

Seeing the four of them deep in debate, he asked—

“What has opened here?”

Without pausing, Nawal replied—

“A university.”

Bisesar Babu looked towards the gate.

“Where is the signboard?”

Sadan slapped his palm against a broken brick and said—

“Invisible, owing to a shortage of funds.”

From that day on, the market had a name for the place: the Veranda University.

Aunt Malti's tea stall stood directly opposite.

She was their most regular listener.

Not that she had much desire to listen.
 Their debates simply fell into her ears whenever she brought them tea.
 With a piece of chalk, Aunt Malti drew little strokes on one of the veranda pillars beside each of their names.
 One stroke for one cup of tea.
 The strokes multiplied.
 So did the debt.
 One night rain blew into the veranda and soaked the pillar.
 By morning, half the strokes had vanished.
 Nawal said delightedly—
 “Half the national debt has been written off.”
 Setting water on the stove, Aunt Malti replied—
 “The pillar may forget. I don’t.”
 The university observed five minutes of silence after that answer.
 Then Parmanand moved a proposal that memory be granted the status of an account book.

Aunt Malti said—
 “Before you grant it any status, add yesterday’s three cups.”
 The debate changed direction again.
 That afternoon the postman stopped by the veranda.
 “Ramakant Mishra?”
 All four looked at him at once.
 Ramakant raised a hand.
 The postman handed him a thick envelope.
 It bore the name of a district cooperative society.
 Nawal’s eyes lit up.
 “Open it.”
 Ramakant turned the envelope over in his hands.
 “What’s the hurry?”
 Sadan said—
 “Unless the envelope intends to answer for itself, there is some hurry.”
 Ramakant opened it slowly.
 It was an interview letter.
 He was to report in town at ten the next morning.
 Parmanand sprang to his feet.
 “The university’s first student is going for an interview.”
 Ramakant folded the letter and slipped it into his pocket.
 “Leave it. I’ve seen plenty of interviews like this.”
 Nawal looked at him closely.
 “How many have you seen?”
 Ramakant fell silent.
 “This is your first, isn’t it?”

Ramakant kept tracing a line in the dust beyond the veranda.
 After a while he said—
 “There’s no point in going.”
 Sadan asked—
 “Why do you say that?”
 “They probably decide on someone beforehand.”
 “On what basis are you saying that?”
 “That’s how it happens everywhere.”
 Nawal did not laugh.
 Quietly, he asked—
 “How much is the bus fare?”
 Ramakant’s finger stopped in the dust.
 Silence settled over the veranda.
 Parmanand searched his pocket.
 Three coins came out.
 From Sadan’s pocket emerged a crumpled note.
 Nawal’s wallet held an old admit card, two tickets, and twenty-seven rupees.
 Ramakant had eighteen rupees.
 Together, the four had seventy-nine rupees.
 Once they added the fare to town and back, morning tea and the cost of changing buses twice, they were short of money.
 Aunt Malti had been watching everything from across the way.
 She came over with tea.
 “Shall I enter today’s four cups?”
 Nawal looked at the pillar.
 “Suspend the accounts for today.”
 Aunt Malti set the cups down.
 “Drink your tea. The debt will still be here tomorrow.”
 Ramakant did not even touch his cup.
 “I’m not going.”
 Aunt Malti looked at him.
 “You received a letter?”
 “Yes. Today.”
 “Then go.”
 “I don’t have the money.”
 Aunt Malti turned her face towards the smoke from the stove.
 “You should have said that first. The workings of the world may be difficult to understand, but understanding your own pocket shouldn’t be this hard.”
 Parmanand burst out laughing.
 Even Ramakant could not suppress a smile.
 But they were still short of money.
 The afternoon was waning.

In the market, chairs, bamboo poles and tarpaulins were being unloaded for an evening wedding.

A handcart overturned.

A heap of chairs spilled beside the mud.

Raghuvir, the tent contractor, looked around for help.

“If I can get four men, everything will be inside in an hour. I’ll pay wages.”

The four scholars of the veranda looked at one another.

Nawal rose first.

“The economics laboratory.”

Sadan stood up too.

“Science department present.”

Parmanand gathered up the end of his dhoti.

“If the Maithili department refuses to lend a hand, it will disgrace the language.”

Ramakant straightened the interview letter in his pocket.

“I am the head of the economics department.”

Raghuvir had no idea what they were talking about.

He merely pointed to the chairs.

“All of these—inside.”

Work began.

For the first ten minutes, the four continued to debate.

Should they carry two chairs at a time or three?

Should they wipe off the mud before taking them in, or carry them inside first and wipe them there?

Nawal said—

“First, a system.”

From a distance Raghuvir shouted—

“First, the chairs!”

After that single sentence, the university suspended theory for a while.

The four worked in silence.

Mud clung to the chair legs.

The tarpaulin was heavy.

Bundles of bamboo pressed into their shoulders.

Ramakant’s kurta was soaked with sweat.

Sadan’s slipper stuck in the mud.

Parmanand stumbled over a chair and sat down on it.

Laughing, Nawal said—

“The thing meant for sitting has made you sit.”

Parmanand got up and dusted himself off.

“This is practical education.”

One hour became two.

When the work was finished, Raghuvir paid each of them sixty rupees.

For a few moments, the four simply stared at the notes lying in their palms. The seventy-nine rupees of the afternoon suddenly seemed like a large fortune.

Ramakant said—

“Don’t all of you put in your full share. This is because of me—”

Nawal cut him off.

“At this university, the fee is equal for everyone.”

Sadan asked—

“And the profit?”

Parmanand replied—

“The profit will be debated next semester.”

When they reached Aunt Malti, the first thing they asked for was the account on the pillar.

She brought out a page from an old ledger.

An amount was written against each of their names.

Nawal clutched his head.

“So the pillar was only the outside account?”

“Yes. The outside one.”

“And the original ledger is inside?”

“The original ledger is kept inside.”

“That’s unfair.”

“Did it take you any time to drink the tea?”

Nawal fell silent.

Ramakant placed some of his share before her.

“Deduct what I owe for tea.”

Aunt Malti pushed the money back.

“Not today. First set aside your travel expenses.”

“But—”

“My shop isn’t running away.”

This time no one laughed.

The four sat on the veranda and counted the money again.

Bus fare, separately.

Money for one meal in town, separately.

Twenty rupees for an emergency, separately.

With what remained, Ramakant repaid half his debt.

Aunt Malti tried hard to stop him, but he would not listen.

“If they ask me in the interview what liability means, I’ll need an example.”

Aunt Malti laughed.

By evening, the next problem had appeared.

Two buttons were missing from Ramakant’s only good kurta.

Parmanand brought his own kurta.

Too broad at the shoulders.

Sadan's kurta was brought.

Too short.

Nawal brought a pale blue kurta from home.

Ramakant put it on.

Almost right.

Aunt Malti looked over from a distance.

"Why only almost? I'll sew on the buttons."

She took out needle and thread and fixed two buttons in two minutes.

Parmanand announced—

"The university now has a clothing department as well."

Tucking the needle into a piece of cloth, Aunt Malti replied—

"I am the vice-chancellor of that department."

That evening the four rose earlier than usual.

Ramakant kept looking at the letter again and again.

As they left, Nawal said—

"Keep all your answers short tomorrow."

Sadan said—

"Say only as much as they ask."

Parmanand added—

"And don't tell them your plan for reforming the world."

For the first time, Ramakant laughed freely.

"If you three aren't there, I'll speak less."

The next morning, all three went to the bus stand to see him off.

Aunt Malti wrapped four pieces of sattu-pakwan in paper for him.

"Food in town will be expensive."

Ramakant tried to pay her.

She drew back her hand.

"This isn't tea. It won't go into the account."

The bus pulled away.

Ramakant waved from the window.

The three returned to the veranda.

His empty place was conspicuous.

Nawal tried to begin a debate.

"Today's subject—"

Parmanand stopped him.

"Not today."

Sadan looked at the pillar.

During the previous day's rain, water had dripped from one corner of the roof.

An earthen bowl was kept there to catch it.

Sadan said—

"We've been talking about rainwater management for a year."

Nawal looked up.
 “Yes. For a very long time.”
 Parmanand asked—
 “Where can we get a ladder?”
 Bisesar Babu sent an old bamboo ladder from his house.
 The three began repairing the loose roof tiles.
 It was a small job.
 The debate started again.
 Should the tile be moved right or left?
 Should they apply the mud first or afterwards?
 From below, Bisesar Babu called—
 “Shut the university and do the work.”
 All three burst out laughing.
 Ramakant returned after noon.
 He was tired, but there was a brightness in his eyes.
 All three asked at once—
 “Well? What happened inside?”
 Ramakant sat down on the veranda step.
 “The interview happened.”
 “And then?”
 “The result will come later.”
 Disappointed, Nawal said—
 “You went all that way just to tell us that?”
 Ramakant took a folded piece of paper from his pocket.
 “The society reimbursed half my travel expenses.”
 Parmanand leapt up.
 “Then the university is in profit!”
 Laughing, Ramakant placed the money on Aunt Malti's ledger.
 “Tea debt first.”
 Aunt Malti counted the money and entered the amount.
 “Only seven cups remain now.”
 Nawal drew seven chalk strokes on the pillar.
 Sadan asked—
 “What's today's subject?”
 Ramakant looked up.
 The corner of the roof that had dripped the previous day was dry.
 He said—
 “Tea first. The world afterwards.”
 Aunt Malti set down four cups of tea.
 Four new strokes appeared on the pillar.
 Parmanand counted them and said—
 “The debt has gone up again.”

Nawal lifted his cup.
“The cost of knowledge.”
From inside, Aunt Malti called back—
“Not knowledge. Tea.”
Laughter spread across the veranda.
The university was open again.

STORY 106

Love on Credit

In the very heart of Belahi market stood Ramdev Sah's small shop.

At the front were tins of rice, lentils, salt, oil and spices, arranged in neat rows.

At the back, Ramdev Sah sat on a wooden platform.

To his right lay a thick credit ledger.

Its binding had been rubbed so bare that it was difficult to tell what colour it had once been.

At first the ledger had contained three columns.

The first — date.

The second — goods.

The third — price.

A year earlier Ramdev Sah had added a fourth column.

Its heading was: "What Was Said."

The reason was simple.

Many customers in the village would later say, "I never took that much salt."

Someone's memory would say: two pavs.

The ledger would say: half a seer.

Arguments followed.

So Ramdev Sah made a rule.

Whoever bought on credit would have the main thing he said recorded as well.

Ramdev Sah's eyesight was no longer as sharp as it had once been.

So most entries were made by his daughter Kusum.

Kusum's handwriting was small but clear.

She listened to what a customer said and wrote down as much as seemed necessary.

Sometimes, a little more than necessary.

That "little more" began with Madhav.

Madhav worked beneath a bicycle-repair shed west of the market.

When the owner had plenty of work, Madhav earned wages.

When work was scarce, his day went empty.

One evening Madhav came to the shop.

He asked for two pavs of rice, one pav of masoor lentils, and a handful of salt.

Kusum weighed the goods and asked—

“Money?”

Madhav turned his pocket inside out.

“There’s only air in it.”

Kusum opened the ledger.

“When will you pay?”

“Friday.”

Kusum wrote: Friday.

Madhav bent over to look at the ledger.

“Will you write down the air too?”

Kusum wrote: Air in pocket.

Madhav started.

“What did you write?”

“What was said.”

“Everything anyone says gets written?”

“Whatever is said while taking credit.”

Madhav laughed.

“Then from now on I’ll think before I speak.”

Kusum wrote that down too.

Ramdev Sah, sitting on the platform, had heard everything.

He pushed his spectacles up and looked toward the ledger.

“Kusum, write accounts, not drama.”

Kusum replied—

“Babu, you were the one who added the ‘What Was Said’ column.”

Ramdev Sah said nothing.

Madhav took his goods and left.

He did not come on Friday.

Nor on Saturday.

On Sunday evening he arrived with two rupees.

Kusum opened the ledger.

“Friday is written here.”

Madhav said—

“There was no work on Friday.”

“You gave the name of a day, not the name of the work.”

Madhav scratched his head.

“Will that be written too?”

“It is connected with the debt.”

Kusum wrote: No work on Friday.

Madhav placed two rupees on the ledger.

“The rest?”

“After the next job.”

Kusum wrote that down as well.

From that day on, Madhav's account began to fill with more sentences than numbers.

One day he came for half a pav of oil.

Kusum asked—

“So little?”

“To keep the debt small.”

She wrote: Less oil so the debt stays small.

The next day Madhav asked for jaggery.

“For yourself?”

“Mother drinks a decoction.”

Kusum weighed out the jaggery.

“You can pay for this later.”

Madhav said at once—

“Write it as debt, not charity.”

Kusum's pen stopped.

Ramdev Sah looked at him too.

Madhav said quietly—

“Whatever I take for Mother's medicine, I'll pay for it.”

Kusum wrote in the ledger: Not charity; he will pay.

Madhav read it and shook his head.

“Did you really need to write the whole thing?”

“The whole thing was said.”

This time Madhav did not laugh.

Two weeks later his debt had fallen to five rupees and twelve annas.

Then, suddenly, it rose again.

The reason was rain.

For three days hardly any bicycles came to the shed where Madhav worked.

He earned no wages.

But the stove at home still had to burn.

He took rice, oil and matches on credit.

Kusum added up the account.

“Now it is nine rupees and four annas.”

Madhav let out a long breath.

“What is getting fatter — the ledger or my debt?”

“Both.”

Kusum wrote: Ledger and debt, both getting fat.

Madhav burst out laughing.

“Your pen is never going to spare me.”

“Pay the money and the pen will spare you.”

“The words too?”

Kusum did not answer.

Instead, she placed a small dot in the blank space.

One rainy evening the wind rose hard.
 People in the market began packing up their shops.
 Rainwater started dripping through the rear roof of Ramdev Sah's shop.
 Two sacks of rice had to be moved before they were soaked.
 Ramdev Sah tried to drag one of them.

Kusum stopped him.
 "Don't lift it yourself."

Just then Madhav came running in.
 He was on his way home from the bicycle shed with his bag of tools.
 Seeing water inside the shop, he put the bag down.
 "The sacks first."

He lifted both sacks onto a high platform inside.

Then he climbed onto the bamboo framework and tied the torn tarpaulin with rope.

The wind whipped his shirt about him.
 Kusum stood below, holding the rope.
 Ramdev Sah moved goods out of the way while shielding the lamp.
 Half an hour later the dripping had slowed.
 Madhav climbed down.

A strand of wire from the tarpaulin had scratched his hand.

Ramdev Sah said—
 "We'll deduct today's labour from your debt."

Madhav asked—
 "How much?"
 "Two rupees."
 "One rupee and eight annas is enough."

Ramdev Sah frowned.
 "You are cutting your own wages?"

Madhav said—
 "I won't take four annas merely because I happened to be passing by."

Kusum opened the ledger.

"Shall I write that too?"

Madhav laughed.
 "By now you write everything anyway."

Kusum deducted one rupee and eight annas from the account.

In the 'What Was Said' column she wrote: Four annas — merely for happening to pass by.

For the first time Ramdev Sah laughed aloud.

"No moneylender in the world would keep an account like this."

Kusum said—
 "This shop does."

The rains passed.

Madhav's work picked up again.

He kept paying in instalments — one rupee, two rupees, sometimes eight annas.

Kusum drew a thin line through the old balance.

Then she wrote the new one.

She never struck out the words in the fourth column.

One day Madhav asked—

"The amount gets crossed out. Why not the words?"

Kusum said—

"Money gets paid off."

"And words?"

"Words have already been spoken."

Madhav fell silent.

After that he joked less often.

Kusum noticed, but asked nothing.

Two days later Madhav came again.

He bought only a bar of soap.

He paid cash.

Kusum did not open the ledger.

Madhav remained standing there.

"What else do you want?"

Kusum asked.

"Nothing just now."

"Then why aren't you leaving?"

"The ledger didn't open."

"You paid cash."

Madhav nodded.

"Yes. Cash."

Kusum began straightening an empty soap box.

Madhav said—

"Don't the words of people who pay cash get written down?"

Kusum smiled.

"It's a credit ledger."

"So if I want my words written, I have to borrow?"

Kusum looked at him.

"Taking a debt deliberately is not wise."

"You could write that down too."

Kusum kept the ledger closed.

Madhav left.

Ramdev Sah looked at his daughter over the top of his spectacles.

"That cash-paying customer stood here a long time."

Kusum straightened the box once more.

“He was choosing soap.”

“There was only one kind of soap.”

Kusum did not answer.

The corner of Ramdev Sah’s mouth lifted faintly.

A few days later there was a small dispute in the shop.

Bihari Kaka insisted that he had taken four seers of flour, not five.

Ramdev Sah found the old page.

There was Kusum’s note: “Give five seers. The granddaughters are coming.”

Bihari Kaka fell silent for a moment.

Then he slapped his forehead and said—

“Yes, the granddaughters came that day.”

The dispute ended.

Closing the ledger, Ramdev Sah said—

“Your ‘What Was Said’ is useful after all.”

Kusum answered matter-of-factly—

“It was your rule.”

“I made a rule. You turned it into a book.”

Madhav was standing outside the shop just then.

He had heard everything.

He came in.

“My section must be the biggest book of all.”

Ramdev Sah said—

“Your section has fewer numbers and more words.”

Madhav looked at the ledger.

“The numbers are going down.”

Ramdev Sah said—

“That is good.”

Kusum turned the page.

Madhav’s balance stood at three rupees and eight annas.

The following month the owner of the bicycle shed went to the city.

Madhav received three weeks of unpaid wages all at once.

That evening he came straight to Ramdev Sah’s shop.

In his hand were folded notes and coins.

“Add it up.”

Kusum opened the ledger.

“Three rupees and eight annas.”

Madhav placed the full amount before her.

Kusum counted it.

The amount was exact.

Beside the balance she wrote in bold letters: “Zero.”

Madhav looked at that word for a long time.

Ramdev Sah said—

"Now you are free."

Madhav asked—

"From everything?"

Ramdev Sah laughed.

"From the debt to my shop."

Madhav's eyes went to the fourth column of the ledger.

His old sentences were still there.

Air in pocket.

No work on Friday.

Not charity; he will pay.

Ledger and debt, both getting fat.

Four annas — merely for happening to pass by.

Madhav asked softly—

"Won't all this be erased?"

Kusum was putting the cap back on her pen.

"Why should it be?"

"The debt is paid."

"The money debt."

Madhav lifted his eyes from the ledger and looked at her.

There was the faintest smile on Kusum's face.

Ramdev Sah cleared his throat.

"No tearing pages."

Madhav laughed.

"I'm not asking for the page."

Ramdev Sah rose and took a new ledger down from the upper shelf.

The old one was almost full.

The new binding was green.

He placed it before Kusum.

"Start this one tomorrow."

Kusum opened the first page.

She ruled four columns.

The first column on the new page — date.

The second — goods.

The third — price.

The fourth — What Was Said.

Madhav asked with a smile—

"Where will you write my name in the new ledger?"

Kusum uncapped her pen.

"When you borrow."

"And if I pay cash?"

"Then the ledger will be spared."

"And the words?"

Kusum held the pen poised above the page.
“You don’t need a ledger in order to speak.”
Closing the rice tin, Ramdev Sah said—
“That rule was not made by me.”
Madhav replied—
“It is a good rule.”
Kusum closed the new ledger.
The old ledger remained beside it.
A pen lay between the two bindings.
Outside the shop, evening was falling.
Madhav turned to leave.
At the doorway he looked back.
“May I come tomorrow?”
Kusum asked—
“What will you take?”
Madhav said—
“I haven’t decided yet.”
Kusum replied—
“Then come with your pocket full.”
Madhav laughed.
“With money?”
Kusum rested her hand on the old ledger.
“Having thought about what you’ll say.”
Ramdev Sah sat smiling on the wooden platform.
Madhav stepped outside.
Kusum lit the lamp.
The first page of the new ledger remained blank.
The fourth column of the old ledger had not closed.

STORY 107

One Free Cup of Tea

On the old road leading towards Saharsa there was a little turn called Belwa Chowk.

The word “chowk” made it sound grand; the place itself was small.

On one side stood a bicycle-repair shack, on the other a seed shop, and between them Budhan’s tea stall.

At daybreak Budhan Sah’s first task was to light the stove.

Then he set water to heat in a brass pot.

Two handfuls of tea leaves, three firm bruises to the ginger, a measured quantity of milk—his hands performed every step without thought.

But there was one ritual that made newcomers stop and stare.

When the first pot was ready, Budhan poured out one cup of tea and set it aside.

The cup was placed on a wooden ledge at the left-hand corner of the stall.

Above the ledge, in small letters written with charcoal, was a single word: “STRANGER.”

The cup had no price.

Nor did it have a fixed owner.

Budhan called it “the first honest opinion of the day.”

The old regulars at the chowk called it “the stranger’s tea.”

Every day Bhola, the rickshaw-puller, would ask—

“Budhan bhai, may I be a stranger today?”

Without even looking at him, Budhan would reply—

“Your credit fills three pages. Who is going to believe you are a stranger?”

Bhola would laugh.

“Then tear out the pages.”

“Will tearing out the pages change your face?”

“I’ll cover my face with a gamchha.”

“And how will you cover your voice?”

At that the men on the bench would burst out laughing.

There was one rule governing the stranger’s tea.

Whoever came to Budhan’s stall for the first time—someone Budhan had never seen before—could drink that cup without paying.

But in return the person had to say one thing.

The tea had to be described exactly as it tasted.

Good, if it was good.

Weak, if it was weak.

Too sweet, if it was too sweet.

Too little milk, if there was too little milk.

Budhan would say—

“People who pay often feel shy about speaking plainly. Someone who drinks free owes me no courtesy.”

The rule had not been born of charity.

Budhan was particularly insistent about that point.

“I am no benefactor,” he would say. “I am testing the taste.”

Bhola would immediately add—

“A taste test in which the examinee gets a scholarship in the form of tea.”

Budhan would scold him—

“You have to turn everything into a university.”

Eighteen years earlier, when the stall had first opened, Budhan’s tea had been badly made.

Everyone at the chowk admitted this now, though no one had admitted it then.

In the first week his maternal uncle had said, “Wonderful! You won’t find tea like this even in the city.”

A cousin had said, “Give me two more cups.”

A neighbour had said, “The fragrance of the ginger is extraordinary.”

Encouraged, Budhan had made the tea stronger and stronger with each passing day.

On the seventh day a traveller waiting for a bus had come in.

After the first sip, the traveller fell silent.

Budhan had asked—

“How is it?”

The traveller had asked in return—

“Shall I tell you the truth?”

“Yes. Tell me the truth.”

“This is not tea. It is medicine.”

Budhan’s face had fallen.

After a second sip, the traveller had added—

“Use half as many leaves, don’t let the milk catch after it boils, and don’t grind the ginger—just crush it.”

That was the first day Budhan had begun to doubt his maternal uncle.

The next morning he made the tea exactly as the traveller had advised.

By noon, the pot had been emptied three times.

Budhan had never asked the traveller’s name.

The bus came, the man boarded it, and he was never seen again.

From the following day onward, Budhan began reserving the first cup for a stranger.

“People who know you give you affection,” he would say. “A stranger gives you correction.”

The regulars at the chowk took turns making jokes about that sentence.

Bhola would say—

“Then at home, treat your wife as a stranger and listen to what she says.”

Budhan would reply—

“Matters at home are hotter than tea. I don’t need your advice there.”

The years changed.

New faces continued to arrive at the chowk.

Some found the cup too sweet.

Some found it not hot enough.

Some thought the smell of milk was too strong.

Once a carpenter arriving from the Nepal side had said—

“The tea is good, but the cup is not clean.”

That evening Budhan had boiled every cup in water.

A student had said—

“The tea is fine, but the bench is crooked.”

Two days later one leg of the bench had been replaced.

An elderly woman had said—

“There is nothing wrong with the tea, but the smoke gets into my eyes.”

Budhan had fitted a bamboo flue above the stove.

Thus the stranger’s cup gradually became not merely a test of the tea but a test of the entire stall.

Budhan refused to admit it.

He would say—

“I ask about the tea.”

Bhola would reply—

“People end up telling you about your whole life.”

Once a newcomer had said—

“The tea is very good, but you stare too much.”

From that day on, while a stranger took the first sip, Budhan kept his eyes on the pot.

Among the old regulars, the cup inspired a peculiar longing.

Not because they wanted to save the price.

Each of them wanted, just once, to become a stranger again.

Once Bhola arrived wearing an old cap, an empty spectacle-frame over his eyes and a gamchha wrapped across his face.

Budhan asked—

“Where are you from?”

Pinching his nose, Bhola answered—

“Purnea.”

Budhan said—

“In Purnea too, is the slipper on your left foot smaller than the one on your right?”

Everyone roared with laughter.

Bhola pulled down the gamchha.

“One day you will have to give me a free cup.”

“When I forget you.”

“Then I shall have to wait.”

“A very long time.”

The game at Belwa Chowk went on.

But one week in Sawan, the game stopped.

Repairs began on the main road.

Large vehicles were diverted along another route.

The buses stopped coming.

No strangers arrived.

On the first day the cup remained on the ledge for two hours.

A thin skin formed over the tea.

In the end Budhan did not throw the tea into the drain.

He drank it himself.

Bhola said—

“So today you have become the stranger?”

Budhan grimaced.

“I am drinking my own tea.”

“Then tell the truth. How was it?”

Budhan said nothing.

Everyone sitting near the counter burst out laughing again.

On the second day the cup was set out again.

No newcomer came.

Nor on the third day.

On the fourth day there were only five old regulars in the stall.

The stranger's ledge looked oddly empty even with the cup upon it.

Budhan filled the cup and set it down.

Bhola said—

“That tea looks sad now.”

Ramphal, the seed-shop owner, said—

“Tea does not have a face.”

Bhola replied—

“Does your sack of seed have one?”

Ramphal fell silent.

Budhan spoke less than usual that day.

The closed road meant more than the absence of strangers.

Daily sales had fallen by half.

The milkman brought the usual quantity, but milk remained in the pot.

The biscuit tin, once empty by evening, now stayed full.
 Every shop at the chowk had the same worry.
 How long would the repairs continue?
 No one had a clear answer.
 Early on the fifth morning Bhola arrived with a proposal.
 "I'll send my wife's sister's husband."
 Budhan asked—
 "Does he know me?"
 "No. He has never seen you."
 "But you know him."
 "So what?"
 "If you send him, he is not a stranger. He is your emissary."
 Bhola scratched his head.
 "Your rules are very strict."
 "The free tea is cheap. The rule is expensive."
 By noon no new face had appeared.
 The heat grew.
 Budhan inverted a small brass bowl over the cup so that dust would not settle on it.
 Ramphal said—
 "Now the tea has a roof as well."
 Budhan replied—
 "You will understand the day your seed gets wet."
 Just then, someone appeared in the distance, pushing a bicycle.
 Every head turned in the same direction.
 Bhola whispered—
 "A stranger."
 Budhan looked.
 As the man came nearer, his face became familiar.
 He turned out to be the milkman's maternal cousin.
 Everyone was disappointed.
 The man could not understand why every face fell when they saw him.
 Evening was approaching.
 The cup was growing cold again.
 Budhan removed the little bowl.
 "Shall I drink it again today?"
 Bhola said—
 "Only if you promise to tell the truth."
 For the first time that day, Budhan laughed.
 Just then a young woman came walking from the broken stretch of road.
 A cloth bag hung from her shoulder.
 She carried a folded sheet of paper in one hand.

Mud clung to her slippers.
Reaching the chowk, she looked around.
“When will I get a bus?”
Ramphal said—
“Not this week.”
Her face fell.
“Then how can I get to Sonbarsa?”
Bhola glanced at his rickshaw.
“Not that far by rickshaw.”
Budhan said—
“Sit down first.”
The young woman asked—
“Can I get some water?”
“Water, yes. Tea too.”
“How much for the tea?”
Budhan lifted the cup from the ledge.
“Nothing for you.”
She looked surprised.
“Why me?”
Bhola broke in—
“Because you are a stranger.”
She looked at him.
“Is that an insult or an honour?”
Laughter rose through the stall again.
Budhan explained the rule.
The young woman listened carefully.
“So the tea is free, but an opinion is compulsory?”
“Yes. For you, there is no charge.”
“And if the opinion is unfavourable?”
“Then it matters even more.”
“And if it is favourable?”
“That is acceptable too.”
She took the cup.
The tea was no longer as hot as it had been at first.
She slowly took a sip.
Everyone watched her face.
She took a second sip.
Remembering his old rule, Budhan turned his eyes toward the pot.
The young woman said—
“The tea is good.”
Bhola was immediately disappointed.
“Is that all?”

She laughed.

"Am I sitting for your examination?"

"I am used to hearing something new."

She turned the cup slowly in her hands.

"There is one thing."

Budhan straightened.

"Tell me."

"By the time you gave me this tea, it had already gone cold."

Budhan nodded.

"The road is closed. The stranger came late."

"Then why do you fill the cup beforehand and leave it waiting for the stranger?"

Budhan was silent.

She said—

"Keep the cup empty."

"Empty?"

"When a stranger arrives, pour in fresh tea."

Bhola slapped one palm with the other.

"In eighteen years, why did this occur to no one?"

Ramphal said—

"It had occurred to me."

Bhola asked—

"When?"

Ramphal replied—

"Just now."

Budhan looked at the cup on the ledge.

It was true: every day he had been setting aside the tea, not the drinker.

If the stranger came late, the tea grew cold.

Many times he reheated it, and the taste changed.

The purpose of the rule was an honest opinion, not cold tea.

Budhan laughed.

"You are right."

The young woman asked—

"So did my opinion pass?"

"Your opinion passed. I failed."

Bhola clapped.

"The stranger's university is open today."

Budhan glared at him.

"From tomorrow, the cup will remain empty."

"But still free?"

"Still free."

"Fresh?"

“Fresh.”

“And me?”

“Not you.”

Bhola became solemn.

“The injustice continues.”

The young woman asked how she could get to Sonbarsa.

Ramphal told her that shared transport could be found two kos farther ahead, near the roadworks.

Bhola offered to take her bag on his rickshaw and drop her there.

She asked the fare.

Bhola said—

“I will charge you.”

Everyone in the stall laughed at once.

Budhan said—

“Do not rely on this man’s charity. He keeps his accounts straight.”

Bhola replied—

“Tea is free. The rickshaw is not.”

Before leaving, the young woman returned the cup.

“What if I come back tomorrow?”

Budhan said—

“Then you will have to pay.”

“In one day I will cease to be a stranger?”

“For me, yes.”

She smiled.

“Then the free tea is expensive.”

“Why expensive?”

“Because from the second visit onward, you will count me as one of your own.”

Budhan was silent for a moment.

“That is a good price.”

The young woman left with Bhola.

In the evening Budhan wiped the ledge clean.

Below the old charcoal word “STRANGER,” he wrote a new line—

“Cup empty, tea fresh.”

Ramphal read it and said—

“Was it necessary to write so much?”

Budhan replied—

“If the rule stays written down, Bhola will not come in disguise again.”

From a distance Bhola shouted—

“I can hear you!”

The next morning Budhan lit the stove.

The pot went on the fire.

The first batch was ready.
 By old habit his hand moved to fill the cup.
 He stopped.
 He placed a clean, empty cup on the ledge.
 Bhola arrived and examined it carefully.
 "Where is the stranger's tea today?"
 Budhan lifted the lid of the pot.
 Steam rose out.
 "In this pot."
 "Not in the cup?"
 "When the stranger comes, then it will be in the cup."
 Bhola sat down on the bench.
 "And when will I become a stranger?"
 Handing him his tea, Budhan said—
 "When I forget both your debt and your words."
 Bhola took the cup and laughed.
 "Then I shall grow old paying for tea."
 Budhan said—
 "That is the difficulty with one's own people."
 The empty cup shone on the ledge.
 The tea in the pot was fresh.
 And the chowk awoke once more, waiting for its first new face.

STORY 108

The Old Man and the Radio

There was a village on the Madhepura side called Bardaha.

A paved road ran through the middle of the village, but Maheshwar Jha's house stood two fields in from the road.

An old mango tree stood to the south of the courtyard.

Beneath the mango tree was a bamboo cot.

Every evening a small radio was placed on the right-hand corner of the cot.

The cover at the back of the radio had broken long ago.

Maheshwar Kaka had tied it in place with a strip of cloth.

A red thread was knotted around the volume knob.

Now that his eyesight had weakened, the red thread told him which way to turn it.

At seven every evening Maheshwar Kaka could miss a meal, but never the radio.

That was when the local broadcast came on.

News was followed by songs.

After the songs came letters from listeners.

And at the end came the voice of the announcer, Shivnath Mishra.

Shivnath Mishra would say—

“It is time for us to take leave now. The cold is increasing; our elderly listeners should keep themselves warmly clothed.”

Maheshwar Kaka would pull the shawl more snugly around his shoulders.

Then his grandson Nilu, sitting inside the house, would smile.

“Baba, did he say that to you?”

Without taking his eyes off the radio, Maheshwar Kaka would reply—

“Who else is old in this courtyard, if not me?”

Nilu would say—

“The whole district is listening.”

“Let the district listen. The words were spoken to me.”

“Does he know you?”

“Very well indeed.”

“Have you ever met him?”

“Does one know a person only by meeting him? Not by his voice?”

After that answer, argument became difficult.

Nilu had tried two or three times already.

Maheshwar Kaka won every time, because he had no need to admit defeat.

His conviction had begun almost twelve years earlier.
 At that time the little culvert west of Bardaha had broken down.
 During the rains, schoolchildren had to wade through knee-deep water.
 The villagers submitted a petition.
 The paper travelled from office to office.
 The culvert remained as it was.
 Maheshwar Kaka sent a letter from the post office.
 It was addressed to All India Radio's "Listeners' Voice" programme.
 Three weeks later, one evening, Shivnath Mishra's voice came over the radio

"Maheshwar Jha of Bardaha writes that the culvert west of his village is broken, causing hardship to the schoolchildren."

That day Maheshwar Kaka had almost sprung off the cot.

"Did you hear that?"

Everyone in the house had come running.

"He said my name!"

The radio had gone on—

"We hope this matter reaches the department concerned."

To Maheshwar Kaka, the meaning of those two lines was perfectly clear.

Shivnath Mishra had come to know him.

The culvert was rebuilt four months later.

Which petition had brought it about, whose pressure had worked, when the funds had arrived—there were different stories in the village about all of that.

Maheshwar Kaka's story was the shortest.

"Shivnath Babu spoke about it, and then it was done."

Nilu had been small then.

Now he was sixteen.

He tried to reason it out.

"Baba, just because he read your name once, does that mean he will know you for the rest of his life?"

Maheshwar Kaka would say—

"Your name was entered in the school register once. Does that mean your teacher no longer knows you?"

"The teacher sees me."

"Shivnath Babu hears."

"The radio speaks only one way."

"Words may travel one way, but attention can travel both ways."

Instead of trying to understand that sentence, Nilu scratched his head.

Maheshwar Kaka's conviction had become part of his daily routine.

Before the evening programme, he cleaned the radio.

He pulled the antenna up half a cubit.

When the batteries weakened, the sound trembled.

Kaka would put his ear close to the set and say—
“Shivnath Babu’s throat is giving out.”

Nilu would say—

“The battery is dying.”

“Everything looks like a machine to you.”

Once the broadcast said—

“Listeners returning from work in the fields, do not forget to wash your hands and face.”

That day Maheshwar Kaka had in fact come straight from the fields and sat down on the cot without washing.

He immediately got up.

“See?”

Nilu doubled over laughing.

“That was a general remark.”

“Was the mud on my hands general too?”

The next day the announcer said—

“The fog will thicken tonight.”

Maheshwar Kaka called to his grandson—

“Nilu, bring the bicycle inside. Shivnath Babu is saying so.”

Nilu said—

“It is a weather bulletin.”

“And who is the bulletin for?”

“Everyone.”

“Am I not part of everyone?”

Nilu had no answer to that.

Meena Devi, the daughter-in-law of the house, enjoyed these arguments.

Sometimes she would deliberately ask—

“Babuji, what will Shivnath Babu say today?”

Maheshwar Kaka would answer gravely—

“Yesterday he said there would be sunshine. Today he will certainly say that the paddy should be spread out to dry.”

If the agricultural advice really did mention paddy, Kaka remained triumphant all day.

If it did not, he would say—

“Not everything can be said on the radio.”

The story travelled as far as the village tea stall.

In the afternoons people teased Maheshwar Kaka.

“Kaka, Shivnath Babu did not take my name yesterday, did he?”

“He will when you have some work worth mentioning.”

“My goat is lost.”

“First look for the goat. The radio is not the police.”

Everyone would laugh.

Maheshwar Kaka laughed too.

He defended his conviction not with anger, but with humour.

One day Nilu decided there ought to be proof.

He explained his plan—

“Baba, if he knows you, then do not listen to the radio for two days. Let us see whether he asks about you.”

Maheshwar Kaka looked at him as though Nilu had made an exceptionally foolish proposal.

“If I do not listen, how will I hear him ask? I shall not hear the answer.”

“Listen on the third day.”

“Remain absent for two days without reason? Is that good manners?”

The experiment ended before it began.

But a few weeks later, two days of absence happened of their own accord, without any plan of Nilu’s.

On the first day, the radio fell silent.

Turn the knob, tap the casing, straighten the antenna—nothing worked.

Maheshwar Kaka turned it this way and that.

“Where has Shivnath Babu gone?”

Nilu opened the battery compartment.

“These two batteries are finished.”

“Bring new ones tomorrow.”

“The market is the day after tomorrow.”

That evening Maheshwar Kaka sat on the cot without the radio.

Seven o’clock came.

The mango leaves kept stirring.

From some distant house came the faint sound of a song.

Kaka strained his ears.

The sound was too far away.

He could not make out the words.

He rose at once.

He drew the shawl over his shoulders.

“Where are you going?” Meena Devi asked.

“To Ramlochan’s.”

“At this hour?”

“His radio works.”

Ramlochan’s house was half a kos away.

Maheshwar Kaka walked there through the darkness without a torch.

By the time he arrived, half the programme was over.

Ramlochan pulled out a low stool for him at the doorway.

“Sit down, Kaka.”

Maheshwar Kaka’s first question was—

“Did Shivnath Babu ask anything?”

Ramlochan stared.

“Ask what?”

“Nothing at all?”

That evening Shivnath Mishra merely introduced the songs, read two letters, gave the weather report, and signed off.

Maheshwar Kaka spoke less than usual on the way home.

The next day Ramlochan himself brought his radio to Maheshwar Kaka’s house.

“Kaka, the market is the day after tomorrow. Keep my radio for two days.”

Maheshwar Kaka refused.

“What will you listen to at night?”

“I will listen at the tea stall.”

“You will listen at the tea stall while I keep something from your house? No.”

Ramlochan laughed.

“Shivnath Babu will be offended.”

Maheshwar Kaka was silent for a moment.

Then he took the radio.

“I will return it tomorrow.”

That evening the programme began.

The reception was clear.

But it was not Shivnath Mishra’s voice.

A young new announcer was speaking.

Maheshwar Kaka sat up straight.

The songs passed.

The news passed.

The listeners’ letters began.

The new voice read the letters as well.

Maheshwar Kaka asked softly—

“Nilu, is the time right?”

“Yes.”

“Is this the same programme?”

“The same.”

At the end the new announcer said—

“Our senior colleague Shivnath Mishra is on leave for a few days. His greetings to all his listener-friends.”

Maheshwar Kaka’s face brightened again.

“Did you hear that? He said friends.”

Nilu said—

“All the listeners are friends.”

“Am I not among them all?”

Nilu lost again.

For the next three days Shivrath Mishra did not return.

Maheshwar Kaka listened to the programme, but every now and then he looked at the radio grille as though a familiar seat beyond it were empty.

On the fourth day he went to the post office.

The postmaster asked—

“Kaka, has the culvert broken again?”

“The culvert is fine.”

“Then who is the letter for?”

“All India Radio.”

“A complaint?”

“No complaint.”

“A request?”

“Not that either.”

Maheshwar Kaka wrote a short letter.

His hand trembled; the letters stood stiff and upright.

He wrote—

“Shivrath Babu is on leave. Please tell him that the evening cot in Bardaha is not empty. Let him rest and return at ease.”

He wrote his name.

He wrote the village.

Nothing more.

Nilu knew nothing about the letter.

Maheshwar Kaka himself dropped it into the postbox.

One week passed.

Then two.

Shivrath Mishra returned.

That evening Maheshwar Kaka ran a finger over the grille of the radio.

“Now it is all right.”

The programme went on as usual.

There was no special announcement.

Maheshwar Kaka’s letter was not read out.

Nilu did not know about the letter, so he could not understand the reason for Kaka’s expectancy.

In the third week the postman brought a small envelope.

It was from the All India Radio station.

Maheshwar Kaka spent five minutes looking for his spectacles.

Nilu came running.

“Shall I read it?”

“I shall read it myself.”

Kaka read it slowly, on his own.

Inside was a printed note of thanks.

At the bottom, one line had been added by hand—

“Greetings to Maheshwarji of Bardaha. I received the news about the cot. — Shivnath”

Maheshwar Kaka said nothing for a long time.

Nilu made no attempt to snatch the letter.

He had already read it himself.

At last Kaka said—

“Now tell me.”

Nilu smiled.

“Now he really does know you.”

Maheshwar Kaka shook his head.

“Not from now.”

“Then since when?”

“From before.”

“The proof has come only now.”

“You were the one who needed proof.”

Nilu fell silent.

That evening Kaka placed the envelope beneath the radio.

The evening broadcast began.

In his usual voice Shivnath Mishra gave the weather, introduced the songs, and read letters from two villages.

He did not mention Maheshwar Kaka’s name.

At the end he said—

“In many relationships in life, people never see one another’s faces; it is the voice that makes a path between them. Good night to all our listener-friends.”

Nilu immediately looked at his grandfather.

Maheshwar Kaka was adjusting his shawl.

“See?”

Nilu laughed.

“That was said to everyone again.”

Maheshwar Kaka lowered the volume of the radio.

“Yes, to everyone.”

He paused for a moment.

“But one needs the sense to hear one’s own share in what is said to everyone.”

Nilu sat down at the other corner of the cot.

For the first time, when the programme ended that day, he did not go straight inside.

A faint crackle remained in the radio.

Night dew was falling from the mango leaves.

Maheshwar Kaka folded the envelope and tucked it safely beneath the cloth strap at the back of the radio.

Nilu asked—

“Baba, what if one day Shivnath Babu leaves the service?”

Maheshwar Kaka said—

“Then another voice will come.”

“Will that voice know you too?”

Kaka laughed.

“Let me listen to it first. Acquaintance can come later.”

The next evening, at seven, two people sat on the cot.

One was an old man who believed that the people on the far side of the radio knew him.

And the other was a boy who could no longer say with certainty that this belief was entirely wrong.

STORY 109

A Shared Umbrella

By the time the Sakri market was breaking up, the sky had stooped so low that it seemed the clouds might brush the bamboo stalls.

There had been sunshine until noon.

So most people had come without umbrellas.

Lakhan Mandal had come carrying the little tin box of his old shoe-repair trade.

He had spent two hours in a corner of the market stitching sandals, replacing straps, and hammering a heel onto a pair of shoes.

The earnings were not much, but they covered his fare home and the price of vegetables for the evening.

Before the market had fully closed, the first heavy drop fell.

Lakhan lifted the tin box and looked up at the sky.

The second drop was twice as large as the first.

By the third, people were running.

Lakhan opened the old umbrella tied behind his box.

The cloth spread out, but the iron runner in the middle would not stay locked at the top.

Lakhan pushed the runner upward with his hand.

The umbrella opened.

He took his hand away.

The umbrella half-closed again.

"Your umbrella does not want to go home with its owner either?" came a voice beside him.

Lakhan looked around.

A thin young man stood there with a small cloth bag slung over one shoulder.

Lakhan did not yet know his name.

Inside the bag were two cotton towels, a cheap set of children's clothes, and a cake of soap wrapped in paper.

Lakhan said—

"The umbrella wants to go. It merely needs two people."

The young man laughed.

"Two people?"

"One to hold the handle, the other to keep this runner pushed up. Only then will His Majesty remain open."

The rain was now falling in thick sheets.

The young man stood under the market awning, but water dripping through its holes was soaking his shoulder.

Lakhan asked—

“Where are you going?”

“As far as Peepal Turn. Then on to Bhittha.”

“I am going as far as Peepal Turn too. Then to Kusaha.”

“So half the road is the same?”

“The road is the same. The umbrella can be half-and-half.”

The young man gripped the runner.

Lakhan held the handle.

The umbrella immediately opened all the way.

The two looked at each other.

Lakhan said—

“See? It does not need friendship. It needs labour.”

The young man burst out laughing.

“And the wages?”

“Half a dry shoulder.”

They left the muddy market and stepped onto the road.

The umbrella was small.

The two men were not.

Within the first ten paces the problem became clear.

Lakhan’s right shoulder was dry, his left wet.

The young man’s left shoulder was dry, his right wet.

The young man said—

“You are tilting the umbrella more toward yourself.”

Lakhan protested at once—

“The handle is in my hand, but the runner is in yours. Cheating can happen from two directions.”

The young man tried to centre the runner.

The umbrella swung to the right.

Lakhan said—

“That is not justice. That is a storm.”

They laughed again.

After fifty paces they made a rule.

For ten paces, the umbrella would lean two finger-widths more toward Lakhan.

For the next ten, two finger-widths more toward the young man.

On the twentieth pace, equality.

The rule worked for five minutes.

Then both forgot the count.

“How many paces has it been?” the young man asked.

"I was relying on your counting."

"And I on yours."

"Then we are even."

Water had collected along the roadside.

An ox cart went past and splashed water up to both their feet.

The young man looked down and said—

"From now on, let the umbrella accounts apply only to the upper half of the body."

Lakhan said—

"Agreed. The lower half belongs to nature."

For the first time, they asked each other's names.

"I am Lakhan."

"I am Salim."

"Where are you from?"

"Bhittha. You?"

"Kusaha."

After a moment Lakhan said—

"We have walked together all this while and only now asked each other's names."

Salim said—

"Saving the umbrella came first. Introductions could wait."

"That is true."

Salim worked carrying loads in the market.

Whoever had a sack, a basket, a crate—if the price was right, he would lift it.

The work was never certain.

Sometimes there was work all day.

Sometimes he waited until noon.

Lakhan stitched shoes and sandals.

His earnings too were like the rain.

Sometimes a downpour.

Sometimes not even a drop.

Salim asked—

"Good earnings today?"

Lakhan lifted the tin box slightly and said—

"The box is heavy. The pocket is light."

Salim patted his bag.

"Mine is the opposite. The bag is light; the shoulder is heavy."

They laughed again.

The rain was so fierce that the road ahead had turned hazy.

Water no longer pattered on the umbrella cloth; it drummed.

At one place, an unpaved track branched off from the metalled road.

There was a deep pothole.
 Lakhan moved left.
 Salim moved right.
 The umbrella pulled between them.
 “Stop!”
 They both said it at once.
 The runner slipped from Salim’s hand.
 The umbrella instantly half-collapsed over both their heads.
 Within two seconds they were soaked through.
 From under the folded cloth Lakhan said—
 “Justice is complete now.”
 From beneath the closed umbrella Salim replied—
 “Yes. Now neither of us can complain.”
 They stood there in the mud, laughing.
 The umbrella was opened again.
 This time Salim, gripping the runner, said—
 “This runner has become so slippery that the hand gets tired.”
 Lakhan said—
 “I will tie a wire around it when I get home.”
 Salim opened his bag.
 A thin, strong cord was tied to one corner of a towel.
 “Will this cord do?”
 “Isn’t that part of your goods?”
 “It is for tying the towel. But the towel is not going to run away.”
 They stopped by the roadside.
 Lakhan pushed the runner up.
 Salim looped the cord beneath it and tied it around the shaft.
 The first knot loosened.
 With the second, the umbrella stood crooked.
 With the third, the runner stayed in place.
 Salim let go.
 The umbrella remained open.
 They looked at it as though it had passed a difficult examination.
 Lakhan said—
 “Your job is over now.”
 Salim dusted his hands.
 “And my wages?”
 “I gave you half a dry shoulder.”
 Salim looked at his soaked shirt.
 “We shall have to reopen that wage account.”
 One person could now manage the umbrella alone.
 Even so, they kept walking together.

After a while Lakhan said—

“You can walk faster if you want. There is no need to hold the runner now.”

Salim said—

“What will I gain by walking faster? Peepal Turn will still be where it is.”

Lakhan said nothing.

He centred the umbrella.

A little bridge came along the way.

There was no water over the bridge, but the fields on both sides were flooded.

The wind was strong there.

It tried to turn the umbrella inside out.

Lakhan gripped the handle hard.

Instinctively, Salim reached up and caught one of the metal ribs at the edge.

The umbrella survived.

Lakhan said—

“You have your job again.”

Salim said—

“There are no permanent appointments under this umbrella.”

“The job is temporary. The soaking is permanent.”

They laughed again as they crossed the bridge.

Peepal Turn was now half a mile away.

The rain had eased a little.

Small streams still ran along the road.

Now and then the two fell silent too.

But the silence was not heavy.

Rain spoke on the umbrella above them.

Their shoes sank into the mud.

Sometimes Lakhan shifted the handle into his right hand.

Sometimes Salim carried the tin box for a while.

Once Salim said—

“Give it to me. I will carry the box.”

Lakhan said—

“You already have a bag on your shoulder.”

“The bag is light.”

“The box is heavy.”

“That is why I am asking for it.”

Lakhan handed him the box.

Salim put it on his shoulder.

With Lakhan’s hand free, it became easier to keep the umbrella centred.

After some distance Lakhan said—

“Give it back now. It is heavy.”

Salim said—

"I told you earlier—the shoulder was heavy."

"The box cannot be the reason for that."

"Let this be the reason for a little while."

At Peepal Turn stood an old peepal tree.

Beneath it was an earthen platform.

The road split there in two.

Left to Bhittha.

Right to Kusaha.

They stopped.

The rain had thinned to almost a mist.

Salim returned the tin box to Lakhan.

Lakhan held out the umbrella handle toward Salim.

"Take it. Carry it as far as Bhittha."

Salim was surprised.

"How will you get to Kusaha?"

"The rain has eased."

"It is just as light on my side."

"There are clothes in your bag."

"There are tools in your box."

"The tools are iron."

"The clothes will dry."

For a few moments they kept offering the umbrella to one another.

At last Salim said—

"Let the umbrella decide for itself."

He let go of the shaft so that it stood straight.

There was no wind.

The umbrella leaned toward neither man.

Lakhan said—

"It is clever. It has stayed in the middle."

Salim looked at his bamboo-coloured cord, still holding the runner in place.

"The cord is mine."

"The umbrella is mine."

"Then we have half a right each."

"Shall we cut the umbrella in two?"

"No. If it rains again, it will need two people."

Lakhan laughed.

"Are you coming to the market next Tuesday?"

"If I get work."

"I will be there."

"Get the umbrella repaired."

"Then I shall not need you."

Salim replied at once—

“Not for the umbrella. I have to get my cord back.”

“Cut it off now.”

“No. Next Tuesday.”

They agreed that the cord would remain on the umbrella until then.

Salim turned toward Bhittha.

Lakhan toward Kusaha.

After ten paces Salim turned and called out—

“Keep the umbrella in the middle!”

Lakhan turned too.

“Whose half is the rain now?”

Salim waved a hand.

“All of it is yours now!”

The following Tuesday the sky was clear.

The sun was out.

Dust rose in the market.

Lakhan sat in his usual place with the tin box open.

The umbrella was folded and tied behind the box.

Beneath the runner, Salim’s cord was still there.

Around noon, after unloading sacks, Salim came over.

From a distance he called—

“Is the cord safe?”

Lakhan opened the umbrella.

A new thin wire now held the runner so that it stayed up on its own.

He untied the cord and handed it to Salim.

“The umbrella is repaired.”

Salim put the cord back in his bag.

“Good. Now one person can manage it.”

Lakhan said—

“Yes. It is fixed.”

For a few moments neither spoke.

Then Lakhan asked—

“Will you walk as far as Peepal Turn?”

Salim looked up at the sky.

“Where is the rain?”

“There is no rain.”

“Then the umbrella?”

Lakhan folded it and put it over his shoulder.

“The umbrella is no longer the excuse. The road is still the same.”

Salim smiled.

He took hold of one side of Lakhan’s tin box.

The two walked out of the market together.

This time the umbrella was closed.
Both their shoulders were dry.
And the road was no longer divided into halves.

STORY 110

The Five-Rupee King

By noon, the scent of fresh greens had settled into Gopi's right hand.

Since morning he had been sitting with his mother on the veranda.

His mother, Malati, was tying into bundles the greens cut from the little patch behind the house.

Gopi shook the leaves clean, evened the stalks, and arranged the bundles in rows.

He was nine years old.

But that day he had done more work than his age ought to require—at least that was his own opinion.

When the last bundle too had been sold, Malati untied the knot in the corner of her sari.

A few coins jingled.

Gopi's ears pricked up.

Malati placed a five-rupee coin on his palm.

"These are your wages."

Gopi looked first at his mother.

Then at the coin.

Then at his mother again.

"All mine?"

"All yours."

"I don't have to give it back?"

"No, you don't have to give it back."

"I don't have to give it to anyone?"

"Not if you don't want to."

Gopi closed his fist around the coin.

The moment his fist closed, his shoulders rose a little.

At the other end of the veranda his little sister, Jhunki, was playing with an earthen lid.

Gopi called to her.

"Hey, Jhunki!"

Jhunki raised her head.

"What?"

Gopi opened his fist.

The coin flashed in the sunlight.

"Look."

Jhunki came closer.
 “Five rupees.”
 Gopi’s eyes widened.
 “How did you know?”
 “It has a five written on it.”
 Gopi was slightly disappointed.
 He had wanted Jhunki to be astonished the moment she heard the news of his wealth.
 But Jhunki began to turn back to her earthen lid.
 Gopi said—
 “I’m rich now.”
 Jhunki stopped.
 “With five rupees?”
 “With my own five rupees.”
 Jhunki looked at the coin again.
 “Then are you a king?”
 The thought had not occurred to Gopi until then.
 But it was a good thought.
 “Yes. I am the king now.”
 He sat down on the old low stool in the middle of the veranda.
 “I am the king.”
 Jhunki abandoned her game as well.
 “What am I?”
 Gopi thought for two moments.
 “You are the guard.”
 “I am the queen.”
 “Guard of the royal treasury.”
 “Queen.”
 “All right. Queen-guard.”
 Jhunki accepted the arrangement.
 Gopi turned an old brass bowl upside down in the middle of the stool.
 The coin was placed beneath it.
 “This is the royal treasury.”
 Jhunki immediately put her palm over the bowl.
 “No one is to touch it.”
 Malati, gathering the discarded stalks of greens, watched the two of them with a smile.
 “Your Majesty, will you eat, or will you spend the whole day staring at the treasury?”
 Gopi rubbed his stomach.
 “A king eats.”
 “Then wash your hands.”

“Does a king wash his hands?”

“The king in my house does.”

Gopi went quietly towards the well.

Even after lunch, his sense of wealth did not diminish.

Again and again he went to the stool.

He lifted the bowl.

Looked at the coin.

Then put the bowl back.

Along one edge of the coin was a small crescent-shaped scratch.

Gopi stared at it until he knew it by heart.

“This is my royal mark.”

Jhunki asked—

“The scratch?”

“The royal mark.”

“A scratch.”

“I’ll banish you from the court.”

“Then who will guard the bowl?”

Gopi fell silent.

Running a kingdom was not simple.

In the afternoon Sito Kaki came by.

She wanted a bundle of bathua greens.

Malati said—

“The last bundle is ten rupees.”

Sito Kaki handed her a twenty-rupee note.

Malati untied the knot in her sari.

She needed two five-rupee coins.

There was only one five-rupee coin in the knot.

She looked at Gopi.

Gopi understood that a crisis had reached the royal court.

Malati said with a laugh—

“Your Majesty, may the kingdom lend us five rupees?”

Gopi immediately placed his hand over the bowl.

“The royal treasury will become empty.”

Sito Kaki laughed.

“Such a tiny kingdom?”

Gopi remained grave.

“The treasury of a small kingdom is still a treasury.”

Malati said—

“If you don’t want to, let it be. I’ll take Sito Didi’s five rupees to her this evening.”

Gopi listened to his mother’s voice.

There was no compulsion in it.

The bowl was still safe under his hand.
 He thought for a moment.
 Then he lifted the bowl.
 "I'll lend it."
 "At what interest?" Sito Kaki asked.
 Gopi did not quite know what interest meant.
 But a king had to answer every question.
 Gopi said clearly—
 "One piece of news by evening."
 "What news?"
 "News of where my coin went."
 Sito Kaki took the coin.
 Gopi pointed out the crescent-shaped scratch on her palm.
 "Look at this mark."
 "Yes, I've seen it."
 "This very coin must come back."
 Sito Kaki said—
 "Your Majesty, money moves. It does not sit still."
 Gopi looked at the empty belly of the bowl.
 He did not like that statement.
 Sito Kaki left.
 Jhunki immediately announced—
 "The king has become poor."
 "I've lent it."
 "The bowl is empty."
 "The royal treasury has gone out."
 "Empty."
 Gopi turned the bowl right side up.
 The empty bowl looked even emptier.
 He turned it upside down again.
 "Now it doesn't show."
 Just then Nanhku from next door peeped onto the veranda.
 Jhunki immediately said—
 "The king is poor."
 Gopi sat a little straighter on the stool.
 "The royal treasury is travelling."
 Nanhku asked—
 "Will there be a royal feast?"
 "When the treasury returns, the matter will be considered."
 "May I become a minister right now?"
 "The minister's post is not vacant."
 Jhunki frowned.

“Who is the minister?”

Gopi hesitated for a moment.

“The kingdom is small at present, so the king is also the minister.”

Nanhku went away laughing.

Jhunki said softly—

“The queen-guard does more work.”

Gopi heard the objection, but there was no official file anywhere in the court from which he could produce an answer.

A couple of hours later Harkhu the milkman passed through the lane.

Two brass milk cans hung from the crossbar of his bicycle.

Gopi and Jhunki were sitting on the veranda.

Harkhu laughed and called—

“Long live the king!”

Gopi was startled.

“How did you know?”

Harkhu stopped his bicycle.

“Sito Didi told me.”

Gopi’s chest swelled again a little.

News of the kingdom had crossed the lane.

Harkhu took a coin out of his shirt pocket.

“Is this the royal coin?”

Gopi jumped down from the stool.

Along the edge of the coin was the crescent-shaped scratch.

“That is my royal coin!”

“At the moment it is in my pocket.”

Gopi’s face fell.

Harkhu laughed.

“Sito Didi paid me five rupees she owed for milk.”

Gopi stared at the coin as though it had sent news from some distant country.

“Will you return it now?”

“Why should I return it? Did your mother borrow five rupees from me?”

Gopi stopped.

The matter was difficult.

Harkhu put the coin back into his pocket.

“Don’t worry. The royal coin is making its rounds.”

He rode away.

Jhunki said—

“King of two houses.”

Gopi said—

“Not two houses. The whole lane.”

This time there was less worry and more pride in his voice.

Towards evening his father, Ramsevak, returned from his little bicycle-repair shop.

There was grease on his palms.

Reaching the veranda, he asked—

“I hear a king has arisen in this house.”

Gopi sat very straight on the stool.

“Yes. The kingdom is running.”

Ramsevak folded his hands.

“Your Majesty, your subject is tired. May he have some water first?”

Jhunki collapsed with laughter.

Gopi ran and brought a lota full of water.

Ramsevak drank and said—

“The king’s service is excellent.”

Gopi immediately asked—

“Did you see my five rupees?”

Ramsevak raised his eyebrows.

“Which five?”

“The one with a crescent-shaped scratch on the edge.”

Ramsevak searched his pocket.

He took out a five-rupee coin.

Gopi pounced on it to inspect it.

There was no scratch.

“Not this one.”

“Will there be a royal inspection of my shop as well?”

“Harkhu Kaka had it.”

Ramsevak laughed.

“He came at noon to have air put in a tyre.”

Gopi’s eyes lit up.

“Then what happened?”

“He gave me twenty rupees. The charge was fifteen. I returned five.”

Gopi stood up.

“Which five?”

“Whichever came into my hand.”

“The scratched one?”

Ramsevak scratched his head.

“I don’t keep the genealogy of coins.”

Jhunki began laughing again.

Gopi was not amused.

“Whom did you give it to?”

Ramsevak thought.

“The postman came by. I had tightened his bicycle bell.”

“To him?”

"Possibly."

Gopi stepped out of the veranda.

He looked down the lane.

The postman was nowhere in sight.

It seemed to Gopi that the royal coin had now taken the government road.

Malati, blowing on the cooking fire, said—

"Gopi, think about your supper. Your five rupees are my responsibility."

Gopi said—

"I don't want another five."

"Why not another coin?"

"I want the one with my mark."

Malati laughed.

"Does Your Majesty own the money or the scratch?"

Gopi did not answer.

Just then a bicycle bell rang in the lane.

It was the postman.

His bag was already empty.

He turned towards the house.

"Malati sister, is there any bathua left?"

Malati said—

"One small bundle."

"Give it to me. They asked for it at home."

Malati picked up the bundle.

"Ten rupees."

The postman searched his pocket.

He took out a five-rupee note, two two-rupee coins, and one five-rupee coin.

Gopi's eyes went straight to the five-rupee coin.

He came slowly closer.

"May I see?"

The postman asked—

"See what?"

"That five."

"A royal inspection?" Ramsevak called from behind.

The postman laughed and placed the coin on Gopi's palm.

Along its edge was the little crescent-shaped scratch.

Gopi's face lit up as if the sun had returned after dusk.

"This is it!"

Malati took the rest of the money from the postman.

The postman left with the bundle of bathua.

Gopi closed his fist tightly around the coin.

"It came back."

Ramsevak asked—

“Where all did it go?”
 Gopi began counting.
 “From my hand to Ma.”
 “From Ma to Sito Kaki.”
 “From Sito Kaki to Harkhu Kaka.”
 “From Harkhu Kaka to Babuji’s shop.”
 “From there to the postman.”
 “From the postman back home.”
 Jhunki asked—
 “Then is this five-rupee coin rich?”
 Gopi said—
 “No. A coin isn’t rich.”
 “Then are you?”
 Gopi sat down again on the stool.
 He lifted the brass bowl.
 He put the coin underneath it.
 Then, after thinking for a moment, he removed the bowl.
 The coin lay openly on the stool.
 “I am the king.”
 “Why?” Jhunki asked.
 Gopi ran a finger over the coin.
 “Because my royal treasury went all around the lane and still recognised me when it came back.”
 Ramsevak burst out laughing.
 “Did the coin recognise you, or did you recognise the coin?”
 Gopi thought for a moment.
 “We recognised each other.”
 After supper that night, the coin did not go under his pillow again.
 It remained on the stool beside the brass bowl.
 At dawn Sito Kaki came to the doorway and called—
 “Your Majesty!”
 Gopi woke and came running.
 “What is it, Kaki?”
 Sito Kaki said with a laugh—
 “Do you have change for five?”
 Gopi looked at the coin lying on the stool.
 Jhunki too was looking at him.
 Gopi picked up the coin.
 “Yes. I have one.”
 Sito Kaki held out her palm.
 Before giving her the coin, Gopi looked once at the crescent-shaped scratch.
 Then he smiled.

“I want news by evening.”

STORY III

The Aroma of Rice

The first dusk of evening was slowly descending upon that old lane in Darbhanga.

Madhav sat by the window of his small rented room.

Letters covered the open book before him, but again and again his eyes strayed from the page towards the courtyard next door.

In the neighbouring house, Kamla Kaki's hearth was burning.

The crackle of dried mango leaves and little sticks came drifting with the air.

A little while later the lid of the pot trembled softly.

Then the aroma of cooked rice crossed the narrow lane and reached Madhav's window.

His hand stopped upon the page.

He closed his eyes.

His village was in that fragrance.

There was the earthen veranda.

There was his mother's old brass pot.

There was his sister drying rain-soaked clothes.

And there was his father's voice, returning from the fields at dusk: "Is the rice ready?"

Madhav opened his eyes.

Before him was the same room once more.

A cot.

A low wooden board.

Two books.

A half-filled sack of rice against the wall.

And in the corner, a small kerosene stove that had not been lit for three days.

Madhav drew water from the earthen jar and drank a lotaful.

Then he opened his book again.

Next door, the lid was lifted.

The aroma of rice grew richer.

Madhav smiled at the thought.

"Mother must still fill the kitchen with smoke when she drains the rice water," he thought.

That night too, his supper was flattened rice and salt.

There was nothing wrong with flattened rice.

At home as well he ate it often.

But eating flattened rice for a fifth consecutive night in the city was not the same as choosing to eat it at home.

Madhav was the son of a poor household, but hunger was no stranger to him.

He knew how to keep accounts with hunger.

College fees, room rent, the price of books, pens, paper, and the fare home - among all these, the cost of food quietly had to find its own place.

Rice arrived from home.

Sometimes two seers, sometimes five.

Rice was not the problem.

Fire was.

Kerosene was expensive.

Buying firewood cost no less.

Madhav had worked it out: if he cooked rice every night, the money for his journey home during the last seven days of the month would disappear.

So most evenings he managed with flattened rice, sattu, curd when he could get it, and otherwise salt with green chillies.

The sack of rice remained in the corner.

And every day the aroma rising from the neighbouring hearth reminded him that a sack could be full while a cooking pot remained empty.

At first Kamla Kaki had paid no attention to this.

Her own days were full.

Sweeping the courtyard at dawn.

Sewing until afternoon.

Seeing to her granddaughter's lessons in the evening.

Cooking rice and lentils at night.

Then one day she noticed something curious.

As long as the water in her pot simmered, the sound of pages turning came from Madhav's room.

The moment the first aroma of rice rose, the pages stopped turning.

The first day Kamla Kaki took it for a coincidence.

The second day it happened again.

The third day as well.

On the fourth day, before lifting the lid, Kamla Kaki looked towards the window.

Madhav was reading.

The lid rose.

Steam escaped.

Madhav lifted his head from the book.

He leaned a little towards the window.

Kamla Kaki immediately looked away.
 She felt like laughing, and she felt sorrow too.
 After dinner that night, she went to Madhav's door.
 "Baua, do you have a great deal to study?"
 Madhav stood up.
 "Yes, Kaki. The examination is near."
 Kamla Kaki let her eyes travel around the room.
 She saw the sack of rice.
 She saw the kerosene stove in the corner.
 There was no fresh trace of soot above it.
 "Do you cook the rice, or merely stand guard over it?"
 Madhav could not help laughing.
 "I don't get much time, Kaki."
 "Does rice require time, or fire?"
 For a moment Madhav's laughter caught in his throat.
 He understood that Kaki had understood.
 But Kamla Kaki asked nothing more.
 She merely said, "All right. Study."
 The next evening, when Madhav returned from college, Kamla Kaki had set
 two pots in the courtyard.
 One was her own large pot.
 The other was small and empty.
 Madhav stopped when he saw the little pot.
 "Whose is this?"
 "Yours."
 "Mine?"
 "Yes, Baua."
 "Why this?"
 Kamla Kaki pushed a stick deeper into the hearth.
 "After my rice comes off the fire, half the heat dies for nothing."
 Madhav was silent.
 "Your rice is yours, your water is yours, and this old pot is mine. Save the
 embers from dying."
 Madhav's ears grew warm.
 "No, Kaki. This won't be right."
 "What is wrong about it?"
 "Your firewood -"
 "How is the wood mine? It belongs to the tree."
 Madhav did not smile.
 Kamla Kaki went on, "If you insist on keeping accounts, sweep away the ash.
 My knees hurt. Take the fire in exchange for that labour."
 Now Madhav laughed.

"Sweep the ash?"

"Yes. A fair bargain."

The bargain was so strange that refusing it was difficult.

Madhav opened his sack.

He took out a bowlful of rice.

He washed it.

He poured water into the small pot.

After Kamla Kaki's rice came off, he set his pot over the fading embers.

They both waited.

Five minutes.

Ten minutes.

Fifteen minutes.

Kamla Kaki lifted the lid and pressed a grain between her fingers.

It was still hard at the centre.

"Half the fire has died," she said.

Madhav laughed.

"Even rice sets examinations for poor students."

Kamla Kaki added two thin sticks to the fire.

A little later the rice was cooked.

That day Madhav ate rice from his own store.

Only with salt and two green chillies.

But the moment he put the first mouthful into his mouth, it seemed to him that the walls of the room had moved a little farther back.

The place had somehow grown larger.

The next day the arrangement changed.

Kamla Kaki did not wait for her own rice to come entirely off the fire.

When only the last breath of cooking remained in her pot, she moved it to the edge and placed Madhav's little pot in the centre of the flame.

The two pots took turns on the same hearth.

Madhav swept away the ash.

Kamla Kaki tended the wood.

Her granddaughter Rani saw the two pots and gave them names.

"This is the big house, and this is the little house."

Madhav asked again, "Why so?"

"Three people's rice is in the big house; one person's rice is in the little house."

"Is the house of one person necessarily small?"

Rani thought and said, "No. The pot is small."

Kamla Kaki laughed.

"Don't argue with this child."

A week later Madhav saw some dry twigs on his way and picked them up.

When he returned from college there were five or seven twigs tucked under his arm.

Kamla Kaki saw them and immediately asked, "What is this now?"

"My share."

"Share of what?"

"The fire."

"I make you sweep the ash."

"The wages for sweeping ash are not that high."

Kamla Kaki took the twigs.

"All right. Is the account even now?"

"For today."

"Will the account open again tomorrow?"

"If the hearth burns."

And so a new kind of accounting grew between them.

There were no rupees in it.

On one side were twigs.

On the other, leftover heat.

On one side, sweeping the ash.

On the other, a corner of the hearth for the little pot.

And at the very centre of it all was the aroma of rice.

Madhav no longer closed his book when the fragrance arrived.

He kept reading and simply understood: it was time to wash the rice.

Sometimes Kamla Kaki called out, "Baua, have you put in the water?"

"Yes."

"Not too much?"

"Measured it today."

"If you measure water to cook rice, the taste will run away."

"What branch of learning is that?"

"The science of the kitchen."

"Is there an examination in it?"

"Every day."

One evening it rained heavily.

Madhav was held up in a college class.

He had no umbrella.

When the rain eased a little, he reached his room drenched through.

It was very late.

Kamla Kaki's courtyard was dark.

Madhav thought: today's fire is gone.

He reached for the flattened rice.

Just then a voice came from the neighbouring courtyard -

"Will you go on studying this late, or will you eat rice too?"

Kamla Kaki stood at the door.

"You haven't gone to sleep?"

"If I were asleep, how would I be calling you?"

Madhav went into the courtyard.

The mouth of the hearth was full of ash.

Kamla Kaki shifted a little of it aside with the iron tongs.

A red point glowed within.

"I saved the embers," she said.

Madhav said nothing.

He simply sat down and blew upon them.

The red point first grew redder.

Then it became a small flame.

Kamla Kaki handed him two dry twigs.

"Wash the rice quickly."

The rice cooked late that night.

But Madhav felt that, for the first time, the distance between the village and the city had grown shorter.

A few days later his younger brother came from home carrying a bundle of rice.

Inside the bundle, their mother had tied two handfuls of new rice separately in a piece of cloth.

His brother said, "Mother said this is from the new harvest. You are to eat it first."

Madhav opened the cloth.

He took the grains into his hand.

Even the uncooked rice carried a faint fragrance.

That evening Madhav put that new-harvest rice into the little pot.

Kamla Kaki moved her own pot to the side.

Madhav's pot came into the centre of the fire.

The water began to bubble.

The lid trembled.

When the lid was lifted, the fragrance was so rich that Rani came running from the other end of the courtyard.

"What rice is this today?"

Madhav laughed.

"Rice from home."

Kamla Kaki stood still for a moment.

She leaned her face towards the steam.

"I've never smelled this fragrance before."

"I used to smell it every day."

Kamla Kaki looked at him.

Madhav understood: he was speaking not of rice, but of memory.

When the rice was cooked, for the first time Madhav served a bowl from his little pot and placed it before Kamla Kaki.

Kamla Kaki raised her eyebrows.

"What is this now?"

"The account for the embers."

"Is my fire that expensive?"

"This is not the price of the rice."

"Then what?"

"Of the fragrance."

Kamla Kaki laughed.

She took one mouthful from the bowl.

She chewed slowly.

"Does your mother use less water?"

"Yes, Kaki."

"That is why the grains remain separate."

"You understood?"

"Rice is not difficult to understand."

Madhav asked again, "And people?"

Kamla Kaki looked at him.

"To understand people, one has to lift the lid."

Madhav laughed again.

Two days later there was a holiday.

Madhav was going to the village.

In the morning he put his room in order.

He tied up his books.

He folded the rice sack.

He washed the little pot and left it in Kamla Kaki's courtyard.

Kamla Kaki said, "The pot will stay here. You'll need it again after the holiday."

Madhav said softly, "Keep it."

"And the twigs?"

"I'll bring them when I return."

"Will the account remain open?"

"As long as there is fire."

Madhav walked out of the lane.

Kamla Kaki sat down to sweep the hearth.

When the ash was cleared away, two round marks remained on the earthen surface - one left by the large pot, the other by the small one.

She swept the ash from around the larger mark; over the smaller one she passed her palm, but did not erase it.

STORY 112

The Grammar of a Love Letter

The afternoon sunlight had crept halfway across Ramanand Jha's veranda and stopped.

Ramanand Jha sat on a woven cot, cutting the edge of an old newspaper into a small slip of paper.

On that slip he meant to write down everything that had to be brought from the evening market.

The first word was - oil.

Salt.

Matches.

Eye medicine.

After those four items, his pen stopped.

He scratched his head.

"There was something else."

Just then a voice came from near the gate.

"Guruji, are you in?"

Ramanand Jha pushed his spectacles up on his nose.

"Come in, Deepak."

Deepak entered the veranda.

He held a folded sheet of paper in his hand.

First he stood before the cot.

Then he looked around for somewhere to sit.

Ramanand Jha pointed towards the low wooden stool beside him.

"Sit down. This is not an examination."

Deepak did not sit.

He gripped the paper more tightly.

Ramanand Jha looked at his hand.

"An application?"

Deepak shook his head.

"Not an application."

"A petition?"

"Not that either."

"An account of a debt?"

"Not that."

"Then why does the paper look so frightened?"

Deepak's ears turned red.

He said softly, "A love letter."

The little shopping slip on which Ramanand Jha had been writing 'salt' slipped from his hand.

"Say that again. What did you say?"

"A love letter."

"Why bring it to me?"

Deepak answered at once, "It isn't for you."

Ramanand Jha stared at him for two moments.

Then he burst out laughing.

"That should have been made clear at the beginning."

Deepak laughed too.

His embarrassment eased a little.

He sat down on the stool.

"Guruji, please correct it once for me."

Ramanand Jha held out his hand.

Deepak gave him the paper.

There were three pages.

Across the top, in large letters, was written - "Most Beloved Sugni Ji."

The moment Ramanand Jha read the first line, he took off his spectacles.

"Who is Sugni?"

"She works in the library."

"Do the two of you speak to each other?"

"Sometimes."

"How many times?"

Deepak thought.

"Four times."

"Three pages of love after four conversations?"

Deepak blushed again.

"But it has been in my heart for a long time."

"Days in the heart do not enter the count."

Ramanand Jha bent over the paper again.

The first sentence was - "You are the moon of my life."

He picked up a pencil.

"There is nothing wrong with the grammar."

Deepak's face brightened.

"Then shall I leave it?"

"First tell me how often Sugni rises over your life at night."

Deepak fell silent.

Ramanand Jha said, "Have you seen the moon?"

"Yes."

"Yesterday?"

"Not yesterday."

"And the day before?"

"Not then either."

"Sugni?"

"Yesterday, in the library."

"Then you see Sugni more often than you see the moon."

Deepak laughed.

Ramanand Jha said, "I will check the grammar. I do not rent out moons and stars."

Deepak took the pencil.

He drew a line through the first sentence.

The second sentence was - "I cannot live without you."

Ramanand Jha read it.

"This too is grammatically correct."

Deepak grew hopeful.

"Then this one survives?"

"What did you eat this morning?"

"Two rotis and potatoes."

"Was Sugni there?"

"No, not this morning."

"Then you are living."

Deepak lifted the pencil.

He struck out the second sentence as well.

"Guruji, at this rate the letter will become blank."

"Blank paper is better than a lie."

Deepak looked mournfully at all three pages.

Ramanand Jha read the next sentence - "My heart chants your name day and night."

"What were you doing while you wrote this?"

"I was truing a bicycle wheel."

"And chanting Sugni's name?"

Deepak laughed and said, "No. I was cursing Rambabu's crooked wheel."

Ramanand Jha held the paper out to him.

"Strike out that line yourself."

Deepak did so.

Half of the first of the three pages was now covered with pencil lines.

Deepak sat with his head in his hands.

"Falling in love wasn't difficult. Writing it is."

Ramanand Jha said, "I never taught the grammar of love."

"Then what did you teach?"

"Write what you have seen. Do not write what you have not seen."

"Where is that in grammar?"

"It was in my school."

Outside the veranda, a crow landed and dipped its beak into a bowl of water kept in a corner of the courtyard.

Deepak opened the paper again.

"Then what should I write?"

Ramanand Jha picked up an empty matchbox.

"What was the first thing about Sugni that you liked?"

Deepak did not answer at once.

He looked out beyond the veranda.

Then he said, "One day it was raining outside the library."

"Go on."

"A child had come to return a book."

"Go on."

"His book had got wet."

"Go on."

"Sugni did not scold him."

Ramanand Jha remained silent.

Deepak continued on his own.

"She opened the book and slipped pieces of old newspaper between the pages, one by one."

"Hmm."

"The child was crying."

"What did she do then?"

"She told him there would be no fine, but that next time he should bring the book wrapped in cloth."

Ramanand Jha handed him the pencil.

"Write that."

Deepak was startled.

"A wet book in a love letter?"

"It is better than the moon."

Deepak took out a fresh sheet.

He wrote, "Sugni Ji, the first time I liked something about you was the day you did not scold the child who brought back a wet book."

Ramanand Jha read it.

"Something about you' is vague here."

Deepak asked, "What should I write?"

"Write what it was that you liked."

Deepak wrote again, "That day, I liked your patience."

Ramanand Jha nodded.

"Now the sentence belongs to you."

A small smile appeared on Deepak's face.

He began the next sentence.

"Since then, whenever I go to the library, I feel like talking to you."

Ramanand Jha read it.

"This sentence is fine."

Deepak looked surprised.

"Nothing to strike out?"

"Not yet."

Deepak grew bolder.

He wrote, "I love you."

Ramanand Jha held his pencil still.

"The grammar is correct."

Deepak stared at him, scarcely breathing.

"And is it true?"

Ramanand Jha handed the pencil back to him.

"That question is not for me."

Deepak read the sentence again.

He did not strike it out.

Ramanand Jha pointed to the next blank space on the page.

"Now write about the answer you want from her."

Deepak wrote, "Awaiting your sweet reply."

Ramanand Jha frowned.

"Why must the answer be sweet?"

Deepak stopped his pencil.

"It is a love letter."

"The answer is hers."

Deepak was silent for a few moments.

Then he struck out the word 'sweet'.

The sentence became - "Awaiting your reply."

Ramanand Jha asked again, "Is she obliged to reply?"

Deepak said softly, "No. She is not obliged."

"Then write that too."

Deepak wrinkled his nose.

"If I am this polite, won't the love become smaller?"

Ramanand Jha laughed.

"If politeness makes it smaller, where was the love?"

Deepak wrote again, "If you should not wish to reply, I will understand that too."

Ramanand Jha read it.

"Should' does not sit properly here."

Deepak circled the word with his pencil.

Twice he wrote a replacement and erased it.

At last he wrote, "If you do not wish to reply, I will understand that too."

Ramanand Jha nodded.

"Now the meaning is clear."

Deepak gathered the original three pages and put them to one side.
 The new letter was now only a little more than half a page long.
 Deepak kept looking at it.
 "Guruji, one thing."
 "Hmm?"
 "From three pages to so little?"
 "The falsehoods have been reduced."
 "And the love?"
 "That is not measured by paper."
 A breeze entered the veranda.
 The old newspaper shopping slip fluttered to Deepak's feet.
 He picked it up.
 It read - oil, salt, matches, eye medicine.
 Deepak asked, "Does your list need correcting too?"
 Ramanand Jha said, "There is no love in this list. That makes it less difficult."
 They both laughed.
 At the end of the letter Deepak wrote, "Name - Deepak."
 Ramanand Jha said, "Only your name?"
 "What else?"
 "On the first page you had written, 'Yours forever and ever.'"
 Deepak looked at the old page.
 "That got struck out."
 "Why did you strike it out?"
 "You told me not to write what is not certain."
 Ramanand Jha smiled.
 "This time you remembered my lesson."
 Deepak began folding the letter.
 Ramanand Jha stopped him.
 "Read it aloud once."
 "Aloud, here?"
 "In front of me. Sugni is not here."
 Deepak read it.
 His voice trembled on the first line.
 On the second, it steadied.
 At "I love you", his voice dropped very low.
 At the final line he laughed at himself.
 Ramanand Jha asked, "Why are you laughing?"
 "I am reading a letter, but it feels as though I am speaking."
 "Then the letter has survived."
 Deepak folded the paper carefully.
 He put it in his pocket.

He rose and bowed respectfully.

At the gate he turned back.

“Guruji, your fee?”

Ramanand Jha picked up the shopping slip with ‘salt’ on it.

“There is a fee?”

“Yes, there should be.”

“On your way back from the market, bring me a packet of matches.”

Deepak laughed.

“Only that much?”

“Grammar is not expensive.”

“And love?”

“I do not know its price.”

Deepak left.

For three days he did not return.

Ramanand Jha went to the market twice.

He bought the matches himself.

On the fourth evening, someone called again at the gate.

Deepak had come.

This time his hands were empty.

Ramanand Jha asked, “The matches?”

Deepak took a packet from his pocket.

“Here they are.”

“It took four days?”

“I paid the fee late.”

Ramanand Jha pushed his spectacles up.

“The answer?”

Deepak put his hand into his pocket.

He drew out a small folded slip.

Ramanand Jha held out his hand.

Deepak hesitated for a moment.

Then he gave him the slip.

There were only two lines on it -

“On Sunday, after the library closes, wait for five minutes

In return for three pages, this much is enough for now.”

Ramanand Jha read it twice.

Then he picked up his pencil.

Deepak snatched the slip back at once.

“No, Guruji.”

“What happened?”

“Do not correct anything on this.”

Ramanand Jha put on a grave expression.

“There is a full stop at the end of the second line, but not the first.”

Deepak folded the slip and put it back in his pocket.

“Let it be.”

“And the grammar?”

“Right now, five minutes matter more.”

Ramanand Jha looked at him for a few moments.

Then he set the pencil down on the newspaper slip.

“All right. I will not touch it.”

Deepak moved towards the gate.

Ramanand Jha called after him, “Be there on time on Sunday.”

Deepak turned and laughed.

“Is that sentence correct?”

“Correct - and true.”

Deepak left.

Ramanand Jha looked again at his market list.

Oil was still the first item.

Salt.

Matches.

Eye medicine.

He put a small tick beside ‘matches’.

Then, in the empty space, he wrote - “Sunday - five minutes.”

He thought for a moment, and did not strike it out.

STORY 113

The Philosopher Betel-Seller

At Pipar Chowk, Badri Sah's paan shop was so small that if two customers stood there together, a third had to accept the dust of the road.

Above the shop, on a strip of tin, red letters proclaimed -

“Badri Paan Emporium.”

A first-time visitor, reading the word 'Emporium', would peer inside.

Inside were a tin of chopped areca nut, a tin of fennel seeds, two little bottles of cardamom, a bowl of catechu, a bowl of lime, and a damp cloth filled with betel leaves.

Badri Sah used to say -

“The bigger the name, the smaller the stock looks.”

The people of the crossroads called him a philosopher more often than a paan seller.

It was not because Badri Sah had read any great books.

The only book in his house was an old almanac, half of whose pages had been eaten by rats.

The reason was that whoever stood at his shop for five minutes went away with his worry a little lighter.

Badri Sah's own claim was modest.

“I do not mend lives.”

He would say this while spreading catechu over a betel leaf.

“I cool your head for five minutes. After that, your head is yours, and your worry is yours.”

One day Nandu the barber came running.

“Badri Kaka, I am leaving home.”

Badri Sah turned over a betel leaf.

“Whose home?”

“Mine.”

“Then where will you go after leaving it?”

Nandu fell silent.

“To my in-laws' house.”

“And your in-laws will ask - for how many days?”

Nandu fell silent again.

Badri Sah touched the leaf with the tip of the lime.

“First tell me, what was the quarrel about?”

“My rice was served late.”

"How late?"

"Half an hour."

"And for how many days are you planning to leave your home?"

Nandu stroked his moustache.

"The arithmetic does not seem to match."

Badri Sah folded the paan and placed it in his hand.

"Pay for this paan, go home, and sit quietly for half an hour. After that, if you still feel like leaving home, come back. Then we shall decide where your ticket should be booked."

Nandu returned in the evening.

"No ticket is needed."

"Did you get your rice?"

"Rice and vegetables both."

"Then philosophy has succeeded."

"Not philosophy. Hunger succeeded."

Both burst out laughing.

The very next day Saraswati Devi, the flower seller, set her basket down on the ground.

"Badri Bhai, this world is full of injustice."

Badri Sah asked while washing a betel leaf -

"What injustice today?"

"That flower seller opposite steals my customers."

"How?"

"She charges two rupees less."

"How much can you reduce your price?"

"Not even by one rupee."

"Then how will you win a quarrel over two rupees?"

Saraswati Devi frowned.

"So I should accept defeat?"

"I am not talking about victory or defeat. I am asking what your flowers have that hers do not."

Saraswati Devi answered at once -

"I pick mine at dawn. Some of hers are left over from yesterday."

"Then stop talking about the price. Say that."

"To the customers?"

"No, to your flowers. The customers will hear."

Saraswati Devi did not take a paan.

"Saved the price."

"Not the philosophy fee. Bring me a garland tomorrow."

On the third day, a small marigold garland hung at Badri Sah's shop.

People at the crossroads began jokingly calling the place a 'university'.

Badri Sah objected.

"At a university, students are examined. Here, the customers examine me."
Mangal Mistri's examinations were the hardest.

Whenever he came for paan, he brought some enormous question about the world.

"How can a human being remain happy?"

Badri Sah would ask -

"Where is your hammer?"

"At the shop."

"And the half-finished stool?"

"That is at the shop too."

"Then finish the stool first. Ask about happiness in the evening."

Mangal Mistri would take offence.

"You never answer serious questions."

"Serious questions are very heavy. The plank of my shop cannot bear that much weight."

Once, two members of the panchayat stopped speaking to each other.

They came to Badri Sah separately, at different times.

The first said -

"He insulted me."

Badri Sah asked -

"In how many words?"

"Three words."

"And how many words did you say in return?"

"That question is not necessary."

"Then cardamom in your paan is not necessary either."

"Why?"

"If the account remains incomplete, the taste will remain incomplete too."

The first member admitted reluctantly -

"Seven or eight words."

Badri Sah put in the cardamom.

When the second member came, the story was reversed, but the number of words was almost the same.

Badri Sah gave both men the same advice -

"Tomorrow, sit together for five minutes. Whoever mentions the old quarrel during the first five minutes will pay for both paans."

The next day both arrived.

For five minutes neither opened his mouth.

In the sixth minute, the first member asked -

"Could you give me a little more fennel?"

The other said -

"Me too."

Badri Sah said proudly -

"See? For five minutes the problem disappeared."

"And from the sixth minute?"

"The sixth minute is not my responsibility."

That sentence became famous at the crossroads.

Whenever someone looked deeply troubled, another would say -

"Go and deposit five minutes with Badri."

Badri Sah's real method was only one thing, though he never stated it plainly to anyone.

When someone described a problem, he did not answer at once.

First he chose a betel leaf.

He trimmed the central rib.

He shook off the water.

He opened the tin of lime.

He mixed the catechu.

Meanwhile, as the speaker repeated the story, he would often understand for himself how much of it was truly necessary and how much was merely heat.

If he still did not understand, Badri Sah asked one small question.

"Right now, at this very moment, what can you do?"

That question was half of his philosophy.

The other half was -

"What you cannot do right now, set aside for five minutes."

But one day neither of those sentences was enough for Badri Sah's own problem.

It was a Bhado afternoon.

Clouds were gathering in the sky.

Badri Sah was sprinkling water over the betel leaves when his landlord, Raghunath Babu, arrived.

"Badri, I have something to tell you."

"Tell me. I am listening."

"From next month, I need this room for my son."

Badri Sah's hand stopped over the betel leaves.

"This shop?"

"Yes, this one."

"How many years have I been here?"

"Seventeen."

"Then where is seventeen years' worth of things supposed to go in one month?"

Raghunath Babu spread his hands helplessly.

"I have needs in my own household too."

Badri Sah said nothing.

Raghunath Babu left.

That day Nandu the barber came by.

“Kaka, one sweet paan.”

Instead of lime, Badri Sah applied catechu twice.

Nandu stared.

“The philosopher’s hand is trembling?”

Badri Sah told him what had happened.

Nandu said at once -

“Why worry? Take half of my barber shop.”

Badri Sah measured it with his eyes.

“Half my customers will fit into your half. Where will the other half stand?”

Hearing this, Saraswati Devi said -

“Beside my flower cart there is room in the evening -”

Badri Sah interrupted her.

“Room.”

“Yes, there is room.”

“And in the morning?”

“In the morning there will be flowers.”

“Then shall I sell paan only at night?”

Mangal Mistri arrived.

“Make the shop on wheels. Wherever the customers are, there will be paan.”

Badri Sah looked at him.

“Did you finish the stool?”

Mangal Mistri fell silent.

“The stool first.”

Everyone burst out laughing together.

Badri Sah did not laugh.

By evening five people had offered five solutions.

Not one of them survived for more than five minutes.

Then the same two panchayat members arrived together.

“Badri, today you deposit five minutes.”

Badri Sah gave a faint, distracted smile.

“My problem is not a five-minute problem.”

“Neither was ours.”

The second member stood before the counter.

“What is it that you always ask us?”

Badri Sah did not answer.

The first member said -

“Right now, at this very moment, what can you do?”

For the first time Badri Sah heard his own sentence from someone else’s mouth.

He looked around him.

The betel leaves lay beneath the damp cloth.

The tins were on the plank.

The customers stood before him.
 There was no answer yet for one month from now.
 There were these five minutes now.
 “What can I do now?”

He said softly.
 “Right now, I can make one paan.”
 “Then make it.”

Badri Sah picked up a betel leaf.
 This time his hand did not tremble.
 He made a paan for the first member.
 He made one for the second.
 He gave Nandu some fennel.

Saraswati Devi's garland had dried; he entered a new garland against her account.

He asked Mangal Mistri -
 “The stool?”
 “Tomorrow.”

“If it remains unfinished tomorrow, there will be no philosophy for you.”
 This time Badri Sah himself laughed.

For the next eight days, people from the crossroads looked at different places for him.

One veranda was too small.
 One rent was too high.
 One place had no water.
 Another fell dark as soon as evening came.
 On the ninth day, Saraswati Devi brought news.

In the lane behind the peepal tree, in front of an old grain warehouse, there was an empty room four cubits wide.

The owner lived away, but his brother kept the key.
 Badri Sah went to see it.
 The room was old.
 Limewash flaked from the wall.
 The door was crooked.
 The roof was low.

But two people could stand in front of it.
 A third would have to endure less road dust.
 The rent was a little higher than at the old shop.
 Badri Sah calculated for a long time.

Then he said -
 “Not every question in life finds its answer in five minutes.”
 Nandu said -
 “Why did you never say that before?”

“Because I had not understood it myself before.”

“So your philosophy has changed?”

“No. In five minutes the question becomes smaller. A smaller question gives you the strength to lift it. The answer still has to be found afterwards.”

On the day the new shop opened, half the people of Pipar Chowk turned up.

Mangal Mistri straightened the old counter.

Nandu hung the signboard overhead.

Saraswati Devi hung a fresh marigold garland.

The signboard once again read -

“Badri Paan Emporium.”

Under it, on his own initiative, Nandu pasted a small piece of paper -

“Life's problems - five minutes.”

The moment Badri Sah saw it, he reached out to tear it down.

The second panchayat member caught his hand.

“Let it stay. It is an advertisement.”

Badri Sah said -

“People will believe it.”

Mangal Mistri laughed.

“Let them believe it for five minutes.”

The people of the crossroads roared with laughter.

The first customer was a teenage boy.

With a very grave face he said -

“Kaka, I have a great problem in my life.”

Badri Sah picked up a betel leaf.

“How great?”

“My examination is tomorrow, and I have studied nothing.”

Badri Sah put the leaf back into the tin.

“Paan will not cure this problem.”

“Then what should I do?”

“Can you reach home in five minutes?”

“Yes, in five minutes.”

“Philosophy finished. Run.”

The boy ran.

Nandu clapped.

Badri Sah leaned his elbows on the counter.

“See? In the new shop, philosophy works faster than before.”

The peepal tree remained in front of the old shop.

But the evening breeze turned through the lane and reached the new shop as well.

Badri Sah adjusted the damp cloth over the betel leaves.

Three customers stood before him, each carrying his own worry.

He looked at them and said -

“One at a time. Life is very large, but my counter is still small.”

STORY 114

The Rented Dog

There was a new bamboo gate in front of Mahendra's house.

The gate was new; the house was old.

The bamboo was not new either.

Mahendra had split three old bamboo poles, joined two pieces across them, tied everything with rope, and given it the form of a gate.

His wife, Sushila, took one look at it on the first day and said -

"Will this gate stop a thief?"

Mahendra tightened the rope and replied -

"A thief will first think there must be something valuable inside."

"What is inside?"

"Why should we tell the thief that?"

Sushila laughed.

There was very little in the house worth stealing.

One brass lota.

Two plates.

A sewing machine, which was Mahendra's livelihood.

And three bundles of cloth in a corner of the room, left by customers to be stitched.

More than his own belongings, Mahendra worried about those bundles.

"If those clothes disappear, people will find another tailor."

He said this one night while oiling the machine.

"If the machine disappears, where will I find another livelihood?"

It was this fear that had produced the bamboo gate.

But on the third night no one opened the gate. Someone merely reached over it and lifted away the brass bowl kept on the veranda.

In the morning Sushila saw the empty place.

"Did the gate stop the thief?"

Mahendra looked at the bamboo posts.

"The gate did its job. The thief came over the top."

"Then build the gate all the way up to the roof."

There was irritation in Sushila's voice, but laughter too.

From that day, talk of getting a dog began.

Not every house in the village had one, but wherever there was a dog, its barking could be heard far into the night.

Sushila kept saying -

"If we had a dog, the veranda would not feel empty."

Mahendra asked around in the market.

When he heard the price of a puppy, he felt his pocket.

Back home he said -

"If we buy a dog now, we shall have to give up dal for two weeks."

"We are not giving up dal."

"Then give up the dog."

"And give up the customers' clothes?"

Both fell silent.

That evening their neighbour Abdul Chacha was walking down the lane with his dog, Kalu.

The name Kalu suggested a black dog.

This Kalu was brown.

His first owner had given him the name; the colour had been beyond anyone's control.

One of Kalu's ears stood upright. The other folded halfway down.

He did not bark the moment he saw someone.

First he sniffed.

Then he decided whether barking was worth the effort.

Abdul Chacha stopped by the gate.

"Mahendra, why has everyone in your house been talking about dogs since yesterday?"

Sushila called from inside -

"Chacha, walls are supposed to have ears; yours are bigger than the walls'."

Abdul Chacha laughed.

"Not my ears - Kalu's. He heard it."

Mahendra came outside.

"We need a dog. We don't have the money."

Abdul Chacha patted Kalu's back.

"Then don't buy one."

"What else can we do?"

"Rent one."

Mahendra assumed Chacha was joking.

"Dogs are available for rent too?"

"Houses are rented. Bullock carts are rented. Cots are rented. Why not a dog?"

Sushila came outside.

"How much rent?"

Abdul Chacha put on a grave face.

"No rupees."

"Then what is the rent?"

“Kalu will sleep on your veranda at night. In the morning he will return to my courtyard. In exchange, bathe him once a week.”

Mahendra looked at Kalu.

Kalu was sniffing the ground.

“Will he agree?”

Abdul Chacha said -

“Kalu obeys me less than he obeys his sack.”

He fetched an old jute sack from his courtyard.

One corner had been torn by Kalu's teeth.

“Wherever I spread this sack, Kalu goes there in the evening and lies down.”

Sushila asked in wonder -

“Are we renting the dog, or the sack?”

“I haven't been able to decide that myself yet.”

On the first night Abdul Chacha spread the sack on Mahendra's veranda.

Kalu sniffed it five times.

Once he looked back towards his old courtyard.

Then he curled up and lay down.

Mahendra was delighted.

“See? The guard has arrived.”

Sushila poured some rice water into a bowl.

Kalu got up, drank it, and returned to the sack.

Mahendra said -

“If we feed him too, the rent will become expensive.”

Sushila replied -

“I used to throw the rice water away. Now it has become wages.”

In the first watch of the night Kalu barked once.

Mahendra sprang from his bed.

“He's here!”

He grabbed a bamboo staff and ran outside.

Abdul Chacha was standing on the other side of the gate.

“It's me.”

“Chacha! At this hour?”

“I left my sickle on your veranda.”

Mahendra looked at Kalu.

“He barks even at his owner.”

Abdul Chacha laughed.

“First rule of a rented guard - no kinship while on duty.”

In the second watch of the night there was barking again.

This time Sushila got up.

Outside, a cat was nudging the lid of an earthen pot.

Kalu sat on the sack and watched it.

Sushila whispered -

“Why doesn't he chase the cat?”

Mahendra said -

“The rent is for barking. Chasing must have a separate rate.”

Trying not to laugh, both went back inside.

In the morning Abdul Chacha came.

“How was the night?”

Mahendra said -

“Two warnings. One for you, one for a cat.”

“Then the arrangement is working well.”

Kalu did not get up from the sack.

Abdul Chacha said -

“Come, home.”

Kalu opened his eyes, then closed them again.

Chacha picked up the sack.

Kalu immediately rose and followed him.

Mahendra's son, Chhotu, burst out laughing at the sight.

“Babu, don't rent the dog. Rent the sack. It will be cheaper.”

For three nights the arrangement worked perfectly.

On the fourth night Mahendra gave Kalu two rotis.

Sushila asked -

“There was rice water. Why rotis?”

“A contented guard will do his work well.”

Kalu ate the two rotis and slept so soundly that in the night a goat pushed through the gate and ate the tulsi plant from its pot.

In the morning Sushila saw the bare tulsi stalk.

“This guard's contentment is very expensive.”

When Abdul Chacha heard, he said -

“No feast before night duty. I learned that today too.”

After that, Kalu received less rice water in the evening and more in the morning.

Gradually Kalu learned the timetable of both houses.

As the sun went down, he looked for the sack in Abdul Chacha's courtyard.

The moment he saw the sack being lifted, he set off for Mahendra's house.

In the morning, when the sack was lifted again, he followed Chacha back.

The children in the lane gave the arrangement a name -

“Half-Day Kalu.”

Chhotu corrected them -

“Night-Time Kalu.”

Abdul Chacha said -

“Rented Kalu.”

Kalu had no objection to any of the names.

He recognised the sack better than names.

A week later came bath day.
Mahendra took Kalu to the well.
The moment the first lota of water fell on him, Kalu bolted.
Mahendra held on to the rope.
Kalu ran three circles around him.
The rope wound itself around Mahendra's legs.
Chhotu kept clapping.
From a distance Abdul Chacha called out -
"Collecting rent is hard work!"
In the end Kalu was bathed.
But Mahendra was half-bathed too.
Sushila brought two towels.
One for Kalu.
One for Mahendra.
"The bargain is even."
She said it with satisfaction.
Mahendra asked -
"By what calculation?"
"The dog is half wet, and the owner is half wet."
"Chacha is the owner."
"At night, you are."
At that answer Abdul Chacha laughed so hard that he began to cough.
The days went by.
Nothing else disappeared from Mahendra's house.
Mahendra gave Kalu the credit.
Sushila would say -
"Only that one bowl was ever stolen. Who knows whether the thief would have come again at all?"
Mahendra said -
"The advantage of guarding is that even what does not happen is credited to the guard."
One night a strong wind blew.
The rope of the gate came loose.
At midnight there was a 'khat' sound.
Kalu got up and barked.
Mahendra ran outside.
The gate had sagged inward.
There was no one there.
He began tightening the rope again.
Kalu sat beside him.
Mahendra stroked his head.

“Because of you I woke up. Otherwise by morning the gate would have been lying on the ground.”

Kalu yawned.

Mahendra understood that he had no great enthusiasm for being thanked.

The next day Chhotu stitched a collar for Kalu from a piece of old red cloth.

Mahendra strengthened its edges on the sewing machine.

With charcoal, Chhotu wrote a single word on it -

“NIGHT.”

Abdul Chacha read it and said -

“What will his name be in the daytime?”

Chhotu thought.

“Kalu by day, Night by night.”

“Two jobs, two names.”

“One wage - rice water.”

Sushila said it.

A month later Mahendra's tailoring work picked up a little.

He asked again about the price of a puppy.

This time he had the money in his pocket.

Back home he told Sushila -

“Now we can buy a dog of our own.”

Chhotu overheard and came running.

“Will Kalu be sent away?”

“Not sent away. He belongs to Chacha.”

“At night he belongs to us.”

Mahendra fell silent.

In the evening Abdul Chacha arrived carrying the sack.

Mahendra told him.

Chacha put the sack down on the ground.

“Buy one. Your own dog is your own.”

Chhotu sat holding Kalu around the neck.

“Then where will he sleep at night?”

Abdul Chacha said -

“Ask Kalu.”

Everyone looked at Kalu.

Kalu sniffed the sack first.

Then he walked towards Mahendra's veranda.

Chhotu declared triumphantly -

“We have our answer.”

The puppy was not bought.

Mahendra used that money to replace a weak post on the veranda and to buy a new belt for the sewing machine.

Some money was left over.

Sushila said -

“We didn’t buy Kalu, and the house improved.”

Abdul Chacha replied -

“That’s the profit from rent.”

“We pay the rent in rice water and baths.”

“And what did I get?”

Mahendra asked.

Chacha pointed to Kalu’s bright red collar.

“By day my dog is now clean and smart. At night he has a job. I have less trouble bathing him. You get a guard. Kalu gets two homes.”

Sushila said -

“Then who loses?”

Abdul Chacha made a great show of thinking for a long time.

“The cat. Now it must think twice before nudging a lid.”

That night Kalu lay curled on the sack.

Inside, Mahendra kept the sewing machine running.

Outside, the wind moved against the gate.

After a while Kalu barked once.

Mahendra did not stop the machine.

He had learned to recognise that bark.

Abdul Chacha was passing through the lane.

His voice came from outside -

“No kinship while on guard duty!”

From inside, Mahendra laughed and called back -

“Rent fully recovered!”

STORY 115

The Empty-Pocket Feast

The afternoon had begun to gather up its light.

Beneath the peepal tree at the crossroads four friends had gathered - Lalan, Phekan, Jamil and Bhola.

In Lalan's hand was a short letter that had come from the post office.

The letter said that he had passed his training examination.

He did not have a job yet.

But by the reckoning of the four friends, passing the examination meant that half the door to a job had opened.

Phekan read the letter a second time and said -

"News like this calls for a feast."

Lalan turned the pocket of his kurta inside out.

An old button fell out.

Two bits of thread fell out as well.

There was not the faintest trace of money.

Jamil turned out his pocket too.

An old bus ticket emerged from it.

Bhola searched his pocket.

He found a single fennel seed.

Phekan said with great pride -

"My pocket contains property."

The other three looked at him.

Phekan produced a small stone.

"What sort of property is that?"

"It got into my slipper yesterday. I took it out and put it in my pocket. Then I forgot about it."

Jamil said -

"So the total wealth of four friends comes to one button, one ticket, one fennel seed and one stone."

Bhola added -

"Quite enough for a feast to celebrate passing an examination."

All four burst out laughing.

Lalan folded the letter and put it back in his pocket.

Lalan said -

"Not a single paisa will be spent today."

Jamil added another rule -

“And we will not ask anyone for anything free.”

Bhola said -

“Whatever we receive in return for work is allowed.”

Phekan put on a solemn face and asked -

“Does laughter count as labour?”

“No. Laughter has a separate wage.”

“Then my contribution is zero again.”

Their laughter broke out together once more.

It was decided: there would be a celebration, the expense would remain zero, and there would be no trickery or deceit.

The four set off towards the market.

The first shop belonged to a sweet-maker.

Oil was bubbling in the pan.

Hot kachoris were puffing themselves into roundness.

Phekan began to walk more slowly.

His neck turned towards the shop of its own accord.

Jamil caught his hand and pulled him along.

“The rule.”

Phekan said -

“I am only looking at the aroma.”

Bhola, dragging his eyes away from the guavas, asked -

“Can an aroma be looked at?”

“When your pocket is empty, all the senses start doing one another’s work.”

The sweet-maker overheard him.

Laughing, he asked -

“Four kachoris?”

Lalan said -

“Today the first course is aroma.”

The sweet-maker looked at his pan.

“Will that course fill your stomachs?”

Phekan replied -

“For now it is the turn of the eyes and the nose. The stomach’s turn will come later.”

The sweet-maker roared with laughter.

The four moved on.

At the next bend stood Ramdev’s fruit stall.

One slat of a bamboo basket suddenly broke.

Guavas began rolling into the road.

Ramdev struggled, trying to hold the basket with one hand and catch the guavas with the other.

Without saying a word, all four ran to help.

Lalan stopped the guavas that were rolling towards the drain.

Jamil pulled two out from beneath a handcart.
 Bhola spread out his gamchha and gathered the smaller guavas into it.
 Phekan tied the broken slat of the basket with a short piece of string.
 Within five minutes the road was clear.
 Ramdev breathed in relief.
 He picked up four guavas and held them out to the friends.
 Lalan immediately drew his hand back.
 "No, Kaka."
 "Why won't you take them?"
 "We are having a feast today, but we will not eat anything obtained by asking or as charity."
 Ramdev frowned.
 "Who said charity? Half my guavas would have gone into the drain. You saved them. These are your wages."
 Jamil whispered in Lalan's ear -
 "Did the rules forbid wages?"
 The four looked at one another.
 Phekan said gravely -
 "The committee will consider the matter."
 Bhola delivered the decision at once -
 "Anything earned by labour is allowed at the feast."
 Ramdev gave them four guavas.
 Phekan asked -
 "Salt?"
 Ramdev laughed and said -
 "Shall I break another basket for that?"
 They all laughed and moved on.
 Now they had four guavas in their hands.
 Phekan sniffed one and said -
 "The first course is confirmed."
 As they crossed the square, they saw a handcart stuck in the mud.
 The cart-puller was pushing it alone.
 On the cart were sacks of roasted gram and puffed rice.
 The four stopped again.
 Jamil said -
 "Our feast demands a great deal of labour."
 All four put their shoulders to the cart.
 The wheel did not turn on the first push.
 On the second, Phekan slipped and nearly sat down in the mud.
 Bhola kept laughing.
 Phekan got up and said -
 "Laugh later. Your Majesties, push."

On the third attempt the wheel came free of the mud.

The cart-puller's name was Nandu.

Wiping his forehead with his gamchha, he said -

"If you had not been here, I would have been stuck for another half-hour."

He placed a handful of roasted gram on a piece of paper.

Lalan was about to refuse again.

Phekan caught his hand.

"The committee has already ruled on this."

Nandu asked -

"What committee?"

Jamil said -

"The Empty-Pocket Feast Committee."

Nandu looked at their pockets.

"When pockets are empty, committees form quickly."

Along with the gram he added a pinch of salt.

Phekan brightened.

"Now the guavas have become civilised."

At the far end of the market was an old pond.

The four thought of sitting on its steps.

But two municipal sanitation workers were lifting heavy bamboo baskets nearby.

The handle of one basket had torn.

Without a word, Bhola stepped forward.

"How far?"

One of the workers said -

"Up to that cart."

Together, the four carried the two baskets to the cart.

The workers thanked them.

There was no question of receiving anything in return.

The four came back and sat on the steps.

Jamil said -

"What did that service add to the feast?"

Rubbing his back, Phekan replied -

"Hunger."

This time their laughter went on for a long while.

There was a public tap beside the pond.

Bhola wiped the guavas with the corner of his gamchha.

Jamil spread the gram out on the paper.

The pinch of salt was divided into four portions.

Phekan began looking for a knife to cut the guavas.

No one had one.

Lalan said -

“A shortage of equipment at the royal feast.”

Bhola broke a guava into four pieces with his hands.

The first guava was shared among the four.

So was the second.

Then Phekan objected.

“If four guavas are divided among four people like this, each of us will merely get one guava.”

Jamil asked solemnly -

“What do you propose?”

“If we combine all four guavas and call it a feast, it remains a feast. If we call it one guava each, it becomes ordinary eating.”

By the authority vested in the one who had passed the examination, Lalan delivered his ruling -

“Today each guava will have four names - opening course, main course, interlude and finale.”

Phekan was satisfied.

The gram kept circulating among them.

No one took a whole fistful.

They picked it up grain by grain.

When Nandu's salt touched the guava, Phekan closed his eyes and said -

“In the city this dish would cost at least ten rupees.”

Bhola asked -

“Why ten rupees?”

“Because we don't have ten rupees.”

The sun was sinking.

Evening light lay across the water of the pond.

The feast was not large.

Four guavas, a handful of roasted gram, a pinch of salt and unlimited water from the tap.

But the conversation of the four friends showed no sign of ending.

Jamil asked Lalan -

“You have passed the examination. When you receive your first earnings, what will you do?”

Without thinking, Lalan replied -

“A feast for the four of us.”

Phekan objected at once.

“No. Then this feast will never be made a second time.”

“Then what?”

“With your first earnings, buy a pair of slippers for your mother.”

Lalan fell silent.

Her old slippers at home really were worn through.

To lighten the mood, Bhola said -

“And what about us?”

Phekan replied -

“By then our pockets will be empty again. We will find a way.”

The evening deepened.

The four rose.

A few gram husks remained on the paper.

Jamil gathered them and dropped them into a rubbish basket.

Bhola turned off the tap.

Lalan carefully put the letter back into his pocket.

Phekan searched his own pocket.

The stone was still there.

He took it out and was about to leave it on the pond steps, then stopped.

“This too is a member of today's feast.”

Jamil asked -

“What did the stone eat?”

“The emptiness of my pocket.”

The four laughed again.

On their way back they passed the sweet-maker's shop once more.

Only a few kachoris were left now.

From a distance the sweet-maker called -

“Did the feast happen?”

Lalan said -

“The feast certainly happened.”

“What was on the menu?”

Phekan began to count -

“Four guavas, one handful of gram, one pinch of salt, unlimited water.”

The sweet-maker laughed loudly.

“And you call that a feast?”

Jamil said -

“The remaining ingredients were four people.”

For a moment the sweet-maker was silent.

Then he turned back towards his pan.

The four moved on.

When they reached the peepal tree, Phekan stopped.

“One account is still unfinished.”

“Which account?”

“The total cost of the feast.”

Lalan turned out his empty pocket once more.

The button fell to the ground again.

Jamil produced the old bus ticket.

Bhola searched for the fennel seed, but it had disappeared.

“Looks as if I ate that during the feast too.”

Phekan held up the stone.

“Total expense - zero.”

Picking up his button, Lalan asked -

“And the total earnings?”

The four looked at one another.

This time Phekan gave no answer.

He merely patted Lalan on the back.

The four took the roads to their respective homes.

Nothing remained beneath the peepal tree - no leaf, no plate, no account.

Only, for a little while, the sound of their laughter lingered there.

STORY 116

The Broken Umbrella Association

The evening rain arrived before the market had closed.

At first two or three heavy drops fell.

Then the sky opened so completely that people at the crossroads ran beneath the shop awnings.

Three men reached the front of Batesar Sah's closed paan shop at the same time.

The first was Shivrath, the tailor.

He had a green umbrella in his hand.

Its cloth was almost intact, but two of its ribs were bent in the middle.

The second was Karim, the bicycle repairman.

The ribs of his umbrella were strong, but its cloth was torn in three places.

The third was Jagdish, who worked weighing sacks in the market.

More than half the cloth of his umbrella was gone.

But its central shaft and handle were still so solid that they could have served as a walking stick.

All three tried to open their umbrellas.

The green umbrella leaned to one side.

As soon as Karim's umbrella opened, three streams of water began pouring onto his head.

When Jagdish's umbrella opened, the sky could be seen clearly through it.

Looking at it, Shivrath said -

"That is not an umbrella. It is a window."

Jagdish replied -

"At least a window has a complete frame."

Karim burst out laughing.

The rain grew heavier.

There was little room beneath the awning.

The three stood with their feet drawn close together.

Water began collecting on the road in front of them.

Shivrath tried to straighten the bent rib of his umbrella.

The rib bent again.

Karim said -

"Your cloth has survived, but the bones are tired."

Shivrath looked at Karim's umbrella.

"Your bones have survived, but the skin is gone."

Jagdish tapped his umbrella shaft against the ground.
 "My soul has survived."
 The three laughed again.
 After a while the laughter stopped.
 The rain did not.
 Shivrath's house was a kos and a half from the crossroads.
 Karim's house lay beyond the little bridge over the river.
 Jagdish's house stood on the road between the other two.
 All three needed to get home.
 None of them wanted to spend the night beneath the awning.
 Karim searched his bag.
 He found a piece of thin wire.
 It was leftover wire used for fastening a bicycle brake.
 Shivrath took a little packet of needle and thread from his shirt pocket.
 Jagdish asked -
 "You carry a needle even in the rain?"
 Shivrath said -
 "If a tailor goes about without a needle, what will people take him for?"
 Karim examined the inside of his own umbrella.
 Then he took the green umbrella in his hands.
 "Shall I take out two ribs?"
 Shivrath was startled.
 "You will cut up your umbrella to save mine?"
 "What is left of my umbrella now, anyway?"
 Jagdish immediately held out his shaft.
 "This central rod may be useful."
 Shivrath looked at his umbrella and asked -
 "And what will be left for you?"
 Jagdish said -
 "A souvenir."
 Karim spread all three umbrellas on the ground.
 Now and then spray from the edge of the awning splashed onto them.
 The three bent over the umbrellas.
 Two or three people in the market began watching from a distance.
 A boy asked -
 "Uncle, are all three umbrellas being repaired?"
 Karim said -
 "No. Three patients are going to make one healthy man."
 The boy remained standing there.
 Shivrath carefully began removing the cloth from the green umbrella.
 The old stitching was tight.
 With the point of his needle he loosened the knots.

Karim removed the strong ribs from his umbrella.
The upper joint of Jagdish's shaft proved to be the best of all.
Karim said -
"He is richer than both of us."
Jagdish puffed out his chest.
"I knew it all along."
Shivnath said -
"Half the cloth is gone, yet the pride is whole."
The work began.
Karim fastened two ribs with wire.
Shivnath stretched the green cloth over the new frame.
At one corner the cloth fell short.
Jagdish cut a blue piece from his torn umbrella and handed it over.
Shivnath stitched the piece into the green cloth.
The umbrella was now green, with one blue corner.
Karim stepped back and looked at it.
"It looks royal."
Jagdish said -
"If the king is poor, these are the colours he wears."
The central shaft was fitted back into place.
The first time they opened it, one rib sprang out.
All three stepped back.
The boy laughed.
The second time Karim tightened the wire further.
Shivnath wound thread around the knot.
Jagdish held the shaft steady.
The umbrella opened fully.
This time it was crooked, but it remained open.
All three looked upward.
No water came through the cloth.
One drop fell from the corner of the blue patch.
Shivnath pressed the spot with his finger.
"One more stitch here."
The stitch was added.
All three moved beneath the umbrella.
The first problem became clear at once.
The umbrella was large for one person, but small for three.
Jagdish said -
"Now we need to form an association."
Karim asked -
"Why an association?"
"Because one umbrella cannot be run by three owners without rules."

Shivnath said -
“First rule - I shall walk in the middle.”
“Why should you be in the middle?”
“The cloth is mine.”
Karim immediately said -
“The ribs are mine. I should be in the middle.”
Jagdish seized the handle.
“The handle is mine, so the umbrella stays in my hand.”
For a few moments the three stared at one another.
Then the umbrella was closed.
The rain was still falling.
The boy laughed again.
Shivnath said -
“All right. The umbrella belongs to no one.”
Karim asked -
“Then?”
“It belongs to the association.”
Jagdish immediately made a rule -
“Whoever holds it will not walk in the middle.”
Karim said -
“What sort of justice is that?”
“His hand will already be raised. Walking at the side will be difficult enough.”
The rule was accepted.
Jagdish held the umbrella.
Shivnath walked on the right.
Karim on the left.
For the first ten steps everything went well.
On the eleventh, Shivnath shifted right to avoid a drain.
The umbrella moved right with him.
Karim’s armpit was drenched.
He cried -
“Bias in the association!”
Jagdish brought the umbrella back to the middle.
At the next bend Karim moved left to avoid a pothole.
This time Shivnath’s back was soaked.
Shivnath said -
“Has the government of the association changed?”
The three went on laughing.
On the way they came to the awning of a medicine shop.
They stopped there and inspected the umbrella.
The blue patch was sound.

The wire was sound.

The shaft was sound.

Only the three owners were wet.

Karim said -

"The umbrella is a success. The owners are still in training."

Jagdish proposed -

"The handle should change hands every two steps."

Shivnath said -

"At two steps each, will we reach home or reach dawn?"

In the end they settled on twenty steps apiece.

Jagdish began counting.

At twenty the umbrella passed to Karim.

At the next twenty it passed to Shivnath.

Now the three began walking at the same pace.

No one had the freedom to hurry ahead.

No one had the freedom to fall behind either.

Jagdish's house came first.

He stopped at his door.

Karim was holding the umbrella then.

Jagdish asked -

"And now, what about my share?"

Still holding the shaft, Karim said -

"Shall we take the rod out?"

The three fell silent.

Then Jagdish laughed.

"No. We are not breaking up the association."

He brought an old sack from inside the house.

He wiped the wet cloth of the umbrella.

Then he said -

"If it rains tomorrow, come and take it from my house."

Shivnath asked -

"And if I need it first?"

Jagdish thought for a moment.

"Then whistle."

Karim said -

"Will we hear a whistle from a kos and a half away?"

"Then come running."

Shivnath said -

"The rules of the association are still incomplete."

The three laughed again.

Karim and Shivnath went on with the umbrella.

Now there were only two people.

All at once the umbrella seemed very large.

Karim said -

"One member fewer, and the convenience has increased."

Shivnath said -

"Do not tell Jagdish that."

Karim's house lay beyond the bridge.

When Karim was handing the umbrella to Shivnath there, his hand paused.

"What if a rib comes loose tomorrow?"

"I will bring it to you."

"And if the cloth tears?"

"I will sew it."

"The shaft?"

Both said together -

"Jagdish!"

The rain had eased a little.

Shivnath walked on alone with the umbrella.

Now he could remain completely dry beneath it.

But after five steps he stopped.

He looked at the blue patch.

Then at the handle.

Then at the knot of wire.

The umbrella was in his hand, but it was not wholly his.

For no particular reason, he smiled.

The next morning the sky was clear.

The three met again at the crossroads.

Shivnath had brought the umbrella with him.

Jagdish looked up at the blue sky.

"Where is the rain today?"

Shivnath said -

"This is the first meeting of the association."

Karim asked -

"The subject?"

Shivnath opened the umbrella.

"The account of the repairs."

The three sat not beneath the umbrella, but around it.

Shivnath said -

"The cloth - mine."

Karim -

"The ribs - mine."

Jagdish -

"The shaft - mine."

After a moment Karim asked -

“Then whose umbrella is it?”

Jagdish answered -

“Whoever the rain is falling on.”

Shivnath nodded.

“And if the rain is falling on all three?”

Karim lifted the umbrella.

“Twenty steps each.”

The three laughed.

It did not rain that day.

Even so, the green-and-blue umbrella remained hanging at the crossroads until evening.

People kept asking -

“Whose umbrella is that?”

The three gave the same answer in different words -

“Not mine.”

“Not his.”

“The association’s.”

And when the rain came again, before opening the umbrella they did not count anyone’s share.

They only looked to see whose armpit would get wet first.

STORY 117

The Forgetful Lover

Nandu had enormous faith in his memory.

So much faith that he considered writing anything down on paper almost an insult.

One day Madhuri had asked with a laugh -

“Do you remember my birthday?”

Nandu had answered at once -

“The seventeenth.”

Madhuri had raised an eyebrow.

“Did you say the seventeenth?”

“The seventeenth.”

“Say it again.”

“The seventeenth. Will the date change if I say it three times?”

Madhuri had burst out laughing.

“No. I only wanted to see how confident you were.”

Nandu had taken that laughter for agreement.

The truth was that Madhuri had said -

“The twenty-seventh.”

At that very moment a cart loaded with sacks of paddy had rattled past along the road.

Nandu had heard half the word.

The other half he had supplied from his own confidence.

From then on, the date had settled in his mind like a stone - the seventeenth.

He worked at a bicycle-repair shop in the market.

All day, among bells, wires, screws and air pumps, his hands grew black with grease.

Madhuri was learning sewing in the adjoining lane.

They usually met in the evening at the bend near the pond.

Their conversations were never long.

“A lot of work today?”

“Yes, a lot.”

“Everyone at home well?”

“Everyone at home is well.”

“Shall we meet tomorrow?”

“If you don't forget the date.”

Madhuri always said that last sentence jokingly.

Nandu took it as a challenge.

The seventeenth was drawing near.

Three weeks in advance, Nandu began saving.

Tea once a day instead of twice.

Half his usual roasted gram.

On two evenings he walked home instead of taking a bicycle ride.

Five rupees here, two rupees there - he kept putting coins aside.

He did not want to buy a grand gift.

A grand gift was beyond both his pocket and his nature.

Madhuri had once said -

“I like things that can be put to use.”

Nandu thought for a long time.

In the end he bought a small, thick-covered notebook from the stationery shop.

Madhuri was learning sewing; she could use it to note measurements, thread and cloth accounts.

The shopkeeper asked -

“A gift?”

Nandu gave a brief answer -

“For keeping accounts.”

The shopkeeper looked at him.

“Can an account book be a gift?”

Nandu replied -

“When the pocket is small, every object changes its name.”

The shopkeeper laughed.

Nandu wrapped the notebook in old newspaper.

Then he thought - only a notebook for a birthday?

That evening he bought two jalebis as well.

He felt tempted to make it three.

After hearing the price, he returned to two.

On the evening of the seventeenth, he tried to finish work early.

The shop owner asked -

“Why such a hurry?”

As he pumped air into a tyre, Nandu said -

“Today is an important date.”

The owner smiled.

“Is the date important, or the person?”

Nandu did not answer.

He thought the owner was growing old.

He tucked the notebook under his arm, placed the jalebis in a leaf bowl and set off towards Madhuri's lane.

Twice on the way he opened the bowl to check.
 The jalebis were safe.
 He felt like opening it a third time, but restrained himself.
 When he reached Madhuri's courtyard, there was no sign of celebration.
 No lamps.
 No aroma of festive food.
 No new clothes.
 Madhuri's mother was sitting in the courtyard, sorting lentils.
 Madhuri sat on the veranda sewing buttons onto a half-finished kurti.
 Nandu stopped at the gate.
 Madhuri looked up.
 "So you've come?"
 Nandu became solemn.
 "Yes, I have."
 "Why are you making such a face?"
 "First close your eyes."
 Madhuri stopped her needle.
 "Why should I close my eyes?"
 "Just close them."
 Madhuri's mother kept sorting lentils and watching them both.
 Madhuri closed her eyes.
 Nandu placed the newspaper parcel in front of her.
 Then, very softly, he said -
 "Many, many happy returns of your birthday."
 Madhuri opened her eyes.
 First she looked at Nandu.
 Then at the parcel.
 Then at her mother.
 Then at the sky.
 Seeing where she was looking, Nandu asked -
 "What happened?"
 Madhuri said -
 "What date is it today?"
 Nandu smiled.
 He was prepared for this question.
 "The seventeenth."
 "Certain?"
 "Absolutely certain."
 Madhuri stuck the needle into the cloth.
 "My birthday is on the twenty-seventh."
 For a moment the leaf bowl of jalebis grew heavy in Nandu's hand.
 "Did you say the twenty-seventh?"

"The twenty-seventh."

"Say it again."

"The twenty-seventh. Will the date change if I say it three times?"

Madhuri's mother laughed so loudly that two lentils fell from her lap.

Nandu forgot his reply.

Madhuri too struggled to contain her laughter.

At last Nandu said -

"You told me the seventeenth before."

"I told you the twenty-seventh."

"No, the seventeenth."

"Yes, the twenty-seventh."

"I remember it perfectly."

"You remember it perfectly wrong."

Nandu immediately collected himself.

"Wrong?"

Madhuri smiled.

"Yes, wrong."

Nandu sat down at the edge of the courtyard.

All at once he remembered his savings, the evenings he had walked home,
the half-portions of roasted gram.

Madhuri picked up the parcel.

"Shall I open it?"

Nandu said gloomily -

"Ten days from now."

"Will the newspaper hold the birthday back for ten days?"

"The date is wrong."

"What fault is that of the gift?"

Madhuri's mother added -

"Or of the jalebis?"

All three looked at the jalebis.

Nandu said slowly -

"Jalebis cannot read dates."

Madhuri's mother laughed again.

The two jalebis were divided into three portions.

Nandu was exceedingly careful while dividing them.

Madhuri asked -

"Where was all this care when you were remembering the date?"

Looking at the jalebi, Nandu replied -

"The sweet was in front of my eyes."

"Wasn't I?"

"You were. But you were talking."

"So?"

“Words move when people speak.”
 Madhuri’s mother said -
 “And your ears remain still?”
 Nandu conceded defeat.
 The jalebis were finished.
 Madhuri opened the parcel.
 When she saw the thick-covered notebook, her laughter softened.
 She opened the first page.
 It was blank.
 “You haven’t written anything?”
 Looking at the page, Nandu said -
 “I thought you should write the first page.”
 Madhuri took a pencil from her sewing box.
 On the first page she wrote -
 “Seventeenth - Nandu’s memory.”
 Underneath it -
 “Twenty-seventh - my birthday.”
 Nandu looked at the page and turned his face away.
 “Will that remain there for ten years?”
 “The cover is thick.”
 “Tear out the page.”
 “I will never tear out this page.”
 Nandu got to his feet.
 Madhuri asked -
 “Will you come again ten days from now?”
 As he rose, Nandu said -
 “We’ll see.”
 “Write down the date.”
 “No. I won’t write it down.”
 “Then what will you do?”
 Nandu tapped his temple.
 “This time it is sitting here.”
 Madhuri’s mother said -
 “The seventeenth was sitting there too.”
 Nandu left without replying.
 The next ten days felt unusually long to him.
 Now and then the shop owner would ask -
 “Is the important date coming again?”
 Amid the clinking of screws, Nandu would say -
 “There was only one date. I reached the wrong bend first.”
 The owner repeated -
 “The wrong bend.”

Nandu narrowed his eyes.

“Has everyone heard about it?”

Tightening a screw, the owner said -

“Secrets grow wings in a market.”

This time Nandu bought no gift.

No sweets.

No flowers.

He decided that since the birthday had already been celebrated once, there would be no second expense.

But on the morning of the twenty-seventh, he woke very early.

He asked no one to confirm the date.

He looked at the wall calendar three times.

27.

He touched the number with his finger.

Then laughed at himself.

In the evening he reached Madhuri's courtyard.

His hands were empty.

Madhuri was already standing at the gate.

She looked at Nandu's hands.

“Nothing in your hands?”

“Already given.”

“Jalebis?”

“Already eaten.”

“Birthday wishes?”

Nandu was silent for a moment.

Then he said -

“Today is the twenty-seventh.”

Madhuri waited.

Nandu continued -

“And today is your birthday.”

Madhuri asked -

“Certain?”

Nandu nodded.

“This time even the calendar is on my side.”

Madhuri laughed.

She went inside and brought out the same thick-covered notebook.

She opened the first page.

The two lines were still there.

Seventeenth - Nandu's memory.

Twenty-seventh - my birthday.

Madhuri wrote a third line -

“Twenty-seventh - Nandu on time the second time.”

The moment Nandu read it, he protested -
 "Why the second time? The first time I was ten days early."

"What kind of time was that?"

"Advance."

"Then will you come in advance next year too?"

Nandu made a grave show of thinking.

"This time I have learned from experience."

"What did experience teach you?"

"Remembering a birthday is not difficult."

"Then what is difficult?"

"Remembering the date is difficult."

From inside, Madhuri's mother called -

"Both of you come in. The kheer is getting cold."

At the word kheer, Nandu stopped short.

"Kheer?"

Madhuri said -

"It's a birthday."

Nandu asked softly -

"Really?"

Madhuri stared at him.

Nandu immediately folded his hands.

"Just checking."

That evening Nandu ate two bowls of kheer.

The first was for the birthday.

The second was not punishment for his mistake on the seventeenth, but its reward.

On his way home, he thought of buying a calendar.

Then abandoned the idea.

It seemed to him that the first page of the thick-covered notebook was more trustworthy than any calendar.

The next day Madhuri wrote one more line in small letters in the corner of that page -

"Next year, ask first."

When Nandu read it, he objected -

"So much verification in love?"

Madhuri said -

"Let the love be right. Just get the date right."

This time Nandu did not argue.

He closed the notebook.

Then he asked Madhuri -

"What day of the week will the twenty-seventh fall on next year?"

Madhuri glared at him.

Nandu laughed.

“All right. I’m writing it down from now.”

STORY 118

The Barber Who Charged Nothing

Mangal the barber's shop stood at the turn beneath the peepal tree.

To call it a shop was itself an act of generosity.

Three reed screens, a tin awning, an old mirror, and in the middle a heavy chair painted blue.

The chair's right arm was a little loose.

Mangal used to say -

"The chair is loose, not my hand."

He laughed harder at that line than anyone else.

That afternoon Dhiru arrived at the shop.

His hair had puffed out so wildly that it looked as though, for the past two months, a comb had done no more than salute it from a distance.

The moment Mangal saw him, he laid his scissors on the table.

"Come, prince."

Dhiru looked into the mirror and touched his head.

"The prince's crown has grown a little too large."

"Not a crown. Neglect."

"There's a feast at home tomorrow. Cut it short."

Mangal slapped the chair.

"Sit."

Dhiru felt his pocket.

"Tell me the price first."

Mangal's eyebrows rose.

"For you?"

"Yes, for me. I've come from the city. I'll pay."

"Did friendship go out on rent the moment you came back from the city?"

Dhiru laughed.

"If you cut it for free, you'll only cut half."

Mangal's face turned serious at once.

"Don't say that again."

"Why ever not?"

"Cutting without payment is one thing. Cutting badly is an insult to me."

Dhiru sat in the chair.

Mangal wrapped an old, freshly washed gamchha around his neck.

"How short?"

"Just enough for me to look human."

"What do you look like now?"

"A thicket."

"Even a thicket has a design."

Dhiru watched him in the mirror.

"Master barber, are you cutting hair or surveying a field?"

Parting the hair down the middle with his comb, Mangal said -

"Your head is harder than a field."

"Why so difficult?"

"Two whorls."

"Are the whorls in my hair or in my fate?"

"In both. But I'll manage the ones in the hair."

This was where Mangal's pride began.

If anyone in the village asked, "Who cut your hair?" and the answer was "Mangal," he remained pleased for two days.

If anyone said, "It's all right," he slept badly that night.

"All right" sounded almost like abuse to him.

He wanted people to say -

"The man who cut this knew the head."

Mangal lifted the hair above Dhiru's right ear.

There was a small old scar there.

"Still there."

Dhiru laughed.

"Because of you."

"Because of me?"

"I was eight. You had made a bamboo sword by the pond. I was the king. The sword struck me."

Mangal stopped his scissors.

"Liar. You fell on your own."

"A king does not fall. The commander is at fault."

"The commander is a barber now. Keep quiet."

The scissors began again.

Snip-snip.

Snip-snip.

After a while Dhiru asked -

"Why so slowly?"

"Shall I hurry over your head?"

"The hair will grow again."

"But what is cut today will be discussed tomorrow."

"You have great faith in your art."

"Not faith. Experience."

"The difference?"

“Faith can exist before you’ve cut anything. Experience comes from cutting and cutting.”

Just then Rambabu came hurrying into the shop.

“Mangal! I’m in a hurry. Cut my hair short in ten minutes. I’ll pay double.”

Mangal had Dhiru’s left-side hair caught in the comb.

“It’ll take half an hour.”

Rambabu looked at the chair.

“That’s only Dhiru. Get him up. Take me first.”

Dhiru made as if to rise.

“I can wait.”

Mangal pressed his shoulder down.

“Sit.”

Rambabu said -

“Double payment.”

Mangal replied calmly -

“There is one chair. Three heads won’t make a second chair grow.”

“Will he pay?”

“No. He won’t.”

Rambabu stared at Dhiru in surprise.

“He won’t?”

“He’s a friend.”

“Then cut mine first. I’m a paying customer.”

Mangal looked at Rambabu’s reflection in the mirror.

“Money does not change the order of heads.”

Rambabu pulled a face and left.

Dhiru said quietly -

“You let double payment walk away.”

“Leave your head half cut and take another man’s money? Then people will say Mangal’s art looks at the price.”

“You worry a great deal about what people will say.”

“Not people. What my scissors will say.”

Dhiru laughed.

“Do scissors speak?”

“When they see a badly cut head, they say - shame.”

Mangal went back to work.

He did not cut the right side too short.

The left side he cut a little shorter.

The moment Dhiru saw it in the mirror, he started.

“Hey! The two sides aren’t equal.”

Mangal’s expression became that of a scholar who has just been told there is an error in his book.

“Equal length does not give every head an equal shape.”

“Is that the barber’s defence?”

“Quiet. There is a scar above this ear. On that side the whorl rises the other way. If I leave both sides the same length, the scar will show and the hair will stand up.”

Dhiru tried to turn his neck.

Mangal straightened his head again.

“Don’t move.”

“I want to see.”

“Look at the end. You don’t put a singer on trial after hearing half a song.”

Two children stopped outside the shop.

One whispered to the other -

“Mangal Kaka is giving a lecture again.”

Without turning, Mangal said -

“Listen. It’s free.”

The children burst out laughing.

An old woman was passing nearby, holding her grandson’s hand.

She stopped and called -

“Mangal barber, cut Monu’s hair this evening.”

Mangal answered at once -

“Bring him, Kaki. This time I won’t cut his ear.”

The old woman laughed.

“You didn’t cut his ear last time either. Why do you praise yourself?”

“Other people take too long to do it.”

Dhiru said -

“You hear that? The disease is old.”

Mangal tapped his head with the comb.

“Customer, quiet.”

“I’m a non-paying customer.”

“All the more reason to be quiet.”

The scissors started again.

Every so often Mangal took two steps back to inspect Dhiru’s head.

Sometimes from the right.

Sometimes from the left.

Once he even stepped outside the shop and looked from beneath the peepal tree.

Dhiru shouted -

“Where have you gone?”

“I’m looking at the shape from a distance.”

“Am I a statue?”

“Still unfinished.”

Dhiru could not hold back his laughter.

Mangal came in again.

He sprinkled a little water on the hair.
 It settled.
 Then he ruffled it with his hand.
 The whorl on the right rose, but the scar above the ear remained covered.
 Mangal said triumphantly -
 "See?"
 "See what?"
 "This."
 "What about it?"
 "Art."
 "All I can see is hair."
 "Your vision is ordinary."
 Dhiru tried to free one hand from beneath the gamchha.
 "Give me the scissors once. I'll make your vision extraordinary."
 Laughing, Mangal stepped back.
 "Hands inside."
 He trimmed the hair at the back of the neck with great care.
 He cleaned the edge with a razor.
 Then he lifted the hair at the front with a small comb.
 "How much here?"
 Dhiru said -
 "Whatever looks right to you."
 Mangal stopped.
 "Wisdom at last."
 "No. I'm tired."
 Mangal laughed again.
 When the work was finished, he removed the gamchha and brushed Dhiru's
 shoulders clean.
 Then he handed him the mirror.
 "Look."
 Dhiru looked straight ahead.
 Then to the right.
 Then to the left.
 Mangal held a second, smaller mirror behind him.
 "The back too."
 Dhiru remained silent for a long while.
 On Mangal's face, pride slowly began to turn into anxiety.
 "What are you thinking?"
 Dhiru lowered the mirror.
 "Nothing. Just looking."
 "What does 'nothing' mean?"
 "The hair is good."

Mangal wrinkled his nose.

“Good?”

“Yes, good.”

“Only good?”

Dhiru had decided to tease him a little.

“All right.”

Mangal almost snatched the mirror from his hand.

“Get up. Sit down again.”

“Why again?”

“‘All right’ does not leave my shop.”

Dhiru doubled over laughing.

“Come on, I was joking!”

“Joke when the hair grows back.”

Mangal snipped two or three more hairs near his temple.

Then stepped back and inspected him.

“Now say.”

Dhiru put on a solemn face.

“Magnificent.”

Mangal was satisfied.

“That word has weight.”

Dhiru took a note from his pocket.

Mangal drew his hand back.

“Keep it.”

“You did the work.”

“I cut a friend’s hair.”

“Did the scissors work for free?”

“My scissors don’t ask me for wages.”

“Oil, water, time?”

“There is still the account of those mangoes we stole together by the pond.”

“You ate half the mangoes yourself.”

“Then should I cut only half your hair?”

Both laughed again.

Dhiru put the note back in his pocket.

As he was leaving the shop, his eyes fell on the loose arm of the chair.

Dhiru knew carpentry work.

He bent down and examined the joint.

“What’s happened here?”

“Leave it. It works.”

“How many more days will you keep giving that speech - the chair is loose, not my hand?”

Dhiru took a small screwdriver from his bag.

Mangal stared.

“You always carry that in your bag?”
 “I’m a carpenter’s son. Why shouldn’t I take pride in my craft like you?”
 In two minutes the arm was tight.
 Mangal kept pretending to stop him.
 “This is payment.”
 Dhiru straightened and said -
 “No. I tightened a friend’s chair.”
 Mangal looked at him for a moment.
 Then smiled.
 “All right, then the account is not even.”
 “Why not?”
 “Half an hour to cut your hair. Two minutes to tighten the arm.”
 “Your art is expensive?”
 “You were the one who said ‘magnificent’ had weight.”
 Dhiru started away.
 When he reached the peepal tree, he ran his hand over his head again.
 The whorl on the right really was lying flat.
 The scar did not show.
 He turned and shouted -
 “Mangal!”
 “What are you shouting from back there?”
 “It’s a little above all right.”
 Mangal pretended to pick up the broom from inside the shop.
 “Get out of here!”
 The next morning Rambabu came again.
 This time he was in no hurry.
 As he sat in the chair, he asked -
 “You cut Dhiru’s hair?”
 Mangal picked up the comb.
 “Why do you ask?”
 “It looks good.”
 Mangal’s face lit up.
 But at once he became serious again.
 “Good?”
 Rambabu did not understand.
 “Yes, very good.”
 “Say magnificent.”
 “Say what?”
 “Nothing. Keep your head straight.”
 Just then the old woman from the previous day arrived with Monu.
 “Mangal barber, don’t cut the child’s hair too short.”
 Mangal looked at Monu’s head.

“First let me understand this whorl.”

Dhiru happened to be passing along the road.

He heard this and laughed from a distance.

The moment Mangal saw him, he called -

“Hey, non-paying customer! Don’t stop here. You lower the shop’s prestige.”

Dhiru called back -

“I’m going. But Monu, be careful! This barber cuts less hair and gives more philosophy.”

Holding his grandmother’s hand, Monu asked -

“Dadi, does philosophy cost extra?”

The old woman replied -

“From Mangal barber? He gives it without being asked.”

The shop filled with laughter.

Mangal opened his scissors.

Snip-snip.

“Laugh, laugh. But don’t move your head.”

STORY 119

Grandmother's Mobile Phone

Dhanwanti Dadi had owned the device for two years, but by her reckoning it was still new.

"It simply refuses to make sense to me," she would say.

Her granddaughter Anima laughed.

"Why should the device understand you, Dadi? You understand it."

Dadi pushed her spectacles higher and peered at the screen.

Round icons were scattered across it.

One held a camera, another a bell, another a green circle.

To Dadi, all the icons were like distant relatives from the same family - their faces looked familiar, but their names would not stay in her memory.

Anima spent three days teaching her.

"Press this green icon and you can talk."

"And the red one?"

"That ends the call."

"Then if I press the red one first, there will be no bother at all."

Anima doubled over with laughter.

On the fourth day, Dadi pressed the camera icon instead of the green one.

She was startled to see her own face on the screen.

"Who put my face inside this little box?"

The whole house burst into laughter again.

The device was difficult for her; the family was not.

Who had taken offence, who had left a sentence unfinished, who said "I am fine" while not being fine at all - Dhanwanti Dadi understood all of that without pressing a single icon.

She had three children.

Her eldest son, Raghunath, lived in the village itself.

Her younger son, Devkinandan, worked in Muzaffarpur.

Her daughter Malati was married into a family near Madhubani.

The grandchildren studied or earned their living in different places.

Earlier, everyone came home and then brought news.

Now the news arrived by telephone first; the people came later.

Dadi's device had become the family's new chaupal.

The first call in the morning was usually Malati's.

"Ma, did you sleep well?"

"I did."

"Has Raghu Bhai gone to the fields?"

"Yes."

"Did Devki call?"

"He called yesterday."

By then Malati's questions about her two brothers had already outnumbered the questions about herself.

Dadi kept count in her mind.

In the afternoon, Devkinandan would call.

"Ma, did you take your medicine on time?"

"I did."

"Is Malati coming?"

"She said next month."

"What is Raghu Bhai doing?"

Dadi counted again in her mind.

In the evening Raghunath would sit in the courtyard.

He did not call, because his mother was right there in front of him.

But even he would ask -

"Did Malati call?"

"Yes."

"What did Devki say?"

Dadi would then smile as she sliced betel nut.

"Why do all of you ask me for news of one another?"

Wiping his face with his gamchha, Raghunath would say -

"Just asking."

Devki would say -

"I don't get the time, Ma."

Malati would say -

"They must be busy."

To Dadi, "just asking," "no time," and "busy" were three names for the same illness.

It was not a serious illness.

But it was an old one.

Six months earlier, Devki had arrived late for Babuji's death anniversary.

Raghunath had said something.

Devki had answered.

Malati had stepped between them.

The matter itself had not been large.

The voices had grown large.

After that the three siblings still spoke, but less often directly to one another.

Dadi had become the bridge between them.

She did not object to being a bridge.

But it amused her that all of them knew how to operate the device, yet their hands somehow grew heavy when it came to pressing one another's numbers.

One day Anima added photographs beside every family member's name on Dadi's phone.

"Now you won't need to read the names."

Dadi looked at the screen.

In Raghunath's photograph his eyes were half closed.

In Devkinandan's photograph half an ear had been cut off.

In Malati's photograph a red wedding curtain showed in the background.

Dadi said -

"I don't need this device to recognise these three."

"It will make things easier."

"Ease is what you people need."

Anima did not understand.

Dadi did not explain.

A small brass bowl always stood beside Dadi's cot.

Inside it lay six small pieces of betel nut.

One day Anima asked -

"What are these for?"

"For counting."

"Counting what?"

"Not who called."

"Then what?"

"Who called and then asked about whom."

Anima thought Dadi was joking.

But Dadi truly kept count.

If Malati called and asked about Raghunath, one piece of betel nut moved to the right.

If Devki called and asked about Malati, a second piece joined it.

If Raghunath asked about Devki's son Sonu's examination, a third piece moved across.

By evening a little map would have formed inside the bowl.

Anima laughed.

"Dadi, the phone keeps a record of calls."

"What does it tell you?"

"Who called, how many times, and how long the call lasted."

Dadi picked up one piece of betel nut.

"Does it tell you that Malati asked your father's name three times?"

Anima fell silent.

"Does it tell you that Devki first asked about my medicine, and then about Raghu's knee pain?"

Anima looked at the device.

Dadi smiled.

"This little box counts numbers. I count the breath behind the names."

Anima liked the sentence.

She immediately thought of writing it down.

But the moment Dadi's eyes fell on her, she put the device aside.

"Not everything is meant to be written down," Dadi said.

A week later a small thing happened in the house.

The charging cable of Dadi's phone became loose.

The device worked until noon.

Then the screen went dark.

Dadi pressed it three times.

No green icon, no red icon, not even her own face.

"Dead?" she asked.

Anima had gone to college.

Raghunath was in the fields.

Dadi placed the device on the cot.

"Rest."

At half past two Malati tried calling.

The phone was off.

At three she tried again.

The phone was still off.

Malati first called Anima.

Anima was in class and did not answer.

Malati paused for a moment.

Then she pressed Raghunath's number.

It was the first time in six months that she had called him directly without any pretext.

Standing on the ridge of a field, Raghunath pressed the green icon.

"Yes, Malati?"

For two moments there was silence at both ends.

"Ma's phone is off."

"I'm in the field. I'm going home now."

"See if she's all right."

"She'll be fine. The cable must be loose."

"Call me when you reach."

"I will."

The call ended.

Malati remained sitting with the phone in her hand for a while.

A little later she pressed Devki's number.

"Did you get through to Ma?"

Devki said -

"I tried twice. It's switched off. I'll call Raghu Bhai."

Malati said -
 "I just spoke to him."
 Devki was silent for a moment.
 "What did he say?"
 "He's on his way home from the fields."
 "All right. Let me know."
 Malati smiled.
 "Why should I? You can ask Raghu Bhai yourself."
 Devki's laugh was faint at first, then clear.
 "You're right."
 Dadi knew nothing of any of this.
 She was shelling peas in the courtyard.
 Raghunath arrived out of breath.
 "Ma!"
 Dadi looked up.
 "What happened?"
 "Your phone is switched off."
 "So?"
 "Everyone is worried."
 Dadi dropped another pea into the bowl.
 "The device stopped. I didn't."
 Raghunath laughed.
 The cable really was loose.
 He pressed the old connection into place and plugged the phone in.
 Ten minutes later the screen lit up again.
 At once the phone rang.
 It was Devki.
 Raghunath held the phone out to Dadi.
 Dadi drew her hand back.
 "You talk first."
 "Me?"
 "Press the green one. That's as much as I know too."
 Smiling, Raghunath put the phone to his ear.
 "Yes, Devki."
 Dadi went on shelling peas.
 The two brothers first spoke about the phone cable.
 Then about their mother's medicine.
 Then about water in the fields.
 Then about Sonu's examination.
 The call lasted five minutes.
 Dadi did not look at the call duration.
 She listened to the weight in their voices.

After many days, each brother waited for the other to finish his sentence.
In the evening Malati called.
This time Dadi pressed the correct icon on the first attempt.
“Ma, are you all right?”
“I was all right from the beginning.”
“And the phone?”
“That has come back to life too.”
Malati laughed.
Dadi asked -
“Did you speak to Raghu?”
“Yes.”
“To Devki?”
“Yes.”
Dadi looked at the bowl.
That day there had been no need to move a single piece of betel nut.
“What is it, Ma?”
“Nothing.”
Dadi put a piece of betel nut into her mouth.
“My phone did very good work today.”
Malati said -
“By being switched off?”
“Yes.”
They both laughed.
When Anima returned at night, she replaced the charging cable.
The new cable gleamed.
Then she sat down to teach Dadi again.
“Look, this is contact, this is message, this is video -”
Dadi raised a hand.
“One lesson a day.”
“What did you learn today?”
Dadi picked up the phone.
She tried to open the screen.
She pressed the wrong icon.
Her own face appeared on the screen again.
Dadi smiled at her image.
“I learned that this little box can connect everyone.”
Anima looked pleased.
Dadi went on -
“But sometimes it must also know how to stay quiet.”
Anima laughed.
The next morning the phone rang again.
Dadi searched for the green icon.

By mistake she pressed the volume-down button.

She shouted -

“Whoever you are, speak loudly!”

Devki was laughing at the other end.

“Ma, it’s me.”

Dadi breathed easier.

“Good. Did you speak to Raghu yesterday?”

Devki said -

“This morning. He called me himself.”

Dadi looked at the betel-nut bowl.

It was empty.

She set the phone aside.

“Then why are you asking me? Tell me your own news.”

STORY 120

One Plate of Pakoras

The rain had stopped, but the tin roof at Harinagar Chowk was still counting drops.

In front of Ramcharit's tea stall, water had gathered into little pools.

Stepping across those pools one by one, five friends came inside.

Jamal first.

Nawal behind him.

Then Bhola.

Chandan entered while shaking the water from his slippers.

Raghuvir came last, the hem of his dhoti wet up to the knees.

The five friends had a rule: after the Wednesday market ended, they would sit for half an hour at Ramcharit's stall.

Whether someone's trade had gone well or badly, the rule did not change.

Ramcharit set down five glasses of tea.

The smell of gram-flour batter rose from the pan of hot oil.

Bhola flared his nostrils.

"Ramcharit, that smell is designed to ruin friendships."

Ramcharit smiled.

"If friendship is that weak, what fault is it of the pakoras?"

Nawal looked towards the pan.

"Give us one plate."

"Only one?" Jamal asked.

"One first. Let the stomachs convene their meeting."

Ramcharit lifted hot pakoras from the oil and placed them on an old brass-coloured plate.

He sprinkled salt and chilli over them.

Beside them he set a small bowl of coriander chutney.

The plate came to the middle of the table.

Chandan counted at once.

"Eleven."

Ramcharit glared at him.

"Eat the pakoras. Don't conduct a census."

Bhola laughed.

"Five men and eleven pakoras. This isn't arithmetic, it's a crisis."

Raghuvir picked up the first pakora.

"This is how a crisis is reduced."

Each of them took one.
 The bowl of chutney went round five times.
 The pairing of cool air after rain and hot pakoras was such that all five fell silent for a few moments.
 From a distance Ramcharit said -
 "See? Gram flour accomplishes more than philosophy."
 Jamal picked up a second pakora.
 "So far, equality prevails."
 The second round was completed as well.
 Ten pakoras were gone.
 One remained on the plate.
 It was nicely round.
 Its edge was crisp and well browned.
 A drop of chutney clung beside it.
 All five looked at it.
 No one reached out a hand.
 Ramcharit went on washing cups, smiling to himself.
 Bhola said -
 "Friendship will break over this one."
 Jamal replied -
 "If it breaks, it will break cheaply. One pakora isn't worth even five annas."
 Chandan said -
 "It isn't a question of price. It's a question of justice."
 Nawal stopped him.
 "Your school has opened again."
 Chandan grew serious.
 "All right. Whoever is hungriest should eat it."
 The five looked at one another.
 No one wished to admit to being hungry.
 Raghuvir placed a hand on his stomach and said -
 "Two have filled me up."
 Bhola said at once -
 "Me too."
 Jamal looked at Bhola's stomach.
 "Your stomach and your word have been old enemies."
 Laughter broke out.
 Nawal said -
 "Let's try another method. It goes to whoever earned the least today."
 Bhola shook his head.
 "Then this won't be friendship; it'll be a market audit."
 Chandan offered another proposal -
 "Whoever is oldest should get it."

Raghuvir started.

"I'm seven months older than you, not so ancient that I need a charity pakora."

Ramcharit laughed again.

"The plate is growing cold; justice is growing hot."

Jamal put down his glass.

"Let's do one thing."

"What?"

"This pakora will be eaten by the one who carries the greatest debt of friendship."

Bhola frowned.

"The one who owes the debt, or the one who gave the favour?"

Jamal fell into thought.

"Now that is a difficult question."

Chandan said at once -

"The one who gave has the right."

Raghuvir laughed.

"Then everyone will open his account book."

Nawal pulled the plate towards himself, but did not take the pakora.

"I'll begin."

He looked at Jamal.

"This pakora belongs to Jamal."

Jamal was startled.

"Why mine?"

"Two years ago the belt of my sewing machine snapped at night."

"So?"

"I had to deliver twenty school uniforms in the morning."

"So?"

"You shut your bicycle shop and spent half the night repairing the belt."

Jamal brushed it aside with a wave.

"That wasn't a debt. The following week you stitched the torn pocket of my kurta."

Nawal said -

"Stitching a pocket took five minutes. Saving the machine took three hours."

"Hours aren't counted in friendship."

"Then the pakora is yours."

Jamal pushed the plate towards Bhola.

"Not mine. Bhola will eat it."

Bhola immediately drew back his hand.

"Why has my name come into this?"

Jamal said -

"The time I had fever, for three mornings he left his own vegetables and went to open the lock of my shop."

Bhola wrinkled his nose.

"I opened the lock. I didn't repair bicycles."

"And who told the customers that Jamal wasn't dead, only down with fever?"

Everyone laughed.

Bhola smiled too.

"All right, but the pakora belongs to Chandan."

Chandan adjusted his spectacles.

"What crime have I committed now?"

Bhola said -

"My daughter Muniya couldn't understand multiplication."

"I taught her for a week."

"Two months."

"Half an hour in the evenings."

"And the fee?"

Chandan fell silent.

Bhola smiled.

"When I asked about payment, you said: first let Muniya recite the table of five without stumbling; then we'll talk."

Jamal asked -

"Did Muniya manage it?"

Bhola puffed out his chest.

"Now she can recite the table of seven too."

Chandan pushed the plate towards Raghuvir.

"Then this is Raghuvir's."

Raghuvir drew his head back.

"I present my defence in advance."

"Defence later," Chandan said.

"Last winter my father was in hospital."

Raghuvir's smile softened.

Chandan continued -

"At two in the morning we needed medicine."

"I live near the market, so I went."

"The shop was closed."

"I had another one opened."

"And you cycled three kos."

Raghuvir said quietly -

"You taught my brother's son before his examination. The account is square."

Chandan smiled.

"You have an old disease: you insist on balancing everything in friendship."

Raghuvir pushed the plate towards Nawal.

"Then Nawal will eat it."

Nawal laughed.

"I've already named Jamal."

Raghuvir said -

"When it's my turn to name someone, that's my right."

"Why?"

Raghuvir wrung the wet edge of his dhoti.

"Last monsoon my younger son's schoolbag tore."

Nawal said -

"That was sewing, not friendship."

"At ten at night?"

"He needed the bag in the morning."

"The fee?"

"Would I charge a child for mending his schoolbag?"

With a look of triumph, Raghuvir said -

"Then the pakora is Nawal's."

The plate had come back to Nawal.

For a moment all five were silent.

Then Jamal burst out laughing.

"What has happened here?"

Bhola traced a circle with his finger.

"Nawal to Jamal, Jamal to Bhola, Bhola to Chandan, Chandan to Raghuvir,
Raghuvir back to Nawal."

Chandan said -

"The circle of debts is complete."

Ramcharit left the cups and came over.

"In all this time the pakora has earned a degree."

Nawal made as if to pick it up.

Then he stopped his hand.

"Shall we cut it into five pieces?"

Jamal objected at once.

"Is this a pakora or a plot of land?"

Bhola said -

"If we cut it, more pieces will remain on the plate than get into the
chutney."

Raghuvir asked -

"Then what do we do?"

Chandan assumed a solemn expression.

"We need a ruling from the Friendship Commission."

Just then Ramcharit's eight-year-old daughter Gudiya came out from inside.

She carried five empty glasses in her hands.

She saw the lone pakora on the plate.

Then she looked at the five friends.

"Is no one going to eat that?"

All five answered together -

"A decision is in progress."

Gudiya thought for a moment.

"May I eat it?"

Everyone fell silent.

Ramcharit looked at his daughter.

"Ask first."

Gudiya asked again -

"May I?"

Jamal was the first to push the plate towards her.

"Yes, from my side."

Bhola said -

"From mine too."

Nawal, Chandan and Raghuvir agreed as well.

Gudiya picked up the pakora.

She dipped it in the chutney.

And ate it in two bites.

The five friends watched her.

Gudiya asked -

"Were you arguing all this time over that?"

Ramcharit burst out laughing.

The five friends laughed too.

Nawal said -

"Not arguing. Settling the accounts of friendship."

Gudiya picked up the empty plate.

"While you settle accounts, pakoras go cold."

She went back inside.

Jamal slapped his palm on the table.

"An eight-year-old girl turns out to be the wisest among us."

Bhola said -

"Not wise. Hungry."

Raghuvir smiled.

"And hunger keeps no accounts of friendship."

Chandan glared at him.

"Don't you start philosophising now."

Laughter rose again.

Ramcharit asked -
"Shall I bring another plate?"
The five looked at one another.
Nawal said -
"Bring it."
Jamal immediately added -
"But this time put only ten on the plate."
Ramcharit raised an eyebrow.
"And if there are eleven?"
Bhola said -
"The eleventh is Gudiya's share."
From inside came Gudiya's voice -
"Tell me beforehand!"
The shop filled with laughter again.
The second plate arrived.
Ramcharit had deliberately put eleven pakoras on it.
The five counted them.
This time no one argued.
The eleventh pakora was set aside at one edge of the plate.
Nawal called -
"Gudiya!"
From inside came the reply -
"Has the decision been made already?"
Jamal said -
"This time the decision was made in advance."
Gudiya came running.
She picked up the pakora.
As Ramcharit refilled the five friends' glasses, he said -
"Good. Friendship has been saved."
Blowing on his tea, Bhola said -
"Friendship was never in danger."
Chandan asked -
"Then what was in danger?"
Bhola looked at the empty plate.
"The eleventh pakora."
The five friends laughed once more.

STORY 121

A Pair of Slippers

From early Sunday morning in Bhadau, clouds had ringed the sky.

The rain had stopped, but the outer platform of the Shiva temple was still wet.

Near the gate, slippers lay in such a crowd that from a distance they looked like a mass of dark leaves.

Nandkishore had come to worship with his wife Vimla, their daughter Gudiya, and their young son Pintu.

They were travelling from the Saharsa side to his sister's house, and the temple lay on their way.

From the other direction, Rambilas Mandal had reached the temple with his wife Sita, his mother Kaushalya, and his son Sonu.

The two families had never seen each other before.

Outside the gate stood a long bench for shoes and slippers.

But the rain-soaked crowd was in a hurry, and everyone set down their footwear wherever they found space.

Nandkishore's slippers were black rubber.

Near the right strap there was a small repair stitched with blue thread.

Rambilas's slippers too were black rubber.

On the left sole was a small round mark made when he had once been lifting a sack of rice.

As she put down the slippers, Vimla said, "On the way back, everyone look carefully before putting on your own. There is a huge crowd."

Nandkishore laughed. "No one but me would ever take a liking to my slippers."

Pintu immediately said, "Then do you like them?"

Vimla burst out laughing.

Nandkishore pulled a face.

Meanwhile, Rambilas placed his slippers beside Nandkishore's.

Rambilas's mother Kaushalya carefully slid her old slippers with the red edging beneath the bench.

"If these disappear, I shall walk home barefoot," she said.

Sita said, "Who would take your slippers?"

Kaushalya laughed. "Someone very clever."

The temple bell rang.

Both families became absorbed in their own worship.

Outside, a light rain began again.
 People pressed closer beneath the awning.
 The mud in front of the slipper bench deepened.
 A few pairs were nudged by people's feet and slid into one another.
 As soon as the rain eased, the crowd surged outside once more.
 In his hurry, Nandkishore picked up a black pair of slippers.
 He did not notice the blue thread.
 In fact, the blue thread had been pressed beneath the wet strap.
 The pair he put on belonged to Rambilas.
 Rambilas too saw a black pair and slipped his feet into them.
 He had put on Nandkishore's slippers.
 The two pairs were almost the same size.
 So for the first few steps neither man suspected anything.
 Nandkishore's family took the road south.
 Rambilas's family headed north towards the bus stop.
 Pintu walked while looking back at the temple bell.

Gudiya caught his hand and said, "Look ahead, or you will end up sitting in the mud."

Nandkishore had gone barely ten or fifteen steps when something hard began to trouble his right foot.

He stopped.

"How did this strap become so stiff today?"

Vimla said, "The slippers are still wet. Come along."

They went on.

A little farther ahead, in front of a tea stall, Nandkishore stopped again.

He took off the slipper and looked at it.

"Where has my blue thread gone?"

Gudiya bent down at once.

"Babu, these are not your slippers."

Nandkishore turned one over and looked at the sole.

There was a small round mark.

Vimla said quietly, "You said, didn't you, that no one would ever like your slippers?"

Pintu said, "But you seem to have liked someone else's."

All four burst out laughing.

Nandkishore picked up the slippers in his hand.

"Come on, back to the temple."

By then, to the north, Rambilas too had slowed his pace.

His left slipper felt loose.

As they neared the bus stop, Sita said, "Why are you dragging your feet like that?"

Rambilas replied, "It feels as if my slippers grew larger overnight."

Sonu bent down to look.
 “Babu, the round mark on your sole is not there.”
 Rambilas took off the slippers.
 Near the right strap, the blue thread was peeping out.
 Sita put a hand to her forehead.
 Kaushalya laughed and said, “Whether you found the deity in the temple or not, your slippers are searching for their owner.”
 Rambilas too turned his family back towards the temple.
 By the gate, the crowd had thinned.
 Beside the bench, two barefoot pairs of feet arrived almost at the same moment, each waiting for the other.
 Nandkishore was carrying the slippers with the round mark.
 Rambilas held the pair with the blue thread.
 Each man looked at what the other was holding.
 Then each looked down at his own bare feet.
 For a moment there was silence.
 Pintu laughed first.
 Sonu burst out laughing too.
 Rambilas asked, “Was this round mark all set to travel to your house?”
 Nandkishore replied, “And this blue thread had set off to catch your bus.”
 They exchanged the slippers.
 Nandkishore breathed with relief when he saw the blue thread on his strap.
 Rambilas looked at the round mark on his sole.
 “Now I recognise the sign.”
 Vimla said, “The signs were there before too. Hurry had simply shut your eyes.”
 Sita said, “In a hurry, people mistake even their own things for someone else’s, and someone else’s for their own.”
 Kaushalya sat down on the platform.
 “First look for my red-edged pair. I hope those too have not gone off on pilgrimage somewhere.”
 Everyone laughed again.
 Kaushalya’s slippers were safe beneath the bench.
 She put them on and was greatly pleased.
 Just then the rain came down hard again.
 Both families were trapped beneath the temple’s outer tin awning.
 The rain was so dense that the peepal tree ahead looked blurred.
 Nandkishore shifted his family to one side.
 Rambilas too gathered his people a little closer.
 Pintu and Sonu stood in the middle.
 The two boys kept looking at each other’s feet.
 Sonu asked, “Are your babu’s slippers all right now?”

Pintu said, "Yes. But he walked straighter in someone else's."

Nandkishore heard him.

"Pintu!"

Everyone laughed again.

There was no sign of the rain stopping.

Kaushalya took a dry gamchha from her bag and laid it over her head.

Vimla asked, "Where are you all going?"

Sita said, "To the bus stop. We have to catch the bus towards Parasauni."

Nandkishore looked surprised.

"Parasauni? We too are going that way. My sister lives in Kharihani."

Rambilas said, "Then half our road is the same."

Gudiya asked, "Will we get the bus from here?"

Rambilas shook his head.

"Not today. They are filling the potholes on the road. The buses are being diverted past the old grain warehouse."

Nandkishore stopped short.

"I had no idea."

Vimla looked at him.

"If you had not put on someone else's slippers, we would have been standing at the old bus stop."

Nandkishore said, "So the slipper mistake was not a mistake, but information?"

Rambilas laughed.

"Do not give the slippers that much importance. They will become proud."

The rain thinned a little.

The two families set off together towards the grain warehouse.

Now Nandkishore kept glancing down at his feet from time to time.

Rambilas asked, "Still suspicious?"

"No. Now owner and slippers have both recognised each other."

At one point on the road there was a narrow bamboo footbridge over a drain.

Kaushalya walked slowly.

Vimla took her by the arm.

Sita carried Gudiya's bag.

Pintu and Sonu went ahead, searching for dry bricks in the mud to step on.

When they reached the warehouse, two buses were standing there.

One was bound for Kharihani, the other for Parasauni.

That was where the paths of the two families had to separate.

Kaushalya asked Vimla, "Tell me your name once more."

"Vimla."

"I am Kaushalya."

"I will not forget that name now."

Kaushalya looked down at her slippers.

"I may forget slippers, but not a name."

Sita and Vimla repeated the names of their villages to each other.

The Tuesday market lay between the two villages.

"We shall keep meeting at the market," Sita said.

Nandkishore shook hands with Rambilas.

"Next time there will be no need to exchange slippers."

Rambilas said, "First make the identifying mark bigger."

The bus whistle sounded.

The two families climbed into separate buses.

From the window Pintu waved to Sonu.

Sonu lifted one of his slippers and waved it in the air.

Rambilas pulled his hand down.

"Put it on your foot. Otherwise we shall have to go looking for another family."

A month later came the Tuesday market.

Nandkishore had come with his family to buy vegetables.

Gudiya suddenly spotted Sonu on the other side of the road.

"There is the slipper boy!" she shouted with a laugh.

Sonu ran over.

Rambilas and Sita came behind him.

Nandkishore held out one of his slippers to show them.

This time, beside the blue thread, a little knot of red thread had also been tied.

Rambilas showed his slippers too.

Above the round mark was a knot of green thread.

Vimla asked, "Why green?"

Sita replied, "So that next time they do not reach your house."

Kaushalya, who had come with them to the market, said softly, "And if they did reach it once, what harm came of it?"

For a moment everyone fell silent.

Then they all burst out laughing.

That day the two families went around the market together.

No one's slippers were exchanged.

At dusk, as they prepared to return home, Nandkishore put on his slippers marked with the red knot.

Rambilas put on his pair marked with the green knot.

The two pairs were different.

But this time their owners knew one another by name.

STORY 122

The Richest Man in the House

On an Ashadh Monday morning, Jagdish Jha sat on his verandah stitching the torn binding of a book.

His house stood two lanes in from the main road, yet it was only a ten-minute walk from the bus stand.

For that reason, many people coming to town from the villages knew the way to his house.

Jagdish did not earn much.

He stitched and rebound old books, panjis, and account ledgers.

When work came, the day went well; when it did not, the needle and thread lay silent on the table in the verandah.

His wife Malti ran the household with careful measuring and counting.

There were two rooms, a small kitchen, and a narrow verandah in front.

The house had four brass plates, yet some nights eight people ate there.

It was Malti, not Jagdish, who understood that arithmetic.

That morning, before leaving for school, Muniya came with a question.

“Babu, who is the richest person in our neighbourhood?”

Jagdish had the needle clenched between his teeth.

“Why are you asking?”

From the kitchen Malti called, “If it is wealth you need for an essay, look outside. You will not find it in this house.”

Muniya burst out laughing.

She had first thought of Ramautar Sahu.

Ramautar had a two-storeyed house, a grain warehouse, and a gleaming motorcar in the courtyard.

Jagdish said, “Then you have your name. Now write.”

Muniya sat down on the verandah.

She wrote the first line: “The richest person in our neighbourhood is Ramautar Sahu.”

Just then there was a call at the gate.

“Is Jagdish Babu at home?”

A thin young man stood there with a bag on his shoulder.

Jagdish went out.

The young man said his name was Ravindra.

He came from the village of one of Jagdish's distant maternal cousins.

His clerical examination was the next day, and there would be no bus back until evening.

The cousin had told him, "Ask for Jagdish's house. You will find a place to spend the night."

Jagdish scratched his head.

Malti had been listening from the verandah.

She called, "First put your bag inside. If the exam is tomorrow, why are you talking about going back tonight?"

Ravindra said awkwardly, "It will trouble you."

Malti replied, "We will calculate the trouble tonight. For now, wash your hands and face."

Muniya looked at her essay.

Then she wrote the second line: "Ramautar Sahu's house is very large."

By midday, Ravindra had explained two mathematics problems to Muniya.

Malti would not let him cut vegetables, but when it was time to fetch water, she told him to take hold of a bucket.

There was a rule in the house.

Whoever stayed the night took on one household task according to their ability.

Someone fetched water, someone taught the child, someone brought salt from the market.

Malti used to say, "Be a guest, not a statue."

Jagdish laughed at this rule, but never objected to it.

After midday, the gate rattled again.

This time there was a woman of about fifty-five and her nephew.

The woman was named Janki Devi.

She had come to the district hospital to have her eyes examined.

The examination was to be the next morning.

The nephew who had accompanied her wanted to return to the village at dawn because cattle were tethered at home.

The question arose of where Janki Devi would stay.

Ravindra immediately began rolling up his mat.

"I will sleep on the verandah."

Malti stopped him.

"No one's name has been written on the mat yet."

Janki Devi said, "I can sleep on the floor as well."

Jagdish said, "This house has no shortage of floor. Only level floor is in short supply."

Everyone laughed at once.

In one corner of the verandah, two old cane mats were rolled up.

The edge of one was tied with red thread.

The other had two knots of yellow thread in the middle.

Those threads had been left by different guests.

Someone had seen the edge fraying and tied it; someone else had seen a cane strip coming loose in the middle and repaired it.

Malti used to say, "Even our mats are known to people."

Muniya wanted to write a third line, but stopped.

She could not remember any mat in Ramautar Sahu's house.

Before evening, clouds gathered.

Three books on Jagdish's worktable were still unfinished.

He was sharpening his needle when two boys from the lane came running.

"Kaka, the bus stand is flooded."

"What has that got to do with me?"

"Two people are asking for your house."

Jagdish narrowed his eyes.

"Who put a signboard for my house at the bus stand?"

The boys ran off laughing.

A little later, an old man and a teenager arrived.

The old man did not know Jagdish.

He knew only the name of Shambhu Master of Pipra village.

Two years earlier, Shambhu Master had spent one night at Jagdish's house.

He had told them, "If you miss the bus, go to Jagdish's house."

Jagdish looked at Malti.

Malti looked at the old man's wet dhoti.

"Come inside first."

Jagdish whispered, "Today's accounts?"

Malti whispered back, "There is less rice in the accounts, not fewer people."

The question of dinner now truly became a large one.

There was about one and a half pav of rice in the house.

There was one bowl of lentils.

For vegetables, only two potatoes and one ridge gourd remained.

Ravindra took half a pav of flattened rice from his bag.

"Mother had packed it for the road."

Before leaving, Janki Devi's nephew had left behind a small packet of jaggery.

The old man's bag held roasted gram.

Malti placed everything on the verandah.

"Now count the wealth of this house."

Jagdish said, "One and a half pav of rice, half a pav of flattened rice, one packet of jaggery, and a handful of gram."

Malti said, "And seven pairs of hands."

Ravindra laughed.

Janki Devi began cutting the ridge gourd.

The old man cleaned the gram.

The boy went to find dry twigs for the stove.
 Jagdish went to fetch water.
 Muniya began washing the plates.
 Four plates were too few for seven people.
 Malti made two leaf plates.
 Ravindra said, "I will eat from a bowl."
 Jagdish said, "A candidate must have a plate, or his letters will come out round."

Laughing, Ravindra stopped insisting on giving up his plate.
 In the end, the rice was thin and the dal was thin too, but the verandah remained full.

From time to time, the clouds sounded over the roof.
 After dinner, the arithmetic of sleeping began.
 There were two mats, one low cot, one bedstead, and half a dry verandah.
 Janki Devi slept on the low cot.
 The old man on the bedstead.
 Ravindra and the boy on the mats.
 Muniya went inside with her mother.
 Jagdish stood on the verandah holding his pillow.
 Malti asked, "Where is your place?"
 Jagdish said, "I am a rich man. I will buy myself a place in my own house."
 Ravindra immediately started to rise.
 "Shall I move?"
 "No, you have an examination. I will sleep beside the binding table."
 Malti glared at him.
 "There is glue on the worktable. In the morning we will find a book stuck to your head."

In the end, Jagdish and the boy lay crosswise and crooked on a single mat in the dry part of the verandah.

At midnight, one of Jagdish's feet slipped out.
 Two drops of rain fell on his heel.
 He drew his foot back in.
 Half asleep, the boy said, "Kaka, do not come into my share."
 Jagdish laughed quietly.
 Janki Devi was the first to rise in the morning.
 She sat by the stove and heated water for Malti.
 The old man noticed a loose latch on the broken window.
 He took a small tool from his bag and tightened it.
 Ravindra looked at Muniya's essay.
 "Only three lines?"
 Muniya said, "It is difficult to write about rich people."
 Ravindra handed the paper back.

"Write what you have seen."

Muniya said nothing.

She folded the paper and put it in her schoolbag.

Ravindra left for his examination.

Janki Devi went towards the hospital.

The old man and the boy set off for the bus stand.

All at once the house felt empty.

Sweeping the verandah, Jagdish said, "See? Air is entering my house again."

Malti said, "Until ten o'clock."

Jagdish stopped.

"Who is coming at ten?"

"Your cousin's husband sent word yesterday."

Jagdish put a hand to his head.

"Muniya, change the essay. Write about the poorest owner of this house."

Laughing, Muniya left for school.

That day in language class, the teacher asked them to read their essays.

Muniya opened the first sheet.

The three lines naming Ramautar Sahu seemed pale to her.

She turned the paper over.

On the back was the new essay she had written during the night.

Its title was: "The Richest Man in Our House."

The teacher raised his eyebrows.

Muniya began to read.

"My father, Jagdish Jha, earns little."

Two children in the class laughed.

Muniya went on reading.

"There are four plates in his house, but the number of people who will eat is never fixed in advance."

"There are two mats, but threads from many villages are tied to them."

"A guest who comes here does not only eat."

"Someone fetches water, someone tightens a latch, someone teaches the child."

"Some nights Babu has to search for a place to sleep in his own house."

The classroom was silent now.

Muniya read the final line.

"I think that when so many people come and go through a house, its wealth must be counted in a different way."

For a few moments, the teacher looked at the paper.

Then he asked, "Has your father read this?"

"Not yet."

"Let him read it."

In the evening, Muniya placed the paper in Jagdish's hand.

Jagdish read the entire essay.

"I am this 'richest man'?"

Muniya nodded.

Jagdish looked at Malti.

"Did you hear that? I have become rich now."

Setting a pot on the stove, Malti said, "Then tomorrow bring two pav of rice from the market out of your wealth."

Jagdish folded the paper and handed it back to Muniya.

"There is one error."

Muniya became alert.

"Where?"

"Not four plates. Janki Devi's nephew cracked one while washing it."

From inside, Malti called, "He did not crack it. It was cracked already."

Jagdish smiled.

"Look, a dispute over my property has already begun."

Just then the gate rattled.

Jagdish, Malti, and Muniya looked at one another.

A voice came from outside, "Is this Jagdish Babu's house?"

Jagdish asked softly, "Do you need to spend the night, or only drink some water?"

The man outside laughed.

"I missed the bus."

Malti lifted the lid of the pot and looked at the quantity of rice.

Then she said to Muniya, "Consider your essay not yet submitted."

Jagdish went to open the gate.

The mat with the red thread was unrolled once again on the verandah.

STORY 123

Savings of Laughter

One evening in Bhadon, Ramlochan Mishra sat before his old wooden trunk.

The lid leaned crookedly to one side, but the lock still worked.

His wife, Surji, was sorting mung beans in the courtyard.

Their granddaughter Sarita came to the doorway carrying her books and exercise books.

She was in Class Eight.

“Grandfather, may I ask you something?”

Turning the key in the lock, Ramlochan said, “If the question is short, ask it. The answer will be long.”

Sarita laughed.

“Teacher has asked us to write an essay on the savings in our household.”

Surji stopped sorting the mung beans.

“Savings in our house?”

“Yes. What Grandfather and Grandmother have saved, where they keep it, and why they save.”

Ramlochan opened the trunk.

Sarita leaned forward eagerly.

Inside were clothes, old receipts, two brass keys, a torn umbrella, and a thick ledger.

Sarita’s eyes settled on the ledger.

“Is that from the co-operative branch?”

Ramlochan said, “Not the co-operative branch’s. The household’s.”

Sarita lifted it out.

On the cover, in faded ink, was written: “Expenses.”

She slowly turned the next page.

There were accounts from many years ago.

Rice, salt, oil, medicine, roofing, farming, marriage, travel.

In many places Surji’s handwriting had added a little sentence after the amount.

Sarita read: “The roof leaked again - rain, an uninvited guest.”

She laughed.

On another page it said: “New spectacles - the old eyes still free of charge.”

On a third: “Cot repaired - Ramlochan’s snoring puts too much weight on it.”

Sarita laughed harder.

"Is this an expense ledger or a book of jokes?"

Surji said, "We wrote down the expenses and lightened the heart along with them."

Ramlochan adjusted his spectacles.

"The money was spent; the sentences survived."

Sarita opened her exercise book.

"Then how much money did you two save?"

The courtyard fell silent for a moment.

Ramlochan looked at Surji.

Surji resumed sorting the beans.

"Money?"

"Yes. That's all I need."

Ramlochan said softly, "Not much."

Sarita asked again, "How much?"

A smile came to Ramlochan's lips.

"The money did not remain, but there is plenty of laughter saved up."

Sarita's pen stopped.

"Will Teacher accept that answer?"

Surji said, "Make Teacher laugh first. Then he will accept it."

Instead of writing the opening line of her essay, Sarita began turning the ledger again.

One page recorded hospital expenses.

The amount was written in large figures.

Beside it Surji had written: "Ramlochan ate khichdi for three days and called it a royal feast."

Ramlochan objected.

"I didn't call it a royal feast. I called it a feast fit for a maharaja."

Surji said, "And after taking the medicine you pulled a face for half an hour."

Laughing, Sarita put her finger on the page.

"Who used to write all these things?"

"Whoever picked up the pen first."

"And when you quarrelled?"

Surji tossed aside a hard bit from the mung beans.

"The expense of a quarrel wasn't entered separately."

Ramlochan said, "But its interest is high."

Just then a bicycle bell rang in the lane.

Naresh, a young man from the co-operative savings group, arrived on his bicycle.

He went from neighbourhood to neighbourhood explaining the new savings accounts to elderly people.

Stopping at the gate, he asked, "Is Ramlochan Kaka at home?"

Ramlochan said, "I am at home. My wealth is out wandering."

Naresh laughed and came inside.

He took several printed sheets from his bag.

"Kaka, there is no minimum deposit requirement now. An account can be opened even with a very small amount."

Ramlochan took the paper.

"My small amount is so small that you would need a magnifying glass to find it."

Surji said from the side, "Have tea first. Then listen to his tale of poverty."

Naresh sat down on the low wooden seat.

Sarita asked at once, "Bhaiya, does saving mean only money?"

Naresh glanced at her exercise book.

"In an account, yes - money."

Ramlochan said, "At home, many other things too."

Naresh smiled.

"The branch doesn't pay interest on those."

Going toward the hearth, Surji said, "At home, laughter pays its own interest."

Naresh looked at Sarita.

"Put that in your essay."

Ramlochan said, "Teacher will strike my name out as well."

While the tea was being made, Naresh continued explaining how to open the account.

Identity proof, nominee details, small deposits, withdrawals.

Ramlochan listened attentively.

Surji asked questions from time to time.

"What if only ten rupees remain at the end of a month?"

"You can deposit even that."

"Five?"

"Five too."

"One?"

Naresh laughed.

"The day I turn up at the branch with one rupee, they will throw me out."

Ramlochan said at once, "There, you see? The entry limit for the poor begins at one rupee."

The veranda filled with laughter.

Then Naresh grew serious again.

"Kaka, jokes apart, it is good to keep a little money aside for medicines or an emergency."

Ramlochan nodded.

"There is sense in that."

Surji set down the tea and said, "He doesn't laugh so quickly when something is sensible."

Naresh asked, "Did you save earlier?"

Ramlochan looked toward the old ledger.

"We did."

He showed him the hospital page.

"It went that year."

Then the page for their daughter's wedding.

"That year too."

Then the page for replacing the roof.

"That year as well."

Naresh fell silent.

Ramlochan closed the ledger.

"Savings were made, then spent; made again, then spent again. In life's ledger, the balance does not remain in the same place forever."

Surji said, "But this time something can be begun again."

Ramlochan looked at her.

"You will begin it?"

"I have a plan."

"That word frightens me as soon as I hear it."

From a corner of the courtyard Surji brought a small brass tin.

It had once held spices.

A yellow turmeric stain still marked the lid.

"From now on, on any day you come back from the market without drinking unnecessary tea, two rupees go into this."

Ramlochan protested.

"Who said tea is unnecessary?"

"On the days you come home and ask for tea again, the tea you had in the market was unnecessary."

Naresh could not hold back his laughter.

Ramlochan said, "And your savings?"

Surji answered at once, "On any day I do not eat an unnecessary piece of jaggery, two rupees."

Ramlochan raised his eyebrows.

"Jaggery is never unnecessary."

"Then the savings scheme is cancelled."

The two looked at each other.

Sarita broke in, "Make one rule: whoever calls the other's thing 'unnecessary' must deposit one rupee."

For a moment there was silence.

Then all three adults burst out laughing together.

Naresh said, "That account will fill quickly."

The account-opening form was filled in that very day.

Ramlochan named Surji as his nominee.

Naresh asked, "Kaki, whose name will you put on your account?"

Surji looked at Ramlochan.

"This man's - if he improves before I do."

Ramlochan asked, "Can a condition be written into the nomination?"

Naresh laughed again.

Sarita wrote something in her exercise book.

Three days later Ramlochan and Surji went to the co-operative branch.

Their first deposit was twenty-five rupees.

Naresh entered it in the passbook.

Ramlochan looked at the figure.

"So little?"

Surji said, "The first letter is small too; the book comes later."

This time Ramlochan did not joke.

He placed the passbook carefully in the trunk.

The brass tin remained in a corner of the kitchen.

In one week eleven rupees gathered in it.

Seven rupees were penalties for Ramlochan's use of the word "unnecessary."

Four rupees came from the two pieces of jaggery Surji had managed not to eat.

Hearing the account, Ramlochan said, "The tax on me is higher."

Surji replied, "Your income is higher - income from talking."

When Sarita returned from school, she would shake the tin.

She liked the sound of the coins.

She also kept reading the old expense ledger.

One day she found a very old page.

The date was from almost thirty years earlier.

It said: "First savings: twenty-two rupees."

Beside it, in Ramlochan's handwriting: "Surji said the world won't change with this much."

Under that, in Surji's handwriting: "Ramlochan said, not the world - the habit will change."

Sarita ran to them with the page.

"You said exactly the same thing before!"

Ramlochan looked at the page.

"Was I really that wise?"

Surji said, "You were, but we could not keep the savings going."

Ramlochan was silent for a while.

Then he said, "This time we shall see whether the wisdom lasts."

The month ended.

The brass tin held sixty-seven rupees.

Surji counted the money.

Ramlochan counted it twice more.

"Sixty-seven?"

"Yes. That's all."

"I thought we had saved more laughter than that."

Surji said, "We would need a bigger tin to count that."

Sarita finished her essay.

She gave it the title: "My Grandparents' Savings."

In the first part she wrote about the co-operative account and the brass tin.

In the second she wrote about the sentences in the margins of the old expense ledger.

Her final line was: "They have begun saving money again, but the laughter had already been saved."

The next day Teacher read the essay and asked, "Is this really what happens in your house, or is it a made-up story?"

Sarita replied, "It happens in our house."

"Then tell your grandparents to keep saving."

That evening Sarita delivered the message.

With a serious face Ramlochan asked, "Does Teacher work for the co-operative branch?"

Surji burst out laughing.

Then she opened the brass tin and dropped two rupees inside.

Ramlochan asked, "Whose penalty is that?"

"I just laughed unnecessarily."

Ramlochan immediately dropped in another two rupees.

"My share too."

Sarita said, "There was no penalty in the rule for laughing."

Ramlochan closed the lid of the tin.

"The rule has changed."

Surji said, "No. This is a voluntary deposit."

Ramlochan placed the old expense ledger and the new savings passbook together in the same trunk.

The brass tin found a place between them.

Closing the lid, he said, "Now the accounts are clear."

Sarita asked, "How much have you saved?"

Ramlochan looked at Surji.

There was laughter in the corners of Surji's eyes.

She said, "For the amount of money, look in the passbook."

Ramlochan added, "No machine has yet been invented to count the rest of the savings."

The trunk closed, and all three laughed again in the courtyard.

STORY 124

The Key

On an Aghan morning, the sunlight had not yet reached the courtyard.

Madhav Jha had gathered his old iron trunk, two sacks of books and a bamboo cot near the doorway.

Today he would leave this house.

Seven years earlier, when he had come here as a tenant, all he owned was one box, two changes of clothes and his appointment letter for the job.

Now his belongings had grown.

There was a wife.

There was a five-year-old daughter.

There were two photographs hanging on the wall.

And beneath the window stood an old wooden chest that was not his.

The chest had been in the room from the very beginning.

The wood was no longer black as if freshly polished; years of sun and rain had turned it a dull brown-grey.

Brass strips covered all four corners.

A broad lock hung in the middle.

There was a long scratch across the lid.

On his first day Madhav had asked, "Will this be moved?"

The landlord, Shashidhar Babu, had replied, "No. Let it stay."

"Is there anything inside?"

With a faint smile Shashidhar Babu had said, "Nothing of any use to you."

Madhav had not asked again.

Slowly the chest became one of the useful things in the room.

At first a lantern was kept on it.

Later, books and ledgers.

After his marriage, his wife Sumitra dried spices on it.

When their daughter was born, her little clothes were sometimes spread over it.

The chest remained shut.

Dust gathered on the lock.

Madhav kept the house keys with him.

They were on a round iron ring.

There were two keys on the ring.

One was thin and shiny.

The other was thick, brass-coloured and of an old-fashioned shape.

The thin key opened the outer door.
 Madhav did not know what the thick key was for.
 The first time he asked Shashidhar Babu, "The second key?"
 Shashidhar Babu had said, "Let it remain on the ring."
 "Which lock does it open?"
 "Something old belonging to this house."
 Madhav had laughed.
 "Can old things be locked away too?"
 Shashidhar Babu had answered, "Sometimes."
 In seven years the heavy key had jingled in Madhav's palm many times.
 He had never taken it off the ring.
 Sometimes he thought it might belong to the old storeroom in the courtyard.
 Sometimes he imagined it opened the locked room above the stairs.
 One day even Meera, his daughter, had asked, "Babu, what is this big key for?"
 Madhav had replied, "For whichever lock it finds."
 For three days Meera searched the house for a lock.
 Then she forgot about it.
 Today was the day the ring had to be returned.
 Outside, the bullock-cart driver was calling, "Babu, is the luggage ready?"
 Madhav answered, "Half an hour."
 Sumitra was sweeping inside.
 She said, "Take out the peg from the wall."
 "Does the peg belong to the house or to us?"
 "You hammered it in."
 "Then it is ours."
 "Justice becomes very sharp when it is time to pull something out of a wall."
 Madhav smiled.
 The peg was removed.
 A small hole remained in the wall.
 He mixed a little mud and filled it.
 Sumitra said, "Why clean it so carefully?"
 "It was clean when I came."
 "So?"
 "If I am returning it, I should return it clean."
 Sumitra said nothing.
 She wiped the window frame as well.
 The chest still stood beneath the window.
 One of its legs was shorter than the others.
 Two years earlier Madhav had cut a thin piece of neem wood and wedged it beneath the short leg.

One rainy night the roof had leaked.

Before covering his own books, Madhav had thrown a sack over the chest.

The next day Shashidhar Babu had seen it and asked, "Did your books get wet?"

"Two of them did."

"You should have saved them first."

Madhav had replied, "Books can be dried. This wood is old."

That day Shashidhar Babu had looked at the chest for a long time.

That was all.

For seven years the rent had been paid on time.

Twice it had been late.

Whenever that happened, Madhav had informed him beforehand.

Shashidhar Babu merely changed the date in his rent ledger.

There had never been a quarrel over accounts.

But they had argued plenty over the small matters of the house.

Where the tulsi platform in the courtyard should be extended.

Where clothes might be spread on the roof.

Why Meera had drawn a flower on the wall with charcoal.

For three days Shashidhar Babu had criticised that flower.

On the fourth day he drew a frame around it.

From then on Meera called him 'Picture-Baba'.

None of these things appeared in any ledger.

At nine in the morning Shashidhar Babu came into the courtyard.

He was carrying his rent ledger.

"Has everything been taken out?"

Madhav said, "Almost."

"What does 'almost' mean?"

"One peg was left. I have taken that out too."

Shashidhar Babu looked at the wall.

The hole had been filled.

"You will hand the house over cleaner than it was for the new tenant."

"That will benefit you."

"And the loss?"

"Mine. Leaving becomes difficult."

For a few moments neither of them spoke.

Then Madhav took the key ring from his waist.

Seven years of rubbing had polished the iron ring smooth.

He placed it in Shashidhar Babu's palm.

"Here."

Shashidhar Babu lifted the ring.

The two keys jingled.

He held up the thin, shiny one.

“This is for the door.”
 “Yes, for the door.”
 “And this?”
 He lifted the thick old key.
 Madhav laughed.
 “You never answered that mystery in seven years.”
 “Did you search for the answer for seven years?”
 “For the first week.”
 “And after that?”
 “Work increased.”
 “So the mystery lost?”
 “It lost to bread.”
 Shashidhar Babu laughed aloud.
 Then he slipped the thin key off the ring.
 He left the old thick key on it.
 He held the ring back towards Madhav.
 Madhav did not take it.
 “Why?”
 “It is yours.”
 “I have no lock for it.”
 “You do. You just have not seen it yet.”
 Shashidhar Babu went over to the window.
 He ran a hand over the old chest.
 A thin line of dust marked his palm.
 He said, “Lift it once.”
 Madhav did not understand.
 “Lift what?”
 “The chest.”
 “But it is yours.”
 “Until now.”
 Sumitra stopped sweeping.
 Meera came and stood at the doorway.
 Shashidhar Babu called to the bullock-cart driver.
 “Come here. This goes too.”
 Madhav immediately protested, “No, no. Not this.”
 “Why not take it?”
 “It belongs to the old house.”
 “Let it stay here.”
 “It has stayed seven years.”
 “My new house is small.”
 “The chest is not small, but it is useful.”
 “I cannot take a gift.”

Shashidhar Babu frowned.

“For seven years you kept books, spices, clothes and your child’s dolls on my chest. When one leg broke, you fitted a piece of wood under it. When the roof leaked, you covered it with a sack. And now you say you have no connection with it?”

Madhav had no answer.

Shashidhar Babu placed the heavy key in his palm.

“Try it.”

Madhav looked at the lock.

For the first time he noticed how old-fashioned its shape was.

The key was made in the same fashion.

He slowly inserted it into the keyhole.

It slid in on the first attempt.

Madhav’s hand stopped.

Meera whispered, “Babu!”

Madhav turned the key.

The lock gave a deep sound from within.

The old lid rose with a creak.

A mingled smell of old wood, dried neem leaves and cotton drifted out.

The chest was almost empty.

In one corner lay a folded piece of old white cloth.

In another were two thin strips of wood.

That was all that remained inside.

Disappointed, Meera asked, “Where is the treasure?”

Shashidhar Babu said, “Empty space is the greatest treasure. Fill it with whatever you like.”

Madhav looked at him.

“This key was with me from the very first day?”

“Yes. From the first day.”

“You never told me?”

“You asked. I put you off.”

“Why?”

Shashidhar Babu rested a hand on the lid.

“I wanted to see whether you would spend your time looking for the lock that matched the key, or whether you would settle into the house and make a home.”

Madhav’s eyebrows rose slightly.

“Was this a test?”

“No, not a test.”

Shashidhar Babu answered at once, “If it had been a test, I would have told you. It was only a foolish curiosity of mine.”

Sumitra laughed.

“At least you admit it.”

Shashidhar Babu laughed too.

“This chest belonged to my wife when she was alive. After she died, I locked it. Whatever was inside, my daughters divided among themselves. The chest remained.”

He patted the wooden lid.

“To me it was a memory. In your home it became a useful thing again.”

Madhav remained silent.

Shashidhar Babu said, “When a memory does nothing but gather dust, sometimes it needs a new home.”

The bullock-cart driver asked, “Shall I load it?”

Madhav looked at Shashidhar Babu.

“You truly want to give it to me?”

“The key is in your palm.”

This time Madhav closed his fist around the ring.

“Load it.”

Four men lifted the chest together.

The neem-wood wedge slipped out.

Shashidhar Babu bent and picked it up.

“Take this too.”

Madhav said, “But this piece of neem came from this house.”

“Now it is a leg of the chest.”

The wedge was placed inside the chest as well.

The lid was closed.

Madhav did not lock it.

Shashidhar Babu asked, “Why did you not turn the key?”

Madhav smiled.

“I will open it for the first time in the new house.”

“There is nothing inside now.”

“That is why.”

The bullock cart began to move.

Meera kept looking back and waving to ‘Picture-Baba’.

Shashidhar Babu stood by the courtyard gate.

The key jingled again at Madhav’s waist.

This time it was no useless old key.

By evening, after they reached the new house, the chest was placed beneath a window.

Sumitra asked, “What shall we put in it?”

Madhav said, “Nothing yet.”

Meera came carrying her drawing book.

“May I keep this in it?”

Madhav opened the lid.

“The first thing will be yours.”

Meera placed the book inside.

The neem-wood wedge lay beside it.

Sumitra folded the old white cloth and laid it over the drawing book.

Madhav put the key into the lock once more.

He thought for a moment.

Then he withdrew it and slipped it back onto the ring.

The lock remained open.

Sumitra asked, “Won’t you lock it?”

Madhav shook his head.

“It stayed locked for seven years. Let it remain open for a while now.”

Evening was settling beyond the window.

Inside the chest, the first drawing book lay quietly.

The key jingled once more at Madhav’s waist.

STORY 125

Ten Minutes

The clock at Darbhanga station showed ten fifty.

The train standing beside the platform was due to leave ten minutes later.

Avinash stood beside his tin trunk, looking towards the gate.

Small beads of sweat had appeared on his forehead, though the Aghan air was cold.

A cloth bag rested on top of the trunk.

Inside the bag were two pairs of clothes, a gamchha and an empty file.

A certificate that belonged in that file had still not arrived.

Guruji had told him, "I'll get it to you before the train leaves."

The certificate was needed for accommodation at the training centre.

In the school's old register, one digit of Avinash's date of birth had been entered incorrectly, and Guruji had spent until the previous evening getting it corrected.

Avinash had said, "I can come to the school myself in the morning."

Guruji had stopped him.

"You go to the station. I'll bring the certificate."

Avinash was still relying on that promise.

He looked at the clock again.

Nine minutes.

Just then, an elderly woman came up beside him, dragging a small metal-bound trunk.

The trunk was not large, but its iron bands made it heavy.

In her other hand she carried a small cloth bundle.

The knot of the bundle had loosened.

As she tried to set it beside the bench, the bundle slipped from her hand.

A brass lota rolled out and went towards the track.

Avinash ran and caught it.

"Mother, here you are."

Taking the lota, the old woman said, "Your feet are quick, son."

"The lota was quick."

The old woman laughed.

"What is your name?"

"Avinash."

"I am Kaushalya Devi."

She began tying the knot of her bundle again.

Avinash pushed her trunk beneath the bench.

Kaushalya said, "I could have done that."

"Two jobs can be done in the ten minutes before the train leaves."

"Not ten. Eight now."

Avinash looked at the clock again.

It really was eight minutes.

Kaushalya asked, "Is this your train?"

"Yes, this one."

"Mine too."

"How far are you going?"

"Beyond Laheriasarai. My daughter will get me off there."

Avinash told her his destination.

He was going to the training centre for the first time.

Kaushalya nodded.

"So your trunk is packed with your future?"

Avinash smiled.

"Only half of it, for now."

"Why half?"

"One certificate is still to come."

"Who is bringing it?"

"My Guruji."

Kaushalya looked towards the gate.

"I am waiting for someone too."

Avinash asked, "Who?"

"My son."

Kaushalya had left home early that morning.

Her son had said that he would first go to the dispensary to have a new dosage written for her medicine, then pack some food from home and reach the station.

Kaushalya had told him, "A train does not wait for anyone's mother or son."

Her son had replied, "I'll reach before the train does."

Now the station clock was putting that sentence to the test.

Both of them looked towards the gate once more.

No one.

Seven minutes.

From inside the train came the rising noise of passengers searching for seats.

A porter called out from a distance.

Avinash gripped the trunk to lift it.

At that moment one of its old clasps came loose.

The lid sprang half open.

Avinash pressed it shut at once.

"This too, now?" he muttered to himself.

Kaushalya said, "Let me see."

"It's nothing. I'll tie it with some cord."

"Do you have any?"

Avinash searched his bag.

He found nothing.

Kaushalya opened her bundle.

Inside it were a small medicine box, thread, a needle and two safety pins.

"I am going to my daughter's house, but I carry half the household in this bundle."

She took out a thick length of red thread.

Avinash kept the clasp pressed down.

Kaushalya wound the thread twice between the trunk's handle and the metal loop of the lock.

Then she secured the knot with a safety pin.

"Now try it."

Avinash shook the trunk.

The lid stayed shut.

"This is stronger than the clasp."

Kaushalya said, "The clasp was iron. The cleverness is in the thread."

Avinash laughed.

Six minutes.

Avinash asked, "What is your son bringing?"

"Medicine and a tiffin."

"You already have medicine here."

"That is the old one. A new dosage has been prescribed."

"And the food?"

"He said, 'Mother, don't eat the pakoras at the station.' If he doesn't come, then pakoras it will be."

Avinash said, "Guruji also told me, 'Don't board without the certificate.' What if he doesn't come?"

Kaushalya looked at him.

"What will you do then?"

"I'll board. If I miss the first day of training, the certificate can reach later."

"Quite right."

"And you?"

"I am not missing the train either. My son can run as far as the next station."

They both smiled again.

Five minutes remained.

The station bell rang.

More passengers began boarding the train.

Avinash lifted Kaushalya's trunk.

"You board first."

Kaushalya said, "And if your Guruji arrives?"

"I'll keep watching the gate."

"Your trunk?"

"It can stay here."

"What if someone else picks it up?"

Avinash thought for a moment.

Kaushalya said, "I'll sit beside my trunk. Leave yours with me too."

"You should board."

"If my son comes, he'll look for me here."

Because each had someone to wait for, both remained standing on the platform.

Four minutes.

A child was leaning his head out of a train window.

Kaushalya called to him, "Put your head inside. Dust will get in your eyes."

The child withdrew at once.

Avinash asked, "Do you order everyone around like that?"

"Anyone who listens."

"My Guruji is the same."

"Then your Guruji is all right."

Avinash smiled.

Three minutes.

Two people came running in through the gate.

One was a young man; the other, a vendor carrying a bundle of paan.

Avinash stepped slightly forward.

Neither of them was his Guruji.

Kaushalya too shook her head.

"Not my son either."

The engine driver's whistle sounded in the distance.

Avinash's face grew a little tense.

He placed the cloth bag on top of the trunk.

"I'll board when two minutes remain."

Kaushalya said, "Wait until one minute remains."

"Why?"

"Give the person you are waiting for his full chance."

Avinash looked at the clock.

Two minutes.

"Do you trust your son that much?"

"He is often late, but he does not abandon what he has promised."

Avinash laughed.

"My Guruji is the same."

Kaushalya smiled and asked, "He is late, and you still trust him?"

Avinash said, "Because when he comes, he never leaves a job half done."

"My son is the same."

"Then both of them suffer from the disease of running."

"And we suffer from waiting."

Their laughter rose together once more.

Kaushalya looked at him.

"What is your Guruji's name?"

Avinash was just about to answer.

Then a voice came from outside the gate: "Mother!"

Kaushalya's face lit up.

"He's here!"

A middle-aged man was running towards them with two containers tucked under one arm and a white envelope in his hand.

One end of his dhoti had been hitched up to his knee.

He reached Kaushalya, trying to catch his breath.

"Mother, I'm late."

Kaushalya said, "The clock told me that already."

The man handed her the medicine box.

Then he held out the tiffin.

"Eat on the way."

At that moment his eyes fell on Avinash.

"Why, Avinash!"

Avinash froze.

"Guruji!"

Kaushalya looked at Avinash.

Then at her son.

Then she burst out laughing.

"This is your Guruji?"

Avinash said, "Yes, he is."

The man looked equally surprised.

"You two know each other?"

Kaushalya pointed towards her trunk.

"Your student lifted my trunk."

Avinash showed him the red thread around his own trunk.

"And your mother tied up mine."

Guruji laughed loudly.

"I was late, and you two divided the work between yourselves before I got here."

One minute.

Guruji handed the white envelope to Avinash.

"Your certificate. Don't let it get wet."

Kaushalya said at once, "Put it in my bundle. There is medicine in there, not water."

Avinash placed the envelope inside her bundle.

Guruji lifted his mother's trunk.

Avinash picked up his own.

They both ran towards the same carriage door.

Guruji helped his mother aboard first.

Then he pushed Avinash's trunk inside.

The whistle blew.

The train began to move slowly.

Running beside the window, Guruji called, "Avinash, look after my mother!"

Kaushalya answered at once, "Let your student look after his trunk. I'll look after him."

Avinash called from the window, "Guruji, the certificate is in your mother's bundle now."

Guruji slapped a hand to his forehead.

"Then both of you look after each other!"

The train gathered speed.

The gate fell behind.

Kaushalya kept waving from the window.

Avinash checked the red thread around his trunk once more.

"Mother, will this knot last all the way to the training centre?"

Kaushalya said, "The knot will last. You open it at the right time."

"And the certificate?"

"Safe in my bundle."

She opened the tiffin.

Inside were two rotis, potato curry and a piece of jaggery.

"Did your Guruji tell me I should eat alone?"

Avinash laughed.

"No, not like that."

"Then half is yours."

"I have chura with me."

"Then I'll have the chura, and you have the roti."

Ten minutes earlier, the two of them had not even known each other's names.

Now one person's certificate was in the other's bundle, and the other's food lay open before the first.

Outside the train window, the fields seemed to run backwards.

Kaushalya said, "Your Guruji is late."

Avinash replied, "But he does not abandon what he has promised."

They both laughed together.

STORY 126

The Last Customer

Jayaram the barber was giving the shop its final sweep of the evening.

He had already lowered the shutter halfway.

Outside, the sounds of the market had thinned.

The brass bowl before the mirror lay upside down to dry.

He washed the razor and wiped it with a cloth.

A white stain of the day's shaving lather remained on the arm of the chair.

He rubbed that off with his finger too.

He was in a hurry to reach home.

His wife Kamala had told him that their younger son Niranjan's fever had risen again today.

But even when closing the shop he never hurried.

Forty years ago, his father had placed the first chair in this shop.

The chair had changed.

The mirror had changed.

The tin roof had changed.

But his father's old wooden comb still hung on the wall.

Jayaram reached out to lower the shutter completely.

Just then a voice came from outside—"Barber, could you give me a shave?"

Jayaram stopped.

Under the shutter he could see a pair of feet coated in dust and mud.

He raised the shutter again.

A lean, thin man stood outside.

The armpits of his kurta were damp.

The legs of his pyjama were dark with mud.

A small cloth bag was tucked under his arm.

His beard had grown for four or five days.

The man asked, "Am I very late?"

Jayaram looked at the clock.

"It is late, but a beard does not ask the time. Sit down."

The man came in.

Before sitting in the chair, he set the bag down.

Then he felt his pockets.

First the right.

Then the left.

Then the upper pocket of his kurta.

His face fell a little.

"May I tell you something?"

Jayaram unfolded the towel. "Tell me."

"I have no money with me just now."

Jayaram's hand paused for a moment.

The man hurried on, "Either my wallet fell out of the bag on the way, or I left it in my room at the inn. I cannot tell."

Jayaram said nothing.

The man began to rise.

"Then leave it. I'll see tomorrow."

Jayaram laid the towel over his shoulders.

"Stay seated."

"But the money—"

"I am shaving a beard, not settling accounts."

The man looked at him uncertainly.

Jayaram began working up the lather.

"Will you tell me your name?"

"Shashikant."

"Your native village?"

"For now, the inn. My home is toward Supaul."

"Work?"

Shashikant smiled a little.

"I look at papers."

Jayaram smiled too.

"Then you do harder work than I do. I look at beards, not papers."

As he applied the lather, he asked, "Are you new to the market?"

"Yes. I'll be here until tomorrow."

"Then stop worrying about repaying me. Who knows when we will meet again?"

Shashikant met his eyes in the mirror.

"That is precisely why I am worried."

Jayaram drew the razor.

"Does worrying fill a pocket?"

"Not even by one coin."

"Then keep your cheek still."

Both laughed.

Outside the shop, the tea seller was packing up his earthen cups.

Two bicycles went past on the road.

Jayaram cleared the first side of the beard.

Shashikant asked, "The shop looks old."

"From my father's time."

"Is it yours?"

Jayaram went quiet for a moment while rinsing the razor in water.

"The walls are mine. Half the land is mine; the other half rests on a loan."

Shashikant watched him in the mirror.

Jayaram changed the subject.

"Lift your chin."

But Shashikant asked, "Has the loan become heavy?"

Jayaram's brow tightened slightly.

"Do you examine papers, or people's heads too?"

"I have a habit of asking questions."

"Then I do not shave the beard of questions."

Again a smile came to both faces.

Jayaram cleared the lather under his chin.

Then, in a very casual voice, he said, "During Kamala's treatment I fell three instalments behind. The bank has sent a notice. If the account is not brought in order by the day after tomorrow, my share of the shop will go into the mortgage file."

Shashikant was silent for a while.

"Did you go to the bank?"

"I did."

"What did they say?"

"One file needs proof of the treatment, another an account of income, and a third the old deposit receipts. I have gathered everything. But the man handling my file said the decision would come from above."

"Do you keep all the papers together?"

"I'll take them again tomorrow."

"Then keep the papers complete."

Jayaram laughed.

"Did you come here for a shave or a loan?"

"Both need an edge."

"For that line, the shave is no longer free. It will cost two rupees extra."

Shashikant laughed openly for the first time.

"I have zero. Add two to zero and?"

"You are the man who looks at papers. You tell me."

"Still zero."

"Then that is that."

Jayaram made a second pass with the razor.

He ran a hand over the cheek to check.

A small rough patch remained in one place.

He lathered it again.

Shashikant said, "Since I have no money, you may make one pass less."

Jayaram turned serious.

"Should a beard be only half well done because there is less money?"

“That argument will not do.”

“Then be quiet.”

He cleaned that small patch too.

Then he wrung out a cloth soaked in warm water and laid it over Shashikant’s cheeks.

Shashikant closed his eyes.

For a few moments the shop was silent.

Outside, the clink of the tea seller’s last earthen cups could still be heard.

Jayaram removed the cloth.

“Now look.”

Shashikant looked in the mirror.

“Completely clean.”

“The beard was mine, the face yours. Credit half and half.”

Shashikant stood.

He tucked the bag under his arm.

Then once more he felt his pocket, as though money might appear by miracle.

Nothing.

“Write down my name. Shashikant Jha.”

Jayaram moved toward the shutter.

“I do not keep debts by writing down names.”

“Then when shall I repay you?”

“When you get a chance to do some small thing like this for someone else, free of charge.”

Shashikant stopped.

“Is that how an account is closed?”

“In my shop it is.”

Shashikant bowed his head.

“I agree to that accounting.”

He stepped outside.

Jayaram lowered the shutter.

When he reached home, Kamala asked, “Why are you late?”

As Jayaram washed his hands, he said, “The last customer.”

“Did you get paid?”

“Not a single coin.”

Kamala looked at him.

“Then what did you get?”

“A beard.”

Kamala smiled.

“The bank will take the shop, and you will go on shaving people for free.”

Placing a damp cloth on his son's forehead, Jayaram said, "Whether the bank takes the shop or not, I'll know tomorrow. Today I came home after cleaning one face."

In the morning Jayaram tied up the file.

The prescription for treatment.

The old deposit receipts.

The little ledger of the shop's income.

The land papers.

He tied them all in a red cloth and went to the bank.

Five people were already sitting in the bank's veranda.

One about a loan instalment.

One about a farmer card.

One to ask about his deposited money.

Jayaram sat with the bundle in his lap.

The wall clock struck ten.

An employee came out and said, "Jayaram the barber?"

Jayaram stood.

"Yes, I am Jayaram."

"Come inside. The regional loan officer will see your file."

Jayaram's stomach tightened.

He thought, "The bigger the word 'regional,' the bigger the trouble."

He entered the room.

Three men sat behind the desk.

In the middle, wearing a white kurta, was a familiar face.

Clean-shaven.

Smooth-cheeked.

Shashikant.

Jayaram stopped in the doorway.

Shashikant too was silent for a moment.

Then, in a very ordinary voice, he said, "Now we shall look at the file. Yesterday we looked at the beard."

The branch manager sitting beside him looked back and forth between Jayaram and Shashikant.

"You two know each other?"

Shashikant replied, "We met for the first time yesterday evening. That acquaintance will give him no advantage in the decision. The file will be examined under the rules."

Jayaram's shoulders loosened slightly.

He opened the red cloth.

He placed the papers on the desk.

Shashikant began reading them one by one.

From time to time he asked the branch manager questions.

“Why was the period of interrupted payment due to medical treatment not recorded?”

The manager checked the register.

“An application had been received, but the supporting proof was marked incomplete.”

Jayaram immediately held out the prescription.

“I had submitted this then as well.”

Shashikant looked at the date on the paper.

“This bears the receipt stamp.”

The manager turned the file again.

One page was folded double and caught in the middle.

He opened it.

That very page recorded the period of treatment.

Shashikant said nothing.

He merely straightened the page and laid it on the desk.

Then he examined the income ledger.

“Three instalments are overdue, but before that twenty-four instalments were paid on time.”

The manager nodded.

“That is on record.”

“Can the rescheduling provision be applied?”

The manager opened a booklet of rules.

He read for some time.

“Yes, if the period of medical treatment is accepted as certified.”

Shashikant pointed to the page.

“The proof was in the file. It was merely trapped inside a folded page.”

Jayaram blurted out, “Then the shop—?”

Shashikant stopped him.

“The shop is not going anywhere for now. The instalments will be rescheduled. The first payment will be next month.”

Jayaram gripped the back of the chair.

His fingers were trembling.

The branch manager said, “You will have to sign the new repayment schedule.”

Jayaram nodded.

A few moments later he looked at Shashikant.

“Yesterday’s shave—”

Shashikant interrupted at once. “Yesterday you gave me a shave. Today the file saved itself.”

“But you found the page.”

“The page was in the file. I merely opened the fold.”

Jayaram’s eyes grew moist.

He tried to laugh.
 "Then what is the charge for opening a fold?"
 Shashikant laughed too.
 "Add two to zero."
 Jayaram laughed aloud.
 The employee at the side understood nothing, but smiled anyway.
 The signatures were completed.
 Jayaram received the new instalment schedule.
 He tied the file again in the red cloth.
 As he was leaving, Shashikant stopped him.
 "One thing."
 "Tell me. I'm listening carefully."
 "I found my wallet at the inn."
 "Good."
 Shashikant put a hand into his pocket to take out money.
 Jayaram immediately caught his wrist.
 "Yesterday's account is closed."
 "But I—"
 "You told me: when you get the chance, do a small thing for someone else for free."
 Shashikant nodded.
 "Did I do that today?"
 Jayaram looked at the file.
 Shashikant turned serious.
 "I did nothing for free today. I applied the rules."
 Jayaram thought for a moment.
 "Then the account is still outstanding."
 "Let it remain outstanding."
 "When will you settle it?"
 "When I find a task that is not written in the rules."
 The two of them stood in the veranda and laughed.
 That evening Jayaram kept his shop open.
 His father's old wooden comb still hung on the wall.
 He placed the new instalment schedule safely in the chest, not behind the mirror.
 As he was lowering the shutter, a young man came running up.
 "Barber, am I too late? Can I get a shave?"
 Jayaram looked at the clock.
 "It is late."
 The young man felt his pocket and said, "I'm short of money."
 Jayaram spread the towel over the chair.
 "Sit first. A beard does not ask the time."

STORY 127

The Broken Watch

On a monsoon evening, the clouds had descended so low over the market that even while daylight remained, the tin roofs seemed to lie under darkness.

Amresh reached Dinanath's little shop with Madhavi's old wristwatch tucked beneath his arm.

Behind the glass at the front of the shop hung five or seven watches.

The hands of some were moving.

Some had stopped.

The inner workings of others had been opened out and laid on pieces of cloth.

Dinanath, a thick magnifying lens fitted over one eye, was tightening a screw in a pocket watch.

Amresh sat down.

Without raising his head, Dinanath asked, "Whose time has gone wrong?"

Amresh placed the watch before him.

"This time, don't mend the time. Mend the watch."

Dinanath looked up.

"Are those two different things?"

"One learns that only after coming to your shop."

Dinanath laughed.

The watch was old.

A thin round case.

A slanting scratch across the glass.

The leather strap was frayed at the edge.

The hour hand stood a little beyond five.

The minute hand rested on the first small mark after three.

Five sixteen.

Amresh had seen that time many times.

Whenever Madhavi wore the watch, its hands remained there.

At first Amresh had assumed the watch was broken.

Two or three times he had even told Madhavi, "Have it repaired."

Each time Madhavi had smiled and turned the conversation elsewhere.

Yesterday the strap had finally torn through.

Taking off the watch and placing it in Amresh's palm, she had said, "If you go to the market, bring a strap for it."

Amresh had asked, "Only the strap?"

Madhavi had not replied.

Amresh had taken that silence for permission.

He had thought to himself: the strap would be replaced, the glass polished, the fault inside corrected, and the watch would run again.

It would become a small gift.

Dinanath turned the watch over.

He ran a fingernail along the edge of the back cover.

He held it to his ear.

Then he tested the little winding crown.

His eyebrows rose slightly.

“Who told you this was broken?”

Amresh said, “It doesn’t run.”

“It doesn’t run, but it isn’t broken.”

“What sort of reckoning is that?”

Dinanath pointed to the crown.

“It has been deliberately pulled out.”

Amresh bent closer.

With the point of a needle, Dinanath lifted a very fine blue thread from beneath the crown.

“Look here. The thread has been wedged in so the crown cannot be pushed back in.”

Amresh kept looking at the thread.

It was so fine that an ordinary glance could scarcely have noticed it.

“So the watch was stopped?”

“Yes, deliberately.”

“At exactly what time?”

Dinanath looked at the hands.

“Five sixteen.”

The words slipped involuntarily from Amresh’s mouth: “Five sixteen...”

Dinanath looked at him.

“Does that time mean something to you?”

Amresh did not answer.

The first raindrop fell outside the shop.

A single tap on the tin.

Then another.

Dinanath asked, “Shall I start it?”

Amresh answered at once, “No.”

A faint smile came into Dinanath’s eyes.

“Then what shall I repair?”

“Change the strap.”

“The glass?”

“Leave the scratch.”

“The dust?”

“Wipe it off.”

“The time?”

Looking at the watch, Amresh said, “Let it stay where it is.”

Dinanath asked nothing more.

He removed the old strap.

For the replacement, he set four straps before Amresh.

Black, dark brown, light brown, and bluish.

Amresh chose the dark brown one.

Madhavi’s old strap had been almost the same colour.

Dinanath said, “A new thing should not be so new that it hides the old story.”

Amresh looked at him.

“Do all of you become philosophers from repairing watches?”

“No. People leave their watches here, and with them they leave their stories.”

“You don’t know this story.”

“Which is why I did not push the crown back in.”

By then the rain had grown heavy.

Amresh wrapped the watch in cloth and set off for home.

All the way, five sixteen kept circling in his mind.

He tried to remember many dates.

Madhavi’s birthday.

His own birthday.

The first time they had met by the river.

The first time they had gone to a book fair together.

The first letter he had given her.

No event clearly joined itself to five sixteen.

Their love had not begun by looking at the hands of a clock.

They had studied at the same high school, but their conversations began later.

Amresh had once taken some old question papers to Madhavi’s younger brother.

Through that pretext, conversation grew.

Conversation became waiting.

Waiting became belonging.

Belonging became discomfort within their households.

Madhavi’s father, Raghunath Jha, bore no hostility towards Amresh.

But where his daughter was concerned, his mind was full of large calculations.

Amresh’s income was small.

His elderly mother lived at home.

His younger brother was still studying.

Raghunath Babu had said, "Affection is one matter. Running a household is another."

Madhavi would argue.

Amresh spoke little.

For many months he never went beyond the outer veranda of Raghunath Babu's house.

Whenever he had some reason to visit, he called from the gate.

Madhavi would come outside.

Sometimes Raghunath Babu himself sat in the veranda and exchanged a few words with him.

But the inner courtyard seemed another frontier altogether.

Where five sixteen belonged among all this, Amresh could not understand.

The next day, when Madhavi returned from school, Amresh gave her the watch with its new strap.

Madhavi looked first at the strap.

She touched the leather with her finger.

Then she looked at the hands.

Five sixteen.

Her eyes rested on Amresh.

"You didn't start it?"

Amresh said, "Dinanath Kaka told me the watch had never been broken."

Madhavi fell silent.

"There was blue thread under the crown."

A smile appeared on Madhavi's lips.

"Is the thread still there?"

"Yes, it is."

"Then it is all right."

Amresh asked, "Why five sixteen?"

Madhavi did not answer at once.

She fastened the watch around her wrist.

The new strap looked slightly out of place beside the old case, but not awkward.

She looked out of the window.

After yesterday's rain, the mango leaves were shining.

Madhavi asked, "Where is that old black umbrella of yours?"

Amresh laughed.

"Is the answer about the watch hidden in the umbrella?"

"A little."

"The umbrella is at home."

"Do you remember the day one of its ribs pushed out?"

Amresh thought.

Rain.

The black umbrella.

The tip of one rib had pierced through the cloth.

That day he had gone to Raghunath Babu's house to return a book.

The rain had shown no sign of stopping even by evening.

Amresh had made it from the gate to the veranda, yet even after closing the umbrella he was wet.

Raghunath Babu had been sitting in the veranda.

Madhavi had brought tea from inside.

Putting the book forward, Amresh had said, "I'll go now."

Looking outside, Raghunath Babu had said, "In this rain?"

"Home is not far."

"If distance is small, that does not mean fever is far away."

Amresh had remained standing.

Raghunath Babu had then looked towards the inner doorway.

There was a wooden peg on the wall.

He had said, "Why are you holding the umbrella outside? Come in. Hang it on that peg."

At the time, Amresh had taken the sentence as an ordinary one.

He had shaken the umbrella, stepped inside, and hung it on the peg.

For the first time.

He had crossed the threshold from the veranda into the house.

The umbrella hung on the peg.

Raghunath Babu had said to Madhavi, "Bring one more cup of tea. He isn't leaving yet."

At that moment Madhavi had looked at her wrist.

Amresh's memory slowly opened.

He asked, "That very day?"

Madhavi nodded.

"Five sixteen?"

"Yes. That very evening."

"But that was only about hanging an umbrella."

"For you."

"For you?"

Madhavi laughed softly.

"For me, it was the first time Babu did not look at you as though you were an outsider."

Amresh fell silent.

Madhavi continued, "It is not as if Babu said yes to the marriage that day."

"He said yes three months later."

"Yes. But that yes, three months later, had begun earlier—on that single peg."

Amresh looked at the watch on Madhavi's wrist.

"So you stopped the watch?"

"I went inside after setting down the tea. I pulled out the crown and broke a blue thread from my shawl to wedge beneath it."

"You never told anyone?"

"Whom would I have told?"

"You could have told me."

"You would have taken the watch to be repaired."

They both burst out laughing together.

Amresh said, "True."

"And today you did take it."

"But now I have learnt."

Madhavi ran a finger over the scratch on the glass.

"Why didn't you have the scratch removed?"

"Dinanath Kaka asked me about that too."

"And what did you tell him?"

"I told him to leave it."

Madhavi looked at Amresh.

"So much wisdom in a single day?"

"It is a watch-repairer's shop. Something or other is bound to get repaired."

Madhavi laughed again.

Two days later it rained again.

Amresh reached Raghunath Babu's house.

This time they were to discuss the date of the wedding.

He had tied a strip of cloth around the old rib of the black umbrella and secured it.

He opened the gate and went inside.

Raghunath Babu sat in the veranda looking through a panji.

Amresh folded the umbrella and began to put it in a corner.

Raghunath Babu looked up.

"Why there? The peg inside is empty."

Without saying anything, Amresh carried the umbrella inside.

Madhavi was standing on the osara.

The watch on her wrist still showed five sixteen.

The wall clock inside struck six two.

Raghunath Babu said, "Madhavi, make tea. Today the discussion will be a long one."

As she went inside, Madhavi looked once at the watch on her wrist.

This time she did not touch its crown.

STORY 128

The Box of Sweets

It was evening in Madhubani market.

Shailaja stood outside a sweet shop, looking through the glass at the boxes arranged within.

From behind her, Devkant said, "Let us take plain peda. It will taste good and cost less too."

Shailaja shook her head. "We are going to Nirmala's house for the first time on such happy news. Plain peda will taste good, but it will look ordinary."

"Do sweets go into the mouth or into the eyes?"

"Into both."

Devkant laughed.

The shopkeeper brought out a square box of saffron makhana paak.

It was wrapped in deep red paper, stamped with gold along the edges, with a small lotus motif in the centre.

Shailaja fell silent for a moment when she heard the price.

Devkant looked at her.

"That much?"

The shopkeeper said, "The makhana is from the new harvest, and the ghee is pure as well."

Shailaja opened her little purse.

She counted the money again.

Devkant said quietly, "We still have to pay for the bamboo for the roof this month."

"Yes, I remember the account."

"Then why buy something so expensive?"

"Last time, at her brother-in-law's wedding, Nirmala said right in front of me, 'The gifts Shailaja brings always show her taste.'"

Devkant raised an eyebrow. "Was that praise or a challenge?"

"Take it as both."

The box was bought.

There was no card on the red wrapping on which to write a name.

When they reached home, Shailaja's thirteen-year-old daughter Ira wrote on a small piece of paper, "For Nirmala Mami — Ira."

She was about to stick it on top.

Shailaja stopped her. "Not on top. It will make it look ordinary."

Ira fixed the slip inside the lid, along the edge, with a little glue.

“Now open it and see?”

“Now it looks good.”

The shop’s golden ribbon had come loose on the way.

Ira took purple thread from the sewing box at home and tied it around all four sides.

Devkant said, “Will the purple thread lower its prestige or raise it?”

Shailaja glared at him.

Ira laughed.

That night Shailaja and Devkant reached Nirmala’s house.

News had arrived of Nirmala’s son Aniruddh’s appointment to a job.

People were coming and going in the house.

Taking the box in her hands, Nirmala said, “Oh, what was the need for all this?”

Shailaja replied, “The occasion calls for it.”

Nirmala weighed the box lightly on her fingers.

She looked at the red paper, the golden print and the lotus motif.

“It is very beautiful.”

Shailaja said casually, “Nothing special.”

Devkant cleared his throat.

Ira suppressed a laugh.

On the way home Devkant said, “Nothing special?”

Shailaja said, “One does not announce the price of a gift aloud.”

“But one adds it up completely in one’s mind.”

“Please be quiet.”

The box was not opened at Nirmala’s house that night.

There was already plenty of food.

Aniruddh said, “We will open it tomorrow.”

His younger sister Rama held the box to her nose and sniffed.

“I can smell saffron.”

Nirmala laughed. “Do not eat sweets with your nose.”

“Just one piece?”

“There are guests here now.”

Bhuvaneshwar said, “And after the guests leave?”

Nirmala lifted the box and placed it on a cupboard inside. “We shall see then.”

Bhuvaneshwar glanced once at his wife.

He understood that some other calculation was hidden inside the words ‘we shall see’.

In the morning Nirmala remembered that she had to visit Sukumari Devi, the sister of her elder sister-in-law.

It was the muh-dekhai ceremony for Sukumari Devi’s granddaughter.

Nirmala's husband Bhuvaneshwar said, "We can buy something on the way."

Nirmala opened the purse for household expenses.

Two days earlier, a trip to town for Aniruddh's papers had cost a great deal.

The coming and going of people at home had also increased.

Nirmala tied the purse shut again.

Her eyes went to the red box lying in the corner.

Bhuvaneshwar understood the look.

"No, not that one."

Nirmala said, "What do you mean, not that one?"

"What you received last night should not be passed on the next morning."

"Am I throwing the sweets away?"

"No, but—"

"Should I go to Sukumari Didi's house empty-handed?"

Bhuvaneshwar fell silent.

Nirmala picked up the box.

She looked at the purple thread.

"This thread looks a little too domestic."

"Sweets are eaten at home."

"A gift is eaten first by the eyes."

At that sentence Bhuvaneshwar laughed. "Where did you hear that?"

Nirmala did not answer.

From an old trunk she took out silver-coloured paper.

She wrapped it over the red paper.

She did not remove the purple thread; she tied green thread over it.

Bhuvaneshwar said, "So, another layer over prestige."

"This is neatness."

"Did the name change?"

"Where is there a name?"

There was no name on the outside of the lid.

Nirmala was reassured.

When she reached Sukumari Devi's house, she offered the box with great respect.

"Didi, this is for the child."

Sukumari Devi said, "More sweets in my house! Two trays came only yesterday."

Nirmala laughed. "There are children in the house. They will finish them."

"I heard the news about your son. It is very good."

Nirmala filled with pride.

After a while she returned home.

Sukumari Devi put the box in a corner.

Running a finger over the silver paper, she said, "Look at the wrapping people use these days. There may be less sweet inside, but the paper is heavy."

Mihira laughed. "Nani, open it and see."

"You have already eaten sweets three times since yesterday."

"These will be different."

"Every box looks different to you children; inside, the sugar is the same."

At noon her granddaughter Mihira asked again, "Nani, shall we open it?"

Sukumari Devi said, "Not now. The guests have left so many sweets that they will not be finished for three days."

In the evening she remembered Shailaja.

Shailaja's son Nachiketa was to leave for town the following week.

Sukumari Devi thought, "The boy is leaving home; let him take something sweet with him."

The next morning she reached Shailaja's house.

Shailaja was sorting paddy in the courtyard.

"Mausi! So early?"

"I felt like seeing you."

Sukumari Devi held out the silver-coloured box. "Keep this for Nachiketa."

Shailaja immediately drew back her hands. "What was the need for all this?"

From the osara Devkant called out, "The occasion calls for it."

Shailaja looked at him.

Devkant turned his face away.

The box came into the house.

Ira placed it on the table.

"Ma, this box is rather heavy."

"There are sweets inside. Of course it will be heavy."

Ira lifted one corner of the silver paper.

Red paper showed underneath.

"Ma."

"What did you see?"

"It is red underneath."

"There are many red boxes."

Ira untied the green thread.

She removed the silver paper.

On the red paper was a golden lotus.

Shailaja stopped sorting the paddy and stood up.

She remembered the price from that first evening—the box bought by postponing the bamboo for the roof, the red paper, the golden lotus, and Ira's purple thread.

For a moment she felt like wrapping the silver paper around it again and sending it to someone else without opening it.

But the thought itself made her laugh.

Devkant came in from the osara.

Ira said softly, "This is..."

Shailaja cut in at once, "It must be from the same shop."

Ira saw the piece of purple thread caught beneath the red paper.

"And this purple thread?"

Devkant's lips trembled.

Shailaja glared at him. "There is nothing to laugh about."

Ira opened the box.

The lid rose slowly.

Inside, along the edge, the little slip of paper was still stuck.

"For Nirmala Mami — Ira."

For a moment there was no sound in the house.

Then Devkant laughed so loudly that the brass lota on the osara rang.

Ira too doubled over with laughter.

At first Shailaja tried to remain serious.

Then her eyes went to the box's three layers—the purple thread, the green thread, the silver paper.

A smile came to her face as well.

"Three houses."

Devkant said, "And the same prestige."

"Two prestiges," Shailaja corrected him. "Mausi was not part of this game."

"True."

Ira counted the sweets.

Twelve pieces.

All exactly as they had been.

"Not even one is missing."

Devkant said, "Prestige does not make one hungry."

This time Shailaja laughed and lightly slapped his arm.

The matter remained within the house until noon.

In the evening Nirmala herself came.

She carried a small plate; she had brought some savoury snacks made at home to mark the news of Aniruddh's appointment.

Ira brought three pieces of makhana paak from inside.

Nirmala picked up one piece.

She bit into it and put it in her mouth.

For a moment her eyes went to the box.

The silver paper had been removed, but the red lotus was plainly visible.

Nirmala began chewing more slowly.

Shailaja asked casually, "How does it taste?"

"It tastes very good."

"We received it only yesterday."

Nirmala looked at Shailaja.

Ira ran inside, or else her laughter would have escaped.
 On the osara Devkant folded the newspaper up to cover his face.
 Nirmala asked softly, "From where?"
 "Sukumari Mausi brought it."
 Nirmala's hand stopped in mid-air.
 Then she too burst out laughing.
 "I thought that once the red paper was covered, the story would change too."
 Shailaja said, "I thought that if an expensive box went from my house, people would see my taste."
 Nirmala said, "They did see your taste. Three times."
 The two women went on laughing.
 Devkant said, "And where will the box go now?"
 Shailaja immediately opened the lid and emptied the remaining sweets onto a plate.
 "Nowhere now."
 Ira picked up the empty box.
 "Give it to me."
 "What will you do with it?"
 "I will keep the threads from my sewing box in it."
 Nirmala picked up the remaining piece of purple thread. "Keep this too."
 Shailaja gave her the green thread as well.
 Ira put both threads inside the empty box.
 As she closed the lid, she again saw her old little slip of paper—"For Nirmala Mami — Ira."
 She did not remove it.
 Devkant asked, "Why are you leaving that there?"
 Ira said, "If the box ever sets out somewhere again, it should not forget the way."
 This time everyone burst out laughing together.

STORY 129

A Small Advertisement

Niranjan Thakur emptied every coin from his pocket onto the desk in the little newspaper office.

Two twelve-rupee notes, one five-rupee note, and small change.

Twenty-nine rupees in all.

The clerk seated on the other side of the desk counted it again.

“Only this much?”

Niranjan tried to smile. “Will this much buy a small advertisement?”

The clerk read the lines written on the paper.

“Work wanted. I can keep accounts and ledgers, make copies, and write letters. Niranjan Thakur, Old Post Office Lane.”

He began counting the words.

“At this size, you are two rupees short.”

Niranjan felt through his pockets again.

An old railway ticket, a brass-coloured button, and an empty corner of cloth.

There was not a trace of cash left in his pockets.

“Cut two words.”

“Which words shall I cut?”

Niranjan looked at the line.

“Remove ‘letter-writing’.”

The clerk shook his head. “That is one word.”

“Remove ‘Old’.”

“Then the address may become incomplete.”

Niranjan thought for a while.

“In ‘Work wanted’, remove ‘wanted’.”

The clerk laughed. “Then the advertisement will sound like an order — ‘Work.’”

Niranjan laughed too.

In the end, “copies” was removed and “letter-writing” was shortened to “letters”.

Twenty-nine rupees was enough.

The clerk tore off a receipt and handed it to him.

“It will appear the day after tomorrow.”

Niranjan folded the receipt and tucked it inside his kurta.

When he stepped out of the office, his pocket was lighter, but his pace was a little quicker.

He had been looking for work for three months.

Balancing a ledger at one shop, accounts at another warehouse; applications somewhere, waiting somewhere else.

The answer was not exactly the same everywhere, but its meaning was nearly always the same.

“There is no place at present.”

His house stood at the last turn of Old Post Office Lane.

Two rooms, a small verandah, and a tulsi altar beside the doorway.

His mother sat on the verandah shelling peas.

The moment she saw Niranjana, she asked, “Did you get it printed?”

“Yes, I did.”

“How much is left?”

Niranjana spread both palms before her.

His mother looked at the empty hands and said nothing.

A pea rolled away to the corner of the verandah.

She rose, fetched it, and put it back.

“I will not go to the market tomorrow,” Niranjana said. “We will manage with whatever is in the house.”

His mother separated the pea pods and said, “Once an advertisement is printed, people do not come all the way to the house carrying work. Do not stop going out.”

“I will not.”

The day after tomorrow, early in the morning, Niranjana did not go to the square to buy the newspaper.

He had no money to buy it.

He stood beside the paan shop and read the public copy hanging there.

The first page, the second page, market prices, notices, obituaries.

Then, very low down, inside a black border, was his advertisement.

It was so small that if the eye missed it once, one had to search for it again.

“Work—accounts and ledgers, letters. Niranjana Thakur, Post Office Lane.”

Seeing his own name in print felt strange.

As though the paper had more faith in him than he had in himself.

That day there were two knocks at the door.

The first was the milkman.

The second was a neighbour’s child looking for a ball.

By evening there was no word of any work.

The next morning Niranjana made the rounds of three places.

A medicine shop, a grain warehouse, and a cloth shop.

At all three, the ledgers were already full and there was already someone to write in them.

On the way home, he felt a little angry with his advertisement.

It seemed as though twenty-nine rupees had become trapped in twelve words on a sheet of paper.

His mother understood the moment she saw his face.

"The newspaper is not at fault," she said.

"Did I blame it?"

"Your face did."

Niranjan laughed.

After noon, a bicycle bell rang at the door.

Once.

Then twice in quick succession.

Niranjan went outside.

At the gate, a thin, dark-complexioned young man was propping up a bicycle.

A dusty bag hung from his shoulder, and sweat shone on his forehead.

He looked at Niranjan for two moments.

"You are Niranjan?"

Niranjan was about to answer when he recognised the voice.

"Harinath?"

Both laughed at once.

Harinath left the bicycle and embraced him.

"Your moustache has finally become a real moustache."

Niranjan said, "And half your hair has gone on leave."

His mother came out from inside.

Harinath immediately bent to touch her feet.

"After so many years?" she asked.

Harinath's laughter softened a little.

"The fault is mine, Ma."

They all sat on the verandah.

Niranjan brought water.

Harinath put a hand into his bag.

Niranjan thought he must have brought sweets.

Instead, Harinath took out an old cloth pouch.

Its knot was tied with red thread.

He placed it in front of Niranjan.

"What is in this pouch?"

"An old account of yours."

Niranjan opened the pouch.

There were notes and coins inside.

Old and new, both kinds.

"Why this money?"

Harinath looked into his eyes.

“Two hundred and seventy-five.”
 Niranjan’s hand went still.
 The number brought back a day from long ago.
 Their final year at school.
 The last date for paying Harinath’s admission fee for industrial training.
 Harinath’s father had been ill.
 There had been no cash at home.
 Niranjan had given him the two hundred and seventy-five rupees he had saved.
 He had meant to buy an old dictionary with that money.
 The dictionary was never bought.
 Harinath got his admission.
 After that, life carried the two of them onto different roads.
 Harinath went away for training.
 Niranjan’s family left their old house and moved into this lane.
 A few letters came, and then the letters stopped.
 The matter of the debt slowly faded from memory.
 Niranjan pushed the pouch back towards Harinath.
 “I had forgotten this.”
 “I had not.”
 “Then why so many years?”
 Harinath looked a little embarrassed.
 “At first I had no money.”
 Harinath paused.
 “When I had money, I did not have your address.”
 Then, with a faint laugh, he added, “When I found the address, I did not have the courage.”
 Niranjan stared at him. “Courage to return money?”
 “When a debt is not repaid on time, the shame grows larger than the amount.”
 His mother carried the empty pea basket inside, as though leaving the two friends space to talk.
 Niranjan asked, “How did you find my address?”
 Harinath took a folded newspaper from his kurta pocket.
 The small advertisement inside the black border had been circled in red ink.
 “I read it at a tea shop.”
 Niranjan looked at the advertisement.
 “Have you brought news of work?”
 Harinath shook his head.
 “Not yet.”
 “Then the advertisement is half successful.”
 “Why half successful?”

"I have not found work."

Harinath placed the pouch back on his palm.

"But you found an old account."

Niranjan laughed.

He opened the pouch and counted the money again.

Two hundred and seventy-five.

Exactly that much.

Harinath also took a grubby old slip from the pouch.

It was the old fee receipt from the training centre.

On the back, in faded ink, was written: "Niranjan—275."

Niranjan recognised the handwriting.

"You have kept this all these years?"

Harinath said, "It was less an account-paper than a marker for finding you."

Niranjan handed the slip back to him.

"Then you keep it."

"Where is the interest?" he joked.

Harinath replied at once, "The interest was very expensive."

"How so?"

"We did not meet for all these years. If that is not interest, what is?"

Niranjan's laughter softened.

He kept the pouch with him.

"All right. Principal accepted."

"And the interest?"

"For interest, do not lose touch again."

Harinath raised a hand in agreement.

A little later, the two went out for a walk as far as the turn of the lane.

Harinath now worked repairing irrigation machines in a nearby town.

It was not his own shop; he worked for someone else for wages.

"I do not have work to give you," he said plainly.

"I did not ask."

"Your face did."

Niranjan laughed.

They stopped for tea at the turn.

Niranjan put a hand into his pocket, then looked at Harinath.

"Tea is on me now."

"With the money from the old debt?"

"Once money has come back, it no longer keeps its old name."

Harinath said, "That is a good principle."

The tea seller set down two glasses.

Harinath opened the same copy of the newspaper again.

"Will you advertise again?"

"Yes. I have already arranged it."

“Bigger this time?”

Niranjan read his little advertisement.

“No. It will stay small.”

“Why keep it small?”

“A big advertisement does not guarantee work.”

Harinath took out a red pen.

“Add one word—‘immediately’.”

Niranjan snatched the pencil from him.

“One word costs money.”

The two friends laughed again.

That evening Niranjan reached the newspaper office.

The same clerk sat at the desk.

He recognised Niranjan.

“Did you find work?”

Niranjan placed twenty-nine rupees before him.

“No. There is no news of work.”

The clerk raised his eyebrows.

“Then again?”

Niranjan placed a new sheet of paper beside the old receipt.

“The advertisement did not search only for work.”

“What else did it find?”

Outside the doorway, Harinath stood holding his bicycle.

Niranjan looked towards him.

“An account eight years old.”

The clerk did not understand, but he smiled.

He began counting the words in the advertisement again.

This time Niranjan did not ask him to cut a single word.

STORY 130

The Blue Pen

In the pale light of dawn, Mithilesh Jha opened his admit card once again.

He looked at his name once more.

The roll number was there.

The examination centre.

The time.

He had already checked everything three times the previous day.

Even so, his finger kept folding the corner of the paper.

Across the courtyard, Raghav Jha was filling a lota with water.

He looked at Mithilesh and smiled.

“Is the admit card still there?”

Mithilesh folded the paper.

“The paper is still there. My heartbeat is increasing.”

Raghav set down the lota and came over to him.

“Which chapter did you leave out last night?”

“None.”

“Then which chapter is this fear written in?”

Mithilesh tried to smile.

“That chapter is outside the book.”

Raghav went inside.

He returned carrying a small wooden box.

As soon as he opened its lid, the smell of old paper drifted out.

Inside lay two certificates, a brass pin, and a deep-blue pen.

There was a crescent-shaped scratch on one part of the pen's body.

Mithilesh recognized it at once.

“This is your lucky pen.”

Raghav picked it up.

“Today it is yours.”

Mithilesh drew back his hand.

“No. You took this to your first selection examination.”

“So?”

“So it should stay with you.”

Raghav placed the pen on Mithilesh's admit card.

“If there is luck in this pen, it will serve you today. If there isn't, at least I will learn to let go of my attachment to it.”

Mithilesh laughed.

“A lucky pen, and advice for free as well?”

“The fee for the advice comes later.”

Mithilesh took the pen in his hand.

Its thin brass-coloured clip was slightly bent.

His fingernail caught on the crescent-shaped scratch.

That scratch was an old mark known to both friends.

Five years earlier, while returning from the library, Raghav's bicycle had fallen.

The pen had scraped against a piece of gravel on the road.

That evening, the two of them had sat on the veranda and rubbed oil over the scratch.

The scratch had not disappeared.

Raghav had said, “Let it remain. Things that keep moving always carry something written on their bodies.”

Today Mithilesh remembered that very sentence.

“Is there ink in it?”

Raghav paused for a moment.

“There should be.”

“Should be?”

“I've kept it in the box for a long time.”

Mithilesh put the cap back on.

“Lucky things are not tested before an examination.”

“Where is that rule written?”

“In the chapter outside the book.”

Both of them laughed.

The examination centre was in the old training building at Laheriasarai.

A crowd of candidates had gathered outside the gate.

Some held bundles of papers.

Some had formulas moving silently on their lips.

Some stood with their eyes closed.

Mithilesh touched his admit card once again.

The blue pen was in the upper pocket of his kurta.

Raghav had come as far as the gate.

“Going in?”

“Yes, going in.”

“Spend the first five minutes reading the questions.”

“Will you stay outside?”

“Not here. I'll go and have tea. I am not going to stand guard over your fear.”

Mithilesh laughed again.

As he went through the gate, his steps already felt lighter.

Long desks stood in rows inside the examination hall.

Mithilesh's seat was by the window.

Outside, the leaves of an ashoka tree were stirring.

The invigilator distributed the answer books.

"No name. Only the roll number."

Mithilesh uncapped the blue pen.

He set the nib to the paper.

A tiny blue dot appeared.

He wrote the first digit of his roll number.

Halfway through the second digit, the line stopped.

Mithilesh tried again.

Not a single mark appeared.

He rubbed the nib against a corner of the paper.

A thin line appeared and immediately ran dry.

His heart gave a sudden thud.

All around him, the soft rustle of pens moving across paper had begun.

The invigilator was distributing the question papers.

Mithilesh opened the pen and looked at the nib.

A blue stain came onto his finger.

Still the pen would not write.

For a moment, it seemed to him that Raghav's luck had been left outside the door.

Then his eyes fell upon the body of the pen.

The crescent-shaped scratch.

That old mark from the fall.

Mithilesh's breathing steadied a little.

He knew the story of this pen's luck.

Before his first selection examination, Raghav had failed three practice tests.

On all those nights, it had been Mithilesh who made him work through the arithmetic problems again.

One night, in frustration, Raghav had even flung the pen onto the table.

Mithilesh had picked it up and said, "Quarrelling with the pen won't solve the problem."

Later, that same Raghav began calling this pen lucky.

In truth, the pen was not expensive.

Raghav had bought it from a stationery shop beside an old-book shop.

In the first month, its nib had to be cleaned twice.

Once, its brass clip had come loose.

Mithilesh himself had tightened its tiny screw with the point of a needle.

Even so, from the day the result came out, Raghav began keeping it separately in the box.

The name "lucky" had first been given to it jokingly by Raghav's younger sister.

The name stuck.

Gradually, the ordinary history of the pen turned into a small story in people's minds.

Mithilesh knew all of this.

Yet here in the examination hall, merely seeing that blue body made his friend's confidence feel close at hand.

For the first time, Mithilesh could not laugh at that thought.

The invigilator reached his desk.

"Any difficulty?"

Mithilesh showed him the pen.

"The pen has stopped."

The invigilator took an ordinary black pen from his bag and handed it to him.

"Here. The examination isn't running away."

Mithilesh thanked him.

He did not place the blue pen on top of the answer book; he set it in the right-hand corner of the desk.

With the black pen, he completed his roll number.

He opened the question paper.

At the very first question, his heart began beating fast again.

He read the second.

Then the third as well.

At the fourth question, his finger stopped.

It was the same kind of arithmetic problem in which he had repeatedly made mistakes three months earlier.

On his practice sheet, Raghav had drawn a circle and written: "First the quantity, then the rate."

Mithilesh wrote two small words in the left-hand corner of the paper.

"Quantity. Rate."

And he began the calculation.

The first answer was completed.

Then the second.

In the middle of the examination, the blue pen rolled off the desk once.

Mithilesh picked it up but did not put it into his pocket.

He placed it back in the corner.

By then he no longer needed the pen to write.

Its mere presence was enough.

In the final half-hour, Mithilesh read through his answers again.

He corrected two calculations.

He crossed out one line and rewrote it.

The final bell rang.

The answer books were collected.

When Mithilesh came outside, the blue pen was in his pocket and there was a blue stain on his finger.

Raghav was not standing in front of the gate.

He was sitting at the tea stall opposite, holding a clay cup.

As soon as Mithilesh reached him, Raghav stood up.

“How did it go?”

Mithilesh placed the blue pen in front of him.

Raghav's smile vanished.

“Why are you giving this back?”

“Your lucky pen wrote one digit and then went off to rest.”

“What are you saying?”

Raghav opened the pen.

He rubbed it on a piece of paper.

This time too, no mark appeared.

He pressed harder.

A single blue dot.

Raghav clutched his head.

“I didn't test it.”

“Neither did I.”

“Then the examination?”

“With a black pen.”

Raghav was silent for a few moments.

“Weren't you frightened?”

Mithilesh picked up the clay cup.

“At first, yes.”

“And then?”

Mithilesh ran his finger over the scratch on the pen.

“Then I saw this mark.”

Raghav looked at the scratch.

“The bicycle one?”

“Yes. Go inside.”

“What did that do?”

“It reminded me that your luck too had fallen three times in practice tests.”

Raghav stared at him for a moment, then laughed so loudly that even the tea seller looked over.

“Was today the day to say that?”

“The pen said it today.”

Together they took the pen to the old pen-repairer in the market.

The elderly craftsman removed the nib and put it into a small glass bowl.

Inside it was a thin crust of dried blue ink.

“Has it not been used for a long time?”

Raghav said, “It was kept in a box.”

The craftsman made a faint sound through his nose.

“The tube of a pen dries if it is kept away. Keep using it.”

Mithilesh looked at Raghav.

Raghav said, “Yes, yes, now I’ll pay for the advice too.”

The craftsman did not understand.

The two friends laughed again.

Three weeks later, the result list was posted on the office notice board.

Mithilesh first searched for his roll number from the top.

It was not there.

He began looking again from the bottom.

Raghav was reading the list from behind his shoulder.

Suddenly his finger stopped at a line in the middle.

“Look here.”

Mithilesh read it.

It was his roll number.

He said nothing.

Neither did Raghav.

For that moment, the noise of the crowd seemed far away.

Mithilesh put his hand into his pocket.

The blue pen was not there.

After it had been repaired, he had returned it to Raghav.

Raghav took the pen from his own pocket.

“In case you need to sign something?”

Mithilesh looked at the pen.

“Test it first.”

Raghav did not write on an empty corner of the notice board; he ran the pen across his own palm.

A deep blue line appeared.

“It works now.”

Mithilesh laughed.

“Good. Your luck is safe again.”

Raghav held out the pen to him.

“Keep it.”

Mithilesh shook his head.

“No. On the day of the examination, it wrote one digit. I wrote the rest.”

Raghav put the pen back into his pocket.

“So it is no longer lucky?”

Mithilesh looked once more at his roll number on the notice board.

“Why not? It wrote one digit correctly.”

Raghav laughed.

The two of them walked out of the crowd.

By then, the blue stain from examination day was no longer on Mithilesh's finger.

But the crescent-shaped scratch on the pen remained clear in his memory.

STORY 131

The Wooden Horse

In the morning, the sunlight had reached only halfway across the courtyard.

Bholanath the carpenter sat beneath the veranda, turning three pieces of jackfruit wood over in his hands.

One piece was suitable for the horse's body.

The neck could be shaped from the second.

The third piece was thin, but it would not yield all four wheels.

His son Santosh stood leaning against a pillar of the veranda, watching the work.

"Is it going to be for me?"

Bholanath did not look up.

"The wood is asking whether it should become something for you or something for the stove."

Santosh laughed.

"Tell the wood I am not a stove."

The corner of Bholanath's mouth moved.

The chisel began to work.

Thin curls of wood fell one after another.

By noon, the horse's back had taken shape.

Its neck was slightly crooked.

Santosh said, "It is looking at me."

"A horse looks towards the road."

"Then shall we give it a road?"

"First it needs feet."

Bholanath began cutting four round wheels.

Three of the wheels were made of jackfruit wood.

For the fourth, the wood fell short.

He cut a round piece from an old neem plank.

The neem wheel was a little darker than the other three.

Santosh asked, "Why aren't all four the same colour?"

Bholanath said, "To run, a wheel needs roundness, not colour."

By evening, all four wheels of the horse were turning.

Bholanath cut a thin strip of brass and fitted it at the front of the axle.

The horse's tail was made from a small tuft of red thread.

Instead of painting it, he gave the wood a thin coat of mustard oil.

The wood's own colour came alive.

Santosh picked up the horse and ran off with it.

“Slowly.”

“It’s a horse, not a goat.”

“It may be a horse, but I made all four of its wheels.”

Santosh tied a string to it and pulled it around the courtyard.

At every turn, the neem wheel made a soft “tak.”

Santosh liked the sound.

That night the horse lay beside his pillow.

For the first time that night, Bholanath shivered.

At first Santosh thought he must simply be tired.

The next day the fever rose.

On the third day Bholanath could not lift his chisel.

The doctor at the village health centre wrote out a two-page prescription.

Some of the medicines were available at the centre.

Two had to be bought outside.

Bholanath folded the prescription and placed it beside the cot.

“I’ll get them tomorrow.”

Santosh asked, “How much do they cost?”

“What business is that of yours?”

“They teach arithmetic at my school too.”

Bholanath did not laugh.

“One hundred and seventy-six.”

There was not that much cash in the house.

He had made two benches for someone, but payment would come only after the paddy from that man’s field was sold.

The paddy was still in the granary.

Bholanath said, “It can wait two days.”

Santosh looked at the prescription.

Then he looked at the wooden horse lying beside the pillow.

The Bargachhiya market was held on Fridays.

Early in the morning Santosh wrapped the horse in a cloth and put it inside his bag.

His mother Gauri thought he was going to school.

He left the school road and turned towards the market.

The market had not fully awakened yet.

Vegetable sellers were arranging their baskets.

The woman who sold earthen pots was dusting them.

In one corner Habib Mian was opening his travelling toy stall.

Bamboo whistles, clay birds, wooden spinning tops and cloth balls hung there.

Santosh stood at a distance.

Habib Mian noticed him.

“What have you come to sell?”
 Santosh took the horse out of his bag.
 Habib Mian first examined the horse's back.
 Then he spun its wheels.
 The neem wheel made a “tak.”
 “Why is this one wheel a different colour?”
 “The jackfruit wood ran out.”
 “Who made it?”
 “My father.”
 “How much do you want for it?”
 Santosh's throat went dry.
 He had worked out the amount during the night.
 “Two hundred.”
 Habib Mian laughed.
 “For that much I could buy three spinning tops.”
 “Three spinning tops are not a horse.”
 Habib Mian spun the wheel again.
 “One hundred and twenty.”
 Santosh moved the horse back towards his bag.
 “Then I don't want to sell it.”
 “One hundred and fifty.”
 Santosh remained silent.
 “One hundred and seventy.”
 Santosh remembered the price of the medicines.
 One hundred and seventy-six.
 “One hundred and eighty.”
 Habib Mian looked at him for a few moments.
 Then he ran a finger along the underside of the horse's belly.
 Bholanath had cut three thin diagonal lines there with his chisel.
 They were his maker's mark.
 Habib Mian said, “One hundred and eighty. But not the bag.”
 Santosh laughed for the first time.
 “The bag isn't for sale.”
 Eighteen ten-rupee notes came into his palm.
 The horse moved onto Habib Mian's cloth.
 The neem wheel made another “tak.”
 Santosh went straight from the market to the medicine shop.
 He bought the two packets of medicine.
 Four rupees remained.
 He put the four rupees into his pocket and went home.
 Bholanath lay on the cot with his eyes closed.
 Santosh placed the medicine beside his pillow.

Bholanath opened his eyes.

"Where did this come from?"

"From the market."

"How much did the medicine cost?"

"One hundred and seventy-six."

"The money?"

Santosh was silent for a few moments.

Bholanath's eyes went to the place where the horse used to lie at night.

The place was empty.

He looked at Santosh again.

"The horse?"

"It went to see the market."

Bholanath's eyes narrowed slightly.

"You sold it?"

Santosh nodded.

"For how much?"

"One hundred and eighty."

Bholanath asked at once, "You didn't lower the price, did you?"

Santosh was surprised.

"No. He first offered one hundred and twenty."

A faint smile came to Bholanath's fevered face.

"Good. Never lower the price of your work."

Santosh took the four rupees from his pocket and placed them on the cot.

"These were left over."

Bholanath said, "Keep them."

"Why these four rupees?"

"The price of the horse's string."

Santosh put the four rupees back into his pocket.

A week later, the fever began to subside.

Ten days later Bholanath could sit beneath the veranda again.

He took the chisel in his hand, but on the first day he only examined its edge.

On the second day he levelled one leg of a bench.

On the third he made a small wooden disc.

Santosh asked, "Will you make a horse?"

Bholanath said, "I can."

"Not another one yet."

"Why not another one yet?"

"That first horse must still be seeing the market."

Bholanath said nothing.

Meanwhile, a month passed.

The rains came.

Then the sun returned.
 The smell of jackfruit wood began to settle beneath the veranda once again.
 One afternoon Habib Mian arrived carrying his wooden chest.
 One corner of the chest had split.
 An iron hinge was loose.
 "Brother Bholanath, save this for me."
 Bholanath turned the chest over and examined it.
 "It will take two days."
 "The next market is tomorrow."
 "Then I'll do it by tonight."
 Habib Mian opened the chest.
 Inside were whistles, spinning tops, small drums and cloth balls.
 As he moved the things aside, a wooden horse rolled out.
 The dark neem wheel struck the ground with a "tak."
 Santosh was writing his lesson in another corner of the veranda.
 His pen stopped.
 Bholanath picked up the horse.
 There were three diagonal lines beneath its belly.
 The red-thread tail had now turned grey with dust.
 One axle was slightly loose.
 Bholanath asked only, "Didn't it sell?"
 Habib Mian laughed.
 "Twice, two different people picked it up. They saw three wheels of one colour and one of another, and put it back."
 Santosh came closer slowly.
 "Does it still make the 'tak' sound?"
 Habib Mian recognized him.
 "Ah, your horse!"
 "It's yours now."
 Habib Mian showed him the loose wheel.
 "Tighten this too. Then I'll sell it."
 Bholanath nodded.
 By evening, the corner of the chest had been replaced.
 A new wooden strip had been fitted.
 The hinge was tight again.
 Bholanath drove a thin bamboo peg into the horse's axle.
 The neem wheel began to turn smoothly again.
 Habib Mian returned before nightfall.
 "How much?"
 Bholanath told him the amount.
 Habib Mian searched his pouch.
 He was short of cash.

“Half now, half at the next market?”

Bholanath said, “That will do.”

Habib Mian lifted the chest.

The horse was resting on top.

He took two steps, then stopped again.

“Wait. Let me say something.”

“Go ahead.”

“This horse has been making the rounds of three markets with me. People look at it, but no one buys it.”

Bholanath remained silent.

“Make me four spinning tops. I’ll take them to the next market. I leave this horse here. Accounts even?”

Bholanath looked at Santosh.

Santosh was looking not at the horse, but at Habib Mian.

“What size should the four tops be?”

Habib Mian showed the measure with his fingers.

“About this size. Two with red thread, two with green.”

Bholanath calculated silently.

“Even.”

Habib Mian placed the horse beneath the veranda.

“Then it is yours again.”

Bholanath said, “No. It is part of the account.”

“Call it the account, then.”

He left.

Santosh did not pick up the horse for a long time.

Bholanath kept putting away his chisels.

At last Santosh asked, “May I have it?”

Bholanath said, “First see whether the axle is tight.”

Santosh tied on the string.

The horse moved across the courtyard.

The three jackfruit-wood wheels turned silently.

The neem wheel made a “tak.”

Santosh stopped.

“The sound is still there.”

Bholanath said, “Neem keeps its own colour, and its own sound.”

Over the next two days Bholanath made four spinning tops.

Santosh tied red and green thread to them.

On market day Habib Mian took the tops away.

He counted the account once more.

Neither man spoke of doing the other a favour.

The wooden horse remained beneath the veranda.

Santosh no longer kept it beside his pillow.

It found a place on top of Bholanath's toolbox.

When small children from the neighbourhood came, Santosh would bring the horse down for them.

When the play was over, he wiped it with a cloth and put it back on top.

One evening Bholanath asked, "What did your horse learn at the market?"

Santosh said as he wound up the string, "Not to lower its price."

Bholanath laughed.

"Anything else?"

Santosh pushed the horse forward once.

The neem wheel made a "tak."

"Not to forget the way home."

Bholanath said nothing.

He began measuring round pieces of wood for four new wheels.

In the evening beneath the veranda, the old horse stood still.

But on its one dark wheel, the dust of the market still clung like a faint line.

STORY 132

The Sewing Machine

The thin morning sunlight passed through the lattice of the window and made a square of light on the sewing table.

Leela had spread a piece of blue cloth in that light and was working.

A fine chalk line ran along the edge of the cloth.

The foot pedal moved in a steady rhythm.

Now and then the belt slipped a little.

Then Leela stopped her foot, lifted the belt back into place with her hand, and the needle began moving again.

Her husband, Harinarayan, stood at the doorway watching all this.

“You kept it running so late last night too.”

Leela did not take her eyes off the cloth.

“I have two kurtas to deliver tomorrow.”

“Doesn’t your foot hurt?”

“A foot’s work is to move; a mouth’s work is to ask questions.”

Harinarayan laughed.

In a wooden box beneath the table lay the head of another old sewing machine.

That machine had not run for a year.

Its shuttle was broken.

Its wheel jammed.

The old machine head had come from Leela’s parental home with the thought that “some part might come in useful someday.”

Harinarayan had cleaned it several times.

But not a single useful part had ever come out of it.

That morning Harinarayan looked once at the box.

Then he went out without saying anything.

It was Harinarayan’s birthday that day.

He did not like any grand celebration of his birthday.

What Leela liked even less was the way he always brushed everything aside by saying, “I don’t want anything.”

This time Leela had made up her mind.

A gamchha with a red border.

Two bowls of kheer.

Two friends in the evening.

That much celebration would be enough.

But there was little cash in the house tin.
 Two customers from the previous week had postponed payment.
 One had said he would pay after the paddy was sold.
 There was a wedding in the other's house; payment would come later.
 Leela counted the outstanding dues and smiled.
 "If it were my birthday, I could celebrate by writing my name in chalk."
 But she had already decided to buy the gamchha for Harinarayan.
 Before noon, she stopped sewing.
 She wrapped the unfinished piece of the blue kurta in cloth and put it aside.
 She detached the machine head from the table.
 The wooden table stood empty.
 The workplace suddenly looked unfamiliar.
 Leela called her neighbour Renuka.
 "Will you come with me for a while?"
 Renuka looked at the machine head.
 "Where?"
 "To the women's cooperative."
 Renuka raised her eyebrows.
 "How many days will it remain pledged?"
 "Five or seven days. I'll redeem it as soon as the next payment comes."
 Renuka said nothing.
 Together they wrapped the machine head in cloth.
 At the cooperative, an article offered as security was not weighed; it was inspected.
 Half of the golden vine pattern was still visible on the black body of the machine.
 The woman keeping the register turned the wheel to test it.
 "Does it run?"
 Leela said, "It was running until this morning."
 "Seven hundred."
 Leela thought for a moment.
 "Seven hundred is acceptable."
 A receipt was made out.
 The machine went into the inner room.
 Seven hundred rupees came into Leela's hands.
 From that money she bought a gamchha for forty-five rupees.
 She bought half a seer of milk, rice, jaggery, and cardamom.
 The total expense came to one hundred and ten rupees.
 She folded the remaining five hundred and ninety rupees and put them in an old red purse.
 "This is the machine's money," she told Renuka.
 "Then what about the birthday?"

"Is one hundred and ten rupees too little for a birthday?"

Renuka laughed.

At that same time, Harinarayan was at Badri the mechanic's shop at the other end of the market.

Badri sold sewing-machine motors, belts, pedals, and old parts.

Leela's old, broken machine head lay on the table.

Badri turned its wheel.

The wheel made half a turn and jammed.

"This won't run."

Harinarayan said, "Did I bring it to make it run?"

"Then why did you bring the machine?"

"For parts."

Badri turned the machine over and examined it.

"Six hundred and twenty."

Harinarayan did not agree at once.

"Seven hundred."

"Six hundred and twenty."

"Six hundred and fifty."

Badri shrugged.

"Six hundred and twenty, and I'll give you the motor belt at half price."

Harinarayan thought.

"All right. At that price."

The old machine was sold.

Six hundred and twenty rupees came into his hands.

He placed five hundred rupees back in Badri's hand.

"Advance for a new motor."

Badri wrote his name in the register.

"The motor will be here by tomorrow evening."

"Not tomorrow. Five days later."

"Why a delay of five days?"

"I have to arrange the rest of the money."

Badri wrote out a receipt.

Harinarayan folded it and put it in the inside pocket of his shirt.

One hundred and twenty rupees remained in his outer pocket.

He started home.

As soon as he reached home that evening, the first thing Harinarayan saw was the empty sewing table.

He stopped at the doorway.

The unfinished blue kurta lay on the table.

The chalk was there.

The scissors were there.

The machine was not.

“Leela?”

A voice came from inside, “Wash your hands and face. Don’t ask yet.”

“Where is the machine?”

“Hands and face first.”

“Has the machine gone to wash its hands and face?”

Leela came out laughing.

In her hands was the gamchha with the red border.

“Happy birthday.”

Harinarayan took the gamchha, but his eyes remained on the empty table.

“Did this gamchha cost the machine?”

“The gamchha cost forty-five.”

“Then the machine?”

Leela took out the red purse.

And the pledge receipt.

“A guest for seven days.”

Harinarayan read the receipt.

Then he looked at Leela’s face.

Then at the receipt again.

“You pledged the machine?”

“I’ll redeem it.”

“When?”

“As soon as the two customers pay.”

Harinarayan sat down on the cot.

For a few moments he said nothing.

Leela thought he would be angry.

But suddenly Harinarayan began to laugh.

Leela glared at him.

“What is so funny?”

Harinarayan took another receipt from the inside pocket of his shirt.

Leela read it.

‘Motor - advance: five hundred.’

She turned the receipt over and read it again.

“Whose motor is this?”

“Your machine’s.”

Leela looked at the empty table.

Then at the receipt.

“A motor for a machine that isn’t in the house?”

Harinarayan laughed again.

“That is exactly the question I am asking now.”

Leela laid the receipt on the table.

“Where did you get five hundred?”

Harinarayan pointed with his eyes toward the empty box beneath the table.

Leela looked there too.

The head of the old broken machine was gone.

"You sold it?"

"If we call that a machine, machines themselves will be offended. It had been sleeping in the box for a year."

"How much did you get?"

"Six hundred and twenty."

"Five hundred into the motor?"

"One hundred and twenty is still in my pocket."

Leela fell silent for a moment.

Then she opened the red purse.

She placed five hundred and ninety rupees on the table.

"Five hundred and ninety."

Harinarayan added his one hundred and twenty.

Together they counted the money.

Seven hundred and ten.

Leela looked at the pledge receipt.

"It will take seven hundred and ten to redeem the machine."

Harinarayan said, "Then the birthday accounts balance."

Leela glared at him.

"The kheer hasn't even been made yet."

"Kheer later. First the machine."

It was almost closing time at the cooperative.

The two of them walked quickly.

Leela had draped the new red-bordered gamchha over Harinarayan's shoulder.

From time to time he wiped his sweat with it.

"The gift is useful," he said.

"We'll know once the machine comes back."

When they reached the cooperative, the gate was half closed.

The woman who kept the register was gathering the papers from outside.

Leela handed her the receipt.

"So soon?"

"The empty table didn't look right at home."

The woman smiled.

Seven hundred and ten rupees were counted out.

The machine came out again, wrapped in cloth.

Harinarayan lifted it.

Leela said, "Careful. This is the post-birthday machine."

Harinarayan said, "And the debt is from before the birthday."

Back home, the machine was seated on the table again.

Leela fitted the belt.

She turned the wheel.
 The needle went up and down twice.
 The unfinished blue kurta was still there.
 Harinarayan hung the gamchha on a peg.
 “Will there be kheer or not?”
 Leela looked at the clock.
 “The two friends will be here soon.”
 “Don’t tell them the story of the machine.”
 “Why not tell the story?”
 “The kheer will grow cold.”
 Leela laughed.
 That night four bowls of kheer were made.
 Two friends came.
 They saw the gamchha.
 They wished him a happy birthday.
 No one knew about the empty box.
 Leela put the motor receipt in the spice tin.
 The pledge receipt went into the machine’s small drawer.
 Five days later Badri the mechanic arrived with the motor.
 He fixed it to the right corner of the wooden table.
 A new belt was fitted.
 The wire ran up to the hook on the wall.
 Leela paid the remaining amount from the sewing payments she had received over the previous three days.
 Badri turned the wheel by hand.
 Then he switched on the motor.
 For the first time, the machine ran without the pedal.
 Leela immediately slowed it down.
 “Not so fast.”
 Harinarayan said, “Until yesterday your foot was hurting.”
 “My foot will rest. My hands won’t.”
 Badri laughed.
 “The machine survived, and so did the motor.”
 Leela said, “One old machine is gone.”
 Harinarayan added, “And one pledge has made a round trip.”
 Badri understood nothing.
 He gathered his tools and left.
 That evening Leela finished the remaining stitching on the blue kurta.
 The soft hum of the motor filled the veranda.
 Harinarayan sat on the cot, folding the red-bordered gamchha.
 After a while a thin drop of oil appeared beneath the motor.

Leela took the gamchha down from the peg and was about to place it under the motor.

Harinarayan caught it at once.

“This is my birthday gift.”

Leela stopped her hand.

“Does motor oil not observe birthdays, then?”

Harinarayan put the gamchha back on his shoulder.

He placed a piece of old cloth beneath the motor.

Leela opened the machine drawer.

The pledge receipt lay inside.

She brought the motor's advance receipt from the spice tin as well.

She folded both receipts together and placed them beneath the needle box.

Harinarayan asked, “Why keep all this?”

Leela turned the wheel gently.

“If we ever forget the accounts, we'll look at them.”

“Which account do we need to remember?”

Leela pressed the motor switch.

The needle began to move.

“The account of two machines and one birthday in a single day.”

Harinarayan laughed.

The red-bordered gamchha remained on his shoulder.

The old box beneath the table was empty.

On the table, the sewing machine was running.

STORY 133

A Pair of Shoes

In the lane east of Madhubani station, the morning dew was still glistening along the edges of the bricks.

Naval bent down and tied the laces of his black shoes.

On the front of the right shoe was a crescent-shaped stain of blue ink.

Three years earlier, an inkpot had fallen in the printing shop; the stain had appeared then and had not gone away despite much scrubbing.

His sister Mrinal sat on the veranda, straightening the corners of her admission slip again and again.

“By what time do you have to reach there?” Naval asked.

“If the fee is deposited before eleven, the admission will be confirmed.”

Mrinal folded the paper and put it into her bag.

“We still need eight hundred and fifty rupees.”

Naval tied a second knot in the lace and said, “It will be arranged.”

“From where?”

“There is money due from the printing shop.”

The answer came in such an ordinary tone that Mrinal did not ask again.

That was Naval's nature.

He spoke little, but remembered the date of every task that had to be done.

He had also remembered the last date of Mrinal's admission for three weeks.

The two left home.

Their mother, Saraswati Devi, came to the doorway and said, “Go straight to the college.”

Naval laughed. “I also have to stop at the printing shop.”

At Station Chowk, Mrinal's path separated from his.

Naval did not go to the printing shop that day.

He went behind the old bus stand, to Rahim, the shoe-repairer who sat beside Shambhu the barber's shop.

On a small bamboo rack in front of Rahim hung old shoes, slippers, and straps.

“What needs repairing?” Rahim asked.

Naval took off his shoes.

“Not repairing. I want to sell them.”

Rahim looked first at the shoes, then at Naval's feet.

“This is your only good pair of shoes.”

“I need money now.”

Before taking the right shoe in his hand, Rahim wiped his palm.
He pressed the sole.

He examined the stitching at the heel.

He scratched at the blue stain with his nail.

"The stain won't come off."

Naval said, "I'm not asking a price for the stain."

Rahim did not smile.

"It needs a new strap. Two nails will have to be driven into the heel again.
Seven hundred."

"Eight hundred and fifty."

"What will I earn at that price?"

Naval remained silent.

Rahim looked at his feet.

The soles of his socks were already growing dirty in the dust.

"Eight hundred."

"I need eight hundred and fifty."

"Is it for something important?"

For the first time Naval looked Rahim in the eye.

"My sister's admission."

Rahim looked at the shoes again.

"All right. But there will be no receipt."

"I don't need any paper."

Rahim took from his cash box one five-hundred-rupee note, one two-hundred, one hundred, and one fifty.

Naval did not count the money.

The shoes were placed on the rack.

Rahim pushed an old pair of rubber slippers toward him.

"Wear these. Return them by evening."

"Rent?"

"If I charge rent for these, why is my name Rahim?"

The slippers were an inch too large for Naval's feet.

As he walked, they made a flap-flap sound behind his heels.

With that sound accompanying him, Naval reached the college.

Mrinal was standing in the queue at the fee counter.

"Did you get the money due?" she asked.

Naval put eight hundred and fifty rupees into her hand.

Mrinal breathed in relief, but at once her eyes fell on his feet.

"Where are your shoes?"

"Ink spilled on them at the printing shop. I've left them with Rahim."

"What happened then?"

"What else? Go on, the line is moving."

Only three students remained ahead of Mrinal.

She wanted to say something, but Naval gestured with his hand - the work first.

The admission was completed.

On the way home, the receipt was in Mrinal's bag, but her eyes kept returning to Naval's oversized slippers.

Two days later Naval returned those slippers to Rahim and began going to the printing shop in the old rubber flip-flops from home.

Mrinal asked, "Your shoes still aren't ready?"

Naval said, "The ink was stubborn."

"Does Rahim repair shoes or wash ink?"

Naval laughed.

"Your curiosity has grown a great deal."

Mrinal left the matter there, but the matter did not leave her.

A week later the scholarship list was posted at the college.

Mrinal saw her name in the third row.

She read the list twice.

Then it was checked against the office records.

She was told that the first instalment of five thousand rupees would be deposited in her account.

When she returned home, she did not tell her mother straightaway.

First she went to the printing shop.

Naval was counting sheets of wedding invitations at a small table behind the machine.

He was wearing the same flip-flops.

The strap of the right one was tied with waxed string.

"Your shoes are still with Rahim?" Mrinal asked.

Without looking up, Naval said, "Yes."

"In eight days the ink stain must have left the village and run away."

This time Naval's hand stopped.

He straightened the stack of sheets.

"Have classes started at your college, or an investigation?"

Mrinal did not answer.

She went straight to Rahim's shop.

Rahim knew her.

"Naval's sister?"

"Yes. I've come for his shoes."

Rahim had waxed thread in his hand.

"He sold them."

Mrinal's suspicion was confirmed, but hearing it made her face grow hot.

"How much did he sell them for?"

Rahim said, "Ask him that."

"I want the shoes."

Rahim pointed toward the rack.

On the upper shelf lay a polished pair of black shoes.

The blue crescent was still there on the front of the right shoe.

The strap was new.

The stitching at the heel had also been redone.

Mrinal reached up and took them down.

Her finger passed over the blue stain.

"What price have you put on them?"

"Twelve hundred."

"You bought them for eight hundred and fifty."

Rahim raised his eyebrows.

"You really are sharp at investigations."

"Three hundred and fifty so quickly?"

"Strap, heel, polish - and I have a stomach too."

Mrinal put the shoes back on the rack.

"I'll come in three days."

Rahim said, "What if they are sold by then?"

Mrinal looked once more at the blue stain.

"Keep them for now."

"Without an advance?"

She took a twenty-rupee note from her bag.

"This is all I have."

Before taking the note, Rahim asked, "Was the admission completed?"

"Yes."

"Then these shoes have already done their work."

Mrinal said, "No. They still have one job left."

Three days later the first scholarship instalment arrived.

Mrinal did not withdraw all the money from the bank.

She set aside what she would need for college books, travel, and the next fee.

She withdrew twelve hundred rupees and went straight to Rahim.

Rahim had wrapped the shoes in cloth and kept them aside.

"I thought you wouldn't come."

"I thought you would sell them."

"A twenty-rupee advance is a very strong bond."

Mrinal laughed.

She told him to deduct twenty from the twelve hundred.

Rahim laughed too.

"You've learned business."

The shoes would not fit into Mrinal's bag.

She put them in a paper bag and carried them home.

On the way, when the bag began to tear, she took the shoes out and carried them in her hand.

The blue stain looked even clearer in the sunlight.
 At home she placed the shoes beneath the cot.
 Naval returned in the evening.
 The waxed string on his flip-flop had loosened again.
 He sat at the doorway and began tying the strap.
 From inside, Mrinal said, "Rahim has given up on the ink."
 Naval's hand stopped.
 "What did you say?"
 Mrinal brought out the shoes.
 The blue crescent on the right shoe faced him.
 Naval said nothing for a long while.
 Then, before taking the shoes, he asked, "How much did you pay?"
 "Twelve hundred."
 "Twelve hundred!"
 "New strap, heel, polish - and Rahim's stomach."
 Naval could not keep from smiling despite himself.
 "Who told you?"
 "Your flip-flops."
 "Where did you get the money?"
 Mrinal placed the scholarship notice in his hand together with the admission receipt.
 "Scholarship."
 Naval read the paper.
 Then he looked at the shoes.
 "This money is for your studies."
 "On the day of my admission, these shoes also went for my studies."
 "I can walk in slippers."
 "I've also worked out the money for my books. This comes after that."
 Naval read the paper again.
 "Your first expense was on shoes?"
 Mrinal nodded.
 "My first bringing-back."
 Their mother had been listening from inside.
 She came out and took the shoes in her hands.
 The moment she saw the blue stain, she understood.
 "This stain has become a member of the family."
 Naval said, "Because of this stain, I got a lower price."
 Mrinal replied, "Because of this stain, I recognized them."
 The next day was Mrinal's first class.
 Naval went with her as far as the bus stand.
 He was wearing the black shoes again.
 The new strap was still stiff, so the lace kept tightening as he walked.

There was time before the bus arrived.

Mrinal took the bag from her shoulder and placed it on the bench.

"Is it hurting your foot?" she asked.

"It's a new strap. It will yield in two days."

"Rahim took twelve hundred. It ought to yield."

Naval laughed.

He stretched his right foot forward.

The morning sunlight fell on the blue crescent.

The bus appeared at the turn.

Mrinal lifted her bag.

Naval said, "Keep the rest of the scholarship money carefully."

Walking toward the bus, Mrinal said, "I've written the account."

"Where did you write it?"

She put a hand on the receipt inside her bag.

"One line for the college. One line for the shoes."

The bus stopped.

Mrinal climbed aboard.

She sat by the window and looked down.

Naval was still standing there.

From that distance, the blue stain on the front of his right shoe could not be seen.

But Mrinal knew - it was still there.

STORY 134

The Lost Purse

In Laheriasarai, Darbhanga, the evening rain had stopped, but the sky was still trembling in the potholes of the road.

Raghuvir was shaking the water from the canopy of his rickshaw.

The day's earnings had not been much.

At noon, his driving permit had been withheld at the transport inspection post, so he was driving a rented rickshaw.

His own rickshaw stood in the veranda at home; the red reflector at the back was broken, and the brake cable still had to be replaced.

The inspecting officer had said, "Get it repaired, pay the fine, and come on Monday with the papers."

That sentence had scratched at Raghuvir's mind all day.

He felt that even a single day's stoppage was a heavy punishment for a poor man.

At around seven in the evening, a middle-aged passenger in a white kurta boarded at Tower Chowk.

He had a thin bag of papers in his hand and a few drops of rain on his head.

"Take me to the old quarters behind the District Magistrate's office," he said.

Raghuvir put his weight on the pedals without replying.

On the way, the passenger searched inside his bag twice.

Once he said, "These papers eat up a person's whole day."

Raghuvir replied before he could stop himself, "It isn't the papers' day that goes. It's the person's day."

The passenger looked at him, but said nothing.

At the gate of the quarters, he paid the fare.

When he found himself five rupees short, he searched his bag again.

Raghuvir said, "Let it be. Next time."

"Will there be a next time?"

"In this city, the roads keep circling back to the same places."

The passenger gave a faint smile and went inside.

Raghuvir turned back toward the station.

After dropping two more passengers, he stopped the rickshaw beneath the awning of a tea stall.

When he lifted a corner of the seat cushion, he found a black leather purse pressed underneath.

The purse was heavy.

For a moment, he looked around before doing anything else.

After the rain, the road had grown sparse.

The shopkeeper was putting away his stove.

Before opening the purse, Raghuvir turned it over in his palm for a few moments.

His daughter Anushka's school fee had to be paid the next day.

The box of medicine for his mother was also almost empty.

His pocket held three hundred and twenty-seven rupees, the earnings of the entire day.

When he opened the purse, the first compartment held not a thick bundle of cash, but four five-hundred-rupee notes and some smaller change.

The second compartment held an identity card.

The moment Raghuvir saw the photograph, his hand stopped.

It was the same officer who had withheld his driving permit that afternoon.

Name - Ashok Kumar Jha.

First surprise rose inside Raghuvir, then a hot thought.

"Papers on Monday," the officer had said.

Now the officer's own papers were in Raghuvir's hand.

The shopkeeper asked, "What did you find?"

Raghuvir closed the purse.

"Someone's belonging."

"Is there a name and address?"

"The identity card has an address too."

"Then give it back tomorrow."

Raghuvir said nothing.

Keeping the purse with him until the next day suddenly felt heavy.

He turned the rented rickshaw around and headed toward the old quarters.

The gate was closed.

A boy sat on the veranda inside with a book in his hands.

Raghuvir called out.

The boy went inside, and a few moments later the same passenger came out.

This time he had changed out of his kurta and was wearing a plain vest.

Raghuvir held out the purse.

"It was left in the rickshaw."

At the sight of the purse, Ashok Jha stood stunned for a moment.

He immediately opened the compartments and checked the identity card, the keys, and the notes.

"I hadn't even realized yet that it was missing."

"I found it just now."

Ashok Jha asked someone inside to bring a chair.

Raghuvir shook his head.

"I have to go back toward the station."

The officer studied his face carefully.

"I feel as though I've seen you somewhere."

Raghuvir's left hand moved instinctively toward the pocket of his shirt, where the inspection receipt lay folded.

He did not take it out.

"At the checkpoint this afternoon."

Ashok Jha's brows rose slightly.

"Oh - the rickshaw with the broken red reflector?"

"Yes, during the afternoon inspection."

"Your driving permit was withheld?"

"Yes. Until Monday."

For a few moments, only the drip of rain was heard on the veranda.

Holding the purse in his hand, Ashok Jha said, "You could have -"

Raghuvir cut him short.

"The purse is yours."

The officer did not finish the sentence.

Raghuvir added, "The driving permit is a separate account."

Ashok Jha slowly nodded.

"Come on Monday with proof of the repairs."

"Whatever the rule requires, I'll do it."

Raghuvir turned to leave.

When he reached the gate, the officer called from behind, "Wait."

He took a five-hundred-rupee note from the purse and held it out.

"Keep this."

Raghuvir looked at the note.

"The fare was five rupees short."

At first, Ashok Jha did not understand.

Raghuvir said, "Those five rupees can be paid next time. Not five hundred."

The boy sitting on the veranda burst out laughing.

Ashok Jha too suppressed a smile.

The note went back into the purse.

Raghuvir returned toward the station.

When he reached home that night, Anushka was sitting with her school admission book open.

"Babu, tomorrow is the last day to pay the fee," she said.

Raghuvir placed the three hundred and twenty-seven rupees from his pocket on the table.

His wife Nirmala counted them and said, "This won't be enough."

"I'll borrow two hundred from Haricharan in the morning."

Nirmala asked, "What happened with the driving permit today?"

Raghuvir took out the inspection receipt and handed it to her.

“Monday.”

Anushka began to read the paper.

“Red reflector, brake cable, fine...”

She looked at her father.

“Why did everything have to be done at once?”

A tired smile came to Raghuvir’s lips.

“Because the rickshaw too decided that there should be only one day for emptying its owner’s pocket.”

Nirmala did not laugh.

She asked, “How much will you have to pay the owner of the rented rickshaw?”

“One hundred and fifty a day.”

For some time, the household accounts continued.

Raghuvir did not mention the purse.

It seemed improper to him to connect that incident with the financial trouble at home.

In the morning, he borrowed two hundred rupees from Haricharan.

Anushka’s fee was paid.

During the day, the mechanic replaced the red reflector, tightened the brake cable, and also fixed the loose screw of the rear bell.

The mechanic joked, “Now you’ll escape the government’s eye.”

Raghuvir replied, “Not the eye. It has to pass the inspection.”

On Monday morning, there was a long queue outside the transport office.

Raghuvir stood there with the repair receipt, the fine receipt, and the inspection slip in his bag.

A few rickshaw drivers knew him.

One of them said, “Ashok Babu is strict. He won’t release anything without complete papers.”

Another asked, “Will your work get done?”

Raghuvir said, “I have every paper they asked for.”

He did not mention the purse here either.

At around ten, his turn came.

Inside the room, Ashok Jha sat behind a desk.

Two assistants were examining files.

When Raghuvir entered, the officer recognized him for a moment, but no special expression appeared on his face.

“Receipt.”

Raghuvir handed over the papers.

“Reflector replaced?”

“Yes. I had it replaced yesterday.”

“Brakes?”

“New cable. Tension checked.”

Ashok Jha told an assistant, "Go outside and inspect the vehicle."

For a moment, a question rose in Raghuvir's mind - an inspection even after he had returned the purse?

Immediately, his own words came back to him: the driving permit was a separate account.

He went outside without a word.

The assistant examined the reflector, pressed the brake, and noted down the number.

Then the two returned inside.

Ashok Jha marked the fine receipt.

"The inspection is complete."

He took the driving permit from a drawer and held it out to Raghuvir.

"Don't delay repairs in future."

Raghuvir took the document in his hand.

"I won't delay again."

That was all.

No thanks, no special concession, no waiver of the fine.

Raghuvir stepped outside and was putting the papers back into his bag on the veranda when he heard a voice behind him.

"Raghuvirji."

He turned.

Ashok Jha was standing at the doorway.

There was a five-rupee coin in his hand.

"The fare left over from that day."

Raghuvir laughed.

"Didn't I say next time?"

The officer placed the coin in his palm.

"Consider this the next time."

Raghuvir put the coin in his pocket.

Then Ashok Jha said quietly, "I didn't tell anyone in the office about the purse."

"Why not in the office?"

"If I had, people would have thought your driving permit was returned because of that."

Raghuvir looked at him for a few moments.

"You did right."

Ashok Jha asked, "You didn't tell anyone either?"

"Not even at home."

"Why not at home?"

Raghuvir adjusted the strap of his bag on his shoulder.

"What wasn't mine - its story wasn't part of my earnings either."

Ashok Jha searched for an answer, but Raghuvir had already started down the stairs.

Outside, his own rickshaw stood waiting.

The new red reflector shone in the sunlight.

His first passenger was an elderly woman who wanted to go to the market.

She sat down and asked the fare.

Raghuvir told her the amount.

She took coins from her bundle and found herself five rupees short.

“Son, I’ll give you the five rupees later.”

Raghuvir put his foot on the pedal.

“Next time.”

The rickshaw moved slowly onto the road.

In his pocket, the five-rupee coin Ashok Jha had given him made a soft sound.

Raghuvir did not put his hand in to touch it.

At the turn ahead, the glint of the new red reflector appeared for a moment in the mirror behind him, and then the road straightened out.

STORY 135

The Rented Room

In that narrow lane of Laheriasarai, the morning sun arrived late.

The houses on either side stood so close that from one roof you could see the clothes hanging on the next.

Suman Mandal had been living for three years in the outer room of Harimohan Thakur's house.

The room was small - one cot, one table, two wooden planks, and an earthen water pitcher by the window.

But for Suman, that room was his first place of his own in the city.

He studied at a teacher-training institute and, in the evenings, tutored two children to pay for his food and rent.

His home was toward Araria.

His mother often wrote in her letters - "Look after your studies first."

Suman would reply - "Everything is fine here."

That sentence was the cheapest reassurance he could give her.

One evening in Sawan, Harimohan Babu sat on the veranda looking through his ledger.

Suman came to pay the rent.

He counted out thirteen hundred rupees and placed them on the table.

Harimohan Babu counted the money, tore off a receipt, then removed his spectacles and said -

"From next month, you'll have to pay fifteen hundred."

Suman thought he had heard wrong.

"An increase of two hundred?"

"Yes," Harimohan Babu answered briefly.

Suman asked, "Why is it going up?"

Harimohan Babu closed the ledger.

"Household expenses have gone up."

That was all he said.

Suman's eyes went to the broken bucket in one corner of the veranda, where rainwater was dripping from the roof.

Three months earlier he had mentioned that leak.

Harimohan Babu had then said - "We'll look at it after the rains."

The rain was not letting up, but the rent was going up.

Suman said nothing.

The following month he paid fifteen hundred.

To find the extra two hundred, he took on a new pupil for evening tuition.
Now on Wednesdays and Saturdays his dinner came late.
The second month, too, fifteen hundred went out.
In the third month, a letter came from home.

His younger sister had been admitted to school; money was needed for her uniform and notebooks.

Suman sent seven hundred rupees home from his savings.

That same week, the institute put up a notice announcing the last date for the examination fee.

One thousand rupees.

Suman read that line again and again.

There were three weeks until the deadline.

He began calculating.

He could take on more evening tuition, but the examination was near.

He could cut down on food, but only the previous month he had run a fever for two days.

Asking for money from home was something he could not accept.

That night, sitting in his room, he opened the old tin box.

It held receipts, postage stamps, two extra pens, and money kept for emergencies.

Three hundred and sixty rupees came out.

On the blank backs of old receipts he wrote the calculation -

"Fee - 1000."

"In hand - 360."

"Balance - 640."

Then he heard Harimohan Babu cough at the door.

"Why is the lamp burning so late?"

Suman closed the box.

"The examination is near."

"Have you paid the fee?"

Suman was silent for a moment.

"I will."

Harimohan Babu did not come inside.

From the doorway he said - "Don't miss the deadline."

Then he walked away.

On the first day of the fourth month, Suman paid fifteen hundred.

As he took the receipt, he asked -

"Babu, if I leave the room, how many days in advance do I need to tell you?"

Harimohan Babu's pen paused for a moment.

"Tell me before the month ends."

"I'll leave when this month is over."

Harimohan Babu looked at him.

“Have you found another room?”

“Yes. Behind the institute.”

Harimohan Babu asked, “How much is the rent?”

Suman said, “Twelve hundred.”

Harimohan Babu lowered his eyes to the ledger again.

He said only, “All right.”

Suman waited for him to say something more - that the rent would not be increased, that he should stay, or at least to offer some excuse about the leaking roof.

Nothing else was said that time.

That night Suman’s mind was made up.

There was no question of paying a fifth month’s rent; on the last day of the month, he packed his belongings.

The cot would not fit on one rickshaw, so he left it at Harimohan Babu’s house; the new room already had a cot belonging to the landlord.

The table, the planks, the clothes, and the tin box were taken away.

Harimohan Babu stood on the veranda.

“Here are the five hundred you gave as a security deposit.”

Suman was surprised.

“I hammered nails into the wall. Deduct it.”

“There is no charge for nails.”

“One pane in the window was already cracked, but people will say I broke it.”

“I remember. It was cracked before you came.”

After taking the five hundred, Suman held out the key.

Harimohan Babu placed the key in his palm and said -

“Do well in the examination.”

The resentment stored inside Suman stung all the more at that ordinary sentence.

He merely said, “Yes,” and walked out.

The new room was near the institute, but the lane was filled with noise all day.

The rent was twelve hundred, yet in the very first month the landlady took three hundred in advance for electricity.

Suman calculated silently - he had thought leaving the old room would save money, but moving had expenses of its own.

The last date for the examination fee was now four days away.

There were seven hundred and ten rupees in the tin box.

He decided he would submit an application to the institute accounts office, asking permission to pay the remaining money two weeks later.

At noon the next day, he reached the accounts office with the application in hand.

An elderly clerk sat inside, turning the pages of a ledger.

Suman gave his name and roll number.

The clerk checked the ledger, then looked at his application.

"What are you asking extra time for?"

"For the examination fee."

"Your fee has already been paid."

Suman laughed, as though he had failed to understand the words.

"I haven't paid it."

The clerk checked the ledger again.

"Name - Suman Mandal?"

Suman answered the first question with "Yes."

"Roll number one hundred and twenty-seven?"

Again Suman said, "Yes."

"One thousand rupees. Paid the day before yesterday."

The application in Suman's hand went slack.

"Who paid it?"

The clerk opened the receipt book beside him.

"Harimohan Thakur."

For several moments Suman stared at that name.

On the receipt, the payer's name had been written as his own - "Suman Mandal."

Below it, in small letters inside brackets, was written only - "Amount received from: Harimohan Thakur."

Suman's first feeling was not gratitude.

It was anger.

He folded the application, put it in his pocket, and went straight to the old lane.

Harimohan Babu was not on the veranda.

A ledger lay open on the old charpoy in the courtyard.

After a while he came out from inside, carrying a small bundle of string.

Without offering a greeting, Suman asked -

"Why did you pay my fee?"

Harimohan Babu stopped at the tone of his voice.

"You found out?"

"Answer me."

Harimohan Babu sat down on the charpoy.

Pointing to it, he said, "Sit."

"I'll stand."

"Then stand."

For a few moments neither spoke.

Then Harimohan Babu turned the ledger toward himself and showed him five lines.

On one side of every line was written thirteen hundred.

On the other side, two hundred.

In small red letters - "Suman - fee."

Suman bent over the ledger.

Five lines.

Two hundred each.

One thousand.

His voice softened, but his anger had not gone.

"So the rent hadn't really been increased?"

"The two hundred I added for you, I kept aside each month."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Harimohan Babu closed the ledger.

"That night I didn't see your box. But I kept hearing your calculations. Letters came from home - sometimes for your sister, sometimes for medicine, sometimes for seed. Whatever remained, you sent home. The examination fee kept being pushed back."

"It was my money."

Harimohan Babu agreed. "Yes. It was your money."

"Then you should have asked me."

Harimohan Babu did not argue at once.

"I should have."

Suman had not been prepared for that answer.

Harimohan Babu continued -

"I thought that if you believed the extra two hundred was rent, you wouldn't spend it. When the deadline came near, I would return it. But you left the room. I didn't understand that the raised rent would hurt you that much."

Suman looked toward the corner where the roof used to leak.

A new tin sheet had now been fitted there.

"I thought you wouldn't repair the roof, only raise the rent."

Harimohan Babu gave a faint smile.

"The roof was repaired late. That was my fault too."

"And the fact that I left the room?"

"I cannot decide the price of that mistake."

The first crack appeared in Suman's anger, but he was in no hurry to soften.

"You could have told me before paying the fee."

"I could have."

"Then why didn't you?"

"I was afraid you would send the money home again."

"If I had sent it home, that would have been my decision."

Harimohan Babu nodded.

"I understand that now."

He opened the bundle of string.

Inside were copies of Suman's five old rent receipts.

Each showed thirteen hundred as rent, with a separate mark for two hundred.

"Keep these. If you ever think I swallowed your money, the account will be in front of you."

Suman did not take the copies.

"I understand the account."

Harimohan Babu did not insist.

Suman turned to leave, then stopped.

"The rent in the new room is twelve hundred."

Harimohan Babu said, "Good."

"But she took three hundred extra for electricity."

For the first time Harimohan Babu laughed openly.

"Accounts never stop following you anywhere."

A smile came to Suman's lips too, but he suppressed it at once.

"Don't laugh yet."

"All right, I'm not laughing."

Another brief silence spread between them.

Suman walked out.

The examination came.

Whether he wrote it well or not, he did not speak to Harimohan Babu about it again.

Two months later, the result was announced.

Suman had passed.

That evening in the new room, he opened the tin box.

The old receipts lay on one side, the institute's receipt on the other.

He took out two new envelopes.

On one he wrote - "Rent."

On the other - "Next Fee."

He looked for a while at the receipt lying between them.

Then he did not put it into the envelope marked "Next Fee."

He placed the receipt with the old rent receipts.

As he closed the box, from the roof of some house in the lane came the sound of dripping water.

Suman reached out and shifted the bucket in the corner of his room into the proper place.

STORY 136

The Nameless Parcel

In the old neighbourhood on the eastern side of Madhubani, the evening sunlight had shrunk as far as the veranda pillars.

Just inside the doorway, beside the tulsi altar, lay a parcel wrapped in thick brown paper.

On top, in a clear hand, was written: “House of Shivkant Mishra, Pipra Lane.”

The space for the sender’s name was blank.

Shivkant Mishra picked up the parcel, first testing its weight and then examining the knot in the cord.

“Who left it here?”

His wife Malti, seated on the veranda, shook her head.

“It was already lying there when I noticed it.”

By the time their elder son Devesh returned from the shop, everyone in the house had gathered around the parcel.

Devesh’s wife Archana wiped her hands after leaving the stove and came outside.

Their granddaughter Rita tried to read the blue stamp on one corner of the parcel.

Only the words “Darbhanga Goods Depot” were clear; half the date was buried in a fold of the paper.

“Open it,” Rita said.

Instead of cutting the cord, Shivkant began to work the knot loose.

It was an unusual knot—a cord wound three times, with a small reversed loop in the middle.

After considerable effort, the paper came open.

Inside were four small bundles.

The first contained two rubber rings for the hand-pump.

The second held a geometry set and a thick exercise book for Rita.

The third contained a cord for Malti’s spectacles and two soft nose pads.

The fourth held a thick, hard-bound ledger for Devesh’s shop.

There was not a single written line inside the parcel.

For a few moments, no one spoke.

Then Archana slowly looked towards an inner pillar.

A small household list had been written there in charcoal: “Pump rings, Rita’s instruments, Mother’s spectacle cord, shop ledger.”

All four objects in the parcel were on that very list.

The list had been there for a month, because each time some larger expense intervened and these small things were postponed until the next market day.

Holding the ledger, Devesh said, "How could someone outside know all four things at once?"

Malti immediately named their married daughter, Sushma.

"She came during the festival last year. She must have seen the list."

Rita said, "If Auntie had done this, why would she leave off her name?"

Shivkant turned the parcel paper over again.

There was no note, no price, no shop stamp.

Just then the younger son, Nandkishore, came in.

Everyone at home called him Nandu.

An old gamchha hung from his shoulder, dust covered his feet, and his eyes carried the heaviness of half-sleep.

"What's this crowd for?" he asked.

Excitedly, Rita set all four bundles before him.

Nandu looked at them once and said only, "Good. At least the pump will leak less now."

Devesh stared at him.

"You're not surprised?"

"Should rubber rings be surprising?" Nandu laughed.

With that, he went towards the inner room.

No one in the house trusted Nandu much with any serious responsibility.

He had left his bachelor's examination unfinished twice, taken up and abandoned two or three small jobs, and for the past six months his habit of sleeping until well into the day had irritated everyone.

As soon as evening fell, he often left the house and returned towards dawn.

When asked, he said, "I have work near the goods depot."

Once, in irritation, Devesh had said, "It is difficult even to call it a job when there is neither a post nor a monthly salary."

After that day, Nandu had almost stopped talking at home about his earnings.

The word "good-for-nothing" was heard less often in front of him, and more often in his absence.

The day after the parcel arrived, the search for the secret sender began.

Sushma said plainly that she had not sent it.

Devesh's in-laws denied it as well.

Shivkant asked two of his former pupils, because one of them lived in Darbhanga.

Both laughed and said they knew nothing about any parcel.

Rita wrote a list of possible names on a sheet of paper and began crossing them out one by one.

The names dwindled; the mystery grew.

On the third day, something occurred to Malti.

“Who took the measurements for the pump rings?”

Archana said, “Nandu.”

“And the spectacle cord?”

“Rita mentioned it, but Nandu was the one who checked the size.”

Devesh said at once, “That does not mean he sent it.”

The sentence came too quickly, as though even linking Nandu’s name with such a possibility made him uncomfortable.

Shivkant said nothing.

He gathered up the parcel cord and placed it in his old file.

A week later, a second parcel arrived.

This time it contained only one thing—a light woollen shawl for Malti.

Four days earlier, when the nights had turned colder, Malti had been sewing the torn corner of her old shawl and had said it was not right to spend money on a new one just then.

There was no reason for anyone except the five people in the house to have heard that remark.

The second parcel, too, bore the blue stamp of the Darbhanga Goods Depot.

The cord was different, but the knot was the same—three turns and a reversed loop.

This time Devesh did not laugh.

“Someone inside the house is carrying our talk outside.”

Archana’s face tightened slightly.

“Passing talk outside and sending things are not the same thing.”

Devesh realised that his words had sounded like suspicion directed at his wife.

“I wasn’t talking about you.”

“Then about whom?”

No one had an answer.

Nandu was not at home that night.

When he returned at dawn, Malti was sitting on the veranda wrapped in the shawl.

He touched its edge and asked, “Is it warm?”

Malti said, “It is.”

Then her eyes fell on her son’s hand.

There were two fresh blisters on his right palm; one had burst and darkened.

“How did your palm get scraped?”

“A rope rubbed it.”

“What rope?”

“The rope for tying sacks.”

Nandu hung up his gamchha and went inside.

Malti watched him go for a long time.

That very day, Shivkant decided to go to the Darbhanga Goods Depot.

Devesh wanted to accompany him, but Shivkant refused.

“Open the shop. I’ll only ask around and come back.”

After noon he took a bus to Darbhanga.

The goods depot stood behind the main road under a long tin roof.

On one side were piles of boxes, sacks and bamboo baskets; on the other stood a weighing scale and a table where receipts were written.

Shivkant showed the papers from both parcels.

The elderly clerk at the table recognised the stamp, but there was no firm record that disclosed the sender’s name.

“No name was entered. The charge had already been paid.”

“Who paid it?”

The clerk turned over a stack of old papers and shook his head.

“A great many people come here every day.”

Disappointed, Shivkant was about to leave.

Just then came the sound of a sack being dragged from behind the roofed shed.

A young man was straightening two sacks and setting them on a wooden platform.

An old gamchha hung from his shoulder.

Shivkant’s feet stopped where they were.

Nandu had not seen him.

He gathered the torn edge of a sack, threaded thick blue cord through a large needle, wound it three times and tightened a small reversed loop in the middle.

The very same knot.

From behind, the elderly clerk called out, “Nandu, enter the charges for yesterday’s two parcels in the ledger.”

Nandu turned.

The moment he saw his father, his hand froze in mid-air. For a few moments, the two simply looked at each other.

Shivkant slowly opened his file and took out the cord from the first parcel.

“Where did you learn this knot?”

Nandu lowered his eyes. “Here, at the goods depot.”

“And the parcels sent home?”

Nandu did not hurry to answer. Behind him sacks were being unloaded from the roof of a bus, and a fine layer of dust rose in the air. “I sent them.”

Shivkant’s first question was not about the money. “Why no name?”

Nandu sat down on a sack. “If I had written my name, the questions would have reached home before the things did—where did the money come from, is the work permanent, why did you spend on this?”

He looked at the blisters on his palm. "The argument would have arrived before the parcel."

Shivkant remained silent. Nandu went on, "I handle sacks, boxes and parcels here from eight at night until three in the morning. I'm paid by the day. There isn't work every day."

"Why didn't you tell us at home?"

"I did say I had work at the goods depot."

This time Shivkant looked away. He remembered that the answer had indeed been heard, but it had not been believed.

Nandu said, "Mother's shawl was cheap at the shop. I saw Rita's instruments while unloading goods. I had the size for the pump rings. Devesh's ledger cost half as much wholesale."

"What do you keep for yourself?"

Nandu did not laugh. "I eat at home. My gamchha is still good."

Shivkant wanted to say something, but amid the noise of the goods depot he could not choose the words.

He asked only, "You come home at dawn and sleep until late in the day?"

"After the night shift."

That short answer made Shivkant see afresh many mornings from the past six months, when he had inwardly resented Nandu for sleeping late.

On the bus home, father and son sat on the same seat; midway Nandu, overcome by sleep, rested his head against the wooden window frame.

For the first time, Shivkant did not wake him.

When they reached home, Devesh began firing questions.

Shivkant placed the parcel cord on the table. "We found the sender."

Rita asked at once, "Who?"

Shivkant looked at Nandu. Nandu was taking off his slippers.

Devesh's eyes fell on his palm. All the questions that had been ready only moments earlier vanished.

Malti simply drew one end of the shawl over her son's shoulder. "When you come home at dawn, go straight to sleep."

Nandu said, "I'll eat first." Archana brought a plate from inside.

There was no apology, no grand declaration.

Over dinner, Devesh kept asking about the daily wages at the goods depot, and Nandu kept giving short answers.

Their old friction did not disappear in one night, but the next morning Devesh did not wake Nandu when he opened the shop.

That day Rita took out her sheet of possible senders again.

Beneath all the crossed-out names, she wrote one name without crossing it out: "Uncle Nandu."

After it, in brackets, she added: "Night shift, goods depot."

When Nandu woke in the afternoon, the paper was lying beside his cot.

He read it, picked up a pencil and crossed out the heading “Secret Donor.”

Above it he wrote: “Things the Household Still Needed.”

Rita watched, but said nothing.

Nandu placed the pencil beside the old list on the pillar.

All four earlier items on the list had already been crossed out.

Below them, in a new line written in Malti’s hand, were the words: “A new gamchha for Nandu.”

STORY 137

Behind the Photograph

When the western room of the old house in Saharsa was opened, the smell of dust came first. Then the lid of the iron trunk creaked.

Udayan Jha opened the window shutters. When the thin evening light fell inside, the shapes of the old clothes, brass, papers and wooden objects became distinct from one another.

The house was to be repaired the following month. For three days they had been talking about sorting out the things that were no longer in use.

His sister Swarnalata brought a thick sack from the veranda. "Broken things go in this. What we keep goes separately."

Udayan laughed. "There are more broken things in Baba's room, and less courage to throw them away."

Inside the trunk lay folded old dhotis, two brass plates, a copper lota, a few letters and a wooden frame.

Within the frame was a grey photograph. Its edges had turned yellow.

In the middle sat an elderly man with a moustache. A teenage boy stood to his right and a girl to his left.

The girl had the end of her sari over her head, but her face did not seem to resemble anyone in the family.

Swarnalata took the photograph in her hand. "Could this be Great-grandfather Jagdish Narayan?"

"It looks like him."

"And on the right—Baba as a child?"

Udayan shook his head. "The ages do not match. Baba had not even been born then."

Just then Udayan's son Aniruddh came in from behind them.

He had been given the job of selling off the old things. An antique dealer from town was due the next day.

Looking at the photograph, he said, "The frame is teak. We could sell it separately."

Swarnalata said at once, "First let us find out who these people are."

"Who is going to remember the names of everyone in all the old photographs in this house?" Aniruddh said. "And what will we do with the frame?"

Udayan did not answer. He placed the photograph against the wall.

The next afternoon the antique dealer, Mohan Sah, arrived.

He weighed the brass objects in his hands, examined the joints of the wooden box and tested the metal of the copper lota.

When he lifted the photograph, he found the paper at the back of the frame loose.

“May I open this?” he asked.

Udayan said, “Open it to inspect the frame, but do not damage the photograph.”

Mohan carefully removed the thin wooden backing. The edge of the paper inside was folded.

As soon as the photograph came out, Swarnalata said, “Wait.”

On the back was a line in blue ink. The writing had faded, but it was still legible:

“Kaushalya is to be regarded not as a daughter, but as one of this household —the debt of that day can never be repaid.”

Below it were only two initials: “J. Na.”

For a while no one in the room spoke.

Mohan Sah put the photograph on the table. His interest lay in the frame, not in the family’s silence.

Swarnalata asked softly, “Who was Kaushalya?”

The name seemed familiar to Udayan, but his memory stopped there.

“Grandmother sometimes used to speak of a Kaushalya Mausī... or am I remembering it wrong?”

Aniruddh read the line on the back again. “Not a daughter, one of the household... could she have been someone who worked for the family?”

Swarnalata looked at him. “Do not put a role before a name before we know.”

Mohan Sah quoted a price. The money he offered for the frame was very little.

Aniruddh was no longer in favour of selling it immediately. He put the photograph back into the frame. “This is not going anywhere yet.”

That evening, after dinner, Udayan opened the old letters.

Most were connected with weddings, upanayan ceremonies, illnesses and accounts of the fields.

Kaushalya’s name did not appear clearly anywhere.

But in one letter the words “Sister Kaushalya” were written. The date was about sixty-two years old.

The letter was addressed to Shashibhushan, the younger brother of Jagdish Narayan.

Only three lines could still be read:

“Sister Kaushalya is now in Madhepur. Tell her that the child survived. I shall remember my debt to her.”

Swarnalata sat for a long time with the letter in her hand. “Which child?”

Udayan's eyes went to the photograph of his own father hanging on the wall.

His father, Harinarayan, had been the only surviving son of the household.

All that was ever said in the family about his birth was that the night he was born had been very difficult.

The next day the brother and sister went to their aunt Vimala Devi.

Vimala Devi was eighty-four. Her hearing had weakened, but her memory for old names was clear.

At the name Kaushalya, the winnowing tray in her hands came to a halt.

"Kaushalya Di?" she asked. "Who told you about her?"

Udayan showed her the photograph.

The old woman first looked at the front, then at the line on the back.

Her eyes did not fill with tears; only the crease between her brows deepened.

"This has come out after a very long time."

Swarnalata moved closer to her. "Who was she?"

Vimala Devi set the winnowing tray down and said, "When my mother gave birth to Harinarayan Bhaiya, the floodwater had reached the courtyard that night."

"The dai was late in arriving. Kaushalya Di came by boat from the hamlet across the water."

"She had experience with childbirth. She stayed in this house for three days. My mother's life was saved, and the child survived."

"And then?" Udayan asked.

"After that the people of the house began to call her sister."

"Her mother had earlier worked pounding paddy for this household. But Jagdish Kaka accepted Kaushalya Di as a sister."

"She came and went as though she were a daughter of the house."

Aniruddh, who had come with them, asked, "Then why was her name no longer heard later?"

Vimala Devi looked at him. "A name does not disappear in a single day."

"First the place where she sat became separate. Then invitations to weddings grew fewer. Then the new generation stopped asking."

"The line of caste that the old people had sometimes crossed was made dark again by those who came after them."

She fell silent for a few moments.

"Kaushalya Di had a son—Rameshwar. He settled near Madhepur."

"I had heard that his daughter still lives there."

Swarnalata asked, "Her name?"

"Sumitra."

Getting to Madhepur was not difficult, yet Udayan did not go for three days.

He felt that seeking out an old relationship was not merely a matter of finding an address.

To arrive one day at someone's door with a photograph in hand when one's own family had gradually forgotten that person did not seem easy.

On the fourth day Swarnalata herself said, "Let us go."

"Whether a relationship is renewed or not is her right. But if we learn the name and then remain silent, that will be forgetting her a second time."

The house in Madhepur was built of a mixture of mud and brick.

There was a tulsi platform in front and, to one side, a small room used for sewing work.

Sumitra Devi was about sixty.

When Swarnalata mentioned Kaushalya's name, Sumitra first seated the guests inside and then asked, "How do you know her?"

Udayan placed the photograph before her.

Sumitra took it in her hands very slowly.

The moment she saw the girl in the picture, she moved away from the back of the chair and sat upright. "This is Nani."

Aniruddh's eyes remained fixed on the photograph.

Sumitra went inside and returned with a small wooden box.

Inside were two old letters, a piece of cloth and a small brass key.

One of the letters had been written by Jagdish Narayan.

It mentioned neither land, nor money, nor any share in the house.

It was simply an invitation, written after the rains when the house had been repaired, asking Kaushalya—addressed as "sister"—to come and see the new harvest.

Sumitra said, "Nani kept this letter with great care."

"She used to say that a big house had once called her one of its own."

"Later she went there less often, but she never threw this letter away."

Udayan's throat went dry. "We knew nothing of this."

Sumitra said simply, "If you did not know, whom should we blame? My mother too spoke very little about that house."

Swarnalata asked, "Have you ever been to Saharsa?"

"I have passed through while changing trains. I have never been to that house."

"Would you come now?"

Sumitra did not answer at once.

She read the line written on the back of the photograph. Her thumb stopped over the words "one of this household."

"First let me keep this photograph with me for one day."

Without thinking, Udayan said, "It is also a photograph of your Nani. Keep it."

Sumitra shook her head. "No."

"The photograph should remain in the house where what is written on it was forgotten."

“Then those written words will be seen every day.”

A week later Sumitra came to Saharsa with her daughter.

It was the first day of repairs on the house. The western room was being emptied.

Mohan Sah had come again to take away wooden objects.

Seeing the old frame, he asked, “You still will not sell this?”

Aniruddh laughed. “The price of this frame has changed.”

Mohan Sah looked at the wood. “The teak is still the same.”

“The price of the wood is the same,” Aniruddh said. “Not the value of the thing.”

Udayan hung the photograph on a new nail inside the veranda.

The writing on the back now faced the wall and could not be seen.

Swarnalata said, “The line is hidden again.”

Aniruddh copied the same sentence onto a small piece of paper and fixed it below the frame.

At the edge he added a name: “Kaushalya Devi, sister of the family.”

Sumitra read the inscription.

She did not ask for anything else to be added before the name.

She simply sat down on the old bench in the veranda where, according to Aunt Vimala, Kaushalya used to sit many years ago.

The repairs to the house began that day with the breaking of a wall.

But Udayan felt that the first repair had taken place not in the wall, but in the family’s memory.

In the evening the trunk was closed again.

The brass plates, the copper lota and some wooden objects went into the pile to be sold.

The photograph remained in the veranda.

Its price was entered in no ledger.

STORY 138

Two Lamps

The day before Diwali, the market at Bisfi was filled with earthen lamps.

Before evening fell, the sellers were lowering their prices, because there was little profit in keeping unsold lamps until the next day and a greater chance of their breaking.

Ten-year-old Nitin was helping Mangru the potter lift his sacks in the market.

Mangru gave him three rupees for the work and, as he was leaving, told him twice, "Go straight home. The crowd will grow."

Nitin stood by a heap of lamps, the coins clenched in his fist.

At his house, not many lamps were lit for Diwali.

His mother, Malati, used to say, "One lamp by the tulsi plant, one at the door—that is enough. Even the oil must be measured."

This year there was not enough oil in the house for two lamps to burn through the night.

Even so, Nitin chose two lamps.

The first was round, flat and entirely plain.

The second had a small bulge on one side, as though the potter's thumbprint had remained in the clay while it was being made.

Nitin kept turning that second lamp over in his hands.

Mangru asked, "Why two? Your mother told you to buy only one."

"One is for the house."

"And the other?"

Nitin pointed towards the river. "For the watchman at the cremation ground."

Mangru opened his mouth to laugh, then stopped. "Who gives him a lamp?"

"I will."

"Do not go there in the evening."

"I will give it before it gets dark."

Mangru gave him two lamps for the three rupees.

He also put in two small cotton wicks. "Take oil from home."

Nitin came home with the lamps tucked under his arm.

Malati was sitting in the veranda, winnowing chura.

An old paddy sack hung on the wall of the house to keep out the cold wind.

In a corner, a little mustard oil remained in a small brass container.

Nitin placed the two lamps before her.

Malati looked first at one lamp, then at the other. "Two?"

"One for the door. I'll give the other at the ghat."

Malati's hands stopped moving. "Which ghat?"

"The cremation ghat. The watchman's hut was dark when I saw it last week. The tea-seller Kaka said his lantern had broken."

Malati was silent for a few moments. "When did you go there?"

"In the daytime. Coming back from school. The shorter road passes that way."

Malati began winnowing the chura again. "Come back before dark."

Nitin understood that he had been given permission.

He looked at the oil container. "For the second lamp?"

Malati lifted the container.

When the oil moved inside, the bottom could be seen.

She poured half into the first lamp and half into the second. "If the lamp at home goes out, I will not fill it again."

"It won't go out."

"A lamp does not obey promises when there is wind."

Nitin smiled.

He wrapped the second lamp in a piece of old newspaper, kept the wick separate and poured its share of oil into a small bottle.

His father, Raghunath, had been doing night work for three months.

Nitin had been told that he had found work guarding a warehouse across the river.

He left before evening and returned at dawn.

During the day he was usually asleep.

Nitin did not like this work because evening meals with his father had stopped.

But he understood that without night work, the sack of rice at home would empty too quickly.

That day Raghunath had left earlier than usual.

Nitin had asked, "Work even on Diwali night?"

Raghunath had replied, "Where work is done at night, guarding is even more necessary on a festival night."

Nitin had not paid much attention to the answer then.

In the evening sky, smoke and a light mist were becoming the same colour.

Nitin took the shorter road towards the river.

A few lamps had already begun to glow at the doors of village houses.

Children were saving their boxes of sparklers.

Here there was the smell of milk, there of jaggery sweets, and elsewhere of mustard oil drifting on the air.

The cremation ghat lay a little away from the main road.

There were stacks of bamboo, old patches of ash, two neem trees and a small tin-roofed shed.

Budhan, who sold tea near the ghat, was packing up his cart.

Nitin greeted him.

"Why are you here?" Budhan asked.

Nitin showed him the newspaper bundle. "A lamp for the watchman Kaka."

Budhan's eyebrows rose slightly. "Do you know him?"

"No. But he lives in darkness."

Budhan looked at the bundle, then at Nitin. "He is here today. He has gone down near the wood shed. But go back quickly."

Nitin began descending the steps of the ghat.

Down below, before darkness fully settled, the river water looked grey.

In the distance a thin line of smoke was rising from one place.

He lowered his eyes.

More than death, it was the silence of the place that seemed strange to him.

Nowhere else in the village was it ever so quiet.

Near the tin shed, a man with his back turned was moving bamboo poles.

He wore an old grey shirt and had a gamchha wrapped around his head.

From a distance Nitin called, "Kaka!"

The man stopped but did not turn around.

Nitin came closer. "Kaka, I've brought a lamp for you."

This time the man turned slowly, but one end of the gamchha was still drawn over part of his face.

In the evening dimness his face could not be seen clearly.

"Who told you I needed a lamp?" The voice had been made deliberately heavy.

"No one. Your lantern is broken."

The man glanced towards Budhan's cart. "He talks too much."

Nitin opened the paper.

He took out the lamp with the clay bulge on its side and placed it beneath the shed.

"This is the second one. The first will burn at home."

"Why is the second one here?"

"Festivals happen in every home. Doesn't the place where the watchman stays count as a home?"

The man did not answer.

Nitin opened the little bottle of oil.

The wind had grown a little stronger.

Using his body as a shield, he poured the oil into the lamp and straightened the wick.

He did not have any matches.

"Do you have a light?"

The man searched his shirt pocket.
 As he took out a matchbox, his right hand came into the last strip of daylight.

There was an old cut mark on the tip of his middle finger.

Nitin's eyes stopped on the mark.

He knew a scar like that.

A year earlier, Raghunath had cut his finger while cutting roofing tin.

After the wound healed, the fingertip had remained slightly bent.

Nitin raised his head.

The man struck a match.

The wind put out the first one.

The second match caught.

He brought it to the wick.

The light rose from below onto his face.

Very softly, the word slipped from Nitin's mouth—"Babu?"

Raghunath's hand went still.

The match had almost burned down to his fingers when he shook it away.

The wick of the lamp was burning now.

For a while, father and son stood silently looking at each other.

"Why did you come here?" Raghunath's voice was his own now.

"To give a lamp to the watchman Kaka."

Raghunath lowered his eyes. "Did you tell your mother?"

"Yes. I told Ma."

"She didn't stop you?"

Instead of answering, Nitin asked, "The warehouse?"

Raghunath rested a hand on one of the bamboo poles of the shed. "The warehouse work ended three months ago. The old keeper of the ghat fell ill. The people who manage the ghat were looking for someone to keep watch at night. I got the work. I could not bring myself to tell you."

"Why did you hide it from me?"

Raghunath looked towards the river. "I thought about what the children at school might say. I thought you might feel ashamed when you heard what your father does."

Nitin looked at the earthen lamp.

The thumb-shaped bulge looked like a small hill in the glow.

"I came to give a lamp to the watchman," he said. "The watchman turned out to be you. What is there to be ashamed of in that?"

Raghunath did not laugh.

But some of the hardness left his face.

"There is enough oil left for the lamp at home?"

"It was divided half and half."

"Your mother?"

“She divided it herself.”

Raghunath closed his eyes for a moment, as though he had found some large answer in that small fact.

Then he said, “Go home now. It is dark.”

Nitin walked two steps and turned back. “Babu, you must not take this lamp home. It stays here.”

“Why should it stay here?”

“I bought it for the watchman.”

This time Raghunath smiled faintly. “All right. The watchman will keep it here.”

Nitin climbed the steps and reached Budhan’s cart.

Budhan tried to read his face but asked nothing.

He only said, “Can you see the road?”

“The road is perfectly clear.”

As Nitin walked back towards the village, he kept seeing lamps at houses far and near.

The sound of firecrackers split the air from time to time.

His father’s night meals, his tired face at dawn, the smell of smoke settled in his shirt—all of it suddenly made sense in a new way.

When he reached home, Malati was adjusting the wick of the lamp at the door.

“Did you give it?” she asked.

“Yes, I did.”

“Did you meet the watchman?”

Nitin looked at Malati’s face.

Now he understood that she already knew the answer to the question.

“I met him,” he said. “The lamp is burning too.”

Malati’s hand paused for a moment.

Then she added the last drop of oil to the lamp at the door.

She asked nothing.

When the night had deepened a little, Nitin looked from the veranda towards the river.

The cremation ghat could not be seen clearly from there.

Trees, houses and darkness lay between.

But far away, a very small light seemed to be flickering—or perhaps it only looked that way; he could not be certain.

The lamp at the door would sometimes bend in the wind, then straighten again.

Nitin sat beside it.

He no longer needed to wonder where his father worked at night.

STORY 139

The Saree on Credit

When the sari was unfolded in the cloth shop at Laheriasarai, its red border gleamed across the glass counter like evening light.

Shailbala touched the fine pattern along the border with her finger, then immediately drew her hand back.

She had already seen the price tag: four thousand two hundred rupees.

"Put it away," she said. "I don't want anything this expensive."

Instead of folding the cloth, the shopkeeper spread it out again.

"How is it expensive, Didi? It is your niece's wedding. Pay in four instalments."

Shailbala's daughter Rupa was with her.

She watched her mother's eyes more than she watched the sari.

Three days earlier, her mother had taken out her old green sari.

The border was a little worn, but the cloth was still good.

Her younger sister Manju had said over the telephone, "Didi, everyone will be there this time. Come wearing something nice."

After that one sentence, the old green sari had been folded and returned to the trunk.

"How much is each instalment?" Rupa asked.

"One thousand and fifty a month. Four months. That's all."

Shailbala looked at the price tag again.

Her husband, Nandkishor, ran a small bicycle-repair shop on Station Road.

His monthly income was never the same.

There were more punctures during the rains and fewer in winter.

Rupa was in the final year of her bachelor's degree, and the school fees of their younger son Chandan were another expense.

"Let me ask at home first—"

Rupa said softly, "Ma, there are only three days left. Babu will only say that the old sari is fine."

Shailbala smiled. "Of course he will."

The shopkeeper folded the red sari and wrapped it in paper.

"Nandkishorji is an old customer. I'll put it down in his name. The first instalment next month."

Shailbala wanted to object, but by then the paper parcel had reached Rupa's hands.

When they reached home, Nandkishor looked at the parcel and remained silent for a few moments.

When he heard the price, his brows tightened; then he looked at Shailbala's face and they relaxed.

"Four thousand two hundred?"

"In four instalments," Shailbala said.

"Instalments do not reduce the price."

Rupa spoke in between. "A niece gets married only once."

Nandkishor did not laugh.

Coiling the hose he used for filling bicycle tyres, he said, "A wedding may happen only once, but the instalment will come four times."

On the day of the wedding, the marriage hall at Sakri was packed with people.

There were not enough chairs on the veranda.

Music sounded inside, while vehicles made a din outside.

Shailbala was wearing the red sari.

Rupa kept adjusting her pallu again and again.

Manju waved from a distance, but just then the bride's maternal uncle became anxious about a missing garland.

Five minutes later the generator stopped.

Then there were too few plates in the dining line.

Somebody's child was crying, somebody's shoes had gone missing, and somebody was in a hurry to leave in a vehicle.

Twice Shailbala thought that someone would say something about the sari.

Manju would ask where she had bought it.

Her elder sister-in-law would look at the pattern on the border and guess its price.

But the night passed.

No one noticed.

On the way home, Rupa said, "Ma, it looked very beautiful on you."

Shailbala kept looking out of the window into the darkness.

"Apart from you, who even saw it?"

Rupa laughed.

The matter ended there.

The following month, on the day the first instalment was due, road digging began in front of Nandkishor's shop.

For three days, cyclists could not get inside.

His earnings fell.

Instead of one thousand and fifty rupees, five hundred was paid.

The shopkeeper wrote in the account ledger: five hundred received; monthly interest on the balance.

"Interest?" Nandkishor asked.

“If an instalment is broken, that is the rule. If you like, pay the full amount next month.”

Nandkishor said nothing.

He folded the slip and put it in his pocket.

The next month Chandan developed a fever.

There were medicine expenses.

Then came Rupa’s examination fee.

The sari lay folded in the trunk, but its account remained open in the ledger.

Shailbala thought of wearing it a second time to an invitation in the month of Shravan.

Then she changed her mind.

“Why wear something so expensive again and again and wear it out?”

Nandkishor said, “An expensive sari does not become cheaper by being worn.”

At those words Shailbala fell silent.

She thought Nandkishor was taunting her.

In truth, Nandkishor was merely stating the arithmetic.

Four months became six.

Six months became ten.

From time to time five hundred, seven hundred, or three hundred rupees were paid.

The interest kept growing in small figures.

Nandkishor understood ledgers, but at the end of each month, whatever remained after oil, rice, medicines and fees was what could be paid.

Halfway through the first year, Shailbala herself went to the shop one day to pay an instalment.

She had three hundred rupees in her hand.

At that very moment a newly married woman and her mother were buying a nine-thousand-rupee sari in cash.

The shopkeeper gave equal attention to both customers, yet Shailbala’s three hundred rupees suddenly seemed extraordinarily small to her.

As he entered the amount in the ledger, she asked, “When will this account finally end?”

The shopkeeper turned the page and said, “The sooner the principal comes down, the sooner it will end. I cannot change the rules.”

“It feels as though the sari is lying at home while the interest is roaming outside.”

This time the shopkeeper looked directly at her.

“Selling cloth is my work. Whether to buy on credit or not is the household’s decision. But I’ll say one thing: if you never wear the cloth, then both the interest and the cloth are wasted.”

Shailbala did not reply.

She took the receipt for three hundred rupees and stepped out.

In the market, fruit, spices, earthenware—everything stood at its own price.

For the first time she understood that the price of the red sari had not stopped at four thousand two hundred rupees; its price was changing with every month of waiting.

That evening she opened the trunk and took out the sari.

For a moment she felt like wearing it the next day.

Then she placed the little receipt on the pallu.

Against the red cloth, the white slip looked startlingly bright.

The sari was folded again.

When a full year had passed, Shailbala took the sari out and aired it in the sun.

The red was unchanged.

A faint crease had formed along the fold of the border.

She shook the sari out and folded it again.

“Why don’t you wear it?” Rupa asked.

“After the debt is paid off.”

Rupa said nothing.

For the first time she understood that the cloth was not being kept in the trunk; it was being kept in the household accounts.

In the second year Rupa began temporary bookkeeping work at a local cooperative society.

After spending her days looking at figures for deposits, withdrawals, interest and instalments, her eyes grew used to them.

One evening she asked Babu for all the old slips.

Nandkishor laughed. “An audit after all this time?”

“Not an audit. I want to understand.”

Rupa arranged all the slips by date.

The original price was four thousand two hundred.

The payments made were separate.

The interest on broken instalments was separate.

In some months interest had even been added on interest, according to the written rules of the shopkeeper.

There had been no cheating; the rule had been printed in small letters on the back of the first slip.

No one in the household had had the time to read those small letters that day.

“How much is left now?” Shailbala asked.

Rupa added the figures.

“One thousand eight hundred and thirty-five.”

Shailbala said in surprise, “After paying so much, still?”

Rupa spread the slips out before her.

"We have already paid more in interest than the original price."

After dinner that night, all four of them sat together.

Rupa proposed that for three months they should hold back some household expenses and clear the remaining amount in one payment.

Chandan offered to stop his extra tuition.

Shailbala refused at once.

"Studies will not stop for the sake of a sari."

In the end, Nandkishor sold the old air pump from his shop, Rupa added the savings from her first two months, and Shailbala pawned one of her two old silver anklets.

Three months later, in red ink, the ledger was marked: "Account closed."

Shailbala sat for a long time with that slip in her hand.

There was less happiness than exhaustion.

Three years later, the niece came to her parents' home with a thick photo album made from the photographs of her wedding.

All the women of the house sat on the veranda turning the pages.

Someone retold the story of the generator failing, someone the shortage of plates, someone the dancing of the groom's friend.

On one page Shailbala appeared.

But half her body was hidden behind another woman.

Only one corner of the red sari's pallu could be seen.

The niece narrowed her eyes and asked, "Mausi, were you wearing red at this wedding?"

Manju said at once, "Red? I don't remember. I thought you were wearing green."

Laughter rose on the veranda.

Shailbala laughed too.

She said nothing.

That evening, after returning home, she opened the trunk.

The red sari lay folded just as before.

In three years it had been worn no more than four times.

She took it out and spread it on the cot.

The pattern on the border still shone, but along with that shine Shailbala now saw the figures on all those slips.

The next morning, as Nandkishor was getting ready to open the shop, Shailbala came into the courtyard wearing the same red sari.

Nandkishor asked in surprise, "Is there some invitation today?"

"No, no invitation."

"Then this sari?"

Shailbala adjusted the pallu on her shoulder.

"It is a sari. I will wear it."

She went out to the market to buy salt, oil and greens.
No one on the way paid any attention to her sari.
This time, neither did she care.

STORY 140

Five Dhurs of Land

In the pale morning mist, a red cord stretched between two corners of five dhurs of land.

At one end of the cord Raghunath Jha held a bamboo stake; at the other stood his younger brother, Jaynath.

Between them, the surveyor Harinarayan had stretched out his brass measuring tape and was reading the figures.

This small plot adjoining the main road was so tiny that if two bullock carts stood there together, half of it would be covered; yet for three months it had become the largest question in the household for the two brothers.

“Take it straight from here,” Raghunath said.

“Father’s old bamboo stake stood on this line.”

Jaynath replied at once, “The stake was moved three times. Look at the measurement on the eastern side in the papers.”

The surveyor wound up the tape and opened it again.

“The paper gives its measurement, but the land lies in its own fashion. Both of you stay calm; then the measurement will be clear.”

Calm had ended three months earlier.

After their father died, the house and fields had been divided long ago, but these five dhurs beside the main road had remained recorded as ‘joint’ property.

At the time, no one had cared about it.

On one side there was an old drain, on the other a thorny thicket, and dust and earth in between.

Villagers placed a foot on it while turning their bicycles; children played marbles there in the evenings.

When land prices rose, it was no longer the size of the five dhurs that caught the eye, but its frontage—directly on the main road.

Raghunath’s son Deepak wanted to open a small tea-and-pakora stall.

By his calculation, a tin roof, two benches and one stove would fit comfortably on the five dhurs.

Jaynath had a different idea.

It was difficult to bring a vehicle from the entrance of his house to the road; he wanted to keep half of the five dhurs open so that the approach could be widened.

The first dispute was only over two cubits of land.

Then old accounts entered those two cubits.

Who had contributed how much to Father's treatment, who had received more land at the time of a wedding, who had sold the fruit from which mango tree—all the old questions came and sat upon those five dhurs.

Raghunath had collected twenty bricks on his veranda.

One day Jaynath saw them and asked, "What are these for?"

"To mark the boundary."

"Has the survey been completed?"

"The survey is already there in the papers."

The next morning Jaynath had all the bricks removed.

Raghunath put them back.

On the third day, two bamboo poles were planted instead of the bricks.

By night the poles were found uprooted.

No one said openly who had uprooted them, but greetings ceased between the two households.

The two brothers drew water from the same well.

The well lay more on Raghunath's side of the courtyard, but the old partition deed recorded joint use by both families.

When Jaynath's daughter-in-law came in the morning with a bucket, Raghunath's wife Kamala would go inside.

The two women who had once talked while drawing water—about vegetable seeds, a child's fever, invitations and family occasions—now heard only the creak of the rope.

The panchayat met.

The mukhiya examined the papers, heard the surveyor's first measurement, and then said, "Divide the five dhurs into two equal parts. Let both of you receive equal frontage on the road."

Raghunath was ready to agree, but Jaynath objected that the corner near the drain lay lower.

"Two and a half dhurs and two and a half dhurs may be equal on paper, but not in use."

Jaynath argued that the width at the front should be equal.

Raghunath insisted that the total area should be equal.

The surveyor drew two maps.

In each, one side or the other lost a cubit somewhere.

Deepak tried to mediate.

"Kaka, I will make the shop a little smaller. You leave a passage for the entrance."

Jaynath looked at him affectionately, but his reply remained firm.

"If I leave half today, tomorrow the papers will show the whole thing as yours."

Deepak fell silent.

From that day he spoke less at home about the tea stall.

In Magh, Raghunath obtained a copy of the old khatiyān from the Block Office.

Jaynath got a copy of the map from the district record office.

The lines on the two documents did not match exactly.

In one map the drain ran straight; in the other it was slanting.

The dispute over five dhurs was no longer one line; it had become the difference between two papers.

"We will go to court," Raghunath said one evening.

Kamala, stirring dal on the stove, asked, "For five dhurs?"

"Not for five dhurs. For my share."

Kamala went on stirring the dal.

"I do not understand whether a share belongs to the land or to the mind."

Raghunath looked at her but said nothing.

At the beginning of Phagun, small marks in white lime began appearing along the main road.

At first people thought electricity poles were going to be installed.

Two days later a survey team arrived.

Employees in yellow caps stretched tapes from the middle of the road towards both sides.

When Raghunath reached there, one of them was driving a small red stake into the middle of the five dhurs.

"What is this survey?" Raghunath asked.

Looking at his paper, the employee said, "The main road is to be widened. The notification has already been issued. This is the proposed edge."

Raghunath's gaze moved from the stake to his pile of bricks.

"My land?"

"Whatever lies inside this line will go into the road."

Jaynath too came running when he heard the news.

For the first time, the two brothers asked the same question in one voice: "How much?"

The employee stretched the tape again.

He went as far as the drain, crossed the thicket, and wrote down the figure.

"Almost the entire five dhurs. The final measurement will be according to the notification."

For a few moments no one spoke.

The line the brothers had failed to draw for three months had been given an entirely different meaning by a government red stake in a single minute.

The question was no longer where the two and a half dhurs would fall; the question was whether anything at all would remain of the five dhurs.

Jaynath brought the map he had kept ready.

The employee looked at it.

“This concerns a private partition. The widening line will not change because of it.”

Raghunath asked, “Compensation?”

“The process will follow the title papers, records and measurements. Since the land stands in joint names, the application too must be made accordingly.”

“Joint?”

The two brothers looked at each other.

They had quarrelled over that word for three months.

Now, without that same word, the application could not move forward without both their signatures.

The following week the two went to the Block Office.

They had to sit on the same bench.

The clerk told them that because it was a joint holding, he needed both men’s identity papers, bank details, old land-revenue receipts and signatures of consent.

One receipt was at Raghunath’s house; the copy of the map was with Jaynath.

Neither could complete the file without the other’s papers.

The bus was crowded on the way back.

The two stood apart.

As they got down, a slip fell from Jaynath’s file.

Raghunath picked it up and handed it to him.

“Your receipt.”

Jaynath took the slip.

“Keep it with you. We will need it again tomorrow.”

Raghunath put the slip in his own file.

That was all that was said, but after three months, for the first time, something had passed from one brother’s hand to the other without an argument.

By Chaitra, the road-widening work had begun.

First the thicket was cut down.

Then the old drain was filled and marks were made for a new drainage channel.

The labourers moved Raghunath’s stack of bricks to one side.

The bamboo poles planted by Jaynath had already been removed.

Deepak put the two old benches he had bought for his tea stall behind the house.

“The shop will not be built here,” he said simply.

Something tightened inside Raghunath.

“We will look for another place.”

Jaynath had been listening.

He said, "There are three dhurs vacant near the bend by my pond. It is away from the main road, but people going to the market pass that way. If you like, go and see it."

Raghunath did not answer at once.

Deepak looked at Jaynath.

"Kaka, the rent?"

Jaynath did not smile.

"First get the shop running. We will settle the account later."

Raghunath's eyes rested on his brother for a moment.

Three months earlier, had he heard that sentence, he would have searched it at once for a hidden meaning—what scheme lay inside 'we will settle the account later'.

Now he merely said, "All right. We will see it tomorrow."

In the first week of Jeth, the earth-cutting machine arrived.

The top layer of the five dhurs was stripped away.

The red stake was pulled out and thrown aside.

The trace of the old drain disappeared.

In a single day, the land on which two maps, three surveys, twenty bricks and countless arguments had accumulated was levelled and absorbed into the foundation of the road.

That evening Kamala met Jaynath's daughter-in-law at the well.

After a long time, the two of them began pulling the same rope again.

When the bucket came up, Jaynath's daughter-in-law said, "Didi, Deepak's shop roof will go up tomorrow."

Kamala asked, "At that bend by the pond?"

"Yes. Father has had the bamboo cut."

The two women looked at each other and smiled.

Their talk moved once again to water, spices and leaves for the roof.

Before the rains, the new surface of the main road was laid.

The five dhurs now remained only on the map; on the ground there was a black tarred road and a paved drain beside it.

The compensation money was divided equally between the two brothers.

The amount was less than what they had imagined the old five dhurs to be worth, but neither felt like adding up the money already spent on court preparations, surveyors and travel.

One evening Raghunath and Jaynath stood beside the new road.

Vehicles sped past.

Pointing with his stick beyond the drain, Jaynath said, "By my calculation, the boundary was somewhere here."

Raghunath asked, "Yours or mine?"

Jaynath was silent for a moment.

"What is the use of saying now?"

In the distance, at the bend by the pond, smoke was rising from the stove of Deepak's small shop.

Four men were drinking tea on two benches.

Raghunath looked at the white edge-line painted on the road.

It ran straight past both houses, obeying neither the eastern map nor the western stake.

Jaynath said, "Come, let us have tea at Deepak's."

Raghunath crossed the small bridge over the drain with his stick.

"Come."

The two brothers walked together along the road where, a few months earlier, there had been five dhurs of land.

STORY 141

The Host

Morning sunlight had not yet reached the eastern wall of the courtyard, but in Raghunath Chaudhary's house the clatter of brass and bell-metal utensils had already begun. Two large cooking pots borrowed from the neighbours, three broad trays, seven buckets, and bundles of leaf plates lay in a row on the veranda. Beside the hearth was a pile of dried mango wood, and bamboo poles had been planted as far as the cowshed to stretch a cloth canopy overhead.

Raghunath was a respected man in the village. Whether there was a panchayat dispute, a marriage to mediate, or boats to arrange during a flood, people came to him. The household income did not match that standing. Three bighas of land, one old cow, and the small earnings of two sons kept the family going. But in people's memory his father's feasts were still alive—five vegetable dishes, curd, sweets, paan, and milk at the end.

This time Raghunath had arranged a village feast to mark the completion of his new veranda. The invitation travelled far by word of mouth. When the expenses were added up for the first time, his wife Malati silently pushed the sheet of paper towards him.

"Where is there this much money in the house?" Raghunath added the figures again. The total did not change.

"We'll borrow it from Ramautar Sahu," he said.

Malati kept looking at his face. "What will remain after the paddy is sold is meant for seed for the transplanting and for the younger one's studies."

"I won't touch that," Raghunath said. "The debt will be for three months. We'll repay it little by little."

Sitting at the back of his shop, Ramautar Sahu wrote the amount on a blue page of his ledger. Eighteen thousand. Three months. Interest separate. Raghunath did not put down a thumbprint; he signed his name. The line beneath that name seemed longer to him than it did on ordinary days.

Shopping in the market became its own small test of honour and embarrassment. The sweet-seller opened two kinds of boxes—laddus and pedas. After hearing the prices, Raghunath ordered only laddus.

"Chaudharyji, only one kind of sweet at your feast?" the shopkeeper asked. "One good sweet is not too little," Raghunath said. "People compare." "Will people's comparisons repay the debt?"

The shopkeeper laughed and fell silent. Raghunath ordered one hundred and eighty laddus. Then he calculated the rice, lentils, curd, and spices. On

hearing the price of paneer, he struck it off the list. Instead, he increased the quantities of pumpkin and chickpea curry. By the time he returned home, the list in his pocket had been folded four times, but the total still had not come down.

Malati looked at the list and said only, "Let the meal fill people's stomachs, not burden us with display."

Raghunath nodded in agreement. But he knew that guests came carrying not only their appetites but their expectations as well. Expectations had no scale on which to be weighed, yet afterwards they were what weighed most heavily.

At noon on the day of the feast, the first sitting began. Salt, lemon, fried potatoes, pumpkin curry, lentils, and rice were served on banana leaves. Raghunath had already told the four teenage boys, "Ask before you serve. Whoever wants something must not be left short; whoever doesn't want it must not have food thrown onto his leaf."

Everything went smoothly in the first sitting. A problem arose in the second. The basket of sweets contained a counted number of laddus. By Raghunath's calculation, there was one for every guest, with twelve kept separately at the end for the cook and the servers.

After eating his laddu, Deenbandhu Jha rested a hand on the corner of his leaf and said, "Give me one more." The boy serving looked towards Raghunath. Raghunath smiled and said, "Once all the sittings are done, if any remain, certainly." Deenbandhu twisted his smile. "Do even the laddus at a feast in your house run according to a ledger?"

Two men sitting nearby laughed. The boy moved on.

By the third sitting, half the pot of curd was gone. From inside, Malati signalled that the women's sitting still remained. Raghunath told the server, "Let the curd reach every leaf once. Then go round a second time."

That sentence too travelled through the sitting in another form.

"It's been measured out in advance," someone said softly.

"A big name—Chaudhary—but half a bowl of curd," came another voice.

Raghunath heard it. At that moment, he moved a small boy aside and bent down himself to lift the used leaves. He did not answer.

By evening, five sittings had finished. In the last sat the field labourers, the cooks, the teenage servers, and those who had arrived late. Everyone received curd. Three laddus remained. Malati said, "Give one each to the three little children."

Raghunath handed the basket to her.

At night, the piles of leaf plates were gathered under the canopy. The borrowed utensils were washed and set aside. Raghunath sat beside a pillar of the veranda, adding up the expenses: rice, lentils, vegetables, curd, spices, oil, leaves, cook, bamboo, cloth, firewood. Some amounts had gone above the estimate.

The cook, Ramphal, sat in front with his three assistants. Their wages were still due. Malati said softly, "Ramautar's payment can wait two days. These people live on the day's earnings." Without answering, Raghunath took cash from the box and placed it in Ramphal's palm. Ramphal counted it and said, "There's a hundred rupees extra."

"The share for those three boys," Raghunath said.

"But they were serving too."

"Exactly."

Ramphal divided the money among them. At that moment the courtyard was almost empty. The feast that had filled the whole day with noise, smoke, and rushing about had now become a few washed utensils, the folded canopy in a corner of the veranda, and a sheet of expenses.

Malati asked, "Did it come within eighteen thousand?" "No." "How much over?" Before answering, Raghunath folded the paper. "Two thousand seven hundred." Malati exhaled. "Then?"

"Ramautar will add the first interest. Next week I'll sell my share of the fish from the pond."

Malati was silent for a few moments. Then, in a very ordinary voice, she asked, "Were people pleased?"

Raghunath's hand stopped on the paper. "They ate and left."

"I asked whether they were pleased."

This time he gave no answer.

The next morning, Raghunath set out towards Ramautar's shop. At the tea stall in the square sat four of the previous day's guests. The conversation stopped for a moment when they saw him, but before he reached the shopfront it had begun again.

"I thought we'd see the old splendour at Chaudharyji's feast," came Deenbandhu's voice. "Splendour?" another man laughed. "Ask for a second laddu and first the counting of the whole village has to be completed!" "And the curd too—measured and measured." "A big reputation, a small hand." Laughter rose.

Raghunath's pace slowed for a moment. He could have gone inside and told them that what they called 'measuring' had been done so that even the labourers in the last sitting would not rise from empty leaves. He could have told them that the laddus had been bought with money borrowed from the moneylender. He could have told them that his own family had eaten only after the final sitting was over late at night.

But he said nothing.

At Ramautar's shop, the blue ledger was opened. The moneylender wrote the first month's interest beside the amount.

"Was the feast good?" the moneylender asked. "It was done." "Were there many people?" "Almost everyone who was invited."

Ramautar tucked the pen behind his ear and said, "In matters of prestige, one doesn't count the expense."

Raghunath looked at the blue page. "It has to be counted. If we don't count it, how will we repay it?"

The moneylender laughed, but Raghunath did not.

Over the next three weeks, talk of the feast gradually faded. But whenever Raghunath's name came up at some village gathering, someone or other retold the story of the curd and laddus. In the retelling, one laddu became half, the curd shrank from a bowl to a spoonful, and five vegetable dishes became two. It was as though the feast had not been eaten but merely heard about.

At home, another story was unfolding. Malati began setting aside five or ten rupees from the milk she sold in the mornings. The elder son started giving a part of whatever wages remained when he returned from the market. Raghunath sold his share of the fish from the pond and reduced the principal for the first time. The amount in the blue ledger grew smaller, but slowly.

One evening, Deenbandhu himself came to the veranda. In his hand was an invitation to his grandson's sacred-thread ceremony.

"Now I need your experience," he said. "How many should I plan each sitting for? You write down fewer people, and more turn up." Raghunath opened the invitation and looked at the date.

Deenbandhu went on speaking by himself. "I'm thinking of two kinds of sweets. Curd separately. But the expense is climbing too high. And afterwards people talk as well." For the first time, Raghunath looked at him closely. He remembered the laughter at the tea stall, but the memory did not enter his voice.

"First write down how much money you have," Raghunath said. "Then write down how many people you can truly feed with it. The difference between those two numbers is not called a feast. It is called debt."

Deenbandhu laughed. "You've become completely calculating."

Raghunath too gave a faint smile. "The calculation becomes clear from the day after the feast."

Deenbandhu left.

Malati brought from inside the small slip on which the blue-ledger account had been worked out. "This month's amount is ready."

Raghunath looked at the figures on the paper. From the direction of the distant square came the sound of people laughing. It was difficult to tell whether they were talking about his feast or about something else.

He rose and set out towards Ramautar's shop. In a corner of the veranda, one brass plate from the day of the feast still lay set aside to be returned to a neighbour. The plate was empty and shining.

But in the blue ledger, the feast was not over yet.

STORY 142

New Mobile Phone

It was a cold January morning.

In a rented room in a narrow lane of Laheriasarai, Aniruddha was pressing down the back cover of his old mobile phone.

One corner of the cover kept lifting; he would fold a thin scrap of paper, wedge it inside, and only then would the device remain switched on.

The screen showed the time, and that was about the only thing it could be relied upon to do.

Aniruddha was in the final year of his B.A.

His father ran a small bicycle-repair shop in the village, and his mother delivered milk to two households morning and evening.

Aniruddha's expenses in the city were measured out carefully - rent, food, college fees, and examination fees.

Anything outside those four lines was regarded as a luxury.

Even so, in the college veranda his old phone had now become more of a marker than a tool for study.

His friends sent photographs of notes on their newer phones, formed groups, and read invitations to programmes.

None of that worked on Aniruddha's device.

One day, after the history class, Deepak turned the phone over in his hand and said, "Does this thing work, or does it only tell the time?"

Everyone laughed.

Aniruddha laughed too, but his laughter came half a moment late.

That evening, after returning to his room, he read again the money-order receipt his father had sent.

The amount was five thousand four hundred rupees.

On the back was a short note in his father's handwriting: "Pay the examination fee and the remaining college dues first."

There were still twelve days before the last date for paying the examination fee.

Aniruddha worked out the figures.

He was due three thousand rupees for a month's work from two tuitions.

A local printing shop also owed him one thousand eight hundred rupees for two hours of evening work counting sheets of paper.

If all the money arrived on time, he could gather the examination fee again.

The next day he went to a shop in the market.

Shining phones stood in rows inside a glass cabinet.

The shopkeeper took out a black handset and placed it in his palm.

Aniruddha asked, "How much?"

"Eight thousand two hundred."

Aniruddha's fingers went still.

"Four thousand eight hundred now, and the rest in two instalments," the shopkeeper said.

For a long time he stared at the smooth back of the phone.

He remembered Deepak's laughter; that moment in the veranda when everyone else seemed to have something gleaming in their hands while his own palm held a scratched, loose-backed device.

"Pack it," he said.

From that day, something changed in the veranda.

Deepak whistled when he saw the phone.

Ritesh said, "Now Aniruddha Babu has become a complete city gentleman."

For the first time, when the group wanted a photograph, they asked Aniruddha to use his phone.

He refused two or three times, then took the photograph himself.

For three days there was a slight new confidence in the way he walked.

People who had earlier turned to Deepak or Ritesh when they wanted notes now also looked at photographs of pages on Aniruddha's phone.

One classmate told him, "It looks good in your hand."

The sentence was small, but Aniruddha kept remembering it for a long time that night.

He put his old phone away in a box.

His father's number, his mother's number, and the numbers of the tuition families - he transferred them all to the new phone.

As he closed the loose cover of the old one, it seemed to him for a moment that he was putting away not merely a machine but his old self as well.

But the new shine brought new expenses with it.

A protective case, a thin sheet of glass for the screen, a data recharge.

The shopkeeper had said that without these things the phone's value would go down.

Aniruddha did not add up two or three such expenses.

Together, the small amounts crossed four hundred rupees.

The examination fee was quietly moving farther away.

At night the blue light of the phone fell across the wall of his room.

He opened his books, but again and again the screen lit up.

A message, a photograph, a small joke.

He felt that he was no longer outside the group.

Four days later, when he went to the first tuition, the child's mother said, "There has been a lot of expense for a wedding this month. Take your money five days later."

The owner of the printing shop said, "A government bill is stuck. Wait a week."

A small fear rose inside Aniruddha, but he covered it with arithmetic.

Even five days later, there would still be two days before the final date.

Meanwhile, the family of the second tuition student left for the village.

That payment was pushed into the following month.

For the first time, Aniruddha opened the box of the new phone and looked at the printed price on the back.

Eight thousand two hundred rupees was written there clearly.

He had seen the figure before, but that night it carried a different weight.

On the college notice board, the last date for submitting the examination form was written in red ink.

Until five o'clock the next day.

The fee was four thousand six hundred rupees.

Aniruddha had eight hundred and seventy-five rupees.

He thought of borrowing from Deepak.

Then he remembered the laughter in the veranda - this time the reason for it would not be his old phone but his debt.

He stopped himself from asking.

That evening he went back to the same shop to sell the new phone.

The shopkeeper turned it over and examined it.

"Once it has been opened, it is used," he said. "Four thousand."

"It hasn't even been twelve days."

"The market doesn't count days."

Even selling it for four thousand would not cover the fee, and the remaining instalments would still have to be paid.

Aniruddha put the box back into his bag.

That night he kept thinking of calling his mother.

He could have told his father that the money had gone into some other expense.

But the moment he would have to name that "other expense," he could not gather the courage to hear his own voice say it.

On the final day he sat in the veranda outside the college office until four twenty in the evening.

No miracle occurred.

The printing-shop money did not arrive.

There was no news from the tuition household either.

At five o'clock the window closed.

The employee inside gathered up the register.

Aniruddha stood up.

The new phone was in his pocket.

For the first time that day, its weight felt heavy.

The next morning he went back outside the office.

The window was open, but the queue there was now for certificates, not examination forms.

Standing to one side, Aniruddha quietly asked the clerk, "Can it be submitted late?"

The clerk turned the pages of the register and said, "The date has passed. The list has been sent to the university. You will have to take the supplementary examination at the next opportunity."

"Not even one paper this time?"

"If there is no form, in whose name would we issue it?"

The answer was not harsh; it was simply the rule.

That hurt Aniruddha more than harshness would have.

If someone had scolded him, he could at least have divided the blame in his mind.

Here there was no one else with whom to divide it.

On the first day of the examination, the college gate was crowded.

Students stood with admit cards in their hands, searching for their rooms.

Aniruddha came too.

Somewhere inside him lingered the hope that perhaps his name might somehow have appeared on the list.

But his roll number was not there.

The office clerk asked, "The fee receipt?"

Aniruddha was silent.

"If the form was never submitted, how could an admit card be made?"

He said nothing.

He went outside and sat beneath a neem tree.

At exactly nine o'clock the bell rang.

The veranda slowly emptied.

The friends who until the previous day had been admiring his new phone all went into the examination rooms.

The phone vibrated.

It was a message from Deepak: "Which room are you in?"

Aniruddha did not reply.

A second message came: "I don't see your name on the list."

He switched off the screen.

An hour later, his father called.

Aniruddha let the phone ring for a long time, then answered.

"Did the examination go well?" his father asked.

Aniruddha's throat went dry.

He could have lied.

He needed only one sentence.

But sunlight was falling through the neem leaves onto his knees, and the sound of the bell seemed to ring inside him again.

"I didn't go inside, Babuji."

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

"Are you ill?"

"No, I'm not ill."

His father asked again, "Then what happened?"

Aniruddha told him everything.

The money order, the new phone, the delayed tuition money, the closed window - everything.

His father did not interrupt him even once.

At the end, he asked only, "Do you still have the phone?"

Aniruddha said, "Yes, I still have it."

"Then keep it. Selling it won't bring today's examination back. First find out from the office when the next opportunity is."

Aniruddha had expected a scolding.

Not being scolded did not lessen his shame; instead, it made it clearer.

When the examination ended that day, Deepak came outside.

He stopped when he saw Aniruddha sitting under the neem tree.

Deepak asked softly, "What happened, yaar?"

"I didn't pay the fee."

Deepak first looked at Aniruddha's hand, where the new phone lay, and then at his own admit card.

The smile disappeared from his face by itself.

"I thought..." He left the sentence unfinished.

Aniruddha said, "I too had thought a great many things."

The following week he sold the new phone.

He received four thousand two hundred rupees.

After paying off the remaining instalments, he put the money left over into a separate envelope.

He went to the office, wrote down the date of the supplementary examination, and wrote in large letters on the envelope: "EXAMINATION FEE."

The old mobile phone returned to his pocket.

Its back cover still lifted at one corner.

Aniruddha folded a thin scrap of paper and wedged it inside again.

One day in the veranda Deepak laughed and said, "The old companion again?"

Aniruddha smiled too.

"It tells the time," he said. "For now, that's enough for me."

STORY 143

The Dowry Fan

It was an afternoon in Jeth.

The bricks in the courtyard had grown hot, and the blades of the grey pedestal fan on the veranda were turning soundlessly.

As Madhu cleaned its grille with a duster, she noticed a thin piece of paper stuck beneath the base.

In red ink it read, "Madhu - Wedding."

Some of the ink had faded, but the writing was still legible.

Madhu began peeling the paper away with her finger when her mother-in-law, Shanti Devi, called from inside, "Let it be. Why are you taking it off?"

"The paper has grown old."

"Old it may be, but it is still a mark. A mark of the things your father gave at the time of your wedding."

Madhu stopped her hand.

The fan turned again and sent a current of air towards her.

On the day of the wedding, the fan had not been the largest of the gifts.

Among a trunk, two brass plates, a bundle of bedding, a small cupboard and some utensils, it had looked quite ordinary.

But members of the wedding party had paused again and again beside the pile of things to look.

Some eyes went to the cupboard, others to the fan.

Madhu's father, Ramakant Mishra, had repeatedly said that day, "All this is for my daughter. There is no list, no account."

The groom's father, Jagmohan Jha, too had said before everyone, "We have asked for nothing."

Everyone liked both statements.

One side displayed its means, the other its freedom from demands.

The fan stood silently in between.

Three months after the wedding, the heat intensified.

At night the fan ran in Madhu and Sudhanshu's room.

One night its speed slowed; the next day the blades turned, but the air weakened.

Sudhanshu brought an electrician from the market.

The electrician opened the base and examined it for a while.

"A small part needs replacing. If you have the purchase receipt, the shopkeeper may even replace it without charge. The warranty should be for one year."

Shanti Devi immediately said, "The receipt must be with Madhu's father. He brought all these things just like that on the wedding day."

Madhu remained silent.

She felt that more than the fan's broken part was about to be opened.

That evening she told her father.

Ramakant laughed at first.

"The receipt? It must be somewhere. I'll look for it."

The next day his younger son, Nawal, arrived with an old envelope.

Inside was the sales receipt for the fan.

The price was four thousand eight hundred rupees.

Below it was the account of three instalments - the first paid fifteen days before the wedding, the second two months after it, and the third still blank.

Nawal said, "Babuji said to show this to the shopkeeper. He'll pay the remaining instalment this month."

Shanti Devi kept looking at the receipt.

Sudhanshu read it too.

When Jagmohan Jha returned from the fields that evening, the paper reached his hands.

His eyes went straight to the blank third line.

"This fan hasn't even been fully paid for yet?"

Madhu said, "Babuji bought it in instalments. He'll pay the rest."

Jagmohan's brows drew together.

"Why in instalments? I had said there was no need to give anything."

Sudhanshu tried to lighten the matter.

"The fan works. It only needs a small part replaced."

"This isn't about the part," Jagmohan said.

"People will think he took on debt to send his daughter off and we kept counting the goods."

For the first time Madhu felt anger, not embarrassment, on her father's behalf.

"Why should what people think be tied to Babuji's instalments?"

Jagmohan did not answer.

He folded the receipt and placed it on the table.

The very next day Ramakant came himself.

Nawal had perhaps gone home and told him everything.

He carried a small cloth bag.

Inside were a new receipt showing the balance fully paid and a fifty-rupee bill for the replacement part.

"The shopkeeper changed the part," he said. "The fan will be running properly by evening."

Jagmohan looked at the receipt.

"Why was it necessary for you to pay the remaining amount immediately?"

Ramakant's tone changed.

"It was mine to pay, not yours."

"That is not what I said."

"Nawal told me you asked, 'It wasn't even fully paid for?' So I paid it in full."

"I only meant to ask why you had taken on debt for the wedding."

"The debt was mine. My daughter went to your home, not the debt."

For a moment the veranda fell so silent that the fan's low hum could be heard clearly.

The electrician was tightening the base at that very moment.

Without raising his head, he continued working.

Jagmohan said, "You are taking my words to mean something else."

Ramakant replied at once, "People carry away the words; meanings are made later."

Madhu kept looking from one to the other.

She understood that choosing any single sentence would not mend the situation.

The honour that both families had tried to preserve in their own ways on the wedding day was now finding thorns in each other's words.

The fan was repaired.

But that night it did not return to the bedroom.

Shanti Devi had it placed in a corner of the veranda.

"The air will spread better here," she said by way of explanation.

The real reason did not need to be spoken.

Two weeks later, discussions began for the marriage of Jagmohan's younger daughter, Rupa.

Some people from the prospective groom's family came to see the house.

Chairs were set out on the veranda.

It was hot.

Shanti Devi said to Madhu, "Switch on the fan."

Madhu plugged it in.

The fan began to turn.

The red paper was still stuck beneath the base.

An elderly woman among the guests read it and laughed.

"Oh, this is the fan that came with Madhu beti."

Shanti Devi smiled too.

"Yes, from that wedding."

Rupa's uncle joked, "Then write down one fan for Rupa too. Otherwise her in-laws will say her sister had one in her home and she doesn't."

Everyone laughed.

Jagmohan did not.

Madhu saw his fingers begin tapping on the arm of his chair.

After the guests left, he said to the uncle, "Don't say such things in front of guests."

The uncle asked in surprise, "What happened? I was only joking."

"A joke later becomes a story."

Within three days that sentence reached Ramakant.

But by the time it arrived, its form had changed - "Jagmohan says that since a fan came from Madhu's home, one is wanted for Rupa too."

Ramakant heard this in the market from someone who did not know the whole context.

He said nothing at once, but that evening he asked his wife, "Did I give a fan, or did I set a price?"

His wife said wearily, "Everyone has a mouth and everyone has a version. Don't get entangled in the same mess again."

But the entanglement now lay between the two homes like the fan's cord, out of sight and yet stretched between them.

Rupa's marriage was fixed.

Jagmohan went himself to Ramakant's house to deliver the invitation.

The first five minutes passed in exchanging courtesies.

In the sixth, Ramakant asked, "Has it been decided that a fan will be given at Rupa's wedding?"

Jagmohan understood at once.

"Who told you?"

"People are saying it."

"Do people not say that I stopped the joke?"

"People hear only half. On the wedding day too they heard only half - that you had asked for nothing, but everyone was looking over all the goods."

Jagmohan's face hardened.

"Are you again suggesting that I took dowry?"

"I am not suggesting anything. I am saying that I gave the fan for my daughter. Don't make it an example and open an account for another daughter."

"I have opened no account."

"Then good."

"But you are speaking as though I make demands."

Neither man's voice rose, but the distance between them widened.

The invitation card remained lying on Ramakant's wooden seat.

Jagmohan got up and left.

Ramakant attended Rupa's wedding, but he arrived late.

He went straight to the dining rows and left soon afterwards.

Jagmohan too found an excuse in being busy.
They exchanged greetings but did not speak.
Madhu watched all this from a distance.

It seemed to her that although the fan was still at home, its shadow had reached all the way to the wedding pavilion.

After the wedding, Rupa left for her marital home.
The house grew quiet again.

The heat of Jeth had now become the humid heaviness of Ashadh.

One evening Shanti Devi sat before the kitchen fire, wiping the sweat from her face.

The fan stood idle on the veranda.

Madhu dragged it to the kitchen doorway.

Shanti Devi asked, "Why here?"

"Because this is where the air is needed."

Madhu plugged it in.

The fan started.

At first the air went straight towards Shanti Devi.

Then Madhu bent over the base and looked at the little red paper - "Madhu - Wedding."

Over all those months, one corner of the paper had come loose on its own.

This time she did not peel it off.

She merely turned the head of the fan so that the air spread into the kitchen.

A little later Sudhanshu returned from outside.

Not seeing the fan on the veranda, he asked, "Where did it go?"

Madhu indicated the kitchen with her eyes.

Inside, Shanti Devi was kneading flour.

The air was falling across her sweat-damp back.

The red paper was beneath the base; from a distance it was not even visible.

Sudhanshu asked nothing.

The fan kept running.

STORY 144

The Large Door

Two weeks before the month of Sawan began, two deep pits were dug in front of Nandakishor Yadav's house.

On one side lay the old bamboo fence; on the other, a heap of red bricks.

Fakira the mason was stretching a string and taking measurements.

Nandakishor kept walking out to the middle of the road to see how the new gate would look from a distance.

"Make the pillars two hands higher," he said. "The house should not look small from the road."

Fakira scratched his head.

"If we raise them higher, more bricks will be needed. The arch above will also become heavier."

"Use as much as it takes. It will be built only once."

From inside the veranda, Vimla Devi was listening to all this.

Before her stood two brass lotas.

On the bottom of one of them, the round stain left by last year's rainwater was still visible.

She came outside and said, "The roof too will be built only once. When will that be?"

Instead of answering, Nandakishor began explaining the width of the pillars to Fakira.

The house had begun thirty years earlier with mud walls and a tiled roof.

Little by little, two brick rooms were built, and then a veranda in front.

The previous year Nandakishor's elder son, Manoj, had found work in a textile factory in Punjab.

At the end of each month, whatever he managed to save, he sent home.

With that money the old tiles had been removed and the walls raised all around, but the money ran short before the roof could be completed.

One room had a concrete roof, the second was covered with tin sheets, while over the veranda in between lay a mixture of bamboo, plastic and old tiles.

In Jeth, Manoj had sent thirty-five thousand rupees and written, "Take care of the roof before the rains. I will not get leave this time."

Vimla had read that line three times.

Nandakishor had read it too.

But that very week, a new gate had been built in front of Rambali Sah's house across the road.

Two thick pillars, a rounded arch above, and gleaming iron leaves in the middle.

In the evenings people stopped to look at it.

For two days Nandakishor only watched.

On the third day he called Fakira.

"There still is not enough money for the whole roof," he argued. "With this money the roof will only be half done. The gate can be completed. At least the front of the house will improve."

Vimla had asked, "Will the rain fall on the appearance or inside the house?"

Nandakishor had laughed the question away.

Work on the gate moved quickly.

The pillars rose, a semicircular arch was built above them, and small square niches were made on both sides where lamps could be placed at night.

An artisan was called from the market for the iron leaves.

Vimla watched Manoj's remitted money turn into bricks, sand, cement, iron and paint.

Inside the house, the unfinished roof remained exactly as it had been.

The old plastic sheet was spread again over the bamboo above the veranda.

There was a hole in one corner, and Vimla cut up an old fertiliser sack and tied it over the gap.

Nandakishor's younger daughter, Gauri, studied at college.

One evening she said to her father, "Bhaiya sent the money for the roof."

"Does your brother see the house from that far away?" Nandakishor asked.

"Bhaiya knows what the rains are like."

"I know too. The roof is four days' work. We will do it with the next money."

Gauri fell silent.

She knew that for her father the gate was not merely brick and iron.

For years a bamboo fence had stood in front of the house.

After the main road through the village was paved, the fronts of newer houses changed, but from a distance theirs still looked unfinished.

Nandakishor cultivated land on share and also sold milk.

Sometimes, standing in front of his own house, he felt that passers-by saw not his labour, but only the bamboo fence.

Seven days later the gate stood complete.

Its leaves were dark green, edged in yellow.

In the centre of the arch, white letters on a blue plaque read: "Nandakishor Yadav."

On the day the paint dried, Nandakishor crossed to the other side of the road and stood looking at it for a long time.

Vimla was sitting inside by the hearth.

Gauri asked, "Ma, will you not come and see?"

Vimla came outside and looked once.

"It has been made well," she said.

Then she raised her eyes to the plastic over the veranda, fluttering in the wind.

A four-inch-high strip of cement had been built along the bottom of the gate so that its leaves would stay clean and mud from outside would not come in.

Fakira had said, "In the rains it will keep outside water from entering."

Vimla had then asked, "And where will the water from inside go?"

Fakira had laughed.

"Where will so much water come from inside?"

The first rain came at night.

First the wind rose, then all at once heavy drops began drumming on the tiles, the tin and the new gate.

Nandakishor got up and went to the veranda.

Raindrops stood like pearls on the new paint.

For a moment he was pleased - the gate looked even brighter in the rain.

Then Vimla's voice came: "Bring a bucket."

Water was dripping through the middle of the veranda.

One knot in the old plastic sheet had come undone.

Gauri brought a bucket from the room.

Within five minutes water began pouring from another place.

A lota was set there.

At a third place, slow drops began to fall.

"Move the sacks, the wheat will get wet," Vimla said.

Nandakishor and Gauri together began shifting the grain sacks into the room with the concrete roof.

Outside, the rain was roaring.

Water began collecting in the unpaved part of the courtyard.

At first this seemed ordinary; such rain came every year.

But earlier the water used to escape towards the road beneath the bamboo fence.

This time a four-inch strip of cement stood across the front.

Within half an hour the courtyard looked like a pond.

Gauri opened the gate.

Water was rushing along the road outside, but the water inside remained trapped by the cement strip.

Vimla said, "What was meant to keep the water outside has kept it inside."

Nandakishor said nothing.

He took a hand hoe and began scraping at one corner of the strip.

The cement was new, but the hoe in his hand could not break it.

He ran towards Fakira's house.

Fakira was not there; his son gave him a small hammer and chisel.

Back home, Nandakishor knelt at the right-hand corner of the new gate.

Beneath the yellow border, at the very strip whose smoothness he had been feeling with his fingers only the previous day, he set the chisel.

The first blow left a small white mark.

The second broke the corner.

With the third, a thin stream of water escaped outside.

Gauri stood silently holding the lantern.

Vimla brought a broom from inside and began sweeping the water towards the small opening.

After a while the stream grew thicker.

The water in the courtyard began to fall.

The gate stood open, both green leaves drenched in the rain.

Above, Nandakishor's name was still clear on the blue plaque; below, a crooked notch had been cut into the cement strip.

Until two in the morning the family kept clearing away water.

All four beds were placed close together in the one room with the concrete roof.

Nandakishor lay listening to the drip-drip into the bucket on the veranda.

By morning the rain had stopped.

A thin layer of mud covered the courtyard.

Outside the new gate, the road looked as though it had been washed clean.

Inside, Vimla was spreading the damp sacks out to dry in the sun.

When Fakira arrived, he was startled to see the broken corner of the strip.

"Who broke this?"

"I did," Nandakishor said.

"It was new work."

"There was no way for the water to get out."

Fakira bent and examined the notch.

"We will fit a drainpipe here and fill it up again."

Nandakishor said, "Do not fill it. Make a proper drain. Permanent."

Fakira nodded.

Then he asked, "Shall I finish the decoration still left on the two sides of the arch today?"

Nandakishor looked up at the roof over the veranda.

The stains from the night's rain ran all the way down the bamboo.

"No," he said. "First look above. Measure all the places where the water is coming through."

Fakira looked at his face, then asked for a ladder without saying anything.

At noon a letter arrived from Manoj.

Gauri read it aloud: the factory would give him an extra shift the following month, and then he would send some more money.

At the end he had written, "The roof has been taken care of, hasn't it?"

Gauri stopped after reading the line.

Nandakishor said, "Write back - the work has begun."

Vimla looked at him.

It was the first time he had answered without mentioning the gate.

For the next three days Fakira replaced the bamboo above the veranda, repaired the joints in the tin sheets, and took measurements for the portion that was to receive a concrete roof.

The arch of the gate remained with its decoration unfinished.

From the road it still looked grand.

People sometimes stopped to read the blue plaque.

No one paid attention to what lay below.

But when the rain came again, water ran straight into the roadside flow through the small drain made at the right-hand corner of the cement strip.

Gauri watched from the veranda.

This time only two or three drops fell through the newly repaired joints above.

Vimla did not bring a bucket.

Nandakishor stood by the gate.

The water was flowing out not beneath the plaque bearing his name, but through the small opening made at the very bottom.

He bent and removed a leaf caught at the mouth of the drain.

He closed the gate, but left the water's way open.

STORY 145

Certificate of Honour

It was the last week of Magh.

Mahendranath Jha was sorting old papers at his writing desk when the postman brought a blue envelope.

Across the envelope, in bold letters, was written: 'Mithila Literary Service Honour.'

Inside was an invitation card with a golden border.

His full name was printed on it, and in the middle were the words 'for long service to literature.'

Mahendranath read it three times.

The first time for the pleasure of seeing his name, the second to understand the date, and the third to read the small print at the bottom.

It said that a brief introduction to each honoured writer would be printed in the annual souvenir volume; contribution towards the souvenir: five hundred rupees; contribution towards the meal and hall: three hundred; travel at one's own expense.

He placed the invitation on the table and called his wife, Sulochana.

'Look, this time they have invited me too.'

Sulochana put on her spectacles.

She read the name and smiled.

'That is good. You should go.'

Mahendranath placed a finger on the small print.

'Eight hundred here itself. Bus fare extra. And if it gets too late at night, lodging will cost extra too.'

Sulochana looked at the invitation again.

'Will they honour you, or hold the ceremony with your money?'

'Not every organisation is like that,' Mahendranath said softly.

'They print a souvenir. They have to hire a hall. Asking for some contribution is not unnatural.'

Sulochana did not argue.

She looked towards the northern wall of the room, where a yellow stain still marked the plaster raised by rainwater.

'Seven hundred rupees are still due to the man who repaired the roof. Just remember that much.'

Mahendranath folded the invitation and slipped it between the pages of a book.

But he did no writing that day.
 Until evening, the bold letters of his own name kept circling before his eyes.
 For thirty years he had been writing poems, memoirs and stories.
 Some had appeared in magazines, and he had published two slim collections at his own expense.

In the village people called him 'Master Sahib' more often than 'writer.'
 For the first time, the invitation had placed before his name the word he had silently heard in his mind for years.

Two days later he deposited the eight-hundred-rupee contribution into the account given by the organisation, then went to the market to have the receipt printed.

The printer charged twenty rupees.
 Then he sent his white kurta to the washerman for the ceremony.
 His shoes were old; a polish would do.
 Mahendranath had a habit of writing down expenses.
 In the margin of his ledger he noted: eight hundred and twenty, kurta washing sixty, shoe polish thirty.

Sulochana saw the ledger and said nothing.
 She merely ran a finger over the entry opposite the roofer's name: '700 due.'
 The ceremony was at the district headquarters.
 Mahendranath caught the five-o'clock morning bus.
 Through the fog he kept wiping the windowpane again and again.
 Inside his cloth bag were his kurta, one of his books, the invitation card and a new story he had written.

He hoped that after the ceremony there would be a chance to talk to someone about the story.

At the entrance to the hall, a register lay open on a table.
 A young man asked his name, checked his receipt, and hung a paper badge around his neck.

On the badge were printed the words 'Honoured Guest.'
 'Where do I get the souvenir?' Mahendranath asked.
 'After the programme.'
 'I had sent my introduction.'
 'Everyone's has come.'

The young man turned towards the next person.
 Inside, a large number of certificates of exactly the same size were stacked on the stage.

Beside them lay gamchhas and small bunches of flowers.
 The first five rows of chairs were full.
 Mahendranath sat in the sixth row.
 Beside him was a poet from Sitamarhi, whose first question was, 'How much did you contribute?'

'Eight hundred.'

The poet laughed.

'They told me a thousand over the phone. I bargained and stopped at eight hundred.'

Mahendranath did not like the remark.

He turned his eyes towards the stage.

The programme began two hours late.

There were many speeches - save the language, the crisis of literature, the indifference of the new generation, the organisation's struggle.

Then the honours began.

Names were called one by one.

Some introductions ran to two lines, some to four.

When Mahendranath's turn came, the announcer mispronounced his pen name.

He went up to the stage, folded his hands, received the gamchha, the flowers and the certificate.

The photographer said, 'Look this way.'

A flash went off.

The next moment he was guided down from the other side of the stage, because the next name had already been called.

The whole thing had taken less than forty seconds.

Back in his chair, Mahendranath opened the certificate.

A golden border, red letters, and this time his name was correct.

Below were the signatures of the president and secretary.

He smelled the paper.

It carried the scent of fresh printing.

He was genuinely pleased.

While standing in the meal queue, he met an old acquaintance, a teacher.

The teacher asked, 'In which magazine has your new story appeared?'

Mahendranath placed a hand on his cloth bag.

'I haven't sent it anywhere yet. I brought it with me. I thought I might give it to someone to read.'

The queue behind the teacher began to move.

'Of course, send it sometime,' he said, and moved ahead.

The programme ended as evening was falling.

The souvenir volume was distributed.

Mahendranath looked for his introduction.

His name was there, and there were four lines, but the title of one of his books had been misspelled.

He thought of telling the secretary, then saw him behind the stage directing the people who were folding the chairs.

By the time Mahendranath reached the bus stand, the last direct bus had left.

Another bus would take him only halfway.

From there he would have to take a shared vehicle.

The total fare was more than he had estimated.

It was half past ten at night when Mahendranath reached home.

Sulochana opened the door.

'Your meal is kept ready. Wash your hands and face first.'

Mahendranath took the certificate out of his bag.

'Look.'

Sulochana read it carefully.

'They have printed your name properly.'

'Yes, this time it is correct.'

'Will you have it framed?'

Mahendranath answered at once, 'Yes. If I leave the paper like this, it will curl.'

The next day he went to the market.

A simple glass frame was quoted at four hundred and fifty rupees.

He asked for something cheaper.

The shopkeeper gave him a thin wooden frame for three hundred and fifty.

Mahendranath paid.

In his ledger he added up the total expense - contribution, printing, laundry, polish, bus, shared vehicle, tea, frame.

The sum came to one thousand nine hundred and sixty-five rupees.

He looked at the figure in silence for a while.

Then he closed the ledger.

At noon the frame came home.

Mahendranath took out a hammer and nail.

Three things already hung on the wall above his writing desk - his daughter's graduation certificate, a photocopy of his son's first appointment letter, and a faded photograph of his father, Ramlochan Jha.

Holding the certificate in his hand, Mahendranath measured the space.

There was no room in the middle.

'Shall I move our daughter's certificate to the other room?' he said.

Sulochana answered from inside, 'Which other room? That one has the grain sacks and the old trunk.'

Mahendranath went to the southern wall.

The plaster there was flaking.

He touched it once and lime dust came away on his fingers.

On the northern wall was the yellow stain of damp.

On the western wall, above the cupboard, were the clock, the main electrical box and two hanging bags.

A narrow strip remained above the door, but the frame would not sit straight there.

He went out to the veranda.

The roofer had left a nail there on his previous visit.

Mahendranath held the frame against it.

Just below ran an old mark left by rainwater.

At the first heavy rain, the paper might get wet.

Sulochana watched silently.

'There is no place,' Mahendranath said.

There was less complaint than surprise in his voice.

'The house is small,' Sulochana said. 'It was just as small before the honour.'

Mahendranath said nothing.

He set the frame on the table.

In the evening his granddaughter Naina came home from school.

Her eyes fell on the new frame.

'Baba, is this your prize?'

'A certificate of honour.'

'Where will you hang it?'

Mahendranath laughed.

'I'm still looking.'

Naina bent over the table and read the name.

'Hang it beside my picture.'

Her drawing hung on the lower part of the northern wall - a blue river, a red house, a green tree.

'There is damp there.'

'Then shall I take my picture down?'

Mahendranath answered at once, 'No. Your picture will stay.'

Naina went inside, reassured.

That night Mahendranath sat at his writing desk.

The frame was propped in front of him.

Lamplight fell on its glass, and behind the glass his name gleamed.

Beside it lay the new story that no one at the ceremony had had the chance to read.

He picked up the story.

He read the first page again.

He struck out two sentences and added one line.

For the first time in many days, his attention settled completely on the words.

Sulochana set down a glass of milk and asked, 'What will you do with the certificate?'

Mahendranath looked at his father Ramlochan's photograph, then at his daughter's certificate.

'I won't put it in the trunk,' he said. 'Let the roof be repaired first.'

'The roofer's seven hundred.'

Mahendranath opened the ledger.

Below the total expense of the honour trip, he drew a new line: 'Roof - 700 due.'

'I'll pay him tomorrow,' he said.

The certificate remained in its frame, but it was not hung on the wall.

It was left standing behind the writing desk, in front of the books.

The following week the roofer came.

The joint above the northern wall was opened, broken tiles were replaced, and the path of the rainwater was diverted.

When the work was finished, Sulochana looked at the yellow stain on the wall and said, 'Once it dries, there will be space here.'

Mahendranath nodded.

Even that day the certificate was not hung.

Mahendranath sat at the desk and opened the new story again.

His name still gleamed in the glass of the frame, but his eyes were on the page.

STORY 146

One Plate Less

It was a Phagun evening. In the western quarter of the village, the wedding feast for Ramlochan's daughter Suchitra was under way. Beneath the long bamboo shamiana adjoining the courtyard, leaf plates had been laid out row after row. The smoke from the hearths, the fragrance of cumin falling into ghee, and wedding songs sung in full voice - all three mingled in the air.

Ramlochan had been running about for three days and was exhausted. One moment he was at the cauldron of rice, the next at the tray of paan, the next watching the road for the groom's party. His young niece Maithili had been given one task - once a row filled, she was to count the leaf plates and the glasses of water.

Thirty-two leaf plates had been laid in the first row. Thirty-two in the second. While the third row was being laid, Maithili counted thirty-one.

She went to the storeroom. 'Uncle, one leaf plate is short.'

Ramlochan's elder cousin Raghuvir immediately said, 'It isn't short. The leaf plate in that corner has been removed.'

'Why, Uncle?'

Raghuvir signalled with his eyes for her to keep quiet. 'Your job is to count, not to ask the reason.'

Maithili turned back, but her eyes remained fixed on the empty place. There was a gap of nearly two hands' breadth in the middle of the row. As people sat down, they kept pretending not to notice it.

A little later, Ramvriksh came from the southern quarter with his wife Malti and their two sons. Ramlochan himself had invited them. The previous year, when Ramlochan had fallen ill, Ramvriksh had taken him to the hospital at night in a bullock cart. After the wedding date was fixed, Ramlochan had told him, 'Come with the whole family.'

When Ramvriksh reached the shamiana, Ramlochan raised a hand from a distance in welcome. 'Sit down. The row is filling now.'

Raghuvir stepped forward and said something close to Ramlochan's ear. Ramlochan's raised hand slowly came down.

'What happened?' Ramvriksh asked.

Ramlochan did not answer at once. Raghuvir said, 'Separate arrangements will be made for all of you later.'

Malti's face hardened slightly. 'Why separately?'

'There is a great crowd,' Raghuvir said.

Ramvriksh looked once towards the rows. He too noticed the empty gap in the middle. He did not count, but he understood.

'Was the invitation to sit with everyone, or to eat what is left later?' His voice was low.

Ramlochan said, 'Ramvriksh, don't make an issue of it. This is a wedding house.'

'I did not come here to make an issue of anything.' Ramvriksh looked at Malti. 'Come.'

Malti turned the boys around. The younger son, Nitin, had his eyes on the tray of sweets; he wanted to ask something, but his mother took hold of his hand. The four of them walked out as quietly as they had come.

Maithili watched it all. A clean leaf plate was in her hand. She had lifted it to lay in the gap, but from a distance Raghuvir shook his head and stopped her.

'Take that leaf plate back and put it away,' came his order.

Maithili carried the leaf plate back to the storeroom. A damp mark from her finger remained on one corner.

The road to the southern quarter was not very long. On reaching Ramvriksh's house, Malti began warming the leftover rice on the hearth. Nitin sat silently on a low stool. At last he asked, 'Why didn't they let us sit?'

Ramvriksh paused while filling a lota with water. 'If I answer that question today, I will fill you with anger. Understand only this much - never let an insult given by someone else become your identity.'

Malti lifted the lid from the rice and said, 'Eat first.'

Nitin said, 'I wanted sweets.'

Malti placed jaggery on his leaf plate. 'This will do for today.'

Vikram stood outside on the veranda, watching the glow of the wedding. The wind was rising. In the distance, the cloth of the shamiana lifted once and then flapped hard again.

The feast went on. Ghee, dal, vegetables, tarua, curd, sweets. The guests kept discussing the flavours. Someone said there was too little salt; someone else said the curd was good. One row rose, another sat down. Again and again, amid the filled rows, the empty gap remained visible like a small cut.

At about ten at night, the groom's party began to eat. Meanwhile clouds gathered in the sky behind the house. No one had expected such clouds in Phagun. At first the wind blew lightly; then the bamboo shamiana began to flap.

'Tighten the ropes!' the cook shouted.

Two young men ran towards the poles. Heavy drops of rain began to fall. People lifted their plates and started moving towards the inner rooms. The rows broke apart.

At the rear of Ramlochan's house, a temporary kitchen had been set up beside an old mud wall. Three large cauldrons stood on the fire there. In the

wind, the tarpaulin overhead began to billow violently. One rope was tied to an old peg in the wall. As the wet earth softened, the peg loosened.

Maithili was gathering empty glasses from the storeroom when she heard a cracking sound. She saw that one part of the rear wall was leaning outwards, while the tarpaulin rope was pulling it towards itself. Two children stood at the foot of the wall holding leaf plates of sweets.

'Move!' Maithili shouted.

Her voice was swallowed by the rain and the commotion.

Just then three people came running in through the outer gate - Ramvriksh, his elder son Vikram, and the younger Nitin. Malti was behind them. They had reached home and were only just changing their clothes when they saw one bamboo pole of the shamiana fall towards the road and heard the uproar.

Ramvriksh understood the situation at a glance. First he moved the children away from the wall. Vikram caught the dangling tarpaulin rope and gave it some slack, reducing the pull on the wall. Nitin kept moving people out through the narrow path behind the kitchen.

'Don't go near the cauldrons!' Malti said, stopping the women. 'They're hot.'

Ramlochan and Raghuvir also came running.

'Hold this bamboo on this side,' Ramvriksh told Ramlochan. 'If we untie the rope, the tarpaulin will come down, but the wall may be saved.'

Without asking a question, Ramlochan took hold of the bamboo. Raghuvir took the other side. Vikram loosened the knot. As soon as the rope came free, the tarpaulin sagged to one side and rainwater poured off it in a rush. The old wall trembled, but did not fall.

Meanwhile, one bamboo pole from the front shamiana fell to the ground. People panicked again. Ramvriksh's sons cleared the rows. A few young men who had until then only been watching now joined in. Within five minutes, the children and elderly people had been moved from the open dining area into the inner rooms.

Within twenty minutes, the rain eased as suddenly as it had begun. Leaf plates, flowers, torn paper streamers and water floated together in the courtyard. The cooking had partly stopped, but no one was seriously hurt. One cook had a small wound on his hand.

Ramlochan stood beside a veranda pillar, trying to catch his breath. His dhoti was wet up to the knees. In front of him, Ramvriksh was washing the mud from his hands with water.

'Why did you come back?' Ramlochan finally asked.

Ramvriksh shook the water from his hands. 'I saw the bamboo fall onto the road. There were children inside.'

'Even so...' Ramlochan's sentence remained unfinished.

Ramvriksh looked at him. 'Disaster does not ask a person's caste before it falls.'

Saying this, he turned towards Malti. 'Come. Let us go home now.'

Raghuvir stepped between them and said, 'Eat before you go.'

For the first time Malti looked at him directly. 'The time for the meal has already passed.'

Raghuvir's eyes dropped.

Maithili ran to the storeroom. She took out the clean leaf plate on whose corner the damp mark of her finger had dried. Then she picked up three more. Inside the veranda, she laid all four leaf plates in a straight line.

Raghuvir wanted to say something, but Ramlochan raised a hand and stopped him.

'No separate last row this time,' he said.

Ramvriksh stood for a few moments, uncertain whether to sit. Just then Nitin, tired with hunger, looked at his mother. Malti stroked his head.

'Let the children eat,' she said. 'We will eat later.'

Maithili served rice on the leaf plates. Nitin sat down. Vikram beside him. Ramvriksh was still standing.

Ramlochan himself picked up the bucket of dal. He poured dal onto Nitin's leaf plate, then Vikram's. Then he looked at Ramvriksh.

'Sit,' was all he said.

Ramvriksh slowly sat down. Malti sat beside him at last.

In one corner of the rain-soaked courtyard, the leaf plates laid earlier had become completely jumbled. It was difficult to tell who had sat in which row.

The bride's farewell took place at dawn. The guests thinned out. Ramlochan and Maithili were cleaning the courtyard. The wet leaf plates were being gathered in one place.

Out of her old habit of counting, Maithili looked at the bundle of leaf plates. Then she smiled and asked, 'Uncle, yesterday one plate was kept short, wasn't it?'

Ramlochan stopped sweeping. He looked towards the place on the veranda where four leaf plates had been laid in a straight line the night before.

'Yes,' he said.

'What will we do now?'

Ramlochan looked across the wet courtyard. 'Now we must count again from the beginning.'

Maithili did not answer. She took out all the clean leaf plates that remained in the storeroom and began putting them into a single bundle. This time, no leaf plate was set aside separately.

STORY 147

A City Address

The day Amresh hung a small tin nameplate outside his rented room, the rain had stopped. In blue paint it read, 'Amresh Kumar, Vidyapati Nagar, Darbhanga.' Beneath it there was no village name, no post office, no block.

The room was not on Vidyapati Nagar's main road. Leaving the main road, at the end of a second narrow lane, behind a grocery shop, stood a cramped courtyard with three rooms. Amresh had been living there for two months. But whenever anyone asked, 'Where do you live?' he would answer easily, 'Vidyapati Nagar.'

If the next question was, 'Village?' his voice would grow a little softer. 'Near Darbhanga.'

In fact, his village was Sonbarsa - about eighteen kos from the town. Written in full, the village address took four lines: village, post office, police station, block, district. Amresh felt that such a long address made him seem small.

It had been two years since he came to Darbhanga. At first he had come to prepare for competitive examinations. Later he began tutoring two children in the evenings and earning enough to pay the rent. At the first house where he taught, the owner, looking at his certificates, had asked, 'Sonbarsa? That's quite far inside, isn't it?'

Amresh had laughed and said, 'I live here now.'

At the second house he heard someone say, 'A young man who lives in town understands the value of time.'

After that one sentence, Amresh began changing the way he introduced himself. Earlier, in written applications, he used to write 'Sonbarsa'. Now he wrote 'Vidyapati Nagar, Darbhanga'. His father's letters did not come to the rented room; the village postman delivered them directly to his home. Even so, the town address seemed to Amresh like a new identity of his own.

One day he went to register his name at the district employment assistance centre. The clerk sitting behind the window asked, 'Native place?'

'Darbhanga.'

'Where in Darbhanga?'

Amresh paused for a moment. 'Vidyapati Nagar.'

The clerk looked at his Aadhaar card. 'This says Sonbarsa.'

'That's the old address. I live in town now.'

'Current residence and native place are different things.'

There was a long queue behind him. The clerk asked again, 'Shall I put Sonbarsa as the permanent address?'

Amresh felt that the young men standing behind him were listening. He said, 'No, put the town address. I live here.'

The clerk shrugged. He typed something into the computer. A receipt came out. Amresh folded it without reading it and slipped it into his pocket.

A few months later, a notice appeared for the state's records-assistant training programme: six months of training, a monthly stipend, and, for successful trainees, the possibility of contract work in various district record rooms. Amresh's graduation marks were good. He filled in the application. He also entered his registration number from the employment assistance centre.

'If you get this work, it will be very good for you,' his father Harinarayan said on a visit from the village. 'You've had the patience for reading papers and documents since childhood.'

Amresh smiled. 'It's only an application so far.'

Harinarayan read the tin nameplate. 'Vidyapati Nagar?'

'Yes, Babu.'

'You cut out Sonbarsa?'

Amresh said jokingly, 'Babu, who here is going to read such a long address?'

Harinarayan said nothing. He merely looked once at the door of the room, the wet courtyard and the nameplate.

Three weeks later, the selection list was posted on the district noticeboard. Amresh's name stood sixth. There were eight training places in all. His hand trembled. He read his name twice.

Opposite his name on the noticeboard was written 'Vidyapati Nagar, Darbhanga'. For the first time, Amresh looked carefully at that line. Seeing his name printed beside the town address stirred a faint pride within him. A young man standing beside him asked, 'Are you from this town?' Without thinking, Amresh said, 'Yes, I live here.' At that moment the name Sonbarsa rose as far as his tongue, then went back again.

On his way home, he bought a marked copy of the selection list. Reaching his room, he hung the sheet beneath the nameplate. At night, in the lamplight, his name and address could be seen on the same line. Amresh felt that after two years of running about, the town was finally accepting his name.

Verification was three days later. The list of required documents included educational certificates, identity card, employment-registration receipt and residence certificate.

That very night Amresh went to the village. His father took all the papers out of the iron trunk. The residence certificate clearly said, 'Village Sonbarsa, Post Office Bhalpatti...' Harinarayan asked, 'Will you need papers for the town as well?'

'No. This is for the native residence.'

At dawn Amresh caught a bus and reached the district office. Twelve young men and women sat on the veranda holding files of documents. They were being called inside one by one.

Amresh's turn came. The superintendent sat on one side of the table, two clerks on the other. The first clerk checked the certificates. The second examined the employment-registration receipt.

'The permanent address here is written as Vidyapati Nagar,' he said.

'Yes... at that time I was living here.'

'The residence certificate is for Sonbarsa.'

'That is my village.'

The superintendent looked over his spectacles. 'Then which is your permanent address?'

Amresh's throat went dry. 'Sonbarsa.'

'Then why does the employment register say Vidyapati Nagar?'

'It was supposed to be the current address... when the entry was made, both somehow became the same.'

The clerk turned the receipt towards him. 'There are two boxes here - current and permanent. Both say Vidyapati Nagar.'

For the first time, Amresh read the receipt carefully. It was true: the same address appeared on both lines.

'I can get it corrected,' he said at once.

'Verification is still in progress,' the superintendent said calmly. 'There is a discrepancy in the documents. Bring a corrected receipt from the employment centre. The deadline is four o'clock tomorrow.'

Amresh gathered up his file and ran.

The employment assistance centre was not very crowded, but the employee who corrected entries in the computer register was on leave that day. Another clerk told him to submit a written application.

'I need it by four o'clock tomorrow,' Amresh said.

'Submit the application. The old entry will be checked and corrected.'

'By when?'

'It is difficult to say just now.'

'My selection will be held up.'

The clerk looked at him. 'Did you check it when it was first entered?'

No answer came from Amresh's mouth.

He ran to the owner of the house he rented. He thought he might obtain some proof of his current residence in Vidyapati Nagar. The owner said, 'You do live here, but this rear portion has no separate house number in the municipal register. The electricity receipt is in my name.'

'A written certificate?'

'I can give one for current residence. How can I give one for permanent residence?'

By evening Amresh had run to three places - the ward office, the employment centre and the district office. Everywhere the same question kept returning in different words: 'What is your native address?'

He had always known the answer to that question. The difficulty was not in the answer, but in the papers.

When he returned to his room at night, the tin nameplate was hanging crooked to one side in the rain-wind. The blue letters of 'Vidyapati Nagar, Darbhanga' gleamed in the damp light.

Ranjit, who lived in the adjoining room, asked, 'You got selected, didn't you?'

Amresh said, 'The papers are stuck.'

'Which paper?'

'The address.'

Ranjit wanted to laugh, but hearing Amresh's voice, he fell silent.

Early the next morning Amresh reached the employment centre. The employee who handled corrections arrived at eleven. The old entry was opened. The clerk said, 'It can be corrected, but a copy of the original document must be attached, and the officer must approve it.'

'By four today?'

'We'll try.'

At one in the afternoon the file reached the officer's desk. At two he left for a meeting. At three thirty-five, Amresh's receipt was issued - this time with Vidyapati Nagar as the current address and Sonbarsa as the permanent address.

Clutching the paper, he ran towards the district office. Rain had begun. The shared vehicle got stuck in traffic midway. Amresh got out and ran on foot.

The office clock showed seven minutes past four when he reached the veranda.

The door of the verification room was half closed. Inside, the clerks were tying up their files.

'Sir, the corrected receipt.'

The clerk looked at the clock. 'The list has been closed.'

'Seven minutes...'

'I understand. But after the eighth place, the first candidate on the waiting list has already been called.'

Amresh placed the paper on the table. The superintendent looked at it. 'It has been corrected. Attach this one to your next application.'

'This time...?'

The superintendent remained silent for a few moments before answering. 'This time the deadline has passed.'

Amresh picked up the paper. Outside, the rain was still falling.

Two days later he went to the village. Harinarayan was sorting maize on the veranda. Amresh put the file down on the cot.

'It didn't happen?' his father asked.

'No, Babu.'

'Were your marks too low?'

'The address was wrong.'

Harinarayan put the maize in his hand to one side. 'The home address?'

Amresh nodded.

Just then the postman stopped his bicycle at the gate. 'Harinarayan Babu! A letter for Amresh.'

Amresh went outside. His full address was written on the envelope - Village Sonbarsa, Post Office Bhalpatti, block, district. Not a single line had been shortened. The letter was an examination notice from a private institution; there was still time.

The postman laughed and said, 'Your letters never get lost in the village.'

Amresh stood there holding the envelope.

Three days later he returned to Darbhanga. The tin nameplate outside his room was still crooked. He pulled out the nail and took the plate down. The blue letters had not faded; he placed the plate inside against the wall.

In the evening he sat down to fill in a new application. The box marked 'Permanent address' appeared.

Amresh did not pause his pen.

He wrote it out in full - 'Village Sonbarsa, Post Office Bhalpatti...' Beneath it, in the box for 'Current address', he wrote the full lane of his room in Vidyapati Nagar, the landlord's name, and the nearest landmark.

It filled four lines.

This time, not one line seemed long to him.

STORY 148

The Smile in the Photograph

The thirteenth-day rites were over. The leaf plates spread in the courtyard had been cleared away, the brass utensils had been washed and set upside down in a corner of the veranda, and the smell of incense still clung inside the house. In that house near Madhubani, all that remained now was the preparation to leave.

Vinod Babu's four children had come from different places. The eldest son, Naresh, from Patna; the second son, Dinesh, from Delhi; their daughter Meera, from Janakpur; and the younger daughter, Sudha, had been living in that house with Babu for the last two years of his life. During Babu's illness, the medicines, tests, nights spent awake and hospital visits had mainly been managed by Sudha. But during the days of the rites, this fact was written on no list.

After midday Naresh said while tying up his bag, 'I have to catch the four o'clock train.'

Dinesh looked at his watch. 'I too have a bus at five.'

Meera was closing the travelling case kept beside a pillar of the veranda. Sudha was putting the rice left in the kitchen into a small container.

Meanwhile Naresh's son Aditya came into the courtyard and said, 'Everyone sit together once. Let's take a group photograph.'

No one showed much interest. Dinesh said, 'Now?'

'After so many days, all of us are together. Who knows when we shall meet again?' Aditya raised his mobile phone. 'There are old photographs of all of us with Baba, but this is the first time we are all together since Baba went away.'

Meera said softly, 'Take it. If Babuji were here, he too would say, "Stand there, all of you together, just once."'

Everyone stood before the northern wall of the courtyard. Naresh was in the middle, Dinesh beside him, then Meera and Sudha. Behind them stood the daughters-in-law and the grandchildren. In front was Babu's empty bamboo chair. Aditya reached out to move it to one side.

Sudha said, 'Leave it there.'

'The chair is coming into the middle.'

'Leave it there.'

Aditya said nothing. The chair remained where it was.

When the photograph was taken, everyone's face looked tired in the first picture. Aditya looked at the screen and said, 'This is very sad. Smile once, please. Baba liked seeing everyone laugh.'

No one's smile came naturally. Then Meera looked towards Sudha. Sudha wiped the corner of her eye and stretched her lips a little. Seeing her, Meera smiled. Naresh too composed his lips. Dinesh gave a faint smile without showing his teeth. The second photograph came out clear.

Aditya said at once, 'This one is good.'

By evening the photograph had been posted on social media. Above it was written: 'In Babuji's memory, the family together even in an hour of grief.'

Aditya cropped out part of the empty chair because, according to him, it made the picture look tilted. But one arm of the chair was still visible in the right-hand corner.

In the first hour it received fifty likes. By night, five hundred. Vinod Babu had taught for thirty years at the local school; many of his former pupils began sharing the photograph. One wrote, 'See Guruji's values; the family is still bound together as one.' Another wrote, 'Such unity is rare.' A third wrote, 'A smile in grief, the courage of life.'

Sitting on the bus, Naresh kept reading the comments. He sent a screenshot of one comment to the family's shared message group: 'See how Babu's name is being honoured.'

Dinesh replied, 'Good. But we also have to look at the final hospital accounts.'

The message group fell silent all at once.

Two days later Naresh sent a photograph of the account book. It added up the total spent on Babu's treatment, how much each person had given, how much had been withdrawn from the bank, and how much of the old household savings had been used. Naresh wrote, 'In my view, whatever savings remain in the house should be divided equally among everyone.'

For the first time Sudha wrote, 'Where is the account of my salary spent on medicines during the last two years?'

Dinesh replied at once, 'Do not measure service in money.'

Sudha did not reply for a long time. Then she wrote only this: 'Then do not measure the bank expenses only in money either.'

Meera wrote in between, 'Stop this discussion for now.'

Naresh wrote, 'Stopping it will not change the account.'

That night the photograph crossed a thousand likes. A local news page posted a brief comment with it: 'The inspiring unity of the family of renowned teacher Vinod Jha.'

Excited, Aditya posted this in the shared group. No one replied.

Three days later an argument began over the key to the house. Naresh wanted the house to be kept locked and cleaned twice a year. Dinesh felt that an empty house would deteriorate quickly and should therefore be rented out. Meera said that it would not be right for the prayer room from their mother's time and Babu's books to fall among strangers. Sudha said that she was still

living in that house; her job was at a nearby school, so the house was not 'empty'.

Dinesh wrote, 'I used the word empty in the ordinary sense.'

Sudha replied, 'I am not ordinary.'

Then no message came for two days.

Meanwhile the photograph kept circulating on social media. Former pupils kept writing stories about Vinod Babu - how he gave books to pupils who could not pay their fees, how he taught extra lessons before examinations. In people's eyes, the smiles of the family's four children became proof of Babu's successful life.

Alone in the house, Sudha kept hearing notifications for those comments. Aditya had created an account for her on her mobile phone. Now and then she opened it, then closed it again.

One evening, after returning from school, she was cleaning Babu's room. From beneath the pillow she found two old medicine receipts. One receipt mentioned money sent by Dinesh from Delhi; the other bore Naresh's name. Sudha looked at the papers for a long time. She remembered that in that month Naresh had delayed paying his son's fees so that he could send the money. Dinesh too had sent money while putting up with a delay in his rent. In the rush of Babu's illness, she had forgotten that.

Sudha thought of sending photographs of the receipts to the shared group, but did not. She put the papers into Babu's file.

The following week Meera arrived unexpectedly. In her hand was a large frame.

'Aditya had it printed,' she said.

In the frame was the same smiling group photograph. The colours were bright and everyone's face was clear. In the right-hand corner, half an arm of the empty chair could be seen.

Meera said, 'I thought we could hang it in Babu's room.'

Sudha looked at the wall. An old black-and-white photograph of Babu was already hanging there, showing him standing among the children of his school. There was room for a nail beneath it.

Then Meera asked softly, 'How far has the matter of the house gone?'

'Nowhere.'

'Dinesh was saying it should be rented out.'

'Naresh says it should stay locked.'

'And you?'

Sudha put the duster to one side. 'I live here - and that fact seems to be the hardest thing for everyone to decide.'

Meera fell silent. The frame remained leaning against the wall.

That evening a message came from Naresh: 'Next Sunday, let the four of us talk it through.' Dinesh wrote only, 'Fine.' Meera did the same. Sudha did not reply.

On Sunday the four of them spoke together. The conversation began with the house, moved to the hospital expenses, then went on to Babu's care, absences, leave from work, salaries, the key, the books and the old fields. At times voices rose; at times one or another fell silent.

Naresh said, 'Each of us did whatever we could from where we were.'

For the first time Sudha said clearly, 'Yes. But we should also name what we could not do.'

After a long silence Dinesh said, 'You are right.'

No decision was reached that day. But for the first time, in the shared group, a separate list of the days of care was made alongside the hospital expenses - not how much money each person had given, but who had been present when, and who had been unable to come when. The list was incomplete, but for the first time it was not only about rupees.

At night Sudha picked up the frame that was leaning against the wall. She went to hang it on the nail, then stopped. Everyone in the photograph was smiling. On social media that smile meant 'unity' to thousands of people. To Sudha, it was a five-second instruction: 'Smile once.'

She did not hang the frame beneath Babu's black-and-white photograph. She put it on the wall of the veranda, where everyone entering the house would see it.

A few days later Naresh came. He saw the frame and said nothing. Then Dinesh came. He too said nothing. The next month Meera came and wiped the glass of the frame.

On social media the likes on the photograph gradually stopped. Newer news pushed it down.

Inside the house, the discussion was still not completely over. Some matters arose again; some fell silent again. But now, whenever any of the four crossed the veranda, that five-second smile stood before them.

One day Aditya came to the house again. Looking at the frame, he asked, 'The photograph looks good here, doesn't it?'

Sudha was tying up Babu's file at the time. She looked up.

'It does.'

'Everyone is smiling.'

Sudha looked once more towards the frame.

'Yes,' she said, 'when the photograph was taken, all of us smiled.'

STORY 149

A Feast on Debt

On the third day after Jagesar Mandal died, two cloth bags lay in one corner of the veranda. One held his dhoti, gamchha and old woollen shawl; the other held Nilima's college books, two files, and eighteen thousand four hundred rupees tied in a blue cloth.

On that blue cloth Nilima had written in her own hand, in small letters: 'Room in town and next semester.'

Harinarayan Mandal, Jagesar's elder son, came and stood before that bag many times, then turned away without touching it. Babu's funeral rites were under way. Relatives were coming to the house. Some carried fruit, some rice, and some advice on their lips.

'How many people for the thirteenth-day meal?' his maternal cousin Shambhu asked.

Harinarayan lowered his eyes and said, 'We haven't counted yet.'

'Count first. If you run to the market on the last day, everything will cost twice as much.'

That night four people sat in the courtyard: Mother, Harinarayan, his younger brother Kailash, and Nilima. Mother said, 'Your Babu used to say while he was alive: don't make a show after I'm gone. Do whatever you can, quietly.'

Kailash agreed. 'Fifty or sixty of our own people. That's all.'

Harinarayan said nothing. For three months before Babu's death he had been making rounds of the hospital in town. Medicines, tests, transport - the savings had melted away in all of it. Even so, some other reckoning was going on inside him.

The very next day he met Baidyanath Sah at the market. Harinarayan had been buying household provisions from his grocery shop for years. Baidyanath himself raised the matter -

'Jagesar Kaka belonged to everyone. If you keep the feast small, people will talk.'

Harinarayan did not smile.

Baidyanath opened his ledger on the wooden counter. 'Rice, dal, oil, spices - write down whatever you need. How can you pay everything at once? Settle the account when the crop is sold.'

The blank page of the ledger lay before Harinarayan. The date was written at the top. Beneath it came the first entry - eight sacks of rice.

When he returned home that evening, he said, 'I've made provision for three hundred people.'

Mother looked straight at him. 'Who told you to?'

'No one. Babu had a name. People will come.'

Nilima was writing something in her file at the time. Her pen stopped. 'Three hundred?'

'The village, relatives, people who farmed with Babu - everyone.'

Kailash asked, 'Money?'

'Sah will give it on credit.'

Mother said softly, 'At a feast bought on debt, is it the soul that is satisfied, or the ledger?'

Harinarayan got up and went outside.

The preparations began. Bamboo arrived. A temporary hearth was built on one side of the courtyard. Leaf plates were counted. Pots of curd were arranged. An advance had to be paid for the fish. The sweet-maker asked for half his money in advance.

At night Harinarayan sat on the veranda and untied the knot in the blue cloth. He counted the notes. Eighteen thousand four hundred. He set ten thousand aside. Then, after pausing for a few moments, he tied the remaining notes back into the cloth.

Nilima was standing by the doorway.

'Babu?'

Harinarayan started. 'You haven't slept yet?'

'That was the money for my room.'

'I'll put it back in ten days.'

'Where will so much money come from?'

'I'll get an advance on the paddy.'

For a few moments Nilima kept looking at the notes in her father's hand. 'I asked where it would come from, not when.'

Harinarayan's voice hardened. 'This is not the time in this house for such accounts.'

Nilima did not reply. She picked up her file and went inside.

From early morning on the thirteenth day, the courtyard filled with smoke. Fish was washed. Dal went on the fire. Sacks of rice were opened. Relatives from far away arrived ahead of time. The dining rows filled not once but five times.

All day Harinarayan ran from one hearth to another, from the gate to the dining rows and from the rows to the storeroom. Babu's photograph hung on the veranda wall. The flowers before it were drying.

By the time the feast ended, it was night. Two large pots of rice were left, half a bucket of vegetables, several pots of curd, and countless used leaf plates.

As the guests left, each had something different to say.

'The arrangements were good.'

'The fish could have come round once more.'

'The curd was excellent.'

'It got crowded when we sat down.'

Harinarayan listened to all of it. Not one person said anything about Jagesar.

The next morning a man from Baidyanath Sah's shop came with the account. The total debt was far higher than Harinarayan had estimated. Rice, oil, spices, curd, firewood, leaf plates, labour - each was listed separately. The advances for the fish and sweets had already gone from Nilima's bundle.

'I'll pay after the crop,' Harinarayan said.

'To be paid after the crop,' the young man writing the account entered in the ledger.

Nilima was to return to college seven days later. The district headquarters was so far from the village that walking there and back every day was impossible. Five girls from the village travelled in the same hired vehicle. The rule was that the month's fare had to be paid together at the beginning of the month. Nilima's blue-cloth bundle had held the fare for those four months, the cost of laboratory materials, and money for books.

On the first day of the month the driver came to the gate and asked, 'This month's fare?'

Harinarayan said, 'Give me two days.'

Two days later he went to the paddy trader. The trader looked over the field, made an estimate, and said, 'If I give you an advance now, then at harvest I won't take the paddy at the market price. I'll take it at the price we fix today.'

The price was low. Harinarayan agreed anyway. Most of the advance went towards Baidyanath's debt. The rest paid two old hospital bills. Nilima's blue cloth remained empty.

On the third day the hired vehicle drove past without stopping. Nilima stood on the veranda with her bag of books in her hand.

'Didn't you go today?' Mother asked.

'The vehicle left without me.'

Harinarayan was folding the receipt for the paddy advance at the time. 'I'll arrange something tomorrow.'

The next day Nilima borrowed a bicycle from her neighbour Sarita. She left at dawn. By the time she returned, it was evening. The bicycle's front tyre kept losing air. On the fifth day it rained. When she reached home in wet clothes, Mother was waiting at the door.

'You won't go like this every day,' Mother said.

'Then how am I supposed to go?'

Mother did not answer.

For a week Nilima went sometimes by bicycle, sometimes in an acquaintance's vehicle, sometimes by bus. She went three days and missed two.

Her laboratory group was changed. Another student was put into the group in which she had worked with four other girls.

On Sunday her classmate Rashmi came to bring her file. 'Your laboratory attendance is falling,' she said. 'The teacher asked about you.'

Nilima turned a page. 'What did you say?'

'That there was work at home.'

Nilima looked at Rashmi. 'That was a lie.'

'Then what should I have said?'

Nilima did not answer.

From the following week she stopped going to college. The books did not close. After the morning chores, she studied in the afternoon. She copied Rashmi's notes. She wrote questions on separate sheets of paper. But the smell of the laboratory, questions put directly to the teacher, debates with classmates, and the library timetable were not available on the veranda at home.

Harinarayan understood this clearly for the first time on a Tuesday. It was ten o'clock. He returned early from the field and saw Nilima sitting on the veranda with a chemistry book open.

'Holiday today?'

Nilima looked up. 'Only I have a holiday.'

'From college?'

'Only me.'

Harinarayan wanted to say something, but no words came. He went inside.

That evening he went to Baidyanath Sah's shop to make the monthly payment. In the ledger, the debt from the feast was slowly shrinking. Baidyanath crossed off the amounts paid with a red pen.

'There isn't much left now,' he said.

Harinarayan turned the ledger towards himself and looked. Eight sacks of rice. Oil. Dal. Spices. Leaf plates. Firewood. One entry after another. All at once he remembered Nilima's file - laboratory dates, lists of lessons, blank days in the attendance record.

'When will this ledger be closed?'

Baidyanath added up the account. 'Two more months.'

Harinarayan said softly, 'The other ledger won't wait that long.'

Baidyanath looked at him questioningly, but asked nothing.

When Harinarayan returned home, he sat beside Nilima's books.

'How many days have you missed?'

Nilima did not count. 'Enough that I can't complete all the laboratory work this semester now.'

'Shall I find another vehicle?'

'Where will the money come from?'

Harinarayan was silent.

Nilima did not close the book. 'I haven't stopped studying. The semester has stopped.'

'What's the difference?'

'There is one for me.'

After that day Harinarayan began avoiding talk of the feast. If someone said the thirteenth-day meal had been splendid, he merely nodded. The monthly payments at Baidyanath's shop continued regularly. The field's paddy went at a low price. Household expenses were cut.

Nilima began tutoring two adolescent girls from the village in the evenings. She did not put that money towards the feast debt. She kept it in an old tin. Inside the lid she pasted a small piece of paper: 'Fare for next semester.'

One day Mother asked, 'Have you told Babu?'

'Not yet.'

'Why not now?'

'Let it fill up first.'

At the end of Paush, Harinarayan paid the final instalment at Baidyanath's shop. Baidyanath drew a red line across the entry in the ledger and wrote, 'Paid in full.' Then he handed him a small receipt.

When he reached home, Harinarayan placed the receipt beside Nilima.

'The feast account is finished.'

Nilima picked up the receipt. She looked at it for a while. Then she opened her laboratory file and placed it inside.

'Why there?' Harinarayan asked.

'That page was blank.'

Harinarayan could not bring himself to ask whether she meant the blank back of the receipt or the blank days of that semester.

In Magh a notice for the next semester came from the college. Nilima opened the tin and counted the money. It was not enough for the full fare, but it was more than half. Harinarayan supplied the rest. This time the blue-cloth bundle was tied again.

On the morning she was to leave, Shambhu met them at the gate - the same Shambhu who had asked about the size of the dining rows on the third day.

'The thirteenth-day feast was excellent,' Shambhu said. 'People still talk about it.'

Harinarayan asked, 'What do they say?'

Shambhu thought. 'The arrangements were good... the fish...'

He could not finish the sentence.

Nilima came out carrying her bag. The blue cloth was in her hand. The hired vehicle stopped outside the gate. She climbed in.

Harinarayan turned towards the veranda. Jagesar's photograph still hung in the same place on the wall. Beneath it there was no ledger of the feast.

A red line had already been drawn through the entry in Baidyanath's ledger.

In Nilima's attendance register, an entire semester remained blank.

STORY 150

The Rented Car

At eight in the morning, Nandkishor Jha straightened the two garlands of red flowers on the gate of his courtyard once again. Just behind them stood a gleaming black car. White flowers on the bonnet spelled 'Ravi', and a small yellow strip in one corner of the windscreen had been covered with flower petals.

'The strip cannot be seen, can it?' Nandkishor asked the driver.

The driver, Shambhu, bent down and looked. 'No. But that is the vehicle-service mark. If anything happens on the road, the number is written there.'

'Nothing will happen,' Nandkishor said. 'And if the mark is visible, people will know the car is hired.'

Shambhu said nothing. He merely opened the bonnet, looked towards the water reservoir, touched the cap, then closed it gently.

It was Ravi's wedding. For three days the house had been full of people's voices, incense, the smell of betel, and the band's rehearsals. Ravi's father, Harimohan Jha, had retired from a government school. The house was brick-built, but not new. There was an old scooter in the courtyard and a two-wheeler belonging to Amit, the younger son. That was all.

But the previous month, when the bride's maternal uncle had raised the matter of transport for the wedding day, Nandkishor had said casually, 'Ravi has a car. He lives in town and hardly uses it.'

Ravi had been sitting there at the time. He had opened his mouth to say something, but his father's look had stopped him.

On the way back Ravi had asked, 'Where is my car?'

Harimohan had said quietly, 'There will be a car on the wedding day. That is all.'

Nandkishor had cut in, 'It is only for one day. People watch these things. The groom must have his standing.'

After that, an expensive car was booked on hire from Darbhanga. Fourteen thousand for the day, flower decoration extra, deposit extra. Nandkishor borrowed five thousand rupees from a moneylender he knew to make up the deposit. Only four people in the house knew this.

All this weighed heavily on Ravi. He was an accounts assistant in town and earned a decent monthly salary, but he could not yet afford to buy a car of his own. Meera, the bride, knew this. Two months after the marriage had been fixed, Ravi had told her, 'I go to the office by bus.'

Meera had laughed and said, 'I went to college by bus too.'

After that simple answer, Ravi had felt no need to say anything more. But in the eyes of the family, a wedding was not merely a matter between two people; there was the village's gaze, the relatives' gaze, the wedding party's gaze - each a separate reckoning.

In the afternoon the wedding party set out. The band was in front, two small cars in the middle, and the black car at the very back. Ravi sat in the black car with his father and Nandkishor. Shambhu kept glancing towards the strip at the front, where the hire-vehicle service mark had been hidden by flowers.

After they had passed the village, the sun grew fierce on the paved road. Cool air circulated inside. Nandkishor was pleased. When two young men standing by the roadside looked towards the car, he leaned towards Ravi and said, 'See? At a wedding, this is what a first impression should be like.'

Ravi kept looking out at the fields where the paddy had already been harvested.

Beyond Sakri, when the road narrowed a little, Shambhu slowed the car. A red warning light flashed once on the dashboard.

He switched off the cool air.

Nandkishor spoke at once. 'Why did you switch it off?'

'The heat is rising.'

'The sun is blazing outside. Of course the heat will rise.'

'Not inside the car,' Shambhu said. 'The engine.'

He drove slowly for a little while. The red light flashed again. This time he pulled the car over to the side of the road.

The two cars behind also stopped. The band vehicle went a little farther and came to a halt.

'Why here?' Harimohan asked.

Shambhu opened the bonnet. A faint wave of hot steam rose. He stepped back.

'There is a split in the water hose,' he said. 'I told the vehicle service this morning that the car should be replaced. The owner said it had been reserved in advance for the wedding and would manage. I cannot take it any farther in this condition.'

Nandkishor's expression changed slightly. 'Inform the vehicle service.'

Shambhu looked towards the corner of the windscreen, then at the flower garland.

'The number was on that strip.'

For a few moments no one said anything.

Amit got out of the car behind and came over. 'It will be in the papers.'

Shambhu shook his head. 'The papers are deposited at the office. My driver's slip has only the booking number. The assistance number was written on the car.'

Nandkishor himself reached out to remove the flowers. The adhesive tape had stuck so firmly that half the lettering on the strip was buried under the flower glue. Amit slowly cleaned the paper. In bold letters on the yellow strip, the words emerged:

'Mithila Wedding Vehicle Service - For Hire.'

Two members of the wedding party standing behind read it. One of them said casually, 'Oh, so it is hired.'

No one laughed. But to Nandkishor those four words sounded louder than the band.

He said, 'Hired or owned, what matters now is getting there.'

Shambhu read the number and called from his mobile phone. He was told that a replacement car could be sent, but it would take an hour and a half to reach them from Darbhanga. An old white jeep was available at the nearest branch; it could arrive in twenty or twenty-five minutes.

Nandkishor asked, 'What is the white jeep like?'

'Ordinary,' Shambhu said.

'Flowers?'

'No. None at all.'

'The vehicle-service name?'

'Written on both sides.'

Nandkishor fell silent.

Time was running short before the auspicious wedding hour. The band players sat down in the shade of a peepal tree by the roadside. An elderly member of the wedding party walked towards a nearby tea stall in search of water. Within five minutes, half the wedding party had gathered there.

The owner of the tea stall recognised Ravi. 'Why, Ravi Babu! Today is your wedding!'

Ravi smiled. 'Yes, but our vehicle has given up halfway.'

The shopkeeper looked towards the car with its bonnet open. 'It will be fixed.'

'Maybe,' Ravi said. 'If not, there are other ways to travel.'

Nandkishor heard this answer from a distance.

Messages kept coming from the bride's house. First they asked where the wedding party had reached. Then whether there was any trouble. Each time Harimohan said, 'We are almost there.'

The third time Ravi took the mobile phone. It was Meera herself.

'What happened on the way?'

Ravi looked at the black car, at the yellow strip exposed among the flowers, and then at his father.

'The hired car broke down.'

There was silence at the other end for two moments.

'So what now?'

Ravi burst out laughing. 'So I am standing by the roadside.'

Meera laughed too. 'Is a wedding party made by the car or by the people?'

Before Ravi could answer, Nandkishor signalled for the mobile phone from his hand. Ravi did not give it to him.

Meera said, 'Come by whatever you can find. Mama can send a small bus.'

'Not a bus,' Nandkishor said almost in a whisper, but his voice carried as far as Ravi's phone.

Meera asked, 'Who said that?'

'Kaka.'

Laughter came again from the other end.

Meanwhile the old white jeep arrived. The vehicle-service name was clearly painted in blue letters on both sides. There was rope on the roof, an iron ladder at the back, and an old sheet on the seat inside. The driver got out and handed the papers to Shambhu.

'This is for the groom?' Disappointment showed in Nandkishor's voice.

'This is what is available,' the new driver said.

Ravi opened the door of the black car and took out the box containing his ceremonial wedding headgear. 'Come on.'

'In this jeep?' Nandkishor asked.

'Yes. This will do.'

'What will people say?'

For the first time Ravi looked directly into his uncle's eyes. 'By now, people know everything.'

After that sentence there was nothing left to say.

The wedding party set off again. The band in front, two small cars in the middle, and behind them the white jeep with the vehicle-service name written on it. The expensive black car remained by the roadside with its bonnet open; Shambhu stood beside it waiting for the assistance vehicle.

When the jeep reached the gate of the bride's house, the children first read the vehicle-service name, then watched Ravi step out of the flowerless vehicle. A few young men smiled, but the smile was not mocking; it was one of curiosity.

Meera's maternal uncle came forward and said, 'Did you have a lot of trouble on the way?'

Before Harimohan could answer, Ravi said, 'The expensive car brought us halfway. The ordinary one brought us the rest of the way.'

Her uncle said only, 'Come.'

The wedding rites began. The band started playing again. People became occupied with the meal, the rituals, the songs and meeting one another. Within an hour, talk of the car had almost ended.

Late that night, when Nandkishor was sitting to one side of the courtyard, Amit came and handed him the receipt from the hire-vehicle service. The assistance vehicle had taken away the black car. One line had been added to the receipt: 'Vehicle-service strip damaged by flower adhesive tape: cleaning charge.'

Nandkishor stared at that line for a long time.

'How much?' Amit asked.

'Eight hundred rupees.'

'Pay it.'

Nandkishor folded the receipt, then opened it again. 'Pay it.'

Amit went away.

A little later laughter came from the wedding pavilion. Nandkishor got up and went there. Ravi and Meera were sitting beside each other. Meera's younger brother was twirling the jeep key in his hand and saying, 'Jijaji, this same vehicle will be there for the return journey. I have already asked whether it will break down halfway.'

Light laughter spread all around.

Nandkishor smiled too. This time he felt no need to look at anyone's face.

At dawn the white jeep stood outside the gate. The vehicle-service name was plainly visible on both sides.

No one felt any desire to cover it with flowers.

STORY 151

Like Gold

One afternoon in Bhadau, Raghunath Jha was moving a trunk away from the wall of the back room of the house. Rainwater was seeping in from one corner, and rust had formed on the bottom of the old iron trunk. The only reason for opening the trunk was to keep the clothes inside from getting wet.

On top lay an old dhoti, two woollen blankets and Mother's yellowing letters. At the very bottom he found a small red velvet box. The edges of the box were worn, but the cloth inside was still soft.

Raghunath lifted the lid.

A necklace, two bangles, a nose-ring and a thin chain lay there filled with a golden gleam. Even in the muddy light of the rains, their shine seemed to set apart the darkness of the room.

'Where did these come from?' his wife Pushpa asked.

Raghunath's younger brother Rameshwar came in from the veranda. The moment he saw the box, he stopped short. 'Mother's?'

'Must be.'

The three of them looked at the jewellery for a long time. Mother had been gone eight years. All their lives they had seen her wearing only ordinary silver anklets and iron bangles. No one had ever spoken of there being so much golden jewellery in the house.

Rameshwar reached out to pick up one bangle, but Raghunath immediately said, 'Not now. Your hands are wet.'

Rameshwar stopped his hand.

By evening the news had spread through the whole house, but not beyond the gate. Raghunath's daughter Neha, Rameshwar's son Kundan, Pushpa, and Rameshwar's wife Meena - all of them had seen the box once. Raghunath told everyone, 'Don't tell anyone outside. It is an old thing. Let us first understand what it is.'

'Let's take it to a goldsmith,' Meena said.

Raghunath shook his head. 'Carry so much jewellery around the market in a bag? First let us keep it safe at home.'

That night the box did not go back into the trunk. It was placed in a small niche built into the wall behind the grain bin, and a new lock was put on the niche's wooden door. Rameshwar himself went to the market to buy the lock. When he returned, there were two keys.

'You keep one, and I'll keep one,' he said.

Raghunath stood for a few moments with both keys in his hands. 'It is better to have only one key. Two keys mean twice the risk.'

Rameshwar did not smile. 'This is my house too.'

'Who said it isn't?'

'Then why should the key be in only one person's hand?'

Pushpa intervened. 'Don't make more of this now. Let it be tested first.'

But it was not tested the next day. Nor on the third day. Raghunath kept saying that they would show it when they found a trustworthy goldsmith. Meanwhile, the lock began to be checked twice a day.

Earlier, Pushpa used to take jars of pickle, the grain measure and utensils for festivals from that room. Now Raghunath would tell her, 'Tell me whatever you need.'

The first two times Pushpa said nothing. The third time she said, 'For twenty years the keys of this house have been in my hands. Now will you take out even the pickle yourself?'

Raghunath's answer was brief. 'It isn't about the key. It's about what is inside.'

'Does what is inside belong to the house, or to you?'

Raghunath did not answer then.

Four days later Lalita came. She was Raghunath and Rameshwar's sister and, after marriage, lived near Benipatti. She had not heard it from anyone else; Neha had told her about it.

'Show me Mother's box,' she said directly.

Raghunath opened the lock. Lalita held the necklace in her hand and looked at it for a long time. 'I don't remember this.'

'Neither do I,' Rameshwar said.

Lalita laughed. 'Then Mother kept more secrets than all of us.'

A few moments later she grew serious. 'If it is Mother's, I have a share in it too.'

The room suddenly seemed smaller.

Raghunath said, 'First let us find out what it is.'

'And if it turns out to be gold?'

Rameshwar kept looking at the wall. Pushpa continued wiping the lid of a jar.

Lalita put the necklace back into the box. 'I am not asking for anything now. I only do not want to hear later - a daughter belongs to another household.'

That day she ate, but returned without staying the night.

The following week the key went missing.

Raghunath had put the key in his shirt pocket after locking the niche in the morning. At noon, when he went to open the room, the pocket was empty. First he searched his own room. Then the veranda. Then the courtyard.

Ten minutes later the entire house was looking for the key.

Raghunath asked, 'Who went near the room?'

Pushpa looked at him at once. 'I did.'

'Why did you go near the room?'

'For pickle.'

'Without me?'

'Must I ask even for pickle now?'

Rameshwar intervened. 'At a time like this, weigh your words before you speak.'

Pushpa's face hardened. 'I should weigh my words? Your elder brother is the one who has lost the key.'

Raghunath's voice was low, but the suspicion in that low voice was plain. 'I only asked.'

Pushpa did not eat that day.

In the evening the key was found in the other pocket of Raghunath's old shirt. He himself had put it there while changing clothes that morning.

Rameshwar handed him the key and said, 'Now?'

Raghunath went to Pushpa. 'The mistake was mine.'

Pushpa said only, 'The key has been found. Has the other thing been found too?'

That night, for the first time, Raghunath did not get up to check the lock.

But the next night he did.

Little by little, guarding the jewellery became part of the household routine. They discussed who would sleep on the veranda at night, who would keep the key when they went to the market, and whether the house would be left empty on festival days. Rameshwar suggested buying a small iron box. Raghunath said, 'When there is a niche in the house, why spend more money?'

Rameshwar replied, 'I don't trust the niche, and I don't trust the key either.'

Raghunath understood that the second part was meant for him.

In Kartik, the engagement of Lalita's daughter Pragya was fixed. Lalita came again. This time she asked for the necklace.

'For one evening,' she said. 'Pragya is Mother's granddaughter. If it is around her neck, Mother's thing will remain in her own family.'

Raghunath refused at once. 'It hasn't even been tested yet. What if something happens on the way?'

'Then have it tested.'

'I will.'

'When will you have it tested?'

There was no answer.

Lalita said softly, 'The jewellery is safe. Where have you kept the relationships?'

This time she did not eat either.

Raghunath and Rameshwar both went to Pragma's engagement, but they sat separately. Lalita spoke to them formally. Pushpa said very little. On the way home, Rameshwar said, 'Have it tested now. The longer the thing stays locked up, the more we are coming apart.'

Two days later Jagdish the goldsmith was called to the house at night. He was an acquaintance of Raghunath's and had run a shop in the market for thirty years. He was asked not to let the matter be discussed outside.

Jagdish placed the box in front of him and first examined the pieces with his eyes. Then he scratched the back of the necklace clasp with his fingernail. He took out a small black stone and rubbed the edge of the necklace against it.

Raghunath grew restless. 'Don't rub it too much.'

Jagdish looked at him. 'Shall I test it, or only look at it?'

'Test it.'

Jagdish rubbed again. A thin golden line appeared on the stone, but beneath it a dull line showed through at once.

He scratched the inside corner of one bangle. A small greenish-brown mark appeared.

Rameshwar leaned forward. 'What is it?'

Jagdish weighed one bangle in his palm. 'The workmanship is old. It is good.'

Raghunath's eyes brightened. 'How pure is it?'

Jagdish remained silent.

'Tell us, what is it?'

'It isn't gold.'

There was no rain in the room, yet it seemed to someone as though water had begun seeping from the wall again.

Raghunath tried to laugh. 'Look properly.'

Jagdish tested the other bangle, tested the chain, and examined the pin of the nose-ring. 'A brass-and-copper alloy with a golden coating. In a few places the coating has worn away. From a distance it shines like gold.'

Rameshwar sat down.

Pushpa stood at the door. Her eyes were not on the jewellery but on Raghunath.

'Value?' Raghunath asked.

Jagdish said, 'The workmanship may have value. The metal, not much.'

No one asked the next question.

Jagdish closed the box. 'Whoever owned it may have had it made for a wedding, a dance, or some occasion. In the old days, imitation jewellery this good was made too.'

Having said that much, Jagdish got up and left.

After the gate had been closed, Rameshwar said softly, 'We quarrelled over two keys.'

Pushpa said, 'I stood under suspicion for the sake of pickle.'

Raghunath remained silent.

After a while he opened the lock on the niche. Instead of putting the box inside, he placed it on the bench in the veranda. The key too was left beside it.

Lalita came the next morning. Rameshwar himself had sent word to her.

After hearing everything, she said nothing for a long time. Then she opened the box and lifted the necklace. The shine was the same.

'Next month Pragya's school is staging a play about an old-time wedding,' she said. 'This necklace may be useful.'

For the first time Raghunath answered without thinking. 'Take it.'

Lalita did not pick up the necklace at once. She looked at Pushpa. Pushpa slid the box towards her.

'Take the necklace,' Pushpa said, 'and the rest too, if you want.'

Lalita took only the necklace. 'Let the rest stay here.'

That night the room was not locked. Raghunath woke once at midnight. His hand went instinctively beneath the pillow, where for several weeks he had been keeping the key.

There was nothing there.

He got up and came as far as the veranda. The red box lay open on the veranda. Neha was trying one bangle on her wrist, while Kundan was trying to pull the other bangle from her hand.

Instead of scolding the two of them, Pushpa was laughing.

Raghunath stood there for a few moments.

Then he went back inside.

The box remained open on the veranda.

STORY 152

Ten Kilos of Rice

The morning sun had not yet fully climbed the yellow wall of the school, but a queue had already formed in the courtyard. Rain had been falling on and off for two weeks; even though the paddy had been transplanted, the rice pots in many homes had grown light. A notice from the panchayat had come: selected families would receive ten kilos of rice each.

Malti Devi had come with her eight-year-old son, Chhotu. This was Chhotu's own school. On a holiday, it felt strange to him to see his classroom shut; today, instead of the blackboard, there were three tables on the veranda, a strip of red cloth and sacks of rice.

Chhotu was not counting the people in the queue. His eyes were on the scales. Iron weights, the balance, and a white sack. In thick green letters on the sack was written: '10 KILOS ASSISTANCE.' Its mouth was stitched with blue thread, and there was a small tear at the right-hand corner. Two or three grains were caught outside the tear.

'Ma, is this ten kilos?' Chhotu asked.

'The scales will tell us,' Malti said. 'You keep quiet.'

In the middle of the veranda, a panchayat employee sat on a chair with a file open before him. Beside him, two young men were checking slips. In front, a man with a camera kept changing his position—sometimes by the gate, sometimes behind the red cloth.

The first name was called—Sukni Devi.

Sukni stepped forward. One of the young men lifted the white sack and placed it in her hands. The sack was heavy; Sukni's elbow bent at once. The employee motioned to her to smile. The camera flashed.

'That's enough,' the young man said.

Sukni tucked the sack under her arm and turned. She had not taken even two steps when a voice came from behind: 'Mother, leave it here. Let everyone's photograph be taken first. It will be distributed afterwards.'

Sukni stood still for a moment. Then she put the sack back on the table. She was given a pink slip stamped 'RECEIVED.'

Chhotu's eyes remained on the blue thread.

The second name—Jagarnath Paswan.

The same sack was lifted again. It was placed in Jagarnath's hands. He looked towards the camera. The flash went off. The sack went back on the table. Another pink slip.

The third name. The fourth name.

The same sack. The same blue thread. The same tear in the right-hand corner.

Chhotu peered beneath the table. Two more sacks lay there, but they looked flattened, as though only half full. The door of the room behind was shut.

'Ma,' he said softly, 'why is everyone getting the same sack?'

Malti's queue moved forward. 'I told you, keep quiet.'

'But where did Sukni Kaki's rice go?'

Malti gripped his hand tightly. Her experience had taught her that asking questions in a queue brought no benefit. To have one's name on the slip, to stand in the queue, to put one's thumbprint at the proper time—that much itself was a great deal.

In a corner of the veranda, Chhotu saw a grain of rice. It had fallen through the tear as the sack was being lifted and set down. He bent and picked it up. Then another.

By the seventh family he had collected five grains.

Malti's name was called eighth.

'Malti Devi, wife of the late Nathuni Sadai.'

Malti stepped forward. Chhotu followed her.

The white sack came into her hands. Chhotu looked at it from very close—the knot in the blue thread was on the verge of coming undone. A grain of rice was half sticking out through the tear in the right-hand corner. Chhotu tried to push it back in with his finger. The young man brushed his hand away.

'Don't touch.'

'This is my mother's rice, isn't it?' Chhotu asked.

Two or three people in the queue laughed.

The employee said, 'Yes, yes, you'll get it. Photograph first.'

The flash went off.

For the first time, Malti tried to smile. The photograph was taken. The young man then took the sack out of her hands almost immediately.

'Leave it here for now. As soon as the supplies arrive by evening, everyone will be given theirs. Keep the slip safely.'

Malti took the pink slip. Chhotu kept looking at the sack.

'Ma, will they give this to someone else again?'

'Come.'

On the way home, Chhotu opened his fist. There were five grains. He could not tell whether the sixth grain had fallen somewhere on the road or whether he had counted wrongly in the first place.

All that day, until evening, Malti kept looking towards the school. No vehicle came. At night the rice-water on the hearth was made thinner. Chhotu tried to count the grains of rice in his bowl, then stopped halfway.

The elderly Janakdulari of the household sat on the veranda cutting betel nut. She asked, 'Didn't they give you the rice?'

Malti showed her the pink slip. 'They said they would give it in the evening. Evening has passed.'

Chhotu broke in, 'Grandmother, they gave everyone the same sack. First Sukni Kaki, then Jagarnath Kaka, then Ma. The flash went off, and then the sack went back.'

Janakdulari turned the slip over in her hand. 'Are we supposed to eat rice on paper?'

Malti grew irritated. 'I'll ask tomorrow. What was the use of quarrelling today?'

Chhotu put his five grains into a fold of an old piece of paper and tucked it beneath the head of the cot. As sleep came, the scene from that day kept returning to him—the sack changing hands, the flash, then empty hands. He could not understand how giving something and showing it being given could become two separate acts.

The next day Malti went back to the school with the pink slip. Chhotu went with her. The veranda was empty. The red cloth had been removed. The tables had been taken inside the classroom. Only the panchayat assistant was there, putting files away.

Malti held out the slip. 'Yesterday you said ten kilos of rice.'

The assistant opened the file and found her name. 'It shows received here.'

'Received where? They put it in my hands, took a photograph, and then took it back.'

The assistant showed her the mark of her thumb. 'Your thumbprint is here.'

Malti's voice hardened. 'I put my thumbprint for the slip. The sack never reached my home.'

By then Sukni Devi had also arrived. The same pink slip was in her hand. Then Jagarnath came. Then two more families. Every file said 'RECEIVED.' No one's home had received rice.

The assistant's expression changed. He said, 'I was given the list yesterday. The distribution was being handled by a separate team.'

'Where is the team?' Jagarnath asked.

There was no immediate answer.

Chhotu sat on the steps of the veranda. The five grains from the previous day were still in his pocket. He placed them one by one on the step. Five small white dots.

Ramanand Babu, a teacher at the school, was arriving just then. Although it was a holiday, he had come to take some papers from a cupboard in one of the classrooms. When he saw the gathering, he stopped.

Ramanand Babu asked, 'What happened here?' Five voices rose at once.

Ramanand heard everyone out. He gave no judgement. Sitting down beside Chhotu, he asked, 'Were you here yesterday?' Chhotu nodded. Ramanand looked into his eyes and asked again, 'What did you see?'

Chhotu pointed to the five grains. 'There was one sack. They gave that same one to everyone. Then they took it back. These fell from this tear.' Ramanand asked, 'The same sack?' Chhotu said, 'Blue thread. A tear here.' He pointed to the right-hand corner of his shirt. 'Here.' Ramanand said nothing.

By noon, the news had reached the block office. Two members of the relief-distribution team arrived. With them came the man who had taken the photographs the previous day. An argument began—the supplies had arrived late, the photographs had been taken first, distribution was to happen afterwards, the list had been closed by mistake, the 'RECEIVED' stamp had been put on the slips too early.

'Then where is the rice?' Malti asked. Many sentences came out in answer to that question, but no rice did.

The photographer began showing the previous day's pictures on the screen of his camera. The first photograph—Sukni holding the white sack. The second—Jagarnath. The third—another family. The eighth—Malti. Ramanand Babu studied the pictures carefully. In every picture the sack was turned the same way. The knot in the blue thread was identical. There was the same small dark mark in the right-hand corner.

'These are not proof of distribution,' Ramanand said quietly. 'They are proof of one sack going round and round.' No one laughed.

The senior employee who had come with the team asked for the records. The previous day's signature register, the store's issue register and the available sacks were counted. The figures did not tally. Five sacks were found in the room behind the school, seven in the panchayat building. The rest of the consignment had never arrived by vehicle at all, yet the list already recorded the entire distribution as complete.

No photographs were taken that day. First the file was reopened. The red 'RECEIVED' mark was struck out, and beside it was written: 'ACTUAL DISTRIBUTION PENDING.' The pink slips were checked again. The available rice was counted. As many families as could be given the full ten kilos that day received it; the rest were given the date of the next consignment in writing.

Malti's turn came towards evening. This time the sack was placed directly on the scales. The needle settled at ten. The employee wrote the weight on the slip. The sack was not placed in Malti's hands; it was lifted straight onto her head.

Chhotu walked behind her. As soon as they passed through the school gate, Malti stopped. 'It feels heavy.' Chhotu did not laugh. He took the five grains from the previous day out of his pocket and placed them on top of the sack. 'Let these five go home too.'

Malti looked at him. 'What will five grains do?' Chhotu thought for a moment. 'Yesterday they came back alone.' Malti began walking again. On the road, the sack really was heavy.

STORY 153

Expensive Shoes

At dawn, before putting on his shoes, Ram Babu Mandal set them on a newspaper and looked at them for a long time. The black leather shone so brightly that even the bamboo post of the veranda was reflected upside down on it. There was nothing else in the house for which a rule had been made that it must be wiped with a separate cloth before being worn.

The shoes had been bought only the day before. Two thousand eight hundred rupees. The shopkeeper had said, 'At an interview, the first glance falls on the feet.' Ram Babu did not know whether that sentence was true, but after fifteen years as a lower-level employee in an office, he certainly understood that the day of a promotion interview was not an ordinary day.

His old shoes were still usable. The soles had been stitched twice, and the leather at the front had turned white along the crease, but they never deserted him in rain or water. His wife Lalita had asked, 'Wouldn't those do?'

Ram Babu had replied, 'They would do. But what will people see?'

Lalita had said nothing more. She had taken three five-hundred-rupee notes from a tin in the grain bin and the remaining money from a small savings box. The money had been kept aside for cloth for a new mosquito net.

The interview was at ten that morning. Ram Babu was ready by seven. The collar of his white shirt was stiff, his trousers grey, and a blue file was in his hand. In the file were a copy of his service book, his appointment letter, training certificate, caste certificate, educational certificates and three small photographs, each in a separate transparent sleeve.

Looking at the file, Lalita asked, 'Is everything there?'

Ram Babu counted each paper and said, 'Yes.'

'And your feet?'

Ram Babu smiled. 'They are the newest of all.'

The road to the bus stand was unpaved. The light rain in the night had left mud along both sides. Ram Babu walked protecting his shoes as though he were placing not his feet but two glass bowls on the road. Twice cyclists passed close to him. Once a calf tugged at its rope and came out onto the road. Ram Babu moved towards the ridge of a field, but not a drop of mud fell on the shoes.

The bus was crowded. He found no place to sit. Holding the file tight against his chest and keeping his feet tucked between two seats, he remained standing. When the edge of a boy's slipper was about to touch the front of the

new shoe, Ram Babu pulled his foot back. The boy looked at him, then at his own slipper.

It was nine twenty when he reached the district office. Twelve employees were sitting in the veranda for the promotion interview. Some wore new shirts, some old clothes. Ram Babu's eyes went involuntarily to everyone's footwear. Two men wore slippers. An elderly employee's shoes were torn at the front.

All at once, Ram Babu could see his two thousand eight hundred rupees very clearly.

His colleague Suresh Jha saw him and said, 'Why, Ram Babu! Today you look like an officer.'

Ram Babu laughed lightly. 'Let me become an officer first; then I can look like one.'

Suresh looked at his shoes. 'This is what you need. They look at appearance too in an interview.'

Hearing that, the tiredness in Ram Babu's feet lessened.

At ten fifteen his name was called: 'Ram Babu Mandal.'

He went inside. There was a three-member committee. The Joint Director sat in the middle, the Accounts Officer on the left, and the senior assistant of the Establishment Branch on the right. His application was already open on the table.

'Sit down,' the Joint Director said.

Ram Babu sat on the chair. His feet rested naturally in one place. The shoes were under the table; the committee was looking at the papers above it.

The first question was about his length of service. The second concerned the arrangement of office records. In the third, he was asked what procedure should be followed if the sequence of pages in an old register was found broken. Ram Babu answered. Fifteen years of work were on his tongue; it was not difficult to speak about what he did every day.

The Accounts Officer asked two or three more questions. Ram Babu answered them. Confidence slowly began to rise within him.

Then the senior assistant of the Establishment Branch said, 'Show us the original certificates.'

Ram Babu opened the blue file. One by one he took out the papers and placed them in front of them. Appointment letter. Educational certificate. Departmental accounts-training certificate.

The senior assistant took the training certificate in his hand. The paper was old at the right-hand corner. A small tear beside the circular edge of the seal had, over the years, grown larger. The transparent sleeve had held it together. The letters were clear. The name was clear. The date was clear. The signature of the training centre was clear. But almost a quarter of the seal had come away with the tear.

'This is torn,' the senior assistant said.

Ram Babu said at once, 'It is an old document, sir. The training was twelve years ago. All the lettering is visible.'

The senior assistant held the certificate up towards the light. 'The seal is not complete.'

'A copy is in the service book.'

'Verification of the original is required.'

Ram Babu took out the certified page of his service book. It recorded that he had passed the training.

The Joint Director looked at the page. 'The training is recorded in the official record. But under the promotion rules, verification of the training certificate is compulsory. If the original is damaged, you need a verified copy from the issuing institution.'

Ram Babu asked, 'Can I submit it today?'

'Where will you get a verified copy today?' the senior assistant asked in an even voice.

The training centre was in Madhubani, about seventy kilometres from the office. Ram Babu fell silent.

The Joint Director wrote something in pencil on the application. 'Your interview will be treated as complete. Document verification will remain pending. Submit a verified copy within seven working days.'

Ram Babu stood up. All three members bent again over the papers for the next name. As he walked out, it struck him that no one had looked at his shoes.

In the veranda, Suresh Jha asked, 'How did it go?'

Ram Babu opened the file and showed him the torn certificate.

Suresh did not look at the shoes. He kept looking at the tear in the paper. 'Because of this?'

'Because of this.'

At noon Ram Babu went straight to the bus stand. The bus to Madhubani was due in half an hour. The sun had grown fierce. The hard back edge of the new shoes began cutting into his heel. He found a seat on the bus, but his feet kept hurting.

It was four when he reached the training centre. A new three-storey building stood where the old building had been. Asking his way, he reached the Records Branch. The employee checked the register. The register for the batch from twelve years earlier was in the storeroom. The person who had taken the storeroom key was on leave that day.

'Come tomorrow,' the employee said.

Ram Babu told him about the seven working days.

The employee shrugged. 'Without the register, I cannot issue a verification.'

Ram Babu returned. As he got off the bus in the evening, it began to rain. The mud he had avoided in the morning had now spread across the road. He no

longer had the strength to walk while protecting his shoes. At the first puddle his foot entered, mud coated the black leather. Ram Babu did not stop.

When he reached home, Lalita first looked at his feet. 'Are the shoes ruined?'

Ram Babu opened the file. 'The shoes are all right. The paper is torn.'

The next day he went to Madhubani again. The storeroom was open. After three hours the register was found, but the training centre's old seal had since been changed. For a verified copy he needed an application, two photographs, service identification and a fee. Ram Babu submitted the application.

'How many days?'

'Normally ten days.'

'I have seven working days.'

The employee looked at him and opened the register again. 'Then get permission from the branch head.'

The branch head was in a meeting. Ram Babu waited for two hours. The wound on his heel had grown worse. Sitting in the veranda, he took off his shoes and placed a handkerchief behind his heel. In front of him, a sweeper in old rubber slippers was sweeping the floor.

By evening, permission was granted. He was assured that the verified copy would be ready within the next three days. Ram Babu returned to the office. The date for preparing the promotion list was close.

On the third day, he received the verified copy. Thick white paper, a new seal, a new signature. Ram Babu placed it in the blue file and handled it as though it were a newborn child. This time, on the journey back from Madhubani, he kept the shoes in a bag and wore his old slippers.

When he submitted the copy at the Establishment Branch, the employee gave him a receipt. Ram Babu asked, 'Is everything all right now?'

Looking at the pile of papers, the employee said, 'As far as I am concerned, the documents are complete. The committee will see the list.'

Two weeks later, the promotion list came out. Ram Babu's name was not on it. Against his application was written: 'Document verification incomplete by the date of the scheduled meeting; to be considered in the next vacancy cycle.'

Ram Babu stood looking at the list for a long time. The interview had not gone badly. The training was not incomplete. His service was not too short. It was only that when the committee met, the new paper had already reached the file, but the entry for the verification letter was made in the main list one day later.

Suresh Jha was promoted. He came to Ram Babu and said quietly, 'Appeal.' Ram Babu wrote an appeal. The reply came: under the rules, the matter would automatically be considered in the next vacancy cycle.

Months passed. The expensive shoes lay wrapped in cloth inside the trunk. Ram Babu again began wearing his old stitched shoes to the office; they did not

hurt his feet. One evening water began dripping from the roof. Lalita ran to move the trunk. Ram Babu got up too. Opening the trunk, he first took out the blue file. The paper of the verified certificate was dry. Then he took out the expensive shoes wrapped in cloth. The leather was still shining.

Lalita asked, 'Shall I keep the shoes above?' Placing the blue file on the topmost shelf of the cupboard, Ram Babu said, 'Let the shoes stay below.'

Before closing the file, his hand touched the old training certificate. The torn corner was still caught inside the transparent sleeve. He placed it beside the new verified copy. Both papers spoke of the same training—one carried the marks of time, the other a new seal. Lalita asked, 'Why keep the old one?' Ram Babu ran a finger over the lettering on the paper. 'I did the training on this one. The new one certifies that I did.' Lalita did not answer. She merely moved a lota under the drops falling from the roof.

Ram Babu kept both papers in the same file. The torn original at the back, the new verified copy in front. When the application for the next vacancy cycle came, it was now clear to him which paper had to be placed foremost. He made no separate decision about the shoes either. He dried the leather and wrapped them in cloth again; there was no reason to throw them away, nor any hurry to wear them.

That night the rain went on for a long time. The shoes were safe inside the trunk. On the top shelf of the cupboard lay a perfectly flat, untorn paper with a complete seal—waiting for the next vacancy cycle.

STORY 154

The Empty Envelope

On the second morning after the wedding, two or four flower petals still lay wet with dew on the veranda of Harinath Jha's house. The bamboo wedding pavilion had already been half dismantled, but the envelopes in the red cloth bag kept in a corner were safe. People had been coming and going until three in the morning, so no one in the house had had the patience to open the bag.

When Harinath returned after bathing, the first thing he did was place the bag in front of himself. His son Anup brought the red ledger. Five years earlier he himself had written on its cover: 'Give-and-take—weddings, sacred-thread ceremonies, housewarmings.' Inside were three columns against each name: amount, date and occasion.

Sumitra, putting tea on the stove, said, 'Eat something first. You have been awake all night.'

Harinath replied, 'The accounts first. If this is put off, who will later remember whose envelope contained how much?'

The newly married Gauri sat with her back against the veranda wall on her last morning at her parental home before the farewell. Her departure was to be at noon. Looking at her father's ledger, she smiled. 'Babu, the wedding is not even over and the accounts have begun.'

Harinath said, 'If we do not keep accounts, relations get out of balance. If someone gives us five hundred and we give five thousand at his house, people will say we have no sense.'

Anup opened the first envelope. 'Jagmohan Mama—two thousand and one.'

Harinath turned the pages of the ledger. 'At his daughter's wedding I gave one thousand and one. All right. Write it down.'

The second one: 'Kaushalya Phua—five hundred and one.'

From beside the stove, Sumitra said, 'When we went to her house, we gave one thousand and one.'

Harinath's brows drew together. 'Write it down. We will remember next time.'

In this way the envelopes kept opening. With each name an amount came out, and with each amount an old incident. Who had given less one year, who had given more, who had arrived on time, who had merely eaten and left—everything began to take its own shape in the columns of the red ledger.

Gauri listened silently. The people who had embraced her and wept the night before were now becoming two thousand and one, five hundred and one, eleven hundred and one.

Anup picked up a white envelope. Written on it in blue ink was: 'Ramvilas Jha, Sonbarsa.'

Harinath said at once, 'Barka Kaka. Let us see what he has done this time.'

Ramvilas was his elder cousin. They lived in different villages, but their childhood had been spent in the same courtyard. Meetings had grown fewer over the past few years. The previous day he had arrived early in the morning. He had tightened the ropes of the pavilion, had water pots filled, and had stood at the gate from the moment the first vehicle of the wedding party arrived. During the evening meal he had left early because his wife fell ill.

Anup tore open the envelope. There was nothing inside. He shook it again, turned it over, ran a finger inside, and said softly, 'It is empty.'

Harinath wondered whether a piece of paper might be stuck somewhere. He took the envelope in his hand and pressed both corners. Nothing.

'An empty envelope with the name written on it?' His voice hardened.

Sumitra lowered the flame under the stove. 'It may have been a mistake.'

'A mistake?' Harinath pulled the red ledger towards himself. 'At his son Neeraj's wedding I gave five thousand and one. It is written here.'

Anup found the entry. There it was, eight years old: Ramvilas Jha, son's wedding, 5,001.

Harinath placed the empty envelope on top of the ledger. 'People themselves tell you the value they place on a relationship.'

Gauri looked directly at him for the first time. 'Babu, Kaka was the first to arrive yesterday.'

'Coming is one thing, the customary gift is another.'

'When the labourer for the pavilion did not come, he tightened the ropes.'

Harinath's voice grew drier. 'One does not give five thousand for that.'

For a few moments, the only sound on the veranda was the tea boiling.

Anup placed his pen beside Ramvilas's name in the ledger. 'What shall I write? Zero?'

Harinath said, 'Write it.'

Just as the pen touched the paper, Gauri said, 'Wait a moment.'

She got up and went inside. Her small bag lay in the room where she had changed out of her wedding clothes the night before. From it she brought a folded receipt.

'This fell from near Babu's kurta last night. I thought it was some bill for the feast.'

The receipt was from Ramautar, the generator man. The time written on it was 9:40 p.m. The amount—three thousand. Harinath's signature was below.

The moment Harinath saw the receipt, he turned his face away.

Anup asked, 'This is from the time the generator stopped last night. But where did the money come from? At that time Raghunandan had the key to the cash box.'

Sumitra looked at Harinath. 'Did you pay it?'

Harinath did not answer.

Gauri said quietly, 'At that time I saw Babu opening an envelope behind the storeroom. I thought it contained some bill.'

Ramvilas's empty envelope was still in Anup's hand.

After a long while Harinath said, 'That envelope contained three thousand and one.'

Sumitra's hand stopped over the glass of tea. 'Then why is it empty?'

'Ramautar said the generator would not run for more than half an hour without fuel. He needed three thousand immediately. Raghunandan had the key to the cash box, and he had gone to the main road with the wedding party. The varmala ceremony was about to begin. If it had gone dark...'

He did not finish the sentence.

Anup looked at the ledger, then at the envelope. 'Then out of three thousand and one, the one rupee?'

Harinath felt in the small pocket of his kurta. He took out a coin and placed it on the table. 'This.'

Gauri's eyes remained fixed on the empty envelope.

Harinath said slowly, 'I thought I would write it down later. Then there was so much to do in one night... I forgot.'

Sumitra asked, 'Was this the only envelope you opened?'

Harinath remained silent.

The silence lengthened.

Anup did not close the ledger. 'More?'

Harinath's eyes went to the red bag. 'The band men demanded the five thousand still due. The sweet-maker's two thousand. The car owner's remaining three thousand five hundred after the advance. I opened three more envelopes.'

Sumitra slowly sat down. 'Whose?'

Harinath separated three envelopes from the bag. 'The names were written on them. I remember the amounts. I had written them on a piece of paper.'

'Where is the paper?'

Harinath searched the other pocket of his kurta. Nothing. 'It got wet during the night; perhaps it tore.'

The red ledger lay open in front of Anup, but its columns now seemed empty. Some of the money they had been treating as a measure of family relationships had already been spent in the middle of the wedding itself—on the night's lighting, the band, sweets and the balance due on the car.

Gauri asked, 'Did Ramvilas Kaka know that you opened his envelope?'

'No. He knew nothing about it.'

'He had given three thousand and one?'

'Yes, three thousand and one.'

'Then why write zero?'

Harinath took Anup's pen. Against Ramvilas's name he wrote 3,001. A few moments later, beside it in small letters, he wrote: 'Generator.'

Anup did not smile. 'This word has never appeared anywhere in the ledger before.'

Harinath turned through the old pages. It was true: there were only amounts there. That someone had stayed all night at the hospital during another's illness, that someone had saved another's paddy in a flood, that someone had kept another's child in his own home for a month so the child could study—there was no column for things like these.

Sumitra said quietly, 'Ramvilas Bhaiya had been carrying water since yesterday afternoon. His wife was ill, yet he still came.'

Harinath tried to close the ledger, then stopped.

Anup picked up another opened envelope. 'How much was in this one?'

'Two thousand and one.'

'Whose?'

'Kaushal Mama's.'

'And in the ledger?'

Anup looked at the 2,001 already written there. By chance, the amount had been remembered.

Harinath said, 'For every envelope I opened, we will check the amount again and write it down. If I do not remember one, we will not guess.'

'Then the accounts will remain incomplete.'

For the first time, Harinath's eyes met his son's. 'Let them.'

After that sentence, no one said anything at once.

Gauri's farewell took place at noon. Ramvilas did not come; he had taken his wife to the hospital. At the time of the farewell, Harinath put the red ledger inside the cupboard. He did not throw away the empty envelope. He placed it on the page of the ledger where Ramvilas's name was written.

Three days later Ramvilas came himself. Harinath seated him on the veranda. They talked for a long time about ordinary things—whether Gauri had reached her in-laws' home safely, how much rain had fallen, what the hospital tests had shown. Harinath did not bring up the envelope.

As he was leaving, Ramvilas said, 'The wedding went well. The electricity went off once at night, but came back almost immediately. I had thought the wedding party would be left in darkness.'

Harinath kept looking at him. 'Because of you, the lights came back at once.'

Ramvilas did not understand what he meant. 'Because of me?'

Harinath did not smile. 'Nothing.'

Ramvilas left.

Harinath went inside and opened the red ledger. Against Ramvilas's name, the amount 3,001 was written. Beside it was also the word 'Generator.'

He did not draw a line through the word 'Generator.'

He placed his pen on the next empty line below, but wrote nothing. After a long while, he closed the ledger.

The empty envelope remained pressed between the pages at that same place.

STORY 155

Invitation

When the afternoon postman entered the lane, Malti Devi rose from the bench on the veranda.

That week, red-and-gold envelopes had been reaching almost every house in the lane. Raised letters in the middle of each envelope read, 'Saumya's Wedding.' On the first day, the child from the house opposite Malti's ran off carrying a card. On the second day, an envelope of the same colour reached Mishraji's door two houses away. On the third day, the postman slowed his bicycle in front of Shashibhushan Jha's gate, rummaged through his bag, then moved on to the next house.

Malti said nothing. She went inside and filled a brass tumbler with water. Shashibhushan sat by the window, looking through an old register.

'Did any post come?' he asked.

'For two houses.'

'Our envelope?'

'Not ours.'

Shashibhushan turned a page of the register. The matter stopped there.

Saumya was Madanmohan's daughter. Madanmohan's father and Shashibhushan had taught at the same school. In the year of the flood, the two families had spent three nights on the same veranda. At Madanmohan's wedding, Malti had stayed at their house for five days, working from the kitchen through to the farewell. When Saumya was born, it was Malti whom Madanmohan's mother had called to give the baby her first oil massage.

Shashibhushan had never entered the account of such an old relationship in any register. But once the red envelopes began moving through the lane, the figures of that account began appearing by themselves in his mind.

Once, when Madanmohan's father had fallen ill, Shashibhushan had spent three nights with him on the hospital veranda. When Usha's mother died, Malti had taken charge of the stove and fed everyone in the house. On none of those occasions had there been an invitation card; word had travelled by mouth, and people had arrived. That was why their waiting for the red card was not merely a desire for the feast. To them, the card was a small assurance that the old line of the relationship had not yet been struck out.

Shashibhushan took out his old diary. Beside Madanmohan's name were two telephone numbers - one very old, one new. Beside his own name there was only the home address. He wondered whether relationships at today's weddings too

were managed through numbers and lists. Then he closed the diary. To voice the question seemed to him a lowering of his dignity.

'Perhaps they mean to give it by hand,' Shashibhushan said that evening.

Malti nodded in agreement. 'The house is so close. Why would they send it by post?'

Two days passed in that waiting.

A bamboo arch went up in front of Madanmohan's house. At the corner of the road a direction board appeared: 'Rajlakshmi Wedding Hall.' Flowers, lights, vehicles and cloth decorations began arriving. The lane filled with talk of the cards too. Who would sit where, what would be served at the feast, how large the wedding procession would be - amid all those questions, Malti remained silent.

On the third evening, their neighbour Kaushalya came over. She had a red card in her hand.

'Which way are you all going?' she asked casually. 'My card says seven o'clock.'

Watching the milk on the stove, Malti said, 'We'll see.'

Kaushalya placed the card on the table and went to look at what was being cooked. Saumya's name shone among the gold lettering. Below it were the names of Madanmohan and his wife Usha. At the very bottom was a small line: 'Arrangements and Guest Management: Rajlakshmi Wedding Hall Service Team.'

Malti read that line twice. Then she put the card back into Kaushalya's hand.

After Kaushalya left, Shashibhushan asked, 'What did it say?'

'Nothing special.'

'The card?'

'Yes, the card.'

'I think they have forgotten.'

This time, after 'Perhaps', both of them fell silent.

A day before the wedding, a teenage boy came from Madanmohan's house.

'Kaki, could we have twelve brass tumblers? The old tumblers at home are falling short.'

Malti went inside. She took tumblers out from beneath the cupboard. She gave him sixteen, not twelve.

The boy was counting them. Shashibhushan sat on the veranda. He felt like asking, 'What time tomorrow?' But the question rose to his lips and stopped there.

The boy went away with the tumblers.

Malti said, 'They remembered the tumblers, not us.'

Shashibhushan replied quietly, 'The number of tumblers is definite. Relationships have no number.'

On the wedding day, they decided to spend the evening like any ordinary day. At seven, decorated vehicles began leaving the lane. The sound of the band floated from afar. Malti prepared dinner early. Shashibhushan switched on the radio, but turned it off five minutes later.

At about eight there was a knock at the gate.

An unfamiliar young man stood outside. An identity badge hung from a blue ribbon around his neck. He carried two cloth bags and a paper list.

'Is the rear entrance to Madanmohan Babu's old house through here?'

Shashibhushan said, 'No. His house is two houses farther on.'

The young man looked at the list. 'I'm with the management team. Some of the family's things arrived in the wrong vehicle. They have to be taken over again.'

Hearing this from inside, Malti came out. 'Did you people distribute the cards too?'

The young man was startled by the question. 'Cards? They were sent from the office, according to the list.'

'The family didn't distribute them?'

'No, Maai. The family were not even given cards for themselves. They are the organiser's side. The guest register contains the names of the guests.'

Shashibhushan's hand went still on the gate. 'Madanmohan himself has no card?'

The young man laughed. 'Why would he need a card? It is his daughter's wedding. He has an organiser's badge.'

He pointed to his own blue identity badge and then went farther down the lane.

Malti and Shashibhushan stood by the gate for a few moments. Lights were circling in the sky in the direction of the wedding hall.

'An organiser's badge,' Malti said softly.

Shashibhushan did not answer at once.

The next afternoon Madanmohan himself came to return the sixteen tumblers. His eyes were red, and his face carried the weariness of a wedding finally completed.

'Kaki, you people were nowhere to be seen yesterday,' he said. 'I looked for you twice.'

Malti went on counting the tumblers. 'We were not invited.'

Madanmohan looked as though he was about to laugh, then his expression changed. 'What?'

Shashibhushan said directly, 'No card came.'

Madanmohan set the sixteenth tumbler on the table and remained silent for a long time. 'Kaka, do you think I made the card list myself?'

He took a folded paper from his pocket. It was a printed extract from the wedding hall's guest register. There were three columns - name, telephone

number, mode of delivery. Beside some names was written 'post', beside some 'by hand', beside some only a number. Shashibhushan's name was not there. Pointing with his finger to the corner of the page, Madanmohan said, 'For names in the old diary that had no number beside them, a separate list was supposed to be made. It seems that list was never completed.'

Shashibhushan looked at the page. For the first time, he felt the shape of his hurt changing. Until then he had believed the family had deliberately left him out. Now it seemed that some unfamiliar hand had seen an empty field and finished the job without carrying his name to the next page. He could not decide whether the insult had become smaller; but its owner had changed.

'Then who?'

'The wedding hall team. There was so much work at home that Usha said, "Just give them the names; they'll handle the rest." I gave them the old diary. They asked for telephone numbers with the names. Where there was no number, they asked for an address. Then the cards were printed, some went by post, some were delivered by hand. I myself saw the printed cards for the first time only on the table beside the stage on the wedding night.'

Malti was wiping the rims of the tumblers with a cloth. 'Was my name not in the diary?'

Madanmohan lowered his head. 'Your name was on an old page. There was no number beside it, so that must be why. Someone left it out while making the list.'

'And you?' Shashibhushan asked. 'Was your name there?'

This time Madanmohan really laughed, though the laughter was tired. 'My name isn't in the guest register. Nor Usha's. Nor Saumya's. Nor the groom's parents'. We all had a separate badge - "Family".'

'Meaning you people were not invited either?'

Madanmohan looked into Shashibhushan's eyes. 'It seems that way.'

Malti's hand stopped.

Madanmohan went on, 'Yesterday my mausi was stopped at the entrance. Her name wasn't on the list either. The guard asked for a card. Mausi telephoned me: "Son, has your daughter invited me or not?" I came down from the stage and went all the way to the gate. That was when I realised that half the family was in the arrangements, half was on the list, and some people were in neither.'

Shashibhushan asked quietly, 'Then who organised the wedding?'

Madanmohan looked towards the car standing outside the veranda, with the wedding hall's name written on it. 'I had the same question last night.'

He took a red-and-gold card from his pocket. One corner was slightly bent.

'This was left on the table beside the stage. I've brought it for you.'

Malti looked at the card but did not put out her hand.

Shashibhushan took it. Saumya's name was at the top. Below were the names of Madanmohan and Usha. At the very bottom was the same small line - the wedding hall's management team.

'What use is it now?' Shashibhushan asked.

Madanmohan's face fell. 'Perhaps it can be of some use for asking forgiveness.'

Shashibhushan did not fold the card. 'Forgiveness does not come through a card.'

Madanmohan remained silent.

Putting the sixteen tumblers beside the cupboard, Malti said, 'May Saumya be happy. The next time there is some occasion at home, tell us by word of mouth first.'

Madanmohan nodded.

After he left, Shashibhushan placed the card on the table. It remained there until evening.

Kaushalya came again that evening. Talking about the wedding, she said her card had been checked three times at the entrance, but once she was inside no one had asked how she was related to the bride or groom. Malti merely listened. Until yesterday, not receiving the card had felt to her like the absence of the relationship itself; today, even after receiving it, she understood that a printed paper had never been complete proof of a relationship. Yet the hurt caused by that paper was real, because people sometimes measure an old closeness by such small signs.

That night Malti opened an old iron trunk. Inside were cards collected over many years - weddings, sacred-thread ceremonies, housewarmings, funerary rites. The lettering on some had faded; some bore oil stains.

She picked up the new red card. Before putting it into the trunk, she paused for a moment.

'Shall I keep it?'

Shashibhushan said, 'Keep it.'

'For remembrance?'

'No. For forgetting.'

Malti did not smile. She placed the card among the old cards.

The trunk was closed.

That night, the remaining wedding lights in the lane went out one by one.

STORY 156

The Umbrella Man

By afternoon the sky had grown so dark that the bulb had to be switched on in Ramanarayan Chaudhary's newly painted sitting room even in broad daylight.

Two cars stood in front of the house. Guests were seated inside. Ramanarayan's younger son had found a job, and a small gathering for tea and snacks had been arranged to celebrate. The sitting room had new cushions, white curtains and a glass table. The family did not want even a single mark of mud or a wet footprint on the floor.

Just then a bicycle bell rang at the gate.

It was Raghunath.

He was the family's long-time servant - the kind who worked for wages, yet knew by heart the habits of three generations of the household. The morning market, the bank, medicines, rations, submitting some paper or other - wherever the family had no time to go, Raghunath's feet reached.

That day he had been asked to bring tea leaves, sugar and two kilos of savoury snacks from the market. On his way back, the rain caught him.

Raghunath carried an old black umbrella. Its cloth had patches of three different colours in three places - blue in one, green in another, brown in the third. The polish on the handle had worn away long ago.

The first heavy drop fell just as he entered through the gate.

On the veranda, Ramanarayan's daughter-in-law, Anjali, immediately said

-

'Raghu Kaka, wait there. There is a carpet inside. You are completely soaked.'

Raghunath held out the bag of savoury snacks. 'Take this inside. The rain is going to get heavier.'

Anjali took the bag.

'Leave the umbrella outside too. It will drip water.'

Raghunath closed the umbrella in a corner of the veranda and leaned it against the wall. He himself remained standing beneath the tin awning.

The rain suddenly came down hard.

Laughter continued inside the sitting room. Cups of tea went round. Ramanarayan talked about his son's appointment letter. Someone asked about the salary, someone about the town, someone about the size of the government quarters.

The first drop fell in the middle of the ceiling.

No one noticed.

The second drop fell on a corner of the glass table. The third landed directly near a guest's shoulder.

Anjali looked up.

A small dark patch was forming on the ceiling.

'Where is that coming from?'

Ramanarayan raised his head. The sitting-room roof had been redone three months earlier. The foreman who had built it had said there would be no need to worry about water for ten years now.

Within a minute the patch became round, then a line of water formed through its centre.

'Bring a bucket!'

A bucket was placed beneath it. But by then water had begun dripping at a second spot.

Then at a third.

The sheen of the sitting room suddenly gave way to the clatter of utensils. Bowls, buckets, an old cooking pot - whatever could be found was placed under the leaks. The guests began moving their chairs.

Raghunath watched everything from outside. The tin awning could no longer hold back the rain driven by the wind. His dhoti was wet up to his knees.

Just then Anjali's voice came from inside -

'Move Mother's medicine box!'

An old wooden chest stood in one corner of the sitting room. Ramanarayan's mother's medicines and some papers lay on top of it. A new stream of water was coming down directly over them.

The papers were removed. The chest was heavy; four people together shifted it.

At that moment lightning flashed. The bulb dimmed once.

From the veranda Raghunath looked towards the inner wall. A line of water was reaching the frame of the electrical switch.

He called out loudly -

'First switch off the mains!'

In the commotion inside, no one heard him clearly.

This time Raghunath came as far as the doorway. Stopping his wet feet outside the threshold, he said again -

'Switch off the mains. The water is reaching the wires.'

Ramanarayan's son ran. The main switch of the house was turned off. The sitting room went dark. There was only the grey light from the windows and the distant flashes of lightning.

The guests' conversation stopped.

Water was now falling in more places than there were buckets. There were no longer enough vessels in the house.

Ramanarayan said irritably, 'What sort of people built this roof!'

Raghunath said quietly, 'The drain above must be blocked. The wind fills it with leaves.'

'Who will go up there now?'

No one had an answer.

Raghunath went round towards the outer corner. A moment later he returned with his old umbrella.

Out of habit, Anjali said, 'Kaka, the umbrella inside -'

The sentence remained unfinished.

Raghunath opened the umbrella. Its three differently coloured patches stood out even in the darkness. Instead of holding it upright, he opened it upside down and placed it beneath the heaviest stream of water.

The cloth of the umbrella began collecting water like a bowl.

'Is there any rope?' he asked.

A thin coir rope was brought from the storeroom. Raghunath tied the ends of the four spread metal ribs like four corners and suspended them from an iron hook above. The umbrella hung upside down.

'Keep the handle pointing down,' he said.

A long strip of an old gamchha was tied near the handle. The water gathering in the umbrella began travelling slowly along the cloth into a bucket. The heavy stream no longer splashed over the floor of the sitting room.

For the first time the guests looked carefully at the old umbrella.

Ramanarayan's mother, who had been sitting in another room, came as far as the doorway with the help of her walking stick.

'Isn't that Raghu's old umbrella?'

'Yes,' Ramanarayan said.

The old woman looked at the blue patch on the umbrella. 'I put that patch on five years ago.'

Raghunath laughed. 'That is why it is still going.'

Ramanarayan's mother pointed towards the green patch. 'Who stitched this other one?'

'My daughter. She had her school examination that year. It rained heavily. Even though the umbrella was torn, I took her to the examination centre that day.'

The old woman was silent for a few moments. 'And the brown one?'

'I put that on myself. I found needle and thread in the market, but no cloth; I cut a piece from an old bag.'

The umbrella's three colours now stood out even more clearly against the sitting room's new curtains and white walls. None of the colours matched another, but all three patches were keeping out the water.

A few people smiled as well, but the sound of the rain was so loud that the smiles vanished at once.

For a second stream, Raghunath set two large brass platters at an angle against each other so that the water would run into a single bucket. At a third spot he found an old plastic sack and cut it into the shape of a gutter.

Fifteen minutes earlier the sitting room had been showing off its white carpet; now it held buckets, platters, a sack, an upside-down umbrella and guests sitting in the dark.

No one was asking about the salary or the government quarters any longer.

Ramanarayan's son kept looking upward in the light of his mobile phone. 'Kaka, how did you know the drain was blocked?'

'Yesterday two sacks of dry leaves were swept up in the back courtyard. The wind carried half the leaves up there. The roof is new; the drain is old.'

'Didn't the foreman see that?'

Raghunath shrugged. 'He looked at the roof. He did not know the habits of the house.'

The rain eased after half an hour.

By then the tea had gone cold. Anjali put water on the stove again, but none of the guests now insisted on tea. From the umbrella hanging in the middle of the sitting room, water travelled along the gamchha and fell drop by drop into the bucket. The sound was so regular that it seemed like a clock ticking in the middle of the conversation.

Ramanarayan looked once at his newly painted ceiling, then at Raghunath's patched umbrella. He opened his mouth to say something, but at that moment the bucket filled. Without saying a word, Raghunath lifted it, emptied it into the drain at the back, and put it back in place.

The guests began leaving one by one. Every person who went out glanced once at the upside-down umbrella.

Raghunath stood near the door. His clothes were still wet.

Ramanarayan suddenly said, 'Raghu, come inside and sit. Why are you standing outside?'

Raghunath looked at the floor of the sitting room. There was mud on his feet.

'The floor will get wet again.'

Ramanarayan tried to say something, then fell silent. Anjali brought not an old sack from the storeroom but a dry cloth and spread it beside the threshold.

Raghunath wiped his feet and came inside. But he did not sit on a chair. He kept watching the water in the bucket.

When the rain stopped at night, they climbed onto the roof. The drain really was blocked with leaves and broken bits of cement. Once the water was released, the streams inside the roof gradually stopped.

The upside-down umbrella remained hanging in the middle of the sitting room all night.

In the morning the mason came to inspect the roof. Ramanarayan went up with him. Anjali was having the sitting room cleaned. One corner of the carpet was wet, but most of it had been saved.

Raghunath was taking the umbrella outside to open it and dry it in the sun.

Anjali asked, 'Kaka, this umbrella has been stitched so many times. Why don't you buy a new one?'

Turning the handle in his hand, Raghunath said, 'I will buy a new one. But I won't throw this away. Its ribs are strong.'

He went outside.

By afternoon the sitting room was almost as it had been before. The buckets were gone, the platters had returned to the kitchen, and the gamchha was drying.

Only beside the door, where the umbrella had been propped outside the previous day, a new hook had been hammered into the wall.

Raghunath took out his bicycle to go to the market. The sky was grey again. He looked for his old umbrella.

The umbrella was not outside beside the wall.

It was hanging on the hook inside.

STORY 157

Number Plate

In the rear veranda of the District Transport Office, Ramakant Chaudhary had already changed queues for the third time. His new car gleamed outside in the sun, but his attention was not on the car. It was on the small box in the application form where the desired registration number was to be written.

An ordinary number would not do for him.

'I want 7777,' he said quietly to Bacchan, the broker.

Bacchan narrowed his eyes and looked at the list. 'There is a lot of demand. The government fee is separate; the arrangement is separate.'

'How much for the arrangement?'

Bacchan did not indicate the figure with his fingers. He wrote an amount with his pen in a corner of the paper and at once covered it with his palm. Ramakant looked at it for a moment, then opened his wallet. That amount did not appear on the official receipt. Behind the veranda, in the shade of an old file cupboard, Bacchan counted the notes and put them into his bag.

Ramakant felt lighter.

Two weeks later, the number-plate maker painted white letters on a black background. The last four digits—7777—were slightly larger than the other characters.

'Why are they so large?' his wife Nirmala asked.

Ramakant laughed. 'So that it can be recognised from a distance. Four sevens—no one will forget them.'

When the car stood in front of the house, the neighbours really did look first at the number and then at the car. The milkman read aloud, 'Seven-seven-seven-seven.' The children in the lane began repeating it in rhythm. Ramakant liked that.

He had a wholesale iron-and-cement business. From the village to the town, anyone who put up a building had, at some time or another, heard the name of his shop. Even so, Ramakant felt that the standing of his business ought to show on his car as well. In the market he parked where the number plate would be clearly visible. Weddings, meetings, business feasts—everywhere 7777 arrived before he did.

One day his daughter-in-law joked, 'Babuji, people may forget your name, but they won't forget the number of your car.'

Ramakant said proudly, 'An identity should be such that once seen, it stays in the mind.'

Three months later, on an evening in Bhadon, he was returning from the Madhubani side after checking the shop accounts. The day had been sultry; by evening a fine rain had begun. The earth along the roadside was slippery, and traffic on the road was sparse.

Ramakant was driving himself. With him was Kailash, the shop's accountant. On Kailash's lap lay the red-bound credit ledger whose accounts they had reconciled that day with three shopkeepers.

Half a kos before Pipar Chowk, the road narrowed. Ahead, a bullock cart was moving slowly. Behind it were two bicycles and a handcart. Ramakant sounded the horn twice. A bus was coming from the opposite direction.

Kailash said, 'Let the bus pass.'

Ramakant glanced at his watch. 'It's getting late. We have to reach home.'

The bus passed, but immediately behind it a motorcycle appeared. Ramakant edged the car a little to the right, then had to cut back to the left. At that moment, the bamboo basket of an elderly cyclist travelling along the edge of the road caught against the left side of the car.

There was a sharp scraping sound. The bicycle spun and fell. The old man too went down at the roadside. The small brass utensils in his basket scattered across the mud.

Ramakant stopped at once. The car came to a halt about forty cubits farther on.

Kailash began opening the door. 'Go back. Let's see.'

People were running up behind them. The bullock-cart driver had stopped. In the rain, a boy stood in the middle of the road waving his hand.

Ramakant looked in the mirror. He saw a pale scratch on the left rear side of his car. As the crowd grew, his hands tightened on the steering wheel.

'I didn't see that I hit him,' he said.

Kailash stared at him. 'The basket caught. The man fell.'

'If the crowd stops the car now, who knows what will happen? We'll inform the police station first.'

'Then call from here.'

Ramakant did not answer. He drove on.

The boy standing behind watched the car go. His name was Neeraj. He was in Class Eight at the nearby high school. On his way back from school he had stopped at his maternal uncle's tea stall. The car was not unfamiliar to him. Two days earlier, the same car had stood near the stall, and Neeraj had pointed out the four identical digits to his friend and said, 'Look, all four are sevens.'

This time, as the car receded behind the curtain of rain, the other letters grew blurred, but the four digits remained clear.

'7777,' Neeraj shouted.

Two men ran out from his uncle's stall. The old man's arm was bent at an awkward angle. There was no blood on his head, but he could not get up. His

name was Devkinandan Sah; in the nearby markets he repaired old brass and bell-metal utensils.

People took him to the health centre. Neeraj told the policeman who reached the station what he had seen.

'The complete number?'

Neeraj shook his head. 'I couldn't read the letters in front. The last four were 7777. The car was dark blue.'

The policeman repeated, 'All four sevens?'

'Yes. I'd seen it before too.'

At first, the clerk at the police station considered the information incomplete. The same last four digits could occur on vehicles in different classes. But Neeraj also described the car's colour, its shape, and the shiny silver strip on its left rear side. The police station requested the register from the Transport Office. In that area, three vehicles turned up with 7777 as the last four digits—an old motorcycle, a white goods carrier, and a dark-blue car registered three months earlier.

The clerk placed a finger on the line in the register.

'Whose is this new car?'

The name was read out—Ramakant Chaudhary.

The half-number Neeraj had seen had now become a road to the full address. He did not know the owner's name, his shop, or his house. He remembered only those four identical digits which the owner himself had chosen so that they would be remembered.

That night Ramakant reached home and wiped the scratch on the back of the car with a wet cloth. Nirmala stood in the veranda. 'How did this scratch get here?' Ramakant said, 'A bamboo basket brushed against it on the road.' Nirmala asked again, 'Whose basket?' 'I don't know.' Nirmala looked at his face for a few moments. Kailash put the credit ledger inside and quietly left.

As Ramakant drove the car in, he noticed splashes of mud on the number plate. He wiped those off as well. 7777 shone again.

Before the shop opened the next morning, two policemen arrived from the station. One asked, 'Is this your car?' The key was in Ramakant's hand. 'Yes.' Then came the question, 'Were you on the Pipar Chowk road yesterday evening?' 'Yes.' One policeman walked around to the back and examined the scratch; the other read the number plate aloud—'7777.' For the first time, Ramakant felt no pride on hearing those four digits.

Neeraj too had been called to the police station. He was not made to stand before Ramakant; the sub-inspector questioned him in a separate room about what he had seen. Neeraj described the colour of the car, the last four digits, the fallen bicycle, and the scattered brass utensils.

The sub-inspector checked the registration register. Among dark-blue new cars with 7777 as the last four digits, only one name appeared in that class in the district.

Ramakant said, 'I did stop. I got frightened when I saw the crowd. I thought the injury would be minor.' The sub-inspector asked directly, 'Did you see the injured man?' Ramakant did not answer. The sub-inspector asked again, 'If you didn't see him, how did you know it was minor?' Ramakant had no answer to that question.

Devkinandan's arm was broken, but his life was not in danger. Treatment expenses, statements, inspection of the car, insurance papers—the next few days passed between Ramakant's shop and the police station. The car was kept in the police-station compound for a day.

When Bacchan heard about it, he came quietly to the shop that evening. 'Things have gone wrong,' he said. Ramakant looked at him. Bacchan asked softly, 'Would you like to change the number?' Ramakant could not laugh. 'It's already registered. What can change now?' Bacchan fell silent too. Both remembered the day in the veranda when money outside the official receipt had been paid for four identical digits. Neither mentioned it.

After Devkinandan returned home, Ramakant went to see him. The old man's arm was bound in a white bandage. The bent bicycle from that day stood propped against the wall in the courtyard, and the basket had been set aside.

Ramakant said, 'Whatever the treatment costs—' Devkinandan did not interrupt. He heard him out. Then he said, 'The expenses can be settled. But if you had stopped, I would not have been left thinking that the man in the car had run away and abandoned me.' Ramakant's eyes rested on the bicycle's bent wheel. 'I was afraid.' Devkinandan said, 'So was I. The only difference was that I was lying on the road.' For a while after that, only the sound of birds was heard in the courtyard.

A week later the car returned home. The scratch had been painted over. The car looked new again. Only the number plate was exactly as before.

That evening Ramakant took the car out after closing the shop and set off for home. Two children playing in the lane read the number at the back —'Seven-seven-seven-seven.' Earlier, hearing that sound, he would see himself smiling in the mirror. This time he stopped the car and looked back for a moment. All four digits were clear—so clear that even on a rainy night a boy had not forgotten them. Ramakant slowly drove on.

STORY 158

The Village Stage

The Magh sun was still gentle, but the field of the village middle school had been warm with activity since morning. A red cloth had been stretched across the new bamboo stage, and above it a white banner bore large letters: 'One Village, One Dignity.' Green-leaf festoons hung on both sides of the stage.

Kedar had been there since six in the morning. He connected the wires of the loudspeaker system, ran cables up the bamboo poles, and repeatedly crawled beneath the stage to tighten loose joints. His father, Fekan, worked with bamboo; the four main corner posts of the stage had been cut to measurements taken by his own hand. Kedar had learnt electrical work in town, so the organising committee had called him to look after the sound system.

By ten o'clock the field was full. People had come from the north hamlet, the south hamlet, the settlement across the river and the market quarter. Mats were spread on the right for the women, and chairs were placed in front for the elderly. Behind the stage, near the school kitchen, three large pots were on the fire. Rice, dal, potato curry and tarua were being cooked.

The principal speaker at the event was Mahendra Babu. He spoke at many social gatherings in the district, and the villagers called him 'Netaji'. When he arrived and climbed onto the stage, Kedar lowered the loudspeaker volume slightly. Mahendra Babu placed a hand on Kedar's shoulder and said, 'Keep the sound clear. Today's message must travel far.'

Kedar smiled and nodded.

The meeting began. After two speakers, Mahendra Babu stood up. The people seated on the mats in front fell silent. He first spoke of the old fellowship of the village, then raised his voice and said—

'Where the rows for eating are separate, the rows in people's minds remain separate too. Equality is not merely a word on paper. Only when we sit and eat together and work together will the village change.'

There was applause. Sitting beside the loudspeaker, Kedar looked towards the back. His mother, Phoolo Devi, and his father, Fekan, were standing at the far end of the field. Neither had found a place to sit in front. Kedar raised a hand to signal that he would meet them near the kitchen after the meeting.

Mahendra Babu's speech lasted half an hour. At the end he said, 'In this field today there is no high or low. We are all people of the same village.'

There was applause again. Kedar too clapped twice.

After the meeting, a crowd gathered around Mahendra Babu in front of the stage. Someone handed him an application, someone bowed in greeting, someone raised the matter of a road to his hamlet. Before coiling the wires, Kedar went behind to look at the meal arrangements. He had eaten nothing since morning.

Near the kitchen, Devkant, the committee secretary, stood with a sheet of paper in his hand. Two boys were counting leaf plates. A long row had begun to form on one side. On the other, two thin bamboo stakes were being driven into the ground and a rope stretched between them.

Kedar asked, 'Why this second way?'

Devkant replied, 'There are too many people. With two rows, it will go faster.'

That sounded natural enough. Kedar moved on. Just then Mahendra Babu came round the back with three organisers. He looked towards the cooking pots, then at the place where the rows were forming.

'The north hamlet and the market quarter on this side,' Devkant said, looking at his paper. 'Everyone else on the other side.'

Mahendra Babu paused. 'The other side is too exposed. It can be seen from the stage.'

Devkant asked, 'Then?'

Mahendra Babu pointed towards the wall behind the school. 'Put them behind that wall. Old customs do not change in a day. Otherwise unnecessary talk will start in front of everyone.'

Kedar had a coil of wire in his hand. He went completely still. Devkant's eyes fell on him, but he said nothing. The two boys pulled out the bamboo stakes and carried the rope behind the wall.

There was no question of Kedar having misheard. The voice had been perfectly clear. It was the same Mahendra Babu who, only moments earlier on the stage, had said, 'Separate rows for eating mean separate rows in the mind.'

Mahendra Babu looked at him. 'Kedar, you are one of the stage people. Eat here with the organisers.'

Kedar asked quietly, 'My mother and father?'

Mahendra Babu looked at Devkant. Devkant said, 'They will eat in the row at the back. There will be less crowding there.'

'Why is my row separate?'

Devkant's expression hardened. 'You have worked for the event, so you are one of the organisers. What is there to question in that?'

Something tightened in Kedar's chest. He did not throw the coil of wire on the ground. He placed it slowly on the wooden table. 'Am I an organiser only as far as the stage?'

No one answered.

Behind the wall, the second row for the meal had already formed. Phoolo Devi had reached it. Fekan stood behind her. With them in the row were people from the settlement across the river and families of some labourers. Leaf plates were being laid out in the front row; in the row behind the wall, people stood holding their own leaf plates in their hands.

The moment Phoolo Devi saw Kedar, she said, 'You will get food at the stage, won't you? Go, eat there.'

Kedar's throat went dry. 'I will eat with all of you.'

Fekan looked at him but asked no question. He simply left a place at the back of his row.

Just then came the sound of plates from the front—the meal had begun. Mahendra Babu sat in the middle of the first row. Tarua, dal and rice were served on the leaf plate before him. The red cloth of the stage moved in the wind. Above it, 'One Village, One Dignity' could still be read clearly.

Kedar was about to sit in the back row when Devkant came running. 'Arre, your plate has been kept near the stage. Why are you here?'

Kedar replied, 'My mother and father are here.'

Devkant lowered his voice. 'Those who worked have been given special honour. You must understand.'

Kedar looked at him. 'If honour takes away the right to sit together, I do not want it.'

Devkant's lips trembled, but he did not argue. He turned away.

The two boys serving food came behind the wall. They carried small pots. In the first row, two pieces of tarua had been served to each person; here only one was being given. Phoolo Devi remained silent. An old man named Lakhan, seated beside Kedar, said, 'One is enough.'

Kedar kept looking at the mound of rice on his leaf plate. He was hungry, but he could not lift the first mouthful.

At that moment a sharp crackle came from the loudspeaker near the stage. Kedar raised his head. The system had not been switched off; its volume had only been lowered. A child had pulled a wire. Kedar began to rise, then stopped. Another young organiser ran over and disconnected the wire.

Fekan said softly, 'Go and see to the work. The equipment is your responsibility.'

Kedar replied, 'I will go after I finish eating.'

For the first time, Fekan smiled. 'All right.'

By the time the meal ended, the field had begun to empty. Mahendra Babu went towards his car. As he was leaving, Devkant said to him, 'The meeting went well.'

Mahendra Babu looked towards the stage. 'Send an extract of the speech to the district paper tomorrow. Keep the part about equality prominent.'

A short distance away, Kedar heard this while coiling the wires. He said nothing.

By evening everyone had left. Leaf plates, earthen cups and scraps of paper remained scattered across the field. The stage was being dismantled. Fekan was untying the bamboo joints. Kedar was taking down the loudspeaker equipment.

Near the wall behind the school, the marks of the two separate dining rows were still clear. Where people had sat, two long strips of earth had been pressed smooth. The rope between them had been removed, but the two small holes where the bamboo stakes had stood remained.

Kedar picked up the rope and came to the front of the stage. As the banner above was being taken down, Fekan said, 'Fold that cloth and keep it. It will be used again at the next meeting.'

Kedar climbed the bamboo frame and untied the banner that read, 'One Village, One Dignity.' When he brought it down, the cloth spread once in the wind. Devkant was still there. He said, 'Keep it carefully. Money was spent to have it made.'

Kedar began folding the cloth. In one corner lay the rope that had divided the dining rows. He picked up the rope, wound it around the folded banner and tied a knot.

Devkant watched him. 'Why the rope?'

Kedar said evenly, 'Both belong to the same event. They can stay together.'

Devkant said nothing.

Fekan lifted the bamboo onto his shoulder. Kedar took the folded banner in his hand. As he crossed the field, his eyes went to the two parallel smooth marks behind the wall. In front, where the stage had stood, the earth was even; behind it, the two rows could still be read separately.

Kedar walked towards home. In his hand was the cloth bearing the words 'One Village, One Dignity', and around it was tightly bound the same rope that had divided the dining rows that afternoon.

STORY 159

The Girl by the Window

The water from the last monsoon had made the wall beneath the window swell a little. A muddy streak marked the white coat of lime, exactly where Madhavi rested her elbow every day. The window opened to the west. From it, a small stretch of the village's main road was visible - the bend by the pipal tree, the roofs of two grocery shops, and, farther away, the bells of bicycles going towards the school.

Madhavi was fifteen. Her schooling had stopped after she completed Class Eight. The school with Class Nine was in the market, three kos from the village. Her father, Ramvilas, used to say, 'For a girl to go so far every day - from now on she can study from books at home.'

No one in the house had taken away her books. Only the road had been taken away.

In the mornings, when three girls of her age cycled towards the market, Madhavi watched them through the bars of the window. At first she used to wave. After a few months she stopped waving too. As soon as she heard the bells of the girls' bicycles, she would open a book, as though her eyes had never gone outside.

In the afternoons the postman, Raghunath, came along this road. An old leather bag was tied behind his bicycle. At the bend by the pipal tree he seldom rang the bell; a loose piece of tin at the back of the bicycle rattled by itself.

One day he stopped in front of Madhavi's window. He had a letter in his hand.

'Child, which way is Shivdulari Devi's house?'

Madhavi started. It had been a long time since anyone had asked her about a road.

'After the pipal tree, the earthen lane that turns left - the third house in that lane. There is a tulsi platform in front.'

Raghunath turned the letter over and looked at it. 'It only says "South Hamlet" here.'

Madhavi smiled. 'They call that the old South Hamlet. The new South Hamlet is across the pond.'

Raghunath laughed. 'You've saved me half my bag.'

He rode on. That was all. Yet that day, after Madhavi opened her book, she could not remain on the same page for long.

A few days later Raghunath stopped again. This time he was looking for an old man who had come to stay temporarily at his son's house. Madhavi gave him directions again. The third time, Raghunath merely asked, 'Has the school group gone by today?'

Madhavi's face tightened a little. 'I don't go to school.'

Raghunath did not press the question. 'All right. Then your window tells the time more accurately than my watch. When the sunlight reaches this far, I know it is nearly twelve.'

He pressed the bicycle pedal and moved on towards the next house.

Gradually their exchanges became a small acquaintance of two or four sentences. Sometimes Raghunath would ask, 'What's the name of the new tenant in this house?' Madhavi told him what she knew and plainly said when she did not know. Sometimes her eyes fell on the round stamp in the corner of an envelope and she would ask, 'Is that a Darbhanga postmark?'

Holding the envelope up from a distance, Raghunath said, 'Yes. The postmark tells where the letter set out from. The address tells where it has to reach.'

The sentence stayed in Madhavi's mind - where it had set out from, where it had to reach.

That evening, on the last page of an old exercise book, she wrote three lines - her name, the name of the village, and the name of the post office. Then she crossed them out. The second time she wrote them in clear letters. The third time she tried to write the full address of the school in the market, but she did not know the name of the road.

Two days later, when Raghunath came, Madhavi held the paper near the window and asked, 'If a letter has to be sent to the school, is this much address enough?'

Raghunath did not take the paper in his hand. He read it from outside the window.

'The school's name, the market, the block - all that is there. Add the PIN code.'

'PIN code?'

Raghunath took an old blank scrap of paper from his bag and wrote six digits on it. 'This is for this area. But are you going to write a letter?'

Madhavi took a moment before answering. 'I'll see.'

Raghunath only said, 'Keep the address clear. What goes inside the letter is yours.'

That night, for the first time, Madhavi wrote to the headmistress of her old school. She changed the opening three times. First she had written, 'I want to study.' The sentence seemed too small. Then she wrote, 'After I passed Class Eight, my studies stopped because of circumstances at home. If there is any way for me to enrol again in Class Nine, please tell me.'

She did not blame her father in the letter. Nor did she write a long account of her unhappiness. At the end she wrote her name and looked at it for a long time.

The next day the letter remained beneath her pillow. On the third day it lay inside a book. On the fourth, the moment she heard the rattle of Raghunath's bicycle, Madhavi's heart began to beat faster. She took the envelope in her hand, but after reaching the window she stepped back again.

Raghunath had reached the bend by the pipal tree.

Suddenly Madhavi crossed the veranda and came into the courtyard. She did not go as far as the gate. She only called from inside, 'Raghunath Kaka!'

The bicycle stopped.

Madhavi went to the gate. Perhaps for the first time since leaving Class Eight, she stood there alone for some purpose of her own. She stretched out her hand and gave him the envelope.

'Will you leave this at the post office?'

Raghunath read the address. 'There's no stamp.'

Madhavi's courage dropped at once. 'Then?'

Raghunath did not smile. In an ordinary voice he said, 'Buy a stamp from the shop, or go to the post office tomorrow and put it on yourself. The letter is yours. It would be good if, the first time, you completed the whole task yourself too.'

He handed the envelope back.

For a moment Madhavi felt that the work had stopped again. Then she took one step outside the gate. The grocery shop at the pipal bend was barely forty paces away. She called to her mother, 'I'm going to get a stamp.'

From the kitchen her mother only said, 'Come back quickly.'

Madhavi went. She bought the stamp. Raghunath was still at the bend, delivering a letter at another house. She returned and fixed the stamp to the envelope. Raghunath put it into his bag.

'Now it's on its way,' he said.

Madhavi looked towards the window. Her chair inside was empty.

Ten days passed. During that time Madhavi did not wait for the postman every day. She did the household work, solved old mathematics exercises, and dried pickles with her mother. But whenever she heard the bicycle rattling in the afternoon, her ears became alert of their own accord.

On the eleventh day Raghunath called at the gate, 'Madhavi Kumari!'

It was the first time her full name, spoken from his mouth, sounded like a name on a piece of mail.

Madhavi came outside. It was a white envelope. The sender was the Headmistress, Girls' High School.

She took the envelope inside, but did not open it in private. She opened it in front of her mother. The letter was short. The time for admission to Class Nine

had not yet ended. She was asked to come to the school with her Class Eight certificate and her guardian's consent. The interruption in her studies would not be an obstacle.

Her mother had the letter read out twice. 'We'll show it to your father when he comes.'

Ramvilas returned from the shop in the evening. He read the letter and remained silent for a long time. Then he said, 'It's three kos away. Who will go with you every day?'

Madhavi could have remained silent as before. At that moment she remembered her window, the forty paces to the stamp shop, and the six digits written on the envelope.

'Sarita, Neelam and Gudiya go every day. I'll go with them. They pass the pipal bend at seven ten in the morning. All three return together.'

Ramvilas looked at her. 'How do you know all these times?'

'From the window.'

At that answer her mother smiled faintly. Ramvilas did not smile. He folded the letter and placed it on the table.

'I'll go with you on the day you enrol,' he said at last. 'After that we'll see.'

Madhavi said, 'All right.' Her voice was not very loud, but it was clearer than before.

Early the following Monday she put her Class Eight certificate, the headmistress's letter and two photographs into a file. Her father was taking the bicycle out. Madhavi looked at her old chair by the window. Her exercise book lay open on it, and the address she had written was still there - name, village, post office, PIN code.

As they went out through the gate, Raghunath's bicycle appeared in the distance. Perhaps he had taken his route a little early that day. On seeing Madhavi, he rang the bell once.

'The window empty today?'

Madhavi pressed the file close to her chest.

'Today I'm on the road.'

Raghunath nodded and rode on.

Madhavi set off with her father towards the pipal bend. On reaching the bend she looked back once. From that distance the western window of her house seemed very small. The chair inside could not be seen. Only the morning light was coming out through the bars.

STORY 160

The Migrant's Daughter

The first bus coming from across the Jogbani border usually did not reach the bend in the village before nine. But by eight Kusum would sweep the veranda and sit beside her father's old iron trunk. Her father did not come on that bus. Sometimes a folded letter came in the driver's hand.

Her father, Harinarayan, worked at a grocery warehouse near Biratnagar, sorting goods, sewing sacks and loading them onto vehicles. It had been three years since he had left home. He returned twice a year - around Dashami and at the end of winter. The rest of the time, three signs of him remained in the house: a torn gamchha hanging on the wall, an old shirt inside the trunk, and a bundle of letters.

At first the letters were short.

'I am well. Keep studying. Listen to your mother. I will send money next month.'

Kusum would read those lines, fold the letter and put it away. To her, her father was a man earning far from home - money came from his hands, but no one at home knew how his days passed.

One day Ramsevak Kaka, the bus driver, handed her a letter and said with a laugh, 'This time your father has sent you a very fat letter.'

Kusum opened it. There were four pages inside. At the top of the first page was written: 'Story: The Knot in the Blue Rope.'

Kusum burst out laughing. The very idea that her father had written a story seemed strange to her.

The story was about a blue rope that spent the whole day tying different sacks. When a sack of rice was opened, it went to a crate of spices; when the crate was unloaded, it held together a bundle of soap. The rope kept thinking that it owned nothing of its own, yet wherever it went it kept something from coming apart. In the end a labourer cut away its frayed part and made several small knots from it; the rope grew shorter, but its work did not end.

Kusum read the story twice.

Her mother, Saraswati, was sorting lentils by the hearth. Kusum asked, 'Did Father use to write stories?'

Saraswati raised her head. 'Not that I knew.'

'This story about the blue rope.'

Her mother took the page, looked at the handwriting, and handed it back. 'It is his writing. But a story? Has going away to work turned him into a writer?'

Both of them laughed.

The next month another letter came. This time the title was 'The Broken Scale.'

In a warehouse, one pan of a balance always hung a little lower. People thought the scale was faulty, but an old labourer cleaned its pointer every day in his spare time. At the end of the story the scale was not repaired; the old man merely told everyone, 'A thing that weighs others ought to be right itself first.'

Kusum liked that line. She copied it into her exercise book.

After that, the letters regularly became stories: 'A Sack Soaked in the Rain', 'The Sack Sewn Three Times', 'The Bird Crossing the Border', 'The Empty Handcart', 'The Sleeping Dog'.

At first Kusum read only the stories. Slowly, she began to read her father through them.

'The Sack Sewn Three Times' said that an old sack had thread of three colours on it - red, black and white. Kusum thought: Father must really spend all day with torn sacks in his hands, choosing thread.

In 'A Sack Soaked in the Rain', a labourer stretched a sack over his own body to save the grain. The ink had spread at one corner of the page, as though water had fallen on it while her father was writing.

In the middle of one story, a line suddenly appeared: 'By afternoon the fine fibres of the thread work their way into the skin of the palm; in the evening, when water touches it, the sting is felt.'

Kusum stopped at that line. Her father never spoke at home about pain in his hands. When he came back on leave, she saw only the hardened skin of his palms. Away from home, he spent his days among thread, sacks and knots - this was a new father.

One day at school the teacher gave the class a topic: 'A Member of My Family.'

All the children chose their subjects. One chose a mother, another a grandmother, another a brother.

Kusum wrote: 'My father sorts goods in a warehouse.'

Her pen stopped after the first line. The sentence seemed incomplete.

She turned the page and wrote: 'My father spends all day looking at ropes, scales, sacks and handcarts.'

Her friend Reena peeped at the page and said, 'Does your father work in a warehouse or make up stories?'

Kusum covered the page at once. 'Both.'

The answer had come out of her mouth on its own.

Back home, she opened the letters again and counted the dates. The first story had begun in the month when her father had come home for Dashami and then gone back. That time Kusum had given him her old Class Five exercise book. 'There are blank pages in it. You can keep accounts in them.'

Now she remembered that as he took the book, her father had said, 'Why waste blank pages?'

Kusum searched inside the trunk. Among the old letters she found a short note from before the first story. It spoke only of sending money. The handwriting was stiff and uneven. In the story-letters, the letters of the alphabet had gradually grown rounder and clearer.

That night Kusum wrote to her father for the first time.

'Father, I liked the story about the blue rope. But if the rope had nothing of its own, did that make it sad?'

After writing it, she laughed at herself. Then she wrote below:

'What was the name of the old man with the scale? When you write the next story, bring that old man back.'

Her mother looked at the letter. 'Will you write this much?'

'Not just this much. I'll write more.'

'And the matter of money?'

'You write that.'

Saraswati looked at her for a while. Then she said, 'All right. I'll write my part on a separate page.'

The letter went with Ramsevak.

Three weeks passed without a reply.

Kusum grew restless. She was afraid her father might have laughed after reading her questions. Perhaps writing stories was only a pastime for him, and his daughter taking them seriously had made him uncomfortable.

In the fourth week, as soon as Ramsevak Kaka got down from the bus, he called from a distance, 'Kusum! This time your father has sent an argument along with his reply.'

The letter was thick.

The first line said:

'I had not written whether the rope felt sad or not. After your question I thought about it - perhaps it did.'

Kusum smiled.

On the second page, 'the old man with the scale' had returned. This time his name was Jagdish. In the story he learned to write the labourers' accounts himself, because earlier he had only put his thumbprint.

At the end of the story her father had written a separate line:

'Jagdish got his name because of your question.'

Kusum made her mother listen to that line three times.

After that, the letters were no longer one-sided. Kusum sent questions. In the next story her father sometimes answered them and sometimes avoided them. Kusum wrote, 'A bird crossing the border does not show papers to anyone. Why do people have to?' In his next letter, her father wrote a story

about two trees standing at the border - one on the India side and one on the Nepal side; beneath the soil, the roots of each reached the roots of the other.

Slowly Kusum understood that her father wrote little directly, but said a great deal inside the stories.

In one story, a labourer who sewed sacks did more than his own share of work for three days because another worker had cut his hand. The money sent with that letter was less than usual.

Kusum asked her mother, 'Was Father ill?'

'No. On the telephone he said he was well.'

'He must have been doing someone else's work too.'

Her mother looked startled. 'How do you know?'

Kusum opened the letter. 'It's in the story.'

Saraswati was silent for a long time. Then she said softly, 'I used to hear what he said only as accounts of expenses.'

That sentence stayed in Kusum's mind.

At the end of winter Harinarayan came home. When he got down from the bus, a blue bag hung from his shoulder and he carried a small box of sweets in his hand. Kusum ran to him, but this time her first question was not, 'What have you brought for me?'

She asked, 'What will Jagdish do now?'

Harinarayan stopped short.

'Who is Jagdish?'

Kusum frowned. 'Jagdish from the story about the scale.'

A smile slowly came to her father's face. 'Oh, him? His story isn't finished yet.'

After reaching home Harinarayan sat beside the trunk. Kusum took out the bundle of letters and placed it before him. Her father looked at the folds of the pages one by one.

'You've kept all these?'

'I didn't throw away a single one.'

'There must be many mistakes in the stories.'

'I've marked them.'

Harinarayan laughed. 'You've become an editor.'

Kusum brought out her exercise book. In it she had copied sentences from her father's stories, written her own questions, and noted a few new story-seeds.

On one page was written: 'Story: Two Shoes by the Border. Nepalese soil on one, Indian dust on the other.'

Harinarayan read it and looked at Kusum. 'You wrote this?'

'You write the rest.'

'The seed is yours.'

'Then half the story is mine.'

Her father said nothing. He rested the exercise book on his knee and looked at that one line for a long time.

After dinner that night, Harinarayan sat on the veranda beside the lantern. Kusum was studying inside. For some time the rustle of paper could be heard.

In the morning a new sheet lay on top of the trunk.

At the top was written:

'Story: Two Shoes by the Border.'

Below it, her father had written the first line:

'The two shoes belonged to the same pair, but all day they touched different earth.'

The second line after it was blank.

In the margin of the page, in small letters, was written:

'Kusum will write the rest.'

STORY 161

The Unfinished Song

The morning sun had reached only halfway across the veranda. Kaushalya Devi was picking pebbles out of an old winnowing tray of paddy. The grains clinked in the brass plate beside her, and from the room inside came the faint thud-thud of an unfamiliar rhythm.

At first she thought Mrinal was listening to some new music again. But three times, after that rhythm, a short melody rose—four notes climbed, one note paused, then an empty space. Kaushalya's fingers stopped among the grains.

The melody repeated.

This time she set the plate aside and rose.

The door to Mrinal's room was half open. Inside, she sat bent before the computer. Sheets of paper, two cables, a small speaker and an old red notebook lay spread across the table. From the speaker rose those same four notes once more.

Kaushalya stopped in the doorway.

'Where did you get that from?'

Mrinal turned. 'What?'

'What just played.'

'I made it.'

Kaushalya looked at her for a few moments. 'Play it again.'

Mrinal pressed a key. The rhythm began. First the clack-clack of a loom, then the thump of a bucket being filled with water, then the light ting of a bicycle bell. Above them all came Mrinal's humming—four notes, a pause, then an empty space.

Kaushalya said softly, 'You did not make that.'

Mrinal's eyebrows lifted slightly. 'I haven't heard it from anyone and written it down, Dadi.'

'Then you have heard it.'

'Where?'

Kaushalya did not answer. She sat on the cot. The fingers of her right hand began beating time on her knee—one, two, three, pause. Then a very thin note came from her throat.

'The transplanted row has turned, O...'

She stopped there.

Mrinal switched off the speaker.

'And then?'

Kaushalya tried to smile, but the smile did not quite form. 'What came next was not mine.'

'Whose was it, then?'

'Jhunki's.'

Mrinal had heard the name before. Jhunki Devi had been Kaushalya's childhood friend. On paddy-transplanting days the two worked in adjoining rows in the field. Kaushalya would raise the song; Jhunki would answer. Jhunki had died years ago. After that Kaushalya sang many songs, but this melody was never completed again.

'You don't remember the answer?' Mrinal asked.

Kaushalya shook her head. 'I remember fragments of words. Not the tune. Not the way Jhunki used to lift it.'

Mrinal turned over the papers on the table. 'I have to submit a new sound composition the day after tomorrow. The theme is the everyday sounds of the village. The loom, the bucket, the bell, the mortar... I took all of them from here. These four notes came into my head on their own. I didn't even realise they had been living somewhere already.'

Kaushalya said, 'Sometimes a tune enters not through the ear, but through the house.'

Mrinal fell silent.

She stopped working until noon. On the first page of the old red notebook she wrote: 'Source of the four notes?' Beneath it she paused before writing Kaushalya's name.

'Dadi, if this was the paddy-transplanting tune of all of you, how can I put my own name on it?'

Kaushalya pulled the winnowing tray towards herself again. 'Not in my name either. The song belonged to the field. Whoever's throat it entered, it became theirs; once it left that throat, it belonged to everyone again.'

'But you must have learnt it from someone.'

'From my mother. My mother from her aunt. Her aunt from whom—who knows?'

Mrinal wrote in the red notebook: 'Anonymous paddy-transplanting melody.' Then added: 'Heard from Kaushalya Devi.'

Kaushalya stopped her at once. 'Where is Jhunki's name?'

Mrinal looked at her.

Kaushalya began naming them one by one. 'Jhunki. Sudama Kaki. Parmesari. Chhotki Budhni. Sarju Mai...'

'So many people?'

'The song did not belong to one throat.'

Mrinal kept writing the names. At the fifth name Kaushalya stopped. Her eyes drifted towards the veranda. 'There were more. I don't remember all their names now.'

'We'll write as many as you remember.'

Mrinal asked, 'Why did you never sing this song again?'

Kaushalya picked a pebble from the tray and rolled it in her palm. 'The first transplanting season after Jhunki died, I raised it. The first line came out, but no answer came from anyone's throat. The other women caught up a different song. That day I understood that some melodies do not live by words alone; someone has to be standing opposite you as well.'

'So you gave it up?'

'One season at first. Then another. After that the field went out on sharecropping. Fewer people came for transplanting. The pace of the work changed. The song itself was left behind.'

Mrinal drew a short line along the margin of the red notebook. 'When I was little, did you used to hum this?'

Kaushalya thought. 'Possibly. When you wouldn't sleep, I used to turn the tune over without any words. I couldn't sing the words—they felt like Jhunki's share. Perhaps the melody remained.'

Mrinal looked at the marks she had made for her four notes. Suddenly she understood how often, while composing the melody, she had instinctively kept that same pause. She had not known why; the moment she removed the empty space, the whole rhythm felt unbalanced.

'So I learnt this from you, but didn't remember?'

'There is a difference between learning something and something settling inside you,' Kaushalya said. 'Some things are not taught. Living in a house, the body simply picks them up.'

That evening Mrinal opened her sound composition again. This time the empty space after the four notes began to trouble her. She tried to add a new note there—a flute-like sound once, a soft bell once, once a second line in her own voice. Everything sounded wrong.

Kaushalya was listening from outside.

'Leave it empty,' she said.

'Why?'

'That was where Jhunki used to come in.'

Mrinal's hand stopped. 'But in the composition the empty space will feel so long.'

'It felt long in the field too.'

Kaushalya came inside. 'While transplanting, we stayed bent low for one whole row. The first melody belonged to those bent bodies. Then came a pause for one breath—the waist straightened, the foot moved forward. After that pause Jhunki would raise the answer. Without the pause, the second line could never begin.'

Mrinal stopped the rhythm. 'So the empty space is part of the song too?'

Kaushalya said, 'Sometimes it is the most important part.'

The next morning the two went to the edge of the pond. A light mist lay over the water. Kaushalya hoped the tune might return to her in the open air. Mrinal had brought no equipment, only the red notebook.

Kaushalya raised the first line.

'The transplanted row has turned, O...'

Then the empty space.

She closed her eyes.

Mrinal said nothing.

Far out in the water a heron stood with its wings folded. From across the pond came the thump-thump of someone working a pestle. Kaushalya's fingers found the old beat on her knee by themselves. One, two, three—pause.

Suddenly two notes came from her mouth. She herself startled. Then a third note. Then a long descent.

'Was it like that?' Mrinal asked softly.

Kaushalya did not answer at once. Then she sang it again. This time her voice trembled on the last note.

'I cannot say exactly,' she said. 'But this is the path my body is taking.'

Mrinal made her own notation for the notes in the red notebook, but did not write any words.

'The words?'

Kaushalya shook her head. 'If I don't remember them, we won't invent them from our own minds. Let it remain unfinished.'

Mrinal smiled. 'In my sound composition too?'

'Add whatever new thing is yours there. But don't put it forward in the old song's name.'

The two returned home.

Mrinal worked all afternoon. After the four notes of the old melody she left the empty space exactly as it was. After that, she did not add the notes Kaushalya had half remembered as if they were Jhunki's reply. Instead she changed the new rhythm—the loom's clack-clack slowly became like the cadence of feet in a transplanting field, the thump of the bucket receded into the distance, and at the end only one new line rose in Mrinal's own voice, with words she herself had written.

In the note above it she wrote: 'Opening melody: anonymous village paddy-transplanting tradition. From the memory of Kaushalya Devi. In remembrance of Jhunki Devi, Sudama Devi, Parmesari Devi, Budhni Devi, Sarju Devi and the companions whose names are no longer remembered.'

Kaushalya read it and said, 'Why haven't you written "singer" beside my name?'

Mrinal laughed. 'You said yourself the song belonged to the field.'

Kaushalya laughed too.

Three days later Mrinal returned from college with no prize in her hand. There were only two lines of comment written by the teacher: 'A new composition has been created without claiming the old source as one's own. The use of empty space is effective.'

Kaushalya read the paper and asked, 'Did they understand the song?'

'Not all of it.'

'Then?'

'They all heard the empty space.'

Kaushalya folded the paper and placed it inside the red notebook.

That night after dinner Mrinal was gathering clothes from the courtyard when Kaushalya's voice rose from inside—

'The transplanted row has turned, O...'

Then the pause.

Mrinal stopped by the doorway. She did not know Jhunki's words. Nor did she sing the line from her own new composition. She only tapped the brass plate twice with her finger in the rhythm of that pause—ting, ting.

Inside, Kaushalya raised the next note.

The song was not completed.

But this time, she did not stop.

STORY 162

The River's Letter

Three months had passed since the floodwater receded, but old Buskatti still did not look like a village. Here stood half a wall, there a fallen bamboo post, elsewhere the soot-black mark of a hearth trapped in sand. The river had abandoned its old course and bent a little to the east, and the ghat that had once stood in the middle of the village had become a deserted bank at that bend.

Madhavi had come to the ghat with her father to gather driftwood. Her father collected branches higher up on the sand, while Madhavi went down towards the wet mud. There she saw the mouth of an old earthen water-pot, half buried. Before the flood, water for the boatmen had been kept in that pot. Now its belly was full of sand.

When Madhavi tried to set it upright, a flat piece of clay, no larger than her palm, came out from underneath. On it were two small scratches made by fingernails—parallel to one another.

Her breath caught.

Only she and Sudha used to make that sign. When they were children and shaped birds out of clay, they would make two scratches on the belly of each bird—one for Madhavi, one for Sudha.

On the piece of clay, written with the tip of a reed, were the words—

‘Madhu, do you come here? — Su’

Some letters were crooked, some blurred, but the moment Madhavi read the name her eyes filled with tears.

On the night of the flood, the two families had fled in different directions. Madhavi's family had reached a temporary settlement on the high road to the east; Sudha's family had gone west, near her maternal uncle's village. For the first few weeks no one had any certain news. Later they heard by word of mouth that both families had survived, but the road was broken, boats were irregular, and there was so much work at home that meeting was impossible.

That day, along with the driftwood, Madhavi took home a handful of smooth clay. At night, after the hearth had gone out, she kneaded the clay and made a palm-sized letter. With the point of a reed she wrote—

‘Su, I do come here. I'll come again next Tuesday. If you can read this, make two scratches.’

Below it she made two parallel marks with her fingernails.

The following Tuesday she went not with her father but with her mother, who was cutting grass. She placed her letter beneath the earthen pot at the ghat. She did not take Sudha's first letter home; she buried it there again. It seemed to her that if she carried the letter away, the ghat itself would be left empty.

Two weeks later, an answer was waiting.

'I read it. I come on Saturdays. Paper gets wet; clay does not run away.'

Madhavi burst out laughing.

From that day, the riverbank became a post office for the two of them.

Rules formed slowly. A letter must not be larger than a palm. After it was written, it had to dry in the sun for half a day. Two scratches were compulsory before it was placed beneath the pot. If there was too much to say, two clay letters could be made, but the first would bear one dot and the second two.

At first, their letters were short.

They never came to the ghat on the same day. Madhavi usually came on Tuesday or Wednesday evening, when the women who cut grass were returning along that route from the eastern settlement. Sudha came on Saturday mornings, on the pretext of going to the market with her maternal uncle. So after leaving a letter, an answer sometimes took four days, sometimes a whole week. During that interval neither tried to guess; the matter remained unfinished until the next letter.

'My goat has had a kid.'

'My mother still wakes at night at the sound of the river.'

'Did you find the old school's blackboard?'

'No. But the mango tree survived.'

After a while the letters grew longer. Sudha wrote that in her uncle's village the question of sending her to school kept being postponed because looking after the younger children of the household had become her responsibility. Madhavi wrote that a temporary school had opened in the eastern settlement, though the roof leaked on rainy days. She described her first day in such detail that two clay letters were not enough; she had to make a third.

Sudha's next reply was only one line—

'You keep studying. I will begin again.'

Madhavi held that letter in her palm for a long time. The next time, she wrote two small mathematics problems on her clay letter, the sort they had once asked each other to solve. Sudha answered one correctly and made a mistake in the other, then wrote below it, 'Don't laugh.' Madhavi replied, 'I got it wrong the first time too.' From then on, their letters were no longer only news of their lives; lessons too began to cross the riverbank.

At the beginning of winter, the river fell further. Sand on the far side could be seen from the old ghat. One day Madhavi felt tempted to wade through knee-deep water and walk across. People said the current in the middle was weak now. She mentioned it in a letter.

Sudha's reply was stern—

'The river has gone down, but the road has not returned. Do not step into it. The longing to meet must not become greater than the letter.'

At first Madhavi was annoyed when she read it. Then she drew a line in the mud of the ghat with her foot and stood looking at the water for a long time. That evening she wrote only—

'All right. I will stay on the bank.'

For the first time each had stopped the other from doing something, and in that restraint their friendship took on a new form.

Around Phagun, Madhavi once found a clay letter broken in half beneath the pot. All that could be read on it was—

'Madhu, now I no longer...'

The rest was missing.

Madhavi went cold. She searched the entire ghat. She clawed through the sand with her fingernails, looked beside the bushes, turned over small pieces of clay near the water's edge. Nothing.

She did not sleep that night. After 'now I no longer...', her mind kept completing the sentence on its own—I will no longer come, I will no longer study, I will no longer be here...

At dawn the next day she reached the ghat without telling anyone. The pot was empty. She had made a clay letter, but could not bring herself to write. At last she wrote only—

'Write the remaining words again. Do not leave half a sentence to the river.'

Three days later Sudha's complete reply came.

'Madhu, now I am no longer afraid. Mama has agreed to send me to school from next month.'

Madhavi read the letter, laughed first, then sat beside the pot crying. She kept the broken half-letter there too. The fear caused by that unfinished sentence taught both of them a new rule: if the meaning of something could change when it broke in the middle, the first line must contain the whole point; details could follow afterwards.

By the end of spring, a small heap of clay letters had gathered beneath the pot. Some were thin, some thick, some made of red clay, some grey. On some the letters were clear; others bore stains of damp. Neither girl took the letters home. To them, these belonged to the riverbank—like the bricks of the ghat, the sand, the old roots.

One day people from the panchayat came. Red bamboo stakes were driven in beside the old ghat. It was announced that before the next rains, earth would be filled along the bank to stop further erosion; the pot, the bushes and the half wall would all be buried.

Madhavi wrote in a clay letter—

'Our post office will be buried.'

Sudha's answer came—

'The post office was not the pot.'

Below were the two scratches.

In their separate homes, both began thinking about where the next place should be. The old peepal had fallen in the flood. The mango tree was too far. Too many people passed along the high embankment. At last Sudha suggested a small Shiva shrine half a kos north of the old ghat, where a dry recess remained between the upper bricks of a crumbling wall. Water would not reach there quickly.

Madhavi wrote—

'The place will change, not the sign.'

Before the rains returned, each came once more, at her own time, to the ghat with the earthen pot. They did not see one another. Madhavi went first. She counted the pile of clay letters—twenty-seven. Sudha's first letter, the one that said 'Do you come here?', was still among them.

Madhavi thought of taking all the letters, then stopped her hand. From the twenty-seven she chose only two—Sudha's first letter and her own reply saying, 'I will stay on the bank.' She arranged the rest again beneath the pot.

That evening Sudha came. She found two letters missing from beneath the pot and understood. She too chose two—the broken half that said 'now I no longer...', and the complete reply, 'now I am no longer afraid.' She covered the rest with a thin layer of earth.

The following week, panchayat labourers began filling the bank with soil. The pot, the bushes and the old masonry slowly disappeared into the embankment.

But the first new letter was already waiting in the wall of the Shiva shrine to the north.

Madhavi had written—

'Su, I found the new place. How is school?'

Two days later, beneath it was Sudha's clay letter—

'The roof is good. The teacher teaches fast. And I sit in the front row.'

Below it were the same two fingernail scratches.

The river began to rise again. The old ghat slowly went under water. Their homes were still far apart, the roads still separate, but the place where they spoke to each other kept changing with the river.

The clay dried, letters took shape, two scratches were made.

The letters kept travelling.

STORY 163

The Little Servant

On a winter morning, sunlight had not yet reached the long veranda at the back of the house. Two drops of dew gleamed on the old brass-coloured measuring tape kept in a corner by the wall. Ishan came running barefoot and stood with his back pressed against the doorframe.

“Kanhaiya, see—have I grown this much or not?”

Kanhaiya stopped in the middle of sweeping. He was only a little older than Ishan. Everyone in the house called him “the little servant”, but from the first day Ishan had called him by his name. Kanhaiya propped the broom against the wall, straightened the measuring tape and placed a finger on Ishan’s head to read the height.

“Half a finger more than yesterday,” he said with a laugh.

“In one night?”

“You drank milk all night, that’s why.”

Ishan at once drew a thin pencil line on the doorframe. There were already several marks there—‘Ishan 6’, ‘Ishan 7’, ‘Ishan 8’—his height from year to year. The writing belonged to different hands: sometimes his mother’s, sometimes his father’s, sometimes his grandfather’s.

Ishan held the pencil out to Kanhaiya.

“Let me measure you too.”

Kanhaiya laughed. “What will you do by measuring me?”

“Are you shorter, or am I?”

The question sounded like a contest. Kanhaiya stood with his back against the frame. Ishan tilted the measuring tape twice while trying to hold it straight. At last he drew a line and wrote—‘Kanhaiya 12’.

The two lines were almost at the same height.

Just then Ishan’s mother, Saroj, came out from inside. She had a wet cloth in her hand. She stopped when she saw the new writing on the doorframe.

“What have you written there?”

Ishan said proudly, “Both our measurements.”

Saroj’s eyes went first to Ishan’s line, then to ‘Kanhaiya 12’. Her voice was not harsh, but the easy smile had gone from it.

“Ishan’s height has been marked here for years. Don’t fill the whole doorframe with writing. Kanhaiya, get on with your work.”

With the cloth she rubbed away ‘Kanhaiya 12’. The pencil letters vanished, though a faint shadow of the line remained.

Kanhaiya picked up the broom. Ishan said nothing.

From that day the measuring tape became their game. But not in full view of the doorframe. In the storeroom an old plank leaned against the wall. Less dust gathered behind it because it stood flush against the wall. Ishan pulled the plank out a little and made their first mark on its hidden side.

“No one will see it here.”

Kanhaiya said, “What if someone throws the plank away?”

“Then somewhere else.”

Every month or two they began measuring each other’s height. Sometimes Ishan was half a finger ahead, sometimes Kanhaiya. Beside the lines there were no full names—only ‘I’ and ‘K’. The date went underneath.

But the measuring tape did not remain merely a thing for measuring height. One day Ishan got stuck on a mathematics exercise from school. The question was: on a cord one cubit long, at what intervals should five equal knots fall? Kanhaiya took an old clothesline, folded it twice, then folded it again and estimated five equal parts. Ishan’s answer had been wrong; the moment he saw Kanhaiya’s knots, he understood.

“Who taught you that?”

“Mother. We had to divide rope evenly along the field ridges.”

The next day Kanhaiya learnt from Ishan how to write his mother’s name. He could write his own name, but in ‘Phulkali Devi’ he kept getting the ‘li’ wrong. Ishan opened a book and showed him the vowel signs. Kanhaiya wrote it five times on the back of an old sheet of paper. The sixth time the letters came out clearly.

The two of them kept no account of this exchange.

The adults in the house did.

One day a tailor came. A new kurta was to be made for winter. Ishan stood on the veranda while the tailor measured his chest, shoulder and arm and wrote the figures on a sheet of paper. Kanhaiya was sitting nearby untangling a bundle of thread. Ishan called to him—

“See whether my arm is longer than yours.”

The tailor laughed. “Am I to measure both of you?”

Ishan said, “Just to see.”

Kanhaiya stretched out his arm. The tailor drew the tape from his shoulder to his fingertips.

“The same,” he said.

Ishan said at once, “See!”

Saroj called from inside, “Tailorji, finish the work first. It will be evening.”

Kanhaiya lowered his arm. Only Ishan’s measurements remained written on the tailor’s paper. The equal length of their arms entered no one’s account.

That evening, behind the storeroom plank, Ishan drew a new mark, but this time not for height. He made two thin lines of equal length for their arms. Kanhaiya laughed and said, "This piece of wood will turn into a whole ledger."

"Let it."

Kanhaiya said, "A ledger has names in it."

Underneath, Ishan wrote 'I' and 'K' in small letters.

Kanhaiya's mother lived in the village. At the end of each month, money from his wages was sent home. Whenever Kanhaiya received a letter from his mother, he first read the letters and words slowly, then asked Ishan about a few lines. Sometimes Ishan explained the meaning; sometimes he could not understand it himself. Then the two of them went to Grandmother, though Kanhaiya kept the letter in his own hands. Once Grandmother said—

"Ishan, have you finished your homework?"

Ishan ran towards his books. Kanhaiya folded the letter and tucked it into an inner fold of his kurta. Their studies once again took separate roads. But in the evening the measuring tape brought them back to the same plank.

When it was time for Ishan to go to school, his shoes were polished and his bag was ready. At that same hour Kanhaiya swept the courtyard, filled water in the kitchen and brought greens from the market. When Ishan returned, Kanhaiya carried his bag inside. Sometimes Ishan kept hold of the bag himself, but Grandmother would say—

"Kanhaiya is there, isn't he? Give it to him."

Kanhaiya took the bag. Ishan said nothing.

By evening the two would meet again near the storeroom. Sometimes they played marbles; sometimes they arranged coloured buttons from a broken watch-box into armies; sometimes they measured the length of the veranda by counting their steps.

Once carpenters came to the house. Termites had eaten into some of the old wooden doors. The doorframe on which Ishan's heights were marked had also become hollow at the bottom. The carpenter tapped it with his hammer and said—

"This frame will have to be replaced."

Saroj said at once, "But all the measurements from Ishan's childhood are on it."

The carpenter bent down and examined the frame. "Then cut out and preserve the strip where the measurements are. There is no point keeping the whole frame."

Ishan was standing there. Behind him Kanhaiya was gathering the wood shavings.

The next day the carpenter removed the frame. Dust fell with the first blow of the hammer. With the second, an old nail came out. With the third, the whole long piece of wood came away from the wall.

Saroj said, "Cut off a narrow strip where the measurements are written."

The carpenter turned the wood over so that he could draw the cutting line from the back.

Hammer raised, the carpenter stopped.

On the back of the wood, which no one had seen for years, were dozens of thin lines. Beside some was 'I', beside others 'K'. Beneath them were months and dates. Sometimes the two lines were half a finger apart, sometimes almost level. Between them were a few brief notes as well—"I ahead today", 'K had slippers on', 'measure again'.

Saroj took the wood in her hands.

Ishan's face turned red. Kanhaiya remained bent down, pretending to gather wood shavings.

"Who wrote all this?" Grandmother asked.

Ishan said softly, "Both of us."

"Since when?"

"For a long time."

Kanhaiya did not raise his head.

Saroj first looked at the old lines on the front—the ones everyone knew about. Then she turned the wood and looked at the lines on the back—the ones that had remained in the house yet outside the house's sight. The writing on both sides was in the same pencil, by the same unsteady child's hand.

The carpenter asked, "Which side's strip shall I save?"

For a few moments no one answered.

Ishan looked at Kanhaiya. Kanhaiya was still bent over, gathering each small splinter of wood into his palm.

Saroj handed the wood to the carpenter and said, "Leave both sides exactly as they are. Don't cut it. Remove only the rotten part at the bottom."

Grandmother seemed about to say something, then remained silent.

The long surviving piece of the doorframe was hung on the inner wall of the veranda. On one side were Ishan's neat old measurements. On the other were the two children's secret measurements, brought out from behind the plank.

That evening Kanhaiya looked at it openly for the first time. "Shall we measure again?" Ishan asked. Kanhaiya smiled. "Now it's on the wall. Everyone will see."

Ishan picked up the measuring tape. "So?" Kanhaiya stood with his back against the wood. Ishan placed a finger on his head and drew a new pencil line. Then, when it was his turn, he handed the pencil to Kanhaiya. Once again the two new lines were almost at the same height.

At the other end of the veranda, Saroj was gathering clothes. Her eyes went once to the wood and then to the two children. She said nothing. The

measuring tape remained propped beneath the wood. Heights continued to be written down.

STORY 164

Mother's Box

In the inner room of the old house in Benipatti, as Tara pulled the iron box out from beneath the cot, she first blew away the dust that had settled on its lid. A thin cloud of dust drifted towards the window.

Manjari came in from the veranda and said, "Wait. We'll open it when Renu arrives."

Tara stopped her hand.

It was the same box whose key Mother, Lalita Devi, always kept tied into the end of her sari. As children, the three sisters knew that the box held wedding saris, some old papers, Grandmother's silver anklets and "grown-ups' matters". But once they grew up, none of them knew exactly what was still inside.

On the twelfth day after Mother's death, the three sisters were sitting under the same roof again.

Manjari had come from Darbhanga. Renu from Janakpur. Tara had been living with Mother in this house for five years. When the question of taking stock of the household things arose, Tara herself had said, "The box will be opened in front of all three sisters."

No one asked whether there was more caution or affection in that sentence.

Renu arrived and sat with her back against the door. "Open it."

Tara turned the key. The lock did not open the first time. On the second attempt, the lid rose with a faint groan from within.

There were two old saris on top. Beneath them lay a ball of wool, a sewing box, empty medicine strips, old school certificates, and three notebooks of household expenses written in Mother's hand.

Manjari took the things out one by one and set them aside.

"Where did the anklets go?" Renu asked.

Tara looked at her. "Mother sold them three years ago. The roof was repaired."

Renu fell silent.

A faded blue cloth lined the bottom of the box. When Tara lifted it, three folded sheets appeared. The sheets were separate, but all three bore the same handwriting.

On the first was written, "For Manjari."

The second—"For Renu."

The third—"For Tara."

For a few moments, no one in the room reached out a hand.

Manjari slowly took her sheet. Renu took hers. Tara picked up the third, but did not open it.

Manjari began to read first.

“Manjari,

When you first went to the town to study, I told you that day not to worry about home. Later, when you began coming home less often, I repeatedly found myself saying that the town had changed you. I did not say that to hurt you, but to cover the sound of my own empty house. I had no right to stop you, yet I did not quite have the courage to send you far away either. That is why I kept saying both things at once. Now I understand that...”

The letter ended there.

Manjari turned the sheet over. There was nothing on the back.

“The second page?” Her voice grew hard.

Tara searched the box again. “It isn’t here.”

Manjari lifted the blue cloth, shook out each corner, and looked between the pages of the expense ledgers.

Renu opened her sheet.

“Renu,

In the second month after your marriage, you came home one night crying. You said, let me stay here for two days. At dawn I sent you back again. At the time, I thought that saving a home meant sending a daughter back to it. Much later I understood that a daughter first needs to be heard. You never opened that matter before me again. I too did not have the courage to ask. After that day, your silence I...”

The letter stopped there.

Renu folded the sheet sharply.

“This is only half of it.”

Tara still had not opened her own letter.

Manjari asked, “Did Mother ever say that she was writing letters?”

“Not that I saw.”

“Did you use to open the box?”

Tara did not answer at once. Then she said, “Not unless Mother told me to.”

Renu looked up. “But the key was with you during the last month.”

“Because Mother’s hands trembled.”

“I am not accusing you.”

“But that is how it sounds.”

Manjari intervened. “Read the third letter first.”

Tara held the sheet in her hand for a long time. Then she opened it.

“Tara,

You stayed with me for five years. Medicines, meals, accounts, visitors—you looked after everything. People kept saying that the youngest daughter was

serving her mother. I listened. But whenever I heard the word service, fear rose inside me, because you had a life of your own as well. The two times you gave up work outside, I took it as a convenience for myself and kept quiet. I never told you that..."

The letter stopped in the middle of the sentence.

Tara read it once. Then a second time.

Renu asked softly, "What comes next?"

Tara showed her the blank back of the sheet.

Three unfinished sentences lay before the three sisters.

Manjari took every paper out of the box. Old insurance slips, tax receipts, school mark sheets, two letters from Father, a wedding invitation, medicine accounts. There was nothing that could be the continuation of any of the three letters.

Renu kept turning the pages of the expense ledgers. "Mother never threw away papers. If she had written a second page, it would be here."

Tara said, "Perhaps she never wrote it at all."

Manjari said at once, "All three letters left unfinished at the same time?"

"They were not written at the same time."

Tara looked at the top of each sheet. There was a small date in one corner. Manjari's letter—Phagun twenty-seven. Renu's—Chait twelve. Tara's—Baisakh two. Three different days.

Manjari matched the dates against the expense ledger. On the page for Phagun twenty-seven were written rice, oil, medicine and "Manjari's letter". Beside it was a small empty square. On Chait twelve—"Write to Renu." Again, an empty square. On Baisakh two—"Talk to Tara." That square too was empty. Renu stared at the three empty squares for a long time. When Mother completed a task in the ledger, she drew a diagonal line through its square. Rice bought—a line. Tax paid—a line. Medicine bought—a line. There was no line beside any of the three letters. "Then there is no next page," Renu said. "No," Tara replied. "The matter itself was never completed."

The strain of searching on Manjari's face slowly loosened, but another uneasiness settled in its place. "I wanted to know what she would have written after 'Now I understand that...'. " Renu tried to laugh, but no sound came. "So did I. I wanted only one word—'mistake'. That's all." Tara ran a finger over her letter. "I wanted to know whether Mother stopped me, or whether I stayed back myself." "Who will tell us now?" Manjari asked. None of the three answered.

Outside, thin sunlight was sliding across the veranda. From a neighbour's courtyard came the sound of spices being ground on a stone slab. The house, which for so long had held the sound of Mother's breathing, was filling once again with ordinary sounds.

Renu unfolded her letter and smoothed it. "Shall I say one thing?" Her two sisters looked at her. "That night I did not tell Mother everything. I only said—

let me stay here for two days. If I had told her the whole thing, I do not know whether her answer would have changed.” Manjari said quietly, “For the first two years after I went to the town, I kept writing letters. In the third year I wrote less. I remembered only Mother’s bitter words, not my own silence.” Tara did not fold her sheet. “I left work twice. Once because of Mother. The second time because I myself grew afraid. But both times I put the blame on her.” For the first time, what stood between the three sisters was not so much Mother’s absence as their own unfinished words.

Manjari spread the blue cloth again across the bottom of the box. “We will not try to complete the letters.” Renu asked, “Why?” “Because words Mother did not write cannot be written in her name by us.” Tara looked again at the three dates in the expense ledger. “But the empty squares?” Manjari closed the ledger. “Let them remain empty.”

Renu folded her letter and put it back inside. Manjari did the same. Before putting away the third letter, Tara paused for a few moments. Then she took three clean sheets lying in a corner of the box. She gave one to Manjari, one to Renu, and placed one before herself. “What are these for?” Renu asked. Tara said, “Not to complete Mother’s letters. So that we do not leave our own words unfinished.”

That day, none of the three sisters wrote a long letter. Manjari wrote, “I had gone to the town; I had not left home.” Renu wrote, “Now I will tell the whole of what happened that night.” Tara wrote, “Of the reason I stayed back, half was Mother, and half was myself.”

The three sheets were kept separate from Mother’s letters. As Tara closed the box, she picked up the lock. She turned it in her hand for a few moments, then hung it on a nail in the veranda.

Manjari asked, “Won’t you lock it?” Tara ran her hand over the lid and said, “Not now.” The room’s window was open. The blue cloth inside could not be seen, nor could the letters. But for the first time, the box was without a lock.

STORY 165

The School Courtyard

Early morning sunlight had not yet properly settled over the school courtyard when Ratneshwar Jha opened the office door and spread a letter bearing a red seal on the table. He had read its two lines the night before as well, but in the morning he read them again: if enrolment in the new session remained below twelve, a proposal would be sent to merge the school with the larger school three kos away.

Ratneshwar looked outside. Eight small pairs of slippers lay scattered beneath the neem tree. That was how many children came regularly. The door of the second classroom had been shut for a month. On the blackboard, last week's addition still remained: forty-seven and twenty-eight.

The bell rang. The children stood in line. Ratneshwar folded the letter and put it into a file. The prayer went on as usual that day, but now and then his voice grew faint.

After the children had left at midday, he was sweeping the courtyard when Subhadra Devi appeared at the gate. She was around seventy, with a white end of her sari over her head and a folded paper in her hand. She lived in the western hamlet of the village. She passed the school twice a day, but rarely came inside.

"Master Sahib," she said, "will you teach me one letter?"

Ratneshwar stopped sweeping.

"Which letter?"

Subhadra unfolded the paper. It was a receipt from a cooperative group. Her name was printed at the bottom, and beside it was the round mark of her thumb.

"This here is my name, but I cannot read it. When they want my thumbprint, people say, put it here, put it there. I want at least to be able to write my own name myself."

Ratneshwar was silent for a few moments. Then he opened the locked classroom. There was dust inside, two broken low stools, and an old board leaning against the wall.

"May I sit now?" Subhadra asked.

"Sit."

The first lesson that day was 'su'. Subhadra's hand trembled as soon as she held the chalk. The first stroke went crooked, the second was far too long. The third time she pressed the chalk too hard and it snapped.

"My hand knows the sickle in the field," she said with a laugh. "This chalk is still a stranger to it."

Ratneshwar laughed too. "The hand will learn."

She came again the next day. And again on the third. Within a week there was less dust in the locked classroom. Subhadra had begun to recognise the first two syllabic signs of her name. She wrote them with a twig in the soil of the courtyard, in ash beside the hearth at home, and sometimes, after cutting vegetables, with a wet finger on her slate.

One evening Nathuni Kaki came with her.

"Teach me numbers," Nathuni said. "I want to know the difference between two hundred and five hundred."

Two days later Rahima Khatoon came as well. She wanted the first letter of her own name. After the children's lessons ended, Ratneshwar began keeping a half-hour evening class. There was no announcement. Three extra mats were simply spread in the courtyard.

The children grew curious. One day Munna of Class Three looked at his grandmother Subhadra's slate and said, "This 'dra' is wrong."

Subhadra did not take the chalk from his hand. "You make it. I'll watch."

Munna slowly formed 'dra'. Subhadra wrote it five times after him. On the fifth, Munna said nothing. He merely nodded.

Meanwhile the letter with the red seal remained in the file. Ratneshwar kept looking at the enrolment register. Eight names. Only two likely new children for the next session. Twelve still seemed far away.

One evening Subhadra asked, "Why was the other classroom locked before?"

Ratneshwar wanted to evade the question, but then took the letter from the file and showed it to her. Subhadra could not read all of it. She only searched for the letters she had learnt.

"What does it mean?"

"There are too few children. If the number does not rise, this school will be merged with another one."

Subhadra looked towards the courtyard. Beneath the neem tree a sheet of paper Munna had left behind was fluttering in the breeze.

"Then where will I learn my 'dra'?" she asked.

Ratneshwar smiled, but gave no answer.

For the next three days Subhadra did not come to the evening lesson. Ratneshwar thought perhaps the pain in her knees had grown worse. On the fourth day she arrived with a folded sheet in her hand. It carried the names of eight households - one with a five-year-old child, another with a six-year-old. The names were not in her handwriting; Nathuni's grandson had written them for her.

"Do all these children go to schools outside the village now?" Ratneshwar asked.

"Some do. Some still go nowhere. I only asked whether they would send them if our own village school remained open. Not everyone said yes."

"Then what next?"

"I marked the ones who said yes."

There was a small circle beside four of the names.

Ratneshwar kept the sheet. "Saying yes is not enough for enrolment."

"I know. I only went as far as their doors."

By the second week the school courtyard presented a curious sight. Eight children by day, five elderly men and women in the evening. Subhadra could now write the whole of 'Subhadra', though the 'vi' in 'Devi' still went wrong again and again. Rahima could read her own name. Nathuni could write numbers up to twenty.

Word of this small evening gathering spread through the village. People came to look. Some laughed; some stood for two minutes and went away. A few mothers came with their children. The children ran about the courtyard while the mothers watched Subhadra's slate.

One day Parvati, whose son attended a private school in the market, sat down beside Subhadra.

"The monthly fees there have risen a lot," Parvati said, "but if this school closes, the child will be stranded in between."

Forming the 'vi' on her slate, Subhadra said, "If we do not send children because we are afraid the school will close, and the school becomes more likely to close because we do not send children, I do not understand that arithmetic."

Parvati said nothing. The following Monday she came with her son's enrolment form.

After that two more names were added. One girl used to come with her grandmother to watch the evening class; her mother said it was difficult to send the child far away. Another family had kept their child at home because of farm work; Ratneshwar went to their house and spoke with them.

The enrolment register reached twelve. Ratneshwar closed it and rested his hand on it for a long time. But the letter said 'below twelve'. Whether twelve itself was enough was not clear. He carefully wrote to the block office reporting the new situation.

Meanwhile Subhadra had an examination of her own. One evening Ratneshwar placed a blank sheet before her and said, "Now write your name without looking."

Subhadra wiped her palm on the end of her sari. Slowly she wrote: 'Subhadra Devi'. The 'bha' leaned a little and the 'vi' was small, but the whole name could be read.

She looked at the sheet for a long time. Then she asked, "Do I need to put my thumbprint on this too?"

"No. Your name is enough now."

"Then this is me?"

Ratneshwar said, "Yes. This is your name, written by you."

The next day Subhadra went to the cooperative group's office. As before, they pointed to the place for her thumbprint on the receipt. She said, "This time I'll write my name." The clerk looked at her for a moment, then handed her a pen. The letters came down slowly, but they came.

That week an inspector came from the block office. He examined the enrolment register, the children's attendance sheets, and both classrooms. He did not stay until the evening lesson, but he noticed the five extra slates lying in the courtyard.

"Whose are these?" he asked.

Ratneshwar said, "Older people from the village come to learn in the evenings."

The inspector opened the register again. New enrolment had now reached thirteen; that very morning another family had registered a child. The inspector wrote a few remarks in red ink, closed the register, and left.

Ten days later a small envelope arrived. It informed them that the proposal for merger had been put on hold for the time being. Ratneshwar pinned the paper beside the blackboard. The children did not understand the whole matter, but from the master's smile they knew something good had happened.

When Subhadra came that evening, Ratneshwar read the notice aloud to her. She listened quietly, then opened her slate.

"Shall I write 'Devi' again now?"

"You can write it already."

"I can, but I do not want the hand to forget."

She wrote her name on the slate. This time the 'vi' was even. Two leaves fell from the neem tree. The second classroom stood open. Inside, two new children were practising letters.

Ratneshwar looked once at the notice, then at Subhadra's slate. The red-sealed paper was on the wall; the two words written in chalk were before him.

The courtyard no longer belonged only to the children. But the school had been saved - before the numbers, by people beginning to return.

STORY 166

The Vermilion Box

The first rain of Ashadh had stopped. The bricks of the courtyard had turned deep red in patches, and a thin stream of water was still sliding past the tulsi altar. Kamala Devi sat on the veranda sorting old clothes: one pile for her granddaughter Revati to play with, one for wiping, and a separate pile for clothes still fit for use.

Revati was playing house in the courtyard with two clay dolls. She had stuck a hibiscus petal on one doll's forehead and tied a thread around the other one's neck.

"Grandmother, do you have a small box?"

Kamala Devi looked up from the fold of cloth. "What will you keep in it?"

"The dolls' jewellery. These petals keep falling off."

"Look in the wooden chest."

Revati went inside. A little while later she returned holding a round brass box. A raised lotus was worked into the lid, and the rim had blackened.

"This one?"

Kamala Devi kept looking at the box in her hand for a moment. The fold she was making in the cloth remained unfinished.

"Where did you find it?"

"Behind the chest. It was wrapped in a blue cloth."

The box had remained in that same cloth for years. Kamala Devi had never opened it. Yet instead of reaching out to take it, she said, "The lid may be stuck. Don't force it."

Revati held the box between both palms and turned it gently. The lid opened with a scrape. Inside, only a very thin ring of red powder remained. Revati's eyes lit up.

"Was there vermilion in this?"

Kamala Devi began folding the cloth again. "A long time ago."

"Yours?"

"Yes. It was mine."

That was all the answer Revati's game required. She ran back into the courtyard with the box. Kamala Devi did not stop her.

In the afternoon Malati returned from the market. She was Kamala Devi's daughter and Revati's mother. The wet road had muddied her sari up to the knees. The moment she stepped through the gate, her eyes fell on Revati's game. The brass box lay in front of the clay dolls.

Malati stopped in her tracks.

“Revati, who gave you this?”

“Grandmother.”

“Grandmother?”

Malati bent down and picked up the box. At the sight of the red residue inside the lid, her brows drew together slightly. She looked towards the veranda.

“Mother, you still had this?”

Kamala Devi said while untangling thread, “If it was kept, it was bound to be found.”

“For Revati to play with?”

“It is a box. In a game it will serve as a box.”

Malati said nothing. Holding the box in the corner of her sari, she walked inside. Revati followed close behind.

“Mother, my box.”

“It isn’t yours.”

“Grandmother gave it to me.”

“I’ll give you another box.”

Revati’s face fell. Kamala Devi watched everything from the veranda. Malati placed the box on the upper shelf in the kitchen, beyond Revati’s reach.

Until evening the work of the house went on as usual, but the little brass box seemed to lie not on the shelf but between three generations. Twice Revati dragged over a chair; both times Malati scolded her.

After the evening meal the rain began again. When the electricity went out, an oil lamp was lit on the veranda. Revati gathered up her dolls and sat beside Kamala Devi.

“Grandmother, why won’t she let me play with that box?”

Kamala Devi looked at Malati. Malati was wiping the kitchen utensils. Her hands did not stop, but she was listening.

“Your mother thinks an old thing might get spoilt in play.”

Revati said at once, “I won’t spoil it.”

Malati put down the utensil. “It isn’t about spoiling it.”

Kamala Devi asked, “Then how did that box become mine?”

“You know.”

“I know, but Revati does not.”

Malati’s voice was low. “What meaning is there in keeping a vermilion box after becoming a widow?”

The lamp flame flickered once. Raindrops kept making a rhythm along the edge of the veranda. Revati did not understand the word ‘widow’, but seeing her mother’s face, she fell silent.

Kamala Devi said very simply, “I did not keep that box for your father.”

The cloth in Malati’s hand became still.

“Then why did you?”

Kamala Devi stroked Revati's head. "For you."

Malati made as though she might laugh, but no laughter came. "A vermilion box for me?"

"Yes, for you."

Kamala Devi rose and went inside. She brought the box down from the shelf. This time she did not put it in Revati's hand but rested it on her own palm. She opened the lid. Red residue still clung to the rim.

"You don't remember?"

Malati shook her head.

"You were five years old. When your father died, the house filled with so many people that even reaching your own cot was difficult for you. One person removed my bangles, another changed my red sari, someone washed my head. Everyone said—it is the custom."

Malati sat down slowly.

Kamala Devi continued, "All day you went from one person's lap to another. At night there were fewer people. You woke, looked at me, and cried so loudly that everyone came running again."

Revati asked eagerly, "Mother used to cry?"

Without looking into her eyes, Malati said, "I was little."

Kamala Devi smiled. "Very little. You kept saying—this is not my mother."

A faint shadow of astonishment crossed Malati's face.

"I said that?"

"Not once. Again and again. You would take my hand, then look at my forehead and let go. To you, a mother had a red dot on her forehead and glass bangles ringing on her wrists. That day I had neither."

The rain outside grew heavier. The lamp flame trembled again.

Kamala Devi said, "It was very late by the time everyone grew tired. You lay in my room crying and crying. I gave you water, told you stories, held you in my lap—nothing worked. In the end you said only one thing: 'Call my mother.'"

Malati's eyes rested on Kamala Devi's head, whose hair parting had been bare for years.

"Then what happened?"

Kamala Devi touched the rim of the box with a finger. "Then I looked for this box."

Malati suddenly sat upright. "That day?"

"That night."

"Mother!"

It was hard to tell whether there was more astonishment or fear in her voice.

Kamala Devi remained calm. "I put a small red dot on my forehead. Not in the parting of my hair. Just that much. When you saw me, you stopped crying. First you touched it with your finger, then you clasped me around the neck. Within moments you were asleep."

Revati listened without breathing. Malati's eyes remained fixed on the box.

"Did anyone see?"

"No one."

"And you... after that?"

"Once you were asleep, I washed it off. By morning the house was full of people again. No one knew."

Kamala Devi paused a little. "The second night you woke again. The same thing. The third night too. On the fourth night you did not look at my forehead. You came straight into my lap and fell asleep. Then I wrapped the box in the blue cloth and put it away."

Malati said nothing for a long time. Her finger kept drawing a small circle on the cloth over her knee.

"I remember little bits of it as if from a dream," she said at last. "A red dot... and holding you around the neck. I used to think it must have happened on some other night."

Kamala Devi said, "Memory too sometimes waits for the right age before telling its story."

Malati picked up the box. She ran her thumb over the carving on the lid. "Why did you never tell me?"

"What would I have said? That on the very first night of the custom, I had broken the custom?"

"You could have told me."

"When you were a child, there was no need to tell you. When you grew up, you had the troubles of your own life. Then the matter became old."

There was a trace of guilt in Malati's voice. "It became old, so the box stayed hidden?"

Kamala Devi shook her head. "Not hidden. Kept. There is a difference."

Revati interrupted, "Grandmother, was it a sin to put on the red dot?"

Malati immediately tried to stop her with, "Revati," but Kamala Devi raised a hand.

"Who will decide what is a sin?"

"Mother put the box up there."

Embarrassment and laughter came to Malati's face at the same time.

Kamala Devi said, "Some customs are made to hold people's grief together, some to give grief a form. But a small child's fear does not understand custom."

Malati said softly, "And a mother's fear?"

Kamala Devi looked at her. "Nor does a mother's fear."

The silence that came between them this time was not as hard as before. The rain eased a little. Somewhere in the distance a frog began to call.

Revati asked for the box again. "Can I play with it now?"

Malati, still holding the box, looked at Kamala Devi.

"Do you want to give it to her?"

“I already did.”

Malati looked once at the red residue inside the lid. Then she tried to wipe it very gently with the tip of her finger, but Kamala Devi stopped her.

“Let that residue remain.”

“It is only residue.”

“Whatever remains, let it remain.”

Malati stopped her hand. Giving the box to Revati, she said, “Don’t bury it in the mud. When your game is over, give it back to me.”

Revati brightened. “All right.”

She placed the box beside the dolls’ house. There was no vermilion inside, so she plucked two thin hibiscus petals and put them in it. One petal was deep red, the other slightly faded by the rainwater.

Malati kept watching from a distance.

After a while she moved closer and sat beside Kamala Devi. “Mother.”

“Yes?”

“That fourth night... when I fell asleep in your lap without the red dot, how did you feel then?”

Kamala Devi looked out at the dark courtyard after the rain.

“I felt that you had recognised me again.”

Malati’s eyes grew moist, but she did not wipe them. She simply took her mother’s hand in her own.

In the courtyard Revati was not arranging a wedding for the dolls. She seated both dolls on the veranda of the same house and divided the hibiscus petals between them. When the game ended, she returned the box to Malati.

This time Malati did not put it on the shelf. Nor did she look for the blue cloth. She placed the box beside Kamala Devi’s sewing case, in the open.

The lid was closed, but the box was no longer hidden.

STORY 167

The Swing on the Tree

When Kusum got off the bus on that Sawan afternoon, the first thing she did was look up at the sky. Clouds had gathered, but the rain had stopped. Sinking into the muddy road with every step, she held her daughter Mansi by the hand and reached the gate of her mother's home. In her other hand was a cloth bag, and from its top peeped a loop of new, thick cotton rope.

All along the way, Mansi had kept asking about that rope.

'Ma, did you really swing on a tree?'

'Not on the tree—on a swing.'

'But the swing was on the tree, wasn't it?'

'Yes, on that very mango tree.'

'Then the tree is an acquaintance of mine too.'

Kusum laughed. 'See it first.'

The moment the gate opened, Mansi ran into the courtyard. Kusum stopped with one foot inside. The courtyard looked larger than before. Where shade used to lie even at noon between the bricks, a broad patch of white sunlight now fell. The eastern wall stood fully exposed. On that side of the wall, where a thick branch had once bent low and covered half the courtyard, there was only empty sky.

Kusum set the bag down.

'The tree?'

Mansi turned and asked, 'Which tree?'

Kusum did not answer. Her eyes searched the ground for old marks. In the middle was a rounded mound, levelled with earth and bricks. The newer bricks around it were a different colour.

Sharda Devi was rising from the veranda. 'Oh, you've come! Why did you walk through all this mud? You could have sent word to Madhukar.'

Kusum bowed to her, but her eyes did not leave the courtyard.

'Ma, where has the mango tree gone?'

Sharda Devi was silent for a moment. 'It was cut down.'

'Cut down?'

'Yes. It had to be cut.'

That brief answer tightened something inside Kusum. She looked at Mansi. The child was still cheerful; she had not yet understood that the thing her mother had promised to show her all along the road no longer existed in this courtyard.

‘When?’ Kusum asked.

‘Last Bhadon.’

‘You didn’t tell me?’

Sharda Devi picked up the bag. ‘Come inside first. Change your clothes. Then I’ll tell you everything.’

Kusum took the bag back from her hand. ‘No. Tell me this first—why was the tree cut?’

Just then Madhukar came out of the back room. He had a small metalworker’s hammer in his hand. Hearing his sister’s voice, he stopped.

‘I had it cut,’ he said.

Kusum turned to him. ‘What was the hurry?’

‘There was no hurry. I had been watching it for two years.’

‘You could have told me once.’

Madhukar set the hammer beside the wall. ‘And what would telling you have done?’

‘At least I would have known.’

‘Would you have known—or stopped us?’

Kusum had no immediate answer. Her hand moved unconsciously to the rope lying on top of the bag.

Mansi stepped between them and asked, ‘Mama, where was the swing?’

Madhukar stroked the child’s head. ‘Your mother used to fly from here all the way to there.’

He pointed towards the eastern wall. Mansi looked up in wonder, as though some rope might still be visible in the empty sky.

Sharda Devi said, ‘Eat first. Hold your court over the tree later.’

Kusum said little during the meal. Mansi kept asking her grandmother about mango pickle, fish from the pond, and the village children. Twice Madhukar tried to bring up the tree, but Kusum kept her eyes on her plate.

By afternoon the clouds had gathered again. When the wind rose, the tulsi leaves in front of the veranda began to tremble. Mansi pulled the new rope out of the bag.

‘Ma, where will we tie this now?’

Kusum looked at the rope. She herself had bought it at the town market the previous week. Remembering the old swing of her childhood, she had imagined seating Mansi on that same branch at least once this Sawan. She had even brought two small wooden fittings from home for fastening the seat-board to the rope.

‘Put it away for now,’ she said.

Mansi’s face fell. ‘You said I would swing at Nani’s house.’

‘I did.’

‘Then where is the swing now?’

Kusum had no answer.

Sharda Devi sat beside a pillar of the veranda. Her eyes fell on the rope. 'You even brought rope with you?'

'Yes, for Mansi.'

'The old habit.'

'The old habit would have been useful if the old tree were still here.'

Madhukar heard the remark as he returned from outside. This time he said nothing. He went straight to the rounded mound in the middle of the courtyard and nudged the edge of a new brick with his foot.

'The roots are still here underneath,' he said. 'Only the part above ground was removed. If we dug out the whole root system, the wall's foundation would have been disturbed.'

Kusum rose and went there. 'Was the tree diseased?'

'It had become hollow inside. In the first storm last Sawan, the southern branch came down. It tore the cowshed roof. Luckily no one was underneath.'

'One branch fell, so you cut down the whole tree?'

Madhukar answered a little sharply, 'It wasn't just one branch. When the trunk was opened, there were termites and rot inside. The carpenter said no one could tell which way it would fall in the next big storm.'

Kusum fixed her eyes on the ground.

Sharda Devi said quietly, 'At first Madhukar would not agree to cutting it. I told him to.'

Kusum looked at her suddenly. 'You?'

'Yes. I did.'

'You wouldn't even let a leaf of that tree be broken.'

'That was when it was a living tree.'

Kusum wanted to say something, but Sharda Devi placed a hand on her right knee. 'When you came last time, you saw that I had slipped, didn't you?'

Kusum remembered. Two years earlier her mother's knee had swollen. She had assumed she had slipped on wet bricks.

'The roots had lifted the bricks,' Sharda Devi said. 'I had already stumbled twice. Even then I had no heart to cut it. Then the branch fell on the cowshed. That night the wind kept blowing, and I lay in my room listening to the tree creak. For the first time I felt that when a memory begins to fall on your head, it is no longer merely a memory.'

Kusum fell silent after hearing her.

Mansi sat down on the rounded mound and scratched at the soil with a finger. 'Nani, did your daughter swing here?'

'From morning till evening.'

'Didn't she fall?'

Sharda Devi laughed. 'She did. Once her nose even bled.'

Mansi looked at Kusum excitedly. 'You never told me!'

Kusum laughed too, though the tightness inside her laughter had not quite gone.

It rained in the evening. The new bricks in the courtyard began to shine. When the rain stopped, Kusum came out from the veranda. No water had collected around the rounded mound. Madhukar had changed the slope of the drain. Along the eastern wall a new narrow path had been made, so that Sharda Devi could reach the tulsi platform without having to step over uneven ground.

Kusum had not noticed that path before.

‘Was this made after the tree was cut too?’ she asked.

Madhukar nodded. ‘The roots had pushed the ground up. I levelled it for Ma’s knee.’

Kusum walked slowly along the narrow path. In childhood, a thick root of the tree had lain there; she would step on it to catch the swing-board. Now there was no root, only level brickwork.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ she asked again, this time more softly.

After a pause, Madhukar said, ‘Because I knew it would hurt you. And also because I knew you’d say, “Wait, I’m coming.” But the tree was in no condition to wait.’

‘I would have come.’

‘I know you would have.’

‘Then why didn’t you tell me?’

Madhukar looked towards the eastern wall. ‘I was a little afraid that you would come and stand in front of the tree, and then I wouldn’t be able to have it cut. And if something happened in the next storm?’

For the first time Kusum looked fully at her brother. There were a few white hairs at his temples. In childhood, when he pushed the swing, Madhukar would run behind holding the ropes. Once, instead of giving him a push, Kusum had made him sit on the board, and both of them had fallen. After that, their mother had taken the swing down for three days.

Now it was not their mother who had taken down the swing. It was time.

That night Mansi slept beside her grandmother. Kusum went to her old room. In one corner of the wall there was still a scratch from her schooldays. The window looked smaller. She understood that a mother’s home remains the size of one’s childhood only in memory; in its daily form people grow old, walls are repaired, and trees too are cut down. The understanding brought no happiness, but the bitterness eased a little.

At dawn Mansi woke her. ‘Ma, get up. Nani says we’re going to the market.’

‘So early?’

‘To buy a tree.’

Kusum sat up. ‘What tree?’

Before answering, Mansi ran outside.

Sharda Devi was ready on the veranda. Madhukar had his bicycle with him.

‘Not the market,’ Madhukar said. ‘The nursery is on the road by the river.’

Kusum looked at her mother. ‘Had you already thought of this?’

‘I’ve been thinking about it ever since the tree was cut. We simply hadn’t decided what tree to plant.’

Mansi immediately said, ‘One for a swing.’

Sharda Devi laughed. ‘Will we find a tree with that name?’

At the nursery, mango, guava, neem, kadamba and jamun saplings stood in rows. Mansi asked the same question about every one: ‘Can a swing be tied to this?’ At last the old man selling the plants laughed and said, ‘It can, but you will have to be patient.’

Kusum stopped in front of a jamun sapling. Its leaves were deep green, and its trunk was only a little thicker than a finger.

‘Why not a mango?’ Madhukar asked.

Kusum remembered the old mango tree in the courtyard, then shook her head. ‘Why make another one just like that tree? Let this be a new tree.’

Mansi held two of the sapling’s leaves together. ‘This one.’

On the way back, the sapling was tied behind Madhukar’s bicycle. Mansi kept turning around to make sure its leaves were not being torn by the wind along the road.

When they reached the courtyard, everyone first stood by the rounded mound where the old tree had been. Mansi said, ‘Plant it here.’

Madhukar pressed the earth with his foot. ‘The old roots are underneath. We’ll have to plant it a little away from here.’

Kusum went towards the south-eastern corner. The evening sun fell there, but it was away from the drain. She marked a place with her foot.

‘In this corner.’

Sharda Devi asked, ‘Why?’

Kusum looked around as though measuring the courtyard’s directions. ‘When I sat on the old swing, the evening sun came from this side into my eyes. The shade of this tree will grow the other way. The house need not become the same house again.’

Madhukar brought a spade. He cut the first earth. Kusum took the spade from his hand. ‘Now me.’

The soil was wet, so digging deep was not difficult. Mansi kept removing small clods by hand. Sharda Devi sat on the veranda watching. When the pit was ready, Kusum carefully loosened the ball of soil around the sapling. The roots were fine, white fibres clinging to the wet earth.

‘Keep it straight,’ Madhukar said.

‘It is straight.’

‘A little towards me.’

‘You want everything turned towards you.’

This time they both burst out laughing together.

Mansi came running with the new rope. 'What do I do with this?'

Kusum gave her one end and held the other herself. Together they made a circle a little away from the sapling to mark the boundary within which the soil was to be pressed. Madhukar poured water in the middle. The rope became smeared with mud.

Mansi was upset. 'But this was for the swing.'

Kusum said, 'It will remain for the swing. For now, it is for measuring around the tree.'

'After how many years can we tie it?'

No one answered at once.

From the veranda Sharda Devi said, 'The day the tree can properly bear its own weight, it will be ready to bear someone else's.'

Mansi looked at the sapling's trunk. 'By then I'll be grown up.'

Kusum stroked her head. 'Perhaps.'

'Then will my child swing on it?'

Madhukar laughed. 'Your schooling hasn't even begun, and your child's swing is already decided.'

Mansi remained serious. 'I'll keep the rope safe.'

Kusum shook the mud from the rope and spread it out on the veranda.

By afternoon, two or three drops of rain shone on the new sapling's leaves. The rounded mound of the old tree was still in the middle of the courtyard; no one had covered it. The new sapling stood a little away from it—so small that its shadow was contained within its own leaves.

When it was time to leave, Kusum stopped at the gate and looked back. Mansi first looked at the old rounded mound, then began counting the leaves on the new sapling.

One, two, three, four, five.

The sixth leaf was half curled. Mansi did not straighten it with her finger. She only bent closer to make sure it was moving in the breeze on its own.

Kusum did not put the rope back in the bag. She hung it on a peg in the veranda.

'Let it stay till next time,' she said.

Sharda Devi said nothing. She looked once at the peg, then at the sapling.

There was no swing in the courtyard yet. But the rope stayed in the house.

STORY 168

The Clay Flute

The morning sunlight had not yet reached the rear wall of the potters' quarter. Ramlochan was turning the wheel, while his twelve-year-old son Nilu was drying small clay tubes beside it.

Pitchers, surahis, lamps and cooking pots came from Ramlochan's hands. From Nilu's hands came, at times, a horse, at times a bird, and at times some object for which he himself thought of a name only afterwards.

That morning the fourth tube cracked as well.

Nilu held it near his ear and blew into it. Only air came out.

'Again?' Ramlochan asked without stopping the wheel.

'The mouth became a little too wide.'

'I have told you three times that clay shrinks in the fire.'

'It shrinks, but not every tube in the same way.'

Ramlochan laughed. 'Then ask the clay first before you make it.'

Nilu did not answer. He picked up the fifth tube. One end was flattened, and there were six small holes along the middle. Around the holes he had pressed marks with grains of rice so that his fingers would not slip on the unfired clay.

He blew into it. The first note came out thin, the second a little heavier; on the third, the air broke. Nilu changed his fingering. This time three notes sounded in succession. The fourth went crooked again.

Ramlochan stopped the wheel and listened.

'It sounds like a flute.'

'Not bamboo. Clay.'

'Then will its name change too?'

'Why should the name change? It is the air that gives the note.'

Ramlochan covered his mouth as he laughed. 'All right, then. The wind is your guru.'

Nilu ran a finger over the flute's holes. He did not like the word guru. The wind told him nothing; only, if a hole shifted a little this way or that, the note changed. He listened and guessed.

By noon five flutes had been set aside. Two were cracked, two were out of tune, and one, by Nilu's reckoning, was usable.

The next day Ramlochan arranged his wares for the weekly market. Nilu placed the usable flute on top of the basket.

'Will you sell it?' his father asked.

'If someone can play it.'

‘What price will you ask?’

Nilu thought. ‘I don’t know the price.’

Ramlochan said, ‘If you don’t know the price, the market will know.’

At the market the flute first caught the children’s eyes. One blew into it and laughed; another held it backwards. A boy offered five paise, but Nilu would not give it to him.

‘Are five paise too little?’ the boy asked.

‘No. You didn’t cover the third hole properly.’

‘Am I buying it or sitting an examination?’

Nilu put the flute back on the basket.

By evening the pots had dwindled, but the flute was still there. As the market was breaking up, Ratinath, a dealer in earthenware who travelled towards town, bought Ramlochan’s remaining lamps and surahis together. While the basket was being tied, the flute fell to the ground.

Ratinath picked it up and blew. A thin note came out.

‘Will you give me this as well?’

Ramlochan looked at Nilu.

Nilu said, ‘Take it. But give it into the hands of someone who can play.’

Ratinath laughed. ‘In town I put every object into someone’s hands.’

‘No. Give this to someone who listens to notes.’

‘Does anyone listen to notes with his eyes?’

Nilu remained serious. Ratinath put the flute into his bag.

Three days later, a middle-aged man stopped before Ratinath’s shop in Darbhanga’s old market. His name was Devvrat Jha. At the town music school he taught boys and girls the flute and vocal exercises. While buying two clay flowerpots for his wife, his eye fell on the clay tube peeping from the side of the bag.

‘What is this?’

Ratinath said, ‘A flute. But don’t think of it as something for sale.’

Devvrat laughed. ‘Something that comes to a shop is not for sale?’

‘The boy who made it said it must be given to someone who listens to notes.’

Devvrat took the flute. He examined the holes, put it to his lips and blew gently. The first note came out clear. The second was a little low. The third climbed unexpectedly high. He stopped, then played again. This time he changed the pressure of his fingers and reduced the air. The third note rose to the same place again.

‘The hole is wrong,’ he said.

Ratinath shrugged. ‘A boy made it.’

Devvrat turned the flute over and over. The holes were not in a straight line. Two had shifted slightly to the right, and one was small. The impressions of the rice grains could still be seen around their edges.

‘How much is it?’

‘The boy gave no price.’

Devvrat gave him five rupees. Ratinath tried to return two, but he stopped his hand.

‘Can I meet the maker?’

‘Ramlochan the potter comes to the next market.’

Devvrat took the flute home. After dinner that night he played it again. His daughter Shruti came from the next room and asked, ‘A new flute?’

‘Not new. Strange.’

‘Why do you say that?’

Devvrat played the third note. ‘If this hole were here instead, the note would sit properly.’

Shruti asked, ‘Then enlarge the hole.’

Devvrat thought of heating a needle and enlarging the hole, but stopped when he looked at the clay. Fired clay was not easy to cut. Then another thing began to trouble him: the other holes too were not at classical intervals, yet two of the notes were unexpectedly sweet.

That night he did not alter the flute.

On the next market day Devvrat reached Ratinath’s shop early. When Ramlochan arrived, Nilu was with him.

Ratinath called from a distance, ‘This is the boy you were looking for.’

Devvrat looked at Nilu. He had expected to meet some young craftsman. Before him stood a thin-armed boy with clay under his fingernails.

‘Did you make this?’ Devvrat showed him the flute.

Nilu recognised it at once. ‘Yes. The third note runs high, doesn’t it?’

Devvrat was silent for a moment. ‘You know?’

‘I understood after it came out of the fire.’

‘Then why did you send it to be sold?’

‘If I had thrown it away because it was out of tune, why would I have made it?’

Devvrat placed the flute in Nilu’s hands. ‘Play.’

Nilu played the first two notes. On the third he half-opened the hole and blew slightly sideways. The note that climbed high in Devvrat’s hands became, in Nilu’s, a soft note in between.

Devvrat watched closely.

‘Again.’

Nilu played it again.

‘How did you learn that?’

‘The hole came out wrong, so I changed the air.’

For the first time Devvrat smiled. ‘You changed the air?’

‘Fingers can’t do everything.’

The market went on around them, but Devvrat sat for half an hour on Ramlochan's mat. He asked Nilu how many flutes he had made, what clay he used, how long he kept them in the fire. Nilu could not answer every question. Ramlochan supplied some of the answers.

At last Devvrat said, 'Can you come to town? I'll show you the intervals between notes.'

Nilu looked at his father.

Ramlochan asked, 'When?'

'On Sunday.'

Ramlochan shook his head. 'Sunday is when we open the kiln.'

Devvrat understood that this was not an answer of yes. He wrote his address on a piece of paper and gave it to Nilu. Nilu folded it and put it in his bag.

For two weeks Nilu did not go to town. In the third week Devvrat came to the potters' quarter himself.

That day Ramlochan was opening the kiln. The smell of hot ash hung in the air. Nilu was taking out the clay tubes one by one and laying them on straw. Some mouths had warped; some tubes had fine cracks.

Devvrat reached out to pick one up. Nilu stopped him at once.

'It is still hot.'

Devvrat drew his hand back.

'The lesson here today?' he asked with a laugh.

Nilu said, 'First let all these cool.'

Devvrat sat on the veranda until noon. Ramlochan showed him the wheel. Nilu made two unfired tubes. Devvrat took out his bamboo flute and measured the distance between its holes, then used a thread to mark the proportions on the clay tubes.

Nilu watched closely.

'If I make it like this, will the notes sit properly?'

'Very nearly.'

'After it shrinks in the fire?'

Devvrat stopped.

Nilu asked again, 'Is this distance for raw clay or for fired clay?'

Devvrat remained holding the thread. His measurements were for bamboo; he did not know how to calculate the clay's shrinkage.

Ramlochan, raising a new pot on the wheel, said, 'He has been troubling me with this question for three months.'

Devvrat laughed. 'Then let him trouble me too.'

That day the lesson was less about notes and more about measurements. Nilu marked five different spacings on five tubes. Ramlochan gave them clay from the same batch. Devvrat said they would measure them all again after firing.

Devvrat returned the following week. One of the five tubes had cracked. The other four had not shrunk equally. Nilu checked the measurements with the thread.

‘The clay was thicker on this side, so the hole shifted slightly inward.’

Devvrat played them one by one. Two flutes produced almost the same sequence of notes. The third took its own path again.

‘Useless?’ Devvrat asked.

Nilu took the flute. ‘No. Another tune will come from this one.’

Devvrat said, ‘Will you make a new rule for every wrong thing?’

For the first time Nilu returned his question. ‘Is every note that does not fit the rules necessarily wrong?’

Ramlochan burst out laughing from behind the wheel.

Devvrat laughed too, but did not answer at once.

After that, the arrangement of Sundays changed. Twice a month Devvrat came to the potters’ quarter. On the other two Sundays Nilu went to town after the kiln had been opened at noon. In the small room of the music school, for the first time he learnt the names of notes, understood ascent and descent, and practised keeping the breath flowing steadily instead of holding it.

But things on Devvrat’s table also began to change. Beside the bamboo flute there were now four clay tubes, thread, a small wooden ruler and a lump of raw clay given by Ramlochan.

One day the head of the school saw the clay in Devvrat’s room and asked, ‘Pottery along with music now?’

Devvrat said, ‘I am learning how much a note shrinks in the fire.’

Whether the head understood him or not, he asked no further questions.

Six months later Nilu made a new flute. It was not as beautiful as the old flute. Finger impressions showed on its surface, and its colour was uneven. But all seven notes sounded clearly in sequence.

He took the flute to town to give it to Devvrat.

Devvrat played it. First note, second, third—each in its place. At the last note he stopped.

‘This one is complete.’

Nilu said, ‘No.’

‘What is left?’

Nilu took the first old flute from his bag, the same one that had reached Devvrat through Ratinath.

‘In this one the third note runs high,’ Nilu said.

‘I know.’

‘But the breath I learnt for that note is not needed on the new flute. The new flute is easy.’

Devvrat placed the two flutes before him. One was close to the rules; the other held the memory of practice born from an error.

‘Which one will you keep?’ he asked.

Nilu said, ‘Both. From one I’ll learn the rules. From the other, the ear.’

Devvrat nodded slowly. Then he held out his old bamboo flute to Nilu.

‘Take this.’

Nilu did not take it. ‘It is yours.’

‘Consider it gurudakshina.’

Nilu asked in surprise, ‘Does the guru give the gurudakshina?’

Devvrat laughed. ‘Let someone change the rule today.’

Nilu took the flute, but did not put it straight into his bag. He placed the new clay flute in Devvrat’s hands and said, ‘Then you keep this. But on one condition.’

‘What is it?’

‘Next time we make the holes, you will not measure the thread.’

‘Then how?’

‘First the clay will measure. After it is fired, you will measure the notes.’

Devvrat turned the flute in his hand. ‘All right.’

That evening, after the music school closed, Devvrat placed the new clay flute beside the window. Next to it lay Nilu’s first flute with the crooked note. They were almost the same size, but the spacing of their holes was different.

The following Sunday Devvrat went again to the potters’ quarter. Nilu was not by the wheel; he was sifting clay behind the kiln. Devvrat sat down there quietly.

Nilu stopped the sieve and asked, ‘A lesson in notes today?’

Devvrat picked up a lump of raw clay.

‘Today, the clay lesson first.’

Nilu tested the lump’s moisture with a finger, then poured a little water into Devvrat’s palm.

‘This won’t become a flute yet,’ he said. ‘First let the clay rest a little.’

Devvrat put the lump back on the ground.

The two of them waited for it to rest.

STORY 169

A Name

When school let out that afternoon in Bhadra, rain clouds hung in the sky, though no rain had yet fallen. Anshu reached home with his schoolbag slung over his shoulder and opened his book as soon as he sat down on the veranda.

His mother, Shailaja, called from the kitchen, 'Studying so early today?'

Anshu did not answer. On one page of the book the teacher had written: 'Ask the people at home and bring the story of your name.'

That day in class all the children had told the stories of their names. One had been named by a grandmother, another after the month of birth, another in connection with the family deity. Anshu had laughed then and said, 'My mother named me.'

His teacher, Vibha Jha, had asked only, 'And before that?'

Anshu had given no answer.

He knew the story of his home. By the time he was six, Ma and Babuji had told him that he had not been born in their home; he had been adopted. It had never been kept as a secret. In the family it was as ordinary a fact as Babuji's liking for sweet paan and Ma's liking for gram-flour curry.

But he had heard the question 'And before that?' for the first time.

In the evening, when Babuji—Raghav—returned from the office, Anshu placed the book in front of him.

'Why did you name me Anshu?'

Raghav said as he took off his shoes, 'Your mother had been thinking of that name for five years beforehand.'

Shailaja called from the kitchen, 'Not five. Three years.'

'I thought it was five.'

'You add two years to everything.'

Anshu did not laugh. He asked again, 'When I came to your home, what was my name then?'

Raghav's hands stopped as he sat on the veranda taking off his shoes. The sound of the ladle from the kitchen stopped too.

Anshu looked from one to the other.

'I did have a name, didn't I?'

Shailaja came out slowly. Her hands were smeared with spices. She went to the water pot to wash them, then sat down in front of Anshu.

'You did.'

'What was it?'

‘Kush.’

Anshu repeated the name twice in his mind. Kush. Short, sharp as a single syllable.

‘Who had named me?’

Shailaja said, ‘A sister at the children’s home told us that your birth mother had given that name. I know only what I was told.’

Anshu remained silent for a while.

‘Then why was it changed?’

Raghav had now sat down on the veranda. ‘We had already thought of the name Anshu.’

‘Before you saw me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then was the name mine or yours?’

The question was straightforward. An expression crossed Shailaja’s face as though she were searching for an answer, although only now, for the first time, did she seem to grasp the meaning of the question.

‘We had thought of it for you,’ she said.

‘But Kush had also been chosen for me, hadn’t it?’

Raghav started to say something in between, then stopped.

Anshu closed the book. ‘I’m only asking.’

He got up and went into the courtyard.

Shailaja kept looking after him.

Dinner that night was ordinary, but Shailaja kept glancing at Anshu’s plate. Once she asked, ‘Did anyone say anything at school?’

‘No. No one.’

‘Did anyone laugh because you were adopted?’

‘No. Nothing like that.’

‘Then why so much about the name?’

Anshu was mixing dal into his rice. ‘Because I didn’t know.’

‘Now you know.’

‘Yes. I know that much.’

‘Only that much?’

Anshu lifted his head and looked at his mother. ‘Do you think that if I’m called Kush, I won’t remain Anshu?’

Shailaja said at once, ‘I didn’t say that.’

‘But that is the question you’re answering.’

Raghav’s hand stopped over his plate. Grandmother Saroj, who had been eating quietly until then, drank some water and put down her glass.

‘A child does not change homes merely by hearing a name,’ she said, and nothing more.

Shailaja looked at Grandmother, but did not reply.

The next day, after Anshu had gone to school, Shailaja began remembering the old days. Thirteen years earlier, when she had gone to the children's home, the little boy had come into her lap and first clutched at her sari. He had not cried; he had only looked all around him.

One of the sisters had called him 'Kushu'. The child had turned his head at once.

Shailaja had paid no attention to it then. So many things had been running through her mind at once—how the child ate, how he slept at night, what sounds frightened him, which toy he kept in his hand. At the time, the name had seemed the simplest thing of all.

On his first night after being brought home, the child had not slept for a long time. Raghav had carried him in his arms and paced the veranda. Shailaja, exhausted, had been sitting on the cot. At one point she had said without thinking, 'Kushu, sleep now.'

The child had looked towards her voice and slowly grown quiet.

That night Shailaja had said 'Kushu' three times.

A few weeks later, 'Anshu' was heard more and more, while 'Kushu' was heard less and less. No one had given an order. The people of the house simply kept calling the new name, and the old one slowly fell silent.

For the first time Shailaja wondered—which had fallen silent, the name or she herself?

When Anshu returned that evening, he had no book in his hand, only a small sheet of paper.

'Did everyone tell the story of their name today?' Raghav asked.

'Some did.'

'And you?'

'I'll tell mine tomorrow.'

Shailaja looked at the paper. 'What have you written on that?'

Anshu put the paper on the table. There were two lines. On the first: 'Kush.' On the second: 'Anshu.'

A slight tightness came into Shailaja's chest.

'What were you doing?'

'Writing both names to see them.'

'Why?'

'To see how the letters look.'

'Do you like Kush?'

Anshu thought for a moment. 'It feels different.'

'And Anshu?'

'That one is familiar.'

Shailaja said nothing.

Anshu folded the paper and put it in his pocket. Then, in an easy voice, he asked, 'Ma, did you call me Kush at first?'

Shailaja started. 'Who told you?'

'Babuji.'

Raghav called from inside, 'I only told him about the first night.'

Anshu came and sat close to his mother. 'Do you remember?'

'I do.'

'Did I hear you then?'

'Yes. You turned your head and looked at me.'

'And when you called me Anshu?'

Shailaja smiled. 'Not at first. It took you a little time to learn that name.'

Anshu smiled too. 'So I had to learn two names.'

'Yes. You must have heard both.'

'You forgot one of them.'

The sentence was spoken like a joke, but Shailaja could not laugh.

The next day at school, Vibha Jha asked Anshu to stand and tell the story of his name. Anshu looked around the class. Some children had already given their answers.

He said, 'My name is Anshu. This name was given to me by my mother and father.'

Vibha Jha waited.

Anshu added, 'At the time of my birth, I was called Kush.'

A child at the back asked, 'Which name do you like?'

A little laughter rose in the classroom. Vibha Jha was about to quiet them, but Anshu answered for himself.

'It isn't a question of which one I like. Both say something about me.'

'So will they call you Kush at home?' another child asked.

Anshu thought for a moment. 'I'll leave that to the people at home. Hearing a name doesn't make me change homes.'

Vibha Jha looked at his book. 'Have you written the story of your name?'

'Only half of it so far.'

'Why have you left it half written?'

'The rest is still happening at home.'

The class laughed again, and this time Anshu laughed too.

That evening Shailaja was gathering clothes in the courtyard. Grandmother was placing a lamp beside the tulsi altar. Anshu sat on the veranda working out mathematics problems. Raghav had gone to the market.

As Shailaja carried a pile of clothes inside, the pages of Anshu's book fluttered in the wind. She reached out and held one page down. At the top was written: 'The Story of My Name.'

She did not read it. She only placed a small brass bowl on the page so the wind would not lift it again.

Anshu came out from inside and asked, 'Did you read it?'

'No. You haven't told me to yet.'

‘Then why not?’

‘I’ll read what you have written when you give it to me.’

Anshu looked at her for a few moments.

‘Ma.’

‘Yes?’

‘Knowing the name Kush didn’t make the name you gave me any smaller.’

Shailaja kept folding the clothes. ‘I know.’

Anshu smiled. ‘You didn’t know that yesterday.’

Shailaja smiled a little too. ‘Yesterday there were some things I didn’t know either.’

That night Raghav brought curd from the market. At dinner, Grandmother went around placing a bowl beside each plate. Shailaja spooned out curd in the kitchen, filled one bowl and said without thinking—

‘Put less sugar in Kush’s bowl. He likes his curd sour.’

Her hand stopped.

Grandmother looked at her. So did Raghav.

Anshu raised his head from his plate.

Shailaja corrected nothing. She placed the bowl in front of him.

Anshu stirred the curd with his spoon, looked once at his mother’s face and said—

‘Yes, that much sugar is just right.’

After that, the meal went on again.

That night, for the first time in the house, the name ‘Kush’ sounded not like the address of a place left behind, but like an ordinary call meant for a bowl of curd.

STORY 170

The Evening Lesson

As the sun went down, the shadow of the guava tree stretched long across the earth of the courtyard. At the edge of that shadow, Nayan sat with his notebook spread open. In front of him, his grandmother, Saryu Devi, was sorting two handfuls of paddy—full grains to one side, hollow ones to the other.

On the first page of his notebook Nayan wrote, “An Old Story from Our Village.”

Grandmother looked up and asked, “How old is an old story?”

“Master Sahib said we should listen to some elderly person at home and write one down. I have to submit it at school tomorrow.”

“An elderly person?” Grandmother raised an eyebrow. “Will you write that I am old, or will you write the story?”

Nayan burst out laughing. “The story. You just tell it.”

“Just?”

Grandmother stopped sorting the grain. “Is a story only told?”

Nayan’s pen hung suspended in mid-air.

Saryu Devi blew the empty grains aside. “Your great-grandmother used to tell a story called ‘The Bird Searching for Shade’. Will you hear it?”

Nayan nodded at once.

Grandmother began. It was the story of a little bird that, on a Jeth afternoon, went from tree to tree through the village searching for shade. One tree told it of its worry about saving its fruit, another about a broken branch, another about falling leaves. At last a small young sapling could not give it shade, but bent its one green leaf over the bird’s head. The bird sat there. The rains came, the sapling grew, and the next Jeth the bird returned with its young.

Nayan kept writing rapidly. Grandmother repeated one line again and again—“Shade is found not by growing large, but by bending down.”

The third time, Nayan said irritably, “Grandmother, I have written that line already. There is no need to keep saying it.”

Grandmother smiled. “If a line does not return in a story, how will the listener find the path?”

“In a written story, the reader can read it again.”

“You are the one writing it, so the rules are yours?”

Nayan did not answer.

The story ended. He turned the notebook towards Grandmother. “Look—three pages.”

Grandmother looked at the pages. To her, the letters were like countless footprints along a field embankment—whose they were and which way they had gone was hard to tell.

She asked softly, "What have you written here?"

Nayan read the first line.

Grandmother placed a finger on the second line. "And here?"

That was read aloud too.

Grandmother placed her finger on the third line.

Nayan laughed. "If you ask about every line like this, I might as well read the whole thing myself."

Grandmother's finger stayed still on the page. "You are writing my story. Am I not even to know what you have written?"

Nayan's laughter stopped.

After a few moments Grandmother rose and went inside. She returned with a slate and a piece of chalk that had been kept on top of an old trunk. One corner of the slate was broken. Nayan recognised it at once—it was the same slate on which he had written his first letter when he was five.

Grandmother placed the slate before him. "From today, every evening: half an hour for your lesson, half an hour for my story."

"You will learn to read?"

"First I will learn to recognise, on your written page, the words I myself have spoken. That much to begin with."

Excitement came over Nayan's face. "We will start with a, aa, i."

"No," Grandmother said. "First write 'inar'."

"Why 'inar'?"

"There was a well in the story."

Nayan started. "There was?"

"The bird first sat on the parapet of the well. There was a cat there, so it flew away. Did you write that?"

Nayan flipped through his notebook. The scene was not there.

"It was getting too long, so I cut it," he said.

Grandmother put the chalk in his hand. "Then the first lesson will begin with 'inar'. With what you cut."

Nayan wrote in large letters on the slate—"inar."

Grandmother studied the shapes of the letters. Nayan placed his finger on the first sound, then the next, then the last. Grandmother pronounced the word three times. The fourth time she did not look at the slate.

"I-nar."

"Good. Now the next letter."

"Now the story."

That was how the evening lessons began.

On the second day the word was “chhanh”—shade. On the third, “paat”—leaf. On the fourth, “baat”—path. Nayan did not follow the sequence used at school; Grandmother chose words from the story. Sometimes a word contained a vowel sign Nayan had not planned to teach yet. Then he had to change the order.

In return, Grandmother told stories, but Nayan was no longer allowed simply to write. First he had to repeat aloud, in his own words, what he had heard.

“The bird went to the peepal tree,” Nayan said one evening.

Grandmother stopped him at once. “Not peepal. Pakar.”

“They are both trees.”

“You and I are both human beings. If someone changes our names, do we become the same person?”

Nayan crossed out “peepal” in his notebook and wrote “pakar.”

Another evening he said, “The sapling gave the bird its leaf.”

Grandmother shook her head. “It did not give away its leaf. It bent the leaf down. If it had plucked off the leaf and given it away, what would the sapling have had left?”

Nayan corrected it again.

Slowly he began to understand that Grandmother’s story was not merely a chain of events. How many times a word returned, where the breath paused, where the voice softened—these too were part of the body of the story.

A week later Nayan brought home a printed sheet from school. The teacher had said that every student was to rewrite the story they had collected in a fair hand and submit it. Selected stories would appear in the school’s annual booklet.

Nayan was excited. After dinner that night, he sat down to rewrite his three-page story. He had little time. Some dialect words seemed to him “too rustic.” He thought of replacing “inar” with a more familiar word, then his eyes fell on Grandmother’s slate. “Inar” was still half-erased upon it. His hand stopped.

But he did not stop everywhere. He reduced the repetitions. The separate answers of the pakar, banyan and guava trees he compressed into a single line. The little episode at the well disappeared again. The written story seemed tighter to him.

The next evening Grandmother sat down with the slate. By then she could recognise ten or fifteen words. Nayan placed the newly written pages before her.

Grandmother tried to read the first line slowly. Joining the letters was difficult. Nayan helped her along.

Then Grandmother stopped at one place.

“Where is the inar?”

Nayan looked at the page. “I did not write it this time.”

“Why, child?”

“The story was getting too long.”

Grandmother settled the slate in her lap. “You taught me to read ‘inar’, but you removed the inar from your own writing.”

Nayan could say nothing.

“You think the story has become shorter?” Grandmother asked.

“Yes. It was long.”

“To me, the path has become shorter. Those are not the same thing.”

Nayan kept his eyes on the page.

Grandmother went on, “Why did the bird sit on the well?”

“For water.”

“No. It was tired. It saw the water later. It saw the cat first. If that is not there, where does its fear come from? And without fear, what value does the small sapling’s bent leaf have?”

Nayan understood gradually. He had thought of the well scene as only an extra incident; Grandmother understood it as part of the inner measure of the story.

He pulled a fresh sheet towards him. “I will write it again.”

“Not today,” Grandmother said. “Tell it first.”

Nayan began telling the whole story without looking at the notebook. He faltered twice. Once he forgot the order of the trees. Grandmother did not supply the answer at once. She waited. Nayan remembered it himself.

When he reached the last line, he said, “Shade is found not by growing large, but by bending down.”

Grandmother smiled. “Now write.”

Nayan wrote late into the night.

Three days later, the teacher looked through his pages at school. With a red pen she marked a few spellings, but after reading the story she asked, “Have you deliberately kept the repetition of this line?”

Nayan said, “Yes. When you listen to it, this line shows the way.”

The teacher looked at him. “Who told you that?”

Nayan replied, “Grandmother. But now I understand it too.”

Whether the story had been chosen for the annual booklet would be known a week later. Nayan did not tell Grandmother about that when he reached home. He had another task first.

That evening he wrote on the slate—“Saryu.”

Grandmother worked at joining the letters. She recognised the first sound, and the next as well. She stumbled over the final vowel sign. Nayan explained it. After a few tries Grandmother read the whole word.

“Saryu.”

“Who is that?” Nayan asked, laughing.

Grandmother laughed too. “Some old person.”

They both burst out laughing together.

Then Grandmother took the chalk. Her hand trembled a little. She tried to write Nayan's name on the slate. The first letter came out crooked. In the second, the vowel sign turned the wrong way.

Nayan reached out to correct it, then stopped.

Grandmother saw the mistake herself. She rubbed out the vowel sign with her finger and wrote it again.

"Nayan."

The word was not neat, but it could be read.

Nayan looked at the slate for a few moments. "Now the story?"

Grandmother said, "Today it is your turn. Tell me what happened at school yesterday as if it were a story."

"That is not a story. It is something that happened during the day."

"Stories are made from things that happen during the day. Where did it begin?"

Nayan thought. "When Master Sahib picked up the red pen."

"No," Grandmother said. "Before that."

Nayan thought again. His eyes went to the corner of the slate where dust from old chalk had gathered.

"When I had cut out the inar?"

Grandmother said nothing. She only turned the slate towards him.

On it were two names, written in crooked, uneven letters—"Saryu" and "Nayan."

Nayan opened his notebook. Before writing the first line, he looked at Grandmother.

"Tell me, where should I begin?"

Grandmother pulled the winnowing tray of paddy towards herself. The evening light was fading now. "From where you began to listen," she said.

STORY 171

The Border Fair

As evening fell, the fair at Janakpur grew even denser. Lights came on along the temporary bamboo arches; from the shop awnings came the clinking of bells, glass bangles and clay toys. Streams of people flowed from one side to the other. A little apart from the crowd, behind the bamboo basket of a flower seller, a small girl sat crouched with both hands clasped tightly around her knees, her eyes fixed on the path.

Manju Devi noticed her first. She had come to the fair with her husband Devesh and their daughter Gauri. Gauri had stopped to look at bangles when Manju's eyes fell on the child. She did not look more than five or seven years old. One of her plaits had come loose, but she was not crying.

Manju went closer and asked, 'Who is with you?'

The girl looked at Manju, then towards the crowd. 'Mother.'

'Where has your mother gone?'

'She was right here.'

Devesh came over too. 'What is your name?'

'Rani,' she whispered.

'Your father's name?'

Rani thought for a moment and said, 'Babu.'

Gauri almost laughed, but stopped when she saw her mother's look. Manju asked again, 'What is the name of your village?'

Rani frowned. 'The name of my house?'

'Yes, where you live.'

Rani pointed south. 'That way.'

Devesh looked all around through the crowd. Near one of the arches was an announcement booth where the names of separated children, found bags and missing people were being called out again and again. He said, 'We'll take you there.'

Rani immediately shook her head. 'No. Mother told me—if you get separated, don't run. Stand where you realise I'm not there.'

Manju asked, 'Did you get separated here?'

'No.' Rani's voice grew softer. 'There were many people over there. I was holding Mother's aanchal. Then the aanchal changed.'

Manju understood. The girl must have caught hold of another woman's aanchal and walked some distance before realising it. Now she was following

her mother's instruction by staying put—but this was not the place where her mother would be looking for her.

Devesh went to the announcement booth and gave Rani's name, age and the colour of her clothes. The reply was that no one had yet come looking for a child of that name.

Meanwhile Gauri had sat down on the ground beside Rani. 'Are there trees at your house?'

Rani looked at her. 'Yes.'

'What trees?'

'Three neem trees together.'

'Three?'

'Two big ones, one small.'

Manju returned. 'Did Mother tell you how you would go home from the fair?'

This time Rani answered without thinking. 'First the long road. Then Jatahi. Then water. Then Babu says—from here, India.'

Devesh and Manju looked at one another.

'India?'

Rani nodded. 'My home is in India. Mama's house is in Jatahi.'

That much information gave them a direction, not a house. They could head towards the Jatahi-Pipraun crossing, but on the Indian side Rani could not say which hamlet or which house was hers.

Manju decided to leave her own name and where she would be staying at the announcement booth, then take Rani to sit somewhere quieter. Gauri would keep hold of Rani's hand. Devesh would tell the fair organisers to inform them if Rani's family arrived.

They moved towards the open courtyard behind the temple, where the crowd was thinner. On the way Rani kept looking back. Manju did not try to buy her anything. She only said, 'Mother must be searching for you. We are here.'

At one side of the courtyard a family sat on a sheet spread on the ground. A small child slept in the man's lap, the woman was taking puris out of a metal box, and a boy of about ten held a bottle of water. Hearing their speech, Manju stopped. It was Maithili, but certain words and pronunciations sounded as though they were from the Indian side.

Devesh asked, 'Where are you all from?'

The man replied, 'From near Harlakhi. We came through the Pipraun crossing.'

Rani suddenly looked at him. 'Pipraun.'

Manju bent down and asked, 'Is your house in Pipraun?'

Rani nodded, then stopped herself at once. 'Beyond Pipraun. Babu says Pipraun. Mother says—near Rajghat.'

The woman of the other family, Savita, came and sat beside Rani. 'Near the Jamuni?'

Rani's eyes lit up. 'Yes. Across the water.'

Savita's husband Ramesh said, 'There are many houses around Rajghat. Your name?'

'Rani,' the child replied.

'Your father's?'

Rani smiled again. 'Babu.'

This time everyone laughed a little, Rani too. The first tightness in her face loosened.

Savita's son Abhay asked, 'What does your Babu do?'

'He takes milk out in the morning.'

'To whose house?'

'Many houses.'

'How many cows?'

Rani counted on her fingers. 'Two. There were three before. The black cow died.'

Ramesh said, 'There is no shortage of milkmen with two cows.'

Abhay asked again, 'What is near your house?'

'Three neem trees.'

'And?' Abhay asked.

Rani fell silent.

Gauri leaned towards her. 'What do you see just before you reach your house?'

Rani thought for a while at that question. 'A red wall. After that the road splits in two. Mother goes left. Babu goes right on his bicycle and then turns back.'

Ramesh scratched his head. 'There must be fifty red walls.'

'What is on the wall?' Abhay asked.

Rani narrowed her eyes as though trying to see it. 'White flowers are painted on it. No one lives inside.'

Savita said, 'The old rice mill?'

Ramesh turned to her. 'The closed godown west of Rajghat?'

'Its wall is red, and there are white round marks on it too.'

Rani did not understand the word 'godown', but she shaped a square with her hands. 'A big house. The door stays shut.'

The route was clearer now. Ramesh's family had planned to return to India before the fair ended. Manju and Devesh did not think it right to send Rani only with them. The fair organisers were told that both families were taking Rani towards Pipraun-Rajghat; Devesh's name and the place where they were staying in Janakpur were written down. If Rani's mother reached the booth, she would be told where they had gone.

Rani was asked, 'Will you come?'

She looked first at Gauri's hand, then at Abhay's. 'What if Mother isn't there?'

Manju said, 'Then we'll search again. But you won't be alone.'

Rani stood up.

The two families sat together in a vehicle going towards Jatahi. Rani sat between Gauri and Abhay. No one crowded her with questions on the way. Sometimes she looked out of the window; sometimes she closed her eyes.

By the time they reached Jatahi, the sky had turned deep blue. The shop lights were on. People were still moving towards and away from the border. Rani peered out of the window, started slightly, then checked herself and said, 'I drank juice here with Mama.'

Devesh smiled. 'So you recognise the road.'

'A little.'

Rani went quiet while they crossed the checkpoint. Lines of light trembled on the dark water of the Jamuni. As soon as they came off the bridge, she leaned forward.

'This water.'

Ramesh said, 'Now look for the red wall.'

Near Rajghat they left the main road and began moving slowly. A little farther on they found an old closed building—a red wall on which round patches of white lime were still visible.

Rani rose from her seat. 'Here!'

'Left or right?' Savita asked.

Rani tried to put her hand out of the window. Manju gently drew it back inside. 'Say it with your mouth.'

'Left.'

They got out of the vehicle and walked. The path split in two. Rani stopped once. In the evening darkness, both sides looked much the same—huts, bamboo and trees.

Abhay said, 'There's no hurry. Think.'

Rani looked down at the earth. Then she listened. From far away came the faint tinkling of a bell.

'Babu's cow.'

Everyone fell silent. The bell sounded again. Rani began to run to the right, but after two steps stopped herself. Her mother's words came back to her—don't run. She turned and caught Gauri's hand.

'This way.'

A little farther on they saw three neem trees—two large ones, with a smaller one between them. A strip of old blue cloth was tied around the trunk of the small tree. Rani's steps quickened.

The courtyard gate stood open. Inside, a woman was coming out barefoot. Her aanchal had slipped from her shoulder and hung halfway down her waist. She saw Rani first, then all the people behind her. For a moment she seemed unable to understand what she was seeing.

'Mother!' Rani cried and ran. This time no one stopped her.

The woman caught her and sank to her knees. She was crying, but no sound came from her. A few moments later a man came running from inside. In his hand was a bell he had removed from a bicycle. One of the two cows in the courtyard shook the bell at its neck.

With her face buried against her mother, Rani said, 'I didn't run.'

Her mother kissed her head. 'I know.'

The story slowly became clear. In the crowd Rani had caught another woman's aanchal and gone ahead. Her mother had searched first at the place where they had separated, then at the announcement booth, then around the outer part of the temple. There she had learned that the child had left with two families towards Pipraun. Rani's father had been just preparing to go towards the border.

Manju and Savita looked at one another. Dust from the fair and the road clung to both their clothes. Devesh and Ramesh stood at the edge of the veranda as though their work was now done.

Rani's mother urged everyone to come inside and sit. Ramesh said, 'It's getting late.'

Manju too was thinking about the journey back when Rani lifted her head from her mother's lap and said, 'Gauri and Abhay won't leave without eating.'

Her mother smiled for the first time. 'So you have learnt all their names too?'

Rani caught Gauri's hand and held out her other hand towards Abhay. 'She is from Nepal. He is from India.'

Abhay laughed. 'And you?'

Rani thought for a moment. Then, holding her mother's aanchal, she said, 'I am from here.'

A little later chura and curd were set out on the veranda. The adults kept talking about the road, the fair and the search. The three children sat near the small neem tree in the courtyard. Gauri asked, 'This little neem?'

Rani said proudly, 'This one is mine. Babu planted it when I was born.'

Abhay reached out to touch the blue cloth tied around the trunk. Rani stopped him. 'No, leave it there.'

'Why?' Abhay asked.

'So the way can be recognised.'

Abhay drew his hand back.

The night was growing deeper. On the road outside the courtyard, towards the border, the voices of travellers had thinned. The leaves of the three neem

trees rustled in the light breeze. The blue cloth tied to the small tree remained clearly visible in the darkness.

STORY 172

The Neem's Shade

The morning sunlight was still caught in the upper leaves of the neem tree in the courtyard. The shade below was cool and round, as though the night had left a piece of itself there. At about this hour Jamuna Kaki would usually lift the latch of the gate and come in. First she would lean the broom against the wall, then, with both hands, lift the little stool kept beneath the neem and move it a little farther inside the edge of the sunlight.

That morning the stool remained in its old place.

Savita looked towards the courtyard twice from the kitchen. The third time, she looked at the clock.

"Jamuna Kaki hasn't come today?"

Sudhanshu, sitting on the veranda with the newspaper open, said, "She must be a little late."

Kamala Devi rested her chin on the knob of her walking stick and kept looking towards the neem. "When is she ever late?"

After eight o'clock, Muniya from the neighbourhood came. She was Jamuna Kaki's granddaughter. She had a prescription in her hand.

"Kaki has had a fever since last night," she said. "The doctor has told her to rest for ten days."

Savita asked at once, "Very high?"

"It was high at night. It has come down a little now."

Kamala Devi made as if to rise. "I will go and see her."

Muniya stopped her. "She is asleep now. She said—tell them at the house, and tell them not to worry."

Sudhanshu folded the newspaper. "All right. Let her rest first. We'll divide the work here among ourselves."

The sentence was simple. There were four capable people in the house: Savita, Sudhanshu, their daughter Ira, their son Neel, and Kamala Devi, who still did much of her own work. Jamuna Kaki came for two hours in the morning and one in the evening—to sweep the courtyard, help with the dishes, sort the vegetables, hang out the clothes, put Kamala Devi's room in order, and do whatever little task happened to catch her eye.

Savita ruled a sheet of paper into three sections—morning, afternoon, evening.

"Neel, the courtyard is yours."

Neel pulled a face. "I have exams."

Ira said, "Will sweeping make your lessons fly out of your head?"

"You do the dishes."

"I will. But you'll hang out the clothes."

Sudhanshu laughed. "Less quarrelling, more work."

On the first day the house really did run. The courtyard was swept, the dishes washed, the clothes hung out, the vegetables cut. In the evening Savita put a small tick beside every line on the sheet.

"See?" Sudhanshu said. "The arrangement works."

Kamala Devi said nothing. She looked at the stool beneath the neem.

At midday on the second day Kamala Devi left half her meal uneaten.

Savita asked, "Is the dal not good?"

"The dal is fine."

"Then why aren't you eating?"

Kamala Devi drew her hand away from the plate. "I'm not hungry."

Savita thought it might be age. But in the evening she noticed that Kamala Devi was not sitting on the stool beneath the neem. She was lying on the cot on the veranda.

"Won't you go outside?"

"The stool is in the sun."

Savita looked into the courtyard. The stool was indeed still in the sunlight.

"I'll move it a little."

She lifted the stool and placed it under the neem. Kamala Devi came outside, but two minutes later went back in again.

Savita followed her. "What happened?"

Kamala Devi gave a short answer. "Nothing."

On the third day Ira came back from college and went straight to her room. Usually she would fling her bag onto the veranda and drink water first. That day she shut the door from inside.

Savita called to her twice. The answer was brief—"Nothing has happened."

At dinner Ira sat with her plate in front of her, but she was not eating.

Neel asked, "Did the result come again?"

Ira glared at him. "Do you have to interfere in everything?"

Neel fell silent.

Sudhanshu said, "That is no way to speak."

Ira pushed her plate away and got up.

For a few moments a kind of silence filled the house that had no line on Savita's list of chores.

That night Savita went to Ira's room. After a long while Ira said that her name had been removed from the final list for the college debate competition. No one had given her a clear reason. She was angry, but more than angry she was embarrassed—she had told everyone at home that her selection was almost certain.

Savita stroked her head. "Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

Ira was quiet for a while. Then she said, "If Jamuna Kaki had been here, I would have told her first."

Savita's hand stopped.

"Why her?"

"She doesn't ask questions first." Ira looked towards the pillow as she spoke.

"She just sits there sorting vegetables. I begin talking on my own."

Savita said nothing to that.

On the fourth day Neel returned from school and went straight beneath the neem. The stool was empty. He took off his bag and set it there, then pulled out a small paper. His marks in mathematics had fallen. He folded the paper and put it back in his pocket.

Kamala Devi was watching from the veranda.

"How much did you get?"

Neel started. "How did you know?"

"It is written on your face."

Neel tried to smile. "If Jamuna Kaki were here, she would say—eat some jaggery first, then show me the marks."

Kamala Devi smiled. "Do you show her all your papers?"

Avoiding her eyes, Neel said, "Not all."

Kamala Devi asked, "Then which ones?"

"The ones with low marks."

Kamala Devi laughed. "Why?"

Neel looked at the neem leaves. "She says—show the paper with low marks first; the one with high marks will go around showing itself."

Kamala Devi burst out laughing. When the laughter ended, her eyes looked a little moist.

That evening, when Sudhanshu returned from the office, he saw that every line on Savita's list had been ticked. Yet something inside the house still seemed unsettled. Nothing belonging to anyone was strewn about, no task had been left undone, but everyone was spending longer in their own rooms.

After dinner Kamala Devi said, "Tomorrow we will go and see Jamuna."

Sudhanshu agreed at once.

The next afternoon not everyone went, only Kamala Devi and Sudhanshu. Jamuna Kaki's house was two lanes away. A small courtyard, an earthen edge, a tulsī altar. Jamuna Kaki was half sitting up on the cot. Her face looked drawn, but the brightness in her eyes was the same as before.

"Why is everyone getting so worried?" she said as soon as she saw Sudhanshu. "I'll be back in ten days."

Kamala Devi sat beside the cot. "Without you I even forgot the time of the neem's shade."

Jamuna Kaki laughed. "Does the shade move when I tell it to?"

“Not the shade. The stool.”

“The stool has to be shown the sun.”

Sudhanshu paid attention to that little sentence. The neem had stood in that courtyard since his childhood. It had never occurred to him that the stool was moved twice a day.

Jamuna Kaki asked, “Did Ira go to the competition?”

Sudhanshu started. “No. Her name was dropped.”

Jamuna Kaki’s eyes narrowed a little. “She must have taken it very much to heart.”

Surprised, Sudhanshu asked, “How did you know?”

“Three days ago she was saying—if my name is dropped, I won’t tell anyone at home.”

Sudhanshu was silent.

“And Neel’s mathematics?” Jamuna asked again.

“His marks were low.”

“Did you give him jaggery?”

This time Sudhanshu laughed. “You know about that too?”

Jamuna Kaki closed her eyes. “If you live in a house, you hear the sounds of the house.”

Kamala Devi straightened the sheet near her feet. For a few moments all three were silent. Outside, a crow landed on the tulsi altar and flew away again.

On the way back Sudhanshu spoke very little. When he reached home, he looked at the chore list Savita had made. Courtyard, dishes, clothes, vegetables, room—everything was written there. He placed his pen on the blank space at the bottom of the sheet, but could not write anything.

Jamuna Kaki came on the morning of the twelfth day. She had no broom in her hand; Muniya had only come to drop her off. She still looked weak.

“No work today,” Savita said at the gate itself.

“Then why did you call me?”

“I didn’t call you. You came on your own.”

“Sitting at home was making my body ache even more.”

From inside, Kamala Devi called out, “First move the stool.”

Jamuna Kaki looked towards the neem. The stool, surprisingly, was exactly in the shade.

She looked at Savita.

Savita smiled. “I’m beginning to understand the time a little too.”

Jamuna Kaki sat down. Neel came from inside carrying the tin of jaggery. Ira brought two cups of tea. Sudhanshu came onto the veranda with an envelope in his hand.

“Your wages for the month,” he said.

Weighing the envelope in her hand, Jamuna Kaki asked, “Why so much? I did no work for twelve days.”

Before answering, Sudhanshu looked at Savita. Then he said, "Whatever was written in the ledger of chores, we managed all of that ourselves."

Jamuna Kaki waited.

After a pause Sudhanshu added, "We have no account of what was not written down."

Jamuna Kaki did not open the envelope. She tucked it into the corner of her sari.

"Then now one thing from me," she said. "My coming back does not mean Neel will give up the broom."

Neel protested, "That is unfair."

Ira laughed. "Think of it as punishment for low marks."

"And you will not stop doing the dishes either," Jamuna Kaki said, raising a finger towards Ira.

Kamala Devi said, "She is right. Let the work stay divided."

Jamuna Kaki looked at her in surprise.

"Then what is my work?"

Kamala Devi patted the place beside her in the neem's shade. "First sit here. We'll see about the rest slowly."

Jamuna Kaki moved the stool a little closer to her.

The broom remained leaning against the courtyard wall. Steam kept rising from the tea. The neem's shade shifted slowly, but this time no one was in a hurry to move the stool.

STORY 173

The Paper Boat

The rain had begun before noon. First came scattered drops, then an even drumming on thatch and tin. The white cord stretched across the courtyard of the old house had grown heavy with rain and sagged low enough to touch the earth here and there. Naresh stood on one side of it, Sudha on the other. Barely twenty cubits lay between them, yet they spoke as though the distance were one of years.

‘The three rooms north of this line are mine,’ Naresh said. ‘The two rooms to the south and the veranda are yours. We’ll make the passage to the back along the eastern side.’

Sudha looked not at the wet cord but at the old tulsi altar. ‘The eastern passage is less than four cubits wide. How will the trunk ever reach Mother’s room?’

‘How many more times is the trunk going to be moved now?’

‘Even if the trunk doesn’t move, people still have to.’

Naresh’s wife, Meena, set down the tea on the veranda and quietly went inside. In the last three months the question of dividing the house had arisen so often that everyone in the household could guess the end of a sentence as soon as it began. Their father had died five years earlier. Their mother the previous winter. At first Sudha had come every week; then one day it was the key to the cupboard, another day the garden at the back, a third day the rights over Mother’s room—little by little the discussion had moved from possessions to shares.

Naresh had remained in the house. Roof repairs, Mother’s medicines, the care of the fields—he remembered every account. Sudha had moved to Darbhanga after marriage, but she too had stayed for months at a time to look after their mother. She did not like hearing an account of her absences. Naresh could not bear to see the value of his presence diminished.

That day the village surveyor had come to measure the property. Halfway through the work he had been stranded at the square by the rain. Before leaving he had said, ‘If the rain stops, I’ll come back in the evening and finish marking the line.’

Instead of stopping, the rain grew heavier.

From the north-west corner of the courtyard, water began to run in a thin stream. It followed a depression in the joints of the old bricks, cut across the middle of the courtyard and headed towards the drain in the south-east corner.

The white cord lay diagonally across that stream. As the water touched it, the cord turned muddy.

Sudha said, 'If this drain is blocked, where will the water go?'

Naresh answered at once, 'The drain falls in my share. I'll keep it.'

'Will the water fall only from the roof over your share?'

Naresh fell silent. The sheet of water running off the northern tin roof, the drops falling from the southern tiles and the water spilling from the mouth of the veranda all gathered in that same depression.

'When the wall goes up, we'll leave a pipe underneath,' he said after a moment.

'And when the pipe gets blocked?'

'We'll clean it.'

'Who?'

That small question began to open the old quarrel again. Naresh wanted to say: whoever lives here. Sudha wanted to say: a house does not belong only to the one who lives in it. But neither spoke yet.

The flow of water strengthened. An old brick in the middle of the courtyard loosened and began to rock. Sudha lifted the edge of her sari slightly and put her foot on it. As the brick sank under her weight, bubbles rose from beneath.

She bent down at once and looked at the brick.

'Is this place still so low?'

Naresh heard the changed note in her voice. 'What?'

'Wasn't this where we used to build the bridge?'

Naresh's eyes settled on the little stream.

Until a few moments ago there had been only a dividing line in the courtyard. Now, from beneath that line, another courtyard began to rise into view—smaller, muddy, belonging to rainy days.

They had been children then. Their father would give them pages from old almanacs. Sudha was quick at folding boats; Naresh was better at sharpening the prow. Water falling from the roof collected in the northern corner, made a narrow stream and ran through this depression towards the drain. Each of them would launch a boat. Whoever's boat reached the mouth of the drain first won.

But there had been a problem in the middle. When Mother went from the kitchen to the cowshed, her feet got wet crossing the stream. One day, exasperated, she had said, 'There's a road for your boats, but none for my feet.'

The next day Naresh had brought two bricks. Sudha had dragged over a flat stone from the corner of the veranda. Together they set the stone on the bricks and made a little bridge—high enough for a paper boat to pass underneath, low enough for Mother to cross easily on foot.

The first time, Sudha's boat got stuck under the stone. Instead of claiming victory, Naresh lay flat on his stomach and pushed her boat through with one

finger. That day they made a rule: if one boat got stuck under the bridge, the other person would free it; no victory would count over a stranded boat.

Sudha laughed softly. 'You cheated too. While pushing my boat along, you used to send yours farther ahead.'

For the first time a smile appeared on Naresh's face. 'You used to make your boats so wide that somehow the bridge became guilty?'

'You built the bridge.'

'You brought the stone.'

For a few moments they laughed together in the rain. Meena watched from the veranda, but did not come outside.

Sudha bent down again. Beside the loose brick, the tops of two old bricks really were visible, parallel to one another. The stone above them was gone; it must have been removed during some repair long ago. But through the narrow gap between the bricks, the water still ran faster than elsewhere.

'Mother used to cross on this bridge,' Sudha said.

Naresh nodded. 'Later Father wanted to put cement over this place. Mother said, "Leave it. It's the children's bridge."'

'I had forgotten that.'

'So had I, until now.'

They fell silent again. Memory had not ended the quarrel. Naresh had borne more of the expense of Mother's medicines; that did not make Sudha's share smaller. Sudha had lived away after marriage; that did not end her belonging to the house. All the old accounts remained exactly where they were. Only now, among them, a small bridge had returned as well.

Naresh lifted the white cord. The rainwater wet his fingers. 'If the wall goes up here, the mouth of the drain will fall inside.'

Sudha said, 'And my passage to the back will be through that narrow lane on the east.'

'Yes. There.'

'Both problems are being created by the same line.'

Naresh began untying the knot in the cord. 'Shall we shift the line four cubits north?'

Sudha ran her eyes across the courtyard as though measuring it. 'Then your veranda will become smaller.'

'It will.'

'I don't need that much extra.'

'Then what do we do?'

Sudha looked at both sides of the stream. 'Leave five cubits in the middle as common space. The drain too, and the passage to the back. The walls can rise separately on either side.'

Naresh did not agree at once. 'A common space will only become another cause of quarrel.'

‘Separate spaces are already doing that.’

This time Naresh did not laugh, but his face was no longer hard either. He fetched the measuring rod kept beside the veranda. He measured five cubits. Then six. Then four.

‘A bullock cart won’t pass through five,’ he said.

‘Who brings a bullock cart here now?’

‘What if the house needs repairs someday?’

Sudha thought for a moment. ‘Six cubits.’

‘With six, the wall will come a little inward in front of my northern room.’

‘I’ll leave one cubit from the southern corner.’

Naresh looked at her. ‘The accounts even?’

‘Let the surveyor settle the account of the land. We’ll settle the account of the path ourselves.’

The rain was weakening now. The stream in the drain had thinned, but had not stopped. Naresh tied the cord again—this time not across the middle of the courtyard, but in two short lengths marking the two edges of the common passage.

When the surveyor returned in the evening, he first looked for the old line. ‘Where has the cord gone?’

Naresh said, ‘The line has changed.’

The surveyor frowned. ‘I’ll have to measure it again.’

Sudha said, ‘Please do. Six cubits in the middle will remain a common passage and drainage way.’

‘I’ll need a written agreement.’

‘Make one,’ Naresh said. ‘But don’t show the drain as belonging to either share.’

The surveyor looked from one face to the other. He was surprised that the two people who had been holding out over half a cubit until noon were now talking of leaving six cubits between them. But he asked nothing. He began the measurements again.

That night Sudha slept in Mother’s room. Outside the window, a light rain began again. In the darkness she could hear the sound of water in the drain. She remembered the paper boats—their wet prows, the two boats bumping into each other, the little white body of one caught beneath the stone.

At dawn Naresh was in the courtyard. He sat beside the old depression with two new bricks and a flat stone. Sudha asked, ‘What are you doing?’ ‘Making a place to cross the water.’ ‘For boats or for people?’ Naresh levelled the stone on the bricks and said, ‘They need different heights. This time I’m measuring properly.’

Sudha picked up a small scrap of paper from the veranda. She did not begin making a boat. She merely folded the paper to measure the gap beneath the stone, then opened it again and handed it to Naresh.

‘Leave this much space. The water won’t stop.’ Naresh looked at the fold in the paper and moved one brick a little farther out. The courtyard was still going to be divided. The rooms would have different owners, the keys would remain separate. But a path had been left through the middle for the rainwater, and over that path stood a small bridge—beneath which a paper boat could still pass.

STORY 174

Silence

Sarojini Devi and Rita rarely quarrelled.

The family considered this a blessing.

In truth, the two of them hardly ever spoke directly to each other.

If Rita needed something, she would tell Manoj, "Ask Mother where the lentils are kept." If Sarojini Devi had something to say, she too would tell her son, "Tell Rita not to leave the wet clothes outside all night."

One courtyard, one kitchen, one veranda; yet words usually travelled by way of Manoj.

This distance had not been created in a single day. During the first month after the wedding, Sarojini Devi, watching Rita at work in the kitchen, kept saying—less salt, a little more oil, sort the rice first, keep the milk vessel separate. Rita did not answer. She kept changing the ways she had learnt in her mother's home, but somewhere inside her settled the feeling that, in this house, everything she did would first be inspected.

In Sarojini Devi's eyes, Rita was far too quiet. She felt that her daughter-in-law never said what was in her heart, only nodded. Rita felt that her mother-in-law was ready to correct her before she was ready to listen.

After that, Manoj became the road between them.

Two years after the marriage, when Rita gave birth to a daughter, for the first time there was something in the house on which both their attention rested in the same place. The baby was named Aditi. Rita saw the smile that stayed on Sarojini Devi's face whenever she looked at her granddaughter; but over Aditi's clothes, sleep, milk and bathing, their ways were once again different.

"Mother says not to oil the baby in the evening," Manoj said one day.

Without looking up, Rita replied, "Tell her the doctor said the time does not matter."

In a tired voice Manoj said, "Why don't the two of you just tell each other?"

Both remained silent.

Aditi was twenty-three days old when that night came.

The baby had been a little listless all day. Rita had noticed it, but by evening she had fed properly twice. At eight that night, the moment milk touched her mouth, she let go. Rita tried again. The baby turned her face away.

Sarojini Devi was spinning thread on the veranda. Hearing the baby's very faint cry from inside, she rose and came in.

“Where is Manoj?” Rita asked.

“He has gone to Darbhanga. He said he would be back by ten tonight.”

Having said that, Sarojini Devi placed her hand on the baby’s forehead. Her expression changed.

“Her body feels hot.”

Rita checked with her own palm. She too felt the heat, but the moment fear entered her she no longer trusted herself to judge the temperature. She took out the thermometer kept in the house. The instant she saw the number, her fingers began to tremble.

Sarojini Devi said, “Come.”

That night, for the first time, Sarojini Devi spoke directly to Rita in the language of a decision.

Rita asked, “Where?”

“The primary health centre. With a baby this small, we are not sitting at home.”

Rita immediately wrapped the baby in cloth. Sarojini Devi took some money, Aditi’s birth slip and a clean towel from the box and put them in a bag.

They called Manoj’s mobile. It rang and rang, but there was no answer.

At the turn of the lane they found a rickshaw still out at night. Sarojini Devi climbed in first, then took half the baby’s weight from Rita’s lap into her own arms so that Rita could sit properly. Neither said anything. Whenever a wheel dropped into a small pothole on the unpaved road, both their hands reached towards Aditi at the same moment.

A yellow bulb burned in the veranda of the health centre. The nurse on night duty took the baby’s temperature again, counted her breaths and carried her inside at once.

Rita stood outside the door. Sarojini Devi stood directly behind her.

After a while, the doctor said that in an infant this young, fever together with reduced feeding could be a serious sign; tests and observation were necessary. The baby was kept at the centre that night, and advice was also sought from a higher-level facility.

Rita sat on a bench. Both her palms were empty. For the first time in twenty-three days Aditi was not in her lap, and Rita felt as though her own body had become unnecessary.

Sarojini Devi took the towel from the bag and placed it in her hand.

“Will you drink some water?”

Rita shook her head.

“No, not now.”

Two minutes later Sarojini Devi asked nothing more. She got up, brought water from the earthen pot in the corner of the veranda, and set the glass beneath the bench.

Rita looked at the glass but did not reach for it.

At half past eleven the nurse came out. "Who is the mother?"

Rita stood up.

"Stay inside. If the baby wakes, try to feed her."

Sarojini Devi rose too, but stopped at the door.

Rita looked at her for a moment. Earlier she would have said to Manoj, "Mother is outside, tell her..." But Manoj was not there.

She asked her directly, "Will you stay here?"

Sarojini Devi replied, "Yes. You go."

There was no special intimacy in those few words, but Manoj's name had not come between them.

Aditi lay in a small iron cot. A bandage was tied near a vein in her hand. Rita sat by her head. The baby opened her eyes, then closed them again.

Rita said softly, "I am here."

Her voice sounded strange to her own ears.

When she came out half an hour later, Sarojini Devi was still sitting upright on the same bench. The glass of water remained full beneath it.

"Did she drink?" was her question.

Rita could not tell whether the question was about the water or the baby's milk.

"She drank a little milk."

Sarojini Devi's shoulders loosened slightly. "Good."

Rita picked up the glass and drank the water.

After midnight the veranda grew quieter. Somewhere far away a dog barked, then fell silent. The ticking of the wall clock could be heard.

Sarojini Devi suddenly asked, "When did she first drink less during the day?"

Rita said, "Around two in the afternoon. I thought she was only sleepier than usual."

"Did you tell anyone?"

"Manoj."

"He did not tell me."

Rita wanted to fall silent as before, but this time the words came out on their own.

"I could have told you."

Sarojini Devi kept looking at the clock. "Yes."

After a few moments she added, "If you had told me, whether I would have listened first or started advising first—I do not know."

For the first time Rita looked properly at her face. That sentence did not sound like Sarojini Devi. Her answers were always ready; tonight she was leaving a question directed at herself.

Rita said, "I too have got into the habit of holding everything back from the beginning."

Sarojini Devi said nothing.

Silence returned, but now it was not a wall as before. Between them lay the open space of two sentences.

At half past one Manoj called. His voice was anxious. His vehicle had broken down on the road and he was looking for another ride.

"How is Aditi?"

Rita said, "The doctors are watching her. She has taken a little milk."

Manoj asked, "Where is Mother?"

Rita looked at Sarojini Devi.

"She is sitting beside me."

Manoj began to say, "Tell Mother—"

Rita interrupted him. "Whatever you have to say, tell her directly. I'm giving her the phone."

Sarojini Devi took the phone. She spoke with Manoj for two minutes, then handed it back to Rita. Neither of them felt any need to comment on this small change.

At two in the morning the nurse called again. Aditi was ready to feed. Rita went inside. This time the baby managed to drink a little more. Afterwards she held Rita's finger and fell asleep.

When Rita came back out, her eyes were wet.

Sarojini Devi did not immediately ask, "What happened?" She merely held out one end of her shawl. Rita wiped her eyes.

"I was frightened," Rita said quietly.

"I was frightened too."

Rita was startled. She had never heard a sentence like "I am frightened too" from Sarojini Devi.

"You always seem certain about everything," Rita said.

Sarojini Devi gave a faint laugh, but it stopped at once. "Just because a person does not say something does not mean it is not there."

The sentence lingered for a while in the yellow light of the veranda.

Towards dawn Aditi's temperature came down. The doctor said she would remain under observation, but for now her condition was more stable than before.

Rita rested her head against the wall behind the bench. Sleep would not come. Sarojini Devi's eyes too were red.

"Close your eyes for a while," Rita said. "And you?" "I'll keep going in and out to check." Sarojini Devi said, "Then half an hour. After that, you." "All right." Earlier such arrangements would have been settled through Manoj. Tonight no third person was needed to divide the watch.

Sarojini Devi closed her eyes at one end of the bench. Rita kept looking at her. The hair at the front of her head had gone white, something Rita had never noticed so clearly amid the daily rush of the house.

After a while Sarojini Devi slipped a little in her sleep. Her hand began to hang over the edge of the bench. Rita lifted it and placed it safely inside—just as, on the rickshaw during the night, both of them had kept steadying Aditi.

When Manoj arrived in the morning, Aditi was asleep. The doctor said she would be kept for the rest of the day. Manoj looked from one woman to the other and began firing questions all at once.

“What happened last night? Mother, did you tell Rita that—”

Sarojini Devi cut in, “I’ll tell Rita myself.”

Manoj stopped.

Rita added, “And I’ll ask her myself.”

A tired smile came over Manoj’s face. “Then my work has decreased.”

No one burst out laughing, but all three faces softened a little. Two days later Aditi returned home. The baby’s clothes were hung to dry on the veranda. From inside, Sarojini Devi called, “Rita, shall I open the window halfway or all the way?” Earlier the question would have travelled through Manoj. Holding the baby in her arms, Rita answered directly, “Halfway. The air is pleasant.” Sarojini Devi opened the window halfway. Light from outside entered the room. The things that had travelled, not for years but for many months, along the road through Manoj had now found a direct path between the two women. The distance had not vanished; an old habit does not disappear in one night. But the silence was no longer a wall. A door had opened in it, and both of them knew that its latch was not in the hands of any third person.

STORY 175

The Postcard

That day, when the subject of post came up at school, more than half the children in Class Five had never even seen a postcard.

The teacher, Madhavi Jha, took ten yellow cards from her bag and spread them across the desk.

“This is not a mobile phone,” she said with a laugh. “What you write on it will not arrive at once. But when it does arrive, your handwriting will arrive with it.”

Seated at the back, Nayan picked up a card and sniffed it.

“Why does it not smell of glue?”

The class burst out laughing.

Madhavi said, “Because there is no envelope to seal. Whatever you write, you write openly.”

About a mile and a half from the school stood the “Sahachar Old-Age Home”. The headmaster had proposed that the children write one postcard each to an elderly resident there. The teachers would assign the names beforehand, but the children were not to write any artificial sermon or dutiful message.

“Write what you truly have to say,” Madhavi told them. “Do not discharge your duty merely by writing, ‘May you remain happy.’”

The class suddenly fell silent.

The name on Nayan’s card was “Gomti Devi”.

He first wrote two lines: “Namaskar. I am Nayan. I study in Class Five.” Then his pen stopped.

Srishti, seated in front of him, had already filled half her card. Nayan leaned forward to look, but Madhavi called from a distance—

“Do not read someone else’s card. The old-age home is not an examination centre.”

Nayan looked at his card again.

Writing about home seemed easiest. Yet he could not decide what in his home was worth writing about. His father worked at a bank branch. His mother did sewing. His grandmother lived in the village. During holidays they went to the village.

All at once he wrote: “My grandmother’s name is Bhawani Devi. She does not write letters to anyone, but she remembers the names of many people from long ago. She likes less fenugreek in mango pickle. There are two lychee trees behind our house, but one is now half dry.”

Madhavi did not laugh when she read the card. She only said, "I can see your home in this. Good."

At the end Nayan wrote, "If you remember any tree, write to me about it."

Three days later, two children from the school and an attendant delivered all the cards to the old-age home. Replying was not compulsory. The headmaster had made it clear that the purpose of the programme was not to place a new task on the elderly residents, but simply to open a path of connection.

A week passed in waiting.

On the following Monday Madhavi came into the classroom carrying a bundle of cards.

"Some replies have come."

Names were called: Srishti, Raghav, Anshu, Nayan.

The handwriting on Nayan's card was in large letters. Gomti Devi had written—

"Nayan Babu, which village is your grandmother Bhawani Devi from? If she is from Pipra Purbari Tol, ask her, 'Do you still remember Gomti Didi's yellow oleander?' If she laughs, write to me again."

Nayan read it three times.

"What is yellow oleander?"

Madhavi said, "Not a tree, a flowering shrub. But this question is for your grandmother."

That evening, at Nayan's house, the postcard seemed to become a larger subject than dinner. His mother read it. His father read it. They looked at one another.

"Shall we call Grandmother?" Nayan asked.

His father said, "The card says to ask her. We can ask her now."

In the village, Grandmother used the phone at their neighbour Ramsevak's house. It rang twice before Ramsevak's son answered. Bhawani Devi came five minutes later.

Without any preamble Nayan said, "Grandmother, do you remember Gomti Didi's yellow oleander?"

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

Then came such a laugh that even without seeing his grandmother's face, Nayan knew that Gomti Devi had written the right thing.

"Where did you find that name?" Bhawani Devi asked.

"A card came from the old-age home."

The laughter stopped.

"Which old-age home?"

His father took the phone. He told her the place and repeated Gomti Devi's name. Bhawani Devi fell silent again.

"Send me a card," she said at last.

"Shall I send a photograph?" his father asked.

"No. A card."

The next day Nayan told the whole story at school. Madhavi asked carefully

"Does your grandmother know Gomti Devi?"

"It is a very old acquaintance. But she did not explain."

"Then will Grandmother write the next card?"

Nayan nodded. "Grandmother said she would write it herself."

The problem was that Bhawani Devi did not ordinarily write herself. She could read and could sign her name, but for years she had had someone else write letters for her.

On Friday, Nayan's father went to the village. Nayan went with him. Bhawani Devi was sitting on the veranda. In front of her lay a yellow postcard and, beside it, an old pen filled with black ink.

"Will you write?" Nayan asked.

"Today we shall see how much my hand obeys me."

The first letter trembled. The second came out clear. Bhawani Devi wrote—

"Gomti, the yellow oleander bush dried up two years after you left. But I cut one branch and planted it in the back courtyard. That too did not survive for long. I never thought you were dead; I only thought your life had gone so far away that my name would not reach there."

Nayan watched silently.

Bhawani Devi paused before writing the next line.

"Only that much?" Nayan asked.

"That much first."

Then she turned the card over and wrote in small letters at the bottom: "Nayan is my grandson. Had he not written, your name would not have reached me."

Nayan asked, "Are the two of you sisters?"

Bhawani Devi looked at him.

"My mother and her mother were real sisters. But we were both raised in the same house. Her mother died very early, so she called my mother 'Ma'. Everyone in the house thought of us as sisters."

"Then why did you lose touch?"

Bhawani Devi watched neem leaves falling.

"There was no single great reason. First marriage, then living far apart, then houses changed, letters grew fewer, addresses between people were lost. After a time, years went by while we kept saying, 'Now I will write.' Sometimes relationships are lost not through quarrels, but through laziness too."

Nayan had not been prepared for this answer. To him, an old relationship breaking had always meant a quarrel.

On Monday the card went to school, and from the school to the old-age home.

Four days later, what came was not a reply from Gomti Devi but a request: if possible, could she be allowed to speak with Bhawani Devi?

Madhavi made the school's rules clear.

"The children's programme will not make private decisions for families. Nayan's family and the manager of the old-age home will speak first."

His father agreed. Gomti Devi had a nephew who lived in Darbhanga and visited her regularly. Gomti Devi herself had chosen to live in the old-age home; her nephew's flat was on the third floor, the stairs were difficult for her, and the house remained empty all day. Hearing this, Bhawani Devi was silent for a long time.

"I had thought—she must have no one."

Over the phone Gomti Devi laughed. "You still have that old illness of yours—you make up the story first and ask questions later."

Bhawani Devi replied, "And you have your old illness—changing your address and telling no one."

Between their laughter, Nayan understood for the first time that the old affection of elderly people could also be filled with teasing, just like children's friendships.

Two weeks later, the school fixed a day to visit the old-age home. The children went as a group. Madhavi had already made it clear that Nayan and his family could have a separate private meeting, but the class programme was not to be turned into a family spectacle.

Bhawani Devi came from the village with Nayan's father.

In the courtyard of the old-age home, Gomti Devi was sitting on a low wooden seat. Her hair was almost entirely white. Bhawani Devi stopped at the gate.

Nayan had imagined that the two would run forward and embrace. Nothing of the kind happened.

Gomti Devi raised a hand and said—

"So late?"

Bhawani Devi replied—

"I could not find anyone to ask the way."

Gomti Devi looked at Nayan.

"Now you have."

Then Bhawani Devi went forward. The two women held hands and looked at each other's faces for a few moments.

Nayan stepped back two paces. He understood that in this moment his presence was necessary, but not his place between them.

On the other side of the courtyard, the children were meeting the elderly people to whom they had written. Someone was reading a poem, someone was talking about their village, someone was simply listening.

Gomti Devi asked Bhawani Devi—

“Did you really plant a branch of the yellow oleander?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Why did you plant it?”

“So I could tell you it had survived.”

“Then why did you never tell me?”

Bhawani Devi laughed. “There is no answer to that question.”

Gomti Devi laughed too.

Nayan took a blank postcard from his pocket. “This is for both of you.” Gomti Devi asked, “What are we to write now?” Nayan said, “I do not know. Whatever you feel like.”

Bhawani Devi took the card but handed the pen to Gomti Devi. At the top Gomti Devi wrote: “Recipient: Nayan.” Then she passed the card to Bhawani Devi. Beneath it Bhawani Devi wrote: “Message: The path has been found.” Nayan read the card. “Shall we put this in the post?” Gomti Devi said, “Certainly. If we hand it to you, the postcard will be offended.”

Three days later, that card arrived in Nayan’s name at the school address. Madhavi did not read it aloud in class. She quietly placed it in Nayan’s hand.

Nayan did not keep the card between the pages of his book. When he reached home, he put it in the tin box where Grandmother’s old letters were kept. Bhawani Devi asked, “Why there?” Nayan said, “Because this is not my card. It is the address of a road.” Bhawani Devi said nothing. She closed the lid of the box, then opened it again and placed the card on top—where, the next time the box was opened, it would be the first thing anyone saw.

STORY 176

The Flower at the Window

In that narrow lane of Laheriasarai stood an old house whose front wall was so close to the street that, in the rains, water falling from the roof brushed a passer-by's shoulder before reaching the ground. The wall bore an old coat of blue paint, with a small window of iron lattice in the middle. The window was a little above street level, but not so high that a child's eyes could not reach it.

Divakar took that lane to school. The main road was somewhat wider, but there were more rickshaws, handcarts and motor vehicles there. This lane was small, and in the mornings one saw only the milkman, the vegetable seller and children going to school.

One Monday Divakar saw a red hibiscus at the window.

The flower was not in a pot. There was only a single flower in a small brass bowl.

Divakar stopped as he walked. It was dark inside. No face could be seen behind the lattice.

When he reached school, he told his friend Mukul—

"There was a red flower at the window of that house with the blue wall today."

Mukul asked, "So?"

"Nothing. But I'll see tomorrow."

The next day there was a yellow marigold.

Looking at it, Divakar said to himself—

"Yellow today. That means no rushing today."

That day he had left his mathematics exercise book at home. Earlier he would have reached school and invented an excuse. But he remembered the yellow flower. Before class began, he went to the teacher and said plainly that he had left the exercise book at home. The teacher said—

"Bring it tomorrow. There is no need to hide it."

That evening Divakar thought—the yellow flower had been right.

On the third day there was a blue butterfly pea at the window.

Divakar decided—the meaning of blue was: ask questions.

In science class there was something he did not understand. Usually he stayed silent because he was afraid the other children would laugh. He raised his hand. The teacher listened to his question, drew a diagram on the board and explained it again.

On his way back from school, Divakar looked towards the window. The butterfly-pea flower had wilted a little.

He said softly—

“Today this flower did not go to waste.”

He could not be sure whether a faint laugh came from inside or whether he had imagined it.

In this way the flower at the window became the first sentence of Divakar’s day.

He gave the red hibiscus the meaning—do not put work off.

The yellow marigold—think slowly.

The blue butterfly pea—ask a question.

The white bela flower—do not quarrel.

Sometimes a small pink flower appeared whose name Divakar did not know. He gave it the meaning—whatever happens today, we shall see.

Mukul laughed at this game of his.

“Do the flowers give you orders?”

Divakar would say, “Not orders. I make the meanings.”

“Then what is the flower for?”

“You need something from which to make a meaning.”

Mukul had no answer.

Kamala Devi lived behind the window. She was seventy-two. Five months earlier she had slipped in the courtyard and injured her right knee. No bone had broken, but even after the injury healed, the courage to go outside had not returned.

She walked within the house—from the bed to the kitchen door, from there to the inner courtyard, then back to her room. But she did not go as far as the front door. She heard the street; she did not see it.

Her daughter-in-law Leela would say again and again—

“Mother, come as far as the front veranda.”

Kamala Devi would reply—

“The house is small. This much is enough for walking.”

One day the doctor had said clearly that the more the knee moved, the easier it would become. Leela had repeated that advice. Kamala Devi had grown irritated.

“Everyone is worried about my leg. Is the leg mine or everyone’s?”

The next morning she devised a method of her own. She plucked one flower from the inner courtyard, took a small brass bowl, and, leaning on her walking stick, went as far as the front window. She placed the flower in the bowl and returned.

It took her thirty-four steps to get there. Thirty-four to return.

For the first week, that was her limit.

Leela asked nothing about the flower. She understood that if Kamala Devi had devised a way for herself, it should not be turned into a rule.

But slowly Kamala Devi began to hear a new voice from the street.

Sometimes a boy would say—

“Red today. I won’t put work off.”

Sometimes—

“White. I won’t quarrel with Mukul today.”

Sometimes—

“Blue. I’ll ask a question.”

Kamala Devi would stand two arm-lengths behind the window and listen. From the angle of the lattice she could not see the boy’s whole face—only the hair on his head, sometimes the bag on his shoulder, and his feet as he went away.

One day she asked Leela—

“Who is that dark-complexioned boy who goes to school in the morning?”

Leela laughed.

“So many children go.”

“The one who talks to the flowers.”

Leela looked towards the window.

“That must be Shambhu Babu’s grandson Divakar. He lives in the lane opposite.”

Kamala Devi merely said, “Hmm.”

Even after that she did not change the way she chose the flowers. Whatever flower she found blooming in the morning, she placed there.

One day only the red hibiscus had bloomed.

As she put the red flower at the window, a laugh rose inside her—“Today he won’t put work off again.”

That day Divakar really was in a position to put something off. After school his friends wanted to go towards the pond, while he had to go home and bring medicine for his mother. He remembered the red flower at the window. He did not go with his friends.

That evening, as he handed the medicine to his mother, he thought—the flower had been right again.

But the following Wednesday the window was empty.

Divakar went two steps ahead, then turned back.

The bowl was there, but there was not a single flower in it.

He wondered—what did emptiness mean?

If Mukul had been there, he would have said, “The flower is on leave today.”

Divakar stood beneath the window.

There was no sound from inside.

He said softly—

“No meaning today?”

The silence inside remained unchanged.

It was almost time for the school bell. He ran off. But throughout the first class he kept remembering the empty bowl.

On the way back, the bowl was still empty.

This time Divakar put his hand on the front door.

From inside Leela asked—

“Who is at the door?”

“It’s me, Divakar.”

The door opened halfway.

Divakar was silent for a moment. Then he asked—

“Why is there no flower at the window?”

Leela smiled when she saw his face.

“So you are the one who talks to the flowers?”

Divakar grew a little embarrassed.

“I only look at them.”

“Mother did not go as far as the window today. Her knee is a little swollen. She walked only as far as the inner courtyard.”

Divakar looked through the doorway. In the distance an elderly woman with white hair sat on a low wooden seat.

Kamala Devi called out—

“Was the school closed because there was no flower?”

Divakar understood that she had been hearing him all along.

Standing there by the door, he said—

“I thought there might be some meaning.”

Kamala Devi said—

“The flower has no meaning.”

Divakar looked towards the bowl.

“Then why every day?”

Kamala Devi ran a hand over her walking stick.

“There are thirty-four steps from the inner courtyard to the window. If I put a flower there, it is thirty-four steps this way and thirty-four steps back. I don’t have to count. I see the flower and know—I had come this far today.”

Divakar was silent for a few moments.

Then he said—

“Then there is a meaning.”

Kamala Devi raised her eyebrows.

“Tell me, what meaning?”

“You reached the window.”

Leela burst out laughing. Kamala Devi did not laugh, but the hard lines of her face loosened a little.

The next day there was a yellow marigold at the window.

Divakar stopped. By his old rule he ought to have said—think slowly.

He did not.

He only said softly—

“You reached it today.”

A voice came from inside—

“Hmm, I heard you.”

After that, the old meanings of the flower colours came to an end.

Divakar no longer kept account of red, yellow or blue. He only looked to see whether there was a flower or not.

Sometimes Kamala Devi recognised the sound of his footsteps and would already be standing near the window. Half her face could be seen behind the lattice.

“Late today?”

“There was an assembly at school.”

“Bag heavy today?”

“Two extra books.”

“Flower small today?”

“The plant’s fault. Not mine.”

Divakar would laugh and walk on.

The rains began. One morning a strong wind was blowing. A white bela flower had been placed at the window, but the wind had tilted the bowl. Divakar reached out and straightened it.

From inside Kamala Devi said—

“Who told you to touch it?”

Divakar pulled his hand back.

“It would have fallen.”

“If it had fallen, I would have put another one tomorrow.”

Divakar said—

“But today’s one would still belong to today.”

This time Kamala Devi laughed openly.

By the time Bhadau was passing, she needed the support of the walking stick less on the way to the window. Leela noticed, but did not praise her. She understood that Kamala Devi did not like announcements about her progress.

One morning Divakar reached the lane and found the window empty.

His feet stopped of their own accord.

This time he was not afraid. He looked towards the door.

The door was open.

Just inside the doorway, Kamala Devi sat on a low wooden stool. Her walking stick leaned against the wall. In her hand was the same brass bowl. In the bowl was a small red hibiscus.

Divakar looked at the window, then at the doorway.

“The flower is in the wrong place today.” Kamala Devi asked, “Why?”
Divakar said, “The window is over there.”

Kamala Devi placed the bowl beside the stool. "Today my feet came this far." Divakar thought for a moment before answering. In the old days he would have invented some new meaning for the red flower. Now he merely nodded. "Then that is good." He set off towards school.

At the bend in the lane, he looked back once. The flower was not at the window. It was by the doorway. Kamala Devi had not stepped out into the street. She was sitting only just inside the threshold. Divakar said to himself, "This far today." The meaning of what came next he left for tomorrow.

STORY 177

First Earnings

In the first week before the new session began, Gopal's bookshop in Jhanjharpur was at its busiest. Parents holding school lists, children's bags, covering paper, name labels and pens—all rose and fell together across the counter.

Manjari had worked in that crowd for twelve days.

Each morning she finished the work at home and reached the shop at ten, covered books, cut name labels, straightened the corners of pages, and returned home at seven in the evening. For the first two days her fingers stayed sticky with glue. From the third day onward, her hands learnt to fold the paper almost by themselves.

On the evening of the twelfth day, Gopal Sah placed a brown envelope in her hand.

"Count it."

Manjari laughed.

"You have counted it."

"You did the work. The money is yours. Count it yourself."

Standing in a corner of the shop, she counted the notes—one thousand six hundred and eighty rupees.

For the first time she had so much money in her hand without having to ask anyone at home for it.

As soon as she put the envelope into her bag, her eyes went involuntarily to the upper shelf. Two books had been kept aside there. Three weeks earlier, at her request, Gopal Sah had reserved them for her—the books she needed for the first term of her postgraduate Maithili course.

Manjari looked away at once.

The two books cost seven hundred and twenty rupees. The re-enrolment fee was eight hundred. Together they came to one thousand five hundred and twenty.

She knew that calculation by heart.

But today the envelope had another purpose.

When she reached home, the first thing Manjari looked at was her mother's feet.

Sulochana Devi was sitting by the stove. The right strap of her black rubber slipper had again been tied with thread. Three months earlier a cobbler had stitched it once, but the strap had torn again at the edge.

While eating, Manjari asked—

“Mother, how many more days will these slippers last?”

Sulochana Devi drew her feet inward.

“As many as they are meant to.”

“What kind of answer is that?”

“Are you writing the biography of my slippers?”

Manjari smiled and let the matter rest there.

After her mother had gone to sleep that night, she took a length of red thread from the sewing box. The slippers were by the door. She measured the length of the sole with the thread, tied a knot in it, then slipped the thread between the pages of one of her books.

The next day was market day.

Early in the morning Manjari said—

“Come to the market with me today.”

“What do you have to buy?”

“Just come.”

“We can get vegetables near the house.”

“Not vegetables.”

Sulochana Devi looked at her face.

“Did you get paid?”

Manjari was startled.

“Who told you?”

“Were you working twelve days for free?”

Manjari burst out laughing.

“Then come.”

“Tell me first, what are we going to do?”

“Something for you.”

Sulochana Devi asked no more. She put on her old black slippers, tied a small purse into the corner of her sari, and set out with her daughter.

On the way, Manjari kept looking at her mother’s feet. The red thread lay safe between the pages of the book inside her bag.

Gopal Sah’s shop stood before the market.

Manjari had planned to pass without stopping, but Gopal Sah was standing outside.

“Manjari!”

Her feet stopped of their own accord.

Gopal Sah gestured towards the inside.

“Your two books are still here. If you don’t take them by Monday, I’ll have to give them to someone else. The next stock will take time to arrive.”

Sulochana Devi looked at her daughter.

“Which books?”

Manjari gave a brief answer—

“For class.”

Gopal Sah did not realise the weight of the matter.

"Isn't enrolment due by Monday too this time? Two college girls were saying so yesterday."

Manjari's fingers tightened around the strap of her bag.

Sulochana Devi asked—

"You haven't enrolled yet?"

"It will be done."

"Exactly when will you do it?"

"By Monday."

"The fee?"

Manjari did not answer.

Gopal Sah fell silent now. He understood that the matter no longer belonged to the shop.

Sulochana Devi asked quietly—

"How much are the books?"

"Eight hundred rupees."

"And the books?"

"Seven hundred and twenty."

"Total?"

Manjari's voice was low.

"One thousand five hundred and twenty."

Sulochana Devi looked at her daughter for a moment, then said to Gopal Sah—

"Keep the books. We'll take them on our way back."

Manjari said at once—

"No, Mother."

Sulochana Devi began walking.

Ten steps beyond the shop, Manjari caught her by the arm.

"I brought you here to buy you slippers."

Sulochana Devi looked at her own feet as though seeing the slippers for the first time.

"For these?"

"It is my first earnings."

"How much did you get from your first earnings?"

Manjari was silent for a few moments. Then she said—

"One thousand six hundred and eighty."

No surprise appeared on Sulochana Devi's face. She merely asked—

"You counted it?"

"Three times."

"Then the calculation is clear."

"What calculation is clear?"

"The books and the enrolment."

Manjari's voice grew a little sharper.

"That can happen later."

"With whose money?"

"I'll work again."

"When will you work again?"

"When the shop gets crowded again."

"And when will that crowd come again?"

Manjari did not answer.

Sulochana Devi stepped aside and stood at the edge of the road. People kept passing by them.

"Manjari, why did you bring me to the market?"

"To buy a gift."

"For whom?"

"For you."

"Then who gets to choose it?"

Manjari was silent.

"The person receiving the gift has the right to choose, doesn't she?"

Manjari looked at her mother's face. There were no tears in her eyes, nor any hardness. Only the look of an ordinary question.

"She does."

"Then I choose."

"The books are for me."

"And who will read them?"

"I will."

"Are you my daughter or not?"

Manjari pressed her lips together.

Sulochana Devi walked on.

"Come. First, the enrolment."

The college was half a kos from the market. Four students stood in a line on the veranda. Manjari had come here the previous day too, but had turned back before reaching the window.

Today her mother was with her.

When it was time to pay the fee, Manjari opened the envelope. As she took out eight hundred rupees, it felt as though her first earnings were being cut in half.

The moment the receipt came into her hand, Sulochana Devi said—

"Not half now. One task is complete."

Manjari said nothing.

The two of them returned to Gopal Sah's shop.

Gopal Sah brought the books down and set them on the counter. The corner of one cover was slightly bent. Without thinking, Manjari began straightening it with her fingers—twelve days of practice.

Gopal Sah said—

“Shall I put covers on these?”

Manjari smiled for the first time.

“I’ll do that myself.”

Seven hundred and twenty rupees went.

One hundred and sixty remained in the envelope.

Manjari folded the nearly empty envelope and put it into her bag. Just then the red thread slipped out from between the books.

Sulochana Devi bent and picked it up.

“What is this red thread?”

Manjari tried to snatch it, but her mother raised her hand.

There was a knot in the thread.

“This was the measure of my slipper, wasn’t it?”

Manjari grew embarrassed.

“Yes, Mother.”

For the first time Sulochana Devi laughed openly.

“You had imprisoned my foot between the pages of a book?”

“So I wouldn’t forget the size.”

“What will you do with this measure now?”

Before Manjari could answer, her mother placed the thread back in her hand.

“Keep it. My foot will not grow before your second earnings.”

They walked towards the market.

A footwear shop appeared ahead. Manjari’s steps slowed again.

Sulochana Devi noticed, but did not go inside.

A little farther on, a cobbler sat by the roadside. In front of him lay rubber straps, an awl, wire and old soles.

Sulochana Devi sat down there.

“Replace this right strap.”

The cobbler took the slipper in his hand and asked—

“Shall I replace both?”

“Only one is bad.”

Manjari said—

“Replace both.”

Her mother stopped him at once—

“The other one is still good.”

Smiling, the cobbler cut off the right strap and fitted a new, thicker one.

“Thirty rupees.”

Manjari took thirty from what remained and paid him.

Sulochana Devi put the slipper on and walked two steps.

“See? I got my gift.”

“This isn’t a gift. It’s a repair.”

"It is a new strap."

"I wanted to give you a whole new pair of slippers."

"The whole foot is old."

Manjari burst out laughing. Her mother did too.

One hundred and thirty rupees remained in the envelope.

On the way home, rain began to fall. They stood under the awning of a shop. Manjari opened her bag and checked—the books were not wet.

Sulochana Devi asked—

"Do you have the red thread?"

Manjari looked between the books.

"The thread is there."

"Good. We'll take the measure again."

Manjari looked at her mother's slippers. The new strap shone in the rainwater.

"With my second earnings?"

"First we'll see what breaks sooner—the slipper or the books for your second term."

Manjari was about to say something, then did not.

On Monday she went to college. The two books were in her bag. She had covered the first one herself that night. Inside the brown paper, at the corner, the little knot of red thread lay pressed—not for measuring, only because she had not yet felt like throwing the thread away.

As she was leaving the doorway, her mother called, "You have the receipt?" "Yes, that too." "Both books?" "Yes, both." "Money?" Manjari felt inside her bag. "One hundred and thirty."

Sulochana Devi tapped her right slipper twice on the ground. "The strap?" Manjari turned to look. "Strong." "Then go."

Manjari walked as far as the bend in the lane. When she reached it, she looked back. Her mother was standing by the doorway. Not new slippers, but one new strap on the old pair.

Manjari's first earnings had not reached her mother's feet in full. Part of it, saved along the road to those feet, was travelling in her bag in the form of books.

STORY 178

The Returning Song

After seven years, when Raghav got off at the bus stand of his village, for the first time he wondered whether he had got down at the wrong place.

Where a peepal tree had once stood at the unpaved bend, there was now a broad paved road. The peepal was gone. So was the paan shop beneath it. At the western ghat of the pond, where as a boy he had waded knee-deep into the water to catch fish fry, an iron fence now stood and a playing field was being laid out inside. The tin awning of the old oilman's shop had disappeared; in its place stood a white two-storey house.

Raghav hitched the bag higher on his shoulder and stood on the road for a few moments.

A young man stopped his bicycle and asked, "Where are you going?"

Raghav tried to smile. "Mishra Tola."

"Which Mishra Tola?"

At the question, his smile faded on its own. In his childhood there had been only one Mishra Tola.

"Near the old Sanskrit school."

The young man shook his head. "The school was demolished five years ago. There is a community hall there now."

Raghav tightened the strap of his bag. "Ramkishun Mishra's house?"

The young man thought for a moment, then said, "I've heard the name. Go as far as the new bridge to the east, then turn left. Ask someone there."

Raghav thanked him. The young man rode away.

That one small exchange opened such an emptiness within him that all seven years of distance seemed to stand before him at once.

Raghav worked in a textile-dyeing unit in Surat. For the first two years he had not been able to save enough money to come home. Later he had returned when his father fell ill, but after three days he had gone away again. After his father's death, his mother began living with his younger brother Neeraj. This time, when the factory closed for fifteen days, Raghav had thought—let me go and see the village.

He had not said, "I am going back." He had said, "I'll go and see."

He stopped at the new bridge. The drain they had once crossed in childhood on two bamboo poles now had a concrete bridge over it. The village name was written on a blue strip along the side. Even reading the name of his own village did not feel like being welcomed home.

The house was easy to recognise. The bel creeper his father had planted still grew at the doorway, though the veranda wall had been painted pink.

His mother came as far as the door the moment she saw him.

“Raghav!”

Even after so many years, hearing his own name from his mother’s mouth loosened something inside him. He set down his bag and touched her feet.

When Neeraj returned from the fields, the two brothers looked at each other for a few moments. Then Neeraj burst out laughing. “Half of *pardes* has settled into your beard.”

Raghav laughed too.

Much had changed in the house. His father’s cot was gone. The old grain bin in the corner of the veranda had been removed. His mother now slept in the small back room. A tin roof had been put over the middle courtyard so that rain no longer fell straight inside.

By evening neighbours came to see him. Some asked about his earnings, some about prices away from home, some said, “Now you people have become outsiders.”

The word “outsider” stayed lodged in Raghav’s ears.

He kept answering and smiling. But now and then his Maithili sentences stopped midway. After years of speaking a mixture of Gujarati and Hindi in Surat, many old words had drifted away from his tongue. Once his tongue searched for an old word; looking towards his mother, he finally said, “*thaam*”—place.

After dinner that night he stepped out through the doorway. There was electricity, but among all the new lamps along the road he found himself wanting to search for old patches of darkness.

Neeraj asked, “Where are you going?”

“Just walking around nearby.”

“You still know the roads, don’t you?”

Neeraj had meant it as a joke, but Raghav did not answer.

He walked north. Three houses had been built where the old threshing floor used to be. Half the bamboo grove had been cut down. A well from which they used to draw buckets of water in summer had been closed with a lid.

Raghav placed his hand on the lid. The iron held the coolness of the night.

Just then, from a distance, he heard a woman’s voice.

It was an old voice—a little tremulous, a little rough, yet at the end of each line there was a familiar turn.

There was no instrument. No festival. The voice stopped now and then, then began again.

Raghav stood where he was.

He did not understand the first line. In the middle of the second he caught one phrase—“the paddy leaf...”

No complete picture formed within him; only a road of sound opened.

Rain from childhood. Mud up to the waist. His mother transplanting paddy. Bent backs stretching far across the field. One group of women raising a line, another group answering it. Children running along the embankments. Raghav and Neeraj's task was to carry water in a lota.

The old voice rose again. This time the line stopped halfway.

A short response came out of Raghav's mouth by itself—the word the second group used to sing in the field.

The voice stopped.

After a few moments a voice came from the darkness—"Who is that?"

Raghav went closer. Beside a small courtyard, an earthen stove was dying out. On the veranda an old woman sat with a winnowing tray of paddy in her lap. Her white hair was tied at the back of her head.

Raghav tried to recognise her.

The old woman asked again, "Who answered?"

"Me... Raghav."

"Which Raghav?"

He felt a little embarrassed. "Ramkishun Mishra's elder son."

The old woman set down the tray and narrowed her eyes. "Oh—Saroj's Raghav?"

The moment he heard his mother's name, recognition came. This was Phulkumari Kaki—the same woman who used to raise the strongest voice in the fields. Her house had once stood behind the old bamboo grove; now that the bamboo had been cut, the house could be seen directly from the road.

"Kaki, you?"

"I am still right here. Ask where you have been."

Raghav laughed, but there was hesitation in the laughter.

Phulkumari Kaki said, "Sit."

He sat on the edge of the veranda.

"Why the song now?" he asked.

"Song?" Kaki took the winnowing tray in her hands again. "I was winnowing paddy. My mouth started on its own."

"That was the call from the rice-transplanting song, wasn't it?"

"It was. These days machines go round the fields at transplanting time. With whom am I to raise the call?"

Raghav remained silent.

Kaki picked two black grains out of the paddy and set them aside. "You still haven't forgotten the answer."

"I didn't even remember the line."

"Not the line. You remembered the turn."

It took Raghav a little while to understand what she meant.

Phulkumari Kaki raised the field call again. This time Raghav listened carefully. Half the words sounded unfamiliar. Some had not made sense to him even in childhood. Kaki stopped midway and asked, "Do you understand 'aripaniya'?"

Raghav shook his head. "Not properly now."

"Ask your mother. She will explain it."

"You explain it."

"If I explain it, you will understand the word. If you ask your mother, talk of the house will come out with it."

Raghav looked at Kaki. The old woman began winnowing paddy again, as though even saying that much were simply part of the day's work.

"The village has changed a great deal," Raghav said softly.

"If it doesn't change, it will rot."

The answer came at once.

"But I recognise almost nothing."

Kaki laughed. "In daylight you looked at the walls. At night listen to the voices. Put the two together and recognise it."

This time Raghav said nothing.

As he was leaving, Kaki stopped him. "Tomorrow morning tell Saroj I cannot remember the second line of her call. She will lie and say she has forgotten it too. Then she will hum it twice and it will come back."

When Raghav reached home, his mother was still awake. The lamp on the veranda was burning low.

"Where had you gone?"

"To Phulkumari Kaki."

An old familiarity lit his mother's face at once. "Does she still winnow paddy at night?"

"And she still sings too."

His mother laughed. "The day she stops singing, then know she is ill."

Raghav sat down. After a few moments he asked, "What was 'aripaniya' in that field call?"

His mother looked at him. "Where did you find that word?"

"In Kaki's song."

Before answering, his mother hummed half the line. The first time her voice was thin. The second time it steadied. The third time the line became whole.

Raghav's memory did not return as one picture of embankments, paddy, mud or childhood. He only felt that the words he had forgotten had gone on living without him in this house, in the throats of these two old women.

He interrupted his mother's line and said, "Kaki says you have forgotten the second line."

His mother replied at once, "A lie. She is the one who forgot it."

Raghav burst out laughing.

“Shall I get the two of you to sit together tomorrow?”

“Why should I? Let her come here.”

“She said you should go there.”

His mother leaned her back against the veranda pillar. “See? Even after seven years our quarrel is exactly as it was.”

Raghav woke late in the morning. His mother was not in the courtyard. Neeraj said, “She has gone to Phulkumari Kaki’s.”

Raghav stepped outside. From a distance came two old voices. One would raise a line, the other cut in and correct it. Then both would laugh. Then the line would begin again.

Raghav did not go there. He sat at the doorway and listened.

He had to go to the market that afternoon. The ticket for his return to *pardes* the following week was still in his bag. He made no great decision about staying in the village. Home, work, money—all those questions remained where they were.

But when he asked Neeraj, “Does the old road to the market still go by the pond?” the sentence came out without stopping halfway.

Neeraj said, “Not by the pond. Now you go by the new bridge.”

Raghav nodded.

In the distance Phulkumari Kaki’s voice rose. His mother answered.

Raghav understood—the road had changed; the way of answering was still alive within him.

STORY 179

The Border Papers

Seated beneath the tin shelter at the border post, Devaki Devi felt the knot in the end of her sari for the third time. There were no papers inside it. There were two keys—one brass-coloured, the other blackened iron.

The brass key was for the back room of her daughter's house. The iron key was for the grain store at the house of her son Shambhu, south of the border. She often tied both keys into the same knot. This time too she had tied them there while returning from her daughter's house.

That day special checks were under way at the post. A bamboo barrier had been put up since morning. Bicycles, pedestrians, sacks and baskets—everyone was being stopped and asked for identification. Devaki Devi had travelled this road so many times in fifty years that she could not have counted them. She had assumed that, as always, they would ask her name, ask her village, glance at the bag in her hand and let her pass.

But the young employee asked, "Do you have citizenship papers?"

Devaki Devi looked first at his face, then at her bag.

"Whose papers?"

The employee thought the old woman had not heard. He said loudly, "Your citizenship papers. An identity card."

"At home."

"Which home?"

Devaki Devi did not answer that question at once.

In the village to the north lived her daughter Muniya. In the back room there, a cot, a small wooden box, two sheets and a brass lota were always kept separately for her. In the village to the south lived her son Shambhu, in the old courtyard where the tulsi altar dated from her husband's time and a faded photograph from her wedding still hung on the wall.

Devaki Devi said, "The old papers will be in the house on this side. The newer papers will be in the house on that side."

The employee frowned. "I need one."

"I need one too. But you tell me which one."

The people standing in the queue burst out laughing. The employee did not. The senior officer seated behind him looked up from his papers.

"Mother, where are you coming from?"

"My daughter's house."

"And where are you going?"

"My son's house."

"Which country is your citizenship from?"

Devaki Devi was silent for a few moments. "When I was married, my father said the papers had been made. I came to this side with my husband. Later, some papers were made again. Shambhu keeps them."

"Where were you born?"

"On that side."

"Marriage?"

"On this side."

"Where do you live now?"

"Wherever there is work for me."

The officer stopped his pen.

Devaki Devi was told to sit in a corner of the shelter. "Let someone from your family bring the papers. Then we'll see."

She set her bag by her feet and sat down. Inside were flattened rice given by her daughter, a small tin of sattū, and two paper flowers made by her granddaughter. Muniya had said, "Mother, you'll reach by evening. I have already informed Shambhu."

Evening was still far away. But the Bhadau sun struck the tin roof so fiercely that time itself seemed to have grown hot.

Across from the shelter stood little shops on both sides of the road. On one side they accepted Nepali rupees, on the other Indian rupees. Devaki Devi remembered the night news had come of Muniya's first labour and she had crossed this road in the dark. No one had asked her country then; everyone had asked, "Is your daughter all right?" At the end of her husband's life, Muniya had come weeping along this road. At Shambhu's wedding, relatives from the other side had arrived singing along this road. In Devaki Devi's memory, the border was not a single line; it was a road along which people carried grief, ceremonial gifts, pickles, medicine, news and the names of children back and forth.

A boy selling tea came to the shelter. "Mother, tea?"

Devaki Devi asked, "Which side's money will you take?"

The boy laughed. "Whatever you give."

"Then your shop is wiser than the border."

The boy did not fully understand what she meant, but laughing, he set down an earthen cup. Devaki Devi drank half the tea and put the rest behind her bag. It seemed to her that water, sunlight and waiting—none of the three asked anyone's citizenship.

An hour later Muniya came running from the other side. Her son Naval was with her. Muniya stopped at the bamboo barrier.

"Mother, you're here?"

Devaki Devi began to rise, but the employee raised a hand and stopped her.

From a distance Muniya asked, "What happened?"

"They are asking for papers."

"Those must be with Shambhu Bhaiya!"

The senior officer asked, "Do you have any copy of her old citizenship document?"

Muniya shook her head. "There was an old document from her birth. But after we moved house, I don't know which trunk it went into."

Devaki Devi said at once, "The red box in the back room."

"There are clothes in the red box."

"Underneath."

"There are old letters underneath."

"Under those."

Muniya thought for a moment. "Mother, the red box opens with your key."

Devaki Devi touched the knot in her sari. The brass key was inside.

Muniya and Devaki Devi looked at each other. The bamboo barrier stood between them. The key was on this side, the box on that.

Naval said, "Shall I take the key?"

The employee refused. During the check, objects could not be passed across like that.

Devaki Devi sat down again. She felt like laughing, but when she saw Muniya's eyes fill, she did not.

By late afternoon Shambhu came racing up on a bicycle from the south. His kurta was soaked with sweat. In his hand was a plastic bag containing a bundle of papers.

"Mother, your papers weren't at home."

"Did you look on the upper shelf above the grain store?"

"It was locked."

Devaki Devi touched her sari again. The iron key was with her too.

This time Naval burst out laughing. Muniya wiped her tears and smiled. Shambhu put a hand on his head and said, "Mother has brought the keys to both houses with her."

A faint smile appeared even on the senior officer's face, but he immediately looked back at the papers.

In the bundle Shambhu had brought were an old ration document, her husband's death certificate, a land-revenue receipt, and a letter from the panchayat. In some, Devaki Devi's name was written as "Devaki", in others "Devakiya", and in one place "Devaki Devi". Her age was not the same in all of them either.

The employee spread out the papers one by one. "Her birthplace is not stated here."

Shambhu said, "She has lived in the village all these years."

"I am not disputing that. For today's check, her identity has to be clear."

From the other side of the bamboo barrier Muniya said, "She is my mother. She stayed at my house for three days."

From this side Shambhu said, "She is my mother. She lives with me."

Devaki Devi listened to both sides. It seemed to her that both children were pulling her towards themselves, while her body remained still beneath the shelter between them.

The officer asked, "Mother, you tell us yourself—where is your home?"

This time the question was asked gently.

Devaki Devi stood up. First she looked down the road to the north. Muniya stood there—the daughter at whose birth Devaki Devi had gone seven days without sleep. Then she looked south. Shambhu stood there—the son with whom, after his father died, she had completed their half-built house.

She said, "If fever rises at night, Muniya will say, 'Mother, stay here.' If the grain store has to be opened in the morning, Shambhu will say, 'Mother, give me the key.' If you ask where my papers are, some of mine lie in both houses."

The employee was about to interrupt, but the senior officer stopped him with a hand.

Devaki Devi continued, "I have answered where my home is. Now you look at the papers and give the answer about citizenship."

Silence spread beneath the shelter again.

The officer went through the papers Shambhu had brought once more. On the panchayat letter was written the serial number from an old electoral roll. He spoke to someone in the room inside. An assistant brought out an old register. Her name, her husband's name and the village were matched. Questions arose over the difference in age, then two elderly local women standing in the queue recognised Devaki Devi. They were asked only her name and family details; the employee wrote these down separately.

Half an hour later the officer said, "You may cross today. But next time, keep an identity document with you."

Devaki Devi lifted her bag. "Next time I'll divide the keys to the two houses as well."

Shambhu said, "Give me the key."

From the other side Muniya immediately called, "Open my box first."

This time Devaki Devi laughed. "See? The quarrel over the keys has started before the papers."

The bamboo barrier was raised. Devaki Devi took two steps south, then stopped and turned. Muniya was standing on the other side. Devaki Devi untied the end of her sari and held up the brass key.

"Send Naval next week. We'll open the red box."

Muniya said, "You come yourself."

Devaki Devi did not answer. She merely raised her hand.

By evening she reached Shambhu's house. The day's last light lay on the tulsi leaves in the courtyard. Shambhu asked for the key to open the grain store. Devaki Devi untied the knot and placed the iron key in his palm. She kept the brass key with herself.

After dinner Shambhu said, "Mother, tomorrow we'll put all your papers in one place. Your name, age, birth—whatever is wrong, we'll have it looked at."

Devaki Devi asked, "You'll keep them in one place?"

"Yes, in one place."

"Then in which house?"

Shambhu fell silent.

Devaki Devi hung the knotted end of her sari on the nail beside her cot. The iron key had remained with Shambhu. The brass key was still in the knot.

The papers would be kept in one place the next day. The keys still pointed in two directions.

STORY 180

Flood Camp

The water of the Kamla River had not reached the school grounds, so people from three villages had been brought there. Rows of blue tarpaulins stood all around the field. In the middle, a platform had been made by tying together old bamboo poles. Behind the platform were the school wall and a narrow passage where, during the day, sacks of rice, dry firewood and empty drums were kept.

On the evening of the fourth day of the flood, a red cloth was hung on the platform. In white letters it read—“Women’s safety is our first responsibility.”

The wire of the loudspeaker ran over the mud to the platform. The people in the camp were told there would be a special meeting at seven in the evening. The women were seated in front. The men behind them.

Ratna came out from the tarpaulin shelter with her twelve-year-old daughter Chunmun and sat in front. The wall of their house had been washed away. A brass plate, two towels, one bag and Chunmun’s old school satchel—that was all that remained.

On the platform sat the block official, a health worker, a panchayat representative and the coordinator of the volunteer group. The coordinator’s name was Harinandan. All day he moved about with a whistle round his neck and a canvas bag full of papers hanging from his shoulder.

Before the meeting, Harinandan ran about below the platform straightening chairs, tightened one corner of the red cloth, then turned towards the women and said—

“If anyone has any difficulty, speak without hesitation. There is a separate night watch.”

A little later the block official began his speech.

“A disaster does not merely break houses,” he said. “It also breaks the ordinary arrangements of safety. That is why special attention will be given to the dignity and safety of women.”

The people seated in front listened in silence.

“After eight at night, women should not go alone to the rear part of the camp. If anyone needs help, call a guard. A separate box has been placed for complaints. Do not remain silent under anyone’s pressure.”

Harinandan pointed towards a wooden box hanging in one corner of the platform. There was a narrow slit in its lid. On top was written—“Confidential.”

Chunmun whispered near Ratna's ear—

"Mother, what does confidential mean?"

Ratna said, "Something that is not said in front of everyone."

"Then will the box listen?"

Ratna stroked her head. "The paper will listen."

By the time the meeting ended, the darkness had deepened. The red cloth shone in the light of the bulb. Harinandan made another announcement—

"Anyone whose family grain coupon has not yet been completed can give the name now. The list will be closed tomorrow morning before distribution."

Chunmun's name was missing from Ratna's coupon. She had mentioned it three times during the afternoon. Harinandan had said, "We'll see in the evening."

Holding Chunmun's hand, Ratna went towards the platform. Five or seven people were standing there to have names entered. Harinandan examined one paper after another.

When Ratna's turn came, he looked at the coupon.

"My daughter's name is missing."

Harinandan gave a short reply—"Yes."

"Do you have the old family coupon?"

"The water took it."

"Any proof?"

Ratna pointed towards Chunmun. "Isn't she proof?"

Harinandan did not smile. He folded the coupon and put it into his bag.

"I'll reconcile the list tonight. Come back after a while."

Ratna asked, "Why not now?"

"There is a crowd."

Ratna wanted to say something, but the people standing behind pushed forward. She took Chunmun and returned towards the tarpaulin shelter.

For dinner that night, flattened rice, jaggery and boiled potatoes were distributed. Chunmun saved half a potato and put it into the bag.

"I'll eat it in the morning."

Ratna said, "By morning, half the village's ants will reach it through this mud."

Chunmun laughed.

At eight, the main bulb over the field was switched off. Only the bulb on the platform, the lantern near the kitchen, and two lights along the women's tarpaulin row remained lit.

Ratna could not forget the coupon. A family of five received five shares; the two of them were receiving only one. Chunmun kept saying she was not very hungry, but at night she kept looking at her mother's plate.

"I'm going to get the coupon," Ratna said.

Chunmun sat up. "I'll come too."

“No. Sit with Neelam Kaki.”

Neelam Devi from the neighbouring tarpaulin said, “Go. I’ll watch her.”

Ratna went towards the platform. No one was in front now. The red cloth was still hanging there. “Women’s safety is our first responsibility”—the words could be read in the half-light of the bulb.

Harinandan was not on the platform.

“Harinandan Babu?” Ratna called.

A voice came from behind—“Here.”

A lantern had been placed in the narrow passage between the platform and the school wall. Its flame was very low. Harinandan was bent near the rice sacks, looking through papers.

Ratna went there, but stopped at the mouth of the passage.

“My coupon?”

Harinandan took the coupon from his bag.

“The name can be added.”

“Then add it.”

He did not hand over the coupon.

“The list is full.”

Ratna did not understand. “My daughter is with me. Does a full list make my daughter any less real?”

Harinandan came a little closer.

“Some things do not happen through paperwork.”

Ratna stepped back. A bamboo post was behind her.

“Give me my coupon.”

Harinandan caught her wrist. His grip was not so hard that a cry came out on its own, but it was firm enough that she could not free her hand at once.

Ratna looked down. Harinandan’s fingers were around her wrist. In his other hand he held the coupon.

“Why make a noise?” he said softly. “I am only trying to help.”

Ratna jerked her hand. Harinandan moved in front of her and blocked the way.

“The name can also be struck off tomorrow.”

What followed that sentence made very little sound—the scrape of cloth, a palm striking the bamboo wall, Ratna’s muffled “Leave me,” and the trembling flame of the lantern. Harinandan pressed her towards the wall and put unwanted hands on her body. Ratna pushed his shoulder with all her strength. The end of her sari caught on a split in the bamboo and tore.

At that moment a child began crying in front of the platform.

Harinandan paused for an instant. Ratna did not bite his arm; she dug her nails in hard and scratched it, then got out of the passage.

When she reached the light of the platform bulb, she did not run. She walked slowly. Her right hand was trembling. She held the torn corner of her sari clenched in her fist.

When she reached the tarpaulin, Chunmun asked—

“Did you get the coupon?”

Ratna did not answer.

The moment Neelam Devi saw her face, she stood up.

Neelam asked again, “What happened?”

Ratna said, “Nothing.”

Neelam saw her wrist. Four red finger marks were clearly visible.

“This is nothing?”

Ratna opened her fist. The torn corner of the sari came out.

Lowering her voice, Neelam asked, “Who?”

Ratna looked towards the platform. The red cloth was still shining.

“The one who has the key to the complaint box.”

Neelam was silent for a few moments. Then she went to the neighbouring tarpaulin and brought Sugni Devi. Sugni was about sixty years old. Since the first day of the flood, she had taken it upon herself to keep watch at night along the women’s row.

Sugni listened to Ratna’s entire account. She did not interrupt even once.

Then she said, “You will not go alone.”

Startled, Ratna asked, “Where?”

“Back there.”

Ratna stared at her.

Ratna asked again, “Now?”

Sugni’s answer was brief—“Now.”

Neelam asked, “Why?”

Sugni said, “By morning that passage will be cleaned. The coupon will be changed. The lantern will be moved. And we will go on asking ourselves what happened.”

The three women moved towards the platform. Chunmun was left in the neighbouring shelter.

Two guards were sitting in front of the platform. Sugni told them, “Come to the back.”

Neelam asked, “Why?”

“Come.”

One guard got up. The other said, “Harinandan Babu is making the list.”

Sugni looked at him. “All the better.”

When they reached the back, Harinandan was not there. The lantern was burning. Ratna’s coupon lay on the ground. One corner of it was stuck in the mud. Two red threads from her sari were caught in the split bamboo.

Sugni touched nothing.

“Guard Sahib,” she said, “stand here.”

“What happened?”

“Remember exactly what you have seen.”

Ratna bent to pick up the coupon. Sugni stopped her.

“Not yet,” Sugni said.

This time Ratna’s voice was hard. “That is my daughter’s coupon.”

Sugni looked at her. “Then you pick it up.”

Ratna picked up the coupon.

At nine that night, the block official was called from his resting shelter. The woman panchayat representative also came. Harinandan was found and brought there.

When he arrived, there were four scratches on the back of his hand.

“What is this?” the official asked.

Harinandan replied, “I got them while lifting sacks.”

Ratna did not look at him.

The woman representative asked, “Ratna Devi, tell us.”

Ratna first showed the torn end of her sari. Then her wrist. Then the coupon. After that, she told what had happened once. Not a second time.

Harinandan began to speak in the middle—

“She is trying to defame me—”

Sugni said sharply, “Your turn will come later.”

A crowd began gathering in front of the platform. The red cloth seemed to tremble slightly though there was no wind, because people were moving behind it.

The woman representative said, “The meeting will be held inside. Clear the crowd.”

For the first time, Ratna looked directly at the platform.

“Why inside?”

For a moment, all voices there fell silent.

Ratna said, “The speech about safety was given outside. Why should this matter go inside?”

The official’s eyes went to the red cloth.

A little later, three chairs were placed in front of the platform. The loudspeaker was not switched on. Ratna did not repeat the entire incident again. She only said—

“I have said what I had to say. The guard saw the place at the back. Look at my wrist, my sari, my coupon and his hand. The rest is your work.”

Harinandan was removed from volunteer duty that night. Before he was sent out of the camp, his bag was checked. Inside were coupons from five families whose names had been held back with the words, “We’ll see in the evening.” Four of those coupons belonged to women.

No one immediately knew whether anything else had been said to anyone that night.

But by morning the complaint box had been moved from the corner of the platform to the middle of the women's tarpaulin row. Its key was given to the woman panchayat representative. Two people began sitting together to prepare the lists. The sacks were removed from the narrow passage at the back, and a brighter light was installed there for the night.

Another meeting was held in the morning. The official said—

"Yesterday's incident was unfortunate. The security arrangements will be made even stricter—"

Sugni interrupted, "Keep the speech short. Put up the lights first."

A soft laugh ran through the people, but Ratna did not laugh.

She was standing in the distribution line with Chunmun. Both their names were on the new coupon.

Chunmun asked, "Mother, why is the confidential box here now?"

Ratna looked at the box.

"Where people can see it."

"Will something confidential stay in sight?"

Ratna thought for a few moments.

"The box will stay in sight. What is inside will not."

Chunmun nodded as though she understood.

Yesterday's red cloth was still hanging on the platform. "Women's safety is our first responsibility."

The passage behind the cloth was now plainly visible. The rice sacks had been removed. A white light burned there instead of the lantern.

Ratna looked that way once.

Then she handed her coupon to Chunmun.

"This time, you keep it."

Chunmun put the coupon inside her school satchel.

Floodwater still filled the low-lying fields of the villages. The camp ground had begun to dry. Behind the platform, repeated footsteps through the mud had made a path.

STORY 181

The Red Blanket

The rear veranda of the city's old hospital remained open all night. There was a curfew on the main road outside, but the movement of injured people inside did not stop. In one corner of the veranda, two bamboo cots had been joined to make a temporary place. There lay the body of a boy, covered with a red blanket. A small earthen cup lay overturned near his head, and by his feet was a single slipper smeared with dust.

The boy had been found at the bend by the canal bridge after the evening riot. The rickshaw-puller who brought him had said only that, when the smoke cleared, he saw the boy lying by the roadside. By the time they reached the hospital, the boy had stopped breathing. No one knew his name.

At two in the morning, Nandlal, the hospital clerk, wrote in the register —“Unidentified boy, estimated age eight years.” He left the box for religion blank.

By dawn, two separate crowds had gathered outside. People from the eastern neighbourhood said the boy might be a child missing from their quarter. People from the western neighbourhood made the same claim. Police constables kept everyone outside the gate.

Karim Mian was with the first group. His nephew Sameer had been missing since the night before. Karim Mian said, “Sameer had a red blanket. His mother wrapped him in it when they left home.”

At the head of the second group was Ramvriksh Sah. His neighbour's son Munna was also missing. Ramvriksh said, “I saw his grandmother give him a red blanket with my own eyes. This boy is from our neighbourhood.”

The sub-inspector posted at the gate listened to both men.

“Two people from each family may go inside for identification.”

Karim Mian said at once, “We will go first. The boy was found on our side.”

Ramvriksh objected, “Half the road by the canal bridge lies on our side.”

In a tired voice, the sub-inspector said, “A dead body is not divided by measurement. Whoever can identify him, come inside.”

Sameer's mother, Shabnam, went in with Karim Mian. Munna's grandmother, Devaki Devi, went with Ramvriksh. Reaching the veranda, the two women stopped a little distance away. The red blanket covered the body from head to foot.

Shabnam's hands were trembling.

"There was a small burn mark near the ring finger of his right hand," she said softly.

Devaki Devi said at once, "Munna's little toe on his left foot was slightly crooked."

Sarita, the nurse, looked at both women.

"We will check one mark at a time. We will not keep lifting the blanket again and again."

The hand was uncovered first. Shabnam looked carefully. There was no old burn mark near the ring finger. She remained silent for a few moments, then shook her head.

"This is not Sameer."

The tension in Karim Mian's face eased a little. But it was not relief. Sameer was still missing.

Then the foot was shown. Devaki Devi bent down and looked. The little toe was straight.

"Not Munna," she said.

Ramvriksh immediately asked, "The child's age?"

"About eight," Sarita said.

"Munna is eight too."

Devaki Devi stopped him.

"A child does not become ours merely because the age matches."

Both families went outside, but the crowd did not disperse. The discussion now rested less on the boy's identity and more on the red blanket.

A young man named Akbar, who had come with Karim Mian, said, "The red blanket looks like the one from Shabnam sister's house. Look at the white stitching along the edge."

Raghunath from Ramvriksh's side replied, "Twenty blankets of this same kind were distributed in our neighbourhood last winter. They had white stitching too."

"Then prove it."

"You prove yours first."

Before long, both groups began collecting testimony of their own. Someone remembered that Sameer had been wrapped in a red blanket that night. Someone remembered that Munna's grandmother's blanket had thread of this same colour. Someone was sure that the bend by the canal bridge was on "their" side. Someone else was certain that the crowd had chased the boy there from the other side.

Nandlal listened to all this from inside the veranda. The register lay open before him. The blank box for religion seemed to him like the largest space on the page.

At half past seven, Mangla Devi, an employee of the municipal relief store, arrived at the hospital carrying three bundles. They contained sheets, bandages

and two blankets. As soon as she turned towards the veranda, she saw the red blanket.

“How did this blanket get here?” escaped from her mouth.

Sarita asked, “Do you recognise it?”

“It is from our store.”

The people outside fell silent all at once.

Mangla Devi lifted one corner of the blanket. On the inner fold, a small ‘17’ had been embroidered in black thread.

“Last winter, thirty-seven red blankets were stitched for the municipal store. A number was embroidered inside each one. This was number seventeen.”

At that moment, Sita Musaharin, who had come with Mangla Devi, put down the bundle and examined the edge of the blanket. Her women’s group had done the stitching for that municipal batch.

“Do you know why all those blankets have white thread on the edges?” she asked.

No voice answered.

“The red thread ran out halfway through. The market was closed. We finished the edges with whatever white thread was left. The same stitching went east and west alike.”

Akbar kept his eyes fixed on the blanket. Raghunath folded his arms. What both sides had taken to be a special mark of their own homes had been stitched onto dozens of blankets in the same room on the same night.

The sub-inspector said, “The cloth has not identified him. Look at the things found on the body.”

Sarita brought a small paper bag. Inside were a mud-stained glass marble, half a broken slate pencil, two chickpeas, and a small brass-coloured bell. No name, no amulet, no thread.

Ramvriksh looked at the bell. “Children keep these things for play.”

Karim Mian said, “Everyone plays with marbles too.”

“Then any of these things could belong to anyone,” Nandlal said.

For the first time, no one objected to that sentence.

Karim Mian stepped forward.

“But the boy was found in this blanket.”

Sarita turned towards him.

“No,” Sarita said clearly.

Karim Mian stopped.

Sarita said, “The boy was brought in without a blanket. The night was cold. I took this blanket from the store to cover the body.”

The murmuring from outside the gate slowly died away. The red colour that had become the claim of two neighbourhoods through the night turned out to be a number from the hospital’s old store.

Ramvriksh asked, “Then whose child is he?”

The question remained unanswered in the veranda.

Nandlal looked at the register. The empty box was still empty.

At ten o'clock, two separate lists arrived from the police station. Seven names of missing people from the eastern neighbourhood, nine from the western one. The people who had made both lists were eager not to let their own number appear smaller. Nandlal circled the names whose ages matched the boy's, but none carried a distinguishing mark that could settle the matter.

"Add him temporarily to the eastern list," said a young man who had come with Karim Mian.

"Why?" Nandlal asked.

"He was found on that side."

Raghunath immediately said, "The bend is shared. Then put him on both lists."

Nandlal capped his pen.

"I will not record one child as dead twice."

With that, he set the lists aside.

By noon, five families had arrived. One had a seven-year-old son, another a nine-year-old. One child had a small mole near his ear, another a black thread around his wrist. Each mark was checked one by one. No one recognised this boy as their own.

But outside, the two groups gathered again. Now the argument was about who had first set fire near the bend where the boy had been found that night. The police kept trying to move both groups away. Inside the hospital, while drinking water, Sarita said, "We have not found the body's name, but people are ready to give his death their own name."

Mangla Devi straightened the edge of the blanket.

"Last night it was only something to keep out the cold."

Nandlal asked, "And now?"

"Now everyone is reading its colour."

In the afternoon, the sub-inspector decided that until identification was made, the body would remain under the hospital's care. It would not be handed over to any community. Both groups were dissatisfied, but this time they no longer had the red blanket to argue over. Sarita folded it and placed it beside Mangla Devi's bundles, then covered the boy with a white sheet.

In the evening Shabnam came again. Sameer had still not been found. She stood for a few moments at the veranda door. Devaki Devi too had come there looking for news of Munna. The two women recognised each other—they had stood on opposite sides of the same body that morning.

Shabnam asked softly, "Munna?"

Devaki Devi shook her head.

"Sameer?"

Shabnam shook her head too.

For a few moments, both women looked towards the white sheet inside the veranda.

Devaki Devi opened her bag. There were two rotis inside. She held one out to Shabnam.

“Have you eaten anything since morning?”

Shabnam took the roti. The two women sat down by the doorway. Inside, Nandlal sat with his pen resting over the blank box in the register. Outside, people from the two neighbourhoods moved along the road calling the names of their missing children.

As Mangla Devi tied up the bundle, she put the red blanket at the very bottom. The black-thread ‘17’ inside it appeared once more, then disappeared into the fold.

STORY 182

Don't Ask the Name

By half past ten at night, near the small bridge south of Kamtaul, the train did not so much stop as come to rest as though torn apart. The first three coaches had left the rails and tilted to one side. In the darkness came first the screech of metal, then the sound of glass breaking, and then many voices calling out at once. People from the nearby villages came running with lanterns, bamboo poles and sheets. Within ten minutes, the station's small waiting room had become a makeshift treatment area for the injured.

When Pragya Devi, a nurse from the primary health centre, arrived, seven injured people were already lying on the veranda. One had a split scalp, another an arm bent at an unnatural angle, another was breathing in short, shallow bursts. With her was Deepak, a laboratory assistant carrying a small blood-testing kit. Pragya knelt beside the first injured person.

"Name?" a local young man asked.

Pragya stopped him. "Don't ask the name yet. Check the breathing first."

She took the injured woman's pulse and told Deepak, "Test the blood group. Keep pressure on the head wound."

The young man looked a little taken aback. He had paper and a pen in his hand.

"Won't there be a register?"

"There will. But the treatment register comes first. The register of names comes after that."

Two large sheets of paper were hung on the station wall. On one, Pragya had "Treatment" written at the top, and below it: serial number, injury, blood group, destination sent to. The second sheet remained blank except for the heading: "Family Search."

The number of injured people kept increasing. The door of one coach had jammed; when it was forced open with bamboo poles, five people were brought out. Some could say their names, some could not. Those who could were entered separately on the Family Search sheet. For those who could not, only their clothing, approximate age and the coach from which they had been found were noted. On the Treatment sheet, only the serial numbers kept increasing.

"Number eleven—B negative," Deepak called out loudly. "Two units needed immediately."

There was a stir among the people standing outside the waiting room. Four young men came in to donate blood. Deepak began testing them. Just then a voice rose from the direction of the gate—

“Tell us the names of the injured first!”

It was not one voice. Within a short while twenty or twenty-five people had gathered near the gate. Some carried lanterns, some sheets of paper. Two separate groups had made lists of names of their own. Outside, people were guessing how many passengers on the train were from which neighbourhood, which caste, which religion.

Shambhunath, a local teacher who had been helping lift the injured, went outside.

“Whatever names have been verified are on the Family Search sheet.”

A young man said, “All the names aren’t there.”

“Not all are known.”

“Then how will we know which people are more badly injured?”

Shambhunath asked, “Whom are you looking for?”

The young man was silent for a moment. “Show us the list first.”

Inside, Pragya was bandaging the leg wound of number eleven. The man was semi-conscious. A ticket had been found in his pocket, but no paper bearing his name. A man from one of the groups outside came as far as the veranda and tried to look at his face.

“Who does he look like?” he asked the people standing behind him.

Pragya drew the curtain.

“Stay outside.”

“We need to know his name.”

“Right now he needs blood.”

“Religion?”

Pragya looked at him. “There is no box for that in the blood test.”

Having said that, she bent over the wound again.

Of the four possible donors, one young man’s blood matched. His name was Ramzan Ansari. Deepak wrote his name in the legal register and took his signature, but on the Treatment sheet on the wall he wrote—“Donor number four—B negative.” Ramzan asked, “Who will receive it?”

Deepak said, “Number eleven. The test matches.”

Ramzan looked towards the curtain for a moment, then held out his arm. “All right.”

Outside, the demand for names grew louder. Some people said the administration was hiding names. Others said injured people from one community were being taken inside first. Two different figures were circulating in mobile-phone messages—one said eight dead, another thirteen; both added guesses about religion, even though the death toll at the station had not yet been verified. Shambhunath looked at the papers held by two young men. The

same injured person had been counted under different names on both lists. He said, “Do not kill someone on a list before he has died. Write the name after it is verified.” The young man holding the paper was annoyed, but he had to strike out the number.

Meanwhile an elderly man, Baidyanath Chaudhary, pushed his way to the gate. His daughter Sunaina had been on that train.

“Where is the list of names?” His voice was trembling.

Shambhunath took him to the Family Search sheet. Seven names were written there. Sunaina’s was not among them.

Baidyanath’s face fell. “Names matter, Babu. If the name is not there, how am I to find her?”

Pragya heard him from inside and came out.

“Names matter,” she said, “for families. The treatment number matters too—for the injured. Do not make the two into the same thing.”

She asked Baidyanath for Sunaina’s age, clothing, seat and a description of the bag she had with her. At the bottom of the Family Search sheet they wrote—“Sunaina Chaudhary, about twenty-six, green shawl, second coach.” A question mark was placed beside it.

Fifteen minutes later a volunteer came running. “A young woman from the second coach has been sent to the school to the north. She had a green shawl.”

Baidyanath wanted to go there. Shambhunath sent a young man with him. This time the name was not a rumour; it had become a road.

By one in the morning, the crowd outside the station was doing two kinds of work—some people were genuinely searching for their own, while others were adding up numbers. A young man from one group raised his mobile phone to photograph the Treatment sheet. When he saw only serial numbers and blood groups, he grew irritated.

“What will anyone understand from this? Write the names.”

Deepak said, “From this, I understand who needs which blood.”

“What will people understand?”

“Show people the Family Search sheet.”

“There is no religion on it.”

“Why should there be?”

The young man did not answer. He went outside, but returned after a while. This time a teenage boy was with him, a bandage tied around his head.

“He can tell you his name—Sajid.”

Deepak added the name to the Family Search sheet. In the Treatment register, his entry already existed—number seventeen, blood group A positive, head wound, conscious.

The young man asked, “Will you write his name on the Treatment sheet now?”

Deepak shook his head. "The name will remain in the hospital file. This wall is for blood and injuries."

At two in the morning blood was needed again. This time the woman listed as number twenty-three was found to have O negative blood. A call went out. Only one elderly man stepped forward—Madhusudan Sah. His own son was missing, but his blood matched.

"I'll give it," he said. Deepak replied, "You are very tired." "Tired, not ill."

After the tests, the doctor gave permission. While donating blood, Madhusudan asked, "Has number twenty-three's name been found?" Pragya said, "No." "Then write—someone's mother, someone's daughter." Pragya did not smile. "That would not be a name. It would be a guess." Madhusudan fell silent. After a while he said, "All right. Write it when the name is found."

Pragya liked that small sentence. All night the crowd outside had wanted to put everyone immediately into some box; for the first time, someone had accepted that a name could be something worth waiting for.

A little before dawn, news came from the school to the north—Sunaina was safe, with an injury to her arm. The young man who had gone with Baidyanath returned and struck out the question mark on the list. Beside Sunaina's name was written—"Found."

At that same time, the man listed as number eleven regained consciousness. Pragya gave him water.

"Can you tell us your name?" The man moved his lips. "Harishankar Paswan."

Pragya added the name to the Family Search sheet. A man standing outside the gate immediately began writing something on his own list. On the other side, Ramzan was drinking tea with a bandage around his arm. He did not know that his blood had gone into Harishankar's body; Harishankar did not know who the donor had been. Both facts were linked by serial number in the hospital's internal register, not on the lists outside.

As morning light grew, both sheets on the station wall could be seen clearly. The Family Search sheet was now crowded with names—beside some was written "Found", beside others "Hospital", beside some there was still a question mark. Around that sheet people cried, laughed, asked directions and ran.

Beside it, the Treatment sheet did not contain a single name. Beside number seventeen was "bandaged", beside number twenty-three "blood", beside number eleven "sent to district hospital"—nothing more. A young man outside asked again, "Will you never write names on this sheet?"

Pragya looked at both sheets with eyes exhausted from the long night. "This sheet has a different job." The young man was about to say something, but at that moment a family saw the name of their relative on the Family Search sheet and ran towards the school to the north. The question was left where it was.

Deepak was sorting the empty blood bags. On the label of one bag were written only the serial number, blood group and time. He placed it in the treatment box. Outside, names were searching for the road home; inside, letters and numbers were tracing routes through bodies.

STORY 183

The Register

Evening sunlight was resting for the last time on half of a pillar in the police-station veranda when Bhawani Devi arrived with her son Jogendra. In her hand was an old photograph of Devaki—blue sari, no bindi on her forehead, her eyes not looking straight at the camera but a little to the left.

Devaki had not returned home for three days. She spent her days in a sewing room in the market, stitching borders on blouses. On the first day, Bhawani waited, thinking she had been delayed. On the second, the proprietor said Devaki had left work after midday. On the third morning, Jogendra said they should go to the police station.

The constable seated behind the desk opened the register. The date had been written at the top of the page in red ink. Below it, the details of four missing people had already been entered.

“First tell me the name.”

Bhawani Devi said, “Devaki Mahato.”

“Age?”

“About twenty-eight.”

The constable looked at Jogendra. “And you?”

“Her brother.”

He kept writing. Village, hamlet, clothing, height, the old burn mark on the left wrist. On the back of the photograph, Jogendra wrote the family name in pencil. Bhawani Devi could not read. At the end, the constable took her thumb impression and said that the information would be sent to police stations in all directions.

As they came outside, Jogendra said, “Mother, the work is done.”

Bhawani Devi tucked the empty photograph envelope into the end of her sari. “He wrote the name, didn’t he?”

“He did.”

On the fourth day, Chanda, Jogendra’s daughter, who studied at college, went to the police station. Her grandmother had told her, “Go and read the paper once. I put my thumb impression on it; you look at the letters.”

Chanda was reading the list of missing people posted on the veranda wall when she stopped. In the third row was Devaki’s photograph. Beneath it was written—“Devaki Devi, wife of Jogendra Mahato, age 32 years.”

Chanda looked first at the photograph, then at the line, then at the name of her own father, Jogendra.

She ran inside. “Why does this say Bua is Father’s wife?”

A different constable was on duty then. He opened the register and looked at the original entry. The first writer’s handwriting slanted. In the box marked “relationship”, at first glance it was not clear whether the word was ‘brother’ or ‘husband’; Jogendra’s name followed it. While preparing the list, someone had read it as ‘husband’. As to how the age had gone from twenty-eight to thirty-two, the register had no answer.

“We’ll correct it,” the constable said.

Chanda asked, “The paper on the wall?”

“A new one will be put up.”

“And the papers sent outside?”

The constable paused. “Wherever possible, the correction will be sent.”

Bhawani Devi came to the police station again. This time, before putting her thumb impression anywhere, she had Chanda read everything aloud. In small letters beside the original line in the register was added—“Unmarried; Jogendra, biological brother; age 28.” The old words were not erased. Only a thin line was drawn through them.

Bhawani Devi asked, “So now my daughter has become unmarried again?”

The constable opened his mouth to answer, but Chanda took her grandmother by the hand.

By midday the corrected notice for the wall had still not been made. The old paper remained posted in the veranda. Two women going to the market read it and carried the story as far as Bhawani Devi’s house: when had Devaki been married, who was Jogendra, and why had the family hidden it? Bhawani Devi answered no one. In the evening, she took Chanda and went to the police station again.

At that moment a constable from an outlying post arrived with a bundle of papers. The top sheet was a copy of the names of missing people. Beside Devaki’s name it now read—“Devaki Devi alias Devaki Mahato.” The space for relationship had been left as a blank line.

Chanda asked, “Why ‘alias’?”

The writing constable said, “The name in the first notice and the corrected name look different. So whoever copied it must have written it this way.”

Bhawani Devi said, “When did Devaki get two names?”

“She does not have two names. It is a correction in the paperwork.”

“Then does the paper understand that?”

The constable did not answer. In red ink he wrote “correction to be sent” on the returned list. Bhawani Devi asked how many such papers had gone out in all directions. No one could give a number.

Chanda said softly near her grandmother’s ear, “Bua is still only one person. The papers are multiplying.”

This time Bhawani Devi gave no thumb impression. She merely looked at the old notice on the wall and walked out.

On the fifth day, the police reached the sewing room in the market. The proprietor, Ramanand Sah, said Devaki had asked for an accounting of her wages three days earlier. There had been an argument over the account. He admitted that voices had been raised, but denied striking her. The other women workers said separately that Devaki's cheek had been swollen that afternoon and that her sewing box had been left behind in the room.

"She left on her own," Ramanand kept repeating.

"Tell us where she went."

"How would I know?"

A new note was added to the register—"Left the workplace voluntarily."

When Bhawani Devi heard this sentence read by Chanda, she asked, "Who wrote about the swelling on her cheek?"

Chanda read the register again. There was no mention of the swelling.

On the sixth day, a message reached the police station from a women's shelter in the district town. Four days earlier, a young woman had been found sitting near the bus stand. Name—Devaki Mahato. Father—late Ramnath Mahato. The village name was almost the same as well. A woman staff member at the shelter said on the telephone that the young woman could not remember her home telephone number, but said she had a brother named Jogendra.

The constable on duty looked at the old list on the wall. It still said—"Devaki Devi, wife of Jogendra Mahato, age 32."

"Our entry says her husband is Jogendra," he said. "Your young woman says Jogendra is her brother."

The shelter worker replied, "She is sitting in front of me. She says she has never been married."

"Age?"

"Twenty-eight."

For a few moments there was silence at both ends.

The constable opened the original register. He saw the correction beside the entry. Then the matter moved forward.

That evening Bhawani Devi, Jogendra and Chanda went with the police to the district town. In the small courtyard of the shelter, Devaki sat wrapped in a yellow shawl. The old burn mark on her left wrist was clear. The swelling on her cheek had gone down a little, but a blue bruise was still visible beneath her eye.

Bhawani Devi did not run the moment she saw her. At first she simply stood still. Devaki rose, took two steps, and then mother and daughter held one another.

Jogendra stood behind them. Chanda squeezed his hand.

The shelter worker said quietly, "She says the proprietor of the sewing room had withheld her wages. When she asked for the account, he hit her. After she

came out, she did not have the courage to return home. She walked as far as the bus stand. She spent the night there.”

Separating herself from her mother, Devaki said, “I kept thinking—should I go home or not? The proprietor had said he would turn it around and accuse me of theft.”

The policeman who had come with them said, “Your statement will be recorded at the police station.”

Devaki looked straight at him. “First write my name correctly.”

The policeman said nothing.

Before they left the shelter, a small slip was prepared at the desk saying “sent with family”. The worker asked Devaki to sign it. Devaki had Chanda read the slip aloud. Her name was correct there, but in the box marked “husband/father” was written Jogendra.

Chanda said at once, “He is her brother.”

The worker looked at the earlier telephone-message paper. “This is the only name the police station gave us.”

Devaki did not sign the slip. “First write Father—Ramnath. If you make my brother my father, tomorrow someone will again say I am telling it wrong.”

The worker made a new slip. The first slip was not torn up; it was placed in the file with “cancelled” written across it. Devaki looked at both versions of the paper together and said nothing.

On the seventh day, Devaki herself went to the police station. The same register in which her existence had been altered three days earlier was opened in front of her. The entry had now grown into three layers. The original read —“Devaki Devi, wife of Jogendra Mahato, age 32.” Beside it was the correction —“Unmarried; Jogendra, biological brother; age 28.” Beneath that was the note —“Left the workplace voluntarily.”

Devaki put her finger on the third sentence. “Who said this?”

“It was the proprietor’s statement.”

“Did anyone ask me?”

“You had not been found then.”

“So the words of the person who was available were written down. The words of the person who was missing were left blank.”

The officer seated behind the desk straightened his pen. “Your statement will be added now.”

Devaki said, “Add it. But after ‘voluntarily’, add that my wages had been withheld, that I was beaten, and that fear was why I did not return home.”

The officer measured the blank space left in the line. There was very little room. He took out a separate sheet and began attaching it to the file.

Devaki asked, “In the register?”

“There is no room here. Your full statement will remain in the file.”

Devaki looked again at the original line. "There was room for my name. There was room for the wrong relationship. There was room for someone else's statement. When it came to my words, the room ran out?"

Two people sitting in the veranda began looking that way. The officer's pen remained suspended in the air for a few moments. Then, in small letters beneath the next line of the register, he wrote—"Statement of missing person attached; previous note one-sided."

Devaki could not read. Chanda, who had come with her, slowly read the whole sentence aloud.

Devaki said, "And the name?"

The officer prepared a new notice—"Devaki Mahato, father late Ramnath Mahato, age 28, unmarried—found safe."

For the first time, Devaki took the paper into her own hands. Pointing out the letters, Chanda read the name to her—De-va-ki Ma-ha-to. Devaki ran a finger over her own name as though touching the body of the letters.

Outside the gate, the old notice was still hanging there, half torn. Rain splashes had spread the ink, but "wife of Jogendra" could still be read. Jogendra stepped forward to take it down. The constable said, "Leave it. A new notice will be put up."

Jogendra stopped his hand.

The new sheet was pasted over the old one. Glue was pressed into all four corners. A few letters from the old line still peeped out from underneath.

Bhawani Devi asked Chanda, "Is my Devaki on the paper on top?"

Chanda read the new line aloud.

Bhawani Devi nodded. "This time, she is."

Inside, the register was closed. Between its pages Devaki had been recorded three times in three different forms. Outside, on the new notice, she appeared once. Devaki looked at the paper, then walked over to her mother.

STORY 184

The Open Door

A thin strip of morning sunlight was entering the courtyard beneath the gate. Rekha sat to one side of that strip. The gate was open, but she did not step outside.

It was her fifth day back home. Fourteen months earlier, she had been taken to the city on the promise of work in a garment factory. After that, the roads kept changing, the people kept changing, and her control over both her labour and her own body kept diminishing. She was freed along with several other young women in a police raid, spent three months in a shelter home, and only after the paperwork was completed was she able to return to her parents' house.

Since the day she returned, the gate of the house had remained open all day. Her mother would say, "Let the air keep coming in."

Rekha understood—there was no need to open such a large gate merely for air.

On the first day her mother had held her tightly to her chest. Her father had stood by a pillar of the veranda, wiping his eyes again and again. Her younger sister Neelu had clung to her feet and cried. Her younger brother Chandan had watched from a distance.

From the second day, all the ordinary talk of the house began again—the price of paddy, Neelu's examination, the tyre of Chandan's bicycle, her father's knee, the leaking roof over the veranda.

Only Rekha's fourteen months were never spoken about.

Whenever she herself tried to say something, her mother would find some task or other to bring up.

"Eat first."

"You are very tired today."

"Leave what has passed behind."

Her father would turn the radio a little louder.

If Neelu began to ask something, her mother would stop her with a look.

Rekha could see that the house had made many preparations for her return—a new sheet, a washed pillow, a comb in her old brass box, clean curtains at the window. But no empty space had been prepared in the house for listening to her story.

On the third day, Malti Kaki came to the gate.

"Has Rekha come back?" Her voice carried into the courtyard.

Her mother immediately looked at Rekha.

“Go inside,” she said softly.

Rekha stopped and asked, “Why?”

“People will have too many questions just now.”

Rekha got up and went into the room. Outside, her mother said, “Yes, she has come back. She is tired. She is resting.”

Malti Kaki asked, “May I see her?”

Her mother replied, “After a few days.”

From inside, Rekha kept looking at the open frame of the gate. The way stood open, but she herself was not allowed to be present upon it.

That evening Neelu quietly came into her room. She had a schoolbook in her hand.

“Didi, are you angry with me?”

Rekha said, “No.”

“Then why are you so quiet with me?”

Rekha tried to smile. “The silence was already here before I came. I am looking for a place for myself inside it.”

Neelu did not understand. She opened her book and sat down.

At dinner that night, her father said that the discussion of Neelu’s marriage would be taken up again the following month. Rekha kept mixing lentils into her rice.

Her mother said softly, “Until then, let as little as possible of the household matter go outside.”

Rekha stopped her spoon.

“Which household matter?”

No one answered across the plates.

“My coming back?” Rekha asked.

Her mother began wiping the rim of her plate.

Her father said, “People are not good.”

Rekha asked again, “What will people say?”

“Whatever comes into their minds.”

“And what will I say?”

This time Chandan raised his head, but when his father’s eyes fell on him, he looked down again.

Rekha ate her last mouthful of rice and got up.

A little later that night, she found Chandan by the courtyard well. He was pulling up a bucket with the rope. When Rekha stood there to take water, he said without looking at her, “Two boys in the market were asking about you today, using your name.”

Rekha took hold of the bucket handle. “What did you say?”

Chandan said, “Nothing.”

Rekha asked, “Why?”

For the first time Chandan looked at her. "Father said we should not talk to anyone."

"What did you feel like saying?"

Chandan's lips trembled slightly. "I felt like saying that Didi has come back. That's all."

Rekha filled the lota with water. "Then next time say exactly that."

Chandan went on coiling the rope. "People will ask more."

"You do not have to answer every question. But there is no need to hide the fact that I have come back either."

Chandan said nothing, but he coiled the bucket rope more neatly than before. Rekha understood—the silence of the house had tied different knots over everyone's mouth, not only hers.

The next morning she opened an old bamboo chest. Inside were a few half-made sikki-grass baskets, coloured thread, and two small fans. Before she had left home, she used to make sikki work with her mother. Malti Kaki helped them sell those things at the market.

Rekha took out a half-made basket and sat on the veranda. Her fingers did not move as quickly as before. The grass broke twice. On the third attempt, the knot sat properly.

At noon Malti Kaki came again. This time her mother had gone towards the pond.

"Rekha?" Kaki called from the gate itself.

Rekha got up, thinking she would go inside. Her foot turned for a moment, then stopped.

"I'm here," she said.

Malti Kaki did not enter the courtyard. She remained standing by the gate.

"Good that you came back."

That was all Kaki said.

Not "Where were you?", not "What happened?", not "Who did it?"

Seeing the half-made basket in Rekha's hands reminded her of old times.

"You still make these?"

"My hands are learning again."

"I need small baskets for my grandchild's upanayan ceremony. Can you make four?"

For the first time in five days, Rekha answered without thinking, "I can."

Malti Kaki said, "I won't pay in advance. Otherwise your mother will say I am stealing work from you."

Rekha laughed. It was a small laugh, but it was her own.

When her mother returned in the evening and heard about the four baskets, she fell silent.

"Why did you agree?"

"I know how to make them."

"But people will keep coming and going from the house."

"The gate is open anyway."

Her mother looked at her at that sentence.

It rained that night. The gate was closed. Inside, the darkness felt a little deeper.

Rekha sat in the same room with her mother. Neelu was asleep. Outside, water fell with a steady drip.

Rekha said, "At the shelter home there was a door that remained open from morning until evening."

For the first time, her mother did not interrupt her sentence.

"Could you go outside?"

"Not without permission."

"Then why was it open?"

"They said it was for air."

Her mother remained silent for a few moments. The rain grew heavier.

Rekha said, "The gate here also stays open. But when Malti Kaki came, I was sent inside."

Her mother's hands became still in her lap.

"I am trying to protect you."

"From whom?"

"From people's mouths."

"During those fourteen months there were very few ways to protect myself from the people I met. If, in my own house, I must again stay shut inside a room in order to protect myself from people's mouths, then where is the difference?"

Her mother could not answer.

Rekha went on, "I will not tell everything today. There may be things I never tell. But whatever I do want to say, I need a place where it can be heard."

The rain eased a little. Her mother got up to close the window. When she returned, she sat beside Rekha.

"I will listen," she said. "I will be afraid, but I will listen."

Rekha did not tell the whole story then. She said only this much: that the first city was not the city whose name they had been told; that on the first night the door had been locked from the outside; that one girl kept repeating her own name again and again so she would not forget it; and that on the day the police came, Rekha could not believe the road outside truly led outside.

Her mother did not ask a single question in between.

At dawn her father was drinking tea on the veranda. Rekha placed the four unfinished basket circles in front of her.

"I'm going to the market today," she said.

Her father paused while lifting his cup. "With Malti?"

"First to her house. After that, on my own."

Many sentences came and went across her father's face. In the end he said, "If it starts raining on the way, stop by the shop near the peepal tree."

Her mother came out of the kitchen with a cloth in her hand. She moved to cover Rekha's head with it, then stopped her hand. She gave the cloth to Rekha instead.

"Wear it if you feel like it."

Rekha put the cloth into her bag.

Neelu came running. "Didi, bring me a black pen on your way back."

From the veranda Chandan called, "Will you take the bicycle?"

"I'll walk."

The gate was open. Rekha paused on the threshold for a moment. The lane outside was the same—mud, two goats, water on the leaves of the peepal tree, a vegetable seller's cry in the distance.

No one stopped her.

She walked slowly as far as Malti Kaki's house. Kaki examined the four baskets, turning one in her hand, and said, "Your knots are still as tight as ever."

Rekha said, "My hands are learning again."

At the market, two people recognised her. One woman looked at her for a little while, then merely began asking the price of vegetables. One man turned his eyes away. Rekha noticed both things, but she did not change the road by which she would return home.

In the evening, when she reached the gate, her mother was sorting paddy in the courtyard. As soon as Rekha stepped inside, her mother asked without looking up, "Did you bring the salt?" Rekha opened her bag. "I did."

"Neelu's pen?" Rekha laughed. "That too." Her mother then raised her head. "The baskets?" Rekha said, "Two were sold. The other two next week."

Her mother nodded, as though this were ordinary household accounting. Rekha took off her bag and placed it on the veranda. Behind her, the gate remained open.

STORY 185

Three Minutes

The hands on the clock tower in the middle of the market showed twenty-seven minutes past four when the first jolt came.

It was so slight that people sitting on the other side of the road did not even turn to look. A handcart rolled back, the front wheel of a bicycle caught against one of its bamboo legs, and two young men looked at each other at the same time.

The handcart belonged to Deepak. Raju was on the bicycle. The two already knew each other.

“Can’t you watch where you’re going?” Deepak said.

Straightening the wheel, Raju replied, “Why have you left your cart in the middle of the road?”

The matter could have ended there.

But the empty milk can tied behind the bicycle fell to the ground and rolled clattering as far as the vegetable stall. At the sound, three people turned around.

A young man who had arrived after the incident began asked, “What happened?”

Someone said, “He pushed him.”

By the time the sentence reached another mouth, it had become—“He hit him.”

By the third mouth—“People from the outside hamlet have come into the market and are beating our people.”

The clock hand reached twenty-eight minutes past four.

Deepak and Raju were still only arguing. But a circle had formed around them.

Two teenagers standing on the steps of the cloth shop raised their mobile phones. A young man who had come to buy vegetables opened his phone too.

“Go closer, go closer!” someone told him.

“I can see clearly from here,” he replied.

Raju looked at the crowd. For the first time, his voice rose.

“I did not push him.”

Deepak said, “His wheel got caught in my cart. That is all.”

That sentence did not reach the outer edge of the circle.

From outside came a new voice—“Whom did he hit?”

“Someone from our hamlet.”

Who? That question fell behind. “Our hamlet” moved ahead.

The circle was now becoming two semicircles. On one side, several young men stood behind Raju; on the other, some gathered near Deepak's cart. Even those who knew neither man were choosing a side.

At that moment, Nathuni Kaka was buying salt in the market.

He was about seventy-two. He heard very little in his right ear; even in the left, people often had to repeat themselves. Fifteen years earlier, after a firecracker exploded near the railway crossing, his hearing had slowly begun to decline. Children in the village sometimes tested him by calling from behind, and he would keep walking without turning.

Nathuni Kaka carried a small cloth bag and a bamboo stick.

He saw the crowd, but could not properly hear the slogans.

What he did see was this: Deepak's cart stood tilted to one side; Raju's bicycle lay on the ground; and from behind the circle, a young man was picking up half a brick.

Kaka placed his bag on the salt seller's counter.

"Keep this," he told the shopkeeper.

The shopkeeper asked something, but Kaka could not hear him.

The clock showed twenty-nine minutes past four.

In the video being recorded by one of the teenagers on the cloth-shop steps, the clock too appeared for a moment.

Two minutes had passed since the first jolt.

The young man who had picked up the brick was named Guddu. He had not seen how the incident began. He had only been told, "They hit one of our people."

He pushed through the crowd and moved forward.

Raju stepped back. His foot caught in the bicycle pedal and he fell to his knees.

Someone took that fall to mean, "They've hit him."

A voice rose—"We won't let this go now."

Three mobile phones went up together.

Nathuni Kaka reached the middle of the circle.

He could not properly hear the slogans from either side. But he could certainly see the brick in Guddu's hand.

He went and stood directly between Guddu and Raju, who was on the ground.

Guddu stopped. The old man's body had suddenly come in front of him, and a moment of uncertainty checked his hand.

"Move, Kaka," he said.

Kaka tried to read his lips.

"Say it again. I didn't hear."

"Move!"

Kaka raised a hand towards his left ear. "Speak louder."

Some people in the crowd laughed. The laughter came at such a moment that no one quite knew whether laughing was appropriate.

Guddu shouted again—“Move!”

This time Kaka understood.

He looked at Raju, then at Deepak.

“First pick up the bicycle,” he said.

“Kaka, don’t get in the middle of this,” Deepak said.

Kaka did not fully hear Deepak’s sentence either. He bent down and began lifting the bicycle by its handlebar.

Raju got up too.

That small act distorted the shape of the circle. Anyone who needed space to surge forward now found the bicycle in front of him. Anyone who wanted a clear view for a video now had Kaka’s back inside the frame.

A young man shouted, “Move him away!”

Nathuni Kaka did not hear that either.

Guddu still held the brick. Kaka straightened the bicycle and turned towards him.

“Where are you taking that brick?”

Guddu replied, “For these people—”

“To build a house?” Kaka asked.

Several people laughed again. This time the laughter was louder.

Guddu grew irritated. “They have hit someone!”

Kaka looked towards Raju. “Who hit you?”

Raju said, “No one.”

Deepak immediately said, “No one hit me either.”

Again, the answer did not carry clearly to the outside of the circle. But the ten or fifteen people in front heard it.

A young man holding up a mobile phone asked, “Then why are you fighting?”

Deepak looked at him. “How long have you been recording?”

The young man lowered the phone.

“Two minutes.”

“Then you didn’t see what happened first.”

After that sentence, for a few moments no new slogan rose.

The clock showed half past four.

Three minutes had passed since the first jolt.

At that exact moment, the brick slipped from Guddu’s hand. It struck the ground and broke into two pieces. No one knocked it away; his grip had simply loosened.

With his bamboo stick, Nathuni Kaka pushed one piece towards the side of the road.

“If this stays in the road, it will cut someone’s foot.”

Deepak began straightening his cart. Raju spun the bicycle wheel. It was slightly bent.

Someone said, "Is the matter over?"

Someone else replied, "Who knows."

The gathering did not disperse at once. Curiosity, like violence, also ebbs slowly. Some people were still watching the footage on their phones.

In one video, only Raju's fall could be seen.

In another, Guddu was moving forward with the brick.

In a third, Nathuni Kaka was coming into the middle, but the first jolt was missing.

No one's phone contained the first two sentences spoken by the two young men.

By evening, five versions of the story were circulating in the market. In one, Raju had hit Deepak. In another, Deepak had pushed first. In a third, twenty men from the outside hamlet had come together. In the fourth, Nathuni Kaka had snatched away the brick. In the fifth, Kaka had slapped Guddu.

Nathuni Kaka heard none of those five stories.

He went back to the salt shop to collect his bag. The shopkeeper said, "Kaka, you became a hero today."

Kaka raised a hand towards his ear. "What?"

The shopkeeper came close and said loudly, "Everyone says you stopped the crowd."

Kaka picked up his bag.

"You mean me?"

"Yes, you."

Kaka thought for a few moments.

"I only saw the brick."

The shopkeeper laughed. "You didn't hear the slogans?"

Kaka shook his head.

"Some sounds. Not the words."

"Lucky that your hearing is weak."

Nathuni Kaka did not laugh at that.

He looked towards the clock tower. The hands showed twenty-four minutes to five.

"It isn't a matter of luck," he said softly. "A brick is not something you need to hear."

The next day Raju came to the market to have his bicycle repaired. Deepak replaced one of the bamboo supports on his cart. At different times, both went to see Nathuni Kaka.

Raju wanted to give him a kilo of guavas.

Kaka refused.

Deepak wanted to pay for his tea.

Kaka refused that too.

“You saved me,” Raju said.

Kaka kept looking at his face.

“Did I save you, or Guddu?”

Raju was silent.

Kaka said, “The brick was in his hand. If it had fallen, it would have hit you. If it had flown, his life would have changed too.”

At midday, one of the teenagers who had stood on the cloth-shop steps came across him again.

He went up to Kaka and wanted to show him the video on his mobile phone.

“Look, this is where you went into the middle.”

Kaka looked at the screen. Inside the small frame was the crowd, raised hands, and his own back. The sound was loud, but to Kaka the words were still indistinct.

The teenager said, “A lot of people have watched these three minutes.”

Kaka asked, “Does it show the first jolt?”

“No, the first jolt isn’t there.”

“Does it show Deepak saying that no one hit him?”

The teenager moved the video back and forth.

“You can hear half of it.”

“Does it show the brick falling?”

“Yes, you can see the brick fall.”

Kaka handed the phone back.

“Then those three minutes aren’t complete.”

The teenager stared at Kaka in surprise.

Nathuni Kaka tucked his bag under his arm and began crossing the market.

When he reached beneath the clock tower, he did not stop. Above him, the hands kept moving. Below, people kept pausing the footage on their devices, moving it forward, and pausing it again.

STORY 186

Cloth

The floodwater was receding, but the clothes in the relief-camp courtyard were still not dry. On a rope tied between two school windows, saris, towels, a child's kurta and a torn sheet kept blowing against one another in the wind.

Since morning, word had spread that a truck carrying clothes would arrive that day. By noon, a queue had formed in front of the veranda. On the old classroom blackboard, the relief stock was written in white chalk—rice, lentils, salt, sheets, children's clothing, men's clothing, women's clothing. A number stood beside each item.

Roopkala Devi could not read the blackboard, but she recognised numbers. She asked, "How much women's clothing?"

Sangeeta, who was helping write down names, said, "Eighty-four bundles."

"And a screen?"

Sangeeta did not understand. "What did you say?"

"A screen for changing clothes."

At that moment, a young man unloading sacks from the truck shouted, "Call out the family numbers first. Don't break the queue."

Roopkala Devi fell silent.

Her granddaughter Sulekha was with her. Sixteen-year-old Sulekha had been wearing the same salwar-kurta for three days. On the first day, river water had reached her knees; on the second, there was mud all over the camp; on the third, she had not dared wash the clothes—because she had no second set to change into.

The distribution table was set up in the middle of the veranda. Two men opened the bundles and displayed the items one by one. A woman volunteer, Meenakshi, checked the numbers.

"Family forty-seven!"

An elderly woman went forward. She received a sari, a blouse and a sheet. Holding up the blouse, the young man asked, "Will this size do?"

The old woman tried to laugh. "How would I know?"

"Check it here. It can't be exchanged later."

The eyes of the people sitting in the veranda turned towards the garment. The old woman immediately wrapped the blouse inside the sari.

Roopkala Devi pressed Sulekha's hand.

"You won't go forward," she said softly.

"Then the clothes?"

“Let us watch first.”

Two families later, a sari came out of a young woman’s bundle that reached only to her waist. No one laughed, but smiles appeared on a few faces. The young woman put the sari back on the table.

“Give another one,” her mother said.

The young man looked towards the sack. “The bundles are already prepared. Take what you get. If anything remains at the end, we’ll see.”

The young woman stood behind her mother.

Sulekha whispered, “Grandmother, I won’t take any.”

Roopkala Devi did not answer.

The camp was arranged so that five or seven families lived in each classroom. Some families had hung a sheet between two bamboo poles to make a corner of their own, but the sheet was also needed as a covering at night. During the day, if a woman had to change clothes, the other women formed a screen around her. Sometimes the wind rose; sometimes children running past knocked the screen aside.

The previous night, Sulekha had waited for four women to stand holding up a sheet so she could change out of her wet kurta. Two women were looking after children, one elderly woman was asleep, and the fourth had gone to fetch water. In the end, Sulekha had slept in the same wet clothes.

The queue grew shorter. From time to time, Meenakshi took women aside and explained that if a size was very wrong, they would look again at the end. But whenever someone said something quietly, one of the men at the table would ask, “What do you need?”

Sulekha’s turn drew near.

Roopkala Devi left the queue and went to Meenakshi.

“Daughter, may I say something?”

“Tell me, Kaki.”

“Who will wear all these clothes?”

Meenakshi smiled. “All of you.”

“Where will we wear them?”

Meenakshi’s smile disappeared.

Roopkala Devi said nothing more. She merely pointed towards the open classrooms, the veranda, the courtyard and the road.

Meenakshi was silent for a few moments. Then she asked, “Isn’t there a separate room for women?”

Sangeeta said, “Six families sleep in that room at night.”

“During the day?”

“There are supplies in it during the day too. The door is broken.”

Meenakshi went inside. One leaf of the door had come off on the very first day of the flood. The other hung half-broken. There was no glass in the window.

She came back outside. The distribution did not stop. She merely looked at the sheets stacked at one corner of the table.

"Can we use two sheets?" she asked the young man in charge.

"Sheets are allocated by family."

"To make a screen."

The young man opened the register. "There is no category for a screen."

Roopkala Devi was listening.

She said, "If there is no category, there is cloth."

The young man looked at her. "What cloth?"

Roopkala Devi pointed towards the pile marked 'wrong size' in one corner of the veranda. Five saris, three blouses, two salwars, and some children's clothes.

"Those five saris haven't been given to anyone yet?"

"The sizes didn't fit."

"Then can we have them for five minutes?"

The young man frowned. "The clothes are for distribution."

"What I am doing is distribution too."

Roopkala Devi picked up the first sari. Meenakshi did not stop her. Sangeeta picked up the second. Two women brought down the rope from the courtyard. Two bamboo poles were stood up in front of the schoolroom's broken doorway. The saris were tied so that they overlapped slightly. A large sari was hung over the empty window frame in place of a sheet.

In ten minutes, the room had changed. It was not entirely empty even now, but trunks had been pushed into one corner. Dry sacks were spread on the floor. Outside, Meenakshi pasted up a small piece of paper—"Women."

Roopkala Devi could not read it.

"What did you write?"

"Women."

"Only that?"

"Only that."

Sulekha smiled for the first time.

Her family number was called. This time the bundle was not opened in the veranda. Meenakshi carried the bundles of five women inside together. Outside, the men continued distributing rice to the next family.

Inside, Sulekha opened her bundle. The salwar was large; the kurta a little loose.

"Will it do?" Meenakshi asked.

Sulekha held the clothes against her body.

"It will."

"Then change."

Sulekha looked around. For the first time in three days, she did not have to ask anyone to stand around her and make a screen.

Roopkala Devi remained seated outside.

A little later, a pregnant woman went inside. The clothes in her bundle were too small. Meenakshi brought another garment from the pile. It fit. The first garment went back to the pile.

By noon, the room was no longer merely a place to change clothes. The women had begun exchanging garments there. One had a salwar that was too large, another a blouse that was too small, another a sari that was too heavy. What had been marked 'does not fit' at the table outside would reach the room and fit someone or other.

Once, twelve-year-old Rani stopped at the doorway holding her bundle. Her mother stood behind her. Rani would not go inside. Roopkala Devi asked, "What happened?"

Rani kept her face lowered. Her mother said softly, "She needs underclothes. There are none in the bundle."

Meenakshi checked the distribution sacks. Such garments were in separate packets, but the packets were lying under the table in the veranda. Large numbers were written on them. Meenakshi brought all the packets inside and said from outside the doorway, "Whoever needs anything, look inside. There is no need to say your name."

At first, no one reached out. Then Rani's mother took one packet. After her, two young women, one elderly woman, then a pregnant woman. No one smiled, but the embarrassment that had made bodies shrink in the veranda loosened a little inside.

While straightening the sari at the doorway, Roopkala Devi said to Meenakshi, "The way you distribute something is as important as the thing itself."

Instead of replying, Meenakshi tightened the knot at the window once more.

The man in charge of distribution came to the doorway twice and asked, "How many saris are inside?"

The first time, Meenakshi said, "Five."

The second time, Roopkala Devi said, "Four on the walls, one on the window."

"The account will be short by five."

Roopkala Devi said, "Short where? They are all right here."

"But they have not been entered against anyone's name."

"For now, enter them against the room."

The young man did not laugh. He kept looking at the paper.

In the evening, distribution ended. The remaining garments were put back into sacks. On the blackboard outside, the old figures were struck through and new ones written. Rice zero, lentils three sacks, men's clothing seven bundles, women's clothing four.

The young man asked, "The five saris?"

Meenakshi pointed towards the room.

"They will stay there."

"I have to submit the account tomorrow."

Sangeeta stood with the chalk in her hand. "Under which heading shall I write them?"

The young man searched for an answer.

Roopkala Devi adjusted her spectacles.

"Write 'cloth'."

Sangeeta laughed. "Cloth is already written."

"Then write it again."

"What should I write?"

Looking at the saris hanging in front of the broken doorway, Roopkala Devi said—

"Cloth, even when it is not on a body."

At the very bottom of the blackboard, Sangeeta drew a new line. After thinking for a few moments, she wrote only the number five. She wrote no word.

That night, Sulekha washed her old wet kurta and spread it on the rope to dry. Wearing the new kurta, she came out of the room just as the wind rose. The saris at the doorway fluttered, but the screen inside did not open. Roopkala Devi herself had tightened the knots on the two bamboo poles.

Before lying down to sleep in the veranda, Sulekha asked, "Grandmother, who will get these saris tomorrow?"

With her eyes closed, Roopkala Devi said, "First let all the women change their clothes. After that we'll see who needs a sari."

Sulekha asked again, "And the screen?"

This time Roopkala Devi opened her eyes.

"The screen is made of cloth. But a screen is not clothing."

Sulekha said nothing.

Outside, the chalked number five on the blackboard was growing a little blurred in the damp night air. Inside, the saris were still.

STORY 187

The Station Room

It was half past ten at night. The train had already left Platform Three at Darbhanga station, but the crowd was still jammed between the footbridge steps and the outer gate. Porters were dragging empty trolleys, the tea seller was washing his brass-coloured kettle, and the announcement system was sending out broken fragments of information about the next train.

A little apart from that crowd, beside an iron pillar under the footbridge, sat a seven-year-old boy. In one hand he held a small paper bag; the other was empty. The top button of his striped kurta was broken. There were no tears in his eyes, but again and again he raised his neck towards the crowd, as though some definite figure might appear there once more.

Banshi the porter was the first to notice him.

“Who are you with?”

The boy kept looking towards the pillar.

“With Mother.”

“Where has your mother gone?”

The boy pointed towards the crowd. “There.”

Banshi looked around twice, then took him to the railway police room.

The room was not large. One desk, two chairs, a long wooden bench against the wall, a yellow light above. In one corner stood a water pitcher and in another an old umbrella. Ramvilas Yadav was on duty. He pulled the register towards him.

“What is your name?”

The boy said, “Ravi Kumar Mandal.”

Ramvilas asked, “Your mother’s name?”

“Sunita Devi.”

“Your father’s full name?”

“Shivnath Mandal.”

“Village?”

“Belahi.”

“Police station?”

Ravi scratched his head. “I don’t know that. Our house is near the well.”

Ramvilas asked, “Which direction is Belahi?”

Ravi moved his hand towards the crowd. “We came by train.”

Ramvilas wrote in the register—Ravi Kumar Mandal, mother Sunita Devi, father Shivnath Mandal, village Belahi. He left police station and district blank.

Meanwhile word spread that a child had been found. Such news has legs of its own at a station. Within five minutes, six people had gathered outside the room. Firoz the tea seller said, "I think he is a passenger's child. Look at the bag in his hand."

Banshi objected, "Does a bag prove someone is a passenger? Children who live around the station carry bags too."

A ticket examiner looked in and said, "Was a ticket found?"

Ramvilas said, "Would a child be walking around with the ticket in his pocket?"

The examiner shrugged. "Then how do we know he came by train?"

An elderly passenger sitting outside said, "Look at his clothes. He is a child from a proper home."

Firoz immediately asked, "Children who live at the station don't have homes?"

The old man fell silent.

In the middle of all this talk, Ravi picked up a small piece of chalk lying at the corner of the desk. On a soot-darkened strip low on the wall, he began drawing a small figure—a girl with two plaits, and beside her a round object.

Ramvilas asked, "Who is this?"

"Radhika."

"And the round thing?"

"Her lota."

"How old is Radhika?"

Ravi opened five fingers, then folded two down. "This many."

"Three years?"

Ravi nodded.

Ramvilas asked, "Where is Radhika?"

"With Mother."

"Where is Mother?"

Ravi again pointed towards the crowd. "There."

By eleven at night, the first claim arrived. Mohan Sah, who sold betel outside the station, came in. With him was a boy of about ten.

"He must be one of the children who wander around the station," Mohan Sah said. "I think I've seen a face like this two or three times."

Ramvilas asked, "Have you seen this child?"

Mohan Sah looked closely at Ravi. "I can't say for certain. The way his hair is cut looks familiar."

The moment Ravi looked at him, he said, "I do not live at the station."

Mohan Sah said, "Will a child tell you everything?"

Ramvilas put his pen down on the desk. "Whatever he tells us, we will first listen to that much."

Mohan Sah went outside, but the words “station child” remained among the people there.

A little later a woman passenger came with her teenage son. She had heard that a child from a family from Samastipur was missing.

“They said his name was Sonu,” she said. “Could this be Sonu?”

Ramvilas looked towards Ravi.

Ravi said clearly, “I am Ravi.”

The woman said, “He might be Ravi at home and Sonu outside.”

For the first time, Ravi became angry. “I am not Sonu.”

Outside, the argument began again—home name, school name, name on the ticket, what the mother called him, what the grandmother called him. Amid so many names, Ravi fell silent.

Ramvilas pulled the door halfway shut. “No one will ask the child any more questions now.”

Firoz sent in tea with two mathris. Ravi ate one. He sat for a while holding the other in his palm.

“Eat it,” Ramvilas said.

“This is for Radhika.”

“When Radhika is found, you can get another.”

Ravi shook his head. “I’ll give her this one.”

He put the mathri into the paper bag.

By midnight the station had grown somewhat quieter. The argument outside had not completely stopped. Some thought the child should be sent to a children’s home; some said information should first be sent to all the trains; some believed the family might have gone outside the station. One young man said, “He cannot properly tell his name and address. There must be something more to it.”

Ramvilas stepped out of the room and said, “A seven-year-old child has been separated at night in a crowd. Why do you want a court statement from him?”

The young man said nothing.

Ravi began to doze where he sat on the bench. Ramvilas brought out an old blanket. Ravi first placed the bag near his head, then covered himself with the blanket.

“Will the light go off?” he asked.

“I am not switching anything off yet.”

“Radhika cries in the dark.”

“The light will stay on here.”

Ravi closed his eyes.

At around one o’clock, a man came running from the direction of the outer gate. His clothes were covered in dust, sweat on his forehead. The moment he looked inside, he stopped.

“My child—”

Ravi was asleep.

Ramvilas raised a hand and stopped the man. “What is your name?”

“Mahesh Mandal. I am his maternal uncle.”

“The boy’s father?”

“Shivnath Mandal.”

“His mother’s name?”

“Sunita Devi.”

“The village?”

“Belahi. Jale police station.”

People gathered outside again. Mahesh explained that his sister Sunita had got off the train with two children. Ravi had been separated from them in the crowd on the footbridge. Sunita had thought Ravi was with his father; the father had thought Ravi was holding his mother’s hand. They realised only after reaching outside. Since then, the two of them had been searching in different directions.

“Where is the mother?” Ramvilas asked.

“She has gone towards Platform One. My brother-in-law is searching near the bus stand outside.”

Someone outside immediately said, “Proof first. Does saying he is the maternal uncle make him the maternal uncle?”

Mahesh turned towards him. “I know my nephew.”

Another man said, “The child is asleep. Wake him up and see whether he recognises him.”

In a hard voice Ramvilas said, “The child will not be woken from sleep for anyone’s argument.”

Mahesh saw the chalk drawing low on the wall.

“He drew Radhika, didn’t he?”

Ramvilas looked towards him.

Mahesh said softly, “Radhika is his little sister. She never goes anywhere without that lota.”

At this one sentence, the people outside divided again into two camps. To some it was proof; to others, it was something he could have heard earlier.

Ramvilas told Mahesh to sit on the bench outside. “Let the mother and father come. If the child is awake then, he can see for himself.”

Two o’clock came. A new train arrived at the station, the crowd rose again, then subsided. The yellow light in the room remained steady. In his sleep Ravi turned once and pulled the bag close to his chest.

A little before dawn, a woman’s voice was heard outside the room—

“Is Ravi here?”

Ramvilas opened the door. The woman was carrying a three-year-old girl. One of the girl's two plaits had come loose. In her hand was a small brass-coloured lota. Behind them stood a thin man, panting.

Before Ramvilas could ask anything, the little girl insisted on being put down.

"Where is Bhaiya?"

At that voice Ravi opened his eyes on the bench. For a moment he could not understand where he was. Then he saw Radhika.

"You didn't leave the lota?"

Radhika made a face and said, "You left us."

Ravi threw off the blanket and stood up. Instead of running first to his mother, he opened the bag. The mathri inside had broken into pieces. He placed the pieces in his palm and held them out to Radhika.

"I saved it for you."

Radhika put one piece in her mouth. She held another towards Ravi's mouth.

Some of the people who had argued all night about his identity were still standing outside. Someone's hand moved towards the blanket, someone's eyes towards Mahesh. But Ravi and Radhika kept sharing the mathri.

Sunita touched Ravi's head. "Where did you go?"

Instead of answering, Ravi asked, "Why did you leave me?"

Sunita was silent for a few moments. Her husband said from behind, "I thought you were with Mother."

Sunita said, "I thought you were with Father."

Ravi looked from one to the other.

"I was with Radhika."

Radhika placed the last piece of mathri in his palm.

Ramvilas pulled the register towards him. The blank space in the line written during the night still had to be filled. He picked up his pen, then looked at the people gathered outside the room.

"Everyone outside. The family stays here."

The door did not close completely. It remained half open. From outside came the whistle of the first train of the morning.

Ravi picked up his bag from the bench. Radhika took hold of one of his fingers. As he came out of the room, no one asked whether he was a passenger's child, a station child, Sonu, or someone by any other name.

Walking towards the stairs, Ravi turned back once. The yellow light was still burning. On the wall, the chalk drawing of Radhika and her lota remained where it was.

STORY 188

Silent Testimony

Morning sunlight had yet to reach the third-floor veranda of the district court. A thin strip of light fell on the floor through the latticed window to the east, but it was somewhat darker in front of the testimony room. Above the door, in black letters, was written—"Closed Proceedings—Unauthorised Entry Prohibited."

Kusum sat on a wooden bench three paces from that door. Her mother, Devmaya, sat beside her; a woman constable was in front; and Suchitra, the support worker, stood to one side carrying a bag of papers. Kusum's hands were empty. With the nail of her right thumb, she kept touching a small white scar on her left palm.

Suchitra said softly to Devmaya, "She will not have to answer too many questions today. The judge will control the pace."

Devmaya immediately said, "She used to speak little even before. After the incident she became completely silent."

Kusum did not look at her mother. She only said, "I did not become silent."

Devmaya turned towards her in surprise.

"Then what happened?"

"People began speaking more in front of me."

The bag in Suchitra's hand slipped a little lower. She seemed about to say something, then stopped.

At the other end of the veranda, the public prosecutor, Arunesh Mishra, was speaking quietly with the police inspector. The inspector said, "She gives short answers. Better to ask in yes or no."

Arunesh said, "Let her say as much as she wishes."

Just then defence counsel came up the stairs as well. Two young men were with him. They looked at Kusum for a moment, then turned their eyes away. The woman constable shifted her chair a little farther in front of the bench. Nothing was said, yet the narrow passage of the veranda became narrower still.

Arunesh came over to Kusum and said in a very low voice, "Answer only what is asked. If you do not remember something, say 'I do not remember'. If you become tired, ask for a break."

Suchitra immediately added, "If you wish, you may take your time before answering."

Devmaya gave a third piece of advice in her own way. "Don't look too much at anyone. Say what happened, then we'll go home."

Kusum listened to all three. One piece of advice came from the law, one from support, one from her mother. Their intentions were not different, yet each sentence had already begun to give her testimony a small shape of how it ought to be delivered.

She asked, "What if I do not understand the question properly?"

Arunesh said, "Ask for it to be put again."

"And if the question contains something I never said?"

This time Arunesh paused a little. "Then say clearly—those are not my words."

Kusum lowered her head and looked at her palm. Rubbing her thumb over the white scar, she seemed to be remembering not a sentence, but a right.

The bell inside rang.

Kusum stood up. Devmaya began to rise too, but the constable signalled with her hand—"Mother will remain outside."

Devmaya reached out as though to catch the end of Kusum's sari, then stopped her hand halfway. Kusum herself adjusted the sari over her shoulder and walked through the door.

The room was smaller than she had expected. The judge's seat was raised, but the chair kept for Kusum was ordinary. In front were the counsels' tables, to one side the recording clerk, and at the back only the necessary staff.

The first question was her name.

"Kusum Devi?"

"Yes, that is me."

"How old are you?"

Kusum told them.

"Have you come to give evidence of your own free will?"

Kusum paused.

"A summons came."

A brief silence spread through the room. The public prosecutor asked again, "But you are not objecting to giving evidence?"

"No. I will give evidence."

The recording clerk began to write.

She was asked the date of the incident. She was asked the place. Kusum kept answering. Sometimes one word, sometimes one sentence. When a question seemed unclear, she said, "Ask again." When a question contained two things at once, she said, "One at a time."

Once the public prosecutor said, "At that time you were very frightened?"

Kusum looked at him.

"At what time?"

"Immediately after the incident."

"I was trembling."

"Because you were afraid?"

"I was trembling—that is all I remember."

The recording clerk drew a thin line through the word he had first written and wrote the second sentence.

Kusum could see that thin line very clearly. When her statement had been written at the police post, she had never seen a word crossed out like that. There, the person writing would occasionally ask, "Shall I write it like this?" and Kusum, exhausted, would nod. Today she understood that nodding one's head and saying a sentence in one's own words were not the same thing.

Before the next question, the judge asked, "Would you like some water?"

Kusum said, "Not yet. Let the questions continue."

No one in the room attached any meaning to that small answer. Kusum found this strangely comforting.

Her eyes went again to the crossed-out line.

After a while, the defence questions began. The tone was courteous, but the edge of the questions was like a thin knife.

"Why did you not call out loudly for help at the time of the incident?"

Kusum said, "I did."

"That is not clearly stated in your first statement."

"I said it."

"Why was it not written?"

For the first time, Kusum looked directly into the counsel's eyes.

"Why are you asking me that?"

The judge intervened. "Reframe the question."

Defence counsel turned a page.

"Very well. When you gave your statement to the police, did you remain silent?"

"No. I answered."

"How much did you say?"

"As much as I was asked."

"Did you say everything?"

Kusum paused again.

"Can anyone say everything all at once?"

The room was quiet again.

The counsel moved on to another question.

A short break was taken before noon. When Kusum came outside, Devmaya held out a lota of water. Suchitra asked, "Are you all right?"

Kusum drank some water and said, "Yes."

Devmaya said to the constable, "See? She is nervous inside, but she does not show it."

Suchitra said softly, "Sometimes the body freezes by itself. It is a natural response of the body."

Kusum handed the lota back to her mother.

"I am sleepy right now."

Both women fell silent.

Kusum rested her head against the wall behind the bench. For five minutes she sat with her eyes closed. She did not fall asleep, but no one got the opportunity to explain the meaning of her silence.

After the break, the testimony resumed. This time there were questions about the medical examination, the time she reached home, and the first person to whom she had spoken about the matter.

The public prosecutor asked, "Why did you not tell your mother everything at first?"

Kusum said, "Mother had a fever that night."

"So you wanted to protect her?"

"I said—Mother had a fever."

"Meaning that you did not want to worry her?"

Kusum's eyebrows lifted slightly.

"That is your sentence."

Arunesh stopped.

The judge looked towards the recording clerk. "Record the witness's own words."

For the first time, Kusum looked towards the bench. There was no gratitude on her face, no relief—only attention.

In the second hour, the defence returned again to her silence that night.

"Your mother says that for two days you hardly spoke properly to anyone."

"Mother was at home. I went out from time to time."

"Where did you go?"

"The hospital. The police station. My aunt's house."

"So you spoke to people?"

"Whatever was necessary with each person."

"But about the incident?"

Kusum rubbed her thumb over the white scar on her palm.

"Sometimes I spoke. Sometimes I did not."

"Why was that?"

"Sometimes I could not find the words."

"Fear?"

"Sometimes."

"Shame?"

Kusum's thumb stopped.

"I did not use that word."

"Then the reason?"

Kusum looked at the counsel for a few moments. Then she said slowly, "Sometimes I was tired. Sometimes the person in front of me had already decided why I was silent. Then it seemed pointless to explain it to them."

The recording clerk's writing slowed slightly.

Defence counsel said, "Are you saying that people did not listen to you?"

Kusum shook her head.

"No. I am saying that people filled my silence with their own words as well."

For the first time in court, while her complete sentence was being written, no one interrupted.

Before the testimony ended, the judge asked, "Is there anything in the recorded statement that you wish to clarify?"

Kusum looked at the recording clerk.

"Read it aloud."

The recording clerk began reading the main portions from the beginning. Kusum stopped him twice. In one place it said "very frightened".

"Remove that. I said I was trembling."

In another place it said "did not tell her mother because of concern for her".

"Remove that too. Mother had a fever—that is all."

The recording clerk made the corrections.

The judge asked, "Anything else?"

Kusum said, "No. Let only as much remain as I said."

The proceedings ended. The door opened. Outside stood Devmaya, Suchitra, two constables and several people who were waiting. As soon as Kusum came out, a local reporter moved towards Suchitra.

"How did the testimony go today? Did she say anything?"

Out of habit, Suchitra opened her mouth to answer—"She spoke with great courage—"

Then she stopped.

She looked at Kusum.

The reporter turned the question to Kusum. "Would you like to say anything?"

Kusum said, "What I had to say today, I said inside."

"Not outside?"

"No. Not about this outside."

The reporter lowered his pen.

As they went down the stairs, Devmaya said softly, "People in the village will ask. What shall I tell them?"

Kusum went down three steps and stopped. In the courtyard below, the man selling lemon water was washing his glass tumblers.

"Say—what belongs to Kusum, Kusum will say."

Devmaya said nothing.

At the last turn of the staircase, Kusum herself asked, "Mother, shall we have lemon water?"

Devmaya said, "Whatever you want."

For the first time, a faint smile came to Kusum's face.
"Then two glasses."

STORY 189

Two Bodies

Three days later, the water of the Kamla had begun to recede, but the veranda of the primary school in Jhitki village was still filled with the smell of the river. The smells of wet earth, rotting leaves, kerosene and medicine had mingled together. Relief sacks lay on one side of the veranda, two bamboo cots on the other. Two dead bodies lay on the cots.

A small paper tag was tied near the feet of each—"Unknown 1" and "Unknown 2."

The first body had been found at dawn near the bamboo grove in the mango orchard. The second, towards evening, at the bend of an old channel. No one knew where the water had brought either of them from.

Even so, by ten o'clock the people standing outside the veranda had divided themselves into two groups.

"The first one is from our side," said Mahendra of the eastern hamlet. "Look, there is red thread around the wrist."

Someone's voice rose, "What does red thread prove?"

"And the other has a black cord around the neck. Can't you see?"

This time Karim Mian from the western hamlet stepped forward. "You'll write down someone's religion from a cord? Does a flood ask before it carries people away?"

Mahendra's voice hardened. "We cannot leave a body without cremation."

From the other side came the reply, "And we cannot give up the right to burial."

Sudhakar Jha, the school headmaster, stood between them. In his hand was the register sent by the block disaster team. Again and again he said the same thing—"Both are unidentified. First let them be identified."

But to the crowd, the word "unidentified" was like an empty space. Everyone wanted to fill it with a name of their own.

The dhoti of the first body was torn near the waist. Half of the second man's kurta had been washed away. The water had swollen the skin. The faces had changed so much that even someone familiar might not recognise them at once. The relief team had covered both bodies with thin white cloth.

A young man said, "The first one could be Shambhu from Hanumannagar. He has been missing since yesterday."

Another replied at once, "No, he was younger."

Someone said the second body was Salim from the Musahar settlement. Someone else said Salim had been thinner. In two minutes, five names appeared, then seven.

Sudhakar closed the register.

“Names will not be entered on guesses.”

Some people in the crowd fell silent, but the argument did not stop.

Just then, a woman’s loud voice was heard at the school gate. “Where are the unidentified bodies?”

It was Surti Devi. She was around seventy, her wet sari lifted to her knees, a short bamboo stick in her hand. Her husband Nandlal had been missing for two days. After the rear wall of their house collapsed, no one had seen whether he had managed to get out.

People made way for her.

Surti went to the first cot. She lifted the cloth from the face by a finger’s breadth. She looked for a long time. Then she moved to the feet. Without touching it, she examined the big toe of the left foot.

“This is not Nandlal.”

Mahendra asked, “How do you know?”

“Half the nail of his left big toe was missing. A sickle cut it while he was harvesting paddy.”

She went to the second cot. She looked at the fingers, then near the ear, and shook her head.

“Not this one either.”

Someone said quietly, “Did you check the religion?”

Surti looked towards him but gave no answer. She carefully arranged the cloth over both faces again.

Just then Rahman’s two sons arrived from the west. Their father, Abdul Qayyum, had been missing since the night of the flood. The elder son, Farid, examined the right hand of the first body.

“Father’s middle finger was crooked. This one is straight.”

He asked permission to see the teeth of the second body. Sudhakar called the relief team’s health worker. One of Qayyum’s front teeth had been capped in silver; this body had no such tooth.

Farid stepped back.

Mahendra said, “Then neither of these is yours?”

Farid looked at him. “I want my father. Not a number.”

For a moment after that sentence, the veranda was quiet.

Noon advanced. Even with the sun behind the clouds, the humidity increased. The ice kept beside the bodies was melting. Rekha Kumari, the health worker, said that if the bodies were not identified by evening, both would have to be taken to the cold room at the block hospital.

At that, the argument rose again.

“Once they go there, there will be delay.”

“Let there be delay, but not the wrong funeral rites.”

“How long can the bodies be kept?”

“Without identification, which rites?”

At one point two young men even took hold of the bamboo of one cot. One said they would take the first body to the eastern hamlet; the other said no body would leave yet. Sudhakar said loudly, “Take your hands off.”

The two young men let go, but the hardness did not leave their eyes.

Then Jamir the boatman came up onto the veranda. His clothes were still stained with mud from the Kamla. The first body had been brought in his boat.

Mahendra immediately asked, “Where did you pick him up?”

“From the channel north of the mango orchard.”

“Then he must have floated in from the east.”

Jamir shook his head. “In this flood the current reversed three times. Things from the east went west, things from the west got caught in the mango orchard. Yesterday my own boat crossed the field and climbed onto the embankment of the pond. You cannot work out a village from the direction of a dead body.”

Someone brought up the red thread again.

Jamir looked at the wrist of the first body. “I tied that thread.”

Everyone turned towards him.

Mahendra frowned. “Why?”

“It was dark at dawn. I saw three things floating at once that looked like bodies. Two turned out to be tree stumps; this was a body. While lifting it into the boat, a red sack tore. I tied the wrist with a thread from that sack and braced it against the bamboo so the body would not fall back into the water.”

Something changed for a moment on Mahendra’s face, but he immediately looked towards the black cord on the other body.

“Then this?”

Jamir shrugged. “That I do not know.”

The crowd had received half an answer; the other half remained open again.

Karim Mian said, “There may be an amulet inside the cord.”

Rekha Kumari said quietly, “Shall we open it to look for a religion? If an examination is needed for identification, it will be done at the hospital. Not as a spectacle here.”

At the word “spectacle”, some people stepped down from the veranda. Not all.

Later in the afternoon another family arrived—Shambhu’s mother, wife and younger brother. His mother began to cry as soon as she saw the first body from a distance, but fell silent when she came close. She looked for an old burn mark on Shambhu’s right knee. It was not there. Nor was it on the second body.

“It is not my son,” she said. There was no relief in her voice, only the exhaustion of having to continue searching.

As she was leaving, she stopped. Surti was still sitting beside a veranda pillar. "Yours?" Shambhu's mother asked.

Surti said, "No."

The two women looked at each other. Then Shambhu's mother took two old towels from her bag and handed them to Rekha Kumari.

"The ice is melting. There are too many flies. Keep these if they are of any use."

Rekha spread one towel over the face end of the first cot and the other over the second.

Until then, none of the people arguing about religion had noticed that the white cloth kept shifting in the wind.

Before evening, the block vehicle arrived. Preparations were made to take both bodies to the cold room. Sudhakar opened the register.

"Unknown 1," he read.

"Unknown 2."

The box for religion was left blank.

Mahendra asked, "Blank?"

Sudhakar held the tip of his pen over the register and said, "Why should I write what we do not know?"

Karim Mian said nothing.

Four people lifted the first cot and four the second. This time no groups formed. Whoever happened to be standing there took hold of the bamboo. Jamir held the front of the first cot; Mahendra the rear of the second. Farid stood holding open the vehicle door.

Surti walked behind them all.

Just before the vehicle left, she asked Rekha Kumari, "Those two towels will stay with them, won't they?"

"They will."

"If they are identified, will you give them to the family?"

Rekha said, "If they want them, yes."

Surti nodded.

The vehicle passed through the gate. Its wheels left two deep tracks in the wet earth. The crowd slowly dispersed. Only the two empty cots remained on the veranda—on one, a small piece of red thread; on the other, an unfinished guess about a black cord.

Sudhakar picked up the red thread and placed it beside the torn relief sack. He wrote nothing in the register about the black cord.

Outside, Surti and Shambhu's mother set off in different directions to search for their missing people.

The two bodies were still unidentified.

But by evening, at least the urgency to give either of them the wrong religious name had left the school veranda.

STORY 190

Curfew Milk

As dawn broke, two milk cans shone in the courtyard of Badri the milkman. Curfew had been in force for three days. On the first day people managed with the rice and lentils left at home; on the second, sugar began to run short; by the third, milk was what everyone spoke of most. But the lanes were deserted, shop shutters closed, and bamboo barricades blocked the main road.

Every day Badri delivered milk along this route from the northern hamlet to the southern one. At the sound of his bell, a brass lota would appear outside one house, an earthen pot outside another. Half a seer for one family, a quarter for another. Whose name, whose religion—Badri's account book recorded only quantities.

Two cans fitted into the iron frame behind his old bicycle. Near the mouth of the right-hand can was a small dent; a year earlier a child from the southern hamlet had run into it. The peg on the left-hand can had been replaced by the blacksmith from the northern hamlet. Badri did not count such marks as part of his accounts. His accounts recorded only how much milk went to which house, who had paid for how many days, and whose vessel had to be returned the next morning.

On the first morning of curfew he had wheeled the bicycle out through the doorway, but at the sound of a whistle on the main road he had taken it back inside. On the second morning the milk did not sell, so half of it was set as curd and some distributed among neighbours. On the third morning, looking at the full cans, for the first time he was less troubled about wasted milk than about the little girl whose house received a fixed quantity every day.

Two nights earlier, a quarrel had broken out along the route of a procession. After that, slogans turned into bricks and stones. One kiosk burned, two young men were injured, and curfew was imposed by dawn. By the third day, the two hamlets were learning even the news of each other through rumours.

Badri's wife Kamla said as she put the lids on the cans, "Don't go today either. Yesterday they detained two people at the crossing."

Badri gave no answer. He washed a small brass container and set it aside.

Kamla caught his hand. "Who is that for?"

"Maheshwar Sah's granddaughter."

"On that side?"

Badri nodded.

Maheshwar Sah lived in the last lane of the southern hamlet. His granddaughter was seven months old. The child's mother had remained weak since childbirth, so milk from Badri's house went there every day. The previous evening, Ramdhani, who was on watch duty, had stopped at Badri's door for water. In the course of conversation he had said, "The baby at Maheshwar's house has had no milk since yesterday. But I am not telling you to go out after hearing this."

Badri did not forget Ramdhani's words all night.

Kamla said, "Ramdhani told you not to go out."

"He also told me the baby had had no milk."

"Of those two things, why did you forget the first?"

Badri did not smile. He poured one and a half pao of milk from the can into the small container, tightened the lid, wrapped the container in a thick cloth and tucked it beneath his arm.

At the first bend in the lane stood four young men. Under curfew they had no reason to be there, but in three days keeping watch had itself become a kind of occupation. Manoj, one of them, asked the moment he saw Badri, "Where are you going?"

"To deliver milk."

Manoj immediately asked, "To whom?"

Badri looked towards the south.

Manoj frowned. "That side? Even after everything that has happened?"

Badri said, "A baby drinks milk."

Another young man cut in, "Their baby, your worry? Let your own hamlet stay hungry while you go serve that side."

There was still plenty of milk in the cans at Badri's house, but he did not argue. Manoj said again, "If you go over there today, tomorrow no one will trust you at your own door. Don't be hurt when people call you a traitor."

Badri asked only, "Will you let me pass?"

Manoj shifted the bamboo pole to one side, but his face wore an expression as though Badri were carrying not milk but some secret object.

The main road was under police guard. Badri did not go straight towards the crossing. Behind the old oil press ran a narrow lane that filled with water in the rainy season. Today the earth there was dry. He took that lane round and emerged behind the first house of the southern hamlet.

Three young men were keeping watch there too. One of them saw the cloth-wrapped container Badri was carrying. "What is it?"

"Milk."

The young man immediately asked, "From where?"

"From my house."

"Meaning from that side."

Badri nodded.

The young man reached out to touch the container, but Badri stepped back. "Don't open the lid. It is for a baby."

"Whose baby?"

"Maheshwar Sah's granddaughter."

At this, the young man standing behind laughed. "You haven't come into our lane for three days, and today you go straight to Maheshwar's house! Who knows what you have mixed into the milk?"

Badri put the container down on the ground. "Let them boil it. If they do not trust it, let them throw it away."

The first young man said, "And then you'll go back to that side, won't you? Carrying news both ways. Milk here, talk there. Quite a business."

"I sell milk."

"You know what they call someone who keeps a foot in two boats, don't you?"

From behind, someone said quietly, "A traitor."

For the first time Badri looked directly into their eyes. "Not two boats. There was one road. You people have cut it into two pieces."

Before anyone could answer, Sunita, Maheshwar Sah's daughter-in-law, came out of the house. She recognised Badri. "You brought the milk?"

Badri nodded. "Yes."

Sunita picked up the container. The young men did not stop her. One of them merely said, "Boil it first."

"We boil it every day," Sunita replied and went inside.

Badri did not remain there. As he turned to leave, he heard the baby crying from inside. A little later came the clink of a brass bowl. That was all. The crying did not stop at once, nor did anyone come to the doorway to praise Badri. He walked away.

By then two policemen had reached the narrow lane near the oil press. Badri was stopped and asked why he had come out during curfew. He explained. The younger constable scolded him; the older one merely wrote down his name and said, "Sit on this veranda until noon. Go home during the relaxation period."

Badri sat on the veranda empty-handed. On the shutter of the closed shop opposite, two different slogans had been written in charcoal the day before. Between them was a pale stain like dried milk—perhaps from an earlier day when one of his cans had knocked against the spot.

When the midday relaxation began, the road suddenly filled with people. Everyone needed rice, salt, oil, medicine, milk. Badri went home, lifted the cans and came to stand near the crossing. The police said he was not to cross the barricade; people would come from their own sides to collect milk.

People from the northern hamlet came first. Manoj was there too. He had not come for milk, but stood watching. A woman asked for half a seer. Badri dipped the measuring cup into the can.

Manoj immediately said, "Did that measuring cup go to the other side?"

Badri said, "No. This measuring cup did not go to the other side."

"Keep it separate. It must not touch vessels from over there."

Badri said nothing. He sent home for a second measuring cup.

A little later people from the southern hamlet arrived. One young man there saw the second measuring cup and asked at once, "Who was this used for before?"

Badri looked at Manoj, then at the young man. "For this side."

"Then we need a separate one."

Badri was silent for a moment. He did not have a third measuring cup. He thought of washing the first one and bringing it back, but the police relaxation would last only a short while. In the end, he began pouring milk from the can into a small brass bowl and from there filling people's vessels.

Maheshwar Sah himself came last. In his hand was the small container from the morning, washed and covered. He handed it to Badri. Inside were two extra rupees.

Badri took out the coins and placed them back in Maheshwar's palm. "Pay only for the milk."

Maheshwar looked at him for a few moments, then put the coins back in his pocket. "The baby drank it."

Badri only said, "Hmm."

The announcement came that the relaxation period was over. People began returning to their own lanes. As Badri lifted the cans, Manoj said, "From tomorrow, stay on this side. Don't go over there."

From the south came the voice of the young watchman, "And if you come to our side, first tell us where you came from!"

Badri lifted the can not onto his head but against his side. Very little milk remained now.

When he reached home, Kamla asked, "How was it today?"

Badri washed the two measuring cups and placed them on separate wooden seats. Then he poured the little milk left at the bottom of the can into an earthen pot.

Kamla asked again, "Will you go tomorrow?"

Badri said, "If there is a relaxation, I will go."

For the morning, Kamla again set aside the two measuring cups separately—one for the northern hamlet, one for the southern. Badri said nothing.

The two measuring cups were separate. The milk can was one.

STORY 191

The Broken Slipper

At the western corner of the crossing, the temporary bamboo barricade was half broken. Fifteen minutes earlier, the evening crowd had pushed through it while fleeing. Now grains of rice, two glass bangles, an overturned basket and a blue slipper lay on the road. The slipper's front strap had been torn away at the base; there was old stitching near the heel, and a dark red stain in the middle.

Journalist Arun Jha bent near the slipper. The photographer with him had not arrived, so he took two pictures with his small camera. Nearby, police were moving people away. Half the market shutters were closed; from the other half, people were peering through cracks in doorways.

Arun asked the paan seller, "Whose slipper is this?"

The shopkeeper shook his head. "How would I know? The crowd ran. I saw a woman fall, that's all."

"Did she get up?"

"Then the smoke came. I pulled down my shutter."

The boy at the medicine shop ahead said, "I saw someone being loaded onto a rickshaw."

"A woman?"

"It was far away. I can't say."

Arun noted: a woman fell; someone was put onto a rickshaw; a slipper was left behind. He had to send a report for the night edition. The editor had told him on the phone, "Don't send dry numbers. Find the human being inside the event."

Arun looked again at the slipper. The red stain held his attention. A police constable said, "Don't touch it. It will be removed when the road is cleared."

Arun asked, "Does it look like blood?"

The constable bent down and looked without touching it. "I can't say."

That "I can't say" did not go into Arun's notes. Instead, he wrote—"red stain."

That night, beneath a bold headline on the newspaper's front page appeared: "One Slipper, One Woman, and a Fleeing Market." In the report, Arun wrote that the blue slipper might be the last trace of an unknown woman who had lost it while running for her life from a violent crowd. He called the red stain "blood-like", and turned the unconfirmed account of someone being lifted onto a rickshaw into "people carried away the injured woman". At the end he

wrote: "Whether the owner is alive or not could not be established by nightfall."

In the morning, the photograph in the report was widely seen. At the shops, people pointed to the slipper and began adding stories of their own. Someone said the woman was from the other neighbourhood. Someone said she had a child with her. Someone looked at the red stain and said with certainty that she had been injured. Arun's written "blood-like" became simply "blood" in people's mouths.

At nine, a reporter from a neighbouring town called Arun and asked, "Did the woman die, or is she in hospital?" Arun said, "Neither has been verified." The reply came, "But your report says 'last trace'." Arun tried to explain that 'last trace' was a possibility, not a death notice. The only answer from the other end was, "We'll cite your report."

After putting down the phone, Arun reread his printed copy. He saw that wherever he had tried to be cautious by writing 'might be', 'like', and 'could not be established', all those words had become small beside the certainty of the headline. For the first time he understood that conjecture had wings faster than the sentences he had written; but he still did not know that before noon, the owner of the slipper would be standing in front of him.

At around eleven, a woman came to the newsroom door. On one foot she wore the other half of an old pair of blue slippers; the other foot was bare. Under one arm she carried an empty bamboo basket. The sole of her bare foot had turned grey in the sun.

She told the guard, "Call the journalist who wrote the story about the slipper."

Arun came out. The woman held the newspaper folded in her hand. Her finger rested on the photograph on the front page.

"Did you pick up this slipper?"

"No. The police probably removed it when they cleared the road. Why?"

"It's mine."

Arun looked first at her foot, then at the photograph. Near the heel was the same kind of stitching in yellow thread.

"You... were there?"

The woman did not smile. "If I had not been there, would the slipper have flown there by itself?"

Arun had a chair brought. "Sit down. Your name?"

"Shakuntala Devi. Before you write my name, tell me this—why did you turn me into a dead woman?"

"I did not write that you were dead. I wrote that it was not clear."

"First you wrote 'last trace', then 'not clear'. Which will the reader remember, the first thing or the second?"

Arun's hand stopped on his file. "Then tell me what happened."

Shakuntala spread the newspaper on the table. “First look at this red stain. You wrote blood.”

“Blood-like.”

“It was tomato.”

She turned the basket over and showed him. At the bottom was a dried red layer of crushed tomato. “I sell vegetables. The crowd shoved me, the basket fell, the tomatoes were crushed. The slipper fell into them.”

Arun kept his eyes fixed on the sentence about the red stain.

Shakuntala continued, “The strap was already weak. It tore when I ran. If I had kept one slipper on and one foot bare, I would have fallen. So I took off the other one too. The one I’m wearing now was picked up later by a boy from the lane and given back to me.”

“You were running from the crowd?”

“Everyone was running. But first I turned back towards my basket. The day’s earnings were tied in a cloth inside it. If you write that, people will say money was dearer to me than my life.”

Arun said at once, “I won’t write it like that.”

“You didn’t ask me the first time either. What did you write then?”

For a few moments, only the sound of the fan filled the room.

Shakuntala said, “While I was lifting the basket, I saw Chhotan fall. His mother sells bangles. That day he was closing the stall alone. People were running over him. I dropped the basket again and pulled him up. Another handcart man helped me. The person people saw being put on the rickshaw was Chhotan, not me.”

“How is Chhotan?”

“His knee is scraped. He’ll be back at the stall tomorrow.”

Immediately another headline rose inside Arun—‘Woman Believed Dead Was Saving a Child.’ He picked up his pen. Shakuntala was watching his hand.

“Now don’t turn me into a goddess,” she said. “I first went back to save my money. Then I saw the child and pulled him up. That makes me neither a sinner nor a goddess.”

Arun put the pen down.

The editor came out from inside. When he heard the news, his eyes lit up. “This could be tomorrow’s second front-page story. The owner is alive, and she saved a child!”

Shakuntala looked at him. “I came to collect my slipper. Not to give you a story.”

The editor was silent for a moment. “The slipper will be with the police. We’ll get it for you. But what we printed wrongly must be corrected.”

“Print the correction. Do not write about me what you did not see.”

That same evening Arun went back to the crossing. The boy at the medicine shop identified Chhotan. There was a bandage on Chhotan’s knee. He said,

“Shakuntala Kaki pulled me up by the hand. I was the one who went on the rickshaw.” The handcart man said the same. The paan seller admitted that he had not seen the woman fall, only bend down; in the confusion of the crowd, he had made an assumption.

In one corner of the police post was a sack containing objects collected after the incident. Arun found the blue slipper. Its strap was indeed broken. The red stain had dried to a dark red-black. Beside the stain, a tiny tomato seed was stuck—the detail his eyes had missed on the first day.

The correction appeared the next morning, but not on the front page. On an inside page, under a two-column headline, it said—“Owner of Blue Slipper Is Alive.” In the first sentence, the newspaper admitted that the previous day’s report had presented unverified assumptions as though they were facts. The second stated that the red stain was from crushed tomato. The third gave Chhotan’s account.

The editor asked Arun, “So short? Where has the human angle gone?”

Arun said, “There is as much as has been verified.”

At noon he took the slipper to Shakuntala’s cart. She was arranging tomatoes. Taking the slipper in her hand, she felt the stitching near the heel, then examined the broken strap.

“It can be repaired,” she said.

“Buy a new pair,” Arun blurted out.

Shakuntala smiled. “A new pair may be cheap for newspaper people. Stitching is cheaper for me.”

The cobbler nearby put two stitches into the strap. Shakuntala put on the slipper and walked two steps. Then she returned to the basket.

Arun took out a copy of the correction to give her. Shakuntala took the paper, read the headline, folded it inward and placed it beneath the basket.

“All right now?” Arun asked.

Shakuntala ran a finger over the slipper strap. “The slipper is all right. You decide about the news.”

Arun turned and walked away. As he crossed the square, he opened his notebook. On the previous day’s page were the words—“red stain.” Beside those two words he drew a small arrow and wrote—“crushed tomato; verified.”

STORY 192

The Locked Room

By half past five in the morning, the shutters of the shops in the textile market on the western side of the city had begun to rise. On the second floor of the last building in the lane, one room was still closed off with three girls inside. There was no heavy padlock on the door from outside, only an iron chain; yet for the three adolescent girls within, that chain had blocked every road in the city for four months.

Fifteen-year-old Neelam had been told that she would learn sewing, earn four thousand rupees a month, and within two years be able to pay for her younger sister's schooling. For the first week, the broker who had brought her from the village came twice a day. After that, the owner's wife would leave food, slide half-finished lengths of cloth into the room, and count the completed pieces in the evening. The girls were allowed out of the room only as far as a narrow corner of the roof, and even then someone always stood outside the door.

To count the days, Neelam scratched small lines into the wall with her fingernail. After a while there were so many lines that she had to count them all over again. Then she changed her method: she began tying small knots, one for each day, into an old piece of cloth using thread given for sewing. She kept the cloth inside her pillowcase.

That morning, heavy footsteps suddenly sounded on the stairs. First came the owner's voice, then someone else's, hard and firm—"Open the door." Inside, the three girls looked at one another. Malti, the oldest, picked up a bundle of thread and pushed it into a corner. Neelam clutched the pillowcase in her lap.

The chain rattled. The moment the door opened, the light from the lane flooded suddenly into the room. With the light came five or six people, two women, a police officer, and several unfamiliar faces craning from the staircase behind them. One person had a camera raised in his hand.

The woman standing in front said, "We are from the district child-protection team. Do not be afraid. We are going to take all of you out of here."

Instead of feeling happy at seeing the door open for the first time, Neelam pulled the end of her sari over her head. At the mouth of the staircase, the round eye of the camera was looking straight into the room.

"Move back," the woman police officer said. "No photographs."

But by then there had already been one flash. For a moment Neelam's eyes turned white with light, then dark.

The raid papers were read out. The room was measured. Three sewing machines, twelve half-finished salwars, two iron trunks, one water jar and a window fastened shut from inside were entered into the record. The things that had been Neelam's entire world for four months were becoming an inventory.

The building owner came up the stairs and began saying that the three girls had come to "learn", that there was no confinement. Rashmi pointed to the bolt on the inside of the door, the plank nailed across the window, and the three pairs of old slippers kept in the corner. "If they came to learn, who decides when they may go outside?" At that question, the owner looked first at his wife, then at the police officer. No answer came at once.

The question startled Neelam. In four months, no one had asked her where she wanted to go. She had only been told—sit, sew, eat, go to the roof, do not go downstairs now. Hearing the question, she remembered the village market, where her mother would sometimes say, "Choose for yourself what you want." Here, she had not even been given a choice about the food on her plate.

"Name?" asked the young man making the record.

"Neelam Kumari."

"Age?"

"Fifteen," Neelam said softly.

"The full name of your village?"

She gave the full name of her village. The young man asked again, "Who brought you here?"

Neelam gave the broker's name. A murmur ran through the people standing on the stairs. Someone said, "So this sort of thing was going on in this building?" Another said, "We had no idea at all."

Neelam felt like asking: if no one had known anything, why did so many people want to look now?

Rashmi, the woman from the child-protection team, began clearing the staircase. "Anyone who is not part of this operation, go downstairs."

From below came another question: "How many girls were found? How many days had they been locked up?" A police officer opened his mouth to give the number, but Rashmi raised a hand to stop him. "First get them out. Count later." The remark seemed small to Neelam, yet something inside her loosened. For the first time that morning, they were not three numbers but three people.

A newspaper representative said, "It is a matter of public interest. We only need one image."

Rashmi looked straight at him. "For the public interest, photograph the room, not the child's face."

Hearing that sentence, Neelam looked properly at Rashmi for the first time.

Before the three girls were taken out, they were told to collect whatever belongings they had. Malti had one bag. The third girl, Rukhsana, had nothing. Neelam opened the pillowcase and took out the knotted cloth. Rashmi asked, “Do you want to keep that?”

“Yes.”

“Is anything written on it?”

“Days.”

Rashmi asked nothing further.

As she came down the stairs, Neelam understood that having a road open out of a room was not the same as being out of other people’s gaze. A police vehicle stood in the lane. Shop shutters were half raised, and people leaned out beneath them. Two cameras rose again. The woman police officer spread her dupatta between the three girls and the crowd like a screen.

“Why are you hiding their faces?” someone called out.

Malti stopped walking. In a low voice she said, “Because this is my face.”

Once inside the vehicle, Neelam turned her back to the window. After four months the road was moving outside, but she did not look at it. Someone’s voice came from beyond the vehicle—“The rescued girls!” The words struck the metal body and entered. Neelam tightened her fist around the knotted cloth.

The first place they were taken was not the police station but a temporary protection room. There they were again asked their names, ages, villages, and the names of their parents. Neelam answered. A third time, a form was prepared for a medical examination. A fourth time, the admission register at the shelter home. The questions were almost the same everywhere; only the people asking them were different.

By noon Neelam’s voice had grown thin. The fifth time, an officer asked, “Why were you brought to the city?”

At the same time, a worker from an organisation was telling someone on the phone, “Three girl children have been rescued.” Neelam heard the word “rescued”. It did not seem wrong to her, only incomplete. If being rescued meant having to tell the same event five times in front of different people, then this day was not over yet.

Neelam remained silent.

The officer asked again.

Rashmi intervened. “This has already been recorded. Do not ask it again unless it is necessary.”

The officer frowned. “It is procedure.”

“Count the child’s fatigue as part of the procedure too,” Rashmi said.

By evening the matter had become a pile of papers. Legal staff, organisation workers, medical personnel—everyone was completing their own part. Neelam understood that many of these people wanted what was best for her. Even so, whenever a door opened without a knock, she started.

Once, two unfamiliar women came inside and began talking to Malti. A young man with them stood at the door taking notes. Neelam asked Rashmi quietly, "Have they come to look at us, or to listen to us?" Rashmi was silent for a moment, then said, "If you do not want it, no stranger will meet you now." She went outside and put a notice on the door: "Permission before entry."

Neelam could not read the notice from a distance. But later, when a staff member wanted to come in, he stopped at the door and asked, "May I come in?" Without thinking, Neelam replied, "Yes, come in." That small question seemed to her as different as a shuttered window and an open sky.

In the shelter home, she was given a bed in a small room. There was a grille over the window, and the door could be locked from inside. The attendant, Meera, showed her in and then, before leaving, put a hand on the door and asked, "Shall I close it, or leave it open?"

Neelam looked at Meera for a moment, trying to understand the question. For the first time in four months, the state of a door was going to be decided by what she wanted.

"Halfway," she said.

Meera pulled the door halfway closed. "I am outside. Call if you need anything."

That night Neelam opened the knotted cloth. The last knot was from that morning. She untied it, but did not throw the cloth away. She did not feel like undoing all the other knots; those days had passed, but they could not be erased.

After a while she heard two staff members talking in the corridor—tomorrow a statement before a judicial officer, then contact with the family, then a decision. "Some people will want to meet her tomorrow," one voice said.

Neelam looked at the half-open gap of the door. She got up and closed the door completely. From inside, she slid the bolt into place. This time, hearing a door close did not make her body tremble.

A few moments later Meera knocked softly twice from outside.

"Neelam?"

"Yes, I'm awake."

"Shall I leave some water?"

Neelam opened the bolt and made only enough of a gap for the water jar to pass through. Meera placed it inside and stepped back. No face leaned into the room, no question came.

Neelam closed the door again. She put the knotted cloth back inside the pillowcase. The locked room of four months and the locked door of this night were not the same. The key to the first had been in someone else's hand; the bolt on this door lay beneath her own fingers.

STORY 193

The Scar

The fan was running in the district assistance office, but Bimla Devi sat with a blue shawl drawn tightly over her shoulders. It was the humid month of Bhadon. Her file lay open on the desk in front of her, with "Assistance for Victim of Violence" written across it in red letters.

Turning over the papers, the committee member seated on the other side of the desk said, "The medical report is here. There is also a copy of the police-station register. But if the scar mentioned here could be seen once, the matter would become clear."

At first Bimla thought she had misheard. Her fingers stopped on the edge of the shawl.

"What is to be seen?" she asked.

"The scar on your arm," the member said casually. "Just one look. That much will make the decision quicker."

Above Bimla's left elbow was a long, crooked scar. Six months earlier, during a quarrel at night, the edge of broken glass had cut her. She had needed stitches. The hospital papers recorded the length, location and depth of the wound. The police had written down her statement. She had also told a judicial officer what had happened. Even so, after all that, her arm was being asked to appear again.

Her cousin Manju, who had come with her, said quietly, "Show them. Then the work will be over."

Bimla did not look at Manju. "Whose work?"

For a moment the room was silent.

The committee member tapped a pen against the file. "We have to see proof. Many applications come in for this assistance."

"The proof is in the papers."

The committee member pulled a thin sheet from the file. "The other side has submitted a written objection saying this mark could be from an old accident."

For the first time Bimla leaned towards the paper. "When did they see my arm?"

"That is what they have written."

"And if you see it, will you know how old the scar is?"

Unease crossed the committee member's face. "I am not a doctor. But verification of the application—"

Rukmini interrupted softly, "The medical report records an examination from when the wound was fresh. The answer to that objection is already there."

It seemed to Bimla that the mark on her body had now become a third document between two pieces of paper—one paper said there had been a wound, another said perhaps there had not, and the third piece of proof was being demanded from her skin.

"Other people write the papers."

"Who writes this body?" Bimla asked.

The member's fingers stopped. No immediate answer occurred to him.

Rukmini, the junior clerk seated beside him, bent over the file. "The medical report contains the identifying mark, the number of stitches and the date of examination," she said. "If another inspection is necessary, it can be done in the medical room in the presence of a woman employee."

The committee member glanced at Rukmini. "I was only suggesting a way to shorten the procedure."

Bimla thought: for six months, everyone had wanted to shorten the procedure for her. At the police station a woman had said, "Raise your arm a little." At the hospital the dressing had been opened three times. The lawyer had said, "If they ask in court, do not be nervous." Two women from the village had come to her house and said, "We are your own people; show us, what exactly happened?" An organisation had asked for a photograph—not her face, only the scar—so they could use it in "public awareness" material.

Each time, Bimla had wondered whether the scar was on her arm or in other people's eyes.

When she came out of the committee room, a woman from an organisation was waiting in the corridor. Her name was Rekha. She already knew Bimla.

"Was there a decision?" Rekha asked.

"They will look at the papers."

"Did they see the scar?"

Bimla remained silent.

Softening her voice, Rekha said, "Please do not take it the wrong way. Sometimes when clear proof is right in front of people, they fall silent. If you want, I can take a photograph in such a way that your face does not appear."

"Which people will fall silent?"

"Those who say the incident has been exaggerated."

"If they see my arm, will they believe it?"

Rekha took a breath before answering. "At least they will have fewer excuses."

Bimla loosened her shawl. The mark lay beneath the cloth on her arm. She did not want to show the scar; she only wanted to ease the fabric. Rekha's eyes went there instinctively, then immediately moved away.

"I do not want this mark to become everyone's property," Bimla said.

Rekha asked quietly, "But for justice?"

"I have given what is necessary for justice. Everyone's curiosity is not justice."

No decision was made in the assistance office that day. The file was held over with the note, "Whether additional examination is required." On the way home, Manju tried several times to say something, but seeing Bimla's face, she remained silent.

When Bimla reached home, she took off the shawl and hung it on a peg. In the courtyard, her mother Dhaniya was sorting lentils. She looked at her daughter and asked nothing. She only said, "The rice is on the fire. Wash your hands and face."

That ordinary sentence gave Bimla relief. There were still people at home who could speak of things that did not begin with the scar.

In the evening, Sita Kaki from next door came and sat with her mother on the veranda. Bimla was inside the room, but she could hear them clearly.

"I heard she will receive assistance," Sita Kaki said.

"The meeting is still pending," Dhaniya replied.

"Is the scar very large?"

The lentils in Dhaniya's winnowing tray stopped rattling. After a few moments she said, "Ask whether my daughter is large or the scar."

Sita Kaki changed the subject. Bimla did not come out. She liked her mother's answer, but she also understood that the scar had now crossed the walls of the house and become neighbourhood talk.

That night, while bathing, a slight sting rose when water touched her left arm. The wound had healed, but the skin pulled tight like something hardened. She touched the edge of the mark with a finger. The whole night of the incident returned to her not when she looked at the scar, but through that pulling sensation—the sound of the door being pushed shut, broken glass, the oil lamp fallen on the floor, and the three-kos road to her mother's house.

There were no other people's eyes in that memory. That was why Bimla felt the memory was her own.

The next day a message came from Rukmini that the medical room had decided no re-examination was necessary. The first report was sufficient; the committee would decide the file at its next meeting.

Manju was pleased to hear it. "See? Now the matter is settled."

Bimla did not smile. "Is the matter settled, or has my arm been spared?"

This time Manju did not laugh either. She simply held Bimla's hand and walked with her for a while.

Three days later there was a women's meeting in the village. Rekha had invited Bimla. The subject was silence about violence inside the home. Bimla spent until afternoon deciding whether to go. In the end she went, but said beforehand that she would not sit on the stage.

The meeting began. Two women spoke of their experiences. One widow said that no marks from the beatings remained on her body, but the fear of years still woke her at night. Hearing this, Bimla looked at her closely for the first time.

Then Rekha said, "Among us is a sister whose body bears a clear mark of violence—"

Bimla rose from her seat.

Rekha stopped mid-sentence.

Everyone at the meeting looked towards Bimla. Some eyes held sympathy, some curiosity, some the expectation of seeing the thing that had not yet been shown.

Bimla did not go towards the stage. Standing where she was, she said, "My name is Bimla. My statement is in the papers. I will say what I wish to say. My arm is not an exhibit for everyone."

No one applauded immediately. Bimla liked that. Applause too could sometimes become another form of staring.

Rekha lowered her head. "All right," she said. "Say only what you wish to say."

Bimla sat down. That day she did not say a single word from the stage.

After the meeting she went straight to Nasima, the tailor at the market. The left sleeve of her old kurta rubbed against the scar. Spreading out the cloth, Nasima said, "Raise your arm a little so I can take the measurement."

Bimla paused for a moment, then removed the shawl herself and raised her arm.

Nasima's eyes fell on the scar. She asked neither "What happened?" nor "Who did it?" She simply measured the cloth at a finger's distance and marked it with chalk. "Shall I keep the seam a little farther out here?" Nasima asked. Bimla placed a finger on the scar and said, "Yes. Let the cloth not rub here."

Nasima began measuring the other sleeve. The conversation moved on to the colour of the cloth, the neckline and the buttons. Bimla lowered her arm. The scar remained where it was. Its measurements were written in documents, its night lived in memory. But in this small shop, she had told only where the seam should not fall.

STORY 194

The Night Truck

By ten at night, a yellow truck had come to a halt behind the closed warehouse at Belaha Crossing. Of the three electric lights across the road, two were out. In the light of the one still burning, faded patches of old lettering could be seen on the truck's body, and a blue tarpaulin tied over the back.

Under the warehouse awning, twenty-two labourers sat with their bundles gathered around them. One had clothes tied in a sheet, another a brass plate, another two pairs of torn garments. After seven months in the city carrying bricks, lifting iron rods and plastering walls, this was all the property they had left. Work had stopped three weeks earlier; the contractor had paid half their wages and said—now fend for yourselves.

Since evening Lalit Sah had been explaining to everyone, “Not just to the border. We’ll cross the border and drop you at Barahiya Bend. From there, each of you takes your own road. Fifteen hundred per person. A child would be half fare, but there are no children. No getting off midway.”

“Fifteen hundred is too much,” said Jagdish Paswan. In his pocket were two thousand five hundred rupees he had saved to buy medicine for his mother once he reached home.

Lalit looked at him as though, along with the fare, the road itself were his private property. “Then walk. The border is seven kos away. The police will stop you at night, the sun will burn you by day. I am taking the risk, and risk has a price.”

Badri Yadav, the truck driver, came to the back and checked the knots of the tarpaulin. “Not twenty-two,” he said to Lalit. “You told me twenty.”

“Two more joined. The money will increase.”

Badri looked inside. “We’ll talk about the money later. Don’t tie the tarpaulin completely tight. Leave this back corner open by a hand’s breadth.”

Lalit said at once, “If it stays open, they’ll be seen at the checkpoint.”

“If it stays closed, people will suffocate inside.” Badri left the knot half loose. “The vehicle is mine. There are people inside, not sacks.”

Lalit laughed. “A lot of righteousness has awakened in you now. Remember it when you take your money.”

The labourers climbed in one by one. Beneath the tarpaulin, the smells of diesel, rope, old onion sacks and human sweat mingled together. Jagdish sat near the open corner at the back. Beside him was Sito Devi, who carried sand with a construction crew. Her husband had returned to the village two years

earlier; she had left her daughter with her mother-in-law and worked in the city.

When the truck moved, everyone's body tilted in the same direction at once. No one laughed. Once the first bend was behind them, the lights outside grew fewer. Through the small gap in the blue tarpaulin, night air entered like a narrow stream. Sito turned her face towards it.

After about an hour, the vehicle suddenly slowed. Badri gave two short signals—the sign Lalit had explained earlier meant they were near a checkpoint. Conversation inside stopped at once. Reaching forward, Lalit pulled the gap in the tarpaulin tight. The darkness thickened.

Jagdish whispered, "Leave it open."

"Quiet," Lalit's voice came back. "Two minutes."

Two minutes grew long. The truck moved, then stopped. From outside, the beam of a torch swept across the tarpaulin. Someone barked, "What's in the back?"

Badri answered, "Empty sacks."

At that instant someone inside coughed. One cough, then another. The torchlight stopped on the tarpaulin.

"Open the knot."

Lalit's body went rigid. Badri said something, but the voice outside remained hard. The knot was opened. Cold night air rushed in, along with light. Sub-Inspector Jaikant at the checkpoint looked at every face, one by one.

"Everyone get down," he said.

No one had the courage to object. On the barren earth beside the road, the twenty-two labourers stood in something like a line. Ahead of the border post, a thick white-painted line cut across the road. On this side was one state, on the other another. Far away in the dark, the light of the other checkpoint flickered.

Jaikant asked Badri, "Why are there people in a goods vehicle?"

Badri said evenly, "Sahib, they've been stranded for three weeks. I was returning empty. I thought I'd drop them off."

Lalit cut in, "We are helping them. There are no buses, no trains. People will die on the road."

Jaikant looked at the labourers. "How much did you pay?"

For a few moments no one spoke. Then Sito said, "Fifteen hundred."

A voice from the other side said, "Same for me."

Then three or four people repeated it together. Badri turned towards Lalit. "You told me eight hundred per person," he said quietly but clearly.

Lalit narrowed his eyes. "Finding the route, understanding the checkpoints, gathering people—does all that happen for free?"

"Then don't call it help," Sito said. "Call it business."

Lalit's lips tightened. "If I weren't doing business, all of you would still be sitting behind that warehouse."

Jaikant raised a hand and stopped the argument. "Do not hold a council over accounts in front of me. The rule is clear—passengers cannot cross the border like this in a goods truck."

"Then where are we supposed to go?" Jagdish asked.

"Go back where you came from. Arrangements will be looked into in the morning."

At this, unease spread through the line. Someone said the warehouse owner would not let them back in now. Someone else said arrangements for the morning had been promised for the last two days as well. Sito remained silent, but held the knot of her bundle tightly in both hands.

Jaikant listened to everyone for a while. The constable standing behind him said, "Sir, impound the truck. Action will be taken against the driver."

"If we impound it, these twenty-two people will be left here by the roadside," Jaikant said. "There is no room in the shelter home at this hour."

Lalit immediately came closer and tried to say something in a low voice. Jaikant stepped back two paces. "No tea-and-snacks talk. Whatever you have to say, say it in front of everyone."

Badri kept looking towards the open corner of the tarpaulin. "If my vehicle is seized, the owner will dismiss me. I did not take these people's fare; what was fixed for me was for diesel and the risk."

"Risk?" Jagdish exclaimed.

Badri looked at him. "Yes, risk. If we are caught, all of you will look for another way home. I will lose my livelihood."

"I have already lost mine," Jagdish said. But after that sentence, no one said anything. Night spread over the road again.

Jaikant went to the checkpoint desk. He turned over some papers, looked at the time, then at the white line across the road. After a while he came back out. "The truck will cross the border empty. All of you will cross the line on foot. Three hundred paces beyond it there is an old peepal tree. The vehicle will stop there. From this checkpoint, I will not allow passengers to cross in a goods vehicle."

Lalit's eyes lit up. "That's all? Come on, come on."

The constable looked at Jaikant in surprise. "Sir—"

Jaikant stopped him. "I will write what I see—the vehicle was checked empty and allowed through. The people went on foot. What happens on the other side is not my responsibility."

Sito looked first at the white line, then at Jaikant. "Meaning the rule will also survive, and we will also be counted as having crossed?"

Jaikant did not answer.

The twenty-two labourers lifted their bundles. Bodies that had sat cramped inside the truck for an hour had to learn to walk again. The white line was not very wide, but that night, to none of them was it merely paint. One by one, they

crossed. When Jagdish reached the line, he instinctively looked back. Badri was slowly driving the empty truck forward; Lalit sat beside him; Jaikant stood in the checkpoint light.

He had said three hundred paces, but the peepal tree appeared after five hundred. When they reached it, Sito put her bundle down on the earth. The soles of her feet were burning. Some people sat down beside the road.

The truck arrived. Badri got down and opened the rear flap. "Climb in quickly. There will be more checks ahead."

Lalit began counting again—"One, two, three..."

Sito did not climb in. "For fifteen hundred, the agreement was that the truck would take us across the border."

"You did cross," Lalit said.

"I crossed on my own feet."

"I made the route possible."

"The police saved the rule, the driver saved the vehicle, you saved your earnings," Sito said calmly. "Did you ask what we saved?"

For a moment Lalit had no answer. Then he said, "You'll reach home. Is that nothing?"

Sito did not reply. She climbed into the truck, because home was still very far away.

Badri began tying the tarpaulin. This time Jagdish left the rear corner open by more than a hand's breadth. Badri saw it but did not come to tighten it. "A lot of dust will get in," he merely said.

"Let it," Jagdish replied. "Air will get in too."

The truck moved on. Through the gap in the blue tarpaulin, the lights of the border post grew smaller. Lalit sat in front adding up his accounts; Badri measured the road ahead; behind them, Jaikant would be writing in his register that an empty truck had been checked. Inside, the twenty-two labourers were once again pressed against one another.

Sito put her bundle beneath her feet and turned her face towards the gap in the tarpaulin. Air was coming in. They had crossed the border, but as to whose mercy, whose business and whose rule governed that short stretch of night, everyone had a different answer. Only the five hundred paces they had walked hurt alike in every body.

STORY 195

The Identification Tag

In the rear veranda of the district hospital, the smell of ice and the smell of wet earth seemed to be fighting one another. The night's unrest had subsided, but bamboo barricades still stood between the city's two neighbourhoods. At daybreak, three bodies had been brought to the hospital. Two had been identified; from the wrist of the third hung a small tag tied with string—"Unknown, approximately thirty-five years old, possibly from the western neighbourhood."

The word "possibly" was small, but that day it carried great weight in the city.

By noon, Naseem's brother Salman and sister Zahira reached the hospital. Naseem had not returned home since the previous night. He was a tailor and in the evenings brought cloth home from a shop in the market. His route passed through the crossing where stones had been thrown the night before.

A police constable stopped the two of them outside the veranda. "First give a description."

Salman said, "Age thirty-seven. An old cut mark behind the right ear. Half the little toe on the left foot is missing. Inside the armpit seam of his shirt, he stitches with blue thread himself."

The constable kept writing on the paper. Then he asked, "Religion?"

Zahira looked once at Salman. From beyond the bamboo barricade came sounds like slogans.

"His name is Naseem Ansari," Salman said quietly.

The constable stopped his pen. "The external tag on this body says western neighbourhood."

"What does that prove?"

"It means that in the list of last night's dead, they are being counted separately. A lot of people outside are asking for numbers."

Zahira asked, "Are we to look at the body or the list?"

The constable said nothing. He went inside, and a short while later an employee came and took them to the cold-room door.

As soon as the sheet was lifted, Zahira's breath caught. The face was swollen, one part of the forehead covered with a dressing. But the cut mark behind the ear was there. Salman bent towards the feet. Half the little toe was missing. Then he turned up the armpit seam of the shirt—uneven stitches in blue thread.

Zahira pulled the sheet back up. "This is Naseem."

The employee opened the tag. "Think once more. Information has already gone out saying western neighbourhood."

Salman's face hardened. "If the information is wrong, correct it."

The employee's eyes went towards the door. "Correct is an easy word. The name will change on the papers, the religion will change, the count will change. The people outside who are already claiming three of the dead as theirs will say two. The other side will gain one. After that, who will ask how Naseem died? Where he was found? Whose crowd it was?"

"All those questions should be asked," Zahira said.

"They should. But also think about which road you will take home tonight."

Silence spread through the veranda.

Naseem's house was in a narrow lane in the northern neighbourhood. At the mouth of that lane, a handcart had been burned the previous day. At night Salman had seen the flames from inside the window. Their mother Sakina was still at home with two grandchildren. Zahira thought—if Naseem's full name and religion went onto the list, the crowd might carry that name to the house before the body ever reached it.

The employee said, "The identification tag will not be changed yet. First meet the officer in charge."

There were three chairs and five people in the officer's room. On the desk lay two registers, one seal, and half a glass of tea. From outside, journalists were calling questions—"How many dead? From which neighbourhood?"

The officer listened to Salman's statement. "Are the identifying marks clear?"

"Three marks," Salman said.

"Any identity card?"

"At home. None was found on the body."

"Then we can make a provisional identification. But the community name has already gone onto the public list."

Zahira asked, "Why was the community name put there?"

A clerk said, "There was a red thread on the wrist. The body was found near the western lane. It was a rushed night."

Zahira immediately remembered Naseem's wrist. "A red thread?"

She went back to the cold room. Beneath the sheet, there really was a faded red thread around the right wrist. Zahira looked at it without touching.

"My daughter tied this thread at the Sonapur fair last year," she said. "The little girl liked the colour and tied it on him. Naseem did not cut it off. He used to say—you should not quickly undo a knot tied by a child's hand."

The clerk's face changed. "How were we supposed to know that?"

"You could not know. Then why did you turn a guess into a religion?"

The employee placed a finger on the word “possibly” on the tag. “That is why ‘possibly’ was written.”

“Did ‘possibly’ reach the list outside?”

The employee remained silent.

Outside in the corridor, two young men were arguing. One said, “Three of our people are gone.” The other said, “Add a name to our side too.” The number of bodies had become like counters in a neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood account.

Salman took Zahira into a corner. “The name has to be corrected.”

“Yes. This is Naseem.”

“But if the religion goes onto the public list?”

“Mother is at home.”

“And the children?”

Zahira looked at the wall, where plaster was flaking away. “If we leave the wrong name, Naseem’s final paper will remain under a name that was not his.”

“And if we write the truth, the living are at risk?”

Neither of them had an answer.

Meanwhile an elderly cleaner, Ramsevak, stopped while crossing the veranda with a mop. He knew Naseem; Naseem had stitched his grandson’s school uniform. “Was this Naseem the tailor?”

Salman said yes.

Ramsevak silently bowed his head. Then he looked at the tag. “Why does it say western neighbourhood here?”

Zahira merely pointed towards the red thread.

Ramsevak said nothing for a long time. Then, showing his own wrist, he said, “There is a black thread on my hand. Can you work out my full name from that?”

The question travelled back to the desk. The officer called for the tag. The red thread, place found, clothing—each was written separately as a note. At the box marked “community”, the clerk’s pen stopped again.

“Write what the family says,” the constable said.

Salman’s face tightened again.

Zahira pulled out a chair and sat down. “Write Naseem’s name. Father—Yusuf. Home—Madhubani Lane, northern neighbourhood. Identification—cut behind the ear, missing part of toe, blue stitching. Leave the religion box blank on the public tag.”

The clerk said, “The rules do not allow us to leave it blank.”

“Then write whatever is necessary in the internal register. On the tag tied to his wrist outside, write only the name and serial number.”

The officer thought for a while. “Make two tags. One for identification in the cold room, one for public information. No community on the public tag.”

“And the list that already went outside?” Salman asked.

"We will issue a correction. But no community will be given with the name."

Outside, the journalists were asking questions again. The officer came to the door and said, "The unidentified deceased has been identified by the family as Naseem Ansari. The initial community classification is withdrawn. Further inquiry will continue."

A voice called, "Which community?"

The officer replied, "For identification, the name is sufficient."

Another voice asked, "Which side should the death count be added to?"

"Add the death count to the dead."

Hearing that sentence did not bring Zahira relief. Naseem could not come back. But at least his body would not be given another name in the quarrel over numbers.

The paperwork continued until evening. There was no immediate way to send word home; Salman sent an acquaintance on a bicycle with the news. After sunset, the crowd outside the hospital gate grew again. The police said it would not be safe to take the body home at night.

Salman grew restless. "Mother is waiting."

Zahira said, "Let the news reach our living mother first. The body will go in the morning."

That night Zahira remained seated in the veranda. A new tag hung on the cold-room door—"Naseem Ansari, No. 3." Nothing more. The red thread was mentioned in the internal register; it was not interpreted.

In the morning, the hearse arrived. Naseem's body was covered with a white sheet. Salman asked, "People in the lane at home will ask his religion again."

Straightening the edge of the sheet, Zahira said, "Anyone who comes to our house, we will tell them Naseem's name. Anyone who comes to demand a count, we will say—first sit down in front of Mother."

Before the hearse left, Ramsevak came running. In his hand was the previous day's old tag. "This was to go into the file. But you should see it."

On the tag, "possibly western neighbourhood" had been crossed out. Over the red line was stamped—"Initial assumption withdrawn."

Salman took the tag in his hand, then returned it to Ramsevak. "Keep it in the file. We do not want this at home."

"Why keep it in the file?"

"At home we have his measuring tape, his scissors, the unfinished sleeves of children's uniforms. Those are enough for identification."

The hearse passed through the gate. The city's bamboo barricades had still not been removed. The driver had to take another route. Zahira kept looking out of the window. The fear of the night had not yet ended; correcting the truth had not automatically brought safety. But on the new tag tied to Naseem's wrist, a name had replaced an assumption.

The vehicle stopped at the mouth of the lane. Mother Sakina stood at the doorway. Her eyes went first not to the sheet but to the tag on the wrist. She could not read the name. Zahira took her hand and said, “Amma, this time the name is not wrong.”

Sakina did not ask for the tag. She only placed her hand on the sheet. Naseem’s little daughter came out from inside. In her hand was the remaining bundle of red thread—the same thread from the fair, a piece of which had been tied around Naseem’s wrist.

The child looked at the thread, then placed it in her mother’s hand. There was no longer any need for anyone to ask which community he belonged to.

STORY 196

The Child's Question

On the third day after the night the village market burned, bamboo mats were hung in the courtyard of the panchayat house. The administration said they were meant to keep out the wind. But people understood that the mats kept out eyes more than wind. Families from the eastern hamlet sat on one side, families from the western hamlet on the other. In the space between them stood relief sacks, water jars and two lanterns.

Nayan was nine years old. There was a scratch on his left elbow, on which his mother applied turmeric paste twice a day. On the night of the fire he had seen nothing. His father had taken him and his little sister out by the back way and run towards the fields. He had heard only sounds—running feet, breaking glass, and somewhere far away a voice shouting, “Run!”

At the panchayat house, for the first time he heard the words “those people” so often.

“Those people cannot be trusted.”

“Those people had prepared in advance.”

“Even their children are taught.”

“Those people are always waiting for a chance.”

Nayan kept wondering—who were those people?

At noon his mother sprinkled salt over his rice. Nayan asked, “Mother, why weren’t those people like us?”

His mother’s hand stopped for a moment. “Don’t ask such things now.”

“Everyone says it.”

“Everyone says many things.” His mother pushed the bowl towards him. “Eat.”

Nayan put a mouthful of rice into his mouth, but the question would not go down. In the evening, his father’s younger brother Devesh sat near the mat, a bandage tied around his head. Nayan asked again, “Kaka, why weren’t those people like us?”

Devesh answered without thinking, “Because they take the side of their own people.”

“Don’t we?”

Devesh looked at Nayan. “You’re a child. You won’t understand what these things mean.”

“Then who threw the first stone?”

“It came from that side.”

“Did you see it?”

Devesh narrowed his eyes. “Ramesh saw it.”

Ramesh was gathering up playing cards in the next corner. Nayan went to him. “Ramesh Kaka, did you see the first stone?”

Ramesh laughed. “Me? Raghu told me.”

Raghu was not at the panchayat house. His arm had been injured and he had gone to his maternal grandfather’s village. For the first time, Nayan realised that the first stone kept moving farther away from him—from Devesh to Ramesh, from Ramesh to Raghu, and from Raghu who knew where.

Dinner was being served. Khichdi had been cooked in one large cauldron, but two separate queues formed on either side of the mat. Ramcharit, the relief volunteer, served first here and then there with the same ladle. Nayan kept watching him. The ladle crossed the gap in the mat; people did not.

Just then, from the other side of the mat came a child’s voice: “Ammi, why aren’t those people like us?”

The bowl stopped in Nayan’s hand. He recognised the voice—Sahil. They studied in the same class at school. On rainy days they used to float paper birds together along the edge of the pond. Sahil was quick at sums, Nayan at handwriting.

From the other side came a woman’s soft reply, “Eat quietly.”

“But Mamu says those people are different.”

“No questions now.”

Nayan moved close to a gap in the mat. Sahil’s eyes appeared from the other side. For a moment both remained silent.

Sahil whispered, “Were you told that too?”

“Told what?”

“That we are different.”

Nayan nodded. “Kaka says your people threw the first stone.”

Sahil said at once, “My Mamu says your neighbourhood threw first.”

For a few moments they remained silent on the two sides of the gap.

“Did your Mamu see it?” Nayan asked.

Sahil bit his lip. “He said Nazir Chacha saw it.”

“Where is Nazir Chacha?”

“At my aunt’s village.”

Nayan remembered Devesh, Ramesh and Raghu. On both sides, the first stone was fleeing into the distance in exactly the same way.

From behind the mat came Devesh’s voice. “Nayan! What are you doing there?”

Nayan moved away. Devesh caught his arm and brought him back. “Didn’t I tell you not to go near the gap?”

“It was Sahil.”

“Don’t take names.”

“He is in my class.”

Devesh let go of his arm, but his voice remained hard. “There is no class now. Stay with your own people now.”

This answer was new to Nayan. School was closed, so was the class closed too? He wondered: when school opened again, would Sahil become someone from his class again, or would he remain someone from the other side of the mat?

The next morning Grandmother sat in the sun turning the beads of her tulsi rosary. Nayan told her his question. Grandmother said, “Religions are different, customs are different.”

“Do different customs make people different?”

“Some things have come down from the ancestors.”

“Who told the ancestors?”

Grandmother stopped turning the beads. “You have too many questions.”

Nayan wondered whether there were too many questions or too few answers.

At noon soap was distributed as relief. There were separate cartons for the two hamlets, but the soap was from the same factory and had the same smell. Nayan brought one bar to his nose. Devesh pushed his hand down. “This is not a toy.”

Behind the mat, Sahil coughed. Even though he wanted to, Nayan did not go near him. The previous night’s “Don’t take names” was caught in his ears.

In the evening three elderly men sat outside the panchayat house talking. Nayan listened. One said, “Their way of eating and drinking is different.” Another said, “You know as soon as you hear the name.” The third said, “They are taught their own history.”

Nayan wondered what he understood merely on hearing Sahil’s name. All he knew was that Sahil borrowed his pen during the half-time break and worked out difficult sums quickly.

At night clouds gathered in the sky. The old roof of the panchayat house began leaking in three places. First the families on the eastern side shifted their sacks. A little later water began dripping on the western side too. The earth beneath the mat in the middle turned soft.

Ramcharit said, “If we don’t remove the mat, the posts will sink.”

Voices came from both sides—“No, let it stay.”

Ramcharit pressed earth around the posts. The mat tilted. Now a space about two hands high opened beneath it. Through that gap water flowed from one side to the other. No one had time to stop it.

Through that empty space Nayan saw Sahil’s feet. Sahil saw his feet too. Both remained silent.

By morning the rain had stopped. On the earth of the courtyard, a single stream had cut a track across both halves. Nayan was touching the mark of that stream with a finger when his father came and said they had been given permission to go and look at the house.

On the road home were burnt shops, black walls and broken windows. His father walked quickly. Nayan followed. At the turn into their lane, he saw the outer door of Sahil's house. Half the lattice had burned away.

"Don't look there," his father said.

"Why?"

"Just don't look."

"That is Sahil's house."

His father stopped. He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it. Finally he said, "The situation is bad now."

For the first time Nayan understood that adults removed names before saying "those people". With a name, the matter became difficult. If he said Sahil, he remembered the class, the pen, sums and the paper birds at the pond; if he said "those people", only the mat remained.

The smell of smoke still lingered inside the house. His mother was cleaning the broken edge of the hearth. His little sister Rinni was making a circle in the ash in the courtyard. Nayan sat beside her.

Rinni asked, "Who stayed behind the mat at the panchayat house?"

Nayan was silent for a few moments. He remembered Devesh saying, "Don't take names."

He said, "Sahil."

"Who is Sahil?"

"A boy in my class."

Rinni made a small path through the circle she had drawn in the ash. "Will he go to school again?"

"When the school opens."

His mother had been listening from inside. She came out, but did not forbid him to say Sahil's name. She only said, "Nayan, don't go to his house just now."

Nayan nodded. "All right."

After a while he asked again, "Mother, if Sahil is not like us, why was his mother telling him that we are not like them? There is an 'us' on both sides, so who is 'them'?"

His mother kept looking at the circle in the ash. She had no immediate answer.

Outside in the lane, someone called for bamboo to be lifted. His father moved towards the door. His mother stroked Nayan's head and said only, "Do not make an answer to that question too quickly."

Nayan fell silent. For the first time, someone had stopped his question not in order to silence it, but to keep from giving it a hurried answer.

Rinni widened the path she had made in the ash. Outside, the burnt smell of the market was still in the air. The school was still closed. Nayan did not

know whether Sahil had reached his own house. The question remained where it was—smaller than all the answers, yet finding its way between them all.

STORY 197

The Price of Testimony

In the veranda of the district court, Lakhan Sada had folded his summons four times and tucked it into the inside pocket of his shirt. The corner of the paper had softened with sweat. He had left home in the dark to catch the morning bus, but his mind was still stuck at the gate of the brick kiln.

The previous evening, Bhubneshwar, the kiln clerk, had told him, “In court, say only what you said before. If you suddenly remember anything more, from tomorrow all three names from your house will disappear from the work register.”

Three names—Lakhan, his wife Budhni and his younger brother Harinath. All three worked at the same kiln, each at a different task. If one name was struck off, the household shook; if all three were, even the cooking fire became a question.

Lakhan had not told Budhni what the clerk had said that night. He had only shown her the summons. Budhni had tied up a small parcel of rice for him and said, “Say what you saw. The rest is with God.”

“Will God pay the wages?” Lakhan had blurted out.

Budhni had given no answer. She had only pushed the half-burnt stick deeper into the ashes.

Beside Lakhan in the veranda sat Malti. Her husband, Jatan Mandal, had fallen to his death four months earlier from a bamboo scaffold beside an unfinished kiln chimney. After the accident, Lakhan had told the police, “Jatan was above, the bamboo broke, and he fell.”

That statement was not false. But it was not complete either.

That day a westerly wind had been blowing across the kiln. Dust from half-baked bricks stung the eyes, and the night dew still made the bamboo scaffold slick. Jatan was arranging bricks above; Lakhan was passing mortar up from below.

One bamboo pole was split thin through the middle. Old jute rope had been wound around the crack. Whenever Jatan put his foot on it, the rope tightened, then slackened again. Even so, in the rush to load the cart on time, no one ordered the scaffold cleared.

When Jatan fell, dust rose first, then people ran. Bhubneshwar had been the first to say, “No one touch the bamboo.” Lakhan had not understood that sentence then; by evening the split bamboo had been replaced.

Before it broke, Jatan had looked down twice and said, "This bamboo is split. Give me another one."

Bhubneshwar had not looked up. Looking towards the cart, he had said, "We have to finish loading this batch today. Work another half hour, then we'll change it."

At that moment Lakhan had been two arm-lengths away from Jatan. He could still hear the creak of the bamboo in his ears.

When the police wrote his statement, Bhubneshwar was standing five paces away. That evening the wages were also to be paid by his hand. Before saying "split bamboo", Lakhan saw Bhubneshwar's eyes and shortened his sentence.

Now, four months later, the court had summoned him again. In four months, the rice in Jatan's house had run out, Malti's gold nose-flower had been sold, and Lakhan's debt had increased twice over.

Malti asked softly, "Did you bring food?"

Lakhan touched his pocket. "Budhni gave me some."

"Do not worry on my account," Malti said. "Say only what you can bear to say. You have a household too."

That sentence did not bring Lakhan relief. Instead, the balance inside him trembled even more.

They had to wait a long time before entering the courtroom. For the first time, Lakhan understood that a poor person's time also had a price, but it was a price he had to pay himself. The day's wages were already gone.

At noon, Lakhan opened his food parcel in a corner of the veranda. Inside were cold rice, salt and two green chillies. Malti did not open hers.

"Won't you eat?" Lakhan asked.

Malti said, "I am hungry, but nothing stays in my stomach."

Lakhan pushed half his rice towards her. Malti ate two mouthfuls, then pushed the parcel back to him. In that small exchange, neither of them spoke about testimony.

In the afternoon his name was called. Reaching the witness stand, he wiped his palm on his dhoti.

The public prosecutor began with simple questions—name, village, work, how long he had known Jatan. Lakhan answered each in a few words.

"Where were you at the time of the incident?"

"On the scaffold, near Jatan."

"Did anything happen before the bamboo broke?"

Lakhan's eyes went towards the door. Bhubneshwar was not outside, but the previous day's sentence was standing inside—three names.

"Jatan had said the bamboo was split," Lakhan said.

Malti's body straightened slightly.

The lawyer asked again, "Did anyone answer him?"

Lakhan remained silent.

The judge said, "Say only what you remember. Do not guess."

This was not a matter of guessing. The memory was very clear. In Lakhan's mind, Budhni's ash-filled stove, Harinath's torn towel, and the gate of the kiln appeared together.

He said, "The clerk, Bhubneshwar, said—this batch has to be loaded today, work another half hour, then the bamboo will be changed."

For a few moments the room was silent. Lakhan's own voice sounded far away from him.

The other lawyer stood up. His first question was sharp. "The kiln owner owed you two days' wages?"

"Yes, two days."

"You were angry about that?"

"If I did not get my wages, I was angry."

"Then would it not benefit you to say something like this against the owner's people?"

Lakhan looked first at Malti, then at the lawyer. "The account of two days' wages is one thing. The split bamboo was another."

The lawyer read out the first police statement. Bhubneshwar's words were not in it.

"Now, after four months, where has this new thing come from?"

Lakhan's throat went dry. He was given water. As he drank, he thought—if he answered this question, the clerk's threat from yesterday could also enter the courtroom.

He put down the glass. "The first statement was written at the kiln. The clerk was standing there. That evening the wages were to come from his hand."

"Meaning you were afraid?"

Lakhan did not say yes at once. The word fear made him feel as though the door of his house, Budhni and Harinath would also be entered into the record.

"I did not tell the whole thing because I was afraid of losing work," he finally said.

The other lawyer asked a few more questions—what time of night it was, how much light there was, whether Jatan had been drunk, how far away Lakhan stood. Lakhan said only what he had seen; where he had not seen, he said, "I do not know."

Outside the door, Bhubneshwar was not there, but a young new worker from the kiln stood beside a pillar. On seeing Lakhan, he immediately looked away. Lakhan could not tell whether he was there only on court business or to carry news back to someone.

In that moment, Lakhan felt less fear about what he had said than about the road home. Even so, he walked slowly forward through the crowd in the veranda with Malti.

When they came outside, his knees were shaking. Malti stepped forward to thank him, but Lakhan raised a hand and stopped her.

“No thanks yet,” he said. “We’ll see the gate tomorrow.”

Malti lowered her eyes. “If you lose your work because of me?”

“Not because of you. Because of the bamboo.”

At the other end of the veranda, a clerk was stamping a witness travel-allowance slip. Lakhan’s slip was made too, but he was told the money would come later.

Lakhan put the slip in his pocket. He had already borrowed the bus fare for the day.

It was evening by the time he reached home. Budhni was washing brick dust in the courtyard. Looking at Lakhan’s face, she understood that he had not stopped with the first statement.

“You told them?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Everything you saw?”

“What I saw.”

Budhni remained silent for a few moments. Then she asked, “Did you tell them about the clerk’s threat too?”

Lakhan started.

“He told me too,” Budhni said. “I didn’t tell you because I thought you might break before you even went.”

Now both understood that each had been hiding fear from the other.

That night no stone came, no one pounded on the door. But whenever dogs barked in the lane, Lakhan woke up. For the first time he understood that sometimes safety is not the absence of an event, but the waiting for one.

In the morning all three went to the kiln. Inside the gate, the names of workers were written in chalk on a bamboo board. Lakhan’s name was not there. Harinath’s name was not there either.

Budhni’s name was there.

From a distance Bhubneshwar said, “One person from a house is enough.”

Budhni looked at Lakhan. “Shall I go in?”

For a moment something bitter rose inside Lakhan—if she went in, would it mean accepting the clerk’s favour? If she did not, the food at home would shrink.

He said, “Go. Your work is yours.”

Budhni went inside. Without saying anything, Harinath tucked his basket under his arm and set off towards another kiln.

Lakhan remained alone outside the gate. In his pocket was the court-stamped travel-allowance slip; in his hand, no work token.

He took out the slip and looked at it. His name was written correctly on it. His testimony from the previous day had also been entered into the court record.

But having one's name written correctly and having work attached to that name were two different things.

Lakhan folded the slip again, put it in his pocket and began walking towards the crossing where labourers gathered. He did not know whether he would find work that day. He knew only this much: the full price of one sentence spoken yesterday had still not been paid.

STORY 198

Across the River

On a night in Bhadau, the Bagmati's current was surging ahead, erasing the signs of homes and doorways. The moon was behind the clouds, and after the embankment on the eastern side of the village breached somewhere, water had filled lane after lane. People were fleeing towards the raised road, carrying on their heads whatever they had managed to seize.

A section of the old bridge had collapsed that very evening. Now there was only one way to reach the road: by boat—Bansi Sahni's old wooden boat, which on ordinary days carried ten people. That night more than twenty people had gathered at the ghat.

Bansi raised the lantern and said, "Eleven at a time. Leave the heavy sacks at the ghat. Lives first, sacks later."

Ramnarayan Jha was clutching a small sack of paddy. Jhagru Paswan had his five-year-old granddaughter Munni tucked against him. Sakina Bibi was with her twelve-year-old son Faizan, and one hand of old Mahavir Mandal was trembling. No one had time to ask who anyone else was.

When the first boat pushed off, the voices of those left behind at the ghat blurred into the distance. Bansi drove the oar into the water and cut diagonally across the current. The water was not calm; at times the boat rose, at times it seemed to sink to its belly.

Ramnarayan put the sack beneath his feet and said, "It is leaning too much to the right."

Bansi said at once, "Names and lineages later. Whoever is heavy, move towards the middle now."

Everyone shifted. Jhagru handed Munni to Sakina because he had to brace the side of the boat with his own body. Without asking anything, Sakina covered the child with the end of her sari. Faizan took Mahavir Mandal's trembling hand and moved him towards the middle.

The boat had reached midstream when there came a sound like a 'thak' beneath its wooden floor. Bansi's face tightened. A submerged bamboo pole had grazed the belly of the boat. The next moment cold water began to collect around their feet.

"Whatever vessel you have, use it to throw the water out," Bansi shouted. "Otherwise the weight will increase."

Whose vessel belonged to whom no longer mattered. Ramnarayan's brass lota reached Jhagru's hand. Mahavir Mandal took Sakina's small bowl. Faizan

picked up the aluminium container that had been resting on the sack of paddy and began bailing. With one hand everyone steadied themselves; with the other they kept throwing the river back into the river.

Munni began to cry in fear. Sakina whispered close to her ear, “Keep holding on to me. The boat will reach the bank.” The child clasped her neck tightly.

A fierce wave came. Ramnarayan’s sack slid to one end of the boat. The boat tilted again. Bansi roared, “Throw the sack out!”

Ramnarayan’s hand fell on the sack, but he hesitated for a moment. It held the paddy that remained in his house. Then Jhagru reached out with his free hand and dragged the sack to the edge. Together they pushed it into the water. The sack surfaced once, then vanished into the dark current.

Ramnarayan said nothing. He took his own lota from Jhagru’s hand, bailed twice, then, without looking, passed the lota to Faizan.

In the boat, no one’s identity was separate any longer. One hand supported the oar, another bailed water, another held the body of a child or an old person steady. In midstream, caste, faith, hamlet, lineage—all such words seemed to have been left behind at the ghat.

Far away, three lanterns could be seen on the raised road. Bansi said, “Head that way. The current will pull left now.”

Faizan folded his gamchha behind Mahavir Mandal’s back so that the edge of the wood would not press against his bones. Mahavir said breathlessly, “Son, a little higher.” Faizan shifted the gamchha upwards.

Munni had stopped crying in Sakina’s lap. Exhausted, the child rested her face on Sakina’s shoulder. Jhagru looked over from time to time, but did not insist on taking her back.

Just before the boat reached the bank, another wave struck. This time Ramnarayan instinctively caught hold of Jhagru’s shoulder and sat down. Jhagru spread his legs and braced himself to keep him from falling. Neither looked at the other; there was no time to look.

Bansi ran the boat into the mud. “Get down one at a time. Once you are off, move ahead. Keep holding the boat until the old people and the children have got down.”

Faizan jumped first. His feet sank into the mud up to the ankles, but he turned and caught Mahavir Mandal’s hand. Ramnarayan supported the old man’s arm from the other side. Jhagru took Munni from Sakina’s lap, but when Sakina slipped as she stepped down, Jhagru caught her by the elbow.

Everyone climbed onto the road. Behind them the river’s roar was just as fierce, but the ground beneath their feet was firm now.

At the roadside, two young relief workers had kept a bucket of drinking water and small pieces of jaggery. They told the people from the first boat to

catch their breath until the second load arrived. There was only one bowl with the bucket.

The bowl went first to Mahavir Mandal, then to Sakina, then Jhagru, then Ramnarayan. It did not occur to anyone to ask who had drunk from it before them. The river was still roaring before their eyes; within that roar, thirst had a religion of its own.

Ramnarayan took two sips and held the bowl to Munni's mouth. The child drank half the water and spilled the rest over Jhagru's dhoti. Sakina burst out laughing. For a few moments, everyone's laughter sounded like a single voice.

A school beside the raised road had been turned into a temporary shelter. A lantern burned on the veranda. The villagers who had arrived earlier began calling out as soon as they spotted people they knew.

"Jha Ji, this way! We have kept a room for our people."

"Jhagru, your hamlet is on the back veranda."

"Sakina sister, the people from the mosque hamlet are gathered under that neem tree."

The voices suddenly gave everyone their identities back. Those who in the boat had been nothing but drenched bodies began, on reaching the road, to become hamlet, caste and faith once again.

Ramnarayan saw his brass lota in Faizan's hand. Faizan was still holding it in the posture of bailing water from the boat, as though his hand had not yet understood that the danger was over.

"This is yours," Faizan said, holding the lota out.

Ramnarayan took it. For a moment he looked at its dulled surface. The mud of the ghat, the river water, Jhagru's palm, Faizan's fingers—the marks of all of them were on it.

His nephew came running from a corner of the veranda. "Uncle, come here. There is water." His eyes fell on the lota. Quietly he asked, "Whose hands was this in?"

Ramnarayan did not answer. He put the lota on the ground and began wringing out his wet dhoti.

On the other side, Jhagru's daughter-in-law saw Munni wrapped in the end of Sakina's sari and came running. Seeing the child safe, she first bent as though to touch Sakina's feet, then stopped midway. She took Munni into her arms.

Sakina smiled and said, "She has stopped crying now."

Instead of thanking her, the daughter-in-law merely nodded. Someone behind her said, "Come, there is a place with our own people." She took Munni away.

Mahavir Mandal was seated on a mat inside the veranda. Faizan's gamchha was still behind his back. Mahavir's son pulled it out and handed it to Faizan, saying, "Your cloth." There was gratitude in his voice, but immediately

afterwards he shifted the mat a little farther inside, as though the boundary needed to be made clear again.

Two hearths began to be made in the school courtyard. On one side there was chivda and jaggery; on the other, preparations were under way to put rice on to cook. No one had given any explicit order about who was to sit where, yet people drifted towards their own marked groups.

Bansi was still by the boat. After setting down the people from the first trip, he was thinking of turning back at once for the second. Water had gathered again in the belly of the boat.

He climbed up to the road and said, "Can someone lend me a lota? I have to empty the boat."

Ramnarayan's lota lay right in front of them. His nephew picked it up, but hesitated before holding it out towards Bansi. He remembered whose hands had touched it.

Ramnarayan took the lota from his nephew's hand. Until a few moments earlier he had been silent. Now he handed it to Bansi and said, "Take it. There is still plenty of river water."

Bansi did not laugh. He simply took the lota and went down the slope.

Ramnarayan's nephew said softly, "Uncle, we can wash it later."

Ramnarayan kept looking towards the river. "Yes," he said, but there was no certainty in his voice whether he was speaking about the lota or about something else that had awakened again inside him.

The second boatload was coming in. The boat's lantern could be seen swaying in the darkness. Meanwhile, in the school courtyard, smoke from the hearths was rising in different directions.

From his own veranda, as he settled Munni to sleep, Jhagru looked once towards Sakina in the distance. Sakina looked too, but now dry ground lay between them—ground on which people had once again drawn their own circles.

In the river, the lota was changing hands again. On the bank, hands were choosing identities again.

STORY 199

Kurthi Lentils

It was the first week of Chait. A trace of winter chill still lingered in the morning air, but the earth in the courtyard dried as the day rose. Saraswati had set an earthen pot on the hearth and was boiling kurthi lentils. The lid trembled from time to time, steam escaped, and smoke caught in the rafters of the veranda.

Ramlochan took down the small bamboo measure hanging from a peg and went into the storeroom. He felt the sack kept in a corner with his hand. It was less than half full. He filled the measure with grain, then poured it back into the sack. He did this three times.

Looking towards the pot, Saraswati asked, "Will the measure change if you count it three times?"

Ramlochan did not answer. He dragged the sack outside. "About twenty-six seers."

His mother, Jagmaya, sat on a cot on the veranda, wrapped in a blanket. For three weeks her body had been weak. She ate little, grew breathless quickly, and by evening her thighs and knees ached. Two days earlier the village health worker had told them not to delay taking her to the block hospital. There would be some cost for tests, travel besides, and perhaps medicines to be bought outside.

Jagmaya looked at the sack. "Will you sell all this?"

Ramlochan said, "Where will the money come from if we do not sell it? The wheat is still in the field. Whatever paddy we had was finished in Magh. There has been no wage work for two weeks."

Saraswati added salt to the pot. "Not all of it. Six seers are set aside for seed."

"What use is keeping seed if Mother lies ill at home?" Ramlochan's voice was not harsh, only tired. "Yesterday at the haat, Nandu the trader said the price of kurthi has risen. In the city, well-off people now buy it calling it a health grain. If we give him twenty seers, the tests, medicines and travel will all be covered."

Jagmaya laughed softly. "In the first Chait after my marriage, my mother-in-law told me—when paddy runs low, kurthi saves the household. Now the city folk have given it a grand name, so has its price become grand too?"

Saraswati took the pot off the hearth. The dal was thin, but the smell of garlic and cumin rose from it. Dividing it among three bowls, she placed Jagmaya's bowl before her first.

Ramlochan rested a hand on the sack and said, "Whatever its name, we need money."

The household accounts were visible not on paper but in utensils and sacks. The paddy bin was empty. The bottom showed in the lentil tin. Only two finger-widths of oil remained in the bottle. The sack of kurthi alone was something that, at a glance, showed Saraswati the next month's cooking. She could soak kurthi at night and boil it in the morning, grind it into a vegetable dish, or, if rice ran short, thicken its broth and fill their stomachs.

She dragged the sack inside. She brought out three bamboo baskets. Into the first she measured six seers. Into the second, twelve. Into the third, the remaining eight.

Ramlochan asked, "What is this?"

"The first is seed. The second is for the household to eat. The third is to sell."

"Nandu will not take eight seers. He does not load anything under twenty seers onto his cart."

Saraswati fell silent. The three baskets remained in a row on the veranda. Jagmaya looked at the first, then the second, then the third.

"Leave my tests," she said.

Ramlochan replied at once, "Do not say that again."

"Then leave the seed."

This time Saraswati raised her face. "If we give up the seed, next Asadh we will be at the moneylender's door again. If we give up the basket for food, in Baisakh we will buy dal from the market. What is cheap now, we will buy dear with that very money then. Cut away one of the three, and two days later a hole will open somewhere else."

At noon Ramlochan put the eight seers from the basket into a sack and took it to Nandu the trader's warehouse. Nandu was sitting by the scales. The moment he saw the sack he asked, "How much?"

"Eight seers."

Nandu shook his head. "I told you before. Not less than twenty. I have to send it to the city. What will I do with little sacks?"

"Pay me two rupees less on the rate."

"It is not about the rate. I need the quantity."

Ramlochan stood there for a while. Inside the warehouse, five large sacks of kurthi were stacked one upon another. Outside, two labourers panted as they loaded maize onto a bullock cart. Nandu bent over his scales again.

"Bring twenty seers," he said. "I'll pay cash."

Ramlochan tucked the sack under his arm and returned home. He stopped twice on the way: once at the pond ghat, once beside a dry bamboo thicket. Reaching home, he set the sack down on the veranda.

Saraswati did not ask what Nandu had said. The sight of the sack told her.

By evening Jagmaya's fever had risen. Her forehead was hot, her hands cold. Ramlochan borrowed a neighbour's bicycle and fetched the health worker. She checked Jagmaya's pulse, asked a few questions, then said, "Take her to the hospital tomorrow morning. It is not right to keep her at home on guesswork."

No fresh meal was cooked that night. The leftover kurthi dal from noon was reheated. Three bowls were shared among four people. Ramlochan's daughter Lalita, who had spent the day at her maternal uncle's house, quietly pushed her own bowl towards her grandmother. Jagmaya ate half a spoonful and pushed the bowl back. "Will you be able to study without eating?"

Lalita said nothing. She drew the bowl back to her place.

Ramlochan sat on the veranda until late that night. The three baskets were before him: seed, food for the household, and the portion to be sold. At last he rose and, not from the first basket but from the second, lifted twelve seers and added them to the third. The twenty seers for sale were now complete. The household's food basket was empty.

Saraswati had been watching from inside. She came out and sat beside the empty basket.

"What about tomorrow?" she asked.

"Tomorrow, first Mother's tests."

"And after that, how will the household run?"

Ramlochan searched for an answer, but did not find one at once. "The wheat harvest will begin. There will be wage work."

"There are twelve days until the harvest."

"We'll manage somehow."

As she tied the sack, Saraswati said, "We will not touch the seed."

Ramlochan nodded. That night, one of the three baskets stood empty.

In the morning Nandu weighed the twenty seers and paid cash. Ramlochan tied the money into an inner fold of his shirt and went with his mother to the block hospital. It was crowded. First the registration slip, then the tests, then the doctor. By the time they returned near evening, he had two packets of medicine in his hand, instructions about food and drink on a sheet of paper, and very little money left. But the doctor had said there was no immediate grave danger; she needed regular meals, rest and medicine, and should be brought back after seven days.

On reaching home, Jagmaya lay down on the cot, exhausted. Saraswati gave her the medicine with water. Then she went towards the hearth.

"What will we cook today?" Lalita asked.

Saraswati opened the grain bin. A handful of rice. A few potatoes. Salt. That was all.

That night they made a thin potato broth. Jagmaya could not eat more than two mouthfuls. The next day Ramlochan went to a landowner's house to ask for wage work; he was told there would be work in three days. On the third

day the rice ran out. Saraswati did not go to a neighbour to borrow. She lifted the piece of sacking from the basket kept for seed. Six seers of kurthi lay there quietly.

She reached out to fill the measure, then stopped.

Jagmaya was watching from the cot. "Take some out."

"This is seed."

"The seed will go to the field, but only if people stay alive until the field."

Saraswati took out half a measure. "Only this much."

That day kurthi went into the pot again. The dal was thinner than before, but four bowls of hot steam rose in the house. Over the next five days, the seed basket lost one and a half seers. As soon as Ramlochan found the first harvesting work, he brought home two days' wages. Some rice, salt and oil came into the house. From the third day onward, he remained in the fields continuously.

On the seventh day Jagmaya went to the hospital again. This time Saraswati went with Ramlochan. The doctor said her body was weak and that her meals should be kept regular. The empty basket rose unbidden in Saraswati's mind, but she said nothing.

Baisakh passed. With the wages from the wheat harvest, the household hearth became regular again. Jagmaya slowly recovered her strength. But as soon as Asadh arrived, a new question stood before them: the time to sow kurthi.

Ramlochan took down the seed basket. A little more than four seers of grain remained. The previous year they had used six seers of seed. It was clear that they would have to reduce the field by two kathas.

"Shall I buy two seers from the market?" Ramlochan asked.

Saraswati asked the price. On hearing it she laughed, but there was no joy in the laughter. The same kurthi that had been sold in Chait to buy medicine would now have to be bought back as seed at twice the price.

"No," she said. "Sow whatever we have. We'll plant marua on the remaining strip."

Ramlochan looked towards the field. "If there is less kurthi, what about next Chait?"

Saraswati was silent for a few moments. "We do not have the answer to next Chait today. Today the seed has survived, Mother is up and walking, and no new knot of debt has been tied around the household. That is not a small thing."

On the morning of sowing day, Ramlochan and Saraswati reached the field. The soil was softer than the year before. Ramlochan took a handful of kurthi and began scattering it along the rows. The first two rows went at the usual spacing. At the third he stopped his hand. There was too little seed. Saraswati said, "Make it a little thinner. Spread what we have."

By the time the day rose, four seers of seed could not fill the whole field. A strip on the western side remained empty. There Saraswati scattered marua seed.

When they returned home, Jagmaya was sitting on the veranda. Before her, in an earthen bowl, lay the last handful of kurthi—the broken and shrivelled grains that had been separated while sorting the seed.

Jagmaya spread those grains across her palm and looked at them. “These will go into the cooking.”

Saraswati laughed and asked, “Not into the seed?”

“What is not fit for the field may still be fit for the stomach.”

In the evening the earthen pot went onto the hearth again. This time there was little dal, with marua rotis beside it. Ramlochan took the first mouthful and said nothing. Outside, the western strip of the field was no longer empty; another seed had already been sown there.

Saraswati placed the three baskets back in the corner of the kitchen. One still awaited the new grain. The second was empty. In the third, two handfuls of broken kurthi remained. She covered the baskets.

Saraswati covered the embers of the hearth with ash. The fire was not entirely out; within, it remained red for the morning.

STORY 200

The Dream of One Bigha

In the Agahan sunlight, the field boundaries stood out clearly. The paddy had been harvested, and egrets settled here and there among the stubble. Shivanath was walking around Devanath Chaudhary's field with an old length of rope. The rope was twenty cubits long. He hooked one end around a bamboo peg driven into the boundary ridge, pulled the other end taut, and counted the knots.

Devanath stood at a distance, smiling. "Measure it. I won't short-change you on the land."

Shivanath smiled too, but his eyes stayed on the rope. He had cultivated this field on share for five years. He knew, as he knew his own courtyard, where water lingered longest, on which strip the wheat grew thin, where rats gnawed into the ridge to make their burrows. The only difference was that on the day the harvest was divided in half, the field became someone else's again.

One bigha. A full bigha.

Devanath's two sons lived in town. He needed money to repair the house, and so he had raised the question of selling this plot. Buyers from the market had come to look twice, but the field lay far from the main road, along a track that turned muddy in the rains. Devanath had told Shivanath, "You've been cultivating it for five years. If you want to buy it, I'll speak to you first."

Shivanath had not slept properly for three nights.

Inside the house, an old chest made by a blacksmith held thirty-nine thousand two hundred rupees. The money had not been gathered in a day. The proceeds from selling two goats, a little saved from his share of the wheat, five thousand given by his younger brother who had gone away for work, and two years of Manjula's sewing earnings - all of it had accumulated slowly in that chest. At first the money had no name. Later, whenever Shivanath opened the chest, he began calling it "the land money."

Devanath had said that if Shivanath paid an advance of thirty-five thousand, he would not sell the land to anyone else for three months. The balance could be paid in three instalments over two years. The deed would be executed on the final payment. The condition was hard, but it did not seem impossible to Shivanath. Once he had one bigha of his own, there would be no obligation to give away half the produce. For the first time, the future seemed visible in the shape of an account.

As he coiled the rope, he said, "I'll pay the advance by the day after tomorrow."

Devanath nodded. "By the evening of the day after tomorrow. After that the outside buyer is coming again."

When he returned home, Manjula was shaking paddy straw at the doorway. Shivanath hung the rope from a peg.

"Did you measure it?" she asked.

"A full bigha."

A faint smile came to Manjula's face. "The rope didn't come up short or long?"

"I've cultivated that field for five years. The rope may deceive me; my eyes won't."

That afternoon their daughter Rama arrived home from the district headquarters. She was in her second year at the government women's college and lived in the hostel. The short winter break had begun. In her bag, among her clothes, was a folded notice.

After the meal she placed the notice before her father. The fee for the next term, three months' hostel charges, and some laboratory materials came to twenty-two thousand four hundred rupees. Because the previous crop had been poor, the money set aside for her studies had already gone into household expenses and cultivation.

Shivanath read the notice again. "By the end of Paush?"

"Yes," Rama said. "After that they won't hold my hostel room. The arrears will show in the examination register too."

"Could you travel from home?"

"Even if I catch the first bus in the morning, I'll miss the first class. By the time I return in the evening, it'll be night."

Shivanath folded the notice and put it back in her hand. "We'll see."

Those two syllables - we'll see - hung in the house until evening.

After dinner that night, Manjula opened the chest. The money was tied in separate knots inside an old cloth bag. She took it all out and laid it on the cot. Rama was studying in the inner room. Their younger son, Mohan, was asleep.

When Manjula finished counting, she said, "Thirty-nine thousand two hundred."

Shivanath said, "I know."

"Thirty-five thousand for the land advance. Twenty-two thousand four hundred for Rama. And Bhola Sah?"

Shivanath remained silent.

The previous Asadh they had taken fertiliser, seed, and pesticide twice on credit from Bhola Sah. After selling their share of the paddy they had paid twelve thousand, but fourteen thousand eight hundred still remained. Sah had

said that if they wanted supplies for the wheat in Magh, they must first reduce the old balance.

Manjula added the three amounts in her head and looked again at the pile of notes. "This money won't open all three doors."

Shivanath said quietly, "If the land slips from our hands, we may never get another chance like this."

"And if Rama's studies stop halfway?"

"She'll sit at home. Who knows when she'll ever return to it?"

Manjula said nothing. She tied the bag again.

Rama called from inside, "Ma, the lamp oil is running out."

Manjula got up. Sitting on the cot, Shivanath kept looking at three invisible piles of money - land, education, debt.

Early the next morning he went to Bhola Sah's shop. Sacks of fertiliser stood in a row by the entrance. Bhola opened his ledger.

"Fourteen thousand eight hundred," he said. "I'm ordering the next consignment. Pay something towards the old account, then I'll enter the wheat supplies."

Shivanath asked, "What if I pay half?"

Bhola shrugged. "If you pay half, I'll have half the confidence. But you need the full supplies, don't you? I don't get goods on credit either."

Shivanath stepped out of the shop. Across the way, the tea seller had a kettle on the stove. He did not drink tea. What had earlier been three separate worries had now become a single knot. Even after buying the land, he would need fertiliser and seed to cultivate it. If he left the old debt untouched and paid the land advance, he would have to borrow again before the first harvest. The first season on his own land would begin in someone else's ledger.

That afternoon he went to the sharecropped field. The owner's share had already been taken away. His own share of the straw lay in one corner. He sat on the ridge and began picking at the dry soil. He could not remember exactly how much produce had been halved over five years, but he remembered every scene of division - two piles, an empty strip between them, one sack this way, one sack that way.

On Devanath's one bigha, that scene would not happen. That was the dream.

In the evening Rama sat at the doorway covering her books for the next term. Shivanath sat down beside her.

"If we can't arrange the hostel and fee money this time, what will you do?"

Rama stopped her hands. "I'll stay at home and study from the books. I'll try again next term."

"Won't it hurt?"

"It will."

The answer was direct. Shivanath looked at his daughter. Rama went back to straightening the book cover.

After a while she said on her own, "Babu, don't give up the land. I can stay at home this term."

Shivanath asked, "Who told you to say that?"

"No one."

"Then who has just made the decision?"

Rama smiled. "I'm only saying it."

Shivanath stood up. He could not tell whether his daughter was trying to lighten his burden or hide her own fear. He made no decision about it that night.

On the third day Devanath was sitting in his courtyard with two buyers. When Shivanath arrived, they got up and left. Devanath asked, "Have you brought the advance?"

Shivanath had the cloth bag in his pocket. "I have. But not the full thirty-five."

Devanath's brow tightened slightly. "How much?"

"Ten thousand now. The remaining twenty-five by Phagun."

Devanath shook his head. "That wasn't the condition before. The outside buyer will pay the full advance."

"I know."

"Then?"

Shivanath was silent for a few moments. "An expense for education came up suddenly at home."

Devanath looked away. "I understand your difficulty, but work on my house is held up too. Land isn't sold out of pity."

Shivanath rested a hand on the bag in his pocket. "All right."

"If you can arrange thirty-five by this evening, the deal is still yours."

Shivanath did not say yes. He simply bowed in greeting and returned home.

On the way he could have turned towards a moneylender's house. There were two people in the village who could give him thirty-five thousand at once - at monthly interest. The advance on one bigha from his savings, Rama's next term on borrowed money, Bhola Sah's old debt pushed onto the next harvest. On paper the arithmetic worked. Only, in that arithmetic, the harvests of the next two years were already spent.

When he reached home, he opened the chest.

Manjula asked, "What happened?"

"Devanath wouldn't agree to ten thousand."

"Then?"

Shivanath counted the thirty-nine thousand two hundred again. First he set aside fourteen thousand eight hundred. Then twenty-two thousand four hundred. Only two thousand remained on the cot.

Manjula understood. But she did not say anything at once.

Shivanath said, "First we'll close Bhola Sah's account. We'll buy the wheat seed without tying a new knot of debt. The rest is for Rama's next term."

"The land?"

"Gone."

After saying the word, he looked for the first time at the empty bottom of the chest. Old newspaper lined it, dust gathered in the corners. Five years of savings would go in two directions in a single evening. Nothing would remain in his hand - neither a land deed nor a bag of rupees.

Manjula said softly, "Not the land. Rama will study."

Shivanath looked at her. "Don't preach to me now."

Manjula fell silent. A few moments later she said only, "All right. We'll go tomorrow morning."

The next day Shivanath cleared the old balance in Bhola Sah's ledger. Sah drew a red line against the amount. Shivanath watched that line, but the relief did not feel as great as he had imagined it would.

After that he went to the district town with Rama and Manjula. The queue at the college accounts window was long. By afternoon the fee, hostel charges, and laboratory amount had been paid. Rama put the receipt in her bag, came outside, and asked, "Babu, shall we have tea?"

Shivanath laughed. "I've got two thousand left now - more than enough for tea. We will."

The three of them drank tea at a roadside shop. They talked about the next term, books, the hostel bedding, and the sattu Rama would take from home. No one mentioned the land.

Four days later, a teacher from another village bought Devanath's one bigha. The news spread through the village in the ordinary way. Shivanath heard it, said, "All right," and walked towards the wheat field.

At the end of Paush, the new owner came to Shivanath's house. He worked in the city and was in no position to cultivate the field himself.

"You've been cultivating this field already," he said. "Will you take it on share this year as well?"

Shivanath was silent for a moment. In front of him, hanging from the peg, was the same twenty-cubit rope.

"What will the terms be?" he asked.

"Whatever is customary in the village."

Shivanath did not answer at once. The land he had dreamed for five years of making his own was before him again with the offer that he give away half its crop. Something tightened inside him, but the wheat season did not wait.

"I'll take it," he said at last, "but the seed and fertiliser costs will be half and half."

The new owner thought for a moment and agreed.

In the first week of Magh, Shivanath prepared to sow wheat on that one bigha. This time he bought the seed from Bhola Sah's shop for cash. The amount was small, but no new credit was entered in the ledger.

Rama had already gone back to the hostel. In a corner of the house, two old book covers lay on her empty cot. Now and then Manjula placed clothes there and then moved them away again.

Shivanath took the rope to the field. The new owner had asked him to straighten the boundary ridge a little. Shivanath drove in a peg and pulled the rope taut. It was the same rope with which he had measured the land in Agahan, before the planned purchase.

A labourer asked, "Measuring it again?"

Shivanath said, "No. This time I'm checking the line for sowing."

The rope remained stretched from ridge to ridge. The measure of one bigha had not changed. Only its meaning had.

Shivanath unfastened the rope, set it aside, and lifted the basket filled with seed. His hand moved along the first row. The wheat grains fell into the cold earth.

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Stories remain alive as long as people and language remain alive.

— GAJENDRA THAKUR

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