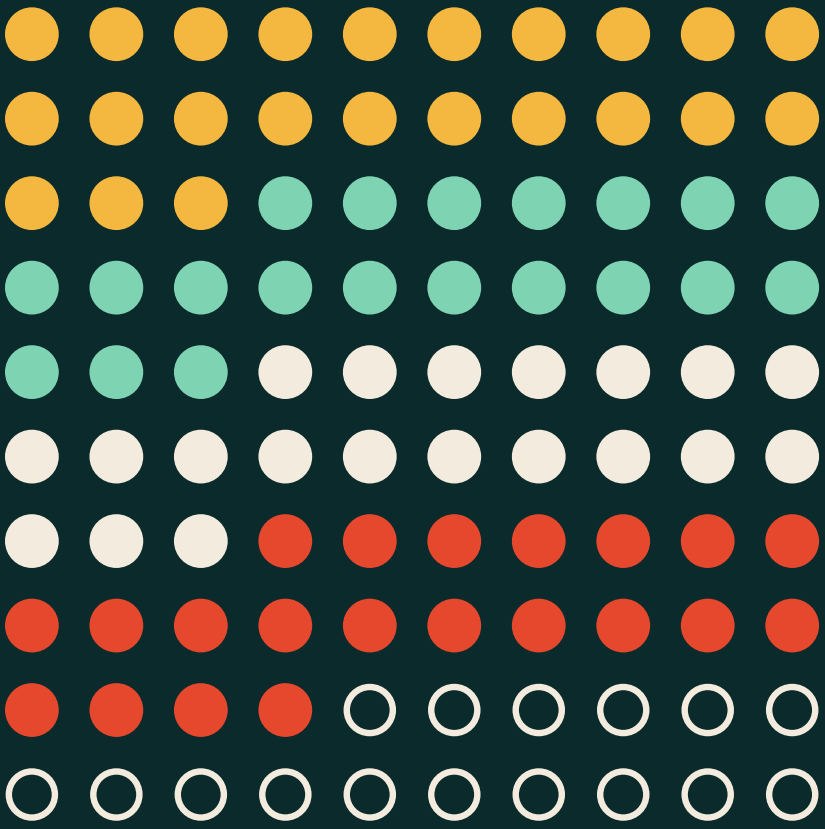
VIDEHA

VOL. III

The Hundred-Story Trilogy

Three Hundred Selected Stories · Stories 201–300



ONE HUNDRED STORIES · ONE HUNDRED DOTS

GAJENDRA THAKUR

Translated from the Maithili by the author himself

The Hundred-Story Trilogy (Volume III)

The Hundred-Story Trilogy (Volume III)

(Three Hundred Selected Stories by Gajendra Thakur)

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

A story lives as long as its people and their language live.

Gajendra Thakur

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Author: Gajendra Thakur

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Translated from the original Maithili into English by the author himself.

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STORY 201

The Empty Bag

It was a Wednesday in the month of Bhadra.

The morning sun had not yet properly risen.

Gopinath Sah took down an old cloth bag from a peg on the veranda.

Its mouth was tied with three knots.

One of the knots had grown old and hardened.

Sarojini Devi was sitting by the hearth.

She glanced once at the bag.

"Have you packed the rope?"

Gopinath Sah said, "Yes."

"The ledger?"

"Yes."

"The weights?"

"Yes."

Sarojini Devi asked nothing more.

From an inner room, Gopinath Sah brought the ledger wrapped in a red cloth.

The corners of the ledger had worn away.

His father's name was written at the top of the first page.

Beneath it was Gopinath Sah's own name.

The yearly accounts began on the second page.

Several pages bore stains from lentils.

On others were small yellow marks of mustard oil.

He put the ledger into the bag.

He added the pointer of a small brass balance.

Four weights.

A strip of old cloth.

A handful of thin cord.

And two empty paper packets.

Sarojini Devi said, "Food?"

"I'll eat something at the haat."

"Take something from home."

Gopinath Sah did not answer.

Sarojini Devi wrapped two rotis and a small box of salt and chillies in a cloth.

That too went into the bag.

Gopinath Sah stepped out through the doorway.

From behind him, Sarojini Devi said, "Don't make it too heavy."

He turned and looked back.

"How heavy can it be now?"

Whether Sarojini Devi smiled at that or not, Gopinath Sah did not see.

The haat was two kos from the village.

Earlier he used to go by bicycle.

Now he went on foot.

Half the road was unpaved.

The night's rain had left mud in two places.

Gopinath Sah walked on with the bag tucked under his right arm.

Near Majhdhar Tola he met Kishun Mandal.

"Early today?"

"On market day, early is better."

"How much seed is left?"

"We'll see."

Kishun Mandal said nothing to that answer.

By the time Gopinath Sah reached the haat, the sun had grown fierce.

From a distance he could see the blue tarpaulin stretched over bamboo slats.

It was Gopinath Sah's old spot.

But that day the tarpaulin had already been put up.

Manju was there.

Manju was Gopinath Sah's daughter.

For the past three months she had been coming at dawn on market days.

That day she had arrived before him.

Paper packets were arranged on the bamboo bench.

Mustard in one lot.

Lentils in another.

Peas in another.

Bottle-gourd, pumpkin and okra seeds in little packets.

With a piece of charcoal, Manju was writing the price on one packet.

Gopinath Sah stood in the shade of the tarpaulin.
Manju looked up.
"What took you so long?"
Gopinath Sah said, "There was mud on the road."
Manju laughed.
"There was mud yesterday too."
Gopinath Sah put the bag beneath the bench.
He did not sit down.
The first customer was an elderly farmer.
He said, "Two pao of mustard."
Manju picked up the balance.
She looked towards Gopinath Sah.
Gopinath Sah rested a hand on one corner of the bench.
He said nothing.
Manju weighed the seed.
The pointer tilted once to the right.
She removed two grains.
The pointer came to rest in the middle.
The elderly farmer looked at Gopinath Sah.
"Right?"
Gopinath Sah said, "The pointer is in the middle."
The farmer placed the money in Manju's hand.
Manju entered it in the ledger.
Gopinath Sah did not touch the ledger.
The next customer was a boy.
He asked for okra seed.
Manju told him the price.
The boy said, "Uncle used to charge less."
Manju replied, "That was a different batch of seed."
The boy looked at Gopinath Sah.
Gopinath Sah looked at the packet of seed.
"This is a new lot."
The boy quietly paid.
The crowd lasted until noon.
Now and then Gopinath Sah passed a packet forward.
Now and then he held out a blank sheet of paper.
Manju handled the rest of the accounts.
Twice she ran short of change.

Both times she opened the little cash box inside the bench.

Gopinath Sah did not tell her which compartment held the change.

Manju found it herself.

After noon the haat grew a little quieter.

Manju said, "Eat your roti."

Gopinath Sah opened the bag.

He took out the cloth in which the rotis were wrapped.

He set the little box of salt and chillies outside.

He sat down behind the bench.

Manju sat down too.

They ate half a roti each.

Gopinath Sah drank water.

Manju said, "Shall I take the ledger home today?"

Gopinath Sah kept chewing his roti.

After a while he said, "It would be better if it stayed at the haat."

Manju's hand stopped.

"At the haat?"

"In the box under the tarpaulin."

"It will get damp there."

"We'll put a brick on top."

Manju said nothing.

After they had eaten, Gopinath Sah opened the bag.

He took out the ledger wrapped in red cloth.

He opened it and looked at the last page that had been written on.

It was not yesterday's account, but the account from the previous market day.

His handwriting was at the bottom.

He held the ledger out towards Manju.

Manju did not extend her hand.

Gopinath Sah placed the ledger on the bench.

"Add today's account to this."

Manju slowly picked up the ledger.

She tied the red cloth around it again.

Gopinath Sah reached into the bag.

He took out all four brass weights.

One by one, he placed them beneath the bench.

He put the balance pointer there too.

Then the bundle of thin cord.

And the strip of old cloth.

Manju asked, "All this stays here?"

"It will be needed here."

"Next time?"

Gopinath Sah looked inside the bag.

Only the empty roti cloth and the little box of salt and chillies remained.

He wrapped the box in the cloth.

"Whatever is needed next time will be found here."

Manju kept looking at his face.

Gopinath Sah left the mouth of the bag open.

In the afternoon the customers began to come again.

A woman asked for lentils.

Manju weighed them.

Gopinath Sah glanced once at the pointer.

It stood in the middle.

He turned his eyes away.

A farmer asked for goods on credit.

Manju opened the ledger.

She searched for his name.

Gopinath Sah did not stop her.

Manju said, "Your previous credit is still unpaid."

The farmer looked at Gopinath Sah.

Gopinath Sah kept his eyes on the ground.

The farmer said, "All right, give me half."

Manju gave him half.

Towards evening the market thinned out.

Manju counted the packets that remained.

Gopinath Sah untied one corner of the tarpaulin.

Manju untied the other.

Together they folded the tarpaulin.

The box was put away inside.

The ledger was placed not on top of the box, but inside it.

Gopinath Sah picked up a brick.

Manju said, "I'll put it there."

Gopinath Sah handed the brick to her.

Manju placed it on the lid of the box.

Gopinath Sah picked up the bag.

It was suddenly light.

So light that his hand rose slightly with it.

Manju noticed.

She said nothing.

As he was leaving the haat, Ramdev the vegetable seller called out, "Uncle, potatoes?"

Gopinath Sah stopped.

He looked at the bag.

Then he said, "Not today."

"Going home empty-handed?"

"I have the bag."

Ramdev laughed.

Gopinath Sah did not.

Beyond the market the earthen road began.

The sun was sinking.

The empty bag under his arm puffed slightly in the wind.

He folded its mouth and pressed it down.

Near Majhdhar Tola he met Kishun Mandal again.

Kishun asked, "Sold everything?"

Gopinath Sah paused for a moment.

"Everything stayed there."

Kishun Mandal did not understand what he meant.

"All right."

The two went their separate ways.

By the time he reached home, evening had fallen.

Sarojini Devi was standing near the doorway.

She looked at Gopinath Sah's hand.

The bag hung low.

There was no shape inside it.

Sarojini Devi asked, "No vegetables?"

"No."

"Salt?"

"No."

"Oil?"

"No."

Gopinath Sah sat down on the veranda.

He placed the bag on the ground.

Sarojini Devi picked it up.

She opened its mouth.
Inside were the roti cloth and the little box.
She took them both out.
The bag truly was empty.
Sarojini Devi asked, "The ledger?"
"There."
"The weights?"
"There."
"The pointer?"
"There."
Sarojini Devi stood holding the bag in her hand.
"Everything?"
Gopinath Sah said, "Everything."
For a while there was silence on the veranda.
A bird drank from the water kept in one corner of the courtyard.
Sarojini Devi ran a hand inside the bag.
Two or three mustard seeds were caught at the bottom.
She shook them into her palm.
"These were left behind."
Gopinath Sah looked at the seeds.
"Let them be."
Sarojini Devi did not put them back into the bag.
She threw them onto the earth at the edge of the courtyard.
Then she shook out the bag.
She hung it on the peg.
It hung flatter than before.
That night Manju came at dinnertime.
She carried a small cloth sack in her hand.
Inside were potatoes, okra and a quarter-seer of salt.
Sarojini Devi said, "He was the one who went to the market."
Manju said, "I went too, this time."
Gopinath Sah kept eating his rice.
Manju looked at him.
"I put the ledger in the box."
Gopinath Sah nodded.
"The brick?"
"It's on top."
"Watch for damp."

"I will."
That was all they said.
Manju left.
At night Sarojini Devi looked towards the peg.
"Next Wednesday?"
Gopinath Sah was stretching out, preparing to sleep.
He asked, "What?"
"The market."
Gopinath Sah was silent for a while.
"We'll see in the morning."
The next Wednesday, Sarojini Devi rose at dawn.
Gopinath Sah rose too.
He washed his face.
He swept the veranda.
The bag hung from the peg.
Once, he reached out his hand.
His fingers touched a corner of the bag.
From outside came the sound of a bicycle bell.
Manju was at the doorway.
A bamboo basket was tied behind her bicycle.
Manju said, "Babu, where is the thick cord for tying the tarpaulin?"
Gopinath Sah went inside.
From the top of the old trunk, he took down the cord.
He placed it in Manju's hand.
"Pull both corners equally tight."
Manju said, "Yes."
She left.
The bicycle bell receded along the road.
Gopinath Sah came back and sat on the veranda.
The empty bag hung from the peg.
Whenever the breeze touched it, its mouth opened a little.
Gopinath Sah did not tie it shut.

STORY 202

A Patch of Sunlight

It was a Paush morning.

The night's mist still clung like pearls to the bricks of the tulsi altar.

Sunlight was climbing over the eastern wall of the courtyard.

Inside the house, the cold was still sharper.

From a corner of the wall, a narrow strip of sunlight descended into the courtyard.

It was no more than two handspans wide.

Jagdish Mahato sat on a woven stool in the veranda.

An old woollen wrap lay over his shoulders.

The phlegm in his chest had not yet cleared completely.

Whenever a cough rose, he turned his face away.

Basanti Devi came from inside carrying two medicines and a glass of lukewarm water on a brass tray.

A woollen bandage was tied around her right knee.

When she walked, she could not bend that leg fully.

"Take your medicine," she said.

Jagdish Mahato looked at the tray.

"And you?"

"I have taken mine."

"When?"

"While you were coughing."

Jagdish Mahato put the medicine into his mouth.

He drank the water and set the glass back on the tray.

Basanti Devi looked at the narrow strip of sunlight.

"It is coming down now."

Jagdish Mahato looked too.

The doctor had said the previous day that both of them should sit in the sun for a little while.

For Jagdish's chest.

For Basanti's knee.

The courtyard was such that, on winter days, sunlight never stayed there for long.

First, after crossing the eastern wall, it fell near the tulsi altar.

Then in the middle of the courtyard.

After that, on the western veranda.

Before noon, it disappeared again.

Jagdish Mahato bent to lift the stool.

Basanti Devi immediately said, "Leave it."

She lifted the stool herself.

As she bent her knee, her face tightened a little.

Jagdish Mahato saw it.

He said nothing.

Basanti Devi placed the stool in the sunlight.

"Sit."

"You sit."

"I still have work to do."

"What work?"

"To see to the hearth."

"The hearth is out."

Basanti Devi fell silent.

The strip of sunlight covered half the stool.

Jagdish Mahato did not sit on it.

He brought another stool.

He placed it beside the strip of sunlight.

The two stools would not both fit in it at once.

One could remain fully in the sun.

Only the front legs of the other.

Basanti Devi kept watching.

Jagdish Mahato turned the first stool toward her.

"Sit."

"It is your chest."

"It is your knee."

"The knee is not going to run away."

"Nor is the chest."

Basanti Devi turned her face and smiled a little.

The smile faded quickly.

Jagdish Mahato coughed.

Basanti Devi sat on the first stool.

Jagdish Mahato on the other.

The sunlight fell on Basanti's right knee.

Jagdish's feet remained in shadow.

For a while, neither spoke.

Outside the courtyard, the milkman passed on his bicycle.

The bell rang.

Then receded into the distance.

A drop of condensed mist fell from the eaves.

It made a round mark on the brick.

Basanti Devi opened one end of her wrap.

She laid it over Jagdish's knee.

"I am warm enough," Jagdish said.

Basanti Devi did not take the end back.

"If you are warm, let it stay."

Jagdish Mahato pushed the edge of the wrap a little lower with his hand.

The sunlight moved forward.

Now Basanti's feet were fully in the sun.

The sunlight reached as far as the toes of Jagdish's left foot.

He moved the foot a little forward.

Basanti Devi saw him.

She dragged her own stool back by half a palm's breadth.

Jagdish Mahato saw that too.

"Why did you move?"

"The brick was uneven."

Jagdish Mahato looked down.

The brick was level.

He said nothing.

Again they were silent.

The strip of sunlight widened a little.

Jagdish Mahato shifted his stool slightly inward.

Now both his feet were in the sun.

Less sunlight fell on Basanti's knee.

Basanti Devi picked up the tray.

"I'll put this inside and come back."

She stood.

At the first step, her knee clicked.

Jagdish Mahato held out his hand.

Basanti Devi did not take it.
She placed one hand behind her on the stool and straightened herself.
"I am all right."
She went inside.
Jagdish Mahato sat with one leg folded on the stool.
The sunlight did not reach his chest.
He loosened the wrap and lowered it from his shoulders.
After a while he coughed again.
From inside the house came the sound of a metal tin.
Basanti Devi returned.
A small bottle of oil was in her hand.
"What is that?"
"For rubbing on the knee."
"In the sun?"
"The doctor said so."
"Put the oil on."
Basanti Devi sat again on the stool.
She opened the bottle.
The smell of oil rose.
She began to rub the oil slowly into her knee.
Jagdish Mahato kept looking at the sunlight.
Most of it now lay in the empty space between the two stools.
He shifted his stool.
Its leg scraped against the brick.
There was a rasping sound.
Basanti Devi looked up.
"Why so close?"
"The sunlight is escaping through the middle."
"Can sunlight escape?"
"If we keep sitting here, it will."
Basanti Devi laughed again.
This time the laughter lasted a little longer.
Jagdish Mahato smiled too.
At once a cough rose in his chest.
Basanti Devi stopped rubbing the oil and stroked his back.
The coughing subsided.
"Come inside," Basanti said.
"Why?"

"There is a breeze."
"There is sunlight too."
"Your chest will worsen again."
"And your knee?"
"It will remain as it is."
Both of them stayed seated.
The sunlight left the legs of the stools and slowly climbed higher.
Basanti's woollen bandage began to glow.
The edge of Jagdish's dhoti looked bright white.
An earthen water pot in one corner of the courtyard stood in shadow.
A patch of sunlight fell on the brass bowl covering its mouth.
The bowl flashed.
Jagdish Mahato narrowed his eyes.
"Do your eyes hurt?"
Basanti asked.
"The glare caught them."
Basanti Devi tried to rise.
"Shall I move the bowl?"
"Stay seated."
"It is glaring."
"I can look the other way."
Basanti Devi sat back down.
Jagdish Mahato moved his stool outward by half a palm's breadth.
It made more room for Basanti's stool.
"You have gone into the shade again," Basanti said.
"My feet are in the sun."
"The doctor said it was for your chest."
"The feet will send word to the chest."
Basanti Devi shook her head.
"You have become very wise."
"In winter, all wisdom runs down toward the feet."
Basanti Devi closed the bottle of oil.
The cap caught after two turns.
She placed the bottle on the tray.
The sunlight had now reached the middle of the courtyard.
The strip was broad.
Both stools could fit inside it completely.
Jagdish Mahato rose to move his stool.

Basanti Devi said, “Leave it, I'll do it.”

“You are not getting up.”

“Then what?”

Jagdish Mahato lifted his stool.

A pull tightened across his chest.

He stopped for a moment.

Basanti Devi saw him.

She took the stool from his hands.

Both of them remained holding the same stool.

For a few moments.

Then they lifted it together.

They set it in the middle of the sunlight.

Together, they moved the second stool as well.

Now they sat not facing one another, but looking in the same direction.

Toward the east.

Above the wall, a clear blue sky was visible.

A crow flew past.

Its shadow crossed their feet for a moment.

Basanti Devi stretched out her right leg.

Jagdish Mahato drew his left foot slightly inward.

A palm's breadth of space remained between them.

“Is this all right now?” he asked.

Basanti Devi said, “Yes.”

After a while, Jagdish's hand trembled.

He pulled the wrap back over his shoulders.

Basanti Devi noticed.

“Are you feeling cold?”

“No.”

“Your hand is trembling.”

“It is age.”

“You did not have age yesterday?”

Jagdish Mahato did not answer.

Basanti Devi opened the other end of her wrap as well.

The two ends of their wraps overlapped.

Jagdish Mahato did not move his away.

The sunlight now lay on his hands.

On Basanti's fingers too.

The shadows of their fingers fell on the brick.
Separate.
A little apart.
Inside the house, the clock ticked.
Neither of them looked at it.
The sunlight kept shifting.
First a little to the right of Basanti's knee.
Then toward the front of Jagdish's feet.
Basanti Devi tried to move her stool again.
Jagdish said, "Leave it."
He stood up.
This time, slowly.
He moved both stools away.
He leaned them against the courtyard wall.
Basanti Devi looked at him questioningly.
Jagdish Mahato went inside.
He returned carrying an old bamboo mat.
A thin mat used for drying paddy.
He spread it in the middle of the sunlight.
"Shall we sit on the ground?"
"How will we get up?"
"If both of us are here, we will get up."
Basanti Devi looked at the mat.
Then at Jagdish.
"The knee?"
"Slowly."
Jagdish sat down first.
He braced his hands behind him.
Holding his shoulder, Basanti Devi lowered herself slowly.
Her knee hurt as it bent.
It showed on her face.
Jagdish Mahato said nothing.
Basanti Devi said nothing either.
They sat close beside each other on the mat.
The patch of sunlight fell at once over their feet, knees, and hands.
No one's stool stood outside it now.
No one's body was half in shadow.
Both were silent.

The last drop of mist fell from the eaves.

Then Basanti Devi said softly, "Is it reaching your chest now?"

Jagdish Mahato did not look at the sunlight.

"Yes."

"And the knee?"

"You tell me."

Basanti Devi placed a hand on her knee.

"Yes."

The sunlight slowly moved westward.

They shifted the mat once.

Then a second time.

The third time, Jagdish Mahato could not rise to move it.

He caught one corner of the mat and pulled it toward himself.

Basanti Devi took hold of the other corner.

Still seated, the two of them dragged the mat into place.

It rasped over the bricks.

The sunlight fell over them again.

Basanti Devi said, "This way is better."

Jagdish Mahato said, "The stools took up too much room."

"Was there too little sunlight?"

"There was too little space."

Basanti Devi was quiet for a while.

Then she said, "We used to sit separately."

Jagdish Mahato did not answer.

He drew his wrap a little higher.

Basanti Devi caught one end of it and pulled it down over her knee.

The wrap now lay between them.

The sunlight fell on it.

The shadow on the courtyard wall climbed higher.

The patch of sunlight began to shrink.

They did not move again.

Basanti Devi drew her right foot a little inward.

Jagdish moved his left foot slightly outward.

The sunlight fell half on one, half on the other.

After a while Basanti asked, "What time is the second dose of medicine?"

"Look at the clock."

"You look."

"The clock is inside."

Neither of them got up.

Inside the veranda, the clock kept ticking.

The patch of sunlight grew smaller still.

Now it fell only on their hands.

Basanti Devi placed her hand on the mat.

Jagdish Mahato did the same.

Two fingers' breadth of space lay between their hands.

The sunlight fell on that small space too.

After a while, Basanti moved her hand a little closer.

It did not touch Jagdish's hand.

Only came near.

Jagdish Mahato did not move his hand away either.

Inside the house, the medicine tin lay on the low cot.

The glass was empty.

The two stools leaned against the wall.

One patch of sunlight remained in the courtyard.

Both their hands were inside that patch.

The rest of their bodies had passed into shadow.

Basanti Devi said, "Shall we go inside now?"

Jagdish Mahato said, "A little while longer."

"The sunlight has gone."

"There is still a little."

Basanti Devi did not get up either.

Slowly, the sunlight slipped from their hands onto the empty part of the mat.

Then it climbed the wall.

The courtyard became cold again.

For a few moments, they remained sitting just as they were.

Then Jagdish Mahato held out his hand.

Basanti Devi took it.

Jagdish stood first.

Then he helped Basanti to her feet.

They did not carry the stools inside.

The mat too remained where it lay.

Basanti Devi picked up the tray.

Jagdish Mahato picked up the bottle of oil.

Together they walked toward the veranda.

Behind them, there was no sunlight left in the courtyard.
The bamboo strips of the mat were slightly pressed down in two places.

STORY 203

The Boat Remained Tied

At dawn, the mist lay low over the river.

The bamboo mooring stake at the landing stood half-submerged in the water.

Raghunath Sahni was loosening the knot in the rope and tightening it again.

The boat had remained tied there all night.

Across the river, brightly coloured cloths could be seen hanging over the field.

Today was the fair.

The village school's annual function was being held there as well.

The first boatload arrived just as the sun was rising.

Three families.

Two children.

One old man.

Four baskets.

One drum.

Everyone was in a hurry.

Raghunath said nothing.

He had the baskets placed in the middle of the boat.

He seated the children on one side.

He settled the old man against the bamboo plank.

"Uncle, will you go and see the fair today too?"

One of the children asked.

Raghunath dipped the oar into the water.

"Let me get all of you across first."

The boat moved out into the current.

In the mist, the river did not seem very wide.

When they reached midstream, the sound of music from the far bank could be heard.

The drummer had one hand resting on his drum.

"Not yet," he said to himself.

Raghunath heard him.

He said nothing.

The boat came in on the sand of the far bank.

Everyone got off.

The children ran away.

The old man climbed up slowly.

Raghunath turned the boat around again.

"Why don't you stay here?" the old man said.

"There are still people on this side."

Raghunath replied.

The boat was empty.

The current turned an empty boat quickly.

Raghunath held the oar slightly at an angle.

On reaching this bank, he brought the boat alongside the bamboo stake again.

The second load was ready.

By noon he had found no time to count the trips.

Sometimes seven people.

Sometimes twelve.

Sometimes only two old people.

Once, four goats as well.

The faces of those going toward the fair were different.

No one was thinking about the return journey.

Everyone kept looking at the colours on the far bank.

Raghunath kept looking at the water.

The current had not risen.

But it was cutting into the sand on the southern side.

Whenever he brought the boat in on the far bank, he had to drive the bamboo pole into the sand again and again.

Near noon, his wife, Phoolo Devi, came to the landing with their daughter Sunita.

Sunita carried a blue cloth bag in her hand.

She was part of the school singing group.

Her white scarf was in the bag.

"Babu, our song is at three," Sunita said.

Raghunath was throwing two potfuls of water out of the bottom of the boat.

"Yes."

"At three."

"I heard you."

Phoolo Devi looked at Sunita.

Then at Raghunath.

"When there are fewer people, come over," she said.

Raghunath lifted the rope.

"We'll see."

Sunita sat down in the boat.

Phoolo Devi placed the girl's bag in her lap.

Seven other people climbed in as well.

The boat set off.

In midstream, Sunita kept looking toward the far bank.

Raghunath, toward this one.

When they reached the other side, everyone got off.

Sunita stepped out and paused.

"At three."

Raghunath had already turned the bow of the boat around.

"Go. You'll be late."

Sunita walked away.

Raghunath returned alone once more.

There were fewer people now on this bank.

The shade of the neem tree at the landing had grown small.

A tea seller was packing up his utensils, waiting to cross to the other side.

"Will anyone be left after you?" Raghunath asked.

The tea seller looked back along the path.

"People from two households are coming."

Raghunath sat down inside the boat.

He rested the oar across his knees.

The blisters on his palms were old.

Today they had grown a little red.

The tea seller said, "Uncle, won't you charge fare today?"

"Why not?"

"It's fair day."

"The river doesn't hold a fair."

The tea seller laughed.

Raghunath did not.

He kept looking at the worn place in the rope.

The two families arrived.

One woman carried a brass plate.

A young man was wheeling a bicycle.

It took time to get the bicycle into the boat.

Raghunath wedged its front wheel against a bamboo plank.

"On the far bank, take it down and wheel it straight ahead," he said.

The young man nodded.

The tea seller boarded last.

The boat was full.

Raghunath looked once toward the path on this bank.

No one.

Two empty earthen cups lay beneath the neem tree.

The dog from the landing too came up to the boat, wanting to follow the people to the far bank.

Raghunath let it aboard.

"That's everyone now," the tea seller said.

The boat pushed off.

This time there was no mist over the river.

Sunlight fell directly on the water.

The fair on the far bank could be seen clearly.

The Ferris wheel was turning.

Brightly coloured flags fluttered.

The school's name was being announced over the loudspeaker.

The boat came in on the far bank.

Everyone got off.

The dog jumped out first of all.

The tea seller unloaded his utensils and paused.

"Uncle, tie the boat here now and stay."

Raghunath probed the sand at the bank with the bamboo pole.

The pole sank half an arm's length.

"A knot won't hold here."

"There's a bamboo post by my stall. Tie it there."

"At night the current will turn."

"Then what?"

Raghunath said nothing.

The young man with the bicycle had also stopped.

"Everyone has come across. Who will you go back for now?"

Raghunath pushed the sand that had collected in the boat into one place with his foot.

Then he picked up the oar.

"The boat's landing is not on that bank."

The young man laughed.

"Stay here just for today."

Raghunath pushed the boat away.

"We'll see when it's time to come back tonight."

The boat entered the current.

The people on the far bank watched for a few moments.

Then they walked toward the fair.

Raghunath came back alone to this side once more.

The landing was empty.

As soon as the bow touched the earth, he stepped out.

He tied the rope to the old bamboo stake.

One knot.

Then another over it.

He tugged the rope to test it.

The boat moved a little.

The knot did not come loose.

Raghunath sat down beneath the neem tree.

There was no sound on this bank.

On the far bank there was every sound.

The announcement loudspeaker.

The drum.

Children shouting.

The creak of the iron Ferris wheel.

At times, applause.

Raghunath took some betel nut from his pocket.

He cut it with a small knife.

He put one piece in his mouth.

He folded the rest in paper and put it away.

He had no watch with him.

He looked at the sun.

It must have been around three.

The loudspeaker said something on the far bank.

The words broke apart while crossing the river.

"...school..."

Then came applause.
Raghunath raised his head.
For a few moments he listened.
Then he looked at the boat again.
A shapely leaf was caught in the bottom of the boat.
He took it out and placed it on the bank.
A song began on the far side.
Girls' voices together.
From that distance, the words could not be made out.
Only the tune reached him.
Raghunath kept chewing the betel nut.
Once, in the middle of the song, his hand stopped.
Then it moved again.
The song ended.
The sound of applause crossed the river and arrived faintly.
Raghunath leaned his back against the trunk of the neem tree.
Two crows flew across to this side.
One perched on the bow of the boat.
The other on the sand.
After a while, the first crow flew away too.
Raghunath stood up.
A strip of cloth was wrapped around the grip of the oar.
The cloth had loosened.
He untied the knot.
Then tied it tight again.
On one plank of the boat, a nail had risen slightly.
He hammered it down with a stone.
He checked the rope once more.
The fair continued on the far bank.
The path on this side remained empty.
The sun began to descend.
The neem tree's shadow stretched all the way to the river.
Raghunath went home once.
His house was five minutes from the landing.
The door was not shut.
The courtyard was empty.
The hearth was cold.
A plate lay overturned.

Phoolo Devi had left the morning rice covered.

Raghunath ate two mouthfuls.

He drank water.

Then he returned to the landing.

The boat was still there.

The rope was taut.

The current had grown a little stronger.

He pressed down the earth around the stake with his foot.

He brought another bamboo pole.

He drove it into the ground behind the first stake.

He looped one turn of the rope around that one as well.

Now the boat was tied between two bamboo stakes.

Across the river, the lights were slowly increasing.

The brightly coloured cloths of daytime were now less visible in the dark.

The rows of lamps could be seen clearly.

Raghunath sat down on the sand.

After a while, a lantern on the far bank moved up and down three times.

The old signal of the landing.

It was not yet time to return.

It was only a question—was the boat there?

Raghunath lit his own lantern.

He raised it twice.

The answer—yes.

The lantern on the far bank became still again.

Raghunath set his lantern beside the stake.

From far away, a man's voice came over the announcement loudspeaker.

The words were breaking apart again.

Then something like the sound of Sunita's laughter came across the water.

Raghunath raised his head.

There were many people on the far bank.

It was hard to tell who had laughed.

He looked at the rope again.

The knot was sound.

After a while, something like Phoolo Devi's red shawl moved near a light.

Raghunath narrowed his eyes a little.

He could not make it out clearly.

He did not get up.

He did not untie the boat.

Everyone was on the far bank.

On this bank, only the landing.

One boat.

Two bamboo stakes.

One lantern.

And Raghunath Sahni.

The current pulled the rope taut.

Then the rope slackened again.

Raghunath reached out and touched the knot.

There was applause again on the far bank.

The boat remained tied.

STORY 204

The Sound of the Refrigerator

There had been no electricity since evening.

The heat of Bhadra still clung to the walls even after the day had faded.

Outside the veranda, people sat in the lane fanning themselves with hand fans.

Inside the house, the darkness seemed a little deeper.

In a corner of the kitchen, the old refrigerator stood silent.

Its sound had been stilled for four hours.

Once the refrigerator fell silent, the other sounds of the house became distinctly audible.

The tick-tock of the wall clock.

The ting of a bicycle passing through the lane.

The scrape of a neighbour dragging a bucket across the roof.

And, every now and then, the slap of a hand killing a mosquito.

Naresh and Meena were both in the room.

Neither was speaking to the other.

The silence between them had begun before the power went out.

That afternoon Naresh had pasted a sheet of paper on the refrigerator door.

In bold letters it said - FOR SALE.

When Meena returned from the market, she saw the paper.

For a while she stood in front of the refrigerator.

Then she peeled off the paper and folded it.

She said nothing.

Naresh said nothing either.

From that moment, conversation had ceased.

The refrigerator was four years old.

It was not new.

Naresh had bought it from a family in Jhanjharpur.

The family had been leaving the town.

The paint on the refrigerator had peeled away in two places.

There was a small dent at the right-hand corner of the door.

One of the shelves inside was half-cracked.

But it worked well.

At first, all it did in the house was chill water.

Sometimes leftover vegetables.

Sometimes curd.

Sometimes the fish brought home from the Sunday market.

Over the past five months, its purpose had changed.

Meena had begun bringing milk home early each morning.

Some of it was for the household.

With the rest she set curd.

At first two neighbouring households bought it.

Then five.

Then the tea seller in the lane said he wanted two bowls every day as well.

Meena had made herself a small ledger.

Beside each name she wrote the quantity.

Half a seer for one.

A seer for another.

Only on Saturdays for someone else.

The ledger always lay on top of the refrigerator.

A blue pen always rested upon it.

Naresh had a small shop selling iron goods.

For three months, sales had been falling.

A new large shop had opened on the main road.

There, nails, wire, locks, pipes and paint could all be bought in one place.

Naresh's old customers still came to his shop.

But fewer of them.

At the end of the month, adding up the accounts made his head feel heavy.

That month the iron wholesaler had come three times asking for his money.

The household electricity bill was already two days overdue as well.

That morning, standing before the refrigerator, Naresh had said -

"If we sell this, two accounts can be cleared at once."

Meena had been boiling milk.

She turned and looked at him.

"Then where will I keep the curd?"

Naresh had said -

"How much do you earn from this anyway?"

Meena looked toward the stove.

The milk was rising.

She lowered the flame.

"How much I earn is written in the ledger."

Naresh did not open the ledger.

He said -

"It takes larger sums to run a household."

Meena replied -

"Large sums are made by adding small ones."

At that, Naresh fell silent.

Before leaving for the shop that afternoon, he wrote the notice and pasted it on the refrigerator.

In the evening Meena had peeled it off and folded it.

Now the folded paper lay on the sill of the kitchen window.

There was no electricity.

The refrigerator was silent.

So were they.

From time to time Meena placed a hand on the refrigerator door.

The cold inside was fading.

Two pieces of yesterday's ice were still left in the freezer compartment above.

She did not open the door.

Opening it would let the cold escape more quickly.

Naresh sat on the charpoy.

There was a fan in his hand.

He fanned himself only a little.

He watched more than he fanned.

The kitchen window.

The refrigerator.

The folded paper on the sill.

Meena went outside once.

From the veranda she brought in an earthen water pitcher.

She filled two glasses with water.

One she placed before Naresh.

She said nothing.

Naresh picked up the glass.

The water was warm.

He drank it.

He set the glass gently on the floor.

"How much curd is there?"

The question came as far as his lips.

But it did not come out.

Meena dampened a cloth and lifted the ledger from the top of the refrigerator.

She set the ledger on the low stool in the veranda.

For the first time, Naresh saw one of its pages lying open.

The dates of the month ran one beneath another in separate lines.

Amounts of money stood on the right.

Little totals below.

A check mark stood beside some names.

Beside others was written "tomorrow."

From where he sat, Naresh tried to make out the figures.

He could not see them clearly.

He did not get up.

Meena closed the ledger.

Someone in the lane said -

"Still not back?"

Another voice answered -

"They're working near the electricity pole."

Naresh looked at the clock.

Eight twenty.

On an ordinary day, by this hour Meena would have washed the vessels for the next morning's milk and set them upside down.

Today the vessels lay empty.

If the curd in the refrigerator spoiled, the morning's orders could not be filled.

Naresh understood that.

He understood, too, why Meena had twice asked people in the lane about the electricity while he was closing the shop that evening.

But he said nothing.

In Naresh's pocket was a small receipt from the wholesaler.

Again and again his fingers touched one corner of it.

The amount on the receipt was circled in red ink.

Selling the refrigerator might bring in that amount.

It might.

The refrigerator was old.

Who knew what price it would fetch?

He had not thought of that when he pasted up the notice that afternoon.

He had thought only of the amount.

In the darkness of night, the amount seemed small.

The refrigerator seemed large.

The curd inside the refrigerator was not larger than the refrigerator.

But behind that curd lay the account of every day.

Meena rose again.

She opened the ledger.

This time the page faced Naresh.

Whether deliberately or by accident,

Naresh could not tell.

Naresh looked at the figures.

The first date.

The second.

The third.

The total below.

Then the expenses.

Milk.

Sugar.

Earthen bowls.

Electricity bill.

Naresh's eyes stopped on that line.

"Electricity - twice."

Two dates were written to the right.

In both those months Naresh had thought the electricity money had gone from the cash box at his shop.

Perhaps it had.

Perhaps half of it had.

He could not remember clearly.

Meena turned the page.

Had Naresh asked, he would have understood.

He did not ask.

Had Naresh spoken, the conversation might have begun.

He did not speak.
It was nine o'clock.
The heat eased a little.
The mosquitoes grew worse.
Meena lit an old incense stick used for fumigation.
The smoke curled up in front of the refrigerator.
Naresh suddenly rose.
He went into the kitchen.
He placed a hand on the refrigerator door.
Meena looked at him.
Naresh did not open the door.
He merely kept his hand there.
"It's getting warm."
He could have said that.
He did not.
He picked up the folded paper from the window sill.
He unfolded it.
"FOR SALE."
In the darkness, the letters were only half visible.
Naresh folded the paper again.
He put it in his pocket.
This time too, Meena said nothing.
Suddenly a child shouted in the lane -
"It's back!"
First a light flickered on in the house opposite.
Then in another house.
Then the fan in their room jerked and began to turn.
The bulb on the wall glowed yellow.
For two moments the refrigerator remained silent.
Then came a small click from inside.
Then a low grrr-grrr.
Then a continuous hum.
The refrigerator came to life.
At first its sound was a little loud.
As though it were releasing four hours of silence all at once.
Meena opened the refrigerator door.
There was still some cold left inside.
No water had seeped out around the bowls of curd on the upper shelf.

She examined each bowl in turn.

Naresh stood behind her.

The refrigerator had three levels inside.

Curd on the top.

Two vessels of milk in the middle.

Below, Naresh's bottles of water and yesterday's vegetables.

Naresh took out the bottle from the bottom.

Instead of drinking a sip, he carried the bottle out to the veranda.

Then he came back.

He took out the second bottle as well.

Meena stood watching him.

Naresh cleared the entire bottom level.

He put yesterday's vegetables into a smaller bowl and tucked it into a corner.

Meena did not ask, "Why?"

Naresh did not say, "Put the curd here."

The hum of the refrigerator filled the space between those two unspoken sentences.

Meena washed the empty milk vessels.

She wiped one of them with a cloth.

Then she opened the ledger.

Against tomorrow's date she wrote three new names.

Naresh went back to the charpoy.

The folded paper was in his pocket.

He took it out.

For a while he held it on his palm.

Meena did not look.

Naresh looked at the blank reverse side of the paper.

He picked up the blue pen.

Meena raised her head.

Naresh wrote -

"Morning - two seers of milk."

Below it -

"Earthen bowls - twelve."

He did not paste the paper back on the refrigerator.

He placed it beside the ledger.

Meena picked up the pen.

She crossed out "twelve" and wrote "sixteen."

Naresh watched.

Meena closed the ledger.

The conversation had still not begun.

The fan was turning.

The children in the lane had gone out to play again.

The refrigerator's hum had settled into an even note.

Naresh sat on the charpoy.

Meena sat at the kitchen threshold.

Five handspans lay between them.

Naresh's glass was empty.

Meena filled it from the earthen pitcher.

She held it out to him.

This time, as Naresh took the glass, his hand brushed hers.

Neither of them withdrew at once.

Only for a moment.

Then Meena drew her hand back.

Naresh drank the water.

"I'll bring the milk in the morning."

Naresh said it softly.

It was the first complete sentence in four hours.

Meena did not answer at once.

She listened to the refrigerator's hum.

Then she said -

"Before six."

Naresh nodded.

That was all.

No apology.

No grand declaration.

The debt was still there.

The wholesaler's receipt was still in his pocket.

Sales at the shop were not going to rise suddenly tomorrow.

Meena understood all this too.

Neither of them said whether the question of selling the refrigerator was now over.

But the words on the front of the paper now lay face down.

The reverse side faced upward.

On it were written tomorrow's milk and the earthen-bowl account.

The night deepened.

The refrigerator kept running.
Sometimes its sound was loud.
Sometimes soft.
Meena put away the utensils.
Naresh switched off the fan.
They prepared to sleep.
The kitchen bulb was switched off.
In the darkness, the sound of the refrigerator was distinct again.
This time it was not the only thing inside the house.
The time for the morning milk had already been settled.

STORY 205

A Month's Rent

It was the fifth day of the month.

There was still an hour before evening.

Jyoti had set the lentils to cook on the kitchen stove.

The flame was low.

Every now and then she lifted the lid to look, then put it back without saying anything.

In the outer room Amar sat with the newspaper open before him.

The same page had been in his hands for half an hour.

He was not reading.

Again and again he looked at the clock hanging on the wall.

Ten minutes past four.

Fourteen minutes past four.

Seventeen minutes past four.

The hands of the clock kept moving.

Inside the house, time stood still.

From the kitchen Jyoti asked -

"Shall I make tea?"

Amar did not lift his eyes from the newspaper.

"At the usual time."

Jyoti did not reply.

Ruchi lay on her stomach on the floor, working out multiplication problems.

She was nibbling the point of her pencil with her teeth.

"Babu, five times seven?"

"Thirty-five."

Amar answered at once.

Ruchi moved on to the next problem.

No one had decided that the house must look like an ordinary day.

Yet each of them went about their work with such care that even an ordinary day seemed something to be rehearsed.

Washed clothes hung on the line in the veranda.

Twice Jyoti went out and straightened their folds.

Amar bent a corner of the newspaper and then smoothed it out again.

Ruchi placed her eraser exactly in the middle of her notebook.

The front door stood open.

Shashikant Babu had said that he would come around five.

He was the landlord.

When he came to collect the monthly rent, he usually sat in this room for five or ten minutes.

He drank a cup of tea.

He wrote out a receipt.

Then he left.

This month they owed four thousand two hundred rupees.

There were three thousand seven hundred in the envelope.

Five hundred short.

The envelope lay in the upper compartment of the cupboard.

Jyoti had counted the money three times that very morning.

Amar had counted it twice as well.

The total had not changed.

Three thousand seven hundred.

At the warehouse where Amar worked, no consignment had arrived on two days the previous week.

He had received no wages for those two days.

The remaining three hundred rupees had gone to the chemist the day before.

Ruchi's cough had worsened over the past three nights.

Twice that afternoon Amar and Jyoti had begun discussing which of these three reasons should be mentioned first to Shashikant Babu.

Both times the conversation had remained unfinished.

"Two days' wages..." Amar had said.

Jyoti had interrupted - "The medicine..."

Then both had fallen silent.

Whether there was one reason or three, the shortage was five hundred rupees.

At half past four Jyoti made tea.

Not three cups.

Two.

Ruchi was drinking milk.

Jyoti set one cup in front of Amar.

The other was for herself.
"What if he comes now?" Amar asked.
"Then I'll make some more."
"Sugar?"
Jyoti looked at Amar.
"There is some."
The answer was brief.
Amar picked up his cup.
The tea was hot.
He blew on it and began to drink.
Ruchi suddenly got up and went to the door.
A bicycle bell had rung somewhere in the lane.
"Has he come?"
Jyoti asked.
"No, the milkman."
Ruchi returned to her notebook and sat down again.
Amar folded the newspaper.
Then immediately opened it again.
"Why do you keep doing that?" Jyoti asked softly.
"Doing what?"
"The newspaper."
Amar said nothing.
He put the newspaper down on the table.
One leg of the table was slightly short.
A folded scrap of paper had been wedged beneath it.
As Ruchi got up, she struck that leg with her foot.
The paper slipped out.
The table began to wobble.
Amar bent and picked up the paper.
It was an old rent receipt.
For the month of February.
It had been folded into four.
Amar folded the receipt again and pushed it back under the table leg.
Jyoti watched him.
"Why an old receipt?"
"I needed a piece of paper."
"Wasn't there any other paper?"
"There was."

Silence again.

With her pencil, Ruchi was drawing a line beneath five times seven.

Five minutes to five.

Jyoti got up and swept the room once more.

The floor was already clean.

She merely swept two specks of dust from beside the door out of the room.

Amar said -

"It's already so clean."

"I could see it."

"See what?"

"The dust."

Amar did not answer.

At five o'clock footsteps sounded in the lane.

This time there was no bicycle bell.

Ruchi started to rise.

Jyoti said -

"You do your sums."

Ruchi remained seated.

Shashikant Babu appeared in the doorway.

In one hand he carried an old brown receipt ledger.

In the other, an umbrella.

The sky was clear.

"Come in, Babu." Amar stood up.

Shashikant Babu propped the umbrella in the veranda.

"It's very hot."

"Yes."

From inside Jyoti called -

"Shall I make tea?"

"If you're already making it."

Jyoti paused for a moment.

Then she said -

"It is being made."

She went towards the kitchen.

Amar offered Shashikant Babu a chair.

Ruchi remained bent over her notebook.

Shashikant Babu looked at her.

"Studying?"

Ruchi said -

"Multiplication."

"Five times seven?"

Startled, Ruchi raised her head.

"Thirty-five."

Shashikant Babu laughed.

"Good."

Amar too tried to smile.

The smile did not quite form.

Shashikant Babu placed the receipt ledger on the table.

The table leg wobbled again.

He steadied the table with his hand.

"Has this leg come loose again?"

Amar said -

"I've wedged some paper under it."

"How long will paper hold it?"

Amar said nothing.

Shashikant Babu looked at the shaft of his umbrella, then at the table.

"The carpenter is coming tomorrow. I'll tell him to give you a thin piece of wood."

"Let it be. It's managing."

"Managing and being right are two different things."

It was an ordinary sentence.

Amar heard its meaning somewhere else.

Jyoti came in with the tea.

She brought only one cup.

For Shashikant Babu.

She had already washed her own cup and Amar's and set them upside down.

"None for you?" Shashikant Babu asked.

Jyoti said -

"We've had ours."

It was true.

Shashikant Babu began to drink his tea.

Once again the ticking of the clock could be heard in the room.

Ruchi's pencil kept moving over the paper.

A vegetable vendor's call passed through the lane.

No one brought up the rent.

The pocket of Amar's trousers was damp with sweat.

The envelope was in the cupboard, not in his pocket.

Even so, he felt as though the envelope were there in his pocket.

Shashikant Babu finished his tea.

Then he drew the receipt ledger towards himself.

"So?"

That was all he said.

Amar got up and went to the cupboard.

He opened the upper compartment.

He took out the envelope.

At that moment Jyoti went into the kitchen, on the pretext of checking the stove flame.

Ruchi remained absorbed in her mathematics.

Amar set the envelope down beside Shashikant Babu.

"We're five hundred short this time."

He said it in the very first sentence.

Shashikant Babu did not open the envelope.

"How much is there?"

"Three thousand seven hundred."

"The rest?"

"I'll pay it by the tenth."

Amar gave no reason.

Not the two days' lost wages.

Not the medicine.

Not Ruchi's cough.

Only the date.

Shashikant Babu opened the envelope.

He counted the notes.

Once.

Then a second time.

"Three thousand seven hundred."

He said it aloud.

Amar nodded.

Shashikant Babu opened the receipt ledger.

He wrote the date.

He wrote the amount.

Three thousand seven hundred.

Below it, in small letters, he wrote -

"Balance: five hundred."
He tore out the receipt and held it out to Amar.
Amar took it in his hand.
The old February receipt was still wedged beneath the table leg.
The new receipt was in his hand.
Shashikant Babu stood up.
"The tenth?"
"Yes."
"All right."
With that, he picked up his umbrella.
Jyoti came out of the kitchen.
"More tea?"
"No, it's getting late."
Shashikant Babu looked at Ruchi.
"Finish your multiplication."
Ruchi said -
"Yes."
He left.
For a little while his footsteps could be heard receding along the lane.
Then no longer.
Amar did not close the door.
He sat down on the chair.
Jyoti picked up the empty cup from the table.
"Did you tell him?"
"Yes."
"Everything?"
Amar paused for a moment.
"Five hundred."
Jyoti understood.
"The reason?"
"No."
Jyoti carried the cup back into the kitchen.
Amar opened the new receipt and looked at it.
Three thousand seven hundred.
Balance: five hundred.
There was nothing written about the tenth.
Only the balance.
Amar began to fold the receipt.

Then did not fold it.

He laid it flat on the table.

Ruchi said -

"Babu, seven times eight?"

Before answering, Amar looked at the clock.

Twenty-seven minutes past five.

Then he said -

"Fifty-six."

Ruchi wrote it down.

Jyoti lifted the lid from the lentils.

Steam rose out.

"Shall I put the rice on?"

"Yes."

Amar picked up the newspaper again.

This time not the front page.

He opened an inside page.

For a while, he actually read.

The table wobbled again.

Ruchi shifted her notebook.

Amar bent and pulled out the old receipt.

The February receipt had been crushed into four folds.

He opened it.

The corners of the paper were flattened and creased.

Amar went to the cupboard, cut a thick piece from an old newspaper, and brought it back.

He folded it into four.

He wedged it beneath the table leg.

The table stood level.

The February receipt remained in his hand.

Jyoti looked from the kitchen.

"What will you do with that?"

Amar put the receipt in the lower compartment of the cupboard.

"Where receipts belong."

Jyoti said nothing.

Outside, evening was descending.

Ruchi turned the page of her mathematics notebook.

Rice had been set on the stove.

The house filled again with its ordinary sounds.

The clink of a lid.
The scratch of a pencil.
The rustle of a newspaper page turning.
The ticking of the wall clock.
Five hundred rupees were still due.
The month too was still unfinished.
But the old receipt was no longer under the table leg.

STORY 206

The Blue Mug

The blue mug had not slipped from Sarita's hand.
It had slipped from Pradeep's.
Both of them were in the kitchen at the time.
So there was no question of who had broken it.
Pradeep was taking down the tea leaves from the upper shelf.
The mug was standing at the corner of the shelf.
His elbow struck it.
The mug fell first onto the wooden bench.
Then onto the floor.
The handle went one way.
The body of the mug broke into two pieces.
A small shard slid and lodged beside a leg of the stove.
Sarita was watching the milk on the stove.
It had not yet risen to the boil.
She turned off the stove.
Pradeep bent down.
"Don't touch it."
Sarita said,
"I can see it."
Pradeep began gathering the pieces.
He placed them on a sheet of newspaper.
The blue was not blue on the inside.
A line of white clay showed within.
Sarita put the milk back on the stove.
"I'll bring a mug tomorrow."
Pradeep said,
"Now?"
Sarita looked at the pan of milk.
"Tomorrow."
"You mean it's necessary to buy one right away?"
Before the milk could boil over, Sarita took it off the stove.

She said nothing.

Pradeep was folding the newspaper around the pieces.

"We have steel tumblers."

"We do."

"Then?"

Sarita strained the tea into two tumblers.

She set one in front of Pradeep.

The other before herself.

Pradeep touched the tumbler, then drew his hand back.

It was hot.

He looked for a cloth.

Sarita took an old cloth from a peg on the veranda and handed it to him.

"A mug was easier to hold," Pradeep said.

Sarita looked at him.

"That is why I'll bring one tomorrow."

Pradeep held the tumbler with the cloth.

"How much will it cost?"

"Sixty or seventy."

"Sixty or seventy is money too."

Sarita blew across the rim of her tumbler.

"I know."

"Expenses have been high this month."

"I know."

"There's the electricity bill."

"I know."

"The household provisions—"

"I know that too."

Pradeep fell silent.

The kitchen still held the stove's lingering heat.

Outside in the lane, a child kicked a ball.

It struck the wall with a dull tap.

Sarita went on drinking her tea.

Pradeep said,

"I'm only saying we can wait four or five days."

This time Sarita answered at once,

"We can wait."

"Then fine."

"But I'll buy it tomorrow."
Pradeep's hand stopped on the tumbler.
"Why?"
Sarita did not answer.
Pradeep asked again,
"What will happen in four days?"
"Nothing."
"Then?"
Sarita put her tumbler down.
"I want to buy it."
The sentence was short.
But in the kitchen it sounded perfectly clear.
Pradeep looked at her.
"When did I forbid you?"
Sarita did not smile.
"You asked—is it necessary?"
"Does that amount to forbidding you?"
"No."
"Then?"
Sarita fell silent again.
Pradeep picked up the broken mug wrapped in newspaper.
"I only keep an eye on the household expenses."
Sarita said,
"Don't I?"
Before answering, Pradeep tightened the folds of the newspaper.
"That isn't the point."
"What is the point?"
"You're bringing in something else again."
This time Sarita looked directly at him.
"The other thing was already here."
Pradeep's expression changed slightly.
"What?"
Sarita rose and opened the cupboard.
In the lower compartment was a small cloth pouch.
She took it out.
Pradeep watched.
The pouch held notes from her sewing earnings.
Tens.

Twenties.

Fifties.

One folded two-hundred-rupee note.

Sarita did not count them.

She merely placed the pouch on the table.

"I'll buy it with this money."

Pradeep said,

"This is household money too."

Sarita's hand remained on the pouch.

"Yes."

"Then, keeping the household expenses in mind—"

"It is household money," Sarita said again.

"Are the decisions household decisions too?"

Pradeep said nothing.

It was not the first time this sentence had come between them.

Only the words had been different before.

Three months earlier, the small low stool in the kitchen had broken.

Sarita had spoken of buying a new one.

Pradeep had said,

"It isn't necessary yet."

A brick had been placed beneath one leg of the old stool.

It was still there.

The previous winter, the belt of the sewing machine's treadle had worn thin.

Sarita had wanted to order a new belt.

Pradeep had said,

"It will last another two days."

Two days became two weeks.

In the end, Sarita asked one of the women whose clothes she stitched to bring a belt when she went to the market.

Pradeep perhaps kept a different account of such things.

To him they were small matters.

To Sarita too they were small.

The problem was that the small matters had to be explained to him again and again.

Pradeep looked at his mobile phone lying at the corner of the table.

Its new case gleamed.

Sarita did not look at the phone.

She said nothing.

Pradeep himself picked it up.

Then set it down again.

"The old case had torn," he said.

Sarita said quietly,

"Did I say anything?"

"No."

"Why didn't I?"

Pradeep did not answer.

Sarita opened the pouch again.

She took out one fifty-rupee note and one twenty-rupee note.

She laid them flat on the table.

"Tomorrow I'll buy the mug with this money."

Pradeep said,

"Buy it."

Sarita put the notes back into the pouch.

"Not now."

"What?"

"I'll take them out tomorrow."

Pradeep's tea was growing cold.

He drank half the tumbler in one swallow.

"Do you think I don't let you spend money?"

Sarita looked towards the wall.

"Have you said that?"

"No."

"Neither have I."

"But that is where this is heading—"

"The point is this," Sarita cut across him,

"Whatever you buy is considered necessary first."

Pradeep frowned.

Sarita continued,

"When I say I want to buy something, the first question is—is it necessary?"

Silence returned to the kitchen.

The stove was cold now.

A fine stain of tea leaves had settled along the rims of the two tumblers.

Pradeep got up to wash his tumbler.

Sarita said,

"Leave it. I'll wash it."

Pradeep turned on the tap.

"I can wash it."

Sarita said nothing.

He had almost finished washing the tumbler when it nearly slipped from his hand.

Both of them reached out at the same instant.

The tumbler was saved.

Pradeep laughed softly.

Sarita did not.

Pradeep turned the tumbler upside down to dry.

"It's steel. It won't break so easily."

Sarita said,

"I'm not talking about the mug breaking."

Pradeep's smile vanished.

"I know."

Perhaps it was the first sentence that night in which both of them understood the same thing.

Pradeep picked up the newspaper containing the broken mug.

He went towards the rubbish basket.

Then stopped.

"Shall I throw it away?"

Sarita said,

"Yes."

Pradeep put the newspaper into the basket.

A small piece of the blue handle fell out of it.

He bent, picked that up too, and put it inside.

They did not discuss the matter again that night.

Sarita sat down at the sewing machine.

Two pillow covers needed their edges finished.

Pradeep sat on the veranda looking over the account pages.

After a while his pen stopped.

"Sarita."

"Mm?"

"Are you running short of sewing cord again?"

Sarita stopped the machine.

"Why?"

"It's entered twice in last month's ledger."

"That isn't cord. It's thread."

"All right."

Sarita started the machine again.

Pradeep said,

"How much does it cost?"

Sarita stopped the machine.

"What?"

"Thread."

"Why are you asking?"

Looking at the page, Pradeep said,

"Just so I can write it down."

Sarita looked at him for a while.

"Depends on the colour."

With his pen, Pradeep drew a short line in an empty space in the ledger.

He wrote nothing.

The next morning Pradeep woke earlier than usual.

Sarita had not yet made tea.

He went into the kitchen.

He took down two steel tumblers.

Sarita came in behind him.

"Up early today?"

"My sleep broke."

Once again they drank tea from steel tumblers.

The blue mug was gone.

Its place was empty.

Sarita prepared her bag for the market.

She put in the list of vegetables.

She wrote soap.

She wrote oil.

She left one line blank at the bottom.

Pradeep was sitting near the table.

He looked at the list.

"You haven't written the mug?"

Sarita said,

"I remember."

"The price?"

Sarita looked at him.

Pradeep said at once,

"No, leave it."

Sarita picked up the bag.

When she returned from the market, she had a mug in her hand.

Not blue.

A pale earthen colour.

With a thin green line around the rim.

Pradeep took it in his hand and looked at it.

"It's good."

Sarita said,

"Seventy."

Pradeep set the mug on the table.

He did not say, "Seventy?"

Sarita began unpacking the shopping.

Pradeep drew the ledger towards himself.

Under the month's expenses he wrote—

"Mug — 70."

He paused.

Beside it, in small letters, he wrote—

"From Sarita's sewing money."

Sarita saw it from a distance.

"Why did you write that?"

Pradeep kept the pen in his hand.

"For the accounts."

Sarita said,

"Wasn't it household money?"

Pradeep looked at the page.

After a while he drew a thin line through "From Sarita's sewing money."

The words remained legible.

But they were visibly crossed out.

Below them he wrote—

"Household."

Sarita did not close the ledger.

She went to the tap to wash the new mug.

Pradeep picked up a steel tumbler and put it on the shelf.

The new mug was placed in the middle of the shelf.

Sarita did not move it towards her side.
Neither did Pradeep.
Tea was made in the afternoon.
There was one mug.
And one steel tumbler.
Pradeep reached for the mug.
Then stopped his hand.
"You take it."
Sarita said,
"Will you take it?"
"It's all right."
Sarita picked up the mug.
Pradeep took the steel tumbler.
For a while they drank their tea in silence.
The mug was new.
The argument was old.
It had not ended.
But this time its price had been entered in the ledger.
And beside it, no one had written, "Necessary?"

STORY 207

The Charger

The charger was not in its place that morning.

Its place was on the small shelf beside the kitchen doorway.

There was an electrical socket below the shelf.

A white cable rose from it and usually hung from a nail above.

Everyone in the house knew—the mobile-phone charger stayed there.

That morning there was only the empty nail.

Manoj first looked at the nail.

Then at the socket.

Then at the corner of the shelf.

The charger was not there.

He lit the screen of his mobile phone.

Seven percent.

At half past seven he had to speak to the grocery-van driver from the market.

The payment message too would come on the phone.

He looked at the nail again.

Kusum was heating milk on the stove.

Manoj asked,

"Where is the charger?"

Kusum did not turn around.

"Where it always is."

"It isn't there."

Kusum took the milk pot off the stove.

She came to the doorway.

She looked at the nail.

"It was right here last night."

Manoj said,

"Who plugged it in last night?"

Kusum looked at him.

"You did."

Manoj was silent for a few moments.

He remembered that he had put his phone on charge at night.

But he could not remember whether he had taken the charger down afterwards.

He moved the little box kept on the shelf.

An old key.

Two coins.

A scrap of cloth stained with turmeric.

No charger.

Kusum said,

"Ask Neera."

Manoj's eyes went towards the inner room.

Neera was gathering her books for school.

Her own charger had stopped working two weeks earlier.

Since then she too had been using the one charger in the house.

Manoj stood in the doorway of the room.

"Neera."

"Yes, Babu."

"Do you have the charger?"

Neera did not lift her eyes from the books.

"No."

"Did you use it last night?"

"In the evening."

"Where did you put it after taking it off?"

"On the nail."

Manoj took two steps into the room.

Neera's blue schoolbag lay on the cot.

Manoj looked at it.

Neera looked at it too.

Neither said anything.

Manoj opened the upper compartment of the bag.

Neera's hand stopped on the book she was holding.

Manoj took out a notebook first.

Then the geometry box.

Then a small cloth handkerchief.

There was no charger.

Neera said,

"Look in the other compartment too."

Manoj stopped his hand.

"I'm only looking for the charger."

Neera said,

"Then look through everything."

Kusum had come to the doorway.

The milk ladle was in her hand.

She said nothing.

Manoj opened the second compartment of the bag.

There were Neera's school identity card, two pens, a folded slip of paper, and a small cloth purse.

No charger.

Manoj closed the bag.

Neera went on arranging her books.

Kusum turned away.

The milk in the kitchen had begun to rise.

Manoj came out as well.

He said,

"Why have you kept your bag here?"

Neera did not answer.

On ordinary days too, she kept the bag there.

Manoj knew that.

Sunlight had not yet entered the courtyard.

The electricity was on.

The phone had fallen to six percent.

Manoj checked the pocket of his shirt.

Nothing.

He opened the drawer.

An old ledger.

A strip of medicine tablets.

A receipt.

No charger.

Kusum brought tea.

Manoj picked up the cup.

"It isn't in your sewing bag, is it?"

Kusum looked at him.

"If you want to, look."

The sentence was short.

So was her tone.

Manoj put down the tea.

"I only asked."

"I answered."

Kusum kept her sewing bag on the veranda.

It held scissors, thread, a measuring tape, two customers' garments, and her small earnings ledger.

Manoj went towards the bag.

He held out his hand.

Then stopped.

Kusum kept looking towards the stove.

Manoj did not open the bag.

He said,

"Leave it."

Kusum did not reply.

Neera came out.

Her books were now inside the schoolbag.

She had tied the cord at the top again.

On ordinary days she did not tie it so tightly.

Manoj noticed.

He said nothing.

Neera did not drink tea.

She took a glass of milk.

All three were on the same veranda.

There was no conversation.

Only the sound of a spoon striking a vessel.

A vegetable seller called from outside the courtyard.

Manoj looked at the phone again.

Five percent.

He could have asked for a charger from his neighbour Jagdish.

He thought of doing so.

But he did not go.

He wanted first to find his own charger.

He looked beneath the cot.

An old slipper.

A crumpled ball of paper.

Dust.

No charger.

Neera said,

"Babu, I'm getting late."

"Go."

Neera stood up.

Then stopped.

"Will you look through my bag again?"

Manoj started.

"No."

Neera watched his face for a few moments.

"All right."

She went out.

Kusum watched her as far as the courtyard gate.

Manoj remained seated near the cot.

Kusum came back.

She picked up her sewing bag and took it inside.

Manoj said,

"I didn't open it."

Kusum said,

"I saw."

Then she went back to tending the fire.

Manoj's phone was at four percent.

He went to Jagdish's house.

Jagdish gave him his charger.

"I'll return it in the evening."

Manoj said,

"By noon."

Back home, he plugged in his phone.

The charging symbol appeared on the screen.

He felt relieved.

But the silence in the house remained exactly as it was.

At half past seven the grocery-van driver called.

Manoj spoke to him.

The payment message arrived.

The work was done.

Meanwhile Kusum had finished measuring garments for two customers.

She was writing something in her ledger.

Manoj's eyes went to the sewing bag.

It now hung from a peg inside the house.

Earlier it used to remain beside the low stool on the veranda.

Manoj asked,
"Why did you hang it there?"
Kusum said,
"It will keep the place clear."
Manoj understood that this was not the whole answer.
He said nothing more.
At noon Neera returned from school.
She took her bag straight into her room.
Earlier she used to toss it on the cot in the veranda.
Manoj noticed this change too.
Neera went to wash her hands and face.
Manoj said,
"The charger still hasn't turned up."
Neera replied,
"You have Jagdish Kaka's, don't you?"
"Yes."
"Then that will do."
Her tone was ordinary.
But she did not look into her father's eyes.
They ate lunch.
Manoj took rice.
Kusum served dal.
Neera took the vegetables.
They spoke only of salt and water.
After the meal Kusum began wiping the shelf.
A drop or two of the morning milk had dried there.
She moved the turmeric box.
Then pushed the cloth behind the shelf.
The cloth caught on something.
Kusum reached her hand inside.
Between the wall and the shelf, the end of a white cable showed.
She pulled it gently.
First the cable came out.
Then the small white block.
The charger.
It had fallen and lodged behind the shelf.
A knot of blue thread on it was grimy with dust.
Holding it in her hand, Kusum looked towards Manoj.

Manoj looked first at the charger.
Then at the empty nail.
Then at Kusum's hand.
"It was here?"
Kusum said,
"Right here, behind it."
Manoj peered behind the shelf.
There was a gap of two fingers between the wall and the wood.
"But I looked everywhere."
Kusum said,
"You looked on top."
"Not behind."
Manoj did not answer.
He took the charger in his hand.
The cable was intact.
The block was intact.
No one had taken it.
No one had hidden it.
No one had kept it in a bag.
Manoj hung the charger on the nail.
Kusum went to wash clothes.
Manoj remained seated on the veranda.
Jagdish's charger was plugged into his phone.
The charger from his own house hung before him.
Both did the same work.
But Manoj's attention was on neither cable.
He remembered Neera's tightly tied schoolbag.
And Kusum's sewing bag.
He stood up.
He unplugged Jagdish's charger.
He plugged in the charger from the house.
Then, carrying Jagdish's charger, he stepped outside.
When he returned it, Jagdish asked,
"Found yours?"
Manoj said,
"Yes."
"Where was it?"
Manoj paused for a few moments.

"It had fallen behind the shelf."
Jagdish did not laugh.
He only said,
"Small things do that."
Manoj returned home.
The afternoon wore on.
Neera came back from school.
She was taking her bag straight into her room.
Manoj said,
"Neera."
She stopped.
Manoj pointed towards the nail.
"The charger turned up."
Neera looked at the nail.
"Where was it?"
"It had fallen behind the shelf."
Neera was silent for a few moments.
Then she said,
"All right."
She started to go inside.
Manoj called again,
"Neera."
She turned.
"Bring your bag here."
Neera's face grew a little hard.
Manoj said at once,
"Not to search it."
Neera said nothing.
She placed the bag on the cot.
Manoj looked at the cord.
"I opened it this morning."
"Yes."
"I should not have opened it."
Neera looked at him.
Manoj said,
"You had not told me to look."
Neera said quietly,
"I had said—look through everything."

Manoj understood.

That sentence had not been permission.

It had been a wound.

Manoj did not touch the cord of the bag.

He only said,

"I won't open it again unless you yourself ask me to."

Neera picked up the bag.

"All right."

She went inside.

Kusum was sewing.

Manoj went to her.

"Your bag too."

Kusum stopped her needle.

"What?"

"I had thought of opening it."

Kusum said,

"But you did not."

"I should not even have thought of it."

Kusum looked at Manoj's face for a few moments.

Then she said,

"You found the charger, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Then let this matter find its place too."

Manoj understood that this was not forgiveness.

But neither was the door closed.

In the evening Manoj examined the gap behind the shelf.

He brought a narrow strip of wood.

He hammered in two small nails.

He fixed the strip so that the charger could no longer fall behind the shelf.

Kusum watched while continuing her work.

Neera kept writing her homework.

Manoj hung the charger on the nail again.

At night Neera plugged in her phone.

"I'll keep it on charge for half an hour."

Manoj said,

"All right."

That was all.

The rain began again.
Wind blew spray into the veranda.
Neera's bag lay at one corner of the cot.
Manoj stood up.
As before, he could simply have picked up the bag and carried it inside.
He reached out his hand.
Then stopped.
"Neera."
"Yes, Babu?"
"Rainwater will fall on your bag."
"Shall I put it inside?"
Neera came out.
She looked at the bag.
"Yes, put it inside."
Manoj picked up the bag.
Its cord remained just as it was.
He placed it on the cot inside.
As he turned back, his eyes went to the charger.
It was on the nail.
Behind the shelf was the new strip of wood.
And inside, on the cot, was Neera's bag.
Manoj had put it there.
Without opening it.

STORY 208

The Clothesline

The sun came out that morning after three days of rain.

The mud in the lane was still soft.

Water had stopped dripping from the eaves, but the bricks of the courtyard were still wet.

Sharda Devi first swept the veranda.

Then she came out carrying the wet clothes in a bamboo basket.

On one side of the courtyard stood an old iron post.

On the other, an iron hook had been driven into the top of the boundary wall.

A clothesline was stretched between the two.

The whole line did not lie within Sharda's courtyard.

By the time half of it reached the boundary wall, it leaned towards Kamli Devi's house.

The arrangement was so old that no one remembered how it had begun.

The moment the sun appeared, clothes were washed in both houses.

Sharda first spread out her granddaughter's white school kurta.

Then two towels.

A blue sari.

A small sheet.

She went on fastening clothespins.

Meanwhile Kamli's voice came from the other side of the wall.

"Sharda, how much space is left on the line?"

Sharda did not look up.

"As much as you can see."

Kamli did not laugh.

"What I can see is half a handspan."

"Then half a handspan is what there is."

A little later Kamli came carrying a large wet bedcover.

She placed a low stool beside the boundary wall.

Climbing onto it, she caught hold of the line.

Her hand brushed against Sharda's blue sari.

Sharda turned at once.

"Don't touch the sari."

Kamli stopped her hand.

"I'm holding the line."

"Hold the line. Not the sari."

Kamli folded the bedcover in half.

She placed one edge over the line.

The other hung down towards the ground.

"Will it dry like this?" Kamli asked.

"How would I know?"

"The line is between both houses."

For the first time Sharda looked straight at her.

"There is a wall in between."

Kamli's hand went still on the line.

Across the lane, the milkman had stopped his bicycle and was measuring out milk.

Hearing the two women's voices, he looked over once.

Then turned his face away.

Kamli slowly took down the bedcover.

"All right."

She stepped down from the stool.

Sharda straightened the corner of one of her towels.

The sunlight began to grow stronger.

Everyone needed sun that day.

Three days' worth of damp clothes had piled up in every house.

In her own courtyard Kamli tied a thin cord between the backs of two chairs.

The bedcover would not stay properly on it.

The moment the wind blew, the cord sagged in the middle.

Kamli took the bedcover down again.

Her daughter-in-law Reena called from inside, "Ma, shall I spread it on the roof?"

Kamli looked up.

There was still water on the roof.

"No."

"Then in the veranda?"

"Where is the sun there?"

Reena fell silent.

On this side of the boundary wall, Sharda heard everything.

She spread her grandson's trousers over an empty stretch of the line.

The line was now almost full.

In Kamli's courtyard, the stool still stood beside the wall.

After a while Sharda's son Nandu came out to go to the market.

He looked at the line.

Then at the stool on the other side of the wall.

"What happened again?" he asked.

Sharda said, "Nothing."

Nandu looked at his mother's face.

"If it were nothing, your face wouldn't look like that."

Sharda picked up the box of clothespins.

"Go to the market."

Nandu went on putting on his shoes.

"You didn't give her any space on the line?"

"My clothes were there."

"The line is old."

"So is my house."

Nandu said nothing.

He went out.

At that moment Kamli's son Ravindra came into the lane carrying two empty sacks.

Nandu and Ravindra came face to face.

Once, the two of them had gone to school together.

Now even their greetings had grown brief.

"Going out?" Ravindra asked.

"Yes."

"Me too."

They walked away in different directions.

Inside the house, Sharda's granddaughter Anushka sat with a book open before her.

She had heard the exchange outside.

"Grandmother."

"What?"

"Does that line belong to them too?"

Sharda did not answer.

"Babu said it is old."

"Do your studies."

Anushka looked down at her book again.

After a moment she asked, "Who owns old things?"

Sharda dropped the clothespins sharply into the box.

"The one who takes care of them."

On the other side, Kamli heard the sentence.

She was standing in the veranda with the bedcover in her hands.

Softly she said, "A great many things can be taken care of."

Sharda heard her.

She did not reply.

The sunlight moved slowly along the clothesline.

The white kurta dried first.

Sharda took it down.

A handspan of space opened on the line.

Kamli looked at the stool.

Then did not rise.

Sharda kept folding the kurta.

The empty space on the line shone in the sun.

Wind passed unhindered through that empty stretch.

Ten minutes went by.

Kamli spread the bedcover in the veranda.

Reena said, "Ma, space has opened up now."

Kamli replied, "Let it remain empty."

Sharda's hands stopped.

She took down the blue sari.

Now another large space opened in the middle of the line.

Kamli did not look towards it.

Sharda went inside.

She put water on in the kitchen.

While washing rice, her eyes kept straying through the window to the line.

Two towels fluttered in the wind.

Empty line between them.

Directly behind that empty stretch stood the boundary wall.

The wall was new.

It had been built four years earlier.

The clothesline was much older.

Even when the wall was built, the line had not been removed.

The mason had left the hook in place.

Why he had spared it, no one had asked.

Long ago there had been no wall there.

Only a bamboo screen had stood between the houses.

Each courtyard had been half visible from the other.

The clothesline had run from the mango tree of one house to the post of the other.

From a distance it had been difficult to tell whose clothes were whose.

At that time Nandu and Ravindra had been small.

The school shirts from both houses used to hang on the same line.

Then, one year, there had been a flood.

Water had entered Kamli's house up to the knees.

For five nights she and her family had stayed in Sharda's veranda.

During those days, most of the clothes on the line belonged to Kamli's household.

Wet towels.

Children's clothes.

Bedding.

A white sheet.

On the morning of the sixth day, the sun had come out.

Sharda's mother-in-law was ill.

There were too many people in the house.

The kitchen was small.

The courtyard was wet.

Sharda was exhausted.

Kamli had washed the white sheet and spread it on the line.

Then, in front of everyone, Sharda had said, "How many more days will your whole house remain spread across my courtyard?"

That was all she had said.

But five people had been there at the time.

Kamli had looked at Sharda once.

Then she had taken down the white sheet.

That evening Kamli had gone back to her still-damp house.

The water had not even fully receded.

They never spoke of the incident again.

The floodwater went down.

The bamboo screen was rebuilt.

The children grew up.

There were marriages in both houses.
There were two deaths.
Once the well was cleaned jointly.
Salt and spices passed back and forth countless times.
But that sentence remained in the clothesline like a knot.
Sharda strained the rice in the kitchen.
She remembered the white sheet.
At the time she had understood her own words as exhaustion.
Kamli had understood them as humiliation.
For all those years, the two meanings had lived side by side.
By noon the sun was fierce.
All of Sharda's clothes had dried.
She cleared the line.
The whole line was empty.
Kamli's bedcover was still damp in the veranda.
Sharda came to the wall.
The stool was on the other side.
She called, "Kamli."
No answer.
"Kamli."
Reena came out.
"Ma is inside."
Sharda said, "Spread out the bedcover."
Reena looked at her for a moment.
Then went inside.
Kamli herself came out.
Her hands were empty.
"What is it?"
"The line is empty."
"I can see that."
"Spread out the bedcover."
Kamli looked at the hook on top of the wall.
"I'll spread it over the chairs."
Sharda was silent.
After a while she said, "It won't dry properly on the chairs."
A slight hardness came over Kamli's face.
"Some things take longer to dry."
Sharda opened her mouth to answer.

Then closed it again.

The wind moved the line.

The empty line made only the faintest sound.

A small metallic creak.

Sharda took her hand off the wall.

She went inside.

So did Kamli.

Later in the afternoon the sky began to turn grey again.

Gathering in the clothes, Reena said, "It will rain again."

Kamli touched the bedcover.

It was still damp.

She looked up at the roof.

The sunlight was fading.

On this side of the boundary wall, Sharda came out carrying a short piece of old bamboo.

Nandu had already returned from the market.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Making a hook."

"Where?"

"On this side of the wall."

Nandu understood.

"A new line?"

"Yes."

"Will the old one come down?"

Sharda looked at the old line.

"No."

Nandu cut the bamboo into a small peg.

It was fixed into the wall on Sharda's side.

A new thin wire was stretched from that peg to the old iron post.

Now Sharda had a separate line for her clothes.

The old line still ran as before to the hook on the boundary wall.

Kamli watched all this from her courtyard.

She said nothing.

The first two drops of rain fell.

Kamli immediately picked up the bedcover.

She placed the stool by the wall.

Climbed onto it.

Caught hold of the old line.

Paused for a moment.

Then spread out the bedcover.

Sharda was gathering the dry towels from her new line.

Neither woman looked at the other.

The bedcover opened out fully across the old line.

The rain had not yet grown heavy.

Only the wind had strengthened.

Kamli clipped one edge in place.

The wind kept lifting the other.

Sharda took a wooden clothespin from her box.

She placed it on top of the wall.

She said nothing.

Kamli saw the clothespin.

She reached out and picked it up.

She fastened the other edge of the bedcover.

"This line has gone slack," Kamli said.

Tightening her new line, Sharda said, "I'll have Nandu tighten it tomorrow."

Kamli said, "Ravindra will be here too."

Sharda was silent for a moment.

"The two of them can tighten it."

Three or four more raindrops fell.

Kamli took the bedcover down again.

"It won't dry today," she said.

Sharda looked at the sky.

"No."

Both women carried their own clothes inside.

It rained during the night.

By morning the sky was clear.

Nandu and Ravindra met in the lane.

Nandu had a ladder in his hands.

Ravindra had a pair of pliers.

Kamli held one end of the old line.

Sharda held the other.

Nandu tightened the hook.

Ravindra pulled the line taut.

No one spoke of the old flood.

No one spoke of the white sheet.

No one said whose line it was.
The line grew taut.
The new line was stretched along that side as well.
The two lines now ran parallel.
One new.
One old.
The sun climbed.
Kamli spread out her bedcover first.
Sharda spread her granddaughter's kurta on the new line.
The wind rose.
The two lines moved separately.
But atop the boundary wall, the old hook was still the same one.

STORY 209

The Closed Tap

The first light of dawn had not yet reached the veranda.

Kalyani Devi turned the tap in the courtyard.

At first there was a faint gurgle from the tap.

Then a single drop fell.

After that, nothing.

She shut the tap again and stood there for a few moments.

Far away on the road, the milkman rang his bicycle bell.

From the neighbour's house came the sound of an iron bucket being set down.

Kalyani turned the tap again.

This time there was not even a gurgle.

She looked at the first bucket standing in a corner of the courtyard.

Empty.

She looked at the second bucket.

There was only a palmful of water at the bottom.

The earthen drinking-water pot was a little more than half full.

Kalyani tightened its lid.

Before going to bed the previous night, she had said—

"Fill two buckets and keep them ready."

Listening to the news, Dinesh Babu had said—

"Chandan will fill them."

Gathering his books, Chandan had said—

"Didi is still awake."

Madhavi had risen late from her studies.

She had thought—Mother must have filled them.

Kalyani had thought—someone or other would fill them.

By the end of the night, the buckets had remained empty.

At that time there had been water in the tap.

Now there was none.

From inside came Dinesh Babu's voice—

"Is the tea ready?"

Kalyani did not answer.
She went into the kitchen.
A small empty pot stood on the hearth.
She opened the lid of the drinking-water pot.
She took out one lota of water and set it beside the hearth.
Then her hand stopped.
One lota was enough to make tea.
But Madhavi had to leave at seven.
Chandan too had to go to school.
Dinesh Babu had to open the shop.
Kalyani had to deliver two stitched garments by eight.
All four tasks belonged to the same household.
One lota of water stood before them.
Dinesh Babu came out onto the veranda.
"No water?"
Kalyani shook her head.
Dinesh went to the tap.
He turned it himself.
The tap remained silent.
"The supply must be shut off."
Kalyani said—
"Must be."
Dinesh looked at the sky.
There was a light winter mist.
"Did water come in the house behind us?"
"I don't know."
"Ask them."
Kalyani looked at him.
"You ask."
Dinesh said nothing.
Madhavi came out from inside carrying a towel.
"Ma, have you heated the water?"
Kalyani looked at the towel.
"There is no water."
Madhavi stopped short.
"None at all?"
"There is drinking water."
Madhavi turned the tap.

Nothing.
"I have an exam today."
Dinesh said—
"Wash your face and hands with a little water."
Madhavi fell silent.
She folded the towel and put it on the chair.
Chandan came out, his eyes still heavy with sleep.
He was holding his little tooth-cleaning tin.
"The tap's dry?"
Madhavi said to him—
"You were told to fill the buckets last night."
Chandan answered at once—
"Babu said you would fill them."
"Who told me?"
"I heard it."
"You heard it; nobody told me."
Dinesh intervened—
"Don't quarrel this early in the morning."
Madhavi turned towards him.
"Who started the quarrel?"
Dinesh fell silent.
Kalyani sat down beside the hearth.
She took down the small pot meant for tea.
"Tea later."
Dinesh said—
"I have to get to the shop early."
Kalyani replied—
"I too have work to deliver."
"Your work is at home."
The sentence was short.
The kitchen was small.
But the sentence took up a little too much space in it.
Kalyani kept turning the lid of the small pot over and back again.
Madhavi looked at her father's face.
Chandan put away his tooth-cleaning tin.
Dinesh said a little more softly—
"I meant that you don't have a fixed time when you must go out."
Kalyani said—

"The person whose clothes I promised for today has a fixed time."

Dinesh said nothing more.

The tap in the courtyard remained silent.

In that silence, the empty buckets from the night before seemed plainly visible.

Madhavi took half a lota of water from the drinking pot.

Kalyani said at once—

"How much did you take?"

Madhavi stopped her hand.

"To wash my face."

"Do it with half a lota."

"This is only half."

"Then fine."

Madhavi washed her face in a corner of the courtyard.

She poured the last two mouthfuls over Chandan's hands.

"Clean your teeth."

Chandan did not laugh.

He quietly did as she said.

Dinesh put on his shirt.

He felt in his pocket.

Two twenty-rupee notes, one ten, and a few coins.

"Shall we buy water from the market?"

Kalyani asked.

Dinesh said—

"They charge forty rupees for one container of water in the market."

"So?"

"I have only sixty with me right now."

"Until evening?"

"If I get money at the shop, then."

Madhavi came out carrying her bag.

"My fare is separate."

Dinesh said—

"Who asked you for it?"

Madhavi tightened her grip on the bag.

"I'm saying, if we have to buy water, I have twenty rupees."

Dinesh's face hardened slightly.

"Keep it. Take it for your exam."

Kalyani rose from beside the hearth.

She went into the room off the veranda.

On the sewing machine lay a garment half stitched since the night before.

Two finished garments had been wrapped in paper.

Kalyani put them into a bag.

From behind her Dinesh said—

"Where will you go before the water comes?"

Kalyani turned.

"To deliver the clothes."

"Leaving the house like this?"

"Where is the house going?"

Dinesh looked towards the tap.

"There is no water."

"There is no water. There is still work."

Something came to Dinesh's lips, then stopped.

Chandan went out into the lane.

A little later he returned and said—

"The tap behind us is dry too."

"Everywhere?"

"Nandu Kaka says it may come by seven."

Madhavi looked at the clock.

Twenty past six.

"I can't wait till seven."

Kalyani said—

"Then go. Wash your hands and face at a tea stall on the way."

Madhavi pulled a face.

"On the day of my exam?"

"Will the exam look at the water or at you?"

Madhavi looked at her mother for a few moments.

Then she tried to laugh.

The laugh did not quite come.

Dinesh said—

"I'll bring water from near the railway station."

Kalyani asked—

"How?"

"I'll take two buckets."

"Carry two buckets all that way?"

"What else can I do now?"

Chandan said at once—
"I'll carry one."
Dinesh looked at him.
"School?"
"I have time till seven forty-five."
Madhavi said—
"I'll carry one too."
Dinesh said—
"You have an exam."
"We'll be back in ten minutes."
All three looked at the buckets.
Kalyani watched the scene in silence.
The previous night, filling even one bucket had been nobody's task.
Now three people were ready together to lift two.
Kalyani said—
"Bring only one bucket."
Dinesh asked—
"What will one do?"
"First we'll fill the drinking-water pot. Then we'll see."
Dinesh picked up an iron bucket.
Chandan caught its handle.
"I'll come."
Madhavi slung her bag over her shoulder.
"I'll go straight on to the bus stand."
The three of them started towards the lane.
Kalyani came as far as the doorway.
Dinesh turned and asked—
"Your clothes?"
"Eight o'clock."
"Shall I deliver them when I get back?"
Kalyani paused a moment before answering.
"We'll see."
The three went out.
For the first time, the house grew quiet.
Kalyani sat down at the sewing machine.
She threaded the needle.
The wheel of the machine began to turn.
The empty tap stood in the courtyard.

The sound of the sewing machine filled the house.
Five minutes later Chandan's voice came from the lane.
"Ma!"
Kalyani came out.
Chandan was running towards the house.
His hands were empty.
"What happened?"
"The water's back!"
Kalyani looked towards the tap.
It was still silent.
Chandan ran to it and turned it.
First came air.
Then muddy water.
Then a clear stream.
Chandan shouted—
"Bucket!"
Kalyani looked towards the room.
The two empty buckets were still there.
She moved to lift one.
Then stopped.
Chandan himself ran and brought one.
He set it under the tap.
"Fill this one first."
Kalyani said—
"This will go into the drinking-water pot."
Chandan nodded.
Within two minutes Dinesh too returned.
He was carrying a half-filled bucket.
"We didn't have to go as far as the railway station."
He set the bucket on the ground.
Chandan's bucket was filling under the tap.
Dinesh picked up the other empty bucket.
He said to Kalyani—
"After this one fills, where?"
Kalyani said—
"Fill the drinking-water pot first."
Dinesh lifted the earthen pot and set it by the tap.
Madhavi had not yet reached the turn in the lane.

She came back.
"Water?"
Chandan said—
"It's back."
Madhavi did not take off her bag.
She filled a small lota.
"This is enough."
Kalyani did not stop her.
Madhavi washed her face.
She ran her wet hands over her hair.
"Now I'm going."
Dinesh said—
"Wait, I'll drop you."
Madhavi said—
"You fill the water."
Dinesh's hand was on the bucket handle.
He did not let go of it.
"All right."
Madhavi went out.
Chandan picked up his schoolbag.
"I'll be late too."
Kalyani said—
"Go. Your hands and face are done."
Chandan ran towards the lane.
Now only Dinesh and Kalyani remained in the courtyard.
The tap was running.
One bucket was full.
The second was half full.
The drinking-water pot was full.
Dinesh said—
"You have two garments to deliver by eight, don't you?"
Kalyani said—
"Yes."
"It's seven now."
"I know."
Dinesh turned off the tap.
Kalyani looked at him at once—
"Why did you close it?"

"The buckets are full."
"We need to fill two more and keep them ready."
Dinesh opened the tap again.
He brought a third bucket.
Kalyani went into the room.
She picked up the bag.
Dinesh said—
"Shall I deliver your work?"
Kalyani stopped at the doorway.
"Your shop?"
"I'll open it ten minutes late."
Kalyani said—
"Will ten minutes ruin anything?"
Dinesh tried to smile.
"No."
Kalyani did not smile either.
She simply handed him the bag.
"Then these two garments can be delivered."
Dinesh took the bag.
"Whose house?"
Kalyani gave him the name and the lane.
Dinesh listened.
The third bucket was filling under the tap.
Kalyani looked at it.
"Turn it off after this one fills."
Dinesh asked—
"Enough for the evening?"
"Enough for now."
Dinesh nodded.
Kalyani sat down again at the sewing machine.
Dinesh slung the bag over his shoulder.
He went as far as the doorway.
Then came back.
The tap was still running.
The third bucket was almost full.
He turned off the tap.
This time Kalyani said nothing.
Dinesh set the full bucket against the veranda wall.

He picked up the bag and went out.
There were three full vessels in the courtyard.
The lid was on the drinking-water pot.
The tap was closed.
Kalyani turned the wheel of the sewing machine.
The water had come late that morning.
But after that, no one needed to call Kalyani for water again.

STORY 210

Half a Kilo of Rice

The evening light was slipping away from the veranda and climbing the courtyard wall.

Malti Devi opened the earthen rice jar in the kitchen.

There were only one or two handfuls of rice at the bottom.

She touched the bottom of the jar with her hand.

Then she put the lid back on.

On the veranda, Shashikant was folding an old newspaper.

Malti said—

"We'll have to bring half a kilo of rice."

Shashikant went on straightening the fold of the newspaper.

"Today?"

"For tonight."

"There is flour."

"Mother needs rice."

From the inner room, his mother, Janaki Devi, coughed.

For a few moments both of them were silent.

Malti said again—

"Half a kilo will be enough."

Shashikant set the newspaper down on the table.

"Money?"

Malti untied the knot at the end of her sari.

There were three ten-rupee notes.

And two coins.

She placed them all on the table.

"This is what we have."

Shashikant counted it.

"It won't be enough."

"Basudev Sah will put the rest on the account."

Shashikant's hand stopped over the coins.

Malti did not look at his face.

She went back toward the kitchen.

Shashikant counted the thirty rupees on the table once more.
Counting did not make the sum grow.
He rose.
He took the cloth bag from the peg on the wall.
Malti came out.
"Go before the shop closes."
Putting on his shoes, Shashikant said—
"It won't close."
"All right, then."
"Has the credit become too much?"
Malti paused for a moment.
"The ledger is there."
"You don't know?"
"I know roughly."
"How much is 'roughly'?"
Malti did not answer.
Inside, Janaki Devi coughed again.
Malti went to her.
Shashikant took the bag and went out.
Basudev Sah's shop was a five-minute walk from the house.
By the time he crossed the lane, the light had faded further.
Two low wooden stools stood in front of the shop.
Ramsevak sat on one.
Dularchandra on the other.
Both were drinking tea.
Inside, Basudev Sah was wiping the pan of the weighing scale.
Shashikant reached the front of the shop and stopped.
Ramsevak said—
"Come."
Shashikant nodded.
Basudev Sah looked up.
"What shall I give you?"
Shashikant placed the bag on the shop counter.
"Half a kilo of rice."
"Which one?"
"The one we usually take home."
Basudev Sah opened the mouth of a sack.
He placed the weight on the scale.

The grains made a small sound as they fell into the pan.
Shashikant did not look toward Ramsevak and Dularchandra.
The two of them were absorbed in their own conversation.
Basudev Sah poured half a kilo of rice into a paper bag.
"Anything else?"
"No."
Shashikant took out the thirty rupees and the coins.
He placed them on the counter.
Basudev Sah counted them.
"Shall I write down the balance?"
Shashikant's eyes went to a corner of the shop.
A thick ledger lay there.
Bound in blue cloth.
Its edges worn.
A little loop of red thread at the top.
Shashikant said—
"Leave it."
Basudev Sah looked at him.
"Then?"
"Don't give me half a kilo. Give me a quarter kilo."
Basudev Sah kept his hand on the paper bag.
"I've already weighed it."
"Take half of it back."
Ramsevak's laughter came from behind him.
He was laughing at something in his own conversation.
Shashikant's back straightened a little.
Basudev Sah said quietly—
"Seventeen rupees remain."
Shashikant was silent.
"The earlier balance is separate."
Shashikant looked at him.
"How much?"
Basudev Sah reached toward the ledger.
Shashikant said at once—
"No. Leave it."
Basudev Sah's hand stopped midway.
"All right."
He did not open the ledger.

He put the bag of half a kilo of rice into Shashikant's cloth bag.
"Shall I write down the seventeen?"
Shashikant again looked toward Ramsevak and Dularchandra.
This time Ramsevak was looking at him.
Shashikant said—
"I'll pay it tomorrow."
Basudev Sah nodded.
He took a small slip of paper from beneath the counter.
With a pencil he wrote on it: "17".
He folded the slip and put it under the scale.
He did not open the ledger.
Shashikant picked up his bag.
Ramsevak said—
"Have some tea?"
"No, there's work at home."
"All right."
Shashikant left the shop.
Once he entered the lane, his pace quickened.
Malti was standing at the doorway of the house.
There was an empty water pot in her hand.
"Did you get it?"
Shashikant handed her the bag.
"Yes."
Malti opened it.
She took out the paper packet.
"The full half kilo?"
"Yes."
"The balance?"
Taking off his shoes, Shashikant said—
"Seventeen."
Malti carried the packet into the kitchen.
Shashikant sat down on the veranda.
A little while later, water began to boil in the kitchen.
The sound of rice being washed came from inside.
From the inner room Janaki Devi asked—
"Will there be rice?"
Malti said—
"Yes, Mother."

Shashikant picked up the newspaper.
Just then Malti came out.
"How much is the old balance?"
Shashikant opened the newspaper.
"I didn't ask."
Malti looked at him for a few moments.
"Why?"
"What would we do by knowing?"
"Pay it."
"Do we have the money to pay it?"
"Not all at once."
"Then?"
"We'll keep paying whatever we can."
Shashikant turned a page of the newspaper.
"Our name will remain written in the ledger."
This time Malti did not answer at once.
She hung the empty water pot on the peg on the veranda.
"Our name is already there."
Shashikant stopped turning the page.
"Who told you?"
"I see it when I go to buy rice, oil, salt."
"You open the ledger and look?"
"Sahji opens it."
"And everyone in the shop keeps looking?"
"Who?"
"People."
Malti's face remained still.
"People go to the shop to buy things."
"People look as well."
"At what?"
"How much is owed beside whose name."
Malti said softly—
"I don't look."
"You don't have to."
"And you?"
Shashikant folded the newspaper.
"Rice was never written on credit against my father's name."
Malti looked toward the smoke from the kitchen.

"Your father was there then."

Shashikant was silent.

"And now?"

"Now I am here."

"Yes."

"Then?"

Malti went back toward the kitchen.

Shashikant watched her back as she walked away.

The smell of cooked rice slowly reached the veranda.

Janaki Devi's coughing had eased.

At dinner that night, Janaki Devi ate rice.

Malti and Shashikant ate rotis.

A little rice was left over.

Malti put it in a small bowl.

Shashikant asked—

"For tomorrow?"

"For Mother's morning meal."

Shashikant nodded.

Before going to bed, Malti took down a tin from the top of the cupboard.

There were a few notes inside.

Shashikant saw them.

"What is this?"

"Money from sewing."

"How much?"

"One hundred and seventy-five."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Why would I?"

Shashikant's expression changed.

Malti placed the notes on the table.

"We'll pay the seventeen tomorrow."

"And the rest?"

"First we'll find out how much the rest is."

Shashikant said—

"This money is yours."

Malti closed the tin.

"Whose rice was it?"

Shashikant said nothing.

Malti put the tin back on top of the cupboard.

The notes remained on the table.

The next morning, before the shop's opening time, Shashikant reached Basudev Sah's shop.

Basudev Sah was sweeping.

"So early?"

Shashikant placed seventeen rupees on the counter.

"For yesterday."

Basudev Sah picked up the money.

"All right."

Shashikant remained standing.

Basudev Sah stopped sweeping.

"Anything else?"

"Show me the old account."

Basudev Sah went inside.

He brought out the ledger bound in blue cloth.

He opened it on the shop counter.

Shashikant leaned forward.

Where the name was written on the page, it said: "Shashikant Household".

Below it were the dates.

Flour.

Oil.

Salt.

Soap.

Once, half a kilo of rice.

Twice, small medicinal items.

Payments made from time to time.

Shashikant looked at the total written at the bottom.

The sum was less than he had imagined.

But it was not zero.

He kept looking at the page.

Basudev Sah said—

"You don't have to pay it all at once."

Shashikant did not answer.

He read the name again.

"Shashikant Household."

He asked—

"Why have you written 'Household'?"

Basudev Sah pushed his spectacles up.

"Malti sister also buys things here."

"My name is written."

"Yes."

"Then why 'Household'?"

Basudev Sah looked at the page.

"Earlier I used to write only the name."

"And now?"

"Now, when an account belongs to a household, I write 'Household' beside the name."

Shashikant remained silent.

Basudev Sah did not close the ledger.

Shashikant put his hand into his pocket.

From Malti's one hundred and seventy-five rupees, he took out one hundred.

He placed it on the counter.

Basudev Sah said—

"So much?"

"Write it down."

Basudev Sah entered one hundred against the repayment.

Shashikant watched.

Then the ledger was closed.

Shashikant returned home.

Malti was finishing the morning work in the kitchen.

Seventy-five rupees lay on the table.

Beside them Shashikant placed the small receipt for the one-hundred-rupee payment.

Malti came out.

She saw the receipt.

"How much remains?"

Shashikant told her the amount.

Malti nodded.

"All right."

Shashikant sat down on a chair.

Malti picked up the receipt.

"What is written in the ledger?"

Shashikant was silent for a few moments.

"Shashikant Household."
Malti looked at him.
"Not just your name?"
"Household."
Malti folded the receipt.
She took down the tin from the top of the cupboard.
She put the receipt inside.
And the seventy-five rupees as well.
Shashikant said—
"From tomorrow we'll write down our expenses."
Malti asked—
"Where?"
"At home."
"In a ledger?"
"I'll bring a small account book."
Malti closed the tin.
"Bring one."
Shashikant rose and started outside.
At the doorway he stopped.
"Do we have rice for today?"
Malti looked at the kitchen jar.
"Until noon."
Shashikant nodded.
"I'll bring some in the evening."
"How much?"
"As much as we need."
Malti said nothing.
Shashikant went out.
That evening Basudev Sah opened the ledger.
Shashikant told him how much rice he wanted.
Basudev Sah placed the weight on the scale.
Shashikant saw the ledger lying open.
This time he did not look away.
The rice was weighed.
The full amount was not paid.
Basudev Sah wrote down the balance.
On the page Shashikant read: "Shashikant Household".
He picked up the bag.

Two men were sitting outside the shop.
Neither of them was looking at the ledger.
Shashikant set off toward home.
The bag was not heavy.
But this time he was not carrying it hidden from view.

STORY 211

The Balcony Flowerpot

The balcony was flooded with bright light that Sunday afternoon.

Rajni was taking the clothes down from the line.

A large earthen flowerpot stood in one corner.

A hibiscus plant grew in it.

The leaves on one side had dried up.

The edges of some leaves had turned black.

A half-open flower drooped from its stem.

As Rajni folded a bedsheet, she glanced at the plant.

She touched a dried leaf.

The corner of the leaf broke off and fell the moment her finger brushed it.

From inside, Vinay asked—

"Have the clothes dried?"

"Yes."

Rajni folded a towel.

Then she said—

"We should move this flowerpot now."

Vinay came to the balcony doorway.

He was holding the notice about the rent increase.

"Why?"

"The plant is drying up."

Vinay stepped outside.

He bent down near the flowerpot.

"But the soil is damp."

Rajni looked at him.

"I watered it this morning."

"I watered it yesterday evening too."

Rajni was silent for a few moments.

"Then perhaps it has had too much."

Vinay touched the soil with a finger.

"It's damp on top. We'll have to see what it's like underneath."

Rajni picked up the bundle of clothes.

"It has been like this for three weeks."

Vinay looked at both sides of the plant.

The leaves facing the inside of the balcony were still green.

The leaves facing outward were much more scorched.

He said—

"One side is much worse."

Rajni looked again.

"Yes."

"If watering were the problem, wouldn't every side look the same?"

"How would I know?"

Rajni went inside.

A second copy of the notice lay on the table.

The landlord had written that the rent would increase from the following month.

For three days the two of them had begun talking about that paper and left the conversation unfinished.

Rajni put the clothes on the cot.

Vinay set the notice on the table.

"The landlord will call again this evening."

Rajni said—

"Let him."

"What shall we tell him?"

"Whatever we decide."

Vinay pulled out a chair and sat down.

"What have we decided?"

Rajni folded the bedsheet again.

"I don't know."

"You said paying this much rent wasn't right."

"Yes."

"Then we were supposed to look for another house."

"We were."

"Did you look at anything?"

Rajni set a kurta aside.

"No."

Vinay said nothing.

The sound of the fan filled the room.

Something fell on the balcony.

Rajni looked that way.

Another hibiscus leaf lay on the floor.

Vinay stood up.

"Let me have a proper look."

Rajni said—

"At what?"

"The sunlight."

"The sun has always fallen here."

"Like this?"

Rajni did not answer.

They both went out to the balcony again.

A bright strip of sunlight was falling across the outer side of the flowerpot.

Vinay shaded his eyes and looked across the lane.

A band of gleaming glass had been installed on the balcony of the new house opposite.

The glass was reflecting the light straight toward their balcony.

Rajni said—

"That wasn't there before."

"They must have put it up last month."

"I didn't notice."

Vinay held his hand near the outer side of the flowerpot.

"It's hot."

Rajni reached out too.

The earthen pot was indeed very hot on that side.

The side facing inward was not nearly as hot.

Vinay said—

"How long does this light stay here in the afternoon?"

Rajni shook her head.

"I don't know."

"Let's see today."

Rajni did not laugh.

"Are we going to sit here all afternoon for the sake of a plant?"

"We don't have to sit. I'll mark it."

Vinay went inside.

He brought a pencil and an old sheet of paper.

He drew a small line on the floor where the sunlight reached the outer edge of the flowerpot.

Rajni asked—

"What's that?"

"After half an hour we'll see how far the line of sunlight has moved."

Rajni carried the bundle of clothes inside.

Vinay came in too.

The notice was still lying in front of them on the table.

He said—

"You were packing a bag yesterday."

Rajni's hands stopped.

"They were old clothes."

"I thought—"

Vinay fell silent.

Rajni asked—

"What did you think?"

"That you were thinking of going to your mother's."

Rajni looked straight at him.

"Did I say anything like that?"

"No."

"Then?"

"I saw the bag."

Rajni rested a hand on the pile of clothes.

"You saw one bag and decided the whole story for yourself?"

Vinay folded the notice.

"You haven't asked me anything for three days either."

"I kept asking. The answer was always, 'We'll see.'"

"I wasn't clear about what I wanted to decide."

"If it wasn't clear, you should have said that."

Vinay lowered his head.

"Yes."

Rajni began putting the clothes into the cupboard.

Again neither of them said anything.

Half an hour later Vinay looked at the clock.

"Shall we check the line of sunlight?"

Rajni closed the cupboard.

"Come."

They went out to the balcony.

The bright strip had shifted almost a handspan across the floor from the first line.

But the outer side of the flowerpot was still within it.
Vinay drew a second line.
Rajni examined the leaves carefully.
The leaves in the sunlight felt warm the moment she touched them.
"All the leaves on this side are damaged."
Vinay nodded.
"Watering it won't fix this."
Rajni said—
"Then where should we put it?"
They looked around the balcony.
There was a clothesline on one side.
A small stool stood on the other.
By the inner wall there was morning sun and afternoon shade.
Vinay said—
"Shall we move it there?"
Rajni tried to get her hands under the flowerpot.
It was heavy.
Vinay said—
"Wait."
Together they gripped it from opposite sides and lifted it.
An old circular mark remained visible on the floor.
They placed the flowerpot by the inner wall.
Rajni spread the leaves apart and looked at them again.
"Will it get less air here?"
Vinay held out his hand.
"There's air."
"And sun?"
"It will get some in the morning."
Rajni said—
"But not that fierce strip in the afternoon."
Vinay looked at the mark where the pot had stood before.
"We'll look again tomorrow."
Rajni said nothing to that.
She picked off the dried leaves and placed them in a small plate.
Vinay looked at two leaves on the green side of the plant.
Among them was a new tender shoot.
"Look at this."
Rajni bent closer.

"It's still alive."
"Yes."
Rajni did not touch the new shoot.
They both went back inside.
The rent notice was still on the table.
Vinay said—
"I made enquiries about two houses."
Rajni's expression changed.
"When?"
"The day before yesterday."
"Why didn't you tell me?"
"I only asked about the rent."
"Even so."
Vinay stayed silent.
Rajni sat down on a chair.
"How much?"
Vinay told her the two amounts.
The first was lower than their present rent.
The second was almost the same.
"Where are they?"
Vinay named the two places.
The first house was closer to Rajni's workplace.
The second was closer to Vinay's parents' home.
Rajni asked—
"Have you decided?"
"No."
"Why?"
"The routes are different for each of us."
Rajni traced a small line on the table with her finger.
"That is exactly why you should have asked me."
"Yes."
"Why didn't you?"
Vinay looked toward the balcony.
"That night you said you no longer felt at home in this house."
"I was talking about the rent and the damp."
"I thought you meant more than just the house."
Rajni was silent for a moment.
"I too kept thinking something more."

"What?"
"That you didn't care where I had to live."
Vinay looked at her.
"I do care."
Rajni did not answer.
Vinay said again—
"I should have said so."
"And you should have asked too."
"Yes."
The fan kept turning.
The sunlight on the balcony shifted slowly.
On the back of the notice Vinay wrote the names of the two places.
Rajni wrote down the distances.
"Is there a direct bus to the first house?"
"Yes."
"And the second?"
"We would have to change once."
Rajni did the arithmetic.
"Some of what we save on rent will go in travel fares."
Vinay said—
"We'll think after we've seen them."
Rajni nodded.
"I can leave at five tomorrow."
"I can leave at half past five."
"The first house at six?"
"All right."
Vinay wrote the time on the paper.
Rajni put a question mark beside the second house.
"What if we like the first one?"
"We'll still see the second."
"Why?"
"Otherwise we'll be guessing again without comparing."
Rajni gave a small laugh.
"You are avoiding a great deal of guesswork today."
Vinay smiled too.
"The sunlight is teaching us a lot today."
Rajni replied at once—
"Don't turn the plant into a guru."

Vinay laughed.

"All right."

This time Rajni laughed too.

It was brief.

But it was the first time in three days.

As the afternoon waned, Vinay went out to the balcony again.

The bright strip of sunlight had now moved away from the flowerpot's old place.

The new place was in shade.

He called Rajni.

"Look."

Rajni came outside.

"It's fine here."

"Tomorrow morning we'll see whether it gets any sun."

"All right."

Rajni touched the soil.

"No water yet."

"Yes."

Vinay adjusted the shallow tray beneath the flowerpot.

The dried leaves had been placed in a small box.

Rajni picked up the box.

"Shall I throw them away?"

"Yes."

Rajni put the dried leaves into the rubbish bin.

A blackened part of one stem was still on the plant.

She asked—

"Shall I cut this?"

Vinay came closer.

"If it's completely dry."

Rajni lightly scraped the surface of the stem with her fingernail.

It was green underneath.

"Leave it."

"Leave it."

They said almost the same thing at almost the same moment.

Rajni looked at Vinay.

Vinay smiled.

That evening the landlord called.

Vinay answered.

"Yes."
He listened for a while.
Rajni was sitting on the other side of the table.
Vinay said—
"We'll let you know by tomorrow evening."
He put the phone down.
Rajni asked—
"He agreed?"
"Yes."
"Then tomorrow we'll see both houses."
"Both."
At dinner that night they sat at the same table.
They did not talk much.
Rajni asked—
"Does the first house have fixed water-supply hours?"
"I didn't ask."
"We'll ask tomorrow."
"Write it down."
Rajni wrote on the paper: "Water?"
Below it: "Sunlight?"
Vinay read it.
"Sunlight too?"
Rajni said—
"The flowerpot will come with us, won't it?"
Vinay looked toward the balcony.
"If the plant survives."
Rajni slid a roti toward his plate.
"It has survived."
Vinay said nothing.
After dinner they went through the household expenses.
Rent.
Travel fares.
Electricity.
Water.
Daily groceries.
Some of the totals did not agree the first time.
They counted again.
The night deepened.

Before going to bed, Rajni opened the balcony door.
The plant stood still in the shade.
The soil was still damp.
She did not water it.
Vinay asked from behind her—
"What are you looking at?"
"Just the soil."
"Dry?"
"No."
Rajni closed the door.
In the morning, soft sunlight fell on the inner wall of the balcony.
The light reached the flowerpot's new place.
It was not harsh.
Rajni came outside.
A green leaf was damp with dew.
Vinay came out too.
"It's getting sunlight."
"Yes."
"Let it stay here."
Rajni touched the soil.
"No water today."
"All right."
They both went inside.
Breakfast was early.
Before leaving, Vinay looked at the paper on the table.
"Quarter to six at the crossing?"
Rajni put the key in her bag.
"Yes."
"We'll see both houses?"
Rajni opened the door.
"Both."
That evening they reached the crossing at the same time.
They saw the first house.
The kitchen was small.
The balcony opened to the east.
Rajni decided nothing.
They saw the second house.
The rent there was higher.

But water was available throughout the day.

Still, they decided nothing.

On the way back Vinay asked—

"Which one is better?"

Rajni said—

"We'll look at the figures when we get home."

"All right."

When they reached home, Rajni went straight to the balcony.

The plant was still drooping.

But unlike the day before, no new leaf had fallen.

Vinay came out too.

"Can you see any difference?"

Rajni said—

"It's too soon to say."

Vinay nodded.

"Then we'll keep watching."

Rajni looked at the two lines they had drawn on the balcony floor on the first day.

The lines were still there.

The flowerpot was now outside that strip of sunlight.

Rajni went back inside.

The calculations for the two houses lay on the table.

She pulled out a chair.

Vinay sat opposite her.

They began adding the figures again.

The plant on the balcony did not turn green at once.

The decision about the house was not made at once that night either.

But this time neither of them was hiding a paper from the other.

STORY 212

Wrong Number

Harinath Jha did not look at the clock in the morning.

A clock hung on the wall, but its hands did not command the shape of his day.

If his eyes opened, it was morning.

If they did not, morning simply came a little later.

When his wife was alive, tea used to be made at seven.

For the past two years, tea had had no fixed hour.

Sometimes at seven.

Sometimes at nine.

Sometimes not until noon.

That Tuesday, the mobile phone rang at twenty past seven.

Harinath reached toward the pillow.

"Hello?"

From the other end came a woman's flat recorded voice—

"Saroj Devi, it is time to take your morning medicine."

Harinath opened his eyes.

The voice continued—

"If you have taken the medicine, press one."

Harinath looked at the mobile phone.

"Wrong number."

The recorded voice finished its message—

"If no response is received, another reminder will be sent."

The call ended.

Harinath put the mobile phone back beside the pillow.

He closed his eyes again.

Five minutes later, the phone rang once more.

"Saroj Devi, your morning medicine—"

This time Harinath cut the call.

Outside, the milkman rode past the lane ringing his bicycle bell.

Harinath sat up.

Yesterday's kettle still stood in the kitchen.

He washed it.

He put water on to boil.

He made tea.

At seven thirty-five, the phone rang for the third time.

Harinath answered it with the tea still in his hand.

"Saroj Devi—"

He pressed one.

The recorded voice said—

"Thank you. Your next reminder is at one this afternoon."

The call ended.

Harinath set the cup of tea on the table.

"Saroj Devi," he said softly.

No one in the house answered.

At one in the afternoon, Harinath was reading an old page of the newspaper.

Lunch had not yet been made.

The mobile phone rang.

"Saroj Devi, it is time to take your afternoon medicine."

Harinath put a hand to his forehead.

"I am not Saroj Devi."

The recorded voice could not hear him.

"If you have taken the medicine, press one."

This time Harinath cut the call.

Ten minutes later it rang again.

He did not answer.

Five minutes later, again.

Harinath turned the mobile phone face down on the table.

Only then did he remember that he was hungry.

He went into the kitchen.

There was rice left from the day before.

He warmed it with a little water.

He took out some pickle.

By the time he finished eating, it was two.

At eight in the evening, the phone rang again.

Harinath had been dozing in front of the television.

The sound startled him awake.

"Saroj Devi, it is time to take your night medicine."

He did not cut the call.

He listened to the entire message.

"If you have taken the medicine, press one. If you have not, press two."

Harinath pressed nothing.

"If no response is received, another reminder will be sent."

The call ended.

Harinath switched off the television.

He went toward the kitchen.

He had not made dinner.

He cooked one roti.

There were two pieces of boiled potato.

He ate those with it.

At eight twenty, the phone rang again.

Harinath pressed one.

"Thank you. Your next reminder is tomorrow morning at seven twenty."

The call ended.

Harinath looked at the clock on the wall.

Eight twenty-two.

He went to bed early that night.

The next day, his eyes opened on their own at seven fifteen.

The phone had not rung yet.

For a while he lay looking at the ceiling.

Then he got up.

He washed the kettle.

He put water on to boil.

He took out the tea leaves.

At seven twenty, the phone rang.

"Saroj Devi—"

As he lifted the kettle from the stove, Harinath said—

"I understand now."

He pressed one.

"Thank you."

The call ended.

This time the tea was hot.

Harinath sat in the veranda.

The milkman came by.

"One packet," Harinath said.

The milkman stopped his bicycle.

"After a long time, Babu."

Harinath paid him.

"There should be milk in the house."

The milkman smiled and rode away.

Before the one o'clock call, Harinath had already served himself rice.

He had placed the mobile phone on the table in front of him.

At exactly one, it rang.

"Saroj Devi, your afternoon medicine—"

Harinath pressed one.

"Thank you."

He began to eat.

The evening call came at eight.

Before that, he had walked as far as the turn in the lane and back.

He had already kneaded the dough for dinner.

The phone rang.

He pressed one.

He cooked the rotis.

On the third day, all three calls came on time.

All three times Harinath pressed one.

The fourth day was the same.

That afternoon, after the call ended, Harinath wondered whose service this actually was.

The recorded voice never gave any name at the end.

He looked at the number appearing on the mobile phone screen.

All the calls came from the same number.

Harinath called it back.

It rang several times.

Then a young man answered—

"Health Reminder Service."

Harinath said—

"You people are calling Saroj Devi?"

"Please give me the registered number."

Harinath gave his own number.

There was some rustling at the other end.

The young man said—

"Yes, Saroj Devi. Three medication reminders a day."

"I am not Saroj Devi."

"Oh."

"I have been getting these calls for four days."

"There was probably an error while entering the digits."

"The correct number?"

"That is part of the patient's information. I cannot give it to you."

"I do not want it either."

The young man said—

"I'll mark this as a wrong number in the register. The calls should stop within twenty-four hours."

Harinath said—

"All right."

"Sorry for the inconvenience."

The call ended.

Harinath put the mobile phone on the table.

At eight that evening, the phone rang again.

"Saroj Devi, it is time to take your night medicine."

A faint smile came to Harinath's face.

"Twenty-four hours," he said.

He pressed one.

"Thank you."

Then he made the rotis.

On the fifth day, the phone rang at seven twenty.

Harinath had already made tea.

He pressed one.

The phone came at one in the afternoon as well.

He was eating rice.

At the ring, he washed his hand and got up.

He pressed one.

At eight in the evening, the phone did not ring.

At seven fifty-five, Harinath was sitting by the table.

The mobile phone was in front of him.

Eight o'clock.

No ring.

Eight oh-five.

No ring.

Harinath picked up the mobile phone.

He looked at the screen.

There was signal.

The sound was on.

He put it down again.
At eight ten, he went into the kitchen.
The dough had not been kneaded.
He thought, "Because the phone didn't ring?"
No one answered.
He took out the flour.
He made rotis.
He ate.
The next morning, his eyes opened at seven twelve.
Harinath looked at the clock.
He remained sitting on the bed until seven twenty.
No call.
At seven twenty-five he got up.
He made tea.
The milkman was riding past the lane ringing his bell.
Harinath opened the door and called—
"Wait."
The milkman turned his bicycle around.
"Late today, Babu?"
Harinath said—
"Five minutes."
The milkman laughed.
"You keep track that closely now?"
Harinath smiled too.
"For the past few days."
At one in the afternoon, no call came.
By twelve forty, Harinath had already taken the rice off the stove.
He sat at the table.
At one, the clock hand stood straight.
The house was silent.
Harinath took his first mouthful.
That day he understood that the calls had stopped.
At eight in the evening, there was no ring either.
He ate on time.
He watched television for a little while.
At nine he switched it off.
On the seventh morning, he got up at seven.
He did not look at the hands of the clock.

As soon as his eyes opened, he rose.
He put the kettle on.
He watered the two flowerpots.
He swept the veranda.
At seven twenty, no call came.
Harinath went on drinking his tea.
At one in the afternoon, still no call.
He went on eating.
At six in the evening, he walked as far as the temple and back.
At eight he cooked rotis.
The day was settling into its rhythm again.
This time without a bell.
The eighth day was Wednesday.
Sandhya was supposed to call at eight that night.
Sandhya was Harinath's daughter.
She lived in Pune.
She usually called on Wednesday nights.
Sometimes a meeting made her late.
Sometimes she called the next day.
Harinath did not want to miss her call.
So he kept the mobile phone on the table.
At eight fifteen that night, the phone rang.
Harinath answered.
The recorded voice came—
"Saroj Devi, it is time to take your night medicine."
Harinath sat upright.
"Again?"
The recorded voice said—
"If you have taken the medicine, press one."
Harinath did not press one.
He listened to the full message.
"If no response is received, another reminder will be sent."
The call ended.
Harinath immediately called the Health Reminder Service.
This time, instead of the young man, a woman answered.
"Health Reminder Service."
"My number has been put back into Saroj Devi's record."
The woman asked for the number.

Harinath gave it.

After a few moments she said—

"You are right. The patient's family has still not provided the correct number. The system has reactivated the old number."

"So the calls will keep coming?"

"We can stop the service."

Harinath was silent.

The woman asked—

"Shall I stop it?"

Harinath looked at the clock on the wall.

Eight nineteen.

He asked—

"Then how will Saroj Devi get her reminders?"

"She will not receive them until we get the correct number."

Harinath's grip tightened around the mobile phone.

"Tell the family again."

"We will send them a message."

"And my number?"

"Shall I stop it?"

Harinath said—

"Yes."

The woman said—

"You will not receive any more calls after today."

The call ended.

Harinath remained sitting at the table.

At eight twenty-five, Sandhya called.

"Babu, have you eaten?"

"Not yet."

"Why so late?"

"There was a wrong call."

"Whose?"

Harinath told her about Saroj Devi.

Sandhya did not laugh.

"For how many days?"

"Eight days."

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"What was there to tell?"

Sandhya fell silent.

Then she asked—

"Has it stopped now?"

"Yes."

"That's good."

Harinath said—

"Yes."

After a while Sandhya asked—

"Are you eating your meals on time?"

Harinath looked at the clock.

"For these eight days."

"Why?"

Harinath was silent before answering.

"It just kept making the time clear."

Sandhya said nothing.

The conversation ended.

On the ninth day, no call came at seven twenty.

Harinath had already risen at seven.

The tea was made.

The milk had arrived.

He left the mobile phone on the table and sat in the veranda.

No call came at one.

Lunch was on time.

No call came at eight.

The rotis were made on time.

The tenth day was the same.

On the eleventh morning, at half past seven, a call came from an unknown number.

Harinath was reading the newspaper in the veranda.

He went inside.

He answered the phone.

"Hello?"

An elderly man's voice came—

"Saroj Devi?"

For a moment Harinath's body went still.

"No."

The man at the other end said—

"Sorry. Wrong number."

The call ended.

Harinath stood with the mobile phone still in his hand.
He could have told the man about the Health Reminder Service.
He did not know the correct number.
Nor did he know who Saroj Devi was.
He put the phone down on the table.
The tea in the veranda was growing cold.
Harinath went outside.
He picked up the cup.
The milkman had already reached the far end of the lane.
Sunlight was slowly climbing the wall.
It must have been around seven forty.
Harinath did not look at the clock.
He turned to the second page of the newspaper.

STORY 213

The Old Curtain

By evening on the day before they were to leave the house, only the curtain still hung at the window.

The wall clock, the photographs, the shelf—everything had been taken down and packed into boxes.

The curtain was pale green, but the middle had faded almost white in the sun.

Four rows of loops had been sewn along the top at different heights.

Ruchi looked at it as she closed a box.

"This isn't going."

Mala was tying a bundle of clothes.

"What?"

"This curtain. We'll throw it away in the morning."

Sudhir came out of the other room.

"What are you talking about throwing away?"

"The curtain," Ruchi said.

Sudhir looked towards the window.

"We'll see."

Ruchi frowned.

"What is there to see? Are we going to hang this in the new house?"

Sudhir said—

"I said, didn't I? We'll see."

Ruchi went into her room.

Mala went on tightening the knot of the bundle.

After a while she asked—

"Will we really throw it away?"

Putting the screwdriver into a box, Sudhir said—

"Will this look right in the new house?"

"Is it a question of how it looks?"

"Ruchi has been asking for new curtains for some time."

"You promised her too."

Sudhir fell silent.

The three of them ate dinner sitting on the floor.

Ruchi asked—

"Will the curtain man come tomorrow?"

"Let us reach the house first," Sudhir said.

"You took the measurements, didn't you?"

"I did."

"Then?"

Mala intervened—

"Let us get the things there first."

Ruchi kept looking at her plate.

"Everything is always 'let us reach the house first.'"

No one answered.

After dinner Mala went to the window.

She held the edge of the curtain.

The cloth had grown thin.

The first row of loops was stitched with old thread.

The second had been machine-sewn.

The third by hand.

Mala had added the fourth the previous year.

Sudhir asked—

"How old is this?"

"Older than this house."

"From the room in Darbhanga?"

"Older than that too."

Sudhir remembered.

In their first rented room there had been no door between the kitchen and the sleeping space.

Mala had tied a rope and hung this curtain there.

Ruchi had been five then.

Later, in another house, an extra strip of cloth had been added to the curtain.

It was meant to separate off a corner where Ruchi could study.

The crooked seam of that addition was still visible.

Sudhir said—

"Let us not tell all this in front of Ruchi."

Mala asked—
"Why?"
"She'll think we're clinging to old things."
"Are we?"
Sudhir did not answer.

The power went out at night.
The three of them sat in the dark.
Ruchi asked—
"How much will curtains for three windows cost in the new house?"
Sudhir gave an estimate.
Mala asked at once—
"That much?"
"The fabric is wide."
Ruchi fell silent.
After a while she asked—
"Why buy all of them at once?"
Sudhir said—
"We don't have to buy them all at once."
"Then mine first?"
"We'll see."
Ruchi said nothing.
When the electricity returned, she went inside.

Mala said softly—
"We'll see."
Sudhir grew irritated.
"What am I supposed to do now?"
"Nothing. Just look at the figures."
"Don't start on money again."
"I didn't start it."
"If the whole deposit from the old house had come back, there wouldn't have been a problem."
"We knew beforehand they would deduct for painting."
"Not this much."
"And the moving charges went up too."
Sudhir was silent.

Mala said—

"Why did you promise Ruchi a new curtain as though it were settled?"

"It's a new house. She'll want something."

"A new rented house."

"So?"

"Nothing."

At eleven that night Sudhir pulled over a chair to take the curtain down.

Ruchi came out.

"Are you throwing it away?"

"I'm taking it down."

"The sack for rubbish is over there."

Sudhir unhooked the first loop.

Mala held the curtain from below.

The moment the last loop came free, the window lay completely exposed.

The light from the house opposite was visible inside.

Without thinking, Ruchi shifted to one side.

Mala began folding the curtain.

Ruchi said again—

"The sack is over there."

Sudhir looked at the window.

"At night?"

Ruchi said—

"Hang up a bedsheet."

Mala opened the curtain out again.

Sudhir climbed back onto the chair.

The curtain was hung up again.

No one said anything.

That night Mala asked—

"Shall we take it with us tomorrow?"

"Ruchi doesn't want it."

"We can throw it away another day too."

Sudhir said—

"Yes."

The vehicle arrived late in the morning.
Meanwhile the belongings began going out one by one.
Boxes, mattresses, stove, gas cylinder, cupboard.
The curtain was the last thing left.
Mala folded it into four and placed it between the folds of a bedsheet.
Sudhir said—
"Leave it?"
Mala did not answer.
Ruchi was standing near the door.
She said—
"Take it. We'll see there."
Sudhir looked at her.
Ruchi went outside.

The old house was empty.
Square marks remained on the walls.
Only the bare rod remained at the window.
Sudhir locked the door.
The vehicle moved off.

The new house was three kilometres away.
The staircase was narrow.
The mattress had to be bent to get it upstairs.
The corner of the cupboard scraped against the wall.
Ruchi opened the window in her room.
About thirty cubits away, another house had a balcony facing it.
Two women were gathering clothes there.
Ruchi shut the window again.
Mala asked—
"Why?"
"There's a house directly opposite."
"What about the air?"
"Later."

The curtain came upstairs with the mattress.
The bedsheet around it had come loose.
A green corner hung out.

Ruchi saw it.
She said nothing.

At noon the three of them sat over spread-out newspaper, drinking tea.
Sudhir kept adding up the expenses.
Mala asked—
"How much is left?"
"I'm still adding it up."
Ruchi asked nothing.
After a while Sudhir said—
"We'll go to the curtain shop this evening."
"Today?" Mala asked.
"Yes."
Sudhir looked at Ruchi.
"Yours first."
Ruchi set down her cup.
"Not today."
"Why?"
"Unpack the things first."
"That work will keep going on."
"We'll see tomorrow."
Sudhir kept looking at her.

By evening the rear window had been opened again.
The balcony opposite was clearly visible.
Mala looked at the old curtain lying on the mattress.
Ruchi looked at it too.
"There's no rod," Ruchi said.
"There's rope," Mala replied.
Two old hooks were fixed above the window.
Mala brought out a thin rope.
Ruchi held one end.
The first row of loops sat too low.
The second too high.
The third fitted properly.
Mala began threading the third row of loops onto the rope.
Ruchi held the other end.

The curtain was slightly wider than the window.
Its lower edge hung two fingers above the floor.
Mala stepped back and looked.
"It's all right."
Ruchi looked too.
The faded patch was plain in the middle.
So was the line of the old join.
Ruchi said—
"It looks awful."
Mala said—
"Yes."
Ruchi gave a small laugh.

Sudhir came in.
He stopped at the doorway.
"You hung this up?"
"For now," Mala said.
"I'm going to the shop."
Ruchi said—
"Not today."
"I'm saying it for your sake."
"This will get me through the night."
Sudhir wanted to say something.
Then he did not.

After dinner Mala asked for the sheet of expenses.
Sudhir looked at Ruchi.
"Tomorrow."
Ruchi went on drinking water.
After a while she went inside.
Mala asked again—
"How much?"
Sudhir handed her the paper.
Mala looked at the figures.
"Does this include the electrician?"
"No."
"Groceries?"

"No."

"Then the curtain?"

Sudhir said—

"We can buy one."

"We can."

"I promised her."

Mala handed the paper back.

"Keep your promise. But there was no need to throw the old thing away first."

Sudhir remained silent.

Before going to bed, Ruchi came out.

"Babu."

"Yes?"

"Give me the curtain seller's number."

Sudhir picked up his mobile phone.

"Why?"

"I'll ask about cheaper cloth."

"What colour do you want?"

"One that keeps the sun out."

Sudhir read out the number.

Ruchi wrote it down.

She did not call.

"Tomorrow," she said.

She went inside.

The electrician came in the morning.

He repaired the switch, took his payment, and left.

Sudhir measured the outer window again.

Ruchi came and stood at the doorway.

"How much?"

Sudhir told her the measurement.

"My window?"

"Yours is covered for now."

Ruchi looked at the old curtain.

"Temporarily."

"Yes."

Sunlight was falling on the faded part of the curtain.
Ruchi ran a finger along the seam.
"Did you sew this?" she asked Mala.
"Some of it. Some was done by a seamstress."
"So many rows of loops?"
"We kept moving house. The height of the rods kept changing."
Ruchi looked at each row in turn.
"Was this also used for my study corner?"
Mala looked at her.
"You remember?"
"A little."
"That was when the second piece was added."
Ruchi looked again at the joined seam.
For a while no one spoke.

Ruchi looked at her father.
"Babu, buy a new one for the outer window."
"And yours?"
Holding the curtain, Ruchi said—
"I have this for now."
"Shall we replace it at the end of the month?"
"We'll see."
Sudhir laughed.
"Yesterday you were going to throw it away."
Ruchi said—
"Yesterday the house was different."

At noon Sudhir brought home a plain curtain only for the outer window.
It was not very expensive.
Nor was it very cheap.
Ruchi looked at the cloth.
"This is fine."
Sudhir asked—
"I didn't ask what colour you wanted for yours."
"I have one for now."
Sudhir looked at the old curtain.

"One month?"
Ruchi said—
"We'll see."

Two days later Mala took down the old curtain to wash it.
The first water turned grey.
Then pale green.
Wringing out the cloth, Mala said—
"It has become very weak."
Ruchi asked—
"Then?"
Mala looked at her.
"Throw it away?"
Ruchi lifted one corner of the curtain.
"Let it dry first."
"Then?"
"Then we'll see."
Mala smiled.
"You're talking like your father now."
Ruchi smiled too.

By evening the curtain had dried.
Ruchi took it down and folded it.
She did not look for the rubbish sack.
Nor did she hang the curtain back at the window.
She placed it on top of a box.
Mala asked—
"Where have you put it?"
"Here for now."
"For how long?"
Ruchi looked at the new curtain in the outer room.
Then at the open frame of her own window.
"Until it's decided."
"What is to be decided?"
Ruchi ran her hand over the fold of the curtain.
"Whether it should be thrown away or used again."

Sudhir came in from outside carrying vegetables.

He saw the old curtain on top of the box.

He asked nothing.

Ruchi said—

"Babu, the top row of loops is ruined."

Taking off his shoes, Sudhir said—

"The third row is still good."

Ruchi laughed.

"You remember too?"

Sudhir paused for a moment.

"The third row fitted in this house, didn't it?"

"In the old house," Ruchi said.

Sudhir pushed his shoes to one side.

"Yes. In the old house."

Outside, the new curtain stirred lightly in the breeze.

The old curtain lay folded on top of the box.

No one called it a keepsake.

No one put it with the rubbish either.

It simply remained in the house until they decided what its next use would be.

STORY 214

The Cylinder Ran Out

At ten minutes past nine that night, the flame on the stove thinned once and went out.

Anima turned the knob off.

The first roti was already on the griddle.

There was steam in the kitchen, but no fire.

She looked at the cylinder.

Then towards the doorway.

In the outer room, Shashank was folding the newspaper.

Anima said—

"The cylinder has run out."

Shashank put the newspaper down.

"Now?"

"Yes."

"The other one too?"

"There isn't another."

Shashank came into the kitchen.

He looked at the griddle.

The dal in the pot was already cooked.

The potato curry was ready too.

Only the rotis remained.

"I'll bring rotis from outside."

Anima looked at the clock.

"The eatery downstairs closes by this time."

"We'll get them on the main road."

"Half a kos away."

Shashank moved towards his slippers.

Just then, from the inner room, Shuchi called—

"Ma, are the rotis ready?"

Anima answered—

"The gas has run out."

Shuchi came out with a book in her hand.
"I'll eat dal and rice."
Anima said—
"The rice is left over from lunch."
"That's fine."
Shashank stopped while putting on his slippers.
"Then shall I not go?"
Shuchi said—
"Not for me."
Anima said—
"I can manage too."
Shashank took his slippers off again.
For a few moments all three were silent.
Then Shashank said—
"Where is that little electric hot plate?"
Anima's hand stopped.
Shuchi immediately asked—
"What hot plate?"
Shashank looked at Anima.
Anima said—
"The old single-burner electric hot plate."
"Where is it?"
Shashank asked again.
Anima did not answer.
Shashank himself turned towards the outer room.
Three cardboard boxes were stacked against the wall.
They had been there for the past four days.
Shuchi had noticed them, but had never opened them.
On one box, in thick marker, was written—"Books."
On another—"Clothes."
Nothing was written on the third.
Shashank bent beside that third box.
Anima stood at the kitchen doorway.
"Is it in there?"
Shashank asked.
Anima said—
"Yes."
Shuchi slowly came into the outer room.

"Where are these boxes going?"

No one answered.

Shashank began peeling the tape from the top of the third box.

The tape was strong.

He asked for scissors.

Anima brought them from the kitchen.

Shuchi kept looking at the blank place on the box where nothing had been written.

Shashank cut the tape.

He opened the lid.

On top lay an old towel.

Beneath it, two steel plates.

A glass.

A small pressure cooker.

And at the bottom, a single-burner electric hot plate.

Shuchi said—

"Why is all the kitchen stuff in the same box?"

Shashank took the hot plate out.

"It just got packed that way."

Shuchi looked at the steel plates.

"Are these plates from our house?"

Anima said—

"Yes."

"Then why are they in a box?"

Shashank kept uncoiling the cord.

Anima said—

"Let us make the rotis first."

Shuchi looked at her.

"Ma."

Anima looked away.

Shashank placed the hot plate on the kitchen counter.

Its cord was short.

The wall socket was too far away.

He began looking for an extension board.

Shuchi remained standing there.

"Where are these boxes going?"

Shashank said—

"Shuchi, let us eat first."

"Where are they going?"
Anima pulled out a chair and sat down.
The gas stove in the kitchen was dead.
The little electric hot plate lay on the counter.
Its cord hung loose.
Shuchi put her book on the table.
"These boxes have been here for four days."
Shashank said—
"Yes."
"Whose clothes are those?"
Shashank said nothing.
Shuchi moved towards the lid of the box.
Anima said—
"Don't open it."
Shuchi's hand stopped.
"Why?"
Before Anima could answer, Shashank said—
"They are my clothes."
Shuchi looked at her father.
"Where are you going?"
Shashank let out a breath.
"I'll live separately for a few days."
The ticking of the kitchen clock suddenly became clear.
Shuchi looked first at Anima.
Then at Shashank.
"Separate from whom?"
No one answered at once.
Shuchi's face changed slightly.
"From me?"
Shashank stepped forward.
"No."
"Then?"
Anima said—
"We have been thinking of living apart from each other for a while."
Shuchi sat down on the chair.
She pulled the book towards herself on the table.
"Since when?"
Shashank said—

"It isn't decided yet."

Anima looked at him.

Shashank corrected himself—

"The place is decided. The day wasn't."

Shuchi looked at her father again.

"The place?"

Shashank was silent.

Anima said—

"A rented room near his office."

"Have you paid the rent?"

Shashank said quietly—

"I've paid the advance."

Shuchi lowered her eyes.

The electric hot plate's cord still did not reach the wall socket.

Shashank took an extension board down from the shelf.

He dusted it off.

Shuchi said—

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Anima said—

"You had exams."

"I still do."

"Yes."

"Then why tell me now?"

No one answered.

Shuchi looked at the box.

"Because the gas ran out?"

Something came over Anima's face that was not quite a smile and not entirely sorrow either.

"More or less."

Shashank plugged in the extension board.

The red light on the hot plate came on.

He placed the griddle on it.

Anima stood up.

"I'll make them."

Shashank took his hand away from the griddle.

Anima put the rolled roti on it.

The griddle heated slowly on the electric hot plate.

The roti did not puff.

Shuchi remained seated at the table.
"I knew you two quarrel."
Anima kept rolling the dough.
Shashank looked at the wall.
"Every household has quarrels," he said.
Shuchi answered at once—
"Not every household packs boxes."
Shashank fell silent.
Anima rolled the second roti.
Shuchi said—
"How long will you live apart?"
Anima said—
"That isn't decided either."
"A month?"
"Maybe."
"Then?"
Shashank said—
"Then we'll see."
Shuchi said—
"See what?"
There was weariness on Shashank's face.
"We can't manage to talk while living in the same house."
Anima turned the roti over.
"Perhaps living apart will make things clearer."
Shuchi looked at her mother.
"Do you want this?"
Anima took a long time to answer.
"I want us not to keep having the same argument every day."
"That isn't an answer."
Anima stopped the rolling pin.
"No. It isn't a complete answer."
Shashank sat down on a chair.
"I can't give you a complete answer either."
Shuchi began folding the corner of her book page.
Anima said—
"Don't fold the page."
Shuchi stopped her hand.
All three were silent for a moment.

Then Shuchi said softly—
"Even at a time like this, you notice the page."
Anima looked at her.
She said nothing.
The third roti went onto the griddle.
The electric hot plate had gradually grown hot.
The roti was cooking a little better now.
Shashank got up and took out plates.
Not the two plates packed in the box.
Three old household plates from the kitchen shelf.
He set them on the table.
Shuchi watched.
"Why did you pack the plates in the box?"
Shashank said—
"Those are my old office plates."
"The glass?"
"That too."
"The pressure cooker?"
Shashank gave a faint laugh.
"I bought that new."
Shuchi did not laugh.
"So you have made all the preparations."
Shashank's smile disappeared.
"I'll need a few things."
"Has Ma made preparations too?"
Anima took the roti off the griddle.
"Where would I go?"
Shuchi said—
"So Babu is the one who is going."
"Yes."
"And me?"
"Here."
"With whom?"
Anima looked at her.
"With me."
Shuchi looked at Shashank.
"You had already decided that?"
Shashank said—

"Your school is close from here."
"That isn't an answer to the question."
Shashank was silent.
Anima switched the griddle off.
Six rotis had been made.
She put the pot of dal on the electric hot plate to warm it.
Shuchi asked again—
"You decided all this without me?"
Anima said—
"I thought we should first decide between ourselves."
"And I am not between you?"
"Not in that sense."
"In what sense?"
Anima searched for an answer.
Shashank said—
"You are our daughter. That will not change."
Shuchi raised her eyes.
"The house will."
Shashank was silent again.
The dal bubbled lightly as it warmed.
Anima lowered the heat.
The heat on the small electric hot plate did not fall at once.
She slid the pot a little to one side.
Shuchi said—
"Will you take this hot plate too?"
Shashank instinctively looked towards the box.
Anima did too.
No one answered.
This time Shuchi gave a faint laugh.
"If the gas hadn't run out, I wouldn't have known anything."
Anima said—
"I was thinking of telling you tomorrow."
Shashank looked at her.
"Tomorrow?"
Anima said—
"Yes."
"You didn't tell me that."
"Do I have to tell you everything first?"

Shashank's face hardened.
Shuchi looked from one to the other.
"Don't start quarrelling again now."
At that sentence, both fell silent.
Anima served the dal into three bowls.
The curry too.
The rotis were placed in a plate in the middle.
The three of them sat down to eat.
The first roti was for Shuchi.
The second for Shashank.
The third for Anima.
For a while there was only the sound of plates.
Shuchi asked—
"Where is the rented room?"
Shashank named the place.
Shuchi calculated the distance in her head.
"By bus?"
"Twenty to twenty-five minutes."
"Can I go there?"
Shashank answered immediately—
"Whenever you want."
Anima stopped with a morsel in her hand.
Shuchi looked at her.
"Do you object?"
Anima shook her head.
"No."
"Can I stay there at night?"
Before Shashank could answer, Anima said—
"First the place should be checked properly."
Shuchi laughed again.
"You have to check the windows, locks and water everywhere."
Anima said—
"Yes."
"Babu's room too?"
Anima said nothing.
Shashank said—
"She has seen it."
Shuchi looked at her mother.

"You went there?"

"Once."

"Both of you?"

"Yes."

Shuchi kept mixing the dal into her rice.

"Then this has been going on for a long time."

Shashank said—

"Two weeks."

"Not just four days of boxes."

"No."

Shuchi fell silent again.

The meal ended.

Anima reached out to pick up the plates.

Shuchi lifted her own plate herself.

Shashank did the same.

All three stood in the kitchen.

There was hardly room for three people at once in the small kitchen.

Anima said—

"You two go outside. I'll wash them."

Shuchi said—

"I'll wipe them."

Shashank said—

"I'll wash them."

Anima looked at him.

"Now?"

Shashank could not tell whether the question was about the plates or something else.

He turned on the tap.

"Now."

Shuchi took a cloth and began wiping the plates.

Anima stood there for a few moments.

Then she went into the outer room.

The open box lay near the table.

Inside it remained the towel, the empty spaces where the plates had been, the glass, and the small pressure cooker.

The electric hot plate was in the kitchen.

Anima did not close the box.

Shuchi came out after wiping the plates.

She sat beside the open box.

"Can I open the box with the clothes?"

Shashank came out of the kitchen.

His hands were wet.

"Why?"

"To see."

"What?"

"How many clothes you're taking."

Shashank dried his hands on the towel.

"What will you know by looking?"

Shuchi said—

"I'll know how long you have prepared for."

Shashank looked at Anima.

Anima was standing by the window.

"Open it," she said.

Shashank cut the tape on the clothes box.

Inside were four shirts, three pairs of trousers, two kurtas, a gamchha, a towel and a sweater.

Shuchi took the sweater out.

"It's hot now."

Shashank said—

"Winter will come later."

Shuchi remained holding the sweater.

"So, until winter?"

Shashank did not answer at once.

"Maybe."

Shuchi put the sweater back in the box.

Her face was calm now.

That calm made Anima even more uneasy.

"Shuchi—"

"I'm fine."

"You don't have to be fine."

Shuchi looked at her mother.

"Then what am I supposed to be?"

Anima did not answer.

Shuchi picked up her book.

"I'm going to study."

Shashank said—

"If you don't study today, even then—"

Shuchi cut him off—

"My exam is tomorrow."

She went into her room.

This time the door closed completely.

The two open boxes remained in the outer room.

Anima sat down on a chair.

Shashank sat opposite her.

For a while neither said anything.

Then Shashank said—

"You were thinking of telling her tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Why tomorrow?"

"Because I didn't like the idea of her finding out by seeing boxes like this."

"But the boxes have been here for four days."

"That is why."

Shashank looked towards the window.

"I thought we should let the exam pass."

"There are exams every month."

"This is the main exam."

"Our decision to live apart cannot keep moving according to her question papers."

Shashank's face slackened with fatigue.

"The decision to live apart."

Anima said—

"For a few months."

"Changing the words doesn't make it smaller."

"I'm not saying it is small."

"Then?"

"I'm saying we should call it what it is."

Shashank looked at the box.

"Now it has been said."

Anima said—

"The gas ran out, and it got said."

For a moment both were silent.

Then a very faint smile came to Shashank's face.

"I had thought the big conversations in this house would happen in the sitting room."

Anima smiled faintly too.

"In our house, the big conversations happen near the kitchen."

The smiles disappeared at once.

From inside came the sound of Shuchi's chair being moved.

Shashank said quietly—

"Should I not go tomorrow?"

Anima looked at him.

"To the room?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"She has an exam."

"And four days later?"

Shashank said nothing.

Anima said—

"Will changing the day change the reason?"

"No."

"Then?"

"I feel guilty."

Anima lowered her eyes.

"So do I."

"You'll be with her."

"That doesn't make the guilt any less."

Shashank nodded.

"No."

The clock struck ten.

In the kitchen, the electric hot plate was cooling.

Anima got up and unplugged it.

Shashank lifted the lid of the box.

"Shall I put this hot plate back?"

Anima said—

"Leave it out until tomorrow."

"Shall we order the cylinder in the morning?"

"Yes."

"Then it should come by afternoon."

"Maybe."

Shashank did not put the hot plate back in the box.

It remained on the kitchen counter.

The two empty spaces where the plates had been remained open inside the box.

At night, Anima went to her own room.

Shashank spread his bedding in the outer room.

This arrangement had been in place for the past two months.

Shuchi had never directly asked the reason for it.

Now the reason had a name.

At half past ten, Shuchi's door opened.

She came out to drink water.

Shashank was still awake.

So was Anima.

Seeing both of them awake, Shuchi stopped.

"Can I ask one thing?"

Anima said—

"Ask."

"Are you getting divorced?"

Shashank said at once—

"No."

Anima did not answer quite as quickly.

Shuchi looked at her mother.

Anima said—

"There is no such decision right now."

"Meaning it could happen later?"

Anima filled a glass with water.

"We don't have the full answer about the future right now."

Shuchi took the glass.

"Don't lie to me."

Shashank said—

"We won't."

"And don't stop the conversation by saying I have exams."

Anima nodded.

"All right."

Shuchi drank the water.

She moved towards the door.

Then turned and said—

"Tomorrow I'm going to see Babu's room."

Shashank looked at her.

"After your exam tomorrow?"
"Yes."
Anima wanted to say something.
Then she did not.
Shuchi went back inside.
The next morning there was still no gas.
Anima heated water on the little electric hot plate.
Three cups of tea were made.
Shuchi drank tea while revising for her exam.
Shashank quietly divided chura into three bowls.
The open box was still visible beside the dining table.
Before leaving for school, Shuchi looked at it.
"Don't take this today."
Shashank asked—
"Why?"
"I'll see it this evening."
"What?"
"Where everything will go in the room."
After a moment Shashank said—
"All right."
Shuchi left.
Anima closed the door.
Shashank said—
"She will go with me."
"Yes."
"You?"
Anima kept looking at the tea leaves left in her cup.
"If she asks me to."
Shashank said nothing.
At nine o'clock the cooking-gas order was placed.
The cylinder arrived in the afternoon.
The deliveryman took away the empty cylinder.
The new cylinder was connected.
Anima lit the stove to test it.
The blue flame was normal.
She turned it off.
The little electric hot plate was still on the counter.
She could have put it back in the box.

She did not.
In the evening Shuchi returned from her exam.
She put down her bag and went straight to the kitchen.
She saw the new cylinder.
Then the small electric hot plate.
"The gas has come?"
"Yes."
"Then why is this still here?"
Anima said—
"Babu isn't taking it yet."
Shuchi looked at her for a few moments.
Then she went into the outer room.
Shashank had not yet returned from the office.
The open boxes were still there.
Shuchi did not close the lid of the clothes box.
She only moved the sweater from the top to the bottom.
At night Shashank came home.
Shuchi said—
"Come."
"Where?"
"To see the room."
Shashank looked at Anima.
Anima said—
"Go."
Shuchi asked—
"You're not coming?"
Anima thought for a moment.
"Not today."
Shuchi nodded.
Shashank took the key.
He bent to lift the box.
Shuchi said—
"Not the box yet."
Shashank straightened.
"Why?"
"First we'll see the place."
Anima looked at Shuchi.
In her own voice, not imitating her mother's, Shuchi said—

"Windows, locks, water—everything."
Shashank smiled faintly.
Anima did too.
The two of them went out.
Anima remained standing at the doorway.
The open box was in the outer room.
The new cylinder was in the kitchen.
The little electric hot plate still lay on the counter.
The problem of the empty gas cylinder had been solved.
Everything else was still open.

STORY 215

Two Plates

By half past seven on Sunday evening, Kiran had set two plates on the table.

Both plates were stainless steel.

One had a delicate floral engraving around the rim; the other was plain.

Sadanand chose the plain plate for himself.

The flowered one was for the guest.

From the kitchen, Kiran asked—

"What time is it?"

Sadanand looked at the clock on the wall.

"Seven thirty-two."

"Did he say seven?"

"Seven to seven-thirty."

Kiran lifted the lid and looked at the dal.

A thin skin had begun to form on top.

She stirred it again.

The pot of rice on the stove was still warm.

There was potato-and-pointed-gourd curry in the pan.

In a small bowl were two pieces of fish.

Fish was not part of the household's ordinary meal that day.

Sadanand had said that morning—

"Manoj Babu may come. Make something nice."

Kiran had asked—

"About work?"

Sadanand had said—

"No, just a visit."

Kiran had not asked again.

She had brought the fish on credit.

The shopkeeper had written forty-five rupees on a slip.

Kiran had tucked the slip beneath her sewing box.

Sadanand had not noticed it.

Half past seven came and went.

The sound of a motorcycle came from outside.

Sadanand stood up.

The sound turned into the next lane.

He sat down again.

There were two glasses on the table as well.

Kiran filled one with water.

She left the other empty.

"Shall I fill it beforehand?"

Sadanand said—

"When he comes."

Kiran left the glass where it was.

On the road outside the house, the vegetable seller was packing up his cart.

Someone called out asking for two kilos of potatoes.

Someone answered—

"Take them tomorrow."

Inside the house, the wall clock kept ticking.

At eight, Kiran turned off the stove.

"It will have to be reheated."

Sadanand said—

"He must be on his way."

"Call him."

"What if he is on the road?"

"Then he won't answer."

Sadanand picked up the phone.

Manoj Babu's name was visible on the screen.

He did not place the call.

He set the phone back on the table.

Kiran noticed this small gesture.

She said nothing.

An old brown file lay on the kitchen counter.

When Kiran saw it during the day, she understood that it contained Sadanand's employment papers.

The file had been in the iron trunk for three months.

Today it had been taken out, wiped with a clean cloth, and placed on the counter.

Kiran had not put it back in the trunk.

Neither had Sadanand.

At ten past eight, Kiran asked—

"Tea?"

"No."

"When he comes, will he have tea or dinner?"

"Dinner."

"Are you sure?"

Sadanand looked at Kiran.

"I told him."

"What?"

"Come and eat."

"That was all?"

"Yes."

Kiran lifted the lid again.

The fish gravy had thickened.

She added a spoonful of water.

Then she put the lid back on.

At twenty past eight, the power went out once and came back immediately.

The clock stopped for two seconds, then began moving again.

Sadanand got up and went to the window.

Three boys went down the lane, pushing their bicycles.

The shutter of one shop was half down.

Manoj Babu was nowhere to be seen.

Kiran wiped a corner of the table.

The flowered plate shifted slightly.

Sadanand straightened it again.

"You should eat," Kiran said.

"He'll be here."

"If you are eating when he comes, he can eat too."

"It feels better to sit and eat together."

Kiran did not smile.

"After how many days?"

Sadanand did not answer.

It had been five months since the printing press closed.

Earlier, Sadanand had operated the press machine on the night shift.

He would leave home at seven in the evening.

Kiran would eat alone then.

Many nights, Sadanand returned at three in the morning.

At those times, Kiran would get up and warm rice on the stove.

After the printing press closed, the two of them were usually at home at the same time.

Yet they rarely ate together.

Sadanand ate late during the day.

Kiran ate whenever she found time between her sewing jobs.

Today there were two plates on the table.

Food had not yet been served on either one.

At eight thirty-five, the phone rang.

Sadanand picked it up at once.

It was a message from the bank.

He read it and placed the phone face down on the table.

Kiran asked—

"Manoj Babu?"

"No."

"Who?"

"The bank."

"What?"

"Nothing."

Kiran fell silent again.

An unfinished blue blouse lay beside the sewing machine.

The customer was due the next morning.

Kiran could have sat down and finished the stitching then.

She did not.

She kept moving between the kitchen and the table.

Sadanand remained seated in the chair.

At eight forty, Kiran picked up the file.

"Why did you take this out?"

Sadanand looked at it for a moment.

"No reason."

"For the first time in five months, for no reason?"

Sadanand reached out and took the file.

He placed it beneath the table.

"Has Manoj Babu heard about the work?"

"What work?"

"The new printing press."

Sadanand remained silent.

Kiran said—

"Ramchandra said yesterday that a printing press has opened in the industrial area."

"Does Ramchandra know everything?"

"Not from me. People were talking at the shop."

"So?"

"So nothing. I'm asking."

Sadanand moved away from the back of the chair and sat upright.

"Manoj knows people there."

"So that is why dinner tonight?"

"People come for dinner too."

Kiran looked at the flowered plate on the table.

"Yes."

For a while, neither of them spoke.

A dog barked outside.

Far away, a pressure cooker whistled in another house.

Kiran asked—

"Have you told him?"

"What?"

"That you need work."

"Not directly."

"Then?"

"He understands."

"How?"

Sadanand's voice grew slightly harder.

"Does everything have to be said in words?"

Kiran did not raise her voice either.

"No. But if you need work, what is wrong with saying it?"

Sadanand ran a finger along the rim of the plate.

"You won't understand."

"I have been managing the household accounts for five months."

"That is different from the matter of work."

"No."

Sadanand looked at Kiran.

For the first time, Kiran looked straight into his eyes.

"I brought the fish on credit."

Sadanand's finger stopped on the plate.

"Why?"
"We were short of money."
"Why didn't you tell me?"
Kiran gave a faint laugh.
"Does everything have to be said in words?"
Sadanand's face did not change.
But his hand moved away from the plate.
At nine, Kiran reheated the food again.
This time she took down the rice too and set it on the pan to warm.
Steam rose again.
She served rice onto the two plates.
Sadanand said—
"Now?"
"Why let it go cold?"
"He'll come."
"If he does, I'll warm it again."
Kiran served the dal.
She put the larger piece of fish on the flowered plate.
The smaller piece went on the plain plate.
Sadanand noticed.
"And yours?"
"I'll eat later."
"Why?"
"I had set out two plates."
Sadanand wanted to say something.
Then he did not.
The two plates, filled with food, remained set on the table.
It became nine ten.
Then nine twenty.
A skin began forming on the dal again.
This time Kiran did not stir it.
Sadanand picked up the phone and called Manoj Babu.
It rang.
Once.
Twice.
Three times.
There was no answer.
He ended the call.

"He must be on the road," Kiran said.

There was no sarcasm in her voice this time.

Sadanand said—

"Perhaps."

At nine thirty, Kiran sat down at the sewing machine.

She picked up the blue cloth.

She turned the machine wheel once.

Then stopped.

"How much is left?" Sadanand asked.

"Half an hour."

"Finish it."

"I don't feel like it."

Sadanand's eyes went back to the two plates.

Kiran said—

"Did you invite him for dinner, or to show him the file?"

"It could be both."

"Yes."

"Kiran."

"What?"

"I am not begging."

Kiran placed the cloth on the table.

"I didn't say you were."

"That is how your words sound."

"I am saying that a matter of work should be handled like a matter of work."

"What do you mean?"

"Call him. Fix a meeting. Take the file. Say—I need work."

Sadanand was silent.

Kiran continued—

"Why should you have to feed him fish in order to ask for work?"

"He is an old acquaintance."

"Then feed him as an acquaintance. Keep the matter of work separate."

"Can you keep everything separate?"

Kiran thought for a moment.

"No."

She picked up the blue cloth again.

"But accounts still have to be kept."

Sadanand got up and went to the window.

The lane was almost empty.

An empty milk van passed slowly.

The shops had closed.

The smell of fish spread over the table.

At nine forty-five, the phone rang again.

This time Manoj Babu's name appeared.

Sadanand picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

He listened.

"Yes."

Then—

"No problem."

Then—

"No, no, not at all."

Kiran sat by the machine watching him.

Sadanand said—

"Tomorrow?"

He listened.

"All right."

Then—

"Yes, I have the file."

Kiran's hand stopped on the cloth.

Very softly, Sadanand said—

"Yes, it was about work."

The call ended.

For a few moments, only the sound of the clock remained in the house.

Kiran asked—

"What happened?"

"He won't be able to come."

"Tonight?"

"Yes."

"Tomorrow?"

"He asked me to meet him outside the printing press tomorrow."

"What time?"

"Eleven."

Kiran nodded.

Sadanand came back to the table.

The rice on both plates had gone cold.

He looked at the flowered plate.

"Take this away."

Kiran rose from the machine.

"Why?"

"He isn't coming."

"But the food is here."

"Set a plate for yourself."

Kiran pulled out the chair in front of the flowered plate.

"This can be my plate."

Sadanand looked at her.

"You'll eat the larger piece of fish?"

"Today I will."

For the first time, Sadanand smiled faintly.

Kiran did too.

She sat down.

Neither plate was reheated again.

Kiran mixed dal into her rice.

Sadanand broke off a piece of the smaller fish.

For a while, they ate in silence.

Then Kiran asked—

"What will you take in the file tomorrow?"

"The old appointment letter, the experience certificate, and the paper from the printing-machine training."

"Do you have photocopies?"

"Two."

"Is your phone number written at the top?"

"The old number."

"Change it."

Sadanand nodded.

Kiran said—

"Will they want a photograph?"

"Perhaps."

"Get one taken tomorrow morning."

"Money?"

Kiran stopped eating and looked at him.

"I have a sewing delivery. I'll get two hundred."

Sadanand immediately said—

"No. I have enough."

Kiran began mixing her rice again.

"Then good."

"Kiran."

"Yes?"

"I'll pay the forty-five rupees for the fish tomorrow."

"Do."

"I'll give it to the shopkeeper."

"All right."

The matter ended there.

They finished their meal.

Kiran reached out to pick up the plates.

Sadanand picked up the flowered plate.

"I'll wash this."

"Both?"

"Both."

Kiran sat down at the sewing machine again.

Sadanand began washing the plates at the tap.

The sound of the water was soft.

Kiran resumed stitching the blue cloth.

The wheel of the machine began turning evenly.

A little later, Sadanand opened the file on the table.

He drew a line through the old phone number.

Under it, he wrote the new one.

Without stopping the machine, Kiran asked—

"Eleven?"

"Yes."

"Leave at ten."

"That early?"

"You have to get the photograph taken too."

Sadanand closed the file.

"All right."

At ten fifteen that night, the table was empty.

The two plates had been washed and placed beside each other on the wall shelf.

The guest had not come.

The food had not gone to waste.

The job had not yet been found.
But eleven o'clock tomorrow was no longer vague.

STORY 216

The Neighbour's Television

Malti Devi's wall clock had been stopped at four seventeen for three months.

She had not taken the clock down.

Nor had she changed the battery.

She had another way of knowing the time.

There was a television on the other side of the wall.

The television was not hers.

It belonged to the neighbours.

Malti Devi had never even seen it.

She only heard its sound.

At seven every morning, a devotional programme began.

At eight, the loud theme of the news came on.

At half past one in the afternoon, the song from a serial could be heard.

At five in the evening, there was a children's programme.

And at eight at night, the news again.

Malti Devi's day was divided among these five sounds.

She measured time less by a clock than by the sounds beyond the wall.

Her room was small.

One cot.

One low stool.

Two brass bowls.

Three tin boxes.

And two sacks of makhana.

Malti Devi sorted makhana at home.

The large kernels went into one box.

The medium ones into another.

The broken pieces into the third.

The shopkeeper left the sacks on Wednesday.

On Sunday he collected the sorted stock.

As soon as the devotional programme began, Malti Devi put the tea on.

At the first notes of the news theme, she sat down beside the stool.

When the afternoon serial's song was heard, she put away the first sack.

Then she warmed the rice.

When the laughter from the five o'clock children's programme came through, she made tea.

After the night news, she covered the boxes of makhana.

Between these markers, she had no need of a clock.

She had a mobile phone.

But it usually lay on the cot.

Malti Devi sat at the stool sorting makhana.

There was no reason to stretch her hand all the way to the phone.

Four people lived in the neighbouring flat.

Ramesh Babu.

His wife, Reena.

His mother, Sharda Devi.

And their twelve-year-old daughter, Minni.

Malti Devi knew all their names.

They spoke very little.

If they met on the stairs, they exchanged greetings.

Sometimes, if someone needed salt, two spoonfuls passed from one home to the other.

Sometimes a parcel arrived at the wrong door and was returned.

That was all.

The wall was thin.

The television came through more clearly than conversation.

If someone wept in a serial, Malti Devi could not make out the words, but she understood the weeping.

If someone argued loudly on the news, she recognised the tone.

In the children's programme, canned laughter returned again and again.

Malti Devi did not think of these as programmes; she thought of them as signs of the hour.

On Tuesday morning, the devotional programme was heard as usual.

So was the news.

Malti Devi sorted enough makhana to fill the first bowl.

The second bowl became half full.

She remained seated.
After a while, she realised her stomach was empty.
She turned an ear towards the wall.
Nothing.
The serial's song had not yet come.
She thought it must not be half past one yet.
She went on sorting makhana.
Outside in the lane, the vegetable seller called out once.
Then silence.
Malti Devi opened the third box.
She tipped the makhana from the bowl into it.
Then her stomach pulled again.
She went to the cot for her mobile phone.
The screen showed two fifty-six.
For a few moments, Malti Devi stared at the phone.
Then she looked towards the wall.
"Is the television switched off?"
The question was addressed to no one.
The rice was cold.
The vegetable curry was from the morning.
She warmed her meal.
While she ate, the sound of utensils came through the wall.
Someone spoke.
The words were not clear.
The television did not come on.
The five o'clock children's programme did not come either.
Malti Devi made tea at half past six.
By then she had had to check her phone three times.
There was no night news either.
She put away the makhana at eight thirty-five.
After looking at the time.
Not after hearing the eight o'clock sound.
The next morning, the devotional programme did not play.
Malti Devi had woken at six fifty-five.
She thought—
"It will start in five minutes."
Seven o'clock came.
Then seven ten.

Silence.

Sitting on the cot, she kept listening to the wall.

The neighbouring flat was not empty.

Someone turned on a tap.

A chair scraped.

Minni seemed to ask something.

Reena's voice came through.

But no television.

Malti Devi made tea.

That day, before she began sorting makhana, she placed the mobile phone on the stool.

At eight she looked at the screen.

Again at ten.

Again at five past twelve.

She grew irritated with herself for doing this.

"I should have had the clock fixed."

The old clock on the wall still showed four seventeen.

Malti Devi got up and took it down.

She opened the cover at the back.

She removed the battery and placed it on her palm.

It was dead.

There was no new battery in the house.

She put the old battery back in.

The clock did not move.

Around noon, when she went out to throw away the rubbish, she met Reena on the stairs.

Reena was carrying a basket of clothes.

Malti Devi stopped.

Reena said—

"Namaste, Didi."

"Namaste."

Reena began climbing upstairs.

Malti Devi asked—

"Has your television broken down?"

Reena stopped.

"No."

"Oh."

"Why?"

"Nothing. I just haven't been hearing it."

Reena shifted the basket to her other hand.

"Minni has examinations. We moved the television into the inner room."

"Hmm."

"When it was against the wall, the sound disturbed her studies."

Malti Devi nodded.

"You did the right thing."

Reena started climbing again.

Malti Devi said—

"I only wanted to know whether it had broken down."

Reena turned back.

"You used to hear it?"

"The sound came through."

"Was it very loud?"

"No."

Malti Devi quickly added—

"It never troubled me."

Reena smiled faintly.

"Ma keeps the volume high. She does not hear very well."

"All right."

They went towards their separate doors.

Malti Devi came home and put down the rubbish bin.

She sat at the stool.

She looked at the phone screen.

Two eighteen.

She began sorting makhana.

She thought of setting an alarm for five.

Then she did not.

A little later, there was a knock at the door.

Malti Devi got up.

Sharda Devi was outside.

She held a small steel bowl.

"Do you have sugar?"

"Yes."

Malti Devi went inside.

She put four spoonfuls of sugar from the tin into the bowl.

Sharda Devi stood at the door.

Her eyes fell on the stool inside.

"Are you sorting makhana late today?"

Malti Devi looked at her.

"Late?"

"Yes. I didn't hear the bowls at all this afternoon."

Malti Devi was silent for a few moments.

Sharda Devi said—

"I used to know from that sound that it was time to eat."

"From my bowls?"

"When you fill the first box and make them clink, you know."

Malti Devi glanced instinctively towards the stool.

The brass bowls stood beside each other.

Sharda Devi said—

"It happens sometime between half past one and two."

"Every day?"

"Almost."

Malti Devi smiled faintly.

"I used to tell the time from your television."

At first, Sharda Devi did not understand.

"What?"

"The half-past-one serial. As soon as it came on, I would eat."

Sharda Devi's mouth remained open for a moment.

Then she laughed.

"So I was your clock, and you were mine?"

Malti Devi laughed too.

"The television."

"Yes, the television."

For a few moments, both women stood by the doorway.

Sharda Devi lifted the bowl.

"The television will stay in the inner room until Minni's examinations are over."

"Let it stay there."

"You should get your clock repaired."

"I'll buy a battery tomorrow."

"I may have one."

"No, I'll buy it."

Sharda Devi left.

Malti Devi closed the door.

She sat down beside the stool.

She picked up a brass bowl.

She did not deliberately strike it against the empty box.

She simply poured in the makhana.

The clinking was ordinary.

No television played beyond the wall.

That evening, Malti Devi set an alarm on her mobile phone for five o'clock.

The alarm rang.

She made tea.

At eight at night, a second alarm rang.

She put away the makhana.

Three days passed like this.

On the fourth day, Minni met Malti Devi on the stairs.

"Kaki."

"Yes?"

"Grandmother says you put away the makhana early today."

Malti Devi stopped.

"Yes, there was less stock."

Minni said—

"She drank her five o'clock tea at four forty-five."

Malti Devi laughed.

"Because of me?"

"She says the bowls went quiet."

"Tell her to look at the clock."

"I do. She doesn't listen."

Minni ran upstairs.

Malti Devi went to the market.

She bought a battery for the clock.

She also looked at a small, inexpensive clock.

The shopkeeper said—

"This one is cheap."

Malti Devi did not buy it.

Back home, she put the new battery into the old clock.

The thin hand began to move.

She set the time by looking at her mobile phone.

Four fifty-two.

She hung the clock back on the wall.

She removed the five o'clock alarm.

And the eight o'clock one as well.

The following Sunday, the shopkeeper came to collect the makhana.

He weighed all three boxes.

"Ready on time this week."

Malti Devi said—

"It always is."

The shopkeeper said nothing.

He lifted the sack and left.

In the evening, Malti Devi cleaned the stool.

The wall clock showed five twelve.

The television was still in the inner room; its sound no longer came through the wall.

Sometimes, when an inner door in the neighbours' flat opened, a faint tune travelled through the corridor and reached her room.

That day, a little burst of laughter from the children's programme could be heard. Malti Devi looked at the clock—five fourteen.

She got up to put the tea on.

Then, from beyond the wall, came three faint metallic sounds. Sharda Devi was perhaps setting down a cup.

Malti Devi paused to listen, then walked towards the kitchen.

The clock was running, the television was farther away; but between the two homes, time still came and went in sound.

STORY 217

The Stalled Lift

Reena Devi lived on the fifth floor.

Vinod Thakur on the seventh.

Both their doors opened in front of the same lift, only two floors apart.

In four years, their conversations had never gone beyond five or seven sentences.

"Namaskar."

"Namaskar."

"Going down?"

"Yes."

"You first."

That was all.

Reena Devi used the lift most often around eight in the morning.

She cooked meals at home and sent them to offices.

There were small steel tiffin boxes.

Sometimes five.

Sometimes seven.

In a good month, as many as nine.

The boxes stood upright in a blue basket with a blue strap.

It took time to place the basket inside the lift.

Then the boy who carried the meals downstairs would arrive.

He would lift the second basket.

Sometimes the boy was late.

Reena Devi would hold the lift door open with one hand.

At that very time, on the seventh floor, Vinod Thakur would keep pressing the button.

His office bus stopped on the main road at eight twenty.

It left two minutes later.

Once he had missed it.

Vinod Thakur had taken a hired vehicle to the office.

It had cost one hundred and eighty rupees.

The second time, he had reached half a day late.

The third time, a sheet of paper was posted on the apartment notice board.

"Do not hold the lift unnecessarily."

Below it was the seal of the management committee.

Reena Devi read the notice.

She said nothing.

The next day she sent the first basket down.

Then she called the lift back up.

She took the second basket down.

The lift made two trips.

It did not take less time.

Only the door was not held open.

This continued for two weeks.

One evening Reena Devi was returning from the market.

In one hand she carried a bag of potatoes.

In the other were three empty steel tiffin boxes nested inside one another.

The lift opened on the ground floor.

Vinod Thakur was standing inside.

In his hand was an old brown office bag.

Reena Devi stepped in.

"Namaskar."

"Namaskar."

Vinod Thakur had already pressed the button for the seventh floor.

Reena Devi pressed the button for the fifth.

The doors closed.

The lift began to move.

Between two floors there was a jolt.

The sound was not very loud.

Only like someone setting a heavy trunk down on the floor.

The lift stopped.

Reena Devi first looked at the buttons.

Vinod Thakur pressed seven again.

Nothing happened.

He pressed five.

Nothing happened.

The small fan overhead kept running.
The light was on as well.
Vinod Thakur pressed the emergency bell.
Somewhere below, they heard a bell ring.
Both remained silent.
The bag of potatoes tugged at Reena Devi's wrist.
She set it on the floor.
The three tiffin boxes clattered.
Vinod Thakur said—
"It has broken down again."
Reena Devi asked—
"Before too?"
"Two months ago, for ten minutes."
"I wasn't here."
"Perhaps it was in the afternoon."
Vinod Thakur took out his mobile phone.
There was one bar of signal.
He called the guard.
The first call did not connect.
The second did.
"Yes, Ramesh?"
He listened.
"There are two of us."
He listened again.
"Between five and seven."
Reena Devi kept watching his face.
Vinod Thakur said—
"He is calling the mechanic. He said twenty minutes."
Reena Devi nodded.
She loosened the knot of the potato bag.
The thin strap had dug into her fingers.
For a while there was only the sound of the fan.
Vinod Thakur kept looking at the lift's floor numbers.
The red light was stuck between 3 and 4.
Reena Devi said—
"Was it you who wrote that notice on the board?"
Vinod Thakur looked at her at once.
"Which one?"

"Do not hold the lift."
For a few moments he did not answer.
Then he said—
"I had made the complaint."
"I knew."
"I hadn't written my name."
"I knew that too."
Vinod Thakur shifted the brown bag to his other hand.
"I kept missing the bus."
Reena Devi said—
"My meals were getting late too."
Silence again.
The lift fan shuddered once.
Reena Devi looked up.
The fan resumed its normal whir.
Vinod Thakur said—
"Holding the door probably puts strain on the machine."
Reena Devi's face hardened.
"I did not break it."
"I didn't say you did."
"Then?"
"I was only saying."
"Let the mechanic decide what belongs to the mechanic."
"All right."
Vinod Thakur fell silent.
So did Reena Devi.
The lid of one tiffin box was loose.
She pressed it down with a finger and fixed it.
Then she pushed the second box farther inside the first.
The metallic sound seemed loud inside the lift.
Vinod Thakur asked—
"How many boxes do you send these days?"
Reena Devi looked at him.
"What?"
"The meal boxes."
"Earlier there were nine. Now five or seven."
"It has gone down?"

"Two offices opened their own canteens. One person carries food from home now."

Vinod Thakur nodded.

"That boy?"

"Sonu?"

"I don't know his name."

"That's who I mean. He didn't come today."

"So these empty boxes?"

"I brought them back myself."

"By the stairs?"

"There was a lift, so I used the lift."

Vinod Thakur laughed softly.

Reena Devi did not laugh.

Then she too smiled.

"Now there is no lift either."

Vinod Thakur said—

"Now I'm in this with you."

Both fell silent again.

The time on the mobile phone was seven fifty-eight.

Reena Devi asked—

"Your office is still in the same place?"

"Yes."

"The morning bus?"

"Yes."

"Eight twenty?"

Vinod Thakur looked at her in surprise.

"How did you know?"

"In the mornings you press the button at eight fifteen."

Vinod Thakur started to say something, then stopped.

Then he said—

"And you used to hold the lift from eight ten to eight sixteen."

"I wasn't looking at the clock."

"I was."

Reena Devi rested her hand near her foot on the potato bag.

"One day the boy was late."

"That day I missed the bus."

"So you complained."

"Yes."

"You could have told me."
Vinod Thakur looked at the wall.
"It didn't feel easy to say."
"The complaint felt easy?"
He did not answer.
Reena Devi did not take the matter further either.
After a few moments Vinod Thakur said—
"A hired vehicle costs one hundred and eighty."
Reena Devi said—
"Sonu asks fifty for a second trip."
Vinod Thakur looked at her.
Reena Devi said—
"If both baskets go down together, it is one trip. Separately, it is two."
"Fifty?"
"His time matters too."
"Yes."
"If a customer's meal is late, they deduct money."
"If I'm late to the office, they deduct half a day."
They looked at one another.
Then both looked away at the same moment.
The emergency bell was pressed again.
This time someone below shouted loudly.
The words were not clear.
Vinod Thakur leaned an ear towards the door and said—
"He's coming."
"Who?"
"The mechanic, perhaps."
Ten minutes passed.
The doors did not open.
The lift was growing slightly warm.
Reena Devi wiped her forehead with the end of her sari.
Vinod Thakur opened the zip of his brown bag.
Inside was a small bottle of water.
He took it out and said—
"Water?"
Reena Devi first shook her head to refuse.
Then she said—
"One sip."

She took the bottle.

Without touching it to her mouth, she poured water from above and drank.

She handed the bottle back.

"Thank you."

"Yes."

Vinod Thakur also drank two sips.

Less than half the water remained in the bottle.

He put it back in his bag.

Reena Devi asked—

"What time do you leave tomorrow morning?"

"Eight fifteen."

"I can have the boxes sent down by eight ten."

Vinod Thakur immediately said—

"I'll withdraw the complaint—"

"Why withdraw the complaint?"

He fell silent.

Reena Devi said—

"The rule is not wrong."

"Then?"

"I did not understand the timing."

"I didn't understand your timing either."

"Every day it may not be eight ten."

"And every day the bus does not arrive at exactly the same time either."

Reena Devi laughed softly.

"Then both clocks are faulty."

"The lift is the third."

This time both laughed.

The laughter was brief.

It ended at once.

From below came the sound of a tool striking metal.

The lift trembled once.

Reena Devi caught hold of the wall.

Vinod Thakur did the same.

The door opened half an inch and closed again.

A voice came from outside—

"Don't panic!"

Vinod Thakur said—
"We're not panicking."
Reena Devi looked at him.
"Neither am I."
Two minutes later the lift began to slide slowly downward.
The doors opened on the third floor.
Outside stood the mechanic, the guard, and two residents.
Ramesh said—
"The lift will remain shut now. It has to be inspected."
Reena Devi lifted the potato bag.
Her wrist was pulled again.
The three empty tiffin boxes were in her other hand.
Vinod Thakur put his bag on his shoulder.
Both moved towards the stairs.
From the third floor to the fifth, Reena Devi climbed slowly.
On the fourth floor she stopped.
She set the potato bag on the floor.
Vinod Thakur stopped too.
"Give them to me. I'll carry the tiffin boxes."
Reena Devi said—
"You have to go up to the seventh."
"The fifth comes first."
"Leave it."
Vinod Thakur said nothing.
He simply picked up the potato bag.
Reena Devi kept the tiffin boxes.
When they reached the fifth floor, he placed the bag beside her door.
As Reena Devi took out her key, she said—
"Save your one hundred and eighty."
Vinod Thakur said—
"And your fifty."
Reena Devi smiled.
She went inside.
Vinod Thakur continued up the stairs.
The next morning a paper was pasted on the lift door—
"Repairs in progress."
At eight five, Reena Devi carried the first basket down by the stairs.
Sonu came up and carried the second basket down.

At eight fourteen, she met Vinod Thakur coming down the stairs.

"The lift didn't open?"

"Not yet."

"The bus?"

"There's time."

Sonu went down ahead with the basket.

Reena Devi stood at the turn of the fifth-floor landing.

Vinod Thakur went down two steps and stopped.

"They say it will be fixed by tomorrow."

"We'll see."

He went down.

Two days later the lift began running again.

At eight twelve in the morning, Reena Devi was placing a basket with seven tiffin boxes inside.

The doors were about to close.

A call signal came from the seventh floor.

Reena Devi withdrew her hand.

The lift went up.

Vinod Thakur entered on the seventh floor.

He looked at the basket.

"Seven today?"

"Yes."

"Good."

He pressed the ground-floor button.

The doors closed.

Reena Devi said—

"Eight thirteen."

Vinod Thakur looked at his watch.

"There's time."

The lift went down.

This time neither of them reached out a hand to hold the door.

STORY 218

The Grocery List

On Wednesday morning, Sudha lifted the rice tin.
The bottom of the tin was visible.
She reached inside and lifted a fistful of rice.
Then let it fall back.
Vinay was drinking tea by the kitchen window.
Sudha said—
"We'll have to buy groceries today."
Vinay looked up from his cup.
"How much is left?"
"Enough rice for today."
"Lentils?"
"Half a bowl."
"Oil?"
"Till tomorrow."
Vinay stopped drinking his tea.
A small slip of paper was held down at one corner of the table.
A piece cut from an old electricity bill.
All week Sudha kept writing things on it.
Salt.
Turmeric.
Mustard oil.
Laundry soap.
Matches.
At the bottom of the paper was Vinay's handwriting.
Five kilos of rice.
One kilo of masoor dal.
Tea leaves.
Half a kilo of sugar.
Both their handwritings were on the same slip.

So little space remained in the middle that two lines had been written at a slant.

Vinay picked up the list.

"Let's get five kilos of rice."

Sudha looked at the water on the stove.

"Now?"

"The rate is lower if we buy five kilos."

"The rate will be lower, but more money will go at once."

"If we go again later, that will cost too."

"The shop is two lanes away."

Vinay folded the list and opened it again.

"But if we buy three kilos, we'll need rice again in five days."

Sudha said—

"In five days the money will have come."

Vinay did not answer.

His wages had been delayed by two days that month.

Yesterday the workshop accounts office had said—Friday.

Today was Wednesday.

The household cash was kept in a white envelope on top of the cupboard.

Sudha took the envelope down.

She counted the notes.

Seven hundred and eighty rupees.

She set aside three twenty-rupee notes.

"This is for milk and vegetables."

Vinay said—

"Bus fare too."

Sudha set aside two more twenty-rupee notes.

Seven hundred rupees remained on the table.

Vinay kept looking at it.

"Will seven hundred be enough?"

"If we buy small quantities, it will."

"If we buy small quantities, it will cost more."

"If some money remains, tomorrow can still run."

Vinay did not smile.

Neither did Sudha.

This was not an argument.

Not yet.

Vinay had the second shift that afternoon.

He had to leave home at twelve twenty.

Sudha had two stitched garments to deliver by evening.

They decided to go for the groceries at nine.

"Will you come?" Sudha asked.

"Yes."

Sudha put the list in his hand.

Vinay read it.

"Two soaps?"

"Not two. One."

"It looks like two here."

"The other line is for matches."

Vinay narrowed his eyes at the list.

"All right."

Sudha said—

"The matchbox has been empty since yesterday."

"The stove has an ignition button."

"It doesn't work every time."

Vinay made a small mark on the list with his nail.

"Keep the matches."

Sudha said nothing.

At nine, the two of them left the house.

The lane was sticky with mud from the night's rain.

Two crates had been turned upside down in front of Mahesh Sah's shop.

Potatoes on one.

Onions on the other.

Inside, sacks of rice stood in rows.

Mahesh Sah sat behind the counter.

The moment he saw Vinay, he said—

"Both of you together after a long time."

Sudha said—

"Money is short, so we've both come to check the arithmetic."

Mahesh Sah laughed.

Vinay did not.

He placed the list on the counter.

Mahesh Sah pushed his spectacles up.

"What first?"

Vinay said—
"Rice."
At the same time Sudha said—
"Oil."
They looked at each other.
Mahesh Sah's hand stopped over the scale weights.
"Shall I do the rice?"
Sudha said—
"Yes."
Vinay looked toward the sacks.
"How much is this one?"
"Fifty-two."
"For five kilos?"
"Two hundred and sixty."
"The other one?"
"Fifty-six."
"Is this one good?"
"Both are fine."
Sudha said—
"Give us three kilos of the fifty-two one."
Vinay immediately said—
"Five."
Mahesh Sah looked at both of them again.
Sudha held down a corner of the list.
"If we take five, nearly half the money will go right here."
"Not half."
"Almost."
"We'll need rice again anyway."
"We need the other things too."
Mahesh Sah rested the tin measure on the sack.
He had not yet scooped out any rice.
Vinay said—
"With three kilos, it costs two rupees more per kilo."
"Six rupees."
"Six rupees is money too."
Sudha said—
"And soap is money too."
Vinay looked at the list.

"The soap can wait till Saturday."
"I have to wash two of your shirts tomorrow."
Vinay looked at his sleeve.
That day a thin streak of machine oil marked the cuff of his blue shirt.
"One shirt will do."
"You have two days of shifts."
Vinay said nothing.
Mahesh Sah asked softly—
"So, the rice?"
Sudha said—
"Three."
Vinay said—
"Four."
Mahesh Sah weighed four kilos.
Sudha wrote a small '4' beside the five on the list.
She did not cross out the five.
She simply wrote four in front of it.
Mahesh Sah lifted the oil bottle.
"One litre?"
Sudha said—
"Half a litre."
Vinay looked at her.
"The rate is lower for one litre."
"The same thing again."
"The rate is lower."
"And the money is lower too."
Mahesh Sah measured out half a litre.
Vinay said—
"How much is left at home?"
"Enough for two lots of vegetables."
"Then this is for four or five days."
"Yes."
"Again on Friday."
"Yes."
Mahesh Sah lifted the lentil tin.
"One kilo?"
Vinay said—
"One."

Sudha said—
"Half."
This time Vinay did not answer at once.
He looked outside the shop.
A cyclist passed with milk cans hanging from the bicycle.
"How much for half a kilo?"
Mahesh Sah told him the price.
Vinay calculated in his head.
"With one kilo, it comes five rupees cheaper."
Sudha said—
"With half a kilo, seventy-five rupees stays with us now."
Vinay placed a finger on the list.
"That isn't saving. It's postponing."
"Not postponing. Making room till Friday."
Mahesh Sah weighed half a kilo of lentils.
He began writing the prices on the list with his pencil.
Salt.
Turmeric.
Matches.
There was no dispute over those three.
There was over the soap.
Mahesh Sah took out one bar.
Vinay said—
"Give us the smaller one."
Sudha said—
"This is for washing clothes. The smaller one dissolves quickly."
"Five rupees less."
"And lasts three days less."
Vinay held the two sizes of soap in his hands and looked at them.
"The bigger one."
Mahesh Sah set down the larger bar.
Sudha slid it into the bag.
Now came the tea leaves.
Mahesh Sah read the list.
"Tea?"
Sudha looked at Vinay.
Vinay said—
"One hundred grams."

Sudha asked—
"And what's left at home?"
"Enough till tonight."
"Shall we drink hot water tomorrow morning?"
Vinay looked at her.
Sudha made no attempt to smile.
She was genuinely asking.
After returning from the night shift, Vinay drank one cup of tea.
Another in the morning.
Sudha usually drank half a cup.
Mahesh Sah stood there holding a small packet.
Vinay said—
"Do you have fifty grams?"
"Yes."
"Give us that."
Sudha said nothing.
Half a kilo of sugar remained on the list.
Sudha said—
"Cross this out."
Vinay asked—
"Why?"
"There is jaggery at home."
"In tea?"
"For two days."
Vinay looked at the list.
"Then cross out the sugar."
Mahesh Sah drew a line through sugar.
For the first time, one item on the list was completely crossed out.
Mahesh Sah added up all the items.
"Six hundred and forty-two."
Vinay took seven hundred from his pocket.
Sudha said—
"How much remains?"
"Fifty-eight."
Mahesh Sah counted out five- and ten-rupee notes and coins.
Sudha read the list once more.
"Half a litre of mustard oil."
"Yes."

"Half a kilo of lentils."
"Yes."
"Four kilos of rice."
Vinay said—
"Not three."
Sudha looked at him.
"Four."
They both picked up the bags.
Vinay took the bag of rice.
Sudha took the bag with the oil, lentils, salt, turmeric, soap and tea.
As they came out of the shop, Vinay said—
"We could have saved six rupees."
Sudha asked—
"Where?"
"By taking five kilos of rice."
"Then fifty-eight would not have remained."
"We would have saved more later."
"We would have had less now."
They walked some distance in silence.
Water had collected at the turn in the lane.
Vinay shifted the bag of rice to his other hand.
"You look at everything in little pieces."
Sudha said—
"And you look at everything in big ones."
"Five kilos isn't big."
"Does soap seem small?"
Vinay did not answer.
Sudha went on—
"Matches?"
"Very small."
"Salt?"
"Small."
"Turmeric?"
"Small."
There was a faint laugh in Vinay's voice.
Sudha said—
"How long will the big sack last without all these little things?"
This time Vinay did not laugh.

He said—
"And how long will the little things last without the big sack?"
Sudha did not answer.
When they reached home, they put the groceries in the kitchen.
Sudha poured the rice into the tin.
With four kilos in it, the tin was more than half full.
Vinay said—
"See? Five kilos would have fitted too."
Sudha placed the half-litre bottle of oil on the shelf.
"This fitted too."
Vinay looked at her.
A faint smile appeared on both their faces at the same time.
Then Sudha took out the soap.
She looked at the cuff of Vinay's blue shirt.
"I'll soak this today itself."
Vinay said—
"Do it tomorrow. You have sewing today."
"The machine oil on the cuff will set."
"Then today."
Sudha went to fill a bucket with water.
Vinay sat at the table.
Mahesh Sah's list was still in his pocket.
He took it out and smoothed it flat.
Small figures stood beside the prices.
On the rice line, first there was five.
Then Sudha's four beside it.
Half written over the one for lentils.
Half instead of one litre of oil.
A straight line through sugar.
Tea leaves: fifty grams.
Beside soap, Mahesh Sah had written: large.
Vinay folded the list again.
Sudha returned carrying the bucket.
"Give me the list."
"Why?"
"I'll write the calculation for next time."
Vinay gave her the slip.
Sudha looked at the back.

There was empty space.
She picked up a pencil.
She wrote—
"Friday: rice?"
Vinay said—
"Why the question mark?"
"We'll see how much is left."
"There will be three kilos."
"There are four now."
"One kilo in two days?"
"Sometimes more gets cooked."
Vinay said nothing.
Sudha wrote a second line—
"Oil?"
Vinay said—
"That's a question too?"
"Yes."
"Lentils?"
"That too."
Vinay took the pencil.
On the back of the list he wrote a third line—
"No soap."
Sudha looked at him.
"Why?"
"We bought the large one today. We won't need it on Friday."
Sudha laughed.
"All right."
Vinay wrote a fourth line—
"Check tea."
Sudha said—
"Put a question mark there too."
Vinay added a question mark.
In the afternoon Vinay left for work.
Sudha sat at her sewing.
The blue shirt was soaking in the bucket.
The half-litre bottle of oil stood on the kitchen shelf.
Four kilos of rice in the tin.
Half a kilo of lentils in the small tin.

Fifty grams of tea leaves.
A new matchbox beside the stove.
In the evening Sudha looked at the slip once more.
Prices were on the front.
Question marks on the back.
She tucked the slip beneath the sugar tin.
At half past ten that night Vinay returned.
The shirt had been washed and hung on the clothesline to dry.
Sudha had made tea for him.
There was no sugar in the cup.
A little jaggery had been dissolved in it.
Vinay took a sip and paused.
"Jaggery?"
"For two days."
Vinay drank again.
"It will do."
Sudha made half a cup for herself.
They sat on opposite sides of the table.
Vinay asked—
"Is there money for vegetables tomorrow?"
Sudha said—
"Twenty out of the fifty-eight."
"Milk?"
"Set aside separately."
"Bus?"
"That too."
Vinay nodded.
After a while he said—
"On Friday, let's not buy five kilos."
Sudha put down her cup.
"Then?"
"We'll look at the list first."
Sudha looked toward the sugar tin.
"There are too many question marks on the list."
"That's good. We'll answer them when the money comes."
Sudha smiled.
Vinay finished his tea.
Their handwriting on that small slip was still different.

But for the next purchase, both of them had left the same empty space on the back.

STORY 219

The Old Mattress

On Friday morning, while Renu was gathering the sheet, her hand once again caught on the bulge in the middle of the mattress.

The cotton inside had shifted toward one side.

Both sides had sunk.

In the middle rose a narrow ridge like a small mountain.

Madhav was still lying there with his eyes closed.

Renu said—

"Shall we turn it over again today?"

Madhav opened his eyes.

"We turned it over last Monday."

"Then let's rotate it."

"That has been done too."

Renu stood holding the sheet in her hands.

Madhav sat up.

He pressed a corner of the mattress.

The lump of cotton shifted inside.

"This won't do anymore."

Renu said—

"You've been saying the same thing for six months."

Madhav did not laugh.

He lifted the corner at the foot of the mattress.

The wooden slat below was visible.

"Let's buy a new mattress."

Renu looked at him.

"This month?"

"This month."

"What about repairing the awning?"

"Next month."

"The previous electricity bill?"

"I'll pay that today."

Renu folded the sheet and placed it on the chair.

"All right."

Madhav said—

"We'll go to the shop in the afternoon."

Renu said again—

"All right."

The answer was the same both times.

The tone was different.

That afternoon they went to the mattress shop on the main road.

Outside the shop, two white mattresses stood one against the other.

Inside, mattresses wrapped in thin transparent covers were stacked along the wall.

The shopkeeper, Umesh, asked them both to sit.

"What size?"

Madhav said—

"Four and a half by six feet."

Renu said—

"It's an old wooden cot."

Umesh asked—

"Standard size or custom size?"

Madhav said—

"Standard."

Renu looked at him.

"It would be better to measure first."

Madhav said—

"For twenty years that same cot has had a four-and-a-half-by-six-foot mattress."

Renu said quietly—

"It was a cotton mattress. It adjusts its own shape."

Umesh picked up a measuring tape.

"If the cot is old, my boy can come and measure it."

Madhav said—

"Is that really necessary?"

"A standard mattress cannot be cut. If it is too small, there will be a gap; if it is too large, it will bend."

Renu said—

"Let it be measured."

Madhav remained silent.

Umesh wrote their address on a slip.

"The boy will come by evening."

On the way home, Madhav kept saying—

"We came to buy a mattress, and now a whole measuring operation has begun."

Renu said—

"Do you stitch clothes without taking measurements?"

"A mattress is not a piece of clothing."

"And a cot is not a notebook in which every page is the same size."

Madhav looked at her.

Renu kept looking at the road.

At five in the evening, Umesh's nephew Nandu arrived.

A measuring tape and a small notebook hung from his shoulder.

Renu removed the sheet from the cot.

Madhav gripped the mattress and dragged it out to the veranda.

The moment the mattress was set on the floor, one corner curled upward on its own.

Nandu burst out laughing.

"This mattress doesn't want to leave the cot."

Madhav looked at him.

Nandu immediately fell silent.

He opened the measuring tape.

First he measured the width at the head.

"Fifty-six inches."

Madhav said—

"That sounds right."

He measured at the foot.

He stopped.

Then measured again.

"Fifty-two and a half."

Renu looked at Madhav.

Madhav said—

"The tape is crooked."

Nandu measured again.

"Fifty-two and a half."

In the middle, the width came to fifty-four.

The length was seventy-two inches on one side.

On the other, seventy-two and three-quarters.

Nandu kept writing in his notebook.
Madhav stood beside the cot.
"How did the cot become so crooked?"
Renu said—
"It didn't become crooked all at once. It became this way over time."
Madhav turned toward her.
Renu placed her hand on the right slat at the foot of the cot.
"This isn't the original slat."
Madhav looked at it.
The colour of the wood was indeed different.
"When was it changed?"
Renu asked—
"Don't you remember?"
Madhav looked at it for a while.
"After the flood?"
"Yes. When we left the last house."
Nandu was winding up the measuring tape.
Renu pointed to the other foot.
"This leg was shortened."
Madhav said—
"The floor in our first rented house sloped."
"Yes."
There was an iron plate fixed to the upper left corner.
Madhav touched it.
"Father had fitted this."
Renu said—
"When Kajal was born."
Nandu closed his notebook.
"A standard mattress won't fit properly."
Madhav asked—
"Custom size?"
"It can be made. But it will cost more."
"How much?"
Nandu gave an approximate figure.
Madhav's brows tightened.
Renu asked—
"What if the cot is straightened?"
Nandu said—

"A carpenter will have to see it. He can say how straight it can be made."

Madhav immediately said—

"What if we buy a new cot?"

Renu fell silent.

Nandu looked at both of them.

"We sell cots at the shop too."

Madhav said—

"I've seen them."

Renu said to Nandu—

"Just give us the measurements. We'll decide the rest."

Nandu left.

The old mattress lay in the veranda.

The cot was empty.

On the bare cot, every joint was clearly visible.

Madhav ran his hand from one side to the other.

"What is the point of keeping this cot now?"

Renu asked—

"What is wrong with it?"

"One corner is three and a half inches different from the other."

"But it still isn't broken."

"Does everything have to be broken before it is replaced?"

Renu did not answer.

She kept looking at the old stitching on the mattress cover.

Madhav said—

"We're replacing the mattress. Let's replace the cot too."

Renu said—

"If we replace both together, the awning repair will be postponed again."

"The awning can wait two weeks."

"Last month the fan was postponed by the same two weeks."

"Then what do we do? Stay clinging to every old thing?"

Renu lifted her head.

"Am I clinging to old things?"

Madhav did not answer at once.

Outside the door, the milkman stopped his bicycle.

Renu took a vessel and went out.

Madhav sat on the empty cot.

The cot creaked softly.
He stood up again.
The subject returned over dinner that night.
Stirring salt into his lentils, Madhav said—
"The shopkeeper will give a discount on the larger cot."
Renu continued serving rice.
"How much?"
Madhav told her the amount.
Renu calculated silently.
"With the mattress?"
Madhav gave another figure.
Renu said nothing.
Madhav said—
"The payment can be spread over six months."
"How many months?"
"Six."
"What about Kajal's course fee?"
"That's next month."
"And the first instalment of this divided payment?"
Madhav put down his spoon.
"Renu, there will always be one expense or another."
"That is exactly what I'm saying."
"Then?"
"Then replace what is necessary. Why replace what still works?"
Madhav made something like a laugh.
"I've been hearing that sentence for twenty years."
Renu stopped her hand.
"What sentence?"
"It still works."
Renu fell silent.
Madhav continued—
"The stove in the first house—it still works."
"It did work."
"The old cupboard—it still works."
"It still does."
"The bicycle?"
"You're the one who insisted on keeping that."
Madhav stopped.

For the first time, a faint smile appeared on Renu's face.

But it disappeared at once.

Madhav said—

"I'm saying that sometimes we have to make room for new things too."

Renu asked—

"How is room made?"

"The old goes out."

"All old things?"

"Whatever is in the way."

"Is the cot in the way?"

"The mattress won't fit it properly."

"Then fix the cot."

"More joints, more plates, more cutting and trimming."

Renu took her hand away from her plate.

"Do you have a problem with joints?"

Madhav looked at her.

"I didn't say that."

"But you are saying it."

"I'm only talking about the cot."

Renu said quietly—

"So am I."

That night they did not sleep on the cot.

The mattress was in the veranda.

Renu spread two old mats on the floor of the room.

She folded two thin quilts over them.

Madhav said—

"Let's bring the mattress inside."

"It's heavy. We'll see in the morning."

They both lay down on the floor.

The fan turned slowly.

Madhav shifted onto his side.

The floor was hard.

Renu asked—

"Can't you sleep?"

"And you?"

"No."

There was silence for a while.

Madhav said—

"Do you remember the first year?"

Renu said—

"What?"

"The room in Jayanagar."

"The one with the tin roof in Jeth?"

"Yes."

"We didn't even have a cot there."

"Three months."

"Four."

"Three."

"We stayed until Sawan."

Madhav fell silent.

Renu said—

"Four."

Madhav laughed.

"All right, four."

Silence again.

Madhav asked—

"Do you remember everything?"

Renu said—

"No."

"Then all this?"

"Things that keep becoming useful stay in memory."

Madhav closed his eyes.

"Remembering that a slat of the cot was changed became useful?"

"It did today."

Madhav laughed again.

This time Renu did too.

After a while Renu said—

"What you're saying isn't entirely wrong either."

Madhav opened his eyes.

"What?"

"It isn't right to keep putting everything off by saying, 'It still works.'"

Madhav waited for her to continue.

Renu went on—

"But it isn't right to throw everything away the moment we say 'new' either."

Madhav said—

"I'm not saying we should throw everything away."

"The cot?"

"The cot..."

He paused.

"We'll look at the cot."

Renu turned onto her side.

"We'll see."

At dawn, as soon as Madhav got up, he went to the veranda.

The old mattress was cold from the night's dampness.

He stood it upright against the wall.

The cot was bare again.

He brought the measuring tape.

Fifty-six at the head.

Fifty-four in the middle.

Fifty-two and a half at the foot.

He measured both lengths again.

The same difference.

Renu came with tea.

"So the tape was right?"

Madhav said—

"It was right."

Renu handed him the cup.

Madhav bent beneath the cot.

A joint in the replacement slat at the foot was sticking out.

He pressed it with his hand.

The slat moved slightly.

"This is loose."

Renu bent down too.

"For a long time?"

"I don't know."

Renu said—

"Call a carpenter."

Madhav said—

"I will."

At ten, Satyanarayan, the neighbourhood carpenter, arrived.

He turned the cot over.

He examined all four legs.

He tapped the joints.

He measured with the tape.

"The whole cot does not need replacing."

Madhav asked—

"Can it be straightened?"

Satyanarayan said—

"As much as the wood allows."

Renu asked—

"Can it be made the same size throughout?"

"To make it exactly the same, I would have to open the head slat too. That wood is good. Why open it?"

Madhav said nothing.

Satyanarayan pointed to the replacement slat at the foot.

"This one was fitted short. They must have used whatever was available at the time."

Renu said—

"After the flood."

"Then that explains it."

Satyanarayan wrote two options in his notebook.

One—repair only the loose joint.

Two—replace the foot slat and bring the width closer to even.

He wrote the cost of each separately.

Madhav looked at the second figure.

"So little?"

Satyanarayan laughed.

"If I sold cots, I would have quoted more."

Renu laughed.

Madhav smiled too.

"Do the second one."

Renu looked at him.

"You won't open the head slat?"

Madhav said—

"Why touch what doesn't need touching?"

Renu said nothing.

Satyanarayan began work.

By noon, the foot slat had been replaced.

The cot stood upright again.

The original measurements Nandu had written down were taken again.

The head remained fifty-six.

The foot was now fifty-five and a half.

The middle was fifty-five and three-quarters.

There was still a half-inch difference in the length.

Satyanarayan said—

"It's old wood. This is as good as it can be."

Madhav looked at the measurements.

Renu asked—

"A standard mattress?"

Madhav said—

"Maybe."

Satyanarayan shook his head.

"There will be a gap."

Renu said—

"Custom size."

Madhav remained silent for a few moments.

"Custom size."

That afternoon they went back to Umesh's shop.

Umesh looked at the new measurements.

"The difference is much smaller now."

Madhav said—

"What about the standard one?"

Umesh said—

"It will fit. But there will be a half-inch gap at the foot."

Renu asked—

"And custom size?"

"It will fit exactly. It will take seven days."

Madhav asked the price.

The price was lower than the first estimate.

There was no longer any need to buy a new cot.

Madhav stood holding the order slip.

Umesh asked—

"Would you like to mix in the cotton from the old mattress? Some people mix old cotton with the new. It brings the cost down."

Renu thought of the old mattress.

The bulge in the middle.
The hollows on both sides.
The cover that had been stitched three times.
She looked at Madhav.
Madhav asked—
"What do you think?"
Renu said—
"No."
Umesh asked—
"No old cotton?"
"No. A new mattress with new cotton."
Madhav signed the order slip.
"Can the old cotton be made into pillows?"
Umesh said—
"It can."
Renu said—
"Not two. Four small cushions."
Madhav looked at her.
"Four?"
"For the veranda."
"All right."
Umesh wrote on the slip—four small cushions.
For seven days, the old mattress went back onto the cot.
But because of the new foot slat, its old shape no longer fit properly.
The cotton rose outward along one side.
Twice each night Madhav pushed it back into place.
Renu said—
"Now the cot no longer fits the mattress."
Madhav said—
"The mattress no longer fits the cot."
They looked at each other.
Then both burst out laughing.
On the seventh day, the new mattress arrived.
Nandu and another boy carried it inside.
The mattress was placed on the cot.
It fit properly at the head.
The corners at the foot sat well too.
A narrow gap still remained near the right foot.

Nandu said—

"It's an old cot. This much will remain."

Madhav put a finger into the gap to check it.

Renu said nothing.

Madhav withdrew his finger.

"Give me the sheet."

Renu opened the new sheet.

Together they pressed down all four corners and fitted the sheet over the mattress.

There was no bulge in the middle.

There were no hollows on either side.

The surface was even.

That night Madhav slept on his old side.

Renu on hers.

There was space left in the middle.

The fan kept turning.

After a while Renu changed sides.

The mattress sank slightly.

Madhav's side barely moved.

Madhav asked—

"Sleepy?"

Renu said—

"It's coming."

"Not too firm?"

"No."

After a while Renu asked—

"Your back?"

"Fine."

Silence again.

In the veranda, four small cushions made from the cotton of the old mattress were stacked one on top of another.

The cot was still not perfectly rectangular.

But the new mattress had not been bent or forced down anywhere.

Once in his sleep, Madhav shifted toward the middle.

Renu did too.

The level space between them did not remain empty.

STORY 220

The Doorbell

On Monday evening, Govind Babu said that a family would come to see the house that night.

Shyamanand was returning from the shop at the time.

Taking the phone away from his ear, he rested a hand on the iron railing of the veranda.

"Tonight?"

"Yes. They're coming by train."

"What time?"

"Hard to say."

Govind Babu added,

"They'll ring the bell. Just show them the place."

Shyamanand was silent for a moment.

"We're still living here."

"I know."

"There are still three months left."

"I know."

The conversation ended there.

Shyamanand went inside the house.

Kamala was taking the rice off the stove in the kitchen.

Nilima had her history notebook open on the table.

Anshu was racing two wooden cars across the floor.

Shyamanand took off his shoes and left them by the door.

Kamala merely looked at his face.

"He said it again?"

"Some people are coming to see the house tonight."

Nilima's pen stopped.

Anshu did not stop his cars.

Kamala asked,

"When?"

"They're coming by train. There's no fixed time."

Kamala turned toward the stove.
Steam continued to rise from the rice.
Shyamanand said,
"Govind Babu says they'll ring the bell."
Nilima did not close her notebook.
She only straightened the pen lying across the page.
Kamala put the lid on the rice.
"Shall we eat first?"
Shyamanand looked around.
Anshu's school shoes lay in the veranda.
Kamala's sari was drying over the back of a chair.
Nilima's bag hung from a nail in the wall.
Two buckets stood near the window.
"Let's tidy up a little."
Kamala did not smile.
"Are they coming to see the house, or to see whether no one lives in it?"
Shyamanand did not answer.
Nilima got up.
She took down her bag and put it in her room.
Anshu asked,
"My cars?"
"Put them in the box."
"Why?"
"People are coming."
"Will they look at my cars?"
"No."
"Then why should I put them away?"
Kamala said,
"Put them away. You can take them out again later."
Anshu picked up both cars and placed them on top of the box.
The box was not closed.
Kamala took down the sari from the veranda.
She pushed the basket of potatoes farther into the kitchen corner.
Nilima picked up three notebooks from the table.
She left the history notebook behind.
Then she picked that up too.
Shyamanand straightened the old umbrella hanging behind the door.

Kamala watched him.

"Is the umbrella a fault in the house too?"

Shyamanand withdrew his hand.

"No."

The evening light slowly faded.

In the two-room house, things left their usual places and moved into temporary ones.

Nilima's books did not go into the box.

They slid under the bed.

Anshu's cars went from the top of the box to inside it.

Kamala's grinding stone moved a handspan back from the kitchen doorway.

Shyamanand's bundle of old newspapers was pushed under the cot.

At seven-thirty, Kamala asked,

"Dinner?"

Shyamanand looked at the clock.

"Let's eat."

He took out four plates.

Then stopped again.

"What if they arrive while we're eating?"

Kamala said,

"They're coming to see the house, not count our rice."

Even so, she took the pot of dal off the stove and put it inside.

All four ate quickly.

Anshu left half his rice.

Kamala picked up his plate.

Nilima looked toward the door as she drank water.

The bell was silent.

At eight, Shyamanand switched on the veranda light.

Govind Babu had said the outside staircase was poorly lit.

Shyamanand tried to make the light from his own home reach as far as the stairs.

At eight-twenty, Anshu yawned.

"Can I sleep?"

Kamala stroked his head.

"Sit for a little while."

"When will the people come?"

"Don't know."

"Where will we live?"
"Where?"
"When this house belongs to someone else."
Kamala's hand stopped.
Shyamanand looked toward the window.
Nilima said nothing.
Anshu asked again,
"Will my school become far away?"
Shyamanand said,
"We haven't decided on any place yet."
"What does that mean?"
"It means we don't know yet."
Anshu was not satisfied with the answer.
But he did not ask again.
At eight-forty, the bell rang.
Once.
All four looked toward the door at the same time.
Shyamanand got up at once.
Kamala adjusted the end of her sari.
Nilima looked at the books under the bed, then looked away.
Anshu put a hand on the lid of the box.
Shyamanand opened the door.
No one was outside.
The stairwell light was on.
The door on the floor below was closed.
From above came the sound of a water pump.
Shyamanand went down one flight of stairs and looked.
There was no sound of footsteps.
He looked upward again.
No one.
Kamala asked from inside,
"Who is it?"
"No one."
"Maybe they went downstairs."
"Why?"
"To fetch their luggage."
Shyamanand stood on the stairs for a few moments.
Then he went back inside.

He did not shut the door completely.

He only set the latch loosely in place.

Anshu asked,

"Was it a ghost?"

Nilima glared at him.

"Quiet."

Shyamanand said,

"It must have been the wrong bell."

Kamala said,

"If that was the wrong bell, the right bell will ring now."

They all sat down again.

No bell rang until nine.

Shyamanand checked his phone.

There was no new message from Govind Babu.

He thought of calling him.

Then did not.

Kamala understood.

"Ask him."

"They must be on the way."

"Then what is there to lose by asking?"

Shyamanand turned off the glow of the phone screen.

"He said the time isn't fixed."

Nilima wanted to take out her history notebook again.

She reached under the bed.

Then she stopped, not because she feared the bell, but because she laughed at herself.

"What happened?" Kamala asked.

"Nothing."

"Take out your notebook."

"What if the people arrive?"

Kamala said,

"They won't reduce the rent because they see a notebook."

Nilima took out the notebook.

She did not place it on the table.

She kept it in her lap and began to read.

Anshu sprawled on the cot.

Kamala straightened him.

"Not here. Inside."

"Will the people see me sleeping?"

Kamala paused before answering.

"Yes. And what if they do?"

"Then let me sleep."

Kamala took him to the cot in the inner room.

But the bedding had not been laid out completely.

While cleaning in the morning, the sheet on the mattress had been folded away.

Kamala unfolded the sheet.

Then looked toward the door.

Then spread the sheet over the bed.

Anshu did not fall asleep within five minutes.

He lay with his eyes closed, waiting for the bell.

At nine-thirty, Shyamanand finally called Govind Babu.

The phone rang.

No answer.

He called a second time.

No answer.

Kamala said,

"The people aren't coming to see his house."

Shyamanand put the phone on the table.

Nilima kept her eyes on the notebook.

After a while she asked,

"How much is he raising the rent?"

Kamala looked at Shyamanand.

Shyamanand said,

"Eight thousand five hundred."

Nilima looked up from the notebook.

"And now?"

"Seven thousand."

"Fifteen hundred more?"

"Yes."

Kamala added,

"And electricity separate."

Nilima was quiet for a while.

"Then we won't be able to stay?"

Shyamanand said,

"We'll see."

This time Kamala did not remain silent.
"For three months I've been hearing 'we'll see.'"
Shyamanand rubbed his palm over his knee.
"I'm looking for a place."
"Where?"
Shyamanand did not answer at once.
Nilima closed her notebook.
"Where?"
"I saw a house behind the bus stand."
Kamala heard this for the first time.
"When?"
"Saturday."
"Why didn't you tell me?"
"It wasn't right."
"What was wrong with it?"
"Only one room."
Kamala looked at the wall.
This house had two rooms.
The two rooms were small.
But until now, there had been two.
"Rent?"
"Six thousand two hundred."
"Water?"
"Two hours in the morning."
Kamala fell silent again.
Nilima asked,
"From school?"
"You'd have to change buses."
Nilima rested a hand on her history notebook.
"Can we stay here until my exams?"
Shyamanand said,
"We'll try."
Kamala said softly,
"My exams won't be over in three months."
Shyamanand's eyes shifted to the door.
The bell was silent.
At ten, someone on the floor above dragged a bucket.
For a moment all four became alert again.

Anshu called from inside,
"The bell?"
Kamala said,
"No. Sleep."
Nilima opened her notebook again.
This time she was not reading.
She merely kept the page open.
Kamala went into the kitchen.
She brought out the pot of leftover dal.
She lifted the lid.
Then put it back.
"Shall I make tea?"
Shyamanand said,
"Make it."
Kamala took out three cups instead of two.
Nilima said,
"For me too?"
"Will sleep come now?"
"What sleep is left now?"
Kamala made three cups of tea.
She warmed milk for Anshu.
Half asleep, Anshu came outside.
"The people didn't come?"
"No."
He took the glass of milk and sat on the chair.
"Can I take out my cars?"
Shyamanand said,
"Take them out."
Kamala immediately said,
"Leave them for now."
Anshu looked at both of them.
Then he did not take out the cars.
At ten-forty-five, Kamala said,
"I've heard of a place too."
Shyamanand put down his cup.
"Where?"
"Behind the dispensary."
"Whose?"

"Sarita, the vegetable seller, told me."
"How much rent?"
"Five thousand eight hundred."
Shyamanand frowned.
"That little?"
"There's a drain behind it."
"Rooms?"
"Two. But one is very small."
"Water?"
"A hand pump in the courtyard."
Shyamanand said nothing.
Nilima asked,
"How far from school?"
Kamala said,
"Twenty minutes on foot."
For the first time Nilima looked closely at her mother's face.
"Did you go to see it?"
Kamala got up to wash the tea cups.
"Only from outside."
"Why didn't you tell me?"
Kamala let water run over the cup.
"It wasn't right."
Shyamanand laughed lightly.
The laugh ended at once.
"Each of us has found one bad house."
Kamala turned and looked at him.
"A good house has a good rent."
Nilima said,
"I know one place that seems good to me."
Both parents looked at her.
"Where?"
"Shyama Didi's aunt's house behind the school."
Kamala was startled.
"When did you ask?"
"I didn't ask."
"Then?"
"She said the upstairs room would be vacant."
Shyamanand asked,

"Rent?"
"I don't know."
"Then how is it good?"
"It's near the school."
This time Kamala smiled.
"Good means something different to everyone."
Nilima smiled faintly too.
Shyamanand did not smile.
He checked his phone again.
Govind Babu still had not replied.
At eleven, the street outside began to grow quiet.
The last clatter from the tea stall stopped.
Two motorcycles passed.
A dog barked.
The bell did not ring.
Kamala said,
"Shall we close the door?"
Shyamanand looked at the loosely set latch.
"What if they arrive?"
"There's a bell."
"Yes."
He closed the door and fastened the latch.
Anshu went inside again.
This time he took his cars with him.
Kamala did not stop him.
Nilima placed her history notebook on the table.
She did not hide it again.
At eleven-thirty, Kamala hung up the old cloth.
On the back of the chair that had been cleared in the evening.
Shyamanand saw it.
He said nothing.
At midnight, all four were still awake.
Anshu opened his eyes from time to time.
Nilima gave up pretending to read and sat by the window.
Kamala kept folding and unfolding a sheet.
A small slip of paper lay in front of Shyamanand.
The monthly expenses were written on it.
Rent — 7,000.

Electricity — about 900.
School bus — 1,100.
Groceries — however much they cut back, never little enough.
Shyamanand crossed out 7,000 and wrote 8,500.
Then added the total.
Then folded the slip.
Kamala asked,
"How much are we short?"
"Don't ask."
"That's why I'm asking."
Shyamanand opened the slip.
"More than two thousand."
Kamala said,
"I can take in more sewing again."
"Until night?"
"During the day."
"And the housework during the day?"
Kamala did not answer.
Nilima said,
"I can stop taking the bus."
Shyamanand answered at once,
"No."
"I'll go by bicycle."
"It's a long way."
"Not every day."
Kamala looked at Nilima.
Nilima lowered her eyes.
From inside Anshu said,
"I'll stop drinking milk?"
All three looked toward his voice.
Kamala got up and went inside.
"You sleep."
Anshu asked,
"How much milk comes in two thousand?"
Kamala put a hand on his head.
"Your milk won't change the house."
"Then?"
"It's grown-ups' arithmetic."

Anshu closed his eyes.

Kamala came back out.

Shyamanand had folded the slip and kept it down.

Nilima was looking out of the window.

At one in the morning, Shyamanand called Govind Babu again.

This time the phone was switched off.

He placed his phone face down on the table.

Kamala said,

"They won't come now."

Shyamanand said,

"The train may be late."

"Which train?"

Shyamanand was silent.

"Did you ask?"

"No."

Kamala laughed for the first time.

It was a tired laugh.

"We don't even know whose train we're waiting for."

Nilima wanted to laugh too.

But the laugh did not come.

At one-twenty, footsteps sounded on the stairs above.

All four became alert.

The footsteps went upward.

The bell did not ring.

Shyamanand went to the door.

He did not open the latch.

Then he came back.

Kamala said,

"Shall I spread the mat in the veranda now?"

Shyamanand nodded.

Kamala took out the mat that had been pushed behind the box in the evening.

She spread it in the veranda.

The house began to recover its own shape.

Nilima put her books back on the table.

Anshu's cars lay in one corner.

Clothes hung over the back of the chair.

The grinding stone came back beside the kitchen doorway.

Only Shyamanand's bundle of newspapers remained under the cot.

At two, Nilima said,

"If they come, what will we say?"

"What will we say?" Shyamanand asked.

"That we will leave after three months?"

"Govind Babu has told them."

"But they'll ask us."

Kamala said,

"We'll tell the truth."

Shyamanand looked up at Kamala.

Kamala added,

"That we are still living here."

Nilima asked,

"And about the rent being raised?"

Kamala paused for a while.

"If they ask, we'll tell them."

Shyamanand said quietly,

"Govind Babu won't like that."

Kamala said,

"I won't lie either."

Silence returned to the house.

This time the silence was less about waiting for the bell than about whose home would be shown when the door opened.

At two-forty-five, Nilima fell asleep with her head on her notebook.

Kamala gently pulled the notebook away and set it aside.

Shyamanand got up to switch off the veranda light.

Then did not switch it off.

"The people may come."

This time Kamala did not stop him.

At three, Shyamanand opened the slip again.

On the blank side he wrote down three places.

Behind the bus stand — 6,200.

Behind the dispensary — 5,800.

Behind the school — rent to be asked.

Kamala looked at it.

"Ask the rent for the third place first."

"Yes."

"There's no need to see the one-room place."

Shyamanand said,

"What if the other two don't work out?"

Kamala looked at Nilima.

She had fallen asleep with her head on the table.

"Then we'll see."

Shyamanand smiled.

"Now you're the one saying 'we'll see.'"

Kamala smiled faintly too.

"Sometimes that phrase has a use."

By four, the street was almost completely silent.

The veranda light was still on.

Shyamanand's eyes kept closing and opening.

Kamala sat on the mat with her back against the wall.

Nilima slept at the table.

Anshu lay stretched out on the cot inside.

The bell did not ring.

At four-thirty, Kamala got up and went into the kitchen.

She put water on to boil.

"Tea?" Shyamanand asked.

"For morning."

"Is the night over?"

Kamala looked out of the window.

The sky was still black, but the blackness had begun to change slightly.

"It is ending."

At five, Nilima woke.

She looked first not at the bell, but at the clock.

"They didn't come?"

Shyamanand shook his head.

Nilima straightened her notebook.

Then asked,

"Should I go to school today?"

Kamala said,

"Why not?"

"Sleep."

"You can sleep after you come back."

Nilima laughed.

"At school?"

Kamala laughed too.
It was the first easy laugh of the night.
At five-twenty, Anshu came out.
He had a wooden car in his hand.
He drove it across the mat in the veranda.
No one stopped him.
At five-forty-five, Shyamanand's phone rang.
It was Govind Babu.
Shyamanand answered immediately.
"Yes?"
Govind Babu said,
"That family isn't coming."
Shyamanand said nothing.
"They changed their mind during the night."
"The train?"
"Not the train. They never left home."
Shyamanand looked at the veranda light.
In the growing daylight, it was almost no longer needed.
"All right."
Govind Babu added,
"I'll tell you when someone else wants to see it."
Shyamanand replied,
"All right."
The call ended.
Kamala asked,
"They're not coming?"
"No."
Nilima asked,
"Then who rang the bell last night?"
Shyamanand looked toward the door.
"Don't know."
Anshu said at once,
"A ghost."
Nilima picked up his car and handed it to him.
"Let your ghost play with the car."
Anshu laughed.
At six, Savitri Devi, the upstairs neighbour, was returning with milk.
She saw Shyamanand's open door.

"Did your bell ring last night?"

Shyamanand was startled.

"Yes."

"My nephew pressed the wrong button."

Kamala came and stood in the kitchen doorway.

Savitri Devi said,

"It was his first time here. He didn't look at the number."

Laughing, she went upstairs.

Shyamanand stood for a few moments at the open door.

The entire night's waiting had begun with one wrong button.

But the things that had come out during that waiting were not wrong.

He went back inside.

Kamala switched off the veranda light.

Nilima sat at the table with her history notebook open.

Anshu raced his car across the mat.

Kamala spread another sari over the back of the chair.

Shyamanand reached under the cot.

He pulled out the bundle of newspapers.

The slip with the monthly expenses was caught underneath it.

He opened the slip.

On the front was the calculation for the increased rent.

On the back were three possible places.

Behind the bus stand.

Behind the dispensary.

Behind the school.

Shyamanand put a small question mark beside the third line.

Then he picked up his phone and began searching for the number of Shyama Didi's aunt.

The doorbell was silent.

All the other sounds of the house had returned to their places.

STORY 221

The Leftover Vegetables

After the evening meal, Nirmala Devi looked at the vegetables left at the bottom of the pan.

There were potatoes, pointed gourd, and two or three pieces of eggplant left.

She had already put out the stove.

Mahendra Babu sat on the veranda, writing down the day's accounts.

Nirmala Devi said, "So much is left."

Mahendra Babu did not raise his head.

"It will do with tomorrow morning's rice."

Nirmala Devi lifted the lid of the pan and looked again.

There was a little too much vegetable curry for the morning rice.

From the lower section of the cupboard, she took out an old steel container.

Two letters had been scratched on its lid—"M" and "R."

In earlier days, the midday meal for both brothers had gone out in that container.

For eight months, the container had hardly been used.

After the household was divided, the utensils too had been divided between them.

But no one had been able to decide which side this container belonged to.

Nirmala Devi put the leftover vegetables in it and closed the lid.

"I'll warm it in the morning," she said.

Mahendra Babu said, "Hmm," and remained bent over his notebook.

The courtyard was still one.

But on the northern side stood Mahendra Babu's cooking hearth, and on the southern side, Ramesh's.

Between them stood the old tulsi platform.

No one had ever discussed whose share the tulsi platform belonged to.

Their mother Saraswati Devi's room stood just behind it.

For that reason, her room too did not fall cleanly into either share.

On the day the house was divided, all this had seemed convenient to everyone.

Eight months later, that same convenience repeatedly turned into inconvenience.

When Nirmala Devi rose in the morning, the container of last night's vegetables was no longer where she had left it.

At first she thought Mahendra Babu might have taken it outside.

But Mahendra Babu had not even gone to bathe yet.

"Where is the container?"

"Which container?"

"The one with last night's vegetables."

Mahendra Babu looked inside from the veranda.

"I didn't touch it."

Nirmala Devi looked all around the stove.

She looked beneath the brass plate.

She looked beside the water pitcher.

The container was not there.

Saraswati Devi came out of her room.

In her hand was Ramesh's old cloth lunch bag.

"I put it in this," she said casually.

Nirmala Devi looked at her.

"Whose?"

"In Ramesh's bag."

"Why?"

Saraswati Devi paused a little.

"It was empty in the morning. The container was lying there. I thought it was food."

Nirmala Devi's hand stopped.

Mahendra Babu closed his notebook.

Ramesh had already left through the southern door.

He worked at a seed shop in town.

He carried his lunch from home.

For eight months now, his bag had been separate, his containers separate, even his route almost separate.

Their mother still sometimes moved things according to the old routine.

This was not the first time.

But this time, the thing she had moved was food.

Nirmala Devi said, "Ma, you could have asked."

Saraswati Devi looked at the empty space in the bag.

"What was there to ask? It was leftover vegetables."

"I had kept it for the morning."

"Then make something else."

Nirmala Devi did not reply.

Mahendra Babu said softly, "Let it be."

"What did I say?"

"Nothing."

On the southern side, Bina had put lentils on the stove.

She had heard everything.

But she did not come outside.

Her son Sonu was buttoning his school shirt.

He asked, "Did Baba take my lunch box today?"

Bina said, "He took his own bag."

"But my blue box is here."

Bina said nothing.

At midday, Ramesh opened his lunch bag in the back room of the seed shop.

First came out the small container of rice.

Then the old steel container.

The moment he saw the "M" and "R" on the lid, his hand stopped.

He had not seen those two letters together for eight months.

He opened the container.

The smell of potato and pointed gourd rose from it.

He understood at once that Bina had not cooked this.

Nirmala always used a little more fenugreek seed in her vegetables.

Ramesh put the lid back on.

The shop owner, Harinarayan Sah, said, "Aren't you going to eat?"

"I will."

"Is the vegetable curry bad?"

"No."

Ramesh opened the container again.

He ate half the vegetables with his rice.

He left the other half.

That was not his habit.

He did not like wasting food.

But that day, emptying the container completely felt strange to him.

When he returned in the evening, he washed the container beside the tap.

Bina noticed it.

"Where did this come from?"

"Ma put it in my bag."

"What was in it?"

"Vegetables."

"Whose?"

Ramesh turned off the tap.

"From the north side."

Bina looked at the container for a few moments.

"Did you eat it?"

"Half."

"Why only half?"

Ramesh did not answer.

After washing it, he placed the container on the low platform in the middle of the courtyard.

Neither on the northern veranda nor beside the southern hearth.

Right in front of the tulsi platform.

When Nirmala Devi came to fill water in the evening, she saw the container.

The lid had been placed separately.

A single drop of water gleamed inside.

She did not pick it up.

Rice was cooked that night.

Nirmala Devi made fresh vegetables.

Bina too had cooked pumpkin and chickpeas in her own kitchen.

Saraswati Devi first sat down by the northern hearth.

Nirmala gave her a plate.

After two mouthfuls, she got up.

"Why are you eating so little?" Nirmala asked.

"I'm not hungry."

"What did you eat at noon?"

Saraswati Devi did not answer.

On the southern side, Bina too had set a plate for Saraswati Devi.

When she reached there, the mother ate two more mouthfuls.

Sonu laughed and said, "Grandmother, you eat twice."

Bina immediately hushed him.

Saraswati Devi kept looking at her plate.

"Not twice," she said, "in two places."

It was a small sentence.

But Bina's hand stopped while serving the food.

The next morning, the container was still on the low platform by the tulsi shrine.

The night dew had chilled its lid.

Saraswati Devi picked it up and took it into her own room.

No one said anything.

Three days later, Saraswati Devi became dizzy.

At midday, while sitting near the doorway of her room, she slipped to the floor.

Sonu saw her first.

He shouted for Bina.

Bina came running.

Nirmala too left the northern hearth and ran over.

Mahendra Babu was not at home then.

Ramesh was at the shop.

Bina placed the mother's head in her lap.

Nirmala brought water.

Saraswati Devi's eyes were open, but her face had gone pale.

"Have you eaten anything?" Nirmala asked.

"In the morning."

"What?"

"Flattened rice."

"At noon?"

The mother was silent.

Bina asked, "You didn't come to me."

Nirmala said, "Nor to me."

They took their mother to the clinic.

The doctor said it was not safe to take medicine while going hungry.

Her blood sugar had fallen very low.

Two hours later she returned home.

Mahendra Babu and Ramesh had both arrived.

That evening, for the first time, all four of them sat together in one room for so long.

Mahendra Babu asked, "Where does Ma eat lunch?"

Nirmala said, "Sometimes here."

Bina said, "Sometimes there."

Ramesh looked at his mother.

"And sometimes nowhere?"

Saraswati Devi rested her head against the pillow.

"Whichever side I go to, the other side assumes I am eating there."

"Did any of us say that?" Bina asked.

"It does not have to be said."

For a while, only the sound of the fan remained in the room.

Mahendra Babu said, "Then let us fix a time."

Ramesh immediately asked, "At whose place?"

Mahendra Babu looked at him.

The sound of their old quarrel had entered that question.

Nirmala quickly said, "Not whose place. Fix the meal."

Bina too nodded silently.

From the next day, it was decided that Saraswati Devi's midday meal would be cooked only once.

A weekly schedule was written down showing which hearth would cook on which day.

Monday, Wednesday, Friday: north.

Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday: south.

On Sunday, whichever side found it convenient.

Saraswati Devi looked at the paper.

"There will be another quarrel on Sunday," she said.

Sonu burst out laughing.

Mahendra Babu too gave a faint smile.

For the first time in eight months, Ramesh looked at his brother and laughed.

On the first Monday, Nirmala cooked rice, moong dal, and bottle gourd for Saraswati Devi.

A little was left over.

She thought she would keep it for the night.

Then Saraswati Devi said, "Put it in the container."

"Which one?"

"The M-R one."

Nirmala paused slightly.

The container was now on the shelf in the mother's room.

She took it down and put the food inside.

On Tuesday, Bina cooked her own midday meal.

A little of yesterday's bottle gourd was still in the container.

She opened the lid and looked at it.

Instead of throwing it away, she warmed it and fed Saraswati Devi that first.

Then she served the dal and rice she had cooked herself.

In the evening, she washed the container and returned it to the shelf.

In this way, the container began to live in the mother's room.

It no longer bore the name of either kitchen.

Whatever little remained was put into it.

At her next meal, the mother ate the leftovers first.

Less food began to be wasted.
But the real change was in where the container belonged.
It belonged neither to the north nor to the south.

Two weeks later, it rained.
Water began to drip from the roof over the southern hearth.
Bina placed a bucket beneath it.
When Ramesh returned in the evening, he examined the bamboo slat.
"This part is joined to Mahendra's wall," he said.
Bina replied, "Water does not read walls."
Ramesh said nothing.

That night, Mahendra Babu stood on his veranda looking at the roof.
Ramesh came into the middle of the courtyard.
"Shall we call the mason tomorrow?"
Mahendra Babu asked, "How much will it cost?"
"We'll know after he sees it."
"Half and half?"
Ramesh did not answer at once.
"Where the joint is shared, half and half."
Mahendra Babu nodded.
It was the same sentence neither of them had been willing to accept eight months earlier.

The mason came the next day.
He opened the bamboo roofing and examined it.
An old beam rested across the walls of both sides.
"If this has to come out, both sides will have to be opened," he said.
Mahendra Babu and Ramesh looked at each other.
Neither said "mine" nor "yours."

The mason worked through the afternoon.
Nirmala cooked rice.
Bina made chokha.
Saraswati Devi said, "Set a plate for the mason too."
Nirmala asked, "From whose kitchen?"
The mother pointed toward the container.

"First take out the leftover vegetables."
Bina laughed.
"Those are mine from yesterday."
Nirmala said, "Today's dal is mine."
Saraswati Devi said, "The plate is the mason's."

All four did not laugh at once.
But the air in the room grew a little lighter.

The mason worked until evening.
The two brothers stood beneath the roof.
Sometimes holding a bamboo pole, sometimes a rope.
When the work was done, Ramesh took out the money.
Mahendra Babu paid the other half.
Neither opened the old accounts.

That night, potato and pointed gourd were cooked on the northern hearth.
Pumpkin and chickpeas were cooked on the southern hearth.
The two households still ate separately.
No one said that from now on there would be one kitchen.
No one said the old quarrel was over either.

After the meal, Nirmala saw that a little potato and pointed gourd remained.
She went to the mother's room to look for the old steel container.
It was not on the shelf.
"Where has it gone?"
Saraswati Devi said, "To the south side."
Nirmala paused.

She crossed the courtyard to the south side.
Bina was putting pumpkin and chickpeas into the container.
Nirmala stood in the doorway.
Bina looked up.
"Do you need something?"
Nirmala said, "The container."

Bina's hand stopped as she was putting on the lid.
"My leftovers are in it."
"Mine too."
For a few moments, the two women looked at each other.

Bina opened the lid again.
"How much do you have?"
"Only two small bowls."
"There is half a container of space here."
Nirmala brought her bowl.
She put the potato and pointed gourd on one side of the container.
The pumpkin and chickpeas were on the other side.
The two vegetables mixed slightly in the middle.
Nirmala tried to separate them with a spoon.
Bina said, "Let it be."
Nirmala stopped her hand.

The container was full.
The lid would not close easily.
Bina pressed down a little.
Nirmala held the other side.
There was a small "click."
The lid settled into place.

Sonu was watching from the courtyard.
He asked, "Whose vegetables are these?"
Bina said, "Leftovers."
"Whose leftovers?"
This time Nirmala answered, "The house's."

The container was placed back on Saraswati Devi's shelf.
The scratched "M" and "R" were still clear on the lid.
But no new mark was added.

STORY 222

The Closed Window

At seven in the evening, the spice-grinding mill would start up.
Earlier, the mill had operated during the day.
For the past two weeks, the owner had extended the work until nine at night.

Naresh's rented room stood directly behind the mill.
Between them lay a narrow lane and a brick wall.
High in the wall was a broad window.
Two panes in the window were already cracked.
One corner of the mesh had also come loose.

Whenever the mill ran, even the utensils inside the room trembled faintly.
Rashmi would sit bent over her notebook.
Ten minutes later, she would press her hands over her ears.

"Babu, I can't study like this."

For the first three days Naresh said,
"It will stop by eight."

But the mill did not stop at eight.
Nine o'clock came.
Then nine-twenty.

On the fourth day Rashmi closed her book.

"My exams begin tomorrow."

From beside the stove Meenakshi said,
"Close the window."

Naresh pulled hard on both shutters.
The wood had swollen.
One shutter came halfway.
The other remained stuck.

He pushed it with his shoulder.
The glass rattled.
The rumbling outside grew a little softer.
But it did not stop.

Rashmi opened her book again.
Five minutes later she raised her head.

"It's still too loud."

This time Naresh did not reply.
He stuffed an old towel into the gap in the window.

After dinner at night, all four of them lived in that same room.
Rashmi's cot stood on one side.
Chhotu's bedding lay on the other.
In the middle, Meenakshi and Naresh spread out their folded mattress at night.

Meenakshi was washing the utensils.
Naresh sat beside the window.
Outside, the mill had shut down.
From the lane came the ring of bicycle bells, talk from the tea stall, and the horn of a distant bus.

Naresh said softly,
"This month we'll have to pay the rent two days late."

In the same low voice Meenakshi asked,
"Why?"

"The money for the extra work at the office hasn't come yet."

Chhotu turned over.
But he did not wake.

Meenakshi said,
"Rashmi's examination fee is due this week too."

Naresh looked outside.
Two motorcycles passed together through the lane.
His reply was lost inside the noise.

"How much?"

"Twelve hundred."

"We'll see."

This was their old way.
After the children slept, they would sit by the window and quietly work through the household accounts.
The noise outside kept their words from spreading through the room.

The children thought their mother and father were simply sitting by the window for some air.

The next day Naresh spoke to the landlord.
The landlord examined the window.
He ran a finger over the glass.

"We'll split the cost of new panes half and half."

"How much?"

"About eighteen hundred."

Naresh did not smile.
He simply kept looking at the window.

That evening he brought two thick sheets of cardboard and a sack of discarded cotton scraps from a second-hand goods shop.
Altogether they cost two hundred and seventy-five rupees.

Meenakshi asked,
"What is all this?"

"We're not replacing the glass."

First he folded an old sheet and fixed it inside the mesh.
Over that he packed the cotton scraps.
Finally, he nailed the thick cardboard sheets into the window frame.

Rashmi stood watching with her book in her hands.

"Now?"

Naresh listened to the mill running.
The sound was still there.
But it was about half as loud as before.

Rashmi smiled.
"Now I can study."

Meenakshi ran her hand over the cardboard.

"What about air?"

"We'll keep the door open."

That night, for the first time, the room was unnaturally quiet.

After the mill stopped, the other noises from outside were also greatly reduced.

Chhotu fell asleep early.

Rashmi studied late.

Naresh spread out the mattress.

Meenakshi put the utensils away.

The two of them did not sit beside the window.

Their usual place was directly beneath the cardboard-covered frame.

Even so, there was no breeze there now.

Naresh said softly,

"About the rent..."

Rashmi's pen stopped.

Meenakshi said at once,

"We'll see tomorrow."

Rashmi began writing again.

A little later Meenakshi asked,

"The money from the office..."

Chhotu opened his eyes.

"What money?"

Naresh said,

"Nothing. Go to sleep."

That night the household accounts were not discussed.

Nor the next night.

On the third night Meenakshi only said,
"Bring less milk tomorrow."

Naresh asked,
"Why?"

Rashmi was listening while memorising her lesson.
Meenakshi said,
"Just for this week."

The conversation ended there.

Four days later a new habit had formed in the house.

When the children were awake, Naresh and Meenakshi spoke only about small practical matters.

"The salt is finished."

"Bring soap."

"Has Chhotu's shirt dried?"

"Close the door."

Beyond that, the conversation did not go.

Naresh had received his salary slip at the office.

The payment for the extra work had not been added that month either.

He put the slip inside his bag.

Meenakshi did sewing work.
Two customers had said they would pay the following week.
She did not tell Naresh this.

The deadline for Rashmi's examination fee was drawing near.
She brought a notice home from school.
She placed it between the pages of a book.

Earlier she would have handed it straight to her mother.
This time she did not.

That evening, while straightening Rashmi's bag, Meenakshi found the notice.

"What is this?"

Rashmi remained silent.

Meenakshi read the notice.

"The last date is the day after tomorrow?"

Rashmi nodded.

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

Rashmi kept straightening the corner of her book.

"I thought you two weren't talking about money anymore."

Meenakshi's hand stopped.

"Who told you that?"

"No one."

"Then?"

Rashmi looked at the cardboard covering the window.

"Before, at night, you two used to sit by the window and talk."

Meenakshi said nothing.

Naresh had not yet come home.

That night he arrived at half past eight.
He hung his bag on the peg.
He washed his hands and face and sat down.

Meenakshi served him a plate.

Rashmi placed the notice in front of him.

Naresh read it.

"The day after tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"You've had this all this time?"

Before Rashmi could answer, Meenakshi said,
"I only saw it today too."

Naresh looked at Rashmi.

"Why didn't you tell us?"

This time Rashmi answered directly,
"You two listen, but you don't talk about your own things."

Chhotu kept mixing rice on his plate.
He did not look up.

Naresh did not fold the notice.
He laid it flat on the table.

"Twelve hundred?"

Meenakshi said,
"It says thirteen hundred and fifty on the notice."

Naresh read it again.
"Examination fee plus laboratory charges."

Meenakshi asked,
"How much do you have?"

Rashmi stood up at once.

"I'm going to study."

She moved to the other corner of the same room.
The distance was no more than seven cubits.

Naresh said quietly,
"Eight hundred at the moment."

The sound of Rashmi turning pages continued.

Meenakshi spoke just as softly,
"I have five hundred and thirty-five."

Chhotu asked,
"How much?"

Meenakshi said,
"Not for you."

Naresh stopped eating.

The room was very quiet.
Outside, the mill was running.
But behind the cardboard and cotton, its sound was muffled.

Naresh said,
"The extra-work money didn't come this time either."

Meenakshi looked at him.

"You never told me."

"I would have."

"When?"

Naresh looked at the cardboard over the window.

Meenakshi understood that this was not an answer.

Running her finger along the edge of her plate, she said,
"Payment for two sewing jobs is held up too."

Naresh asked,
"How much?"

"Nine hundred."

"You didn't tell me that either."

"When would I have told you?"

Both fell silent.

Rashmi's pen kept moving across her notebook.
Chhotu finished his rice and drank water.

After dinner Naresh opened his bag.
He took out the salary slip.
He placed it in front of Meenakshi.

Meenakshi read it.

"There is a deduction of five hundred here too."

"Against the old advance."

"You didn't tell me this either."

Naresh tried to smile.
The smile did not form.

"We used to say everything by the window."

Meenakshi looked at the cardboard-filled frame.

"Did the window close, or did our mouths?"

Naresh did not answer.

That night, after the children slept, the two of them remained awake.

The ticking of the clock was clearly audible in the room.
The clock had never seemed so loud before.

Once Meenakshi said,
"Shall we go up to the roof?"

Naresh looked toward the outside.

"The landlord's family sleeps upstairs."

"Then?"

"Tomorrow."

Meenakshi turned over.

The next day the mill ran again.
Rashmi studied.
Chhotu did his homework.

On his way home from the office, Naresh collected an old table fan from a repair shop.
It was his own fan.
Three months earlier, he had left it for repair because it made a noise.

Meenakshi asked,
"Is it fixed?"

Naresh said,
"Not completely."

He switched on the fan.
The blades began to turn.
Along with them came a "gharr-gharr" sound.

Rashmi raised her head.

"It's making noise again."

Naresh switched it off at once.

"I'll get it fixed."

At ten that night Chhotu fell asleep.
Rashmi also closed her book.

Naresh placed the table fan on the floor.
He ran it at low speed.

"Gharr... gharr... gharr..."

Meenakshi looked at him.

"Rashmi is awake."

From behind the curtain Rashmi's voice came,
"I'm going to sleep."

A little later even the sound of her turning over stopped.

Naresh left the fan running.
Meenakshi sat on the corner of the mattress.

For the first time, the two of them sat away from the window.

Naresh said,
"We have to pay thirteen hundred and fifty the day after tomorrow."

Meenakshi said,
"I'll give five hundred and thirty-five."

"I have eight hundred."

"We'll still be fifteen short."

They were silent for a few moments.

Meenakshi said,
"The milkman owes me fifteen."

Naresh nodded.

"The rent?"

"Two days late."

"The landlord?"

"I'll tell him."

Over the sound of the fan Meenakshi asked,
"How many more months will the deduction continue?"

"Three more months."

"The belt on the sewing machine needs replacing."

"How much?"

"One hundred and eighty."

"This week?"

"No. Next week."

The conversation slowly widened.
From rent to medicine.
From milk to school shoes.
From Chhotu's torn bag to Rashmi's books for the following month.

There was no grand solution.
Some things were simply written down.
Some were pushed forward.
On some, the two still disagreed.

The fan kept going gharr-gharr.

In the morning Rashmi got up and looked at the fan.

"Did this run all night?"

Meenakshi said,
"For a while."

Rashmi switched it off.

The room became completely quiet again.

She looked at her mother.

"The fee?"

Meenakshi said,
"It will be paid today."

Rashmi only said, "All right."

When Naresh returned that evening, the window was still closed.
The cardboard sheets were just as they had been.

The mill was running.
Rashmi was studying.
Chhotu was drawing.

From beside the stove Meenakshi asked,
"Will you get the fan repaired?"

Naresh remembered its gharr-gharr sound.

"Not completely."

Meenakshi smiled.

After dinner Naresh switched the fan on at low speed.

Rashmi looked once over the top of her book at her mother and father.
Then she lowered her eyes to the page again.

The window remained closed.

But this time Naresh said,
"Let's make next month's accounts in advance."

Meenakshi said,
"Yes. Tell me."

STORY 223

Sunday Clothes

On Sunday afternoon, the clothes in Kamala Devi's courtyard were drying quickly.

There had been a light drizzle at dawn.

After ten, the sun came out.

Malati brought down the first bamboo basket from the roof.

Sudha followed with the second basket.

Both sisters had come to their mother's house on the same Sunday for the first time in a month.

A nerve in their mother's right arm had been strained.

The doctor had told her not to lift heavy buckets.

Kamala Devi sat in a low chair.

She insisted on folding the clothes.

Malati said,

"You sit. We'll do this."

Sudha set the basket down between them.

Inside were their mother's three cotton saris, two petticoats, four blouses, two towels, an old bedsheet, and a few smaller pieces of clothing.

Malati began separating the saris.

Sudha, the blouses.

Kamala Devi said,

"Keep the sari with the red border on top. The puja is on Wednesday."

Malati said, "Yes."

For a while, there was only the rustle of cloth.

In one corner of the courtyard stood a pot of tulsi.
A faint smell rose from its damp earth.

Sudha picked up a blouse.
She ran a finger over the seam near the sleeve.

"This is still holding up?"

Kamala Devi looked from a distance.
"Why wouldn't it?"

Without looking up, Malati said,
"It was stitched in those days."

Sudha's hand stopped.

The inside seam of the blouse had been turned twice.
The small stitches along the edge were still strong.

Sudha folded the blouse.

Malati spread out another sari.

Nothing was said.

Kamala Devi tried to get up.
Malati said at once,
"You stay seated."

"I'll bring water."

Sudha got up.
She brought three glasses of water from inside.

Kamala Devi took two sips, then leaned back in the chair.

Sudha set down her glass.
Then she looked again at the pile of blouses.

"If the machine were still here, this sleeve could be made good for a while longer."

For the first time, Malati looked directly at her.

"If the machine were still here."

Kamala Devi had closed her eyes.

Sudha said,
"The same thing again?"

Malati went on folding the sari.

"I didn't start it."

"But you said it."

"I said what was true."

The courtyard fell quiet again.

Ten years earlier, Kamala Devi's cataracts had grown worse.
A date had been fixed.
They had fallen short of money.

At the time, Malati lived in Patna.

Her husband had a small job in the accounts department of a hospital.

Their two children were in school.

Sudha lived with their mother in this house.

She tutored children at home.

Two days before the cataract operation, Sudha sold their mother's old foot-operated sewing machine.

The money made up the shortfall.

Malati heard about it only after the surgery.

From that day on, one question remained suspended between the two sisters.

Malati would say—had you told me once more, I would have sent the money.

Sudha would say—there was no time, and when I had told you earlier, I had not received a clear answer.

Each of them had her own accounting of what had happened.

Neither account could cancel the other.

Sometimes Kamala Devi said selling the machine had been necessary.

Sometimes she said, "You could have waited a few days."

That only made the dispute hazier.

Sudha folded a small towel.

"Your phone was switched off that night."

Malati said,

"It wasn't switched off. I was on a bus."

"I called three times."

"I called back."

"The next day."

"At eleven that night."

"By then the buyer had already come to see the machine."

The sari remained half-folded in Malati's hands.

"You could have waited one day."

Sudha did not answer at once.

She picked up a towel.
She evened out the two ends.
Then folded it in half.

"That day, I did not know whether waiting one more day was safe."

Malati said,
"I thought it was."

"Yes."

"I still do."

"And I still think selling it was the right thing to do."

Kamala Devi opened her eyes.

"Were you two supposed to fold clothes, or hold court?"

Sudha did not laugh.
Neither did Malati.

But both picked up the clothes again.

Malati's pile grew into neat squares.
Sudha's leaned a little crooked.

That difference had been there since childhood.

Kamala Devi said,
"Sudha, make the corners even."

Sudha said,
"Ma, the clothes are going into a cupboard. No one is grading the measurements."

A faint smile appeared on Malati's face.

"That's why everything falls out the moment the cupboard opens."

This time Sudha laughed.

"Your piles stand like soldiers."

Kamala Devi said,
"Enough. Now that's better."

The afternoon was waning.
A square of sunlight on the rear wall was slowly sinking lower.

Malati picked up their mother's blue petticoat.
The drawstring at the waist had half come loose.

"This needs stitching again."

Sudha said,
"I'll do it by hand."

Malati said,
"Two washes and it will come loose again."

"Then we'll give it to the tailor."

"Yes."

Sudha was quiet for a moment.

"If the machine were here, five minutes."

Malati turned the petticoat over and looked at it.

"If it were here."

This time there was no barb in her voice.

Sudha did not carry the point any further.

Kamala Devi said,
"Are you going to leave the petticoat torn now in the name of the machine?"

Malati said,
"No."

Sudha said,
"No."

They spoke at the same time.

Kamala Devi smiled.

Malati took a small pencil from her bag.
On an old piece of paper she wrote—"Blue petticoat—drawstring."

Sudha looked at her.

"You still make lists?"

"If I don't, I forget."

"I forget first and remember later."

"You forget more."

"That is also true."

For a while, the two worked quietly again.

In the courtyard there was only the soft sound of clothes being folded.
Now and then a handcart passed on the distant road.
Now and then a child shouted next door.

Sudha picked up an old pillowcase.

"Throw this away."

Kamala Devi said at once,
"No."

Malati examined one corner of the pillowcase.
The cloth had worn thin on one side.

"What good will keeping it do?"

Kamala Devi said,
"It can become a cleaning rag."

Sudha looked at Malati.

"See? It's hard to sell anything from this house."

Kamala Devi raised an eyebrow.

Malati's hand stopped again.

Sudha said quickly,
"All right, I shouldn't have said that."

Malati did not toss the pillowcase back into the basket.
She placed it beside the pile meant for cleaning rags.

"No. You've said it now."

Sudha was silent.

Malati said,
"I still grieve for that machine."

Sudha said softly,
"So do I."

Malati looked at her.

"Then?"

"Grief and a decision are not the same thing."

Malati said nothing.

Sudha went on,

"I sold it. Even now I would say that, at the time, it seemed necessary to me. But why should that mean I cannot grieve for it?"

Malati folded the blue petticoat neatly once more.

"I still think you acted too quickly."

"All right."

"What do you mean, all right?"

"I mean you still feel that way."

For the first time, Malati laughed.

"And you still feel that you did the right thing."

"Yes."

"So where does that leave us?"

Sudha picked up the sari with the red border.

She held out its loose end toward Malati.

"Here."

Malati caught the end.

Holding opposite sides, the two of them pulled the sari slightly taut.

The creases straightened.

Sudha said,

"Perhaps this has no solution."

Malati said,
"Perhaps it doesn't."

"Then?"

"Then fold the clothes."

Together they folded the sari down the middle.

From the stool, Kamala Devi said,
"The puja sari goes on top."

Malati said,
"I remember."

Sudha said,
"Put it on your list."

Malati gave her a look.

This time both of them burst out laughing.

Before evening, all the clothes had gone into the cupboard.

The blue petticoat lay in a separate bag.
It would go to the tailor on Monday.

The pillowcase meant to become a cleaning rag was left in a corner of the kitchen.

The sari with the red border remained on top.

Malati got up to leave for home.
Sudha began looking for her slippers as well.

Kamala Devi asked,
"Who will come next Sunday?"

The sisters looked at each other.

Malati said,
"My children have exams."

Sudha said,
"I can come by afternoon."

Malati said,
"You wash them. I'll come in the evening and fold them."

Sudha thought for a moment.

"All right."

Malati reached the doorway.
Then she turned back.

"Tell the tailor to put in a strong drawstring."

Sudha said,
"I will."

Malati stepped outside.

No clothes were left in the courtyard.

The old dispute had not gone anywhere either.
But that Sunday, neither of them needed the old dispute to be resolved.

STORY 224

After the Mustard Harvest

The mustard had been harvested.

In the field, small stubble now stood where the yellow flowers had been.

Whenever the wind blew, the dry stalks rubbed against one another with a faint rustling sound.

Bhola Mandal sat beside the field bund.

An old ledger was in his hand.

There were two round oil stains on its cover; he had wiped them with a cloth many times.

The stains had faded, but they had not disappeared.

Ramvilas was coming through the field.

As he came, he pulled up one or two mustard stalks left after the harvest and tossed them aside.

Bhola said,

"The weight tallied."

Ramvilas asked,

"How much?"

"Thirteen maunds and twenty-seven kilos."

"I had estimated twelve maunds."

"The grain was heavy this time."

Ramvilas sat down.

Bhola opened the ledger.

On one page were written oil, seed, fertilizer, ploughing, harvesting, transport - everything.

The last line was blank.

Ramvilas asked,

"Why is it blank?"

Bhola said,

"This time the account is stuck right there."

"How much is left?"

"It is not money that is left."

Bhola slid the ledger towards him.

For twenty years, the partnership on this field had been half-and-half.

The field did not belong to Bhola Mandal.

Nor did it belong to Ramvilas.

Janki Devi, who lived at the edge of the village, owned sixteen kathas of land.

After her husband died, Janki Devi could no longer cultivate the field herself.

At first she had given the land to different people on sharecropping terms.

Sometimes there was a quarrel over seed, sometimes fertilizer, sometimes the weighing.

Twenty years earlier, Bhola and Ramvilas had taken the field together.

After giving Janki Devi her agreed share, they divided whatever remained equally between them.

At that time Bhola had bullocks.

Ramvilas had more cash.

Bhola ploughed, repaired the bunds, and spent nights guarding the field.

Ramvilas bought seed, brought fertilizer, and sold the crop at the market.

If anyone asked why they divided it equally, both gave the same answer:

"He does what I cannot; I do what he cannot."

How much labour equalled how much money had never been measured.

Year after year, equality became a habit.

But now there were no bullocks.

Bhola's bullocks had been sold five years earlier.

Ploughing was done with hired machinery.

Threshing too was done by machine.

A hired small vehicle carried the crop to the market.

Ramvilas's son Pradeep said that the old arithmetic of the partnership had itself grown old.

That day Pradeep too came to the field.

He had a small notebook in his hand.

"Babu," he said to Ramvilas, "I've added up everything."

Bhola looked at him.

Pradeep opened the notebook.

"The total cash expense is fourteen thousand three hundred and twenty."

Ramvilas said,

"Yes."

"Nine thousand two hundred came from our house."

Bhola remained silent.

Pradeep continued,

"Five thousand one hundred and twenty came from Bhola Kaka's house."

Ramvilas said quietly,

"You have counted the money."

"Accounts are made in money."

Bhola said,

"And the work?"

Pradeep turned towards him.

"We can add wages for the work."

"Add them."

Pradeep turned a page in the notebook.

"There was no transplanting; it was mustard. Ploughing by machine. Labourers for harvesting. Vehicle for transport. Looking after the field..."

He stopped.

Bhola said,

"What is the rate for looking after a field?"

Pradeep tried to smile.

"That is..."

"That is what?"

Ramvilas interrupted,

"Son, not every kind of work has a market rate."

Pradeep said,
"So it cannot be accounted for at all?"

Bhola closed the ledger.

The wind blew.
The smell of mustard still lingered in the harvested field.
In the distance, a woman was gathering stalks.

Bhola said,
"This time I paid half the fertilizer money later."

Pradeep said,
"Yes, it is written here."

"And the night the water pump broke down?"

"Three hundred and forty for repairing the water pump."

"Whose bicycle brought the mechanic at two in the morning?"

Pradeep said nothing.

"I went. Three kos."

"We can count that as labour."

"How much?"

Pradeep looked at the page of his notebook.

Bhola asked again,
"When the bull got into the field in Jeth, whose son slept here for three nights?"

"Manoj."

"Manoj is my son."

"We'll add his wages too."

Bhola laughed.
"Manoj will say the wage for sleeping in the field at night is different from the wage for daytime."

Pradeep grew uncomfortable.

Ramvilas ran his hand over the ground.
The soil was dry, but a little moisture remained underneath.

He said,
"Pradeep, what you are saying is not wrong."

Bhola looked at Ramvilas.

Ramvilas continued,
"It is true that now more of the cash expense comes from our house."

Bhola said,
"Then say it."

"Say what?"

"Shall we stop dividing half-and-half?"

Ramvilas did not answer at once.

The question had come up before too.
But never this directly.

Seven years earlier, Bhola's wife had been ill.

That season Bhola had spent less time at the field.

For three weeks Ramvilas alone looked after the water pump, fertilizer, and weeding.

When the crop was divided, it was still half-and-half.

The next year, Ramvilas's daughter was getting married.

For two months, Bhola did most of the fieldwork.

The crop was again divided half-and-half.

Sometimes one household gave more time.

Sometimes the other gave more money.

Their twenty-year partnership had survived on the understanding that every year would not be weighed separately.

Pradeep said,

"All I'm saying is that the work has changed now."

Bhola said,

"Yes, it has changed."

"Then the shares should change too."

Bhola looked towards the field.

"To what?"

Pradeep added some figures in his notebook.

"Cash and labour together... perhaps sixty-forty."

"Whose sixty?"

Pradeep did not answer.

Ramvilas said,

"That is exactly the question."

Pradeep gave an awkward laugh.
"Whoever contributes more."

Bhola said,
"Will we decide the contribution beforehand, or after the harvest?"

"Beforehand."

"It was not decided beforehand this time."

Pradeep fell silent.

After a while he left.

Bhola and Ramvilas remained seated in the field.

Ramvilas asked,
"Did you feel hurt?"

Bhola said,
"The point is not bad. The timing is."

"Why?"

"If you change the rule after dividing the crop, it is no longer a rule; it is a claim."

Ramvilas nodded.
"Right."

Bhola opened the ledger again.
"Half-and-half this time?"

"As we had agreed."

"Next time?"

Ramvilas looked towards the far edge of the field.
Janki Devi's grandson was cutting date-palm leaves there.

"Next time we'll write it down beforehand."

Bhola said,
"Write what?"

"Money."

"Work."

"Yes."

"Time?"

"Yes."

"Watching the field?"

"Yes."

"Work done by people from the household?"

Ramvilas looked at him.
"That too."

Bhola smiled.
"Then the ledger will grow fat."

Ramvilas said,

"Let it."

Two days later, the crop was sold at the market.
Janki Devi's share was set aside.
Bhola and Ramvilas divided the remaining money equally.

Pradeep said nothing.
But he did not throw away his notebook.

A week later, Janki Devi called both of them.
She was sitting on a low wooden seat in the veranda.

"The next crop?" she asked.

Ramvilas said,
"We're thinking of moong."

Bhola said,
"If the rains come on time."

Janki Devi said,
"I have something to say."

Both fell silent.

"This time my grandson says I should give the land to just one man. The paperwork would be simpler."

Bhola looked at Ramvilas.

Janki Devi continued,
"I told him that two men have been running this field for twenty years. Why should I suddenly put down only one name?"

Ramvilas asked,

"What do you want?"

"I want the field kept properly. Sown on time, harvested on time. I want my share clear."

Bhola said,
"Then the partnership remains."

Janki Devi said,
"The partnership is between the two of you. I only want my field not to lie vacant."

On the way home, Bhola said,
"See? Even the owner of the land does not understand our shares."

Ramvilas smiled.
"Do we understand them ourselves?"

The next day Bhola bought a new ledger.
The old ledger was only half full.
Even so, he bought a new one.

On the first page he wrote -
"Moong - next season."

Below it he made two lines.
One line: "Money."
The other: "Work."

Ramvilas came.
Looking at the page, he said,
"Two lines?"

Bhola said,
"Your son's accounting."

Ramvilas sat down.

"First, let's make the rules."

They talked for half an hour.

What should the rate be for a day's fieldwork?

If the water pump broke down, did bringing the mechanic count as work or as expense?

Was going to the market work, or responsibility for selling?

Was judging whether seed was good or bad a matter of time, or of experience?

Several lines were filled.

Even then, no rule emerged.

Ramvilas said,

"I think you made the wrong lines."

"Then?"

"If we keep separating money and work, they will never become equal."

Bhola asked,

"Then what should I write?"

Ramvilas thought for a while.

"Responsibility."

Bhola looked at the page.

Ramvilas said,

"One man will take responsibility for seed, fertilizer, and sale. The other for the field, timing, machinery, and labourers. Whoever takes a responsibility must see it through. Expenses will be shared."

Bhola said,

"And the shares?"

"We'll talk about that again."

"Again?"

"Yes. How can we fix the share before we have made the rules?"

Bhola smiled.
"I thought the rules would protect the share."

Ramvilas said,
"Perhaps rules only make the quarrel clearer."

Both walked out towards the field.

Some green grass had begun to grow in the harvested mustard field.
They discussed loosening the soil in one corner for moong.

Ramvilas said,
"This time I'll arrange the ploughing."

Bhola asked,
"Your responsibility?"

"Write it down."

"Seed?"

"You."

"Market?"

"Me."

"Water pump?"

Bhola and Ramvilas both stopped at once.

For twenty years, the water pump had never been the sole responsibility of either man.

Whoever was available operated it.

When it broke, whoever noticed first went looking for the mechanic.

Ramvilas said,

"The water pump is shared."

Bhola laughed.

"An old word has slipped back in."

That evening Pradeep looked at the ledger.

"Where is the line for the shares?"

Ramvilas said,

"Not yet."

"Then the account is incomplete."

Bhola was sitting there too.

He said,

"Let the work begin first. Whatever we decide, we'll write it down beforehand. We won't change it after the harvest."

Pradeep asked,

"Will it remain half-and-half?"

Before Ramvilas could answer, he looked at Bhola.

Bhola said,

"I bought the new ledger to answer that question."

Pradeep said nothing.

Two days later, the machine for turning the soil came to the field.
The driver quoted his rate.
Ramvilas settled the rate.
Bhola measured the fuel.

When the machine started, they remembered the ploughing with bullocks twenty years earlier.
Back then, Bhola's bullocks had been half the foundation of the partnership.
Now that foundation had turned into a rental receipt.

When half the ploughing was done, the driver stopped to drink water.
Bhola picked up a handful of soil.

Ramvilas asked,
"What are you looking at?"

"Just the soil."

"What is it worth?"

Bhola looked at him.
"Ask Janki Devi that."

Both laughed.

By evening the field had been turned.
The mustard stubble had gone under the soil.
No sign of the yellow season remained above ground.

Before leaving for home, Bhola said,
"Tomorrow we'll look at the seed."

Ramvilas said,

"You look. That's your responsibility."

"Money?"

"Shared."

Bhola smiled again.

"The word has come back again."

This time Ramvilas did not laugh.

He kept looking at the turned field.

The mustard had been harvested.

The crop had been sold.

The money had been divided half-and-half.

But after the bullocks were gone, after machines arrived, after the work of the market changed, the basis of the old half-and-half partnership was still not clear on paper.

The new ledger lay open.

For the first time, the question was being written before the crop, not after it.

The field was not empty.

Before the next crop, the meaning of the old partnership still had to be decided anew upon it.

STORY 225

The Herdsman's Footpath

The morning sun had not yet climbed above the tops of the mango trees.

Bisanpur's new road was shining with the night's dew.

Two or three leaves had fallen on the black paved strip along the side.

On one side of the road ran a concrete drain; on the other rose a high earthen verge.

Budhan Paswan reached the road with his seven goats and two calves.

At that point all the animals stopped at once.

Budhan stopped too.

Earlier, at this very spot, the footpath had crossed where the road now lay and gone straight towards the Simraha grazing ground.

After the road was built, the footpath had been cut into two pieces.

The stretch on this side lay beneath his feet.

The stretch on the far side, used far less for two months, was sinking into the grass.

Between them lay the new road.

And along the road, the concrete drain.

The goats looked at the drain, then back at Budhan.

Budhan said,
"Come on."

The first goat put a foot forward.

Seeing the width of the drain, it stepped back again.

Budhan laid his short bamboo stick across the drain.

"This is no bridge for you," he said to himself.

Then he turned the herd southward.

Three hundred paces farther along the new road was a concrete culvert.

The drain could be crossed there.

But going up to the culvert, circling to the other side of the road, and then picking up the old footpath added nearly half a kos.

Budhan was nearing seventy.

His stride was still steady, but his knees were not what they had once been.

The goats were always in a hurry.

The calves kept stopping to tear at the grass.

Budhan repeatedly urged them on towards the culvert.

A bicycle bell rang behind him.

It was Runki.

Budhan's granddaughter.

A bag of notebooks and books on her back.

She was on her way to school.

Runki stopped her bicycle.

"Grandfather, going by the culvert again?"

"What else? Shall we fly across the drain?"

Runki looked to the far side of the road.

The old footpath could still be made out.

A faint brown line through the grass.

"Earlier we used to go straight from here."

"Earlier there was no road."

"Has the road been a good thing or a bad thing?"

Budhan laughed.

"Did your teacher ask you that question?"

"No."

"Then go to school. You'll be late."

Runki pedalled away.

After going a little distance, she turned to look back.

Budhan was still driving the animals towards the culvert.

The new road was no longer new to the village.

It had been inaugurated two months earlier.

Before that, in the rains, the earthen track from Bisanpur to the market turned into bog in three places.

Two-wheelers got stuck.

A sick person had to be carried on a cot as far as the main road.

People tying milk cans to bicycles lost half their milk to splashing on the way.

All that changed when the new road came.

The morning milk vehicle began coming directly to the hamlet.

For the first time, the little school vehicle arrived on time even on rainy days.

Measured by the clock, the market seemed closer.

Budhan himself had praised the road in its first week.

"Now our slippers won't get left behind in the mud," he had said.

But while the road was being built, the footpath existed nowhere on the map.

It was not in the land records.

Nor was it the boundary of anyone's field.

It was simply a line in the earth, made by animals going out from three hamlets of the village.

Years upon years of feet had made that line.

The small hooves of goats.

The broad hooves of cows.

The bare feet of herdsmen.

In the rains, the deep marks of bamboo staffs.

In winter, a thin layer of dust.

No one had made it.

So the people building the road did not think they were breaking it either.

The road simply went down over it.

In the first week, the animals crossed the paved surface.

The drain had not yet been completed.

In the second week, the drain was cast.

In the third, earth was piled along the edge.

Then the old straight route was blocked.

Maheshwar Rai, who kept a larger herd, faced no particular difficulty.

His eight cows now stayed mostly in the cowshed.

Green fodder came by vehicle.

Even when two of the cows went out in the evening, they only went as far as the field behind the house.

But for small livestock keepers like Budhan, the Simraha grazing ground was essential.

Kamli Devi's three goats.

Ramesar's one cow and two calves.

Karim's five sheep.

All of them went out to the grazing ground by day.

And all of them now had to detour by the culvert.

Earlier, Budhan reached the grazing ground from home in fifteen or seventeen minutes.

Now it took more than half an hour.

The same on the way back.

An hour had been added to the day's walking.

For some people, an hour was a small thing.

For Budhan, an hour was a matter of his knees.

For Kamli Devi, an hour was a matter of the hearth.

For Ramesar's daughter, it was a matter of school, because she returned from the morning herding and then went to class.

One Sunday, Runki went with Budhan.

"Why today?" Budhan asked.

"To see."

"What?"

"The route."

She carried not a phone but a small notebook.

Runki began counting her steps.

From the bend near the house to the old footpath.

Then south along the side of the road.

The culvert.

Then north again.

Then the old footpath once more.

"How many?" Budhan asked.

"One thousand two hundred and thirty-seven steps."

"Your steps are small."

"That's why the number is big."

Budhan laughed.

On reaching the grazing ground, Runki wrote in her notebook: 'New route.'

Then Budhan showed her the old one.

"Straight from the roots of this mango tree."

Runki walked back along the old footpath.

She reached the road.

She stopped on this side of the drain.

The line on the far side was not perfectly straight.

Now that the road was wide, the old line looked as though it had shifted two or three hands' breadths.

"Grandfather, wasn't the footpath straight?"

"Is a path ever straight like a line on paper?"

Runki fell silent.

Budhan sat down on the edge of the drain.

"There used to be a little hollow here. In the rains it filled with water. The animals went round it on the left. That's why the path bent here."

Runki drew a crooked line in her notebook.

"There is a drain here now."

"Yes."

"Is the drain necessary?"

"Necessary. Otherwise the road will break up."

"Is the footpath necessary?"

Budhan looked towards the grazing ground on the other side.

"You tell me."

After returning home at noon, Runki opened her notebook and laid it in the courtyard.

She wrote down the step-counts for both the old route and the new one.

Old route—short.

New detour—long.

But the notebook could not get anyone across the drain.

The next day Runki went to school.

When she returned in the evening, she saw that the smaller of Budhan's calves was walking with a limp.

“What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Why is it limping?”

“It slipped on the paved stretch near the culvert.”

Runki bent down and looked at the hoof.

There was a light scrape.

No blood.

“Medicine?”

“I washed it with salt water.”

Budhan kept the matter small.

That day Runki did not open her notebook.

Three days later it rained in the village.

The first heavy rain.

Water gleamed on the paved surface of the new road.

The drain filled and began flowing fast.

The road remained intact.

People were pleased.

Had it still been the old earthen track, this rain would have turned it to mud again.

When the rain stopped in the evening, Runki went out with Budhan.

At one point in the drain, muddy water was swirling.

Exactly where the old footpath had crossed the road.

From the field on the far side, a small streamlet was running into the drain.

Dried mustard stalks, grass and earth had jammed inside the drain.

The water was rising towards the edge of the road.

Two labourers were clearing the drain with spades.

One of them was Nandu the mason.

He was from a village near Bisanpur.

He had worked there when the road was being built too.

Seeing Budhan, Nandu said,
"Uncle, mud gets stuck here again and again."

Budhan said,
"Water used to drain out here before too."

"Where was the drain then?"

"There wasn't a drain. There was a hollow."

Runki opened her notebook.

"And the footpath too."

Nandu laughed.

"You've been measuring it as well?"

"I counted the steps."

She showed him the notebook.

Nandu stopped working and looked at the paper.

"The path on this side was here, and the one on that side there?"

"Yes."

"And the drain in between."

"Yes."

"So what do you want now?"

Runki did not answer at once.

Budhan said,
"We don't want the road broken."

Nandu smiled.

"That's a good start."

"The drain should remain too."

"That's good as well."

"We only want the animals to be able to cross."

Nandu judged the width of the drain with his eyes.

"If you make something like a culvert, it'll cost money."

Budhan said,
"We're not asking for a culvert."

Runki looked at two thick concrete slabs lying beside the drain.

They were drain covers, like the ones placed in front of house entrances so people could cross on foot.

"Like these?" she asked.

Nandu said,
"If slabs like these are laid, the water can flow underneath. But you'll also need a slope at the roadside. The animals will slip otherwise."

Budhan said,
"Make the slope rough, with earth and grit."

Nandu picked up his spade again.

"I don't make the decisions. It has to be approved from above."

The matter ended there.

Runki expected something to happen the next day.

Nothing happened.

The road remained as it was.

The drain remained as it was.

Budhan kept detouring by the culvert.

A week passed.

In the meantime, Maheshwar Rai sent two large cans of milk to the market along the new road.

He was pleased.

"It used to take half an hour; now it takes ten minutes."

Kamli Devi heard him.

"It used to take me fifteen minutes to get my goats to the grazing ground; now it takes half an hour."

Maheshwar laughed.

"Everyone has their own time."

Kamli did not answer.

Runki had heard the exchange.

The word 'time' stayed in her mind.

That night she wrote in her notebook—

'The road saves ten minutes.'

And underneath—

'The footpath detour adds fifteen minutes.'

Then she stopped.

Whose ten minutes?

Whose fifteen minutes?

The notebook did not answer that question.

The next Sunday, Runki spoke to Kamli Devi, Ramesar and Karim at the grazing ground.

"Do all of you go round by the culvert?"

Kamli said,
"What else can we do?"

Karim said,
"Sometimes I make the sheep jump the drain."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"For me or for the sheep?"

Everyone laughed.

Ramesar remained serious.

"Twice, motorbikes came past fast. The animals scattered across the road. There isn't much room to get off the road near the culvert."

Runki asked,
"What if slabs were laid across the drain at the old crossing, with an earthen slope?"

Kamli said at once,
"Then it would be straight through."

Karim said,
"A width of one and a half or two hands would be enough for sheep."

Ramesar said,
"More for a cow."

"How much?"

They stretched out their arms to show her.

Budhan was laughing from a distance.

"Now the footpath is being measured not in feet, but in hands."

Runki said,
"No one measured it before either. Now there is a drain, so a measurement is needed."

Budhan stopped laughing.

He said,
"You're right."

Four days later workers came to the roadside again.

This time two concrete drain covers had broken.

A junior engineer was there with Nandu the mason.

Runki stopped there on her way back from school.

Budhan was already standing there.

Nandu said,
"Look at this girl's notebook."

The engineer first looked at the drain.

Then at the notebook.

"This isn't an official measurement," he said.

Runki's face fell.

Nandu said,
"Take the official measurements later. First look at where the path is."

The engineer crossed to the other side of the road.

He looked at the old footpath disappearing into the grass.

Then he came back to this side.

Then he walked as far as the culvert.

Ramesar's cow happened to be coming round by the culvert at that very moment.

His daughter was with the cow.

As a vehicle approached, she pulled the cow sharply to the side.

The engineer said nothing.

He came back and measured the width of the drain.

"Three slabs will be needed."

Nandu said,
"And on the sides, rough earth and stone that hooves can grip."

"It won't rise onto the paved surface?"

"The slope will stay below road level."

The engineer wrote something on a sheet of paper.

Budhan asked,
"Will it be built?"

"We'll add it to the repair work."

"When?"

"I can't say that."

Budhan nodded.

He was accustomed to answers like that.

Runki said nothing either.

Another day passed.

Then a week.

The old footpath on the far side grew greener still.

Where no feet fall, doob grass fills in quickly.

Every day on her way to school, Runki looked at that green strip.

She was afraid the footpath would disappear altogether.

One day she said to Budhan,
"If everyone keeps going round, the old path will vanish."

Budhan said,
"Does a path vanish?"

"The grass has filled it."

"When the grass goes, it will form again."

"What if people no longer remember it?"

Budhan planted his staff in the earth.

"A path survives less by memory than by need."

Runki did not write that sentence in her notebook.

She felt that putting it on paper would make it sound too grand.

In truth, Budhan had said it as an ordinary thing.

In the last week of Ashadh, there was another spell of heavy rain.

This time the drain filled at two places.

The repair vehicle came.

With it came three concrete slabs.

When Runki returned from school, there was no crowd by the drain, only Nandu and two labourers.

Budhan was not there either.

Nandu was cutting away earth.

"Is it being made?" Runki asked.

"Can't you see?"

One by one, the three slabs were laid across the drain.

A cow could not pass abreast with another, but two or three smaller animals could cross comfortably.

On both sides of the road, below the paved surface, rough slopes of gravel and earth were made.

The drain remained open.

Water kept flowing beneath the slabs.

Runki asked,
"Is this the footpath now?"

Nandu said,
"This is a drain crossing."

"The footpath?"

"The animals will make that."

In the evening, Budhan came with the herd.

The first goat stopped at the new slabs.

It sniffed them.

It put one foot down.

Then the other.

Crossing the slabs, it stepped onto the grass on the far side.

The other goats followed it.

The calf hesitated for a while.

Budhan stroked its neck.

"Come on."

The calf crossed too.

Runki stood at the roadside and watched.

There was no inauguration.

No ribbon was cut.

No plaque bore anyone's name.

Maheshwar Rai came along with the milk vehicle.

The vehicle slowed as it passed.

From behind the glass, he raised a hand.

Budhan raised his hand too.

That was all.

The next morning Budhan set out again with the animals.

This time he did not turn towards the culvert.

He went straight to the old crossing.

He crossed the three slabs.

On the far side, the old footpath was still faint in the grass.

The goats wandered a little, each tearing grass in a different direction.

Budhan kept calling them on.

Within two days, a brown line appeared again through the grass.

Within seven days, the line was clear.

But it was not exactly as it had been before.

Coming up to the road, it now climbed onto the three concrete slabs.

It crossed the drain.

It touched the little rough slope beside the paved strip.

Then it descended on the far side.

The old footpath did not remove the new road.

Nor could the new road erase the footpath completely.

At one small place, each altered the shape of the other.

On Sunday, Runki opened her notebook again.

She did not cross out the old step-count.

Nor did she cross out the step-count of the new detour.

Underneath, she wrote—

'After the drain crossing was made—measure again.'

Budhan looked at the notebook.

"You'll count your steps again?"

"Yes."

"What will you do with all this measuring?"

Runki said,

"I'll see how much shorter the route has become."

Budhan smiled.

"The route hasn't become shorter."

"Then?"

"The detour has become smaller."

Runki asked,

"What's the difference?"

Budhan looked towards the road.

Then towards the grazing ground.

"A path is where it has to take you."

Runki did not write that sentence either.

She closed the notebook.

The morning sun was falling on the black paved surface of the road.

Vehicles moved along it.

On the three slabs at the side, a little earth clung from the goats' hooves.

Those marks of earth did not spread across the road.

They ran only from this side of the drain to the other.

And beyond them, through the grass, a slender footpath was beginning to form again.

STORY 226

The Pond Keeper

On a Jeth evening, the pond water shone from afar like a thin sheet of metal.

On the western side of the village the fields had turned from yellow to grey, but in the pond's northern corner two or three clumps of reeds were still green.

Near those reeds, an egret stood on one leg.

Just behind the egret, Vanshi Mahato was pushing a slender bamboo rod into the water.

Small marks, cut long ago with a knife, ran along the rod.

Some marks had worn smooth; some were still sharp.

Vanshi Mahato turned the rod once to the right and examined it.

Then he bent towards the surface of the water.

"Another half an inch lower today," he said to himself.

The pond was called Kajraha.

No one in the village could now say whether the name had come from the colour of the water or from the dark grass that had once grown along the pond's edge.

For Vanshi Mahato, the question of the name did not matter.

He watched the water.

How much it had fallen and when, when it had risen at the same time as the well water, when the eastern drain had brought in silt—all this lived in his memory as separate years.

People in the village called him "the keeper of the pond."

It was not an official post.

He had neither an appointment letter nor a monthly wage.

Long ago, on the communal fishing day, he would be given five seers of fish.

Sometimes, after the paddy harvest, two paseris of grain.

Later, even that stopped.

But the name remained—the keeper.

That evening Vanshi was pulling the rod out when dust rose from the direction of the road.

First came a small truck.

Behind it came an excavator.

Last came Arun Thakur on a motorcycle.

Arun was not from this village.

He lived at the other end of the district and was the new contractor.

The panchayat had awarded the contract for the "restoration" of Kajraha pond.

On paper, the work was clear: remove silt, strengthen the banks, repair the paved ghat on the southern side, put up safety fencing all around, and clear the drainage before the rains.

The contract period was eighteen days.

On the first day, Arun walked all around the pond and inspected it.

With him were two labourers, the excavator driver, and Rajiv, the panchayat assistant.

Rajiv carried the measurement ledger.

Vanshi Mahato stood there with his bamboo rod.

Looking towards the northern bank, Arun said,

"If we dig from here, we'll get good silt."

The driver nodded.

Vanshi Mahato said,

"Don't remove silt from here."

For the first time, Arun looked at him properly.

"Why?"

"This is the silt basin."

Arun did not understand.

Vanshi pointed to the narrow drain on the northern side.

"In the rains, runoff from the fields comes here first. The soil settles here. The middle of the pond stays clear."

Arun did not laugh, but impatience was plain on his face.

"Uncle, on the plan this is part of the pond too."

"It is part of the pond. That is why it must be left."

Rajiv looked up from the ledger.

Arun said again,

"We'll deepen it. It will hold more water."

Vanshi rested the rod on the ground.

"The deep part is in the middle. The shallow edge has a different job."

"The work will be done according to the plan."

"Water doesn't read plans."

Rajiv gave a faint smile.

Arun did not.

He did not prolong the argument on the first day.

The labourers began cutting away the brush gathered near the southern ghat.

The excavator moved down to the western side.

Vanshi Mahato planted his bamboo rod in the northern corner and went home.

At dawn on the second day, the sound of the machine reached the village.

Earth rose in scoop after scoop and piled up on the bank.

Children stood at a distance and watched.

Vanshi Mahato arrived at around nine.

He had an old spade in his hand.

He went towards the eastern outlet.

Roots of kans grass and dry leaves were clogged there.

He began clearing them slowly.

Arun saw him from a distance.

"Uncle, the labourers will do that."

Vanshi did not answer.

After a while Arun came over.

"The labourers are working on the western side right now."

Vanshi said,

"Then who will open the eastern mouth?"

"We'll clear it tomorrow."

"And if it rains tomorrow?"

The sky was completely clear.

Arun looked up.

"Rain today?"

"I'm not talking about rain. I'm talking about the mouth doing its job."

This time Arun laughed.

"All right. Clear it."

Vanshi Mahato kept working the spade.

By noon, the narrow eastern channel was clear.

Tiny snail shells gleamed along its edge.

Without picking up a single shell, Vanshi scraped the earth away from beside it.

On the third day, it was the turn of the shallow northern section.

The excavator reached it.

Vanshi Mahato was already standing there.

Arun stopped the vehicle.

"Uncle, move aside."

Vanshi did not move.

"Leave this section."

"If we leave it, the measurement will fall short."

"You'll damage the pond just to make up the measurement?"

Arun's voice hardened.

"I haven't come here to damage the pond. I have a responsibility."

Vanshi said,

"So do I."

"Whose responsibility is on paper?"

The question hung in the air for a moment.

Vanshi Mahato looked at Arun's face.

Then at his own bamboo rod.

"On paper, yours."

He said softly,

"In the water, mine."

Arun signalled to the driver to switch off the machine.

"Rajiv!"

Rajiv came running.

Arun said,

"Call the panchayat head. Let this be decided today."

By afternoon, the pond bank had turned into a small gathering.

The village head, Usha Devi, arrived.

With her came the ward member, two farmers, Ramdin the fisherman, and a few curious villagers.

Usha Devi first listened to Arun.

Opening a page of the measurement ledger, Arun said,

"The contract requires this much cubic earth to be removed. If we leave the northern section, the quantity will fall short. Then the accounts will get held up."

Usha Devi looked at Vanshi.

"What do you say?"

With the edge of his spade, Vanshi Mahato drew a crescent in the soil.

"The drain releases water here."

He drew a small line through the middle of the crescent.

"In the first hard rain, the silt spreads here."

Then he pointed towards the middle of the pond.

"This bank catches the silt. If you dig it out, the soil from the first rains will go straight into the deep part."

Ramdin said,

"Fish fry live here too."

Arun immediately asked,

"What kind of fish?"

Ramdin fell silent.

He did not have a definite answer.

Vanshi Mahato did not come to Ramdin's rescue.

He said,

"Leave the fish aside. Talk about the silt."

Arun looked at the lines drawn in the earth.

"All this is guesswork."

"Yes."

Vanshi said it calmly.

"And some of it is what I have seen."

"Where is it written down?"

Vanshi lifted his bamboo rod.

"Here."

A few people laughed.

Usha Devi did not.

She took the bamboo rod in her hand.

"What are these marks?"

Touching each mark in turn, Vanshi said,

"This is Jeth from three years ago. This is Ashadh that year, when the pond filled in two nights. This is Bhadon last year. This is Kartik the year the water fell before its time."

"Dates?"

"There are no dates."

Arun said,

"That is exactly the problem."

Vanshi Mahato accepted it.

"Yes, that is the problem."

His agreement surprised Arun a little.

Vanshi continued,

"I could not write it down. But you can."

The gathering did not reach an immediate solution.

Usha Devi said work on the northern section should be stopped for two days.

Excavation could continue elsewhere.

Arun's face fell.

"I'll lose two days."

"Work elsewhere."

"And the measurement?"

"We'll look at the measurement again."

The gathering dispersed.

Arun remained silent until evening.

Vanshi Mahato sat beside the eastern channel.

As the sun went down, the water turned yellow.

An egret landed in the shallow margin and took two steps.

Arun came over while gathering his papers.

"Uncle."

Vanshi looked up.

"Do you think I'm your opponent?"

Vanshi thought for a moment.

"No."

"Then why did you stand in front of the machine?"

"Because the machine did not know me."

At first Arun did not understand.

Vanshi rested his hand on the handle of the spade.

"You know me. The machine doesn't."

Arun said nothing.

He kept looking towards the middle of the pond.

After a while he asked,

"Do you object to the fence too?"

Vanshi said,

"To a complete fence."

"Children can fall in."

"Yes."

"Then?"

"Leave two slopes for livestock. Leave one ghat. Put fencing around the rest."

Arun looked at him in surprise.

"So you aren't against the fence?"

"I'm against closing off the pond."

This time Arun smiled.

"There's a difference?"

"A great deal."

The wind changed during the night.

Lightning flashed far to the north.

It did not rain, but the smell of earth rose in the air.

The next morning Arun took Rajiv with him to inspect the northern drain.

Vanshi Mahato was already there.

This time Arun had brought a measuring tape.

He measured the width of the drain.

Then the shallow crescent-shaped section.

Then the depth in the middle of the pond.

Rajiv kept writing the figures in the measurement ledger.

Vanshi watched in silence.

Arun asked,

"How much of the silt basin should be left?"

Vanshi marked the boundary with his spade.

"From here to here."

"That much?"

"You can make it smaller."

Arun replied at once,

"Yesterday you were saying leave it."

"I said leave it. How much to leave can be measured."

Arun stretched the measuring tape across the ground.

He measured twice.

Then he said,

"If we leave this much, we'll have to remove a little more earth from the deep western section."

Vanshi asked,

"How far down is the old bed there?"

Instead of answering, Arun looked at Rajiv.

Rajiv turned the pages of the ledger.

"It hasn't been fully checked."

Vanshi said,

"Check that first."

This time Arun did not get irritated.

By noon, bamboo poles had been lowered at three places in the western section to test it.

There really was more silt there than in the middle.

The measurements were redrawn.

The required quantity could almost be met.

More than half of the northern silt basin could be saved.

Arun said,

"All right. The machine won't enter here."

Vanshi Mahato did not immediately thank him.

He asked,

"And the eastern outlet?"

Arun burst out laughing.

"Will you settle every account at once?"

"Rain falls everywhere at once."

Arun nodded.

"We'll look at that too."

The contract work picked up speed again.

Silt was removed from the western side.

Two broken steps at the southern ghat were rebuilt.

Posts were planted for the fence.

Vanshi Mahato came every day, but he no longer stood in front of the machine.

Sometimes he checked the distance of the fencing; sometimes he pulled out grass caught in the outlet.

Whenever Arun saw him, he would ask, "Uncle, what's left now?"

Most days Vanshi said nothing.

One day he said,

"Move this post two cubits back."

Arun put a hand to his head.

"Again?"

Vanshi pointed to old hoof marks in the earth along the bank.

"Cattle come down here."

Arun said,

"I'm already leaving two slopes."

"This is the third."

"I can't leave three."

Vanshi remained silent for a while.

Then he said,

"All right. Close this one. But make the eastern slope wider."

Arun looked at him.

"Don't you want to win every point?"

Vanshi Mahato laughed.

"Is the pond a wrestling match?"

The question stayed with Arun.

On the evening of the twelfth day, the first heavy rain fell.

The sky suddenly turned black.

The dust settled.

The unpaved paths began to shine.

Arun had gone out of the village that day.

Vanshi Mahato sat on his veranda and watched the rain.

When it grew heavier, he rose with his walking stick.

His daughter-in-law stopped him.

"Where are you going in this rain?"

"To the pond."

"Now?"

"Now is when it has to be seen."

He went out without taking an umbrella.

When he reached the pond, the eastern drain was not roaring, but it was running fast.

Muddy water from the northern fields was spreading across the shallow crescent-shaped section.

There, the current slowed.

The first thin layer of silt settled along the margin.

The water in the middle was still a little clearer than that.

Vanshi Mahato went to his bamboo rod.

The water had risen by two marks.

He did nothing.

He only watched.

That night it rained for three hours.

At dawn Arun came straight to the pond.

His clothes were smeared with mud up to the knees.

Vanshi was already there.

Arun looked at the northern section.

The new silt was plainly visible.

With the edge of the spade he checked its thickness.

"This much from one rain?"

Vanshi said,

"This was a small rain."

Arun looked towards the middle of the pond.

"If we had dug this section out..."

Vanshi did not finish the sentence for him.

He only said,

"Then next monsoon you would have seen where the silt settled."

Arun was silent for a while.

Then he called Rajiv.

"Bring the measurement ledger."

Rajiv brought it.

Arun said,

"Write a note."

"What?"

Arun looked towards the northern section.

"The shallow northern strip has been retained to trap silt entering with runoff."

Rajiv wrote it down.

Arun continued,

"The eastern outlet is to be kept open."

Rajiv wrote that too.

Vanshi Mahato kept looking at the page in the ledger.

There was no triumph on his face.

Suddenly he said,

"One thing is wrong."

Arun looked startled.

"What?"

"Don't write that it was left because I said so."

Arun looked at the ledger.

"I haven't written that."

"Good."

"Why?"

Vanshi planted the bamboo rod in the water.

"Tomorrow I may not be here. The ledger should contain the reason, not the name."

Rajiv stopped in the middle of writing.

Arun said quietly,

"All right."

The work was completed on the seventeenth day.

The fencing was installed, but the southern ghat and the wide livestock slope on the eastern side were left open.

The northern silt basin remained intact.

The western section was deepened.

At the mouth of the outlet, instead of an iron grille, a thick bamboo barrier like a removable lattice was fitted, so that leaves caught there could be cleared away.

At first Vanshi Mahato was doubtful about this.

Arun said,

"A fine iron grille would trap the leaves. You were right about that."

Vanshi said,

"I wasn't against iron."

"I know."

"I was against a fine mouth."

"I know that too."

On the eighteenth day, the panchayat came for inspection.

Usha Devi walked all around.

She checked the accounts.

The measurements matched.

The work was declared complete.

People looked at the new ghat, the fencing, and the deep water.

No one paid special attention to the shallow northern section.

There, two small birds were pecking at the thin layer of muddy silt.

Vanshi Mahato sat at a distance in the shade of a peepal tree.

When the inspection was over, Arun came to him.

"Uncle, the contract is finished now."

"Yes."

"And your work?"

Vanshi looked at the pond.

"The contract is finished. The pond isn't."

Arun laughed.

"You've started again."

Vanshi smiled too.

Arun took a new measuring rod out of his bag.

It was not an ordinary bamboo pole.

It was a slender iron rod, marked and numbered at every inch.

"This is for you."

Vanshi did not reach for it.

"Is there something wrong with my bamboo?"

"No."

"Then?"

"Keep both."

Vanshi took the new rod.

He planted it beside the old bamboo one.

The two rods stood side by side in the water.

The old bamboo carried no dates.

The new rod carried numbers.

Vanshi looked at both.

Then he said to Arun,

"When the next rain comes, you will write down the first mark."

Arun asked,

"Me?"

"In your ledger."

Arun was silent for a moment.

"I won't be here."

"Then Rajiv will write it."

"And if Rajiv isn't here either?"

Vanshi looked at the pond water.

"Then whoever is here will write it."

Evening was descending.

Sunlight broke through a gap in the clouds in the western sky.

The shadows of the new fence posts fell across the water.

Between those shadows, the old bamboo rod and the new measuring rod were both visible.

The rain-deposited silt along the edge was still soft.

Three slender egret footprints marked that soft silt.

Vanshi Mahato looked at the prints.

He did not measure them.

He simply kept them in his memory.

STORY 227

Evening at the Cattle Shed

Agahan evenings descended early.

The sun had dipped beyond the empty paddy fields.

A crow cawed twice on the cattle-shed roof and flew away.

Jagarnath Yadav sat on the field ridge beside the heap of dung.

A slender bamboo stick was in his hand.

His eyes were on the cattle shed.

Naresh brought a long wooden board from the courtyard.

Five columns had been drawn on it in white chalk.

At the top were written—

"Name."

"Milk."

"Fodder."

"Medicine."

"Remarks."

Jagarnath looked at the board.

"What is this?"

Naresh leaned the board against the wall.

"The evening register."

"Will the cattle shed run by a register?"

"If the cattle shed runs by guesswork, how will we understand the expense?"

Jagarnath did not laugh.

There were eight animals in the cattle shed.

Five cows, two calves, and one old cow.

Jagarnath had named them all.

Dhauri.

Kajri.

Phulwa.

Supti.

Birni.

The two calves were named Tikuli and Sonari.

The old cow was named Jhumki.

On Naresh's register, the column beside the names was blank.

He picked up the chalk and wrote—

"Dhauri — 5.2"

"Kajri — 4.7"

"Phulwa — 6.1"

"Supti — 2.8"

"Birni — 3.9"

Beside Jhumki's name he wrote—

"0.6"

Jagarnath's gaze stopped at that number.

"Zero point six?"

"This evening."

"She has grown old."

"That is what I'm saying."

"What?"

Naresh put down the chalk.

"Fodder will fall short this winter."

Jagarnath remained silent.

"Jhumki eats all day," Naresh said, "and gives around half a seer of milk. She has already needed medicine twice. If we sell her, the pressure on fodder will ease."

Jagarnath looked toward the cattle shed.

Jhumki was tethered beside Supti.

Supti was a young cow that had calved for the first time.

That was why the evening milking was most troublesome with her.

Jhumki stood beside her, quietly chewing the cud.

"Sell her today?" Jagarnath asked.

"Not today. The market is the day after tomorrow."

"So by the day after tomorrow she will increase her milk?"

Naresh grew irritated.

"Babu, this isn't about increasing milk. It's about the accounting."

"Does everything enter the accounting?"

"Anything that matters can."

Jagarnath scratched the earth with his stick.

"Then write it."

"What?"

"Supti gives milk because Jhumki stays beside her."

Naresh looked at the register.

"Is that something measured?"

"No."

"Then?"

"Measure it."

Naresh looked at his father's face.

There was no laughter in Jagarnath's voice.

The evening work of the cattle shed began.

First, straw was put into the troughs.

Then came a thin mash of bran.

Naresh had changed the portions from that month.

In place of the small brass bowl, he had brought an iron measuring vessel.

Two measures for Dhauri.

One and a half for Kajri.

Two for Phulwa.

One and a half for Supti.

One for Birni.

Half for Jhumki.

Earlier Jagarnath fed them all by eye.

"So little?"

"It is enough for Jhumki."

"Have you looked at her body?"

"I estimated her weight."

"Estimated?"

"I measured the girth of her chest."

Jagarnath fell silent again.

He did not dislike what Naresh had said.

Without saying anything, he ran a hand over Jhumki's back.

Her bones were not jutting out as they once had.

"All right," he said.

Naresh was surprised.

"What?"

"Not half. Give three-quarters."

"Why?"

"Winter is beginning."

Naresh wrote on the register in chalk—

"Jhumki — fodder 0.75."

Jagarnath said,

"If you keep writing zero point this and zero point that, the cow won't understand."

Naresh laughed.

"The cow won't read it."

"You will."

For the first time that evening, both of them laughed.

But the matter did not end there.

The next day Naresh began changing the order of the tethering ropes in the cattle shed.

His idea was that the cows giving more milk should stand on one side.

Those giving less on the other.

That would make feeding easier.

It would take less time to move the milking bucket.

Recording the amount of milk would be easier too.

"Dhauri, Phulwa, Kajri in this row."

He said this while untying the ropes from the posts.

"Supti and Birni in that row."

Jagarnath asked,

"Jhumki?"

"At the end."

"Not beside Supti?"

"It will disturb the order."

Jagarnath said nothing.

He untied Jhumki and tethered her where Naresh had said.

By evening the new arrangement looked neat and orderly.

Equal distances.

Equal open space in front of the troughs.

A clear path for placing the buckets.

Naresh was satisfied.

Dhauri was milked first.

Then Phulwa.

Kajri.

Everything went well.

Then came Supti's turn.

Naresh washed her udder.

Supti kicked a hind leg.

"Move."

Naresh sat down again.

Supti lashed her tail.

The bucket overturned.

There was no milk in it, only the washing water.

Naresh picked up the bucket.

"What happened today?"

Jagarnath stood a little way off.

"Ask the register."

Naresh did not look at him.

He stroked Supti's head.

The cow stretched her neck and looked toward the other row.

Jhumki was there.

Supti lowed loudly again.

Jhumki answered with a soft sound.

Naresh untied the rope.

"All right."

He tethered Jhumki beside Supti again.

Supti shifted her feet twice.

Then she stood still.

Naresh sat down to milk her.

This time the bucket did not overturn.

Jagarnath said,

"Write it."

Naresh said nothing.

After the milking, he went to the board.

In the "Remarks" column he wrote—

"Supti — calm when Jhumki is beside her."

Jagarnath read the words.

"Measured now?"

"Half measured."

"Why only half?"

"It is only one day's observation."

"All right."

On the third day, Naresh deliberately did not move Jhumki away again.

Supti remained calm.

The fourth day as well.

On the fifth day Jagarnath himself said,
"Now write it—three days."
Naresh wrote it.
On the sixth day, something else emerged from his register.
Birni's milk had been falling steadily.
From 3.9 to 3.6.
From 3.6 to 3.3.
From 3.3 to 3.1.
Jagarnath kept saying,
"The weather is changing."
Naresh said,
"The weather changes for all of them. Why only Birni?"
Jagarnath looked at Birni's head.
Her eyes were clear.
Her nose was moist.
Her gait was normal.
She was chewing the cud as well.
"Nothing is wrong with her."
Naresh looked at the trough.
Bran was almost always left in Birni's trough.
"Why does she leave this?"
"Perhaps she does not like it."
"She used to eat it before."
Naresh looked at the fodder register from the previous week.
The decline had begun on the day the new straw arrived.
He took some straw in his hand.
There was more fine dust in it.
Jagarnath also took some in his hand.
He brought it to his nose and smelled it.
"This is straw from the bottom of the stack."
"What does that mean?"
"It had got damp and was dried again."
"Bad?"
"Not bad. But Birni is avoiding this smell."
"Why didn't you tell me earlier?"
Jagarnath did not answer directly.
"All the cows are eating from the same stack."
Naresh said,

"But only one cow's milk is falling."
They looked at each other.
This time there was no argument.
Naresh set aside some of the older, dry straw for Birni.
Two days later her milk was 3.4.
The next day, 3.6.
Naresh wrote in the register—
"Possible effect of the smell of the straw."
Jagarnath was pleased to read the word "possible."
"That is a good word."
"Why?"
"Not everything becomes certain at once."
Naresh handed him the chalk.
"Then you write too."
Jagarnath did not take the chalk.
"My writing is slow."
"Is the cattle shed running away?"
Jagarnath looked at him.
Naresh was smiling.
Jagarnath took the chalk.
"What should I write?"
"What you see."
"Everything?"
"What is useful for the register."
Jagarnath wrote on the first line—
"Phulwa — in the evening she slightly favors the left leg."
The letters were crooked.
Naresh read them.
"Since when?"
"Since yesterday."
"Why didn't you tell me?"
"I was watching. If it was there today too, I would have told you."
Naresh lifted Phulwa's foot.
A small pebble was lodged between the hooves.
He took it out.
He washed the foot.
Phulwa stood normally again.
Jagarnath said,

"Now write—cause found."
Naresh wrote it.
From that day a new column was added to the board.
Naresh wrote at the top—
"Observation."
Jagarnath asked,
"Wasn't there already 'Remarks'?"
"That was mine."
"Whose is 'Observation'?"
"Yours."
Jagarnath said,
"Observation is not only mine."
Naresh had not written "yours" in chalk.
He left only the word "Observation."
A week later a livestock-feed trader came.
He looked at Jhumki.
"She is old. Will you sell her?"
Before answering, Naresh looked at the register.
Jhumki's milk figure was small.
The cost of her fodder looked large beside it.
There were two marks in the medicine column.
But three things were written in the "Observation" column—
"Supti is calm when she stays beside her."
"The calf Sonari shares the trough with her."
"At night, when the herd stirs, she calls out first."
The trader asked,
"How much?"
Naresh said,
"Not now."
Jagarnath looked at Naresh.
Naresh did not look at him.
The trader left.
At night Jagarnath asked,
"You won't sell her?"
"The accounting isn't complete yet."
"The milk figure is complete."
"The accounting of the cattle shed is not only milk."
Jagarnath smiled.

"Where did you learn that?"

"From the register."

Jagarnath understood that Naresh was turning his own answer back on him.

He did not pursue the matter.

But the fact that Jhumki had been spared brought him relief.

The relief was not hidden.

Naresh saw it.

A few days later the problem came from the opposite direction.

While distributing the evening fodder, Jagarnath dropped an extra handful of bran into Supti's trough.

Naresh saw him.

"Now what is this?"

"Her body is asking for it."

"She has had her full measure today."

"Look at her eyes."

"Will we measure her stomach with her eyes?"

Jagarnath was silent.

Naresh looked at the register.

Supti's milk had risen over the previous four days.

From 2.8 to 3.4.

From 3.4 to 3.9.

From 3.9 to 4.2.

Calculations ran through Naresh's mind.

If milk had increased, fodder should increase too.

But adding a whole handful at once was not right.

He said,

"From tomorrow we'll increase the portion by a quarter. No extra today."

Jagarnath put half the handful of bran back into the vessel.

"Half?"

"Half."

They laughed again.

The work of the cattle shed had now become less an argument and more a negotiation.

How much fodder.

How much rest.

Whose rope where.

How many times which calf should be allowed near its mother.

When a cow's milk fell, what should be checked first.

Naresh kept the numbers.

Jagarnath kept the signs.

One day Naresh asked his father,

"How did you name all the cows?"

"As they seemed to me."

"Kajri is black, that makes sense. Dhauri is white. Phulwa has a flower-like mark on her forehead. But Supti?"

Jagarnath laughed.

"When she was little, she slept all day."

"And Jhumki?"

"The end of her tail looked like a tassel."

Naresh had written small numbers beside the names in the register.

1, 2, 3, 4.

One day Jagarnath asked,

"Have you run out of names?"

"No. Numbers are easier on medicine slips."

"Will the names remain?"

"They will."

That evening Naresh brought small iron tags.

On one side of each tag was a number; on the other, a name.

Jagarnath picked one up and read—

"4 — Supti."

"Both?"

"Both."

"Why?"

"One for you and one for me."

"What a foolish thing to say."

"Then?"

"Both are for her."

Naresh did not answer.

He hung the tag above the rope.

By the first week of Paush, the evenings had grown colder.

A thin layer of mist rose from the fields and drifted toward the cattle shed.

Jagarnath now wrapped himself in a thick blanket in the evenings.

Naresh placed dry fodder in the troughs.

One day the electricity went out.

The courtyard went dark.

Naresh began reading the register by the light of his phone.

Jagarnath said,

"Lower the light. The animals are getting frightened."

Naresh lowered the light.

It was difficult to record the milk quantities in the dark.

"Leave it today?" Jagarnath said.

"No."

"Why?"

"If we leave one day, tomorrow we'll say two days."

Jagarnath leaned his stick against a post.

"Then I say milk them first. The numbers can come later."

They began working in the dark.

The sound of milking was clear.

Milk fell into the bucket in a stream.

The cows' breathing.

The rubbing of the calves' ropes.

The crackle of dry straw.

Jhumki's low call.

Supti's answer.

For the first time Naresh felt that even without seeing, half the condition of the cattle shed could be understood by sound.

The milking ended.

The light was switched on again.

Naresh wrote down the measurements.

In the "Observation" column Jagarnath wrote—

"All calm in the dark."

Naresh read it and laughed.

"Is this useful for the register?"

Jagarnath said,

"You'll understand tomorrow if it is dark again."

Naresh did not erase it.

By the time Magh approached, the board had filled up.

Old figures were erased and new ones written.

But there were some remarks Naresh would not allow to be erased.

"Supti — calm when Jhumki is beside her."

"Birni — eats less straw that has been damp."

"Phulwa — check the left foot."

"Jhumki — little milk, but a different use within the herd."

Jagarnath read the last line.

"Who wrote this 'different use'?"

"I did."

"It isn't clear."

"Then you write it."

Jagarnath took the chalk.

He erased the old line.

He wrote a new one—

"Jhumki — keep her with Supti; the calves heed her."

Naresh read it.

"It's long."

"Truth can be long."

"The register is small."

"Then make a bigger register."

Two days later Naresh brought a thick paper file from the market.

On the first page he wrote—

"Evening at the Cattle Shed."

Jagarnath asked,

"The register has a name too?"

"I gave it one."

"Why evening?"

"Because the arguments happen in the evening."

Jagarnath burst into laughter.

For a moment all the cows in the cattle shed raised their heads and looked.

Naresh laughed too.

Then he drew two broad columns on the first page.

On the left he wrote—

"Measure."

On the right he wrote—

"Observation."

Jagarnath asked,

"What goes in the middle?"

"In the middle?"

"What is neither a measurement nor merely an observation."

Naresh thought for a while.

Then he left a narrow blank space between the two columns.
"Here?"
Jagarnath said,
"We'll understand that later."
That evening the sun was red.
Smoke lay across the empty fields.
Somewhere in the distance, stubble was burning.
Inside the cattle shed, Jhumki was chewing the cud.
Supti stood calmly beside her.
Phulwa was bearing her weight evenly on her left foot.
Birni was eating the older dry straw.
Naresh measured the milk and wrote it down.
Jagarnath kept looking over the animals' bodies.
After a while Naresh held out the file to him.
"You write today's observation."
Jagarnath took a pen, not chalk.
Slowly he wrote—
"Evening fine."
Naresh read it.
"Only this much?"
"This much today."
"Nothing special?"
"Nothing being special is also something."
Naresh looked at the left-hand column of the page.
All the numbers were normal.
He looked at the right-hand column.
Only two words—"Evening fine."
The narrow blank space in the middle was still empty.
Naresh did not try to fill it.
Outside, the darkness was deepening.
Jagarnath picked up his stick.
"Come, let's eat."
Naresh closed the file.
He checked the ropes in the cattle shed once more.
Jhumki and Supti stood side by side.
Both the number and the name shone on the iron tag.
Naresh turned off the light.
In the darkness, the first sound was Jhumki's slow chewing of the cud.

Then Supti's breathing.
And after that, nothing.
The evening really was fine.

STORY 228

The Mango Orchard

It was the first week of Jeth.

Noon had not yet fully risen, but the dust on Belahi's unpaved road had begun to turn pale in the light.

The car from the city stopped beside the mango orchard.

Amarnath got out first.

Then his wife Kavita and their daughter Richa.

The driver pulled the car to the side of the road in search of shade.

Amarnath took a folded paper from his pocket.

Three figures were written on it.

The total area of the land.

The agreed price per kattha.

And the date of registration.

Kavita asked, "Will Badri Kaka be here?"

Amarnath looked at his watch.

"He said he would be in the orchard."

Richa looked inside the orchard.

Mango trees stretched far into the distance.

Some trees were heavy with fruit; some had very little.

Some branches rested on bamboo supports.

Dry leaves, small unripe mangoes, and branches broken by the previous night's storm lay on the ground.

It was Richa's first visit to this orchard.

She had lived in the city since birth.

She had heard stories about her grandfather's house, but the house had been sold five years earlier.

Only the orchard had remained.

"Is it this big?" she asked.

Folding the paper, Amarnath said, "It is as large as the papers say."

Then a voice came from inside.

"Trees do not become more or fewer because of what a paper says."

Badri Mahato emerged carrying a bamboo basket.

An old gamchha was draped around his body.

There was mud on his feet.

Behind him, a teenage boy came dragging a broken branch.

Amarnath smiled.

"Kaka, I was talking about the acreage."

"The acreage is correct."

Badri set the basket on the ground.

"The accounting of the trees is separate."

Amarnath paid no attention to the remark.

"Where is Devkinandan Babu?"

"He should be coming."

"He'll have the measurements checked again today, and the papers will be ready tomorrow."

Badri looked at the folded paper in Amarnath's hand.

"Does the paper also say anything about this year's mangoes?"

Amarnath paused.

"The mangoes?"

"Yes."

"The mangoes belong to the orchard."

"The orchard belongs to you."

Badri spoke softly.

"But this year's fruit has already been contracted out."

Kavita turned toward him.

"How?"

Badri took a small oil-stained cloth pouch from inside the basket.

Inside it was a folded receipt.

There was writing in blue ink on the paper.

At the top was a date from the month of Phagun.

Below it was written: twenty-five thousand rupees in advance for this year's mangoes from sixty-two fruit-bearing trees.

In the place for the signature was the name of Amarnath's father, Shyamanand Jha.

Amarnath read the paper twice.

"Babuji never told me about this."

Badri did not reply.

Kavita asked, "Is that his signature?"

Amarnath held the paper up toward the sunlight.

"It looks like his."

Richa asked, "Why sixty-two trees? There are more than that here."

Badri motioned for her to walk farther inside.

"Come, I'll show you."

In the first row of the orchard, thin white rings of lime marked the trunks of some trees.

Others had no rings.

Badri placed a hand on one tree.

"This is a Dasheri. It has little fruit this year."

He pointed to another tree.

"This is a Maldah. This one is included in the deal."

A branch on a third tree was dry.

"This one hasn't been right for three years."

Richa noticed a small red thread tied around a trunk.

"What is this thread?"

"The fruit trader's man tied it."

Amarnath frowned.

"Kaka, I think Babuji must only have taken some money, and the rest would have been settled later."

"Yes."

"Then once the orchard is sold, we can settle the account."

Badri looked at him.

"The account of the money can be settled."

"Then?"

"Fruit is not money."

Amarnath fell silent.

Badri walked on.

In the middle of the orchard stood a small old brick platform.

An earthen water pot had been kept there.

An inverted brass bowl rested on top of the pot.

Badri drank some water.

Then he said, "Raghunath Sah made the deal after looking at the fruit in Phagun."

"He paid twenty-five thousand."

"Since then, medicines, guarding, bamboo, labour—some expenses have been his, some mine."

"If the crop is poor, the loss is his."

"If it is good, the profit is his."

"The land still remains yours."

Amarnath said, "But after registration the land will belong to Devkinandan Babu."

"That is why I asked whether the papers say anything about the mangoes."

From the road in the distance came the sound of a motorcycle.

A few moments later Raghunath Sah arrived.

He was of medium build.

A white gamchha was wrapped around his head.

He carried a small ledger.

He greeted Amarnath respectfully.

"How is Babuji's health?"

"He is not keeping well."

"I called twice."

"He does not talk much these days."

Raghunath nodded.

Then he asked directly, "Badri Kaka showed you the receipt?"

"He did."

"I have to pay the remaining amount when the fruit is harvested."

Amarnath asked, "What if I sell the orchard tomorrow?"

Raghunath closed his ledger.

"Sell the land."

"I have not bought the land."

"I have contracted this year's fruit."

"Will the new owner accept that?"

"That is a question for you to ask him."

His tone was not harsh.

But the point was direct.

Kavita spoke in between.

"And if the new owner does not accept it?"

Raghunath looked at the trees for a while.

"Then I will take the loss."

"Only the twenty-five thousand?"

"Twenty-five thousand was only the advance."

"Add the medicines, smoke treatment, labour twice, bamboo—everything spent so far."

Badri said, "And four nights of guarding during storms."

Raghunath looked at him.

"That is Badri Kaka's labour."

"I will pay him separately for that."

For the first time Richa understood that three different accounts were running within the same orchard.

The account of the land.

The account of the fruit.

And the account of guarding it.

The same trees appeared in all three.

But in each account, the trees were not the same kind of thing.

By noon Devkinandan Chaudhary arrived.

Two men who took measurements came with him.

Devkinandan did business between the town and the village.

He was more interested in the acreage than in the orchard itself.

Driving a bamboo stake at the boundary, he asked, "From here, how far north does it go?"

Badri pointed to an old shisham tree in the distance.

"In a straight line with the shisham."

The surveyor stretched the measuring cord.

Devkinandan told Amarnath, "If registration is tomorrow, we'll begin putting up the fence the day after."

Raghunath was standing there.

"Put up the fence."

Devkinandan looked at him.

"You?"

"I have contracted this year's fruit."

Devkinandan laughed.

"I am buying the land with the trees on it."

"Buy the land with the trees."

Raghunath said.

"The fruit has already been sold."

The laughter stopped.

Amarnath held out the receipt.

Devkinandan read it.

"This was a private arrangement made by your Babuji."

Amarnath said, "The arrangement concerns the fruit of the orchard."

"But I agreed to the sale price after seeing an orchard full of fruit."

At that, Amarnath fell silent.

It was true.

When the price had been agreed, Devkinandan had come to inspect the fruit.

Amarnath had been in the city.

Badri had shown him the trees.

Kavita asked softly, "So you did not know about this arrangement either?"

Devkinandan said, "No one told me."

Badri looked uncomfortable for the first time.

"I thought the owners would know."

Amarnath said, "I did not know."

Raghunath said, "I thought the buyer would be told later."

The four of them looked at one another.

Richa quietly sat down on the brick platform.

No koel called in the orchard.

There was only the faint rustle of leaves.

Somewhere in the distance came the sound of a hoe striking earth.

Devkinandan said, "Then the price will have to be negotiated again."

Amarnath said at once, "The price has already been settled."

"With the fruit."

"The paper does not mention the fruit."

"It mentions the trees."

"The trees and this year's fruit are not the same thing."

Devkinandan did not smile.

"Is this how you buy land in the city?"

Amarnath's tone changed.

"Do not speak to me as though I am some city outsider."

Badri stepped back two paces.

Kavita looked toward Richa.

She understood that the matter could now move from fruit to pride.

She said, "First let us understand how many days it will take to harvest the fruit."

Raghunath said, "The main crop, fifteen to twenty days."

"All of it?"

"No."

"Some trees are late-bearing."

"Until the end of Jeth."

Devkinandan asked, "Then for a month I am not to do any work on my own land?"

"Measure the boundary."

Raghunath said.

"Put up the fence."

"But do not cut or prune the fruit-bearing trees."

Devkinandan narrowed his eyes.

"I am not planning to cut the trees now."

It was the first time everyone realized that no one had clearly asked why he was buying the orchard.

Amarnath asked, "Will you keep the orchard?"

Devkinandan said, "Some of the trees."

"I am thinking of building a storage shed in the vacant portion to the south."

"The old trees on the north side will remain."

Badri looked at him closely for the first time.

"Water stands longer in the north."

Devkinandan said, "So?"

"The south is better for a storage shed."

Devkinandan said nothing.

By afternoon the measurement was complete.

The figures were written down on paper.

Raghunath checked the number of trees again in his ledger.

Badri showed all sixty-two trees one by one.

Richa walked along with them.

She noticed that the red threads were not tied at the same height on every trunk.

Some trunks were thick.

Some were so slender that they hardly seemed old enough to be called trees.

Two green mangoes lay beneath one tree.

Richa picked one up.

Badri said, "That fell from one of the contracted trees."

Richa turned the mango in her hand.

"Then does this belong to Raghunath Kaka?"

Raghunath laughed.

"I do not claim fallen green mangoes."

"Why not?"

"If I did, I would have to carry home baskets full of windfall green mangoes."

Richa placed the mango on the platform.

By evening the discussion still had no conclusion.

Devkinandan said the price should be reduced somewhat.

Amarnath did not agree.

Raghunath said that if he was to give up the fruit, the advance, expenses, and expected profit would have to be added together and settled.

Devkinandan did not agree to that.

Badri, in between, kept talking only about the trees.

"The first picking will be in three days."

"If a strong wind comes, the date will change."

"The fruit on four trees to the north will ripen late."

All this irritated Amarnath.

What he saw was Monday's registration, the train back to the city, and his leave from the office.

Raghunath saw the mango season.

Devkinandan saw the land coming into his possession.

Badri saw the trees.

That night they all stayed in the old village house.

The house no longer belonged to the family.

Its new owner lived in the city and had opened one room for them as guests.

Spreading a sheet on the charpoy, Kavita said, "I thought selling the orchard would be a two-day matter."

Amarnath said, "If Babuji had told me this earlier, there would have been no complication."

Richa asked, "Why did Dada sell the mangoes?"

"He must have done it every year."

"I did not even know."

"Why did you need to know?"

Richa fell silent.

After a while she said, "Then why do I need to know that the orchard is being sold?"

Amarnath did not answer.

Kavita kept looking at an old nail on the wall.

A photograph must once have hung there.

Now only a pale square remained.

In the middle of the night, the wind grew strong.

Leaves rustled across the tiled roof.

From the direction of the distant orchard came the knocking of bamboo.

At dawn Badri knocked on the door.

"Some fruit fell in the storm."

Amarnath got up irritably.

"How much?"

"We should go and see."

They all reached the orchard.

Mangoes were scattered across the ground.

Not many.

But enough to fill five or six baskets.

Raghunath was already there.

Two of his labourers were gathering the fruit.

Devkinandan had also arrived.

Looking at the fallen mangoes, he said, "This is why I say the price was fixed with the fruit included."

Raghunath said, "And this is why I say the risk was mine."

The two faced each other again.

Badri kept lifting the baskets.

Richa saw that the mangoes that had been on the branches yesterday were on the ground today.

The land was still where it had been.

The question of ownership was still where it had been.

But in a single night, the fruit had changed its condition.

She said to Kavita, "Ma, land papers do not change this quickly, do they?"

Kavita smiled.

"No."

"Fruit changes."

"Yes."

"Then it must be difficult to write both in the same line."

Kavita looked at her.

"That is why people write many lines."

The morning light grew stronger.

Badri sorted the fallen fruit.

The unripe ones separately.

The bruised ones separately.

The sound fruit separately.

Raghunath's labourers were marking the baskets.

Devkinandan was asking the surveyor something about the boundary.

Amarnath sat on the brick platform with the receipt and the draft sale deed open before him.

Both sheets of paper fluttered in the wind.

On the small sheet were the fruits of sixty-two trees.

On the larger sheet was the entire land.

Suddenly Amarnath called Badri.

"Kaka."

"Yes?"

"How much of your guarding payment for this year is still due?"

Badri set down the basket.

"Why now?"

"Tell me."

Badri did not answer at once.

"Raghunath will pay me after the fruit is harvested."

From a distance Raghunath said, "I will pay him."

Amarnath asked, "How much?"

Raghunath opened his ledger.

"The two labourers are separate."

"Six thousand is still due to Badri Kaka for guarding."

"And the medicines?"

"That is my expense."

Amarnath wrote six thousand on the paper.

Devkinandan came closer.

"Are we making a new account now?"

"No."

Amarnath said.

"We are clearing the old account."

"I will not reduce the price."

Devkinandan said, "Then the fruit?"

"Raghunath Sah will take the fruit from the sixty-two marked trees this year."

"Until the end of Jeth."

"Until then Badri Kaka will look after the fruit and the trees."

"You may measure the boundary, put up the fence, and begin work on the vacant southern portion."

"No cutting on the fruit-bearing trees to the north until the end of Jeth."

Devkinandan thought for a while.

"And if a branch breaks in a storm?"

Badri said, "If it must be cut for safety, cut it."

"But tell me first."

Devkinandan looked at Badri.

"You will tell me?"

"The land will be yours."

"The fruit this year belongs to someone else."

"The tree stands in between."

For the first time Devkinandan laughed.

"The tree is in a bad position."

Badri laughed too.

"A tree is always in between."

On the day of registration, two additional lines were added to the draft.

The fruit from the sixty-two identified trees for this year shall be harvested under the prior arrangement until the end of Jeth.

Until that period, access to the orchard by the fruit trader and the keeper shall not be obstructed.

Devkinandan added one more line.

If any tree or the new fence is damaged during the harvesting of the fruit, the fruit trader shall compensate for the damage.

Raghunath read it and said, "Fine."

Badri could not read.

Amarnath read the lines aloud to him.

Badri only asked, "Is the keeper mentioned in the paper?"

"Yes."

"Then it is fine."

The registration was completed in the afternoon.

The money reached the account.

In his mind Amarnath calculated how much of the remaining loan on the city house could now be repaid.

Kavita thought about the next expense for her mother's treatment.

Richa sat in the shade of a neem tree outside the registration office.

Before returning, they all went to the orchard once more.

This time Devkinandan walked in front.

His men had planted new bamboo stakes along the boundary.

A red cloth had been tied to one of the stakes.

Inside that red marker began the old rows of mango trees.

Raghunath's man was checking again the threads tied to the sixty-two trees.

Badri was sawing off a dry branch.

Amarnath asked, "Kaka, after the end of Jeth?"

Badri stopped the saw.

"Then?"

"The guarding?"

Badri looked toward Devkinandan.

Devkinandan said, "I will need a man."

"But the account will be new."

Badri said, "Accounts are always new."

Amarnath said nothing.

Richa went to the tree beneath which she had picked up the green mango the day before.

The mango was no longer on the platform.

Perhaps someone had picked it up.

Perhaps it had rotted.

Perhaps some child had carried it away.

She did not look for it.

As the car was about to leave, Badri brought a small bag.

Kavita asked, "What is it?"

"Fallen mangoes."

From a distance Raghunath called out, "Those are not in my account."

Devkinandan burst out laughing.

Badri placed the bag in the car.

"These are from yesterday's storm."

Amarnath asked, "Who owns these?"

Badri said, "Whoever eats them."

The car started moving.

The orchard receded behind them.

The red boundary cloth flashed once, then disappeared among the trees.

Richa opened the bag.

The mangoes were still unripe.

She held one to her nose.

There was a faint fragrance.

In Amarnath's bag was the large registration document.

Inside it he had also kept the small receipt that had come out of Badri's old pouch.

Kavita asked, "Why are you taking that receipt with you?"

Amarnath said, "I'll show it to Babuji."

"But the account has been settled."

"Yes."

After a moment he said, "Still, I'll keep it."

Richa kept looking out of the window.

On both sides of the road lay empty paddy fields.

Behind them, in the orchard, the owner of the land had changed.

The fruit still belonged to the old deal.

The keeper was still there.

And the wind of Jeth knew the name of none of the three.

STORY 229

The Current of the Kamla

Bhado was drawing to a close.

This time the Kamla was not flowing past the eastern side of the village; it had cut across the south-eastern corner.

As a child wipes away a chalk line with the palm and draws it somewhere else, so the river had shifted its bank.

Sand gleamed in the bed of the old channel.

The earth beside the new current was still wet.

When a foot was set upon it, the heel sank half an inch.

Sudama Yadav was walking towards the ghat with three bamboo stakes tucked beneath his arm.

Behind him came his nephew Neeraj, carrying the measuring rope.

Neeraj lived in the city.

This year he had come to the village at his father's insistence.

The reason was land.

Six katthas on paper.

How much on the ground—that had been discussed at home for three days.

Sudama said, "River land is easy to measure on paper."

Neeraj replied, "And without paper, how do we know the land has been measured at all?"

Sudama smiled.

"You'll see this time."

Across the ghat stood an old silk-cotton tree.

Fifteen years earlier, Sudama's father had driven the first survey peg in line with that tree.

The peg was gone.

The tree remained.

That was why Sudama still treated the tree as the first marker for measurement.

But this time the river no longer lay between the silk-cotton tree and the field.

It had shifted far to the south of the tree.

There was sand through the middle of the old channel, and reeds had sprung up amid the sand.

Neeraj stretched out the rope.

"From here?"

Sudama said, "First take the line of the silk-cotton tree."

"But the bank is over there."

"The bank is over there today."

Neeraj looked at him.

Sudama drove a bamboo stake into the ground.

"The river's today and the paper's yesterday are not the same thing."

A woman's voice came from a distance.

"Driving the pegs again?"

It was Phoolo Devi.

Her field adjoined Sudama's.

She was coming with an empty basket balanced on her head.

Phoolo's husband had died three years earlier.

Since then she had managed the field accounts herself.

She came closer and looked at the bamboo stake.

"So my field must have grown this time too?"

Neeraj laughed.

"The river has moved back, so consider the land increased."

Phoolo did not laugh.

"Whose is the increased land?"

Neeraj's laughter stopped.

Sudama said, "That is precisely why land is measured."

Phoolo set the basket down on the sand.

"Measure it, but remember the old division."

Sudama looked at her for a moment.

"I brought the bamboo precisely for remembering."

Ramvilas, the village surveyor, was expected by noon.

It was not an official survey.

For now they were only matching the old markers so the household could understand the situation.

Neeraj opened a photograph of the land register on his phone.

The plot number was clear.

The boundary was written there—north: the current of the Kamla.

The whole dispute had caught on those four words.

"North: the current of the Kamla."

If the current shifted, did the northern boundary shift too?

Phoolo said, "My father-in-law used to say the boundary ran from tree to tree."

Neeraj asked, "Are the trees written in the document?"

"The document was never read out to me."

"Then?"

"The field has been read."

Sudama remained silent.

He did not like what Phoolo had said, yet it did not seem wrong either.

In the older way of farming, boundaries often depended less on paper and more on memory.

Which thorn tree stood on which ridge.

Where whose oxen used to turn.

From where whose first row of transplanting began.

All of that was recorded in people's minds.

The river read no such register.

It simply cut, abandoned, and cut again.

Ramvilas arrived at noon.

He carried a measuring tape, an old survey notebook, and a small red-cloth pouch.

He first looked at the silk-cotton tree.

Then at the bamboo stake.

Then at the new current.

"Whose measurement do you want?"

Neeraj said at once, "Whether the full six katthas are there or not."

Phoolo said, "And where my boundary is."

Sudama said, "First recover the old line."

Ramvilas listened to all three requests.

He said, "There are three questions. One measurement will not answer all three."

Neeraj frowned.

"But the land is only one."

With his foot Ramvilas drew three small lines in the sand.

"One—the area entered in the register."

A second line.

"Two—the old boundary markers."

A third line.

"Three—the land cultivable at present."

He lifted his foot.

"On land by a river, these three are often not the same."

Neeraj said, "Then how are we supposed to sell it?"

Sudama slowly turned his eyes towards him.

It was the first time Neeraj had spoken openly of selling.

At home he had spoken only of 'clearing up the account.'

Phoolo turned her head towards Neeraj.

"Sell?"

Winding the rope, Neeraj said, "Father wants to clear the loan on the house in the city."

Sudama said nothing.

He had not been unaware of this.

But beside the river, the word sounded different to him.

Ramvilas began his work.

The first bamboo stake was set in line with the silk-cotton tree.

From there they measured to the remains of the old ridge.

Half the ridge had been eaten away.

On the half that remained were two clumps of doob grass.

Pointing to one clump, Phoolo said, "My transplanting used to turn here."

Sudama said, "So did mine."

Ramvilas did not laugh.

"The two fields adjoined each other. Both rows turned here."

He continued writing down the measurements.

Neeraj entered the figures on his phone.

A little farther on, the rope fell across the sand of the old channel.

No one cultivated there.

There were only reeds and timber washed down by the last flood.

Neeraj said, "But this is land."

Phoolo said, "It may be, by Jeth."

"What is it now?"

"Sand the river has left behind."

Sudama said, "If it stays for two years, it will become a field."

Neeraj was dissatisfied.

"The register says six katthas. I want a measurement."

Ramvilas said, "I am giving you a measurement, not a verdict."

They moved on.

By the time they reached the new current, the measuring tape lay across wet earth.

The river water was not clear.

The faintly muddy current slowly licked at the eroding bank.

Neeraj took off his shoes.

He had imagined the river had shifted a great distance away.

But standing on the bank of the new current, he understood that the river had not gone far; it had merely carried its question elsewhere.

Ramvilas did not drive a stake at the water's edge.

Neeraj asked, "No marker here?"

"Who knows where a marker beside water will be tomorrow?"

Five hands back from the bank, he drove in a short stake.

"This is only today's witness."

Phoolo said, "So the northern edge of my field is here too?"

Ramvilas said, "The cultivable ground ends here. The old boundary was not here."

"Then my land has become smaller?"

"The ground has become smaller. The question of rights is different."

Neeraj immediately asked, "And what about the sand that has appeared in the old channel?"

Ramvilas looked at him.

"Have you cultivated it yet?"

"No."

"Any ridge?"

"No."

"Any fixed marker?"

"No."

"Then do not force it into a box on the paper yet."

Neeraj fell silent.

The noon sun was fierce.

They all sat in the shade of the silk-cotton tree.

Phoolo took sattu from her basket.

She looked at the three men.

"Have some."

Neeraj refused at first.

Then he accepted.

Sudama held out a lota of water.

For a little while no one spoke of land.

A crow cawed from the silk-cotton tree.

Wind moved over the sand of the old channel.

The reeds bent to one side.

Ramvilas opened his survey notebook.

"According to the old measurement, Sudama's share is six katthas."

Neeraj sat upright.

"And cultivable now?"

Ramvilas looked at the figures.

"About four katthas and sixteen dhurs."

Neeraj's face changed.

"So little?"

"Erosion has taken the rest."

Phoolo asked, "Mine?"

"Your register says five katthas and eight dhurs. Cultivable now, about four katthas and twelve dhurs."

Phoolo remained grave.

"So both have shrunk."

Ramvilas said, "On this bank, yes."

Neeraj looked towards the sand of the old channel.

"If we add that?"

Ramvilas closed the notebook.

"You are in a hurry to make the number whole."

Neeraj replied, "My sale price will depend on area."

For the first time Sudama spoke sharply. "Why should land that is not yet a field fetch the price of a field?"

Neeraj too grew irritated.

"It is ours on paper."

Phoolo cut in, "On paper, the current of the Kamla is also the boundary."

All three fell silent.

The river was not loud.

Yet in that silence it could be heard clearly.

Ramvilas said softly, "That is why documents have to be read differently beside a river."

Neeraj stood up.

"I want a clear answer."

Ramvilas too rose.

"A clear answer will come from the court, the circle office, the old survey, the new survey—all of them together. Today I am showing you the land."

Neeraj said, "Then today's measurement is useless?"

Sudama kept looking at him.

Winding the tape, Ramvilas said, "It becomes useless only when you treat one number as the whole truth."

Phoolo picked up her basket.

"What I understood today is simply this: the river eats both our fields, and the quarrel will be between the two of us."

Sudama gave a faint laugh.

Neeraj did not.

They turned back towards home.

Near the old ridge, Sudama stopped.

He did not step on the clump of doob grass.

Neeraj had walked ahead.

Sudama called him back.

"Look at this."

Neeraj turned.

Sudama scraped at the soil.

A small piece of brick emerged from within.

"This was the corner of the old ridge."

Neeraj bent to look.

"What does that prove?"

"Nothing."

Sudama put the brick back where it had been.

"Only that land too has a memory."

In the evening the survey notebook was opened again in the courtyard.

Neeraj's father, Shyamsundar, joined by phone from the city.

He kept asking the same question.

"Are the six katthas there or not?"

Before answering, Neeraj looked at Sudama.

Ramvilas had already left.

Phoolo too had gone home.

Only Sudama, Neeraj, and the old papers remained in the courtyard.

Neeraj said, "The register says six katthas."

Shyamsundar asked, "On the ground?"

Neeraj paused briefly.

"Four katthas and sixteen dhurs are cultivable."

There was silence at the other end.

Then came the question, "The rest?"

Neeraj said, "Some has gone in erosion, some lies as sand in the old channel."

Irritated, Shyamsundar said, "Then add the sand and measure it."

Sudama lowered his eyes.

Neeraj did not agree as quickly as he would have before.

"It is not stable yet."

"Land is land."

Neeraj said quietly, "Beside a river, it is not that simple."

Sudama looked at him.

Shyamsundar said, "I sent you to the village to measure land, not to study philosophy."

Neeraj's face tightened.

He did not answer.

The call ended.

It rained at night.

Not heavily.

But enough for a steady patter to sound on the roof.

At dawn Sudama went alone towards the river.

Neeraj followed behind him.

The bamboo stake set up yesterday as 'today's witness' had tilted.

A thin slice of earth had fallen from the bank during the night.

The bamboo was now very close to the water.

Neeraj said nothing.

Neither did Sudama.

The two stood beside the tilted bamboo.

A little later Phoolo came too.

She looked at the bank.

"In one night?"

Sudama said, "In one night."

Phoolo looked towards her field.

"So yesterday's measurement is already old?"

Neeraj said quietly, "Not the area. The line of the bank."

Phoolo looked at him.

"You understand the difference now?"

Neeraj smiled.

"A little."

He took a small notebook from under his arm.

Yesterday he had written only figures.

Today, beneath the figures, he wrote three separate headings—

"Area in the register."

"Cultivable at present."

"Portion changing because of the river."

Sudama read them.

"You'll show all three to the buyer?"

Neeraj said, "Yes."

"The price will fall."

"It may."

"Then?"

Neeraj looked towards the new current.

"What is the point of adding a price for what we do not understand?"

Phoolo started towards her field.

As she went, she said, "Write my measurement in three boxes too."

Neeraj said, "I will."

Sudama stepped forward to straighten the bamboo.

Neeraj stopped his hand.

"Leave it."

"It is crooked."

"Even so."

Sudama asked, "Why?"

Neeraj said, "Where it stood yesterday and where it stands today—that too is a measurement."

For a while the two of them looked at the tilted bamboo.

The current of the Kamla flowed slowly on.

It completed no one's six katthas.

Nor did it preserve anyone's five katthas and eight dhurs.

It only made its own course.

And beside it, people went on drawing their own lines—on paper, on earth, and in memory.

STORY 230

The Scent of Paddy

On a Kartik evening, the first thing Anil smelled as he stepped off the bus was dust.

At the village turn, the old tea stall beneath the peepal tree was gone. In its place stood two new shops with tin awnings.

Seven years earlier, when he had last come home at harvest time, bullock carts still turned at this bend. Now motorcycles passed again and again, throwing up dust.

Anil tucked his small bag under his arm and took the footpath.

It should have taken him fifteen minutes to reach the house. But at the first bend he stopped.

The scent of paddy was coming from the distant fields.

It was not the scent as it lived in his memory.

In memory, the scent of paddy was warm—mingled with afternoon sun, straw, dung, dust, and the smell of his mother's sari-end.

Now there was more of wet leaves and the greenness of cut stalks in it.

Anil drew one deep breath.

Suddenly he remembered the warehouse in the city where he counted bundles of cloth. During the rains, when trucks arrived with damp sacks, the mingled smell of raw cotton and moisture was something like this.

He smiled.

In seven years, even the smells of the village had begun, inside him, to ask for comparison with some room in the city.

When he entered the courtyard, his mother, Saraswati Devi, looked first at the bag, then at her son.

"Such a small bag?"

"I'm here for three days."

"Three days?"

Anil laughed. "The factory wouldn't give me five days' leave. Two days will go in travel."

His mother's smile grew smaller at once.

On the veranda his father, Parmanand Jha, sat on an old woven munj stool. A warm cloth was tied above his right knee.

"So you've come?"

"Yes."

"Just in time."

Anil understood that this was not a welcome but information.

His younger brother Rajesh came out from inside.

The boy who, seven years earlier, used to steal Anil's kurta and wear it was now a man of his height.

There was a sickle in Rajesh's hand.

"Harvest starts at dawn tomorrow," Rajesh said.

"By machine?"

"Half is already done by machine. There's water in the western corner. The machine can't enter there. One and a half bighas will be cut by hand."

Anil put down his bag.

"I'll come too."

Rajesh looked at his palm.

"With that hand?"

Anil looked at his own palm as well.

Friction from cloth bundles, ropes, and boxes had hardened it, but gripping a sickle was another matter.

"It's a hand," he said.

Rajesh said nothing.

At dinner that night, talk of the harvest kept returning.

Mother asked, "How many labourers are coming?"

Rajesh said, "Six are fixed. Budhni Kaki will bring four women. There'll be two men."

Father said, "He'll be the seventh."

He looked at Anil.

Anil laughed. "I'm not the seventh. I'm family."

Mixing rice on his plate, Father said, "When a hand works a sickle, the hand may belong to the family, but the work is labour."

Rajesh looked at Father for a moment, then at his plate.

Anil noticed the glance.

"Why count me in the wage calculation?"

Father said evenly, "The field belongs to both brothers. The expense falls on both brothers. Whoever gives labour, his labour will be recorded too."

The morsel in Anil's mouth stopped.

"And the money I send?"

"That is recorded too."

Rajesh again said nothing.

After dinner Father went inside and returned with a thin file.

The file held pages of farm accounts—seed, fertilizer, ploughing, pump, machine, wages, sacks, transport.

On some pages amounts were written against Anil's name.

On others, the amounts against Rajesh's name were smaller, but beside them were short notes—"three days at the pump," "opened the drain," "night watch," "with the paddy transplanting."

Anil kept turning the pages.

"The value of all these days isn't written."

Father said, "That's what I'm saying. This time we'll write it."

Rajesh suddenly said, "Not everything can be written."

Parmanand looked at him. "Why?"

"How many times I went to the field, how many times I checked the water, how many times cattle got in—will we count all of it?"

"Then why count money?" Father asked.

Rajesh fell silent.

Anil closed the file.

It seemed to him that on his first night home after seven years, the smell rising most sharply was not the scent of paddy but the smell of these old pages.

He rose at five in the morning.

Rajesh was already in the courtyard.

He was examining the edge of a sickle.

"This is for you," he said, holding out an old sickle to Anil.

"Why an old one?"

"A new sickle will cut your hand."

Anil laughed. "An old one won't?"

"An old one gives warning first."

The two brothers set off for the field together.

In the morning mist the paddy field was not a single colour. Here it was golden, there green, elsewhere muddy. The western corner really was wet. Their feet sank in.

Where the machine had cut the day before, short stalks stood at an even height.

In the section that had to be cut by hand, the paddy bent low.

Budhni Kaki arrived with five others.

Anil greeted her respectfully.

"Will the city babu take up a sickle?" she laughed.

"Today I will."

"Tomorrow we'll inspect your palm."

Everyone laughed.

The work began.

Within the first five minutes Anil understood that cutting paddy was much simpler in memory than in the hand.

Grip a fistful of stalks with the left hand, draw the sickle with the right, lay the cut paddy in one direction, watch where you place your feet, and do not slow the person behind you.

His first fistful was only half cut before it snagged.

From behind, Rajesh said, "Not force. Change the angle."

Anil changed the angle.

The stalks came through.

After ten minutes his back began to protest against bending.

After half an hour, the hardness earned from old ropes in his palms proved useless.

After an hour he understood that standing eight hours in the city and bending two hours in a field were two different kinds of exhaustion.

Budhni Kaki moved ahead of him.

Without appearing to hurry, she cut at twice his pace.

Anil watched her hands.

There was not a single unnecessary movement.

Rajesh was fast too, but every so often he stopped cutting to straighten a bundle, open a small channel to drain water from a wet patch, or inspect the edge of someone's sickle.

For the first time, Anil saw all these tasks inside the word "harvest."

By ten, the sun had grown fierce.

Mother sent water and flattened rice with jaggery.

Everyone sat on the field ridge.

Budhni Kaki looked at Anil's palm.

Blisters were rising in two places.

"Back to the city tomorrow?"

"The day after."

"Then these blisters will go to the city with you."

Anil laughed.

Rajesh did not.

He was looking toward the section cut by machine.

Anil asked, “What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Say it.”

Rajesh broke off a small piece of jaggery.

“Tomorrow Father will write today's day of yours in the file too.”

“Let him.”

“Will he write my whole year?”

Anil did not answer.

Rajesh said, “I don't want him to write it. But if he writes one day and leaves all the other days unwritten, the account will lean crooked.”

Anil said slowly, “Do you think that because I send money, I consider my share greater?”

Rajesh looked at him.

“I didn't say that.”

“But you feel it?”

Rajesh was silent for a while.

“Sometimes.”

Anil put the piece of jaggery into his mouth.

“Sometimes I feel that without me, where would the money for fertilizer, seed, and the pump come from?”

“You're right to feel that.”

“Then?”

“Both things can be true.”

From a distance Budhni Kaki called, “If the rest is over, the paddy won't cut itself.”

The brothers rose.

By noon Anil's pace had improved somewhat.

He now gripped smaller fistfuls.

A smaller fistful cut faster, though it made more bundles.

Rajesh said, “This is fine. Find your own pace.”

“Not yours?”

“Mine was made over seven years.”

Anil's sickle stopped for a moment.

Rajesh had probably said it without any second meaning. But the sentence sank deep inside Anil.

By evening only the last strip in the western corner remained.

The water there was below the knee, but the soil was soft.

That was why the machine operator had given up on it the day before.

Budhni Kaki's group said the wages for this patch would have to be separate.

Father had come to the ridge.

"We'll pay what was agreed," he said.

Budhni Kaki answered directly, "What was agreed was for dry ground. This will be cut in water."

Rajesh looked at Father.

Anil understood that the argument was about money, but he remembered days at the city factory when a bundle of wet goods weighed twice as much yet was counted as one bundle all the same.

He said, "The waterlogged patch is different."

Father looked at him.

"What do you know of it?"

Anil said quietly, "Today I'm learning."

Budhni Kaki did not laugh.

Neither did Rajesh.

After some discussion, an additional wage was fixed for the waterlogged strip.

Work began again.

This time Anil was at the very back.

His feet sank into the mud and came free again.

The stalks were wet.

The scent of paddy was stronger here.

For a moment Anil straightened and breathed in.

It was the same scent that had stopped him on the road the day before, but now there was less memory in it and more fatigue.

He liked that.

A scent did not have to be old in order to be beautiful.

By sunset the last strip had been cut.

All the bundles were brought to the ridge.

Budhni Kaki settled the wages with her group and left.

Anil, Rajesh, and Father remained.

The harvested field suddenly looked very large.

The boundary that had seemed clear while the paddy stood had now become rows of short stubble.

Father said, "Threshing tomorrow."

Anil was blowing on his palm.

"I'll stay."

"You leave the day after tomorrow."
"I'll stay until morning."
Rajesh looked at him but said nothing.
That night Father brought out the file again.
Today's wages were added to the expense page.
So was the extra amount for the waterlogged strip.
Then Father wrote—"Anil—1 day harvesting."
He left some space after it.
"The rate?" Anil asked.
"We'll decide tomorrow."
Rajesh stood by a pillar of the veranda.
Anil said, "Don't write a rate."
Father stopped his pen.
"Why?"
"Writing a price for one day won't make the account right."
"Then?"
Anil pulled the file toward himself.
He opened a new page.
At the top he wrote—"Money."
Beside it he wrote—"Days."
Then, after thinking, he made a third column.
Father asked, "What's this?"
Anil paused with the pen.
"What fits completely neither into money nor into days."
Rajesh came forward slowly.
"What's its name?"
Anil smiled.
"You name it."
Rajesh took the pen.
He stared at the empty column for a long time.
Then he wrote—"Care."
Anil read it.
"That's hard to measure too."
"So should we leave it blank?"
"No. Let it be written that this exists too."
Father kept looking at the file.
Perhaps he did not like the new page.
But he did not tear it out.

Mother called from inside, "The food is getting cold."

Rajesh reached to close the file.

Anil stopped him.

"One more thing."

"What?"

"The extra wages for Budhni Kaki's waterlogged patch today—that expense should not simply be split half-and-half between the two brothers."

Father frowned.

"Why?"

"The drainage channel in that patch stayed blocked this year. Rajesh opened it alone three times, and it filled again. If his work goes under 'care,' then mistakes should go in that column too. But living far away, I can't pay half the expense and claim equal responsibility just because I sent half the money."

Rajesh said at once, "The fault wasn't mine alone. The pump pipe was lying there."

Anil laughed.

"Then write that."

Rajesh laughed too.

Father smiled faintly for the first time.

"You two will turn the file into a book of stories."

Anil said, "The old pages tell quite a few stories already."

After dinner Anil prepared to sleep on the veranda.

On one side of the courtyard lay several wet bundles brought in from the harvest.

As the night deepened, their smell spread.

Anil's palm ached.

He rubbed into the blisters the mustard oil his mother had given him.

Rajesh sat down beside him.

"What do you do with these hands in the city?"

"Count bundles, tie them, lift them."

"How many bundles?"

"Depends on the day."

"Does your file there record your days?"

Anil laughed.

"There, they record hours."

"Care?"

"There is no such column."

The two were quiet for a while.

From somewhere far away came the low hum of a threshing machine.

Rajesh said, "At dawn tomorrow we'll turn the bundles. The paddy from the waterlogged patch is wet."

"I'll get up."

"The blisters?"

"With the blisters."

When Anil woke before dawn, the courtyard was not yet fully light.

Rajesh was already turning the bundles.

Without saying anything, Anil took hold of one side.

Together the brothers turned the bundles.

A steam-like smell rose from inside the wet paddy.

Anil drew another deep breath.

This time he thought neither of the city warehouse nor of his childhood seven years earlier.

He understood only that this paddy had been cut yesterday, had lain wet through the night, and had to be turned in the morning.

Rajesh asked, "What are you smelling?"

Anil said, "Paddy."

"You recognized it after so many years?"

Anil turned another bundle.

"Before, I was recognizing the wrong thing."

Rajesh asked, "What?"

Anil thought for a moment.

"I used to think the scent was home."

Rajesh looked at him.

Anil continued, "The scent belongs to the paddy. The reckoning of home is separate."

Rajesh said nothing.

He lifted another bundle.

The morning light kept growing.

The courtyard remained full of the scent of paddy.

The file lay closed on the table inside.

Its new page had three columns—money, days, care.

There was still a great deal of empty space in the third column.

The day after tomorrow Anil would return to the city.

Rajesh would remain with the fields.

The paddy would be threshed, sacks filled, half sold, half kept at home.

The accounts would be made again.

But this time money alone would not be counted.

And the scent of paddy—it would remain under its own name.

STORY 231

The Shade of a Tree

It was the last week of Jeth.

From early morning, the courtyard of Madhuban Primary School was filled with dust and the smell of lime.

A plan had been approved for two new classrooms, a toilet, a drinking-water tap, and an accessible ramp.

For three months, the headmistress, Saroja Jha, had grown weary of moving the paperwork for the work from office to office.

Now the contract had finally been awarded.

The sand had arrived.

The first truckload of bricks had also been unloaded.

At eight in the morning, the contractor, Vinod Mandal, arrived with two labourers, a mason, and a tin of red paint.

Junior engineer Amresh was with him.

Amresh carried the plan folded in his hand.

He began measuring from the northern corner of the school.

Saroja Jha watched from the veranda.

"The first room here," Amresh said.

He drew a straight line of lime on the ground.

"And the second here."

The second line ran up to the southern roots of the old peepal tree and stopped.

The peepal had stood there since before the school was built.

Its trunk was so thick that even three children with their arms spread could not encircle it completely.

One part of its root rose above the ground like a snake.

Another had broken through the old earthen platform and emerged outside it.

Amresh opened the plan again.

"The tree falls right in the middle here."

Vinod had already understood that.

He opened the tin of red paint.

Dipping the mason's brush into it, he painted a thick cutting mark on the peepal trunk.

Saroja Jha came down from the veranda.

"Is that the mark for cutting it?"

"Yes," Vinod said. "Otherwise the veranda will not sit straight."

Amresh added, "The drainage channel also has to pass along this side."

He showed her a blue-pencil line on the plan.

"If the tree remains, the drain will have to bend."

Saroja Jha said nothing.

She was remembering all the applications of the previous year.

Once the funds had been sanctioned and then sent back.

Once an objection had been raised over the measurement of the land.

Once the contractor had withdrawn before even beginning the work.

This time she wanted nothing that might stop the work again.

Just then Chhedi Paswan, the school's former attendant, entered through the gate.

Chhedi had retired five years earlier.

But his house was half a kos from the school, and he often wandered over here in the mornings.

Sometimes he checked the bell.

Sometimes he tightened the tap.

Sometimes he picked up papers the children had thrown away.

Saroja Jha saw him from a distance.

"Chhedi Kaka, look—the work is finally beginning."

Chhedi looked at the heap of bricks.

Then he looked at the peepal with the red mark on it.

For a while he remained silent.

Vinod saw his face and laughed.

"Kaka, if this is about worship or ritual, say so now. Don't have the work stopped later."

Chhedi looked at him.

"It is not about worship or ritual."

"Then?"

"Wait until the first rain."

Vinod burst out laughing.

"Does cutting a tree require permission from the rain?"

Chhedi looked again toward the roots of the peepal.

"Whether you cut the tree or leave it is for all of you to decide. But we still have to see where the water goes."

Amresh folded the plan.

"The drainage is shown on the plan."

Chhedi said, "Does the plan show where the water comes from?"

Amresh did not answer him at once.

Vinod put the brush back in the tin.

"Kaka, these are official measurements. Not guesses."

Chhedi smiled.

"Mine is not a guess either."

He walked to the western side of the peepal.

Between the roots he pointed out a low hollow.

In summer it was filled with dry leaves.

"Look here."

Amresh bent down.

"What?"

"The colour of the soil."

The soil in the hollow was darker than the rest of the courtyard.

Amresh scraped it with a finger.

Dry on top, somewhat hard beneath.

"What does that prove?"

Chhedi said, "In the rains, water from the northern fields enters here. When it reaches the roots it divides into two. One stream goes toward the gate, the other toward the old watercourse."

Vinod looked around.

"Where is the watercourse?"

Chhedi pointed toward the south-western corner of the school.

There, between two bushes and some grass, lay a slightly lower strip of ground.

In summer it looked like a footpath.

"That way."

Vinod said, "That is not a watercourse. It is empty ground."

Chhedi said, "In Jeth every watercourse looks like empty ground."

Saroja Jha intervened.

"Chhedi Kaka, has water ever entered the school because of this before?"

"Eight years ago."

Chhedi answered at once.

"The small embankment to the west had been raised. After three days of rain, the water came up to the veranda."

Saroja Jha had not been at the school that year.

"What happened then?"

"The embankment was cut open."

"Is anything written about it?"

Chhedi shook his head.

"The water went down, and the matter went down with it."

Amresh opened the plan again.

He compared the old building, the new rooms, and the proposed line of the drain.

The ground had been dry when the plan was drawn.

The courtyard had been recorded as almost level.

"No slope is shown here," he said.

Chhedi replied, "A slope does not form by looking at paper."

Vinod's face hardened slightly.

"There is a deadline for the work. If we wait until the rains, there will be trouble with the foundations."

Saroja Jha knew that too.

The foundations had to be filled within fifteen days.

She asked Amresh, "Is it necessary to cut the tree?"

Amresh said, "According to the approved plan, the corner of the veranda falls here. So does the drain. If we change it, the measurements will have to change again."

"By much?"

"We will have to see."

Vinod immediately said, "If it changes, the calculations for brick, cement, and labour will all change."

Chhedi quietly moved away.

He did not begin a campaign to save the tree.

He called no panchayat.

At noon the school meal was served.

As on an ordinary day, the children sat with their plates in the shade of the peepal.

The red cutting mark shone on the trunk.

Some children saw it and asked,

"Will the tree be cut?"

The teacher Neelam said, "Nothing has been decided yet. Eat your meal."

The children returned to their rice and dal.

Saroja Jha sat in the office looking through papers.

Outside, the contractor's men were marking the ground for excavation.

The peepal was not cut that day.

Vinod said the woodcutters would come the next day.

The next morning the sky was grey.

The air was hot, but the leaves were turning their undersides upward.

Chhedi came to the school again.

He said nothing.

He began clearing the bushes to the south.

Neelam asked, "Kaka, what are you doing?"

"Removing the leaves."

"Why?"

"Let the water recognise its path."

By noon the clouds were rumbling heavily.

Before the school-closing bell, the wind grew strong.

Saroja Jha ordered the children to be sent home early.

Most of them left.

A few children from distant villages remained on the veranda.

The first drops were large.

Then, within five minutes, the courtyard blurred beneath the rain.

Water struck the tin roof so loudly that conversation became difficult to hear.

Vinod's labourers were covering the bricks with tarpaulin.

Amresh was not at the school that day.

Saroja Jha was about to close the office door when Chhedi called out.

"Madam, come here."

She could not step down from the veranda.

There were two fingers of water in the courtyard.

Chhedi stood to the west of the peepal.

A muddy stream from the northern fields was cutting through the school's raw earthen edge and entering the courtyard.

The stream came straight toward the peepal roots.

Saroja Jha watched from a distance.

The water struck the raised root.

One part turned east and flowed toward the gate.

The other caught the hollow beneath the roots and turned south-west.

In the low strip that Vinod had called empty ground, a thin stream suddenly began to gleam.

Chhedi had cleared away the bushes, so the water flowed without obstruction.

But a heap of sand lay near the marked line of the new classroom.

The heap blocked part of the flow.

Within ten minutes the water began spreading back toward the veranda.

Vinod saw it too.

"Move the sand!" he shouted at the labourers.

Two labourers ran over with spades.

A small channel was cut through the heap of sand.

The water rushed out with a hiss and ran southward.

Rainwater streamed down over the red cutting mark.

Some of the paint washed from the trunk into the soil.

Chhedi said nothing.

He only watched the water flow.

Half an hour later the rain eased.

Saroja Jha's sari was wet up to her knees.

Vinod's sandals were packed with mud.

He stood by the peepal roots and kept looking at the low strip to the south.

"Does this stream run all through the rainy season?" he asked Chhedi.

"Whenever the northern fields fill."

"Every time?"

"The heavier the rain, the stronger the stream."

Vinod said nothing more.

The next morning Amresh arrived early.

He had brought a long transparent tube, two bamboo poles, and a measuring tape.

This time Chhedi asked him no questions.

Amresh repeatedly measured the school's northern edge, the peepal roots, the southern strip, and the height of the veranda.

Neelam taught the children on the other veranda.

Every so often their eyes strayed toward the measuring.

Amresh rolled up the tape.

"There is a slope."

Vinod asked, "How much?"

"Small, but enough. The water will seek this way."

Chhedi remained silent.

Amresh looked at the old blue line on the plan.

The proposed drain was meant to cut past the tree and run straight south.

The actual water first went east, then curved by the roots and moved south-west.

"If the room is built here," Amresh said, "one corner of the foundation will fall in the flow."

Vinod immediately said, "Then we will make the drain masonry-lined."

Amresh shook his head.

"We can line the drain, but where will we catch the water? The inflow from the north is separate."

Saroja Jha brought chairs out from the office.

The four of them sat around the plan.

Chhedi remained standing at a distance.

Saroja said to him, "Kaka, you come too."

Chhedi said, "I do not understand papers."

"You understand water."

He came and sat down.

Amresh drew a new line.

"If the first classroom is shifted three hands east and the second set at a slight angle to it, this low strip will remain open."

Vinod immediately said, "The veranda will not look straight."

Saroja Jha looked at him.

"Is a school built to be looked at or to be studied in?"

Vinod did not laugh.

He was calculating.

"The brickwork will not increase much," Amresh said.

"The roof-junction will change."

"It will."

"The ramp?"

"The ramp will come round from the east. The gradient will be gentler."

"The drain?"

"We will follow the old water-path and take it outside the southern wall. We will put a grate midway."

For the first time, Chhedi placed a finger on the plan.

"The ground is low here."

Amresh drew a small circle where his finger rested.

"We will not make a deep collection pit here. The flow will remain open."

Vinod asked, "The tree?"

Amresh paused for a moment.

"The tree will not fall in the middle of the drain. The roots should not be cut."

"So the tree stays?"

"With this measurement, it can."

Chhedi did not look at the peepal.

He asked, "And the water?"

Amresh said, "The water too."

Saroja Jha let out a breath.

But the matter did not end there.

The revised measurements had to be sent to the office.

Some items in the contract estimate had to be rewritten.

Vinod was dissatisfied.

He said, "You have twisted a straightforward job."

Amresh replied, "The ground is not straight."

For three days, work continued only on the eastern foundation.

The red cutting mark on the peepal had washed half away.

On the fourth day, approval for the revised drawing came by phone; the written copy was to arrive later.

Vinod showed the labourers the new lines.

The mason asked, "Will it be built crooked like this?"

Vinod said, "Not crooked. According to the ground."

Chhedi heard from a distance.

He did not smile.

The work gathered pace again.

The grass in the old water-path was cut.

Its edges were not sealed completely with brick.

Where the students had to cross, two flat slabs were laid.

The foundations of the two rooms were built at a distance from the peepal.

The ramp rose to the veranda from the eastern side.

The new toilet was built in the southern corner.

Vinod often said, "The whole plan was turned around for one tree."

One day Chhedi replied, "Not for the tree."

Vinod asked, "Then for what?"

Chhedi pointed toward the southern drain.

"For what the rain showed."

By Sawan the walls had risen.

The shade of the peepal no longer fell on the new wall as it had before.

At noon the shadow of its leaves now reached halfway across the ramp.

The children's meal began to be served on the new veranda.

Some children still carried their plates beneath the peepal.

Some sat on the threshold of the new classroom.

For no one was it a victory.

For no one was it a defeat.

One evening in Bhadon there was another heavy rain.

This time water from the new roof came down through the spout and entered its own drain.

Water from the northern fields followed the old low strip and reached the peepal roots.

At the raised root the flow divided in two.

One part entered the drain.

The other went toward the gate.

The foundations of the new classrooms remained dry.

Saroja Jha stood on the veranda watching it.

Chhedi was not at the school that day.

The next morning he came by on his walk.

The soil in the courtyard was still damp.

He bent near the new drain and looked at the line in the mud.

Then he looked at the peepal trunk.

Only a faint pink stain of the red cutting mark remained.

As Saroja Jha opened the office, she asked, "Kaka, did the water go properly?"

Chhedi said, "It did."

"And the new rooms were safe?"

"They had nowhere to go."

Saroja laughed.

The school-opening bell rang.

The children ran in through the gate.

One child looked toward the new classroom and asked, "Madam, why isn't this veranda straight?"

Before answering, Saroja Jha looked toward the southern drain.

Yesterday's rainwater had left a thin brown line there.
She said, "Because the ground is like this."
The child looked at the line for a few moments.
Then went into the classroom.
The shade of the peepal slowly moved across the new ramp.

STORY 232

The Dom's Flute

On the last Wednesday of Kartik, a village festival was to be held in the grounds of the Belsandi Middle School.

For three days already, a bamboo gateway, cloth pennants, and rows of earthen lamps had been taking shape.

A long sheet of paper had been hung on the school veranda.

The programme schedule was written on it.

Welcome song at five in the evening.

Girls' dance at five twenty.

Panchayat address at six.

Performance by the visiting singers' troupe at six thirty.

Prizes at seven thirty.

Group song at eight.

At the bottom, in red ink, it said—Times may change according to circumstances.

Chandeshwar Dom stood beside that sheet twice.

The first time, he searched for his name.

The second time, he made sure that it truly was not there.

An old cotton bag was tucked under his arm.

There were three flutes in the bag.

One long.

One medium-sized.

One small.

The mouth of each was covered with a strip of cloth.

After reading the list, Chandeshwar went toward Pramod Jha's office.

Pramod Jha was secretary of the festival committee.

He sat amid papers, receipts, and the ledger of payments due.

Standing at the door, Chandeshwar asked, "Where have you put my time?"

Pramod Jha looked up.

"Whose?"

"The flute's."

Pramod Jha thought for a moment.

Then he said, "Was your name written down?"

Chandeshwar did not smile.

"The day before yesterday you yourself said you would keep ten minutes in between."

Pramod Jha turned the pages of the ledger.

"I said I would keep ten minutes. Nothing was said about printing your name."

"Where is anything printed? This is a sheet written by hand."

Pramod Jha did not look toward the sheet.

He said, "The schedule is very tight. The outside troupe should arrive by seven. If there is a gap in between, we will have you play."

Chandeshwar asked, "And if there is no gap?"

"Next time."

Chandeshwar adjusted the bag under his arm.

He went outside.

On the veranda, Rekha Teacher was writing down the children's names.

Seeing Chandeshwar, she asked, "Uncle, where is your performance?"

"Wherever an empty place turns up."

Rekha looked at the list.

She wanted to say something, but Chandeshwar had already gone down the steps.

A bamboo decoration was being built in the northern corner of the field.

Chandeshwar himself had supplied the twelve poles used in it.

The committee had already fixed the price of all twelve poles.

The poles had been counted.

A receipt had been written.

Payment would be made after the festival.

There was no receipt for the flute.

Chandeshwar's house stood half a kos west of the school.

A bamboo screen stood in front of the house.

Baskets and winnowing trays were kept on one side of the doorway.

On the other lay trimmed bamboo strips and hollow offcuts.

Between them, five half-made flutes rested on a narrow bench.

Chandeshwar's father too had made flutes.

He had also played them at fairs and village gatherings.

As a child, Chandeshwar had learned to recognise the smell of bamboo before he learned the names of notes.

Which bamboo was dry inside.

Which bamboo had a hairline crack in its body.

Which bamboo had to hang for six months after cutting.

All this he had learned through his hands.

But at festivals he was not invited to play for this knowledge.

He was asked to play when there was an empty stretch in the programme.

When the outside artists were late.

When the children's dance costumes were not ready.

When a speaker had not yet arrived.

He did not call his flute "time in between."

For him, it was complete time.

On the day of the festival, the field began filling from the afternoon onward.

Chandeshwar arrived at four.

He was given no identification badge.

The volunteer at the entrance said, "Uncle, you are one of us. Just go in."

Chandeshwar went inside.

He sat near the roots of the peepal tree behind the stage.

He placed the bag by his feet.

The sound-system men were joining wires.

Two large loudspeakers stood at the two corners of the stage.

A word spoken onstage carried all the way to the far end of the field.

Sometimes its echo came back.

Ramavatar was looking after the sound system.

Glancing at Chandeshwar's bag, he laughed and said, "Uncle, will your voice fight with my speakers today?"

Chandeshwar said, "My voice does not fight."

Pulling a wire, Ramavatar said, "Without all this, the back rows will not hear a thing."

Chandeshwar replied, "Then if the back rows want to hear, they can come forward."

Ramavatar burst out laughing.

"Where will so many people fit in front?"

Chandeshwar rested a hand on his bag.

"Then as many as hear, will hear."

At five, the welcome song began.

The amplified voice struck the school's tin roof and came back.

The girls' dance followed.

There was applause.

The panchayat speeches began.

The first speaker rose for ten minutes and spoke for twenty-five.

Instead of shortening his own turn, the second speaker began answering the first speaker's points.

Pramod Jha kept looking at his watch.

Chandeshwar remained seated by the peepal tree.

At six forty-five, the visiting singers' troupe had still not arrived.

Pramod Jha came over to him.

"Uncle, play for five minutes."

Chandeshwar asked, "Five?"

"Only until the troupe arrives."

Chandeshwar opened his bag.

Just then came the rumble of a vehicle from the south side of the school.

Pramod Jha turned to look.

It was the singers' troupe's vehicle.

He immediately said, "Leave it. They have arrived."

Chandeshwar put the flute back into the bag.

He said nothing.

The singers' troupe climbed onto the stage.

A loud beat burst from the speakers.

Young men in the front of the field began to dance.

Chandeshwar stayed seated at the roots of the peepal tree.

Rekha Teacher came to him.

"Uncle, aren't you going home?"

"The payment for the twelve bamboo poles is still due."

Rekha understood that this was not the whole answer.

She asked nothing more.

At seven thirty-five, the prize distribution began.

During the prizes, the electric lights flickered twice.

Ramavatar ran to the rear.

He checked the wires.

The lights steadied again.

The group song was to begin at eight five.

The children stood in a line behind the stage.

At that very moment, the entire field went dark.

The speakers fell silent.

The stage lights went silent.

The school veranda went silent.

For the first two moments, people simply stared into the darkness.

Then many voices rose at once.

"The power is gone!"

"Where are the children?"

"Move back!"

"Don't step on the wires!"

Ramavatar ran again.

In the light of his phone, Pramod Jha began looking at the programme sheet.

Someone said the joint in the main wire had come loose.

Someone said it might take half an hour.

Someone said it would be fixed in five minutes.

Between those five minutes and that half hour, the festival was stranded without a voice.

People began talking among themselves.

Some got up and started toward home.

Some children began laughing in the dark.

The chairs in front of the stage began scraping and shifting.

Pramod Jha came to Chandeshwar.

"Uncle."

Chandeshwar looked up.

"Play something until the power comes back."

Chandeshwar asked, "In this noise?"

Pramod Jha looked around.

"We'll quieten the people."

Chandeshwar said softly, "Will you quieten them first and then have me play, or have me play and then quieten them?"

Pramod Jha did not answer.

Rekha Teacher was listening.

She said, "First seat him on the stage."

There was no electric light.

A small oil lamp was placed on the stage.

In its glow, only half the chair could be seen.

Chandeshwar sat not at the centre of the stage, but at the right-hand corner.

From his bag he took out the medium flute.

He removed the strip of cloth.

He wiped the mouth of the flute with a finger.

Without a microphone, Pramod Jha shouted, "Please be quiet! Local artist Chandeshwar—"

He paused for a moment.

Then he said, "Chandeshwar Dom will play the flute."

Many people in the back rows did not hear.

Conversation continued.

Chandeshwar put the flute to his lips.

The first note was very soft.

So soft that even people in the front row could lose it in one another's talk.

The second note was a little longer than the first.

At the end of the third, the air left a faint rasp inside the bamboo body.

A child in the front row said to his mother, "Quiet."

The mother looked at him.

The child turned an ear toward the stage.

Two chairs behind him, someone stopped talking.

The person beside him stopped too.

The flute still had not grown louder.

To hear it, people had to lower their own voices.

That change travelled slowly from the front row toward the back.

Someone signalled with a hand.

Someone touched the person beside him with a knee.

Someone said no "hush," but simply turned an ear toward the stage.

The noise in the field began to fall, layer by layer.

First the scraping of chairs became audible.

Then that too diminished.

After that came the faint tinkling of a bell from a distant cattle shed.

The rustling of peepal leaves could be heard.

So could the sound of someone's foot brushing the dry Kartik grass.

Through all of it, the notes of the flute went on.

Chandeshwar was not playing any famous tune.

It was a walking tune his father used to blow in the evenings while shaving bamboo.

Four short notes.

A long pause.

Then two low notes.

The pause too was part of the melody.

For the first time, the people were listening to the pause.

The field grew so quiet that the sound of water being poured from an earthen pitcher behind the stage could be heard clearly.

Ramavatar was bent over the wires.

He raised his head and looked toward the stage.

A wire was in his hand, but he did not connect it.

Chandeshwar changed the tune.

This time he lifted the small flute.

Its voice was thin and clear.

Old Sudama Devi, seated near the front, suddenly took her granddaughter's hand.

The granddaughter asked, "What happened?"

Sudama Devi merely shook her head.

She did not want to say anything.

Two young men standing in the back row slowly moved forward.

They did not begin to dance.

They only shortened the distance from which they were listening.

Meanwhile, the electricity flickered back on in the school veranda.

One light came on.

Then another.

A faint hum rose inside the loudspeakers.

Ramavatar reached toward the switch.

Pramod Jha saw him.

He signalled with his hand for him to stop.

Ramavatar's hand halted where it was.

The lights had returned.

The sound system remained off.

Chandeshwar's flute continued.

Now the whole field could hear him, because the whole field was quiet.

Rekha Teacher stood by the stage steps, holding the programme sheet.

She looked at the blank space beneath the red writing.

In that space she wrote in pencil—Chandeshwar Dom—Flute.

She looked at her watch to write the time.

Eight eighteen.

She wrote 8:18.

She left the finishing time blank.

Chandeshwar lifted the long flute.

This flute had a deeper tone.

He played a short melody he had made while drying cut bamboo after the rains.

There was no festival cheer in the tune.

No name of any deity.

No fragment of any famous song.

There were only breath, bamboo, and pauses.

The final note was not long.

It slowly grew smaller.

Then it ended.

Chandeshwar lowered the flute from his lips.

For a few moments afterward, the field remained silent.

No one applauded at once.

For those two or three moments, Chandeshwar did not look ahead.

He ran a finger over the holes of the flute.

Then a clap rose from the front row.

Then another.

After that, the whole field filled with applause.

The loudspeakers were still off.

The sound of the clapping travelled far without amplification.

Chandeshwar did not stand and bow.

He simply wrapped the flute in cloth and put it into his bag.

Pramod Jha climbed onto the stage.

He said, "Very beautiful. Now the group song—"

Rekha Teacher said softly, "First write down the time."

Pramod Jha looked at the list.

"How long was it?"

"From eight eighteen to eight thirty-eight."

"Twenty minutes?"

Rekha said, "Yes."

Pramod Jha looked at Chandeshwar for a moment.

An artist called for five minutes had played for twenty.

No one had been watching the clock.

The group song followed.

The festival ended at ten that night.

People began to go home.

Half the lamps by the bamboo gateway had already gone out.

Chandeshwar was picking up his bag near the peepal tree.

Pramod Jha called to him.

"Uncle, take the payment for the twelve bamboo poles."

He counted the amount from the ledger.

Chandeshwar counted it and put it inside his bag.

Pramod Jha said, "And thank you for the flute."

Chandeshwar remained standing.

He did not start to leave.

Pramod Jha asked, "Anything else?"

Chandeshwar said, "There were twelve bamboo poles."

"Yes."

"They were counted."

"Yes."

"Their price was written down."

"Yes."

Tying the mouth of his bag, Chandeshwar said, "The flute was twenty minutes."

Pramod Jha was silent.

He understood the point.

"Are you asking for a fee?"

Chandeshwar said, "If you called me an artist and had me play on the stage, will there be some entry for that in the ledger, or only a thank-you?"

Pramod Jha sat down on the chair again.

He opened the expenditure page of the ledger.

That page listed—Sound system.

Cloth decorations.

Visiting singers' troupe.

Oil for the lamps.

Prizes.

Bamboo decoration—Chandeshwar.

Pramod Jha looked at the next blank line.

"The committee had not fixed any payment for you."

Chandeshwar said, "It had not fixed one. That is true."

"Then how much should I write now?"

Chandeshwar did not immediately name a figure.

He looked out toward the field.

In front of the stage, Ramavatar was gathering the wires.

Rekha Teacher was collecting the things the children had left behind.

Chandeshwar said, "Write what you pay a local singing group for one performance."

Pramod Jha said, "There are four people in that group."

"I am one."

"Then one-fourth?"

Chandeshwar smiled.

"Was the song heard in four separate parts?"

Pramod Jha too smiled faintly.

"No."

He looked at the ledger again.

Rekha Teacher came inside.

She said, "Five hundred can be entered for a local solo performance. Two prize items are left over; there is money remaining under that head."

Pramod Jha said, "If we shift the budget head, it will have to be explained in the accounts."

Rekha said, "Write the explanation."

A few moments later, a new line was added to the ledger.

Local solo artist—Chandeshwar Dom—Flute—five hundred rupees.

Pramod Jha signed it.

Chandeshwar did not put a thumbprint; he wrote his name.

Slowly.

Chandeshwar Dom.

He counted the five hundred rupees.

Then he asked, "Who will make next year's list?"

Rekha said, "We will."

"In an empty slot?"

Rekha replied, "No. We will give you a time."

Chandeshwar made no promise in response.

He simply slung the bag under his arm.

Then he walked home.

The next morning, the festival field was half empty.

The bamboo pennants were being taken down.

Ramavatar was loading the loudspeakers onto a vehicle.
Yesterday's programme sheet still hung on the school veranda.
The wind fluttered one corner of it.
The pencilled name beside 8:18 was still clear.
Chandeshwar Dom—Flute.
A thin line had been drawn through to 8:38.
Rekha Teacher came to take down the sheet.
For a moment she looked at the name.
Then she did not fold the paper.
She placed it straight inside the ledger.
The wind moved through the peepal leaves in the field.
Their sound was very soft.
No one had to order anyone to be quiet in order to hear it.

STORY 233

The Map of the Hut

At half past seven in the morning, two bamboo stakes were driven into the ground in front of Phulbasiya Devi's courtyard.

A red string was stretched between the stakes.

The string ran straight across the corner of the veranda towards the rear wall.

At first Phulbasiya thought some child was playing a game.

But when she looked towards the road, she saw three men in yellow caps taking measurements.

One held a measuring tape, another a sheet of paper, while the third was marking small signs on the ground from a bag of lime.

Phulbasiya stepped down from the veranda.

"Why is this red string running through my house?"

The young man sprinkling lime raised his head.

"The drain will pass through here."

Phulbasiya kept looking at him.

"A drain is supposed to run outside. How can it pass through a house?"

The young man looked towards the man holding the paper.

The man folded the map and came forward.

"This strip is vacant on the map, Mother."

Phulbasiya did not smile.

She turned and looked at her veranda.

The tiled roof was not new, but the earthen walls had been plastered many times.

Three shades of earth showed in the wall like layers from different periods.

The innermost layer was blackish brown, the middle one red, and the upper part a pale yellow.

"Where is it vacant?" Her voice was quiet.

The man with the paper opened the map again.

On it, the road was a thick line, the edge of the pond a thin blue line, and between them lay one long blank strip.

Phulbasiya's house stood in that blank strip.

"There is no house marked here," the man said.

"Is there no mark for the house, or is there no house?"

The man was silent for a moment.

"We are doing the survey. We first go by what is on the map. Then we check it on the ground."

"Then look now."

Phulbasiya spread out her hand and pointed to the veranda, the walls, the tulsi platform, and the small vent through which smoke from the hearth escaped.

"Three generations have been looking at this place. Has the map only just seen it?"

This time the man gave a faint smile, but it vanished at once.

"My name is Shailendra. I am with the panchayat survey team. Today we are marking the line of the drain. I will not make the decision alone."

"If this red string is going to make the decision, write down its name too."

A voice came from behind.

"Ma!"

Mahendra was running towards them.

He was Phulbasiya's son.

He weighed grain sacks at a shop in the market, and reaching there by eight every morning was his daily routine.

That day a neighbour's child had run to tell him that surveying was under way at his house.

"What happened?" Mahendra asked, panting.

Phulbasiya pointed at the red string.

"Our house is not on the map. So the drain is going through the house."

Mahendra wanted to see Shailendra's paper.

Shailendra did not hand the map over; he held it in his hand and showed it to him.

A drain five cubits wide was proposed along the eastern side of the road.

It was to run south as far as the school bend and then meet the old drainage channel.

On paper the line was clear.

On the ground it was not nearly so clear.

The strip between the road and the pond lay two cubits lower in one place, a cubit higher in another; here there was scrub, there a house, elsewhere a cowshed.

"Why aren't the houses on this map?" Mahendra asked.

Shailendra said, "This is not a map of house ownership. The drainage work has been drawn on an old base map. Only the principal structures are shown."

"And our house is not a principal structure?"

Before Shailendra could answer, a loud voice came from the road.

"How long are you going to stay at one spot?"

The contractor, Jagdish Babu, was approaching in a white shirt.

A mobile phone was in his hand, shining shoes on his feet.

He looked at the red string, then at Phulbasiya, then at the paper.

"Keep the line straight. Every extra bend means more bricks, sand and labour."

Mahendra stepped forward.

"To keep it straight, will you cut through a house?"

Jagdish Babu answered not him but Shailendra first.

"Is the house recorded in the file?"

Shailendra said, "Not on the work plan."

"Then get a written revision from the panchayat. I will not bend the line on my own."

Phulbasiya said, "Will the red string be removed until the written revision comes?"

"We cannot stop the work."

"The house cannot stop either."

Jagdish Babu looked at his watch.

"Mother, I have not come here to argue. I have work to finish."

"I too have a life to finish."

By then people from nearby had begun to gather.

One held a brass pot of milk, another had a child under her arm; someone on the way to the fields had stopped mid-step.

Government surveying in a village often stops people in their tracks.

A line drawn on paper may or may not coincide with someone's field, someone's wall, someone's footpath, but everyone begins measuring his own land in his mind.

Phulbasiya's neighbour Ramdev said, "This house was here even when I was a child."

From behind, Sarita Kaki said, "My wedding palanquin stopped in front of this veranda."

Jagdish Babu grew impatient.

"A drain cannot be built out of old stories."

Shailendra did not fold the map.

He ran his eyes from the level of the road to Phulbasiya's courtyard.

"Let me measure the slope once."

Jagdish Babu said, "The slope is given on the plan."

"It has to be matched with the ground."

"Do it quickly."

Shailendra had his assistant bring a transparent tube and water.

Water was filled into both ends of the tube.

One end was held at the mark by the roadside, the other behind the courtyard.

Phulbasiya watched the water settle in the tube.

For the first time, inside that small tube, the line on the government map began to speak with the slope of the earth.

Shailendra measured three times.

Then he measured twenty cubits farther east along the road.

Then near the old embankment of the pond.

"From here the water naturally falls towards the south-east," he said.

Ramdev laughed.

"You need a tube to learn that? Sleep here on a rainy night and the water itself will tell you."

Phulbasiya smiled for the first time.

"On a rainy night the map will get soaked, Ramdev."

People laughed.

Jagdish Babu did not.

"Where will you put the bend?"

Shailendra did not pull up the stake holding the red string.

He first went to the northern corner of the courtyard.

There was an old shallow channel in the earth there, barely visible through the grass.

"What is this?"

Phulbasiya said, "An old watercourse."

"How old?"

"It was here when I came here as a bride."

Mahendra said, "Father used to say his father had made it."

Shailendra studied the direction of the channel.

Without touching the wall of the house, it sloped towards the south-east and, thirty cubits farther on, met the proposed line of the drain.

Jagdish Babu said, "The old watercourse is narrow."

"It can be widened," Shailendra replied.

"There will be two bends."

"Two bends, but less excavation. The ground is already lower here."

Jagdish Babu fell silent.

He was calculating the cost in his head.

Mahendra looked at Phulbasiya.

"Ma, didn't Father say that in the old days the pond water drained through this channel during the rains?"

Phulbasiya shook her head.

"Not the pond. The water from the three courtyards uphill. When the pond filled, water used to back up this way instead."

Shailendra immediately went to inspect the upper end of the old channel.

Weeds, broken bricks and two tarpaulin sacks were lodged there.

The moment Phulbasiya saw them, she said, "The grocer threw those tarpaulin sacks there yesterday."

Mahendra said, "I'll remove them."

"Remove them now," Shailendra said.

As soon as the sacks were pulled away, the soil beneath was seen to be damp.

There had been a light rain the previous evening.

A thin line of moisture clearly traced the direction of the old watercourse.

With his pencil Shailendra drew a second line along the margin of the work plan.

He did not strike out the first straight line.

He merely wrote beside it: "Alternative ground slope observed on site."

Jagdish Babu asked, "Can work begin on this basis?"

"No. The panchayat engineer will inspect it."

"Until then?"

"Excavation will remain stopped near this house. Work can continue on the other section."

Jagdish Babu's face hardened.

"Will the whole team stop for one house?"

"Not the whole team. Twenty cubits."

"Twenty cubits today will become forty tomorrow."

Phulbasiya said, "If forty houses are found within forty cubits, the map will have to look forty times."

Jagdish Babu looked at her.

Then said nothing.

Speaking to someone on his mobile phone, he walked towards the southern section.

The red string still stretched across the courtyard.

Shailendra did not remove it.

"Why are you leaving this?" Phulbasiya asked.

"Let the line that has been questioned remain a question. The engineer will come and see both."

Phulbasiya looked at the string.

"For the first time, a question in this house is visible in red."

By noon the villagers had begun telling the story of the house in their own different ways.

Someone said Ramkhelawan had built the first hut there after a flood.

Someone said the strip was government land.

Someone said it was fallow ground belonging to the pond.

Someone said bullock carts used to turn at that spot before the road was built.

Phulbasiya heard every story but did not interrupt any of them.

That afternoon Mahendra did not go to the shop.

He opened the old trunk in the house.

There were no land papers in it.

There was an old ration slip, two wedding invitations, Mahendra's school certificate, his father's death certificate, and a yellowing photograph.

Half of the same tiled roof could be seen in the photograph.

A small neem tree stood in front.

Phulbasiya took the photograph in her hand.

"The neem broke in storms three times. The house was re-thatched three times. Not once was any paper made."

Mahendra said, "Shall we show all this?"

"To whom?"

"To the engineer."

"He will inspect the drain, not the age of the house."

"Then what are we supposed to prove?"

Phulbasiya put the photograph back in the trunk.

"Only this much: the drain cannot pass through the house. Who owns the land is another matter."

Mahendra looked at his mother in surprise.

"You won't raise the question of the land?"

"Why should a matter for which we have no papers be decided on the day of the drain?"

There was neither anger nor fear in Phulbasiya's voice.

"If every battle is fought on the same day, none of the battles remains clear."

By evening the red string looked black in the shadow of the veranda.

Phulbasiya stepped over it and went to the hearth.

She did not remove the string.

That night Mahendra's daughter Gudiya came home from the city after finishing her studies.

The moment she put a foot through the doorway, she saw the red string.

"What is this?"

Mahendra said, "Our house is not on the map."

Gudiya laughed.

Then she saw her father's face and stopped laughing.

She studied geography in college.

"Which map?"

Mahendra told her about the paper.

Gudiya went outside.

She looked at the road, the pond, the house and the old watercourse.

"It is easy to say the map is wrong," she said, "but perhaps the map was never made for this purpose."

Stirring the vegetables on the hearth, Phulbasiya said, "If it was not made for this purpose, why were they using it to cut through a house?"

Gudiya fell silent.

After a while she said, "That is a fair question."

At ten the next morning the panchayat's junior engineer arrived.

Shailendra, Jagdish Babu and panchayat member Sita Devi were with him.

Gudiya too stayed home.

The engineer first looked at the map.

Then at the red string.

Then at the house.

"This structure is not on the base map," he said.

Phulbasiya asked, "How old is the base map?"

The engineer looked at a corner of the paper.

"Twelve years."

From behind, Ramdev said, "The house is more than fifty years old."

The engineer did not look at him.

He examined the alternative line drawn by Shailendra.

"Did you check the slope?"

"At three points."

"The old watercourse?"

"It exists on the ground. Its upper end was blocked. After it was cleared, yesterday's moisture was visible."

The engineer took the measurements himself.

He walked twice around the house.

He stopped near the northern corner of the veranda and examined the soil.

"If excavation is done here, the foundation will be exposed."

Jagdish Babu said, "So we bend it?"

"Widen the old watercourse. But at the southern end there must be a flap gate to stop backflow from the pond."

Shailendra began writing.

Jagdish Babu asked about the cost.

The engineer gave an estimate.

It was not much higher than the straight alignment, because the old watercourse was already low and therefore required less excavation.

Jagdish Babu's face relaxed.

"All right."

Phulbasiya said, "Then the red string?"

The engineer said, "It will be removed."

Shailendra moved to pull up the stakes.

Gudiya stopped him.

"One minute."

Everyone looked at her.

Gudiya asked, "Will the house be added to the work plan?"

The engineer said, "The revised line of the drain will be added."

"The house?"

"This is not a revenue record."

"I am not asking about ownership. Will the object on the ground that caused the line to be changed be marked on the work plan or not?"

The engineer thought for a few moments.

Shailendra said quietly, "We can record the site condition as 'existing residence'."

The engineer nodded.

"Write it."

Jagdish Babu said, "If later this leads to some ownership claim—"

The engineer stopped him midway.

"A work plan does not confer ownership. But what exists on the ground must be shown on the plan used for the work."

Shailendra picked up his pencil.

Beside the straight red line he drew a small rectangle.

Inside the rectangle he wrote: "Existing Residence."

Mahendra kept looking at the map.

Phulbasiya did not look at it.

She said to Shailendra, "Remove the string first."

The red string was untied.

The corner of the veranda lay open again.

Two small holes remained where the stakes had been pulled out.

Phulbasiya pushed soil into those holes with her big toe.

Work began on the third day.

The grass in the old watercourse was cut away.

As the soil was dug out, fragments of old baked brick were found inside.

Phulbasiya said, "They must be from Ramkhelawan's time."

Mahendra asked, "How old?"

"You don't ask a brick its age."

Jagdish Babu's labourer laughed.

Phulbasiya laughed too.

Two days later the bend in the drain passed along the northern side of the house.

The veranda was saved.

The old watercourse now had brick edges.

A flap gate was fitted at the southern end to stop water backing up when the pond filled.

The first heavy rain came a week later.

Gudiya was preparing to return to the city that day.

As soon as the rain began, Phulbasiya stopped her.

"Don't go. First watch the map sit its examination."

Everyone sat on the veranda.

Water from the road entered the drain.

At the bend it swirled for a moment, then ran south between the new brick edges of the old watercourse.

The courtyard remained dry.

Water from the pond did not back up.

Mahendra said, "This time the map passed."

Gudiya said, "Not the map. The ground and the map both."

Phulbasiya kept looking outside.

Raindrops were falling where the red stakes had stood.

The ground had become level again.

"Is the house on the government map now?" she asked Gudiya.

Gudiya said, "No. On the work plan it is marked 'Existing Residence.' The revenue map is a separate process."

Phulbasiya nodded. "Then half the work is done."

Mahendra said, "We'll do the rest too." "We will. But today, look at the drain."

The rain grew heavier. Water poured from the roof in a stream. That stream turned towards the old watercourse.

For three generations the house had stood on the land, yet on paper it was still not fully a house. But for the first time, a small rectangle had appeared in the blank strip of a government work plan.

Inside that rectangle there was no owner's name. There were only two words: "Existing Residence."

Those words were enough for Phulbasiya that day. The map had not given her house any legal right. But at least it no longer treated it as empty ground through which a line could simply be drawn.

STORY 234

The Cow's Bell

It was the last week of Phagun.

The morning sun had not yet properly reached the cattle shed, but Mohan sat in the courtyard with old papers spread before him.

The papers held three years of accounts.

Straw.

Dry fodder.

Oilcake.

Medicine.

Bechan's monthly wages.

Repairs to the plough.

Rope for the yoke.

And in the middle, in bold letters, were written the names—Hirna and Kajru.

Hirna and Kajru were the two bullocks of the household.

They were not the same colour.

Hirna's body was pale grey, with a small white patch on his forehead.

Kajru was deep brown, but the rim of his right ear looked as though it had been clipped from birth.

Both bullocks wore bells around their necks.

Hirna's bell had a heavy note.

Kajru's was a little thinner.

From a distance, Bechan could tell from the sound which of the two was walking in front.

Mohan placed a finger on the paper and said, "Babu, look at this account again."

Ramsagar was sitting on a low wooden cot.

He had no desire to inspect the accounts, but Mohan had been raising the same point for three days.

"I've seen it," Ramsagar said.

"Then?"

"Then what?"

Mohan turned the paper towards him.

"This is the hire charge for ploughing two bighas by machine. Add up three rounds. Then look at the cost of keeping the bullocks for a whole year."

Without touching the paper, Ramsagar said, "I've added it."

"Then keeping bullocks is a losing bargain now."

This time Ramsagar picked up the paper.

"In farming, losses do not come from bullocks alone."

"I'm not saying they do."

"Then?"

"I'm saying—the work for which the bullocks were kept is now done by a machine in less time."

The sound of a bell came from the cattle shed.

First the heavy one.

Then the thinner note.

Ramsagar looked that way.

Bechan had untied both bullocks and was taking them towards the pond.

Mohan heard them too, but kept his finger on the paper.

"The market is the day after tomorrow," he said. "Ramesh of Bisanpur says he wants the pair."

Ramsagar was silent for a while.

"The price?"

Mohan told him.

Ramsagar fell silent again.

Mohan had expected his father to object.

He had thought the proposal to sell the bullocks would cause a major quarrel in the house.

But Ramsagar merely said, "The price is not too low."

Mohan's face relaxed.

"Then shall I tell him?"

"Speak to Bechan first."

Mohan lifted his eyes from the paper.

"Bechan?"

"Yes."

"The bullocks are ours."

"I know that as well as you do."

"Then?"

Ramsagar folded the paper.

"The bullocks are ours. But their days are spent with Bechan."

Mohan said nothing.

The remark struck him as sentimental.

And he did not want sentiment in this matter.

Two years earlier Mohan had left a small private job in town and returned to the village.

He did not want to give up farming.

On the contrary, he wanted the economics of it to be understood clearly.

How much was invested.

How much was harvested.

How much went into the household.

How much was sold.

How much remained.

He disliked his father's old answer—"The field knows the account of farming."

He would say, "If you do not write down the account, you will call the loss tradition."

Ramsagar usually laughed at that.

This time he did not.

At noon Bechan returned after grazing the bullocks.

Hirna went straight to the trough.

Kajru first stopped beside the tap in the courtyard.

Bechan stroked his head.

"Thirsty?" he said.

Kajru gave no answer.

He stretched his neck towards the tap.

Mohan brought a bucket from inside.

"Bechan Kaka," he said, "sit for a moment."

The moment Bechan heard Mohan's tone, he understood that this was not an ordinary conversation.

He sat down beside the wall of the cattle shed.

Ramsagar came too.

Mohan spoke plainly.

"The day after tomorrow Hirna and Kajru will be sold."

Bechan first looked at Mohan.

Then at Ramsagar.

Then at the bullocks.

"Both?"

"Yes."

"Not one?"

"They'll fetch a better price as a pair."

Bechan nodded.

There was little surprise on his face.

In the previous two years, five households in the village had sold their bullocks.

At first the new ploughing machines had come from the market town.

Now two hired machines were available in the neighbouring village.

A field that took a day and a half to plough with bullocks could be done by machine in a few hours.

Bechan had been watching all this.

"All right," he said.

The answer came more easily than Mohan had expected.

"Ramesh will come himself to take them."

"All right."

"The morning after tomorrow."

"All right."

Bechan began to rise.

Ramsagar said, "Sit a little longer."

Bechan sat down again.

For a few moments only Hirna's bell could be heard.

He was moving his neck as he ate from the trough.

Suddenly Bechan asked, "Up to what date will my account be settled?"

Mohan did not understand.

"What account?"

"My wages."

"You'll get this month's full wages."

"This month's?"

"Yes."

Bechan nodded again.

"And my share of paddy?"

Mohan fell silent.

Bechan's wages had two parts.

The monthly cash amount was not large.

When the paddy was harvested, he also received one maund of grain.

That arrangement had continued since Ramsagar's father's time.

Mohan said, "The paddy won't be harvested until Agahan."

"I know that too."

"Then?"

Bechan wiped his palm on the edge of his dhoti.

"The paddy I receive in Agahan is not wages for the month of Agahan."

Mohan said nothing.

"It is my share for looking after the bullocks through the year."

Ramsagar looked at Mohan.

There was no complaint in Bechan's voice.

He was only explaining the account.

"By Phagun more than half the year has passed," Bechan said. "If the bullocks are sold, that is fine. But we should understand how far my share of paddy has accrued."

Mohan remembered the account sheet lying before him.

Straw.

Dry fodder.

Oilcake.

Medicine.

Bechan's monthly wages.

His annual share of paddy had not been written separately on that paper.

It was usually taken straight out of the harvest.

"I'll add it," Mohan said.

Bechan did not smile.

"Add it."

He stood up.

After noon Mohan sat down with the papers again.

This time he added a new line—

Bechan—annual share of paddy.

How much would half of it be?

How much for eight months?

If the bullocks were sold the day after tomorrow, how much of the year would count as completed?

He began counting the months on his fingers.

Ramsagar watched from a distance.

"Not so finely," he said.

Mohan replied, "You were the one who said the account should be made."

"Make the account. But don't cut a man into pieces of months."

Mohan grew irritated.

"Then give him the full maund?"

"How much of his work is complete?"

"Up to Phagun."

"When did we buy the bullocks?"

"In Jyeshtha."

"Bechan has been looking after them from that day."

Mohan stopped.

In truth, he had been thinking of the year as beginning in January.

The agricultural year did not begin in January.

Hirna and Kajru had not been bought at the market last Jyeshtha.

They had been in the household for seven years.

But the annual cycle of wages ran through transplanting, ploughing, paddy, wheat, straw, and then the summer fodder.

Mohan folded the paper again.

In the evening Bechan was brushing down the bullocks.

Hirna stood with his eyes closed.

Kajru kept lifting a hind leg now and then.

"Stand still," Bechan scolded.

Kajru stood still.

Ramsagar came into the cattle shed and said, "Are you feeling bad?"

Without turning, Bechan asked, "About what?"

"The bullocks being sold."

Bechan kept brushing them.

"Were the bullocks mine?"

"No."

"Then does the right to feel sorrow belong only to the owner?"

Ramsagar said nothing.

Bechan laughed himself.

"There is sorrow. But sorrow cannot buy straw."

Ramsagar smiled too.

Bechan checked the strap of Hirna's bell.

The leather strap was tearing on one side.

"This will have to be replaced," he said.

Ramsagar said, "Why replace it now? He'll be gone the day after tomorrow."

Bechan turned and looked at him.

"Will we send him out of this house wearing a torn strap?"

Ramsagar gave no answer.

Bechan took an old strip of leather from his bag.

"I'll stitch it tomorrow."

The next morning the ploughing machine arrived.

No one in the village gathered to watch it.

It was no longer something new.

The driver climbed down at the edge of the field and asked Mohan the area.

"Two bighas and eight kathas."

"Is the soil dry?"

"The upper part is dry. There is a little moisture in the back corner."

The driver looked over the field.

"We'll do the upper part first."

Ramsagar stood at a distance.

Bechan was feeding Hirna and Kajru in the cattle shed.

The machine's roar spread across the field.

Long rows of earth turned over.

Mohan looked at his watch.

At this hour Ramsagar would once have had his hands on the plough handles.

Hirna and Kajru would have been in the yoke.

Bechan would have walked in front, watching the clods of earth.

Now there was only the driver.

There was Mohan.

And the sound of the machine.

By noon the upper field was finished.

Mohan was pleased.

"See?" he said to his father. "Two days' work."

Ramsagar said, "I see."

"And the bullocks?"

Looking across the field, Ramsagar said, "For ploughing? You are right."

No look of victory came over Mohan's face.

He had not expected his father to agree so easily.

He realised that an argument is difficult only when the other person disagrees.

Here the real difficulty lay elsewhere.

That evening Bechan stitched the strap and fastened the bell around Hirna's neck again.

The bell rang.

Its note was as heavy as before.

Bechan bent his ear towards it and listened.

"Good."

Mohan asked, "What need is there for the bell? Ramesh has an enclosed cattle shed."

Bechan said, "Are you asking what need there is?"

"Yes."

"I don't know."

"Then why all this effort?"

Bechan tugged the strap to test it.

"Whatever is my responsibility until tomorrow, it is my work to keep it in good order."

Mohan fell silent.

The next morning Ramesh arrived early.

He had brought two men with him.

The price had already been settled.

Even so, the bullocks' teeth were examined.

Their legs were inspected.

Their shoulders were felt.

Seeing the white patch on Hirna's forehead, Ramesh asked, "Did this one work more in the plough?"

Bechan replied, "Both worked."

"This one looks heavy."

"Hirna is slow, not weak."

Ramesh looked at Bechan.

"Will you come?"

"Where?"

"As far as my village. You can show us the way."

Bechan looked at Ramsagar.

Ramsagar said, "Go and come back."

The money was counted.

Mohan counted it twice.

Ramesh once.

The paper was signed.

Hirna and Kajru were led out.

At the mouth of the courtyard Kajru stopped once.

Bechan slackened the rope.

"Come."

A bell rang.

First the thinner one.

Then the heavy note.

The two bullocks moved towards the road.

Ramsagar stood at the doorway.

Mohan stood on the veranda.

Neelu, the small child of the household, came running out from inside.

"Where are the bullocks going?"

Mohan said, "To another home."

"Will they come back?"

"No."

Neelu stared for a few moments.

"The bells too?"

"Yes."

The bullocks passed the bend.

Their bells could be heard for a while.

Then they stopped.

Bechan returned on foot after noon.

His hands were empty.

But he had something tucked under his arm.

Ramsagar asked, "What is it?"

Bechan opened it and showed them.

Kajru's old, thin-toned bell.

Mohan was startled.

"That went with the bullock."

"The strap tore on the way."

"But you stitched it only yesterday."

"Hirna's. This is Kajru's."

Mohan laughed.

"Then what did Ramesh say?"

"He said, 'Keep it. I have no need for a bell.'"

Bechan turned the bell in his hand.

Mohan said, "You keep it."

Bechan did not ring it this time.

"Me?"

"Yes. You recognised that sound for so many years."

Ramsagar too said, "Keep it."

Bechan looked at the bell.

Then he set it down gently on the ground.

"I don't want the bell."

Mohan's eyebrows rose.

"Why?"

"What will I do with a bell if I take it home?"

"Remember."

Bechan gave a faint laugh.

"Can memory run a household?"

Mohan was silent.

Bechan said, "I want what is still owed to me."

The sentence was not harsh.

But it was clear.

Ramsagar said at once, "You will get it."

Mohan went inside.

That evening all three sat down with the papers again.

This time Mohan did not add up only the cost of the bullocks.

Bechan's monthly wages.

His share of paddy.

The period from the previous Jyeshtha until now.

The cash still owed.

Ramsagar said, "Give him the full paddy share."

This time Mohan did not object.

Bechan said, "Why the full amount?"

Ramsagar replied, "Because we are ending your year in the middle."

Bechan shook his head.

"A little more than half would be fair."

Mohan looked at him.

"Why are you asking for less?"

"Because for the next six months I will not be looking after the bullocks."

Ramsagar smiled.

"So you keep accounts too."

"If a poor man does not keep accounts, hunger teaches him to."

Mohan wrote the amount in the ledger.

After a while Bechan asked, "Would the ploughing-machine owner need a man?"

Mohan said, "For what work?"

"Not with the driver. The owner keeps someone to handle oil, ropes, spare parts, and note the order of the fields."

"Would you do it?"

"I can learn."

Ramsagar kept looking at Bechan's face.

"From bullocks to a machine?"

Bechan said, "The bullocks did not do my work. I did the work. The bullocks were with me."

Ramsagar's expression changed.

Mohan's pen stopped in the middle of a line.

Bechan added, "The bullocks are gone. Why should I stop?"

The next day Mohan spoke to the owner of a ploughing machine in the neighbouring village.

The man would not promise work immediately.

"There will be a rush in Baisakh," he said. "Then I'll need a man for two weeks."

Mohan told Bechan.

Bechan said, "I'll start with two weeks."

"And the other days?"

"Some field labour. Some goats."

"Goats?"

"I have two. I'll get two more."

Mohan laughed.

"Then tie the bell around one of those goats."

Bechan laughed too.

"A bell this big would break a goat's neck."

Until evening Kajru's bell lay there at the edge of the courtyard.

Neelu picked it up and began ringing it.

Clang.

Clang.

Clang.

Ramsagar said, "Don't ring it so much."

Neelu asked, "Why?"

Ramsagar searched for an answer.

Bechan said, "Let him ring it. It isn't around a bullock's neck now."

Neelu rang it again.

The sound echoed through the empty cattle shed.

At that moment Mohan had opened his account ledger.

On the old page was written—

Bullock expenses.

He did not cross out the line beneath it.

He merely wrote beside it—

Ended: Phagun.

Below that he wrote—

Bechan—paddy share and remaining cash to be settled.

Then he left some space.

Ramsagar asked, "Why leave it blank?"

Mohan said, "For the next work."

Ramsagar looked outside.

The cattle shed was empty.

A little old straw lay in the trough.

The tethering post was still there.

The plough leaned against the wall.

The need for bullocks had genuinely diminished.

That was not difficult to accept.

What was difficult was understanding how many other accounts opened the moment one need came to an end.

Evening was deepening.

From the direction of the neighbouring village came the heavy sound of a ploughing machine.

In the courtyard Neelu rang the bell once more.

Clang.

Bechan paused as he crossed the doorway.

He did not turn back.

He only said, "Neelu, not so hard. It's brass; it may crack."

Neelu rang the bell softly.

This time the sound was small.

But clear.

STORY 235

The Unpaved Road

It was the first week of Bhadra.

For three days the rain had been falling off and on.

The wheel-ruts in the unpaved road of Balha village were still fresh.

Yet by six in the morning people would already be gathering at the bend in the road.

There was only one reason.

The bus.

Not even a month had passed since a regular bus service had begun in the village.

Earlier, reaching the main road meant walking three and a half kos.

Older people looked for a bullock cart.

Schoolchildren pedalled their bicycles through the mud.

Women going to the market set out at dawn with baskets on their heads.

Now the bus left the bend at six twenty in the morning.

In the evening it dropped them there again at five ten.

During the first week, the villagers learnt the bus's time not from a clock but from its sound.

A rumble would rise from the distant road.

Dogs would begin to bark.

Raghu, who ran the tea stall, would put water on the stove for the second time.

And Kanak would pick up the schoolbag.

Kanak was sixteen.

Kanak studied at the block higher secondary school.

Earlier, Kanak's father, Dhaneshwar, used to take Kanak by bicycle as far as the main road.

If the day turned bad, school was missed.

Now Kanak would say, "I will go on my own."

Whenever Dhaneshwar heard this, pride and a sense of emptiness came over his face together.

The rear seat of the bicycle had been left empty.

The bus had changed more than Kanak's day.

Shanti Devi could now take two baskets of vegetables to the town market on Tuesdays and Fridays.

Earlier she could not carry more than one basket.

On the way back, the empty baskets held salt, oil, medicine and exercise books for the children.

Budhan Mahato had already gone twice to the hospital to have his eyes examined.

Three boys from the hamlet at the far end had begun going to town every day for wage work.

Raghu's tea stall had shifted to the bend.

His brother sat at the old spot, but there were fewer customers there now.

One bus had redrawn many small lines inside the village.

Where someone's day would begin.

Where someone's goods would be sold.

Who would receive news first.

Who would have to wait.

For the first two weeks the road remained dry.

Ramji, the bus driver, said, "The road is unpaved, but it can take the weight."

The villagers took the sentence as praise.

In the third week it rained.

On the first night, rain fell hard for two hours.

The next morning the bus did reach the bend, but in the low southern stretch its rear wheel sank halfway into the mud.

All the passengers got down.

The men pushed.

The women stood at the edge, steadying their baskets.

Kanak took off the shoes, carried them by hand and crossed the mud.

It took half an hour before the bus could get free.

Ramji said nothing.

He kept turning back to look at that stretch of road.

When the bus returned in the evening, the conductor called out, "If it is like this tomorrow, the bus will not come as far as the bend."

That single sentence spread anxiety through the village.

Raghu said, "We will have to fill the road here."

Dhaneshwar said, "We may be able to get broken bricks from the kiln."

Shanti Devi said, "If the bus stops coming, we will be back to the old days."

That evening ten or fifteen people went out with lanterns to inspect the road.

Where the bus had sunk, the road was naturally a little lower.

Rainwater came from the fields to the east, crossed that low stretch and drained towards a hollow on the west.

The old bullock carts used to pass along one side of that channel.

A cyclist could put a foot down and get across.

For the bus, the depression was too deep.

At dawn the next day, people began bringing broken brick, earth and pieces of old roof tile.

By noon the low stretch had been filled.

The road had been made level.

In the evening Ramji brought the bus and drove slowly over the repaired patch.

The bus crossed without sinking.

No one clapped.

But relief showed on every face.

"Now it is all right," Raghu said.

That night it rained again.

This time the rain went on for a long while.

Before the rumble of the bus was heard at dawn, a cry came from the southern hamlet.

"Water is coming into the house!"

Dhaneshwar ran.

Raghu left the stove and ran.

Kanak followed with the schoolbag.

The southern hamlet lay a little lower than the road.

Parvati Devi's courtyard was filled with water up to the knees.

The first step of the veranda was under water.

The chickens had climbed onto a bamboo platform.

Two sacks of paddy had been placed on a cot.

Parvati's granddaughter Meera was throwing water out with a brass bowl.

Kanak caught hold of her hand.

"What will happen if you keep throwing out this much?"

Meera said, "Nothing. But I cannot just stand here either."

Dhaneshwar looked towards the road.

Where there had been a low channel the previous day, there was now a raised filling of brick and earth.

The water coming from the eastern fields could no longer cross the road.

It had turned south and poured into Parvati's courtyard.

Raghu said quietly, "We have blocked the water's way."

No one answered.

Just then the sound of the bus came from far away.

Meera looked at her wet clothes.

She too studied at the block girls' school.

The new bus service had made it possible for her to remain enrolled.

Earlier her mother had said that sending her every day on a three-kos walk to the road was not possible.

Meera said, "Do not stop the bus."

Parvati Devi looked at her.

"Who is stopping it?"

Meera fell silent.

Parvati went on, "We need the bus. But we do not need water inside our house. Both things can happen together."

The bus stopped on the other side of the filled patch.

Ramji got down and looked at the situation.

Scraping the mud near the wheel with his foot, he said, "If you raise the road, you must leave a way for the water."

Raghu was a little irritated.

"Yesterday you said the bus was sinking."

Ramji replied calmly, "It was sinking. But I did not tell you to stop the water."

The statement was simple.

That was why it also sounded a little harsh.

The bus left half an hour late.

Kanak and Meera climbed aboard.

Meera sat with her wet feet tucked beneath the seat.

As the bus moved off, she kept looking at her house through the window.

Parvati Devi was still draining water from the courtyard.

Kanak went to school after reaching town.

So did Meera.

But in the village that day, the question of the road became larger than the question of the bus.

People gathered near the panchayat house in the afternoon.

Someone said, "Remove the filling."

Someone said, "If you remove it, the bus will stop coming."

Someone said, "Turn the road another way."

Someone asked, "Who will give the land?"

At that question, everyone fell a little quiet.

There were private fields on both sides of the road.

Those who wanted the road widened for the sake of the bus were not so ready to give up even two hands' width of their paddy field.

Shanti Devi sat down after setting her basket aside.

She had returned early from the market.

She said, "If we remove the bricks, the first problem returns. If we keep the whole stretch filled, Parvati's house will flood. We need a passage through the middle for the water."

Dhaneshwar said, "Shall we cut a drain?"

An elderly farmer named Bindeshwar shook his head.

"If you only cut a drain, the bus wheel will sink there again."

For a while people drew lines in the earth with sticks.

Bindeshwar understood the old construction of the road.

He said, "There used to be two thick bamboos laid here, with earth above them. The water passed underneath."

Raghu laughed.

"Will the bus run over bamboo now?"

Bindeshwar laughed too.

"Not the bus. Understand the idea. Weight above, a passage for water below."

This time no one laughed.

Two old concrete pipes lay in a rear room of the panchayat building.

They had originally been brought for draining a hand pump, but had never been used.

That afternoon they were measured.

If the two pipes were laid side by side, the water could pass through.

When Ramji brought the bus back that evening, he inspected the place again.

He said, "Pack the earth firmly above them. If the wheel passes straight over it, the bus should manage."

"And the rain?" Dhaneshwar asked.

"The rain will tell. The road is unpaved. I cannot make it paved on paper."

Shanti Devi smiled at that.

That night the bus did not come as far as the bend.

It stopped near the main road.

The villagers walked out to it.

Kanak said, "One day on the old route."

Meera replied, "The old route feels short now."

The next day the pipes were laid.

The broken bricks were set in place again.

The earth was tamped down.

Small bamboo stakes with red cloth tied to them were planted on both sides so that the driver would know there was a water passage underneath.

Parvati Devi sat there all day.

Someone told her, "You look after the house. We are all here."

She replied, "The house is visible from here. I will watch the road too."

By evening the work was finished.

A little rain fell that night.

At dawn Parvati Devi was the first to rise.

She went to the pipes.

Water was coming from the eastern fields.

It entered the mouths of the pipes, passed beneath the road and flowed towards the hollow on the west.

She watched it for a while.

Then she went home and set Meera's schoolbag outside.

By six fifteen people had begun gathering at the bend.

Raghu was pouring tea.

Shanti Devi's baskets held aubergines and okra.

Kanak had the schoolbag tucked under one arm.

Meera was scraping mud from her slippers.

At six twenty the sound of the bus was heard.

The bus approached the low stretch slowly.

Ramji reduced speed.

Everyone's eyes were on the wheels.

The bus passed over the pipes.

The earth sank a little.

The red cloth fluttered.

Underneath, the water kept flowing.

The bus stopped at the bend.

The conductor called out, "Town! Town!"

People began to climb aboard.

Parvati Devi gave Meera two rupees separately.

"Buy an exercise book."

Meera asked, "And the house?"

Parvati looked at the water flowing beneath the road.

"The house is standing for now. You go."

The bus moved away.

Its wheels left two fresh lines on the unpaved road.

Looking at those lines, Raghu said, "This road will always need repairs like this."

Bindeshwar replied, "If a road is used, it will bear marks."

Dhaneshwar asked, "And troubles?"

Bindeshwar was silent for a moment.

Then he said, "Where people travel, the reckoning travels too."

Kanak and Meera were already so far away that only the red rear of the bus could be seen.

Below, water kept flowing through the pipes.

Above, wheels kept moving along the unpaved road.

STORY 236

Guardian of the Fields

Dukhan Mahato removed the two thorny branches laid across the eastern entrance to the grazing ground.

The morning dew still clung to the blades of grass.

When the first cow of the morning went in, the bell at its neck rang once.

With his knife, Dukhan made a notch on the small bamboo stake at the edge.

No one had ever told him to do this.

For twenty or twenty-two years, he had been doing it on his own.

At first his younger brother used to be with him.

Then his brother left for the city.

After that, Dukhan alone kept removing thorns, mending broken embankments, and filling with earth the foot-tracks hollowed out after the rains.

People in the village called him the "guardian of the fields."

Dukhan would laugh whenever he heard the name.

"What can I guard about the grazing ground?" he would say. "Where cattle and goats walk, the paths make themselves."

That morning three herds went in.

The first was Ramlochan's five cows.

The second was Kaushalya's seven goats.

The third was Chhotan's two buffaloes and a heifer.

By the time the sun had risen, the grazing ground looked almost empty.

The cows had gone down into the low northern stretch.

The goats were near the thorn scrub to the west.

The buffaloes lay beside the muddy edge of the pond.

Only Dukhan remained at the eastern entrance.

Just then a government vehicle from the block office arrived.

Three people got out of the vehicle.

Chandrakant, the village mukhiya, was with them as well.

One young man carried a map in his hand.

Another had a measuring tape.

The third man was Arvind, the son of Mangaru from the village.

After living away for fifteen years, Arvind had returned and started a milk-collection business in the village.

He wanted to lease six bighas of the grazing ground and grow fodder there.

"It will be fenced," Arvind said, "but villagers will be able to buy cut fodder at a low price."

Dukhan asked no questions.

They began measuring.

The young man kept drawing lines on the paper.

"There are no animals in this part," he said.

Dukhan replied, "Not now."

The young man looked up.

"The survey is happening now."

"Yes."

"Then I will write what is here now."

Dukhan remained silent.

By noon the measuring was complete.

A six-bigha section in the south was enclosed on the map with a blue pencil line.

Chandrakant said, "The village income will rise. Land lying idle will finally yield something."

Dukhan said nothing again.

The government vehicle drove away.

That afternoon the goats came into the very southern section that had been marked.

There was less grass there, but more leafy scrub.

From a distance Kaushalya called, "Dukhan Kaka, will they put thorns around this side from tomorrow?"

"Not yet."

"Arvind said the land is going to be given to him."

"So far, only a line has been drawn on paper."

Kaushalya did not take her eyes off the goats.

"Which comes first - the line on the paper, or the thorns?"

Dukhan did not laugh.

In the evening he sat beside the bamboo stake.

He looked at the old knife-notches from all those days.

There was no proper count of how many marks there were.

Some were for cows, some for buffaloes, some for the day an embankment had broken.

Those marks were his memory, not evidence.

The next day Dukhan brought an old school notebook from home.

Half its pages were still blank.

On the first page he wrote -

"Grazing Ground - Movement."

Below it he made four columns - time, household, animals, direction taken.

Writing came slowly to him.

Ramlochan's five cows went in.

He wrote, "Morning. Ramlochan. Five. North."

Kaushalya's seven goats went in.

He wrote, "Morning. Kaushalya. Seven. West."

At ten o'clock the grazing ground again looked almost empty.

Dukhan wrote nothing in the register.

At two in the afternoon, Kaushalya's goats went south.

He wrote, "Afternoon. Seven. South."

In the evening Chhotan's buffaloes went exactly where the blue line had been drawn.

He wrote that down too.

On the third day Manjari came.

Manjari taught at the village school.

She looked at Dukhan's register.

"What is this?"

"The movement on this land."

"Who told you to write it?"

"No one."

Manjari turned the pages.

"You are writing the time as well?"

"Those people came at noon."

Manjari understood.

"One day will not be enough."

"That is why I will write for seven days."

"Why seven days?"

Dukhan thought for a moment.

"There is a market day in a week, the school is closed on one day, and people's work changes."

Manjari asked, "And the rain?"

"When the rain comes, I will write again."

Manjari stayed there until evening that day.

She added a new column to the register - "How many times."

"The same animal may come twice in a day," she said.

Dukhan nodded.

On the fourth day Arvind came.

He looked at the register.

"Kaka, do you want to stop my work?"

Dukhan said, "Where is your work in my hands?"

"People say you are opposing it."

"I am writing."

"What?"

"What moves here."

Arvind read the page.

"What will this prove?"

"I do not know."

"Then why?"

"When a decision is made, it should not be made by calling this empty land."

Arvind was silent for a moment.

"Kaka, does this grazing ground pay for itself now?"

Dukhan understood the question.

"Will the grazing ground pay, or the animals?"

"I am talking about income for the village."

"Yes."

"If the lease is granted, the panchayat will receive money."

"Yes."

"And fodder will grow here too."

"Yes."

Arvind grew a little irritated.

"Then what is the problem?"

Dukhan pointed to the register.

"I am writing down the problem."

Arvind burst out laughing.

"You have not lost this habit of yours."

"What habit?"

"Not giving a straight answer."

Dukhan laughed too.

"On land that is not straight, straight answers are hard to find."

The fifth day was market day.

Many of the village animals reached the grazing ground late.

Young men from some households had taken animals to the market to sell them.

Until noon the southern section remained almost empty.

In the evening, three herds suddenly gathered there.

Manjari kept noting the times.

The sixth day was a school holiday.

Children brought the calves and goats out early.

The grazing ground stayed full from morning onward.

Dukhan said, "If the survey had happened today, the land would have looked heavily used on paper."

Manjari said, "And yesterday, hardly used."

"That is why you cannot understand the habits of land from a single glance."

On the seventh day there was a light rain.

The soil in the southern part absorbed the water quickly.

Water stood in the low northern section.

All the cows and buffaloes moved south.

Dukhan kept the raindrops from falling on the register.

That afternoon Chandrakant came.

"The gram sabha meets tomorrow," he said. "The lease will be discussed."

Dukhan handed him the register.

Chandrakant turned the pages.

"You wrote all this?"

"Manjari did too."

"How many animals were there?"

Manjari said, "The same animals came repeatedly, so there are two counts. One is the number of distinct animals; the other is the number of visits."

Chandrakant frowned.

"Who at the gram sabha will understand so much accounting?"

Dukhan replied, "The ones who divide the land will understand it."

The next day the gram sabha met on the school veranda.

Arvind stated his proposal clearly.

Fodder would be grown on six bighas.

A fence would be put up.

The panchayat would receive an annual lease payment.

Village livestock owners would be able to buy cut fodder at a low price.

Some people agreed.

Some opposed it.

Kaushalya stood up.

"I have seven goats. If I have to buy cut fodder, where is the profit in keeping goats?"

Arvind said, "It will be sold cheaply."

Kaushalya said, "At present I pay nothing for grass."

Ramlochan said, "But the grazing ground does not provide enough grass throughout the year either."

At that Kaushalya fell silent.

It was true.

In summer the green part of the grazing ground shrank greatly.

Chandrakant opened Dukhan's register.

He read out the figures from the seven days.

No one applauded.

No one changed their opinion at once either.

Arvind asked for the register and studied the entries for the southern section.

"Why did all the animals come this way on the rainy day?"

Dukhan said, "Water was standing in the north."

"And in summer?"

"Goats at midday. Buffaloes in the evening. Fewer cows."

Arvind opened the map.

"What if I take three bighas instead of six?"

Kaushalya did not object at once.

She came closer to the map.

"Where would the fence go?"

Arvind showed her the blue line.

For the first time, Dukhan took the map in his own hands.

He put a finger on a narrow strip.

"Leave this path open."

"Why?"

"The goats use this way to reach the scrub on the west."

Ramlochan pointed to another place.

"Do not fence this low section. In the rains the animals turn this way from the north."

Manjari checked each point against the register.

The meeting went on for a long time.

In the end, no lease was approved.

Nor was it rejected.

It was decided that livestock movement would be recorded for another two months, especially between the end of summer and the first heavy rain.

After that, they would meet again to decide how much of the land, if any, could be fenced.

Arvind looked disappointed, but as he rose he handed the register back to Dukhan.

"Kaka, next time write down my fodder figures too."

Dukhan said, "You write those."

"Two registers?"

"Yes. One for the movement of the land, one for your costs."

Arvind laughed.

"Then who will decide?"

Dukhan looked out from the veranda toward the grazing ground.

"Whoever has to decide will read both."

In the evening Dukhan again removed the thorny branches from the eastern entrance. Ramlochan's cows went in. Kaushalya's goats followed behind them.

The two small survey stakes still stood in the southern section. No one had pulled them out. No one had stretched wire between them either.

Beside those stakes, Dukhan stood his old bamboo upright. It bore the old knife-notches. In his hand was the new register.

From that day on, Dukhan stopped making notches. What he had once only remembered, he now began to write down. The grazing ground was still shared. And the decision was still to be made.

STORY 237

The Paddy-Planting Song

The morning water still lay motionless in the paddy field. The night's rain had stopped, but the clouds hung low. Along the edge of the field, yesterday's footprints in the mud had been half washed away.

Sonmati came towards the field, gathering her sari up to her knees. In her hand was a short, old bamboo stick with which she used to set the first line for transplanting.

Behind her came Basanti, Rekha, Devaki, and three other women. Each carried bundles of paddy seedlings.

Looking across the field from a distance, Sonmati said, "Today we'll begin from the eastern corner. The water is right there."

Basanti laughed. "What rises first—the song or the seedlings?"

Sonmati said, "Without the song, the row goes crooked."

Rekha laughed. "A row is straightened by the eye, Kaki, not by a song."

"Can your eyes watch the feet of nine people at once?" Sonmati replied.

Just then a rumbling sound came from the road.

They all turned. Pawan, Devkant's son, was bringing a rice-transplanting machine. Behind it were iron teeth and square compartments for holding seedlings.

Basanti's laughter stopped.

Devkant followed on a motorcycle.

"Today the transplanting will be done by machine," he said. "We've got a two-day break between spells of rain. This much field won't be finished by hand."

Sonmati planted the stick in the mud. "Then why did you call us?"

Devkant told her, "The machine can't reach everywhere. The corners, along the embankments, wherever seedlings are missed—you'll fill those places. The wages will be counted separately."

Rekha went up to the machine. "How much can it do in a day?"

Pawan said proudly, "As much as all of you would do in two days."

Sonmati did not look at Pawan. She kept looking at the field.

Earlier, on transplanting days in this field, ten or twelve women would step into the water in a single line. One would raise the opening line of the song and another would answer. To the beat of the song their hands went down, seedlings sank into the mud, and their feet advanced together.

A woman who was falling behind would shorten her answering line. If one part of the row moved ahead, the woman leading it would hold the opening note a little longer.

The song was time, measure, and play all at once.

Today the machine made its first round.

Its rumble spread across the field.

Pawan sat on the seat. Devkant walked along the embankment. The women followed behind, watching.

The iron teeth picked up the seedlings and pressed them into the water at fixed intervals. The row was so straight that Rekha said, "See, Kaki? Straight even without a song."

Sonmati said nothing.

After the first round, Pawan stopped the machine.

"Mark the places where there are gaps," Devkant said.

Basanti asked, "How do we mark them?"

Pawan handed them three small bamboo pegs. "The more empty spots each person fills, the more will be counted. We'll settle the account in the evening."

For the first time Sonmati looked at Pawan. "The empty places will be counted?"

"Yes. Everyone's wages according to the work done."

Basanti picked up her seedlings. "Come then. Let's go looking for empty places."

The seven women did not form a single line.

One went east, another to the middle, another along the embankment.

For the first half-hour Sonmati remained silent.

She was used to keeping her pace by watching the elbow of the woman on her left. Now there was no one on her left. The machine's noise came from the right.

From a distance Basanti called, "Five missed here!"

From the other side Rekha called, "Seven for me!"

Devaki shouted, "Don't count—plant!"

Pawan laughed. "Without counting, how will we settle the evening's account?"

By noon, three-quarters of the field had filled with straight rows.

The women's backs had not remained bent continuously as before. From time to time they could stand upright.

Basanti said, "This is one advantage. My back hasn't broken."

Sonmati conceded, "It is an advantage."

Rekha said, "And tomorrow we'll be able to take up another field."

Devaki said softly, "What if a machine comes to that field too?"

No one answered.

They ate their midday meal on the embankment. Earlier, the transplanting team sat together in one place. Today Pawan sat in the machine's shade, Devkant ate the flatbread brought from home, and the women sought shade under different trees.

Sonmati opened her cloth bundle: flattened rice, salt, and green chillies.

Basanti came and sat beside her.

"Kaki, start a song."

Putting some flattened rice into her mouth, Sonmati said, "A transplanting song doesn't rise while you're sitting."

"A song is a song."

"No. It moves with the movement of the hands."

Rekha came over too. "Then sing to the pace of the machine."

Sonmati smiled. "Will the machine answer?"

Rekha wanted to say something, then fell silent.

After the meal Pawan took up the western corner. There the field narrowed like a triangle, with a bamboo grove on one side and an old embankment on the other.

The machine tried twice to turn. Its rear teeth touched the embankment.

Pawan got down to inspect it.

"This corner will have to be done by hand," he said.

Devkant called the women. "All of you come here together. Let's finish it quickly."

Sonmati picked up her bamboo stick again.

"Where do we start the row?" Rekha asked.

Sonmati placed the stick in the water and aligned two points. "From beyond the bamboo grove's shadow to this mark."

The seven women again stood in one row.

For the first time that day, their shoulders were close to one another.

Sonmati lifted a handful of seedlings.

Without thinking, a line came from her lips—

"Moon in the mud, a current in the water..."

Basanti answered at once—

"Plant the paddy together, harvest the burden together..."

It was not a line from an old song. Sonmati too had perhaps never sung it before.

Devaki laughed. "Did you make that up just now?"

"It came out of my mouth," Sonmati said.

A second line rose.

This time Rekha answered.

The song was not very loud. The machine was switched off, so the sound travelled far.

Four rows were planted.

Sonmati raised the opening line, Basanti answered, Rekha added words in between. Once Devaki laughingly said the wrong words, and everyone burst out laughing.

The triangular corner slowly turned green.

Pawan sat on the embankment watching.

"If you work like this, how will the counting be done?" he suddenly asked.

The song broke off.

"What?" Basanti asked.

"How many seedlings did each of you plant in this corner? I have to record everyone's wages separately this evening."

Sonmati placed the seedlings in her hand down in the water.

Rekha said, "The four of us did it together."

"Not four, all seven," Devaki corrected her.

Pawan opened the register. There was a space beside each name for a number.

"Then how do I divide the corner into seven?"

Basanti laughed. "How can a corner be cut into seven pieces?"

Devkant said, "Write the same amount for everyone according to the time spent."

Pawan wrote the same figure beside all seven names.

Rekha bent down to look. "What is this number?"

"One corner," Pawan said.

Rekha laughed again. "The measure of the work has become like the song."

Sonmati asked, "How is it like the song?"

"One person begins, another answers, but in the end what's written is —one corner."

For a few moments Sonmati looked at Rekha's face.

Then she picked up the seedlings again.

By the time the triangle was finished, the clouds had thickened again.

Pawan started the machine. The rumbling once more filled the field.

The women again dispersed in search of empty spots.

No song rose.

Once Sonmati tried to begin a line, but her own voice came back only as far as her own ears.

She fell silent.

By evening the field was finished.

The machine's straight rows were filled here and there by small corrections made by hand. In the western triangle the rows curved slightly, but there was no empty patch.

Pawan opened the register and began calculating wages.

Beside Rekha's name: twenty-seven empty spots. Beside Basanti's: twenty-two. Beside Devaki's: nineteen. Beside Sonmati's: only eleven.

Looking at the register, Rekha said, "Kaki, you filled fewer."

Sonmati said quietly, "I was watching the row."

Pawan said, "There is no separate wage for that."

Devkant intervened. "An equal share of this corner has been added to everyone."

Sonmati said nothing.

The wages were distributed.

Counting her coins, Basanti said, "Earlier our backs stayed bent all day during transplanting. Now the work is finished in half a day."

Devaki said, "Earlier we got seven days of work. Now it is three."

Rekha said, "I'll sew for the other four days."

Devaki laughed. "You know how to sew."

Rekha fell silent.

In that silence, no one blamed the machine. No one praised it either.

Sonmati picked up her bamboo stick from the embankment.

Pawan took the machine towards the road. Its rumble gradually faded into the distance.

The women went to the canal bank to wash their feet.

Mud dissolved away into the water.

Very softly Basanti began the first half of the new line again—"Moon in the mud..."

Sonmati looked at her.

Rekha kept washing her feet. Devaki wrung out her sari. No one answered at once.

Basanti did not complete the line either.

Sonmati smiled, but did not force the song to rise.

On their way back, they passed by the western corner of the field.

In the evening light, the machine's straight rows looked alike all the way into the distance. Near the bamboo grove, the rows planted by hand held a slight curve.

Looking towards that corner, Rekha said, "The machine still won't be able to turn there."

From far away Pawan called, "Next time I'll bring a smaller machine!"

They all laughed.

Sonmati laughed too.

She said nothing about whether the song would rise next time.

That question was not settled in the field. Only this much was certain: wherever they still had to step into the water together in one line, the first note might yet come from someone's mouth.

Across the rest of the field lay the machine's straight rows, and the evening wind moved through them even without a song.

STORY 238

The Register Beneath the Banyan

It was a Jeth afternoon. The banyan's shade was not round; it had stretched eastward. Dry leaves had gathered among the roots, and an old wooden bench stood over them.

Munilal sat on the bench. Before him lay open a thick register bound in cloth. The corners of the cover had worn white.

Everyone in the village called it 'the Banyan Register.'

It was called a register, but it was not an official one.

No one entered wedding dates in it, nor land holdings. What it recorded was when canal water arrived, how far it reached, whose field received its turn, whose turn was missed, and who exchanged a turn with someone else.

Munilal had once been a farmer. As he grew older, his son took over the fields. Twenty-five years earlier, two families had fought over canal water. After that, the practice began of sitting beneath the banyan and writing down the turns.

The first page had held only seven names.

Now it held the names of twenty-seven households.

That day Munilal was turning the pages when Sudha, a teacher at the school, came hurrying up.

'Uncle, people have come from the block office.'

Munilal pushed his spectacles up. 'What for?'

'To inspect the drought-relief claims.'

'There was no rain, and that needs inspection?'

Sudha could not smile. 'The papers say our village is irrigated.'

Munilal's hand stopped on the page.

'Irrigated?'

'The government canal register says water was released into this branch on eleven days between Jeth and Bhadav.'

Munilal said quietly, 'It may well have been released.'

'As far as the village?' Sudha asked.

Munilal turned the register toward her. 'Look at this.'

Sudha bent over it.

Jeth 12 - second watch of the night. Water as far as the first eastern bend.

Jeth 13 - dawn. Water stopped at Harigovind's field.

Ashadh 4 - midnight. Two hours.

Ashadh 19 - water entered the branch, did not reach the mouth of the village channel.

Sawan 7 - silt at the gate. No water.

Sawan 21 - held back in the upstream village.

Bhadav 3 - one hour at night, only five fields.

Bhadav 14 - branch dry.

Sudha kept turning the pages.

'Where are the eleven days?'

Munilal said, 'On paper.'

From beyond the banyan, Mahendra, who sold tea, called out, 'The government people are sitting in the panchayat house. They're asking all the farmers for their papers.'

Sudha lifted the register.

Munilal immediately put a hand on it. 'Where are you taking this?'

'To show them.'

'This is not a government document.'

'So?'

'So they will say: you people wrote this yourselves.'

Sudha did not close the register. 'We wrote it ourselves, yes. But the dates are not lies.'

Munilal remained silent.

Near the banyan roots, a tethered goat stretched its rope and sniffed at the dry leaves. Far away the canal embankment lay pale under the sun. There was no water there, only fine dust.

Two officials and a junior engineer were seated in the panchayat house. On the table lay government registers, measurement sheets, and a stack of applications.

The farmers went in one by one.

Ramvilas came out with his face drawn.

'What happened?' Sudha asked.

'They say my field falls in the irrigated category. Relief is only for unirrigated fields.'

'Did you get water?'

Ramvilas laughed. 'Water? I hired a private pump twice.'

Munilal came slowly, the register tucked under his arm.

The moment he saw him, Ramvilas said, 'Uncle, show them your register.'

The official inside heard the voice from outside. 'What register?'

Sudha said, 'The village canal-water register.'

The official held out his hand. 'Bring it.'

Before handing it over, Munilal asked, 'Will this document be accepted?'

The official looked at the page. 'It does not belong to the department.'

'Then?'

'We can look at it. Whether it counts as evidence is another matter.'

Munilal placed the register on the table.

The junior engineer turned the pages. 'Who writes this?'

'On a day when someone exchanges a turn, there is also a thumbprint or signature beside the name,' Munilal said. 'I write the rest.'

The engineer stopped at one page. 'It says here: Ashadh 4, midnight, two hours. How can the time be so exact?'

Munilal replied, 'That night Phulkumari's daughter-in-law was in labour. Someone had gone to bring a vehicle. We looked at the clock when the water was released because it was her field's turn. The vehicle arrived two hours later. The water was cut off then.'

From outside Phulkumari called, 'It is true.'

The official looked toward the door. 'Don't all speak at once.'

The engineer looked at another page. 'Bhadav 3 - one hour, five fields. Names?'

Munilal read out the five names.

Two of those five people were present in the panchayat house. Both raised their hands.

The official leaned back in his chair. 'Look, the departmental register records the days on which water was released from the main canal into the branch. Your register records whether it reached the village. Those are not the same thing.'

Sudha said at once, 'Then which one was used when the area was classified as irrigated?'

Before the official could answer, the engineer said, 'Water was released into the branch, so the area must have been treated as irrigated.'

'And if the water never reached the fields?' Ramvilas asked from outside.

The official said again, 'That is why an inspection is being conducted.'

Munilal ran a hand over the register. 'If the inspection happens at noon, the canal will look dry. How will you see the one hour of water that came at night?'

For a few moments the room was silent.

The engineer asked, 'Where is the gate?'

'A mile and a half upstream from here.'

'Where does the silt collect?'

'At the third bend.'

'Will you show me?'

Munilal closed the register. 'Now?'

'Now.'

The afternoon was beginning to decline when five people set out along the canal embankment: the engineer, the official, Sudha, Munilal and Ramvilas.

The mouth of the canal was wide. In two places upstream the grass was green, but toward the village the ground was cracked.

At the third bend there really was a high mound of silt.

The engineer pushed a bamboo measuring rod into it.

'How long has this been here?'

Ramvilas said, 'At least two years.'

Munilal corrected him. 'It has been this high since Bhadav last year. Before that it was half as high.'

'Is there a record?' the official asked.

Munilal opened the register.

Bhadav 27 - silt at the third bend after the water fell. Next turn blocked.

On the next page: Kartik 8 - five households cut away the silt together; half the passage opened.

Phagun 3 - filled again.

The engineer kept looking at the page.

'How did you remember all these dates?'

Munilal said, 'I did not remember them. That is why I wrote them down.'

At that sentence Sudha looked at Munilal.

People called the register beneath the banyan a memory, but Munilal regarded it as a way of escaping the unreliability of memory.

When they reached the last field in the village, Ramvilas pointed out the dry stubble of his paddy.

'Water came here on Bhadav 3,' Munilal said.

Ramvilas looked startled. 'Not as far as my field.'

'Your name is not among those five.'

Ramvilas quickly checked the register. It was true. The five names belonged to other fields.

He was silent for a few moments.

Sudha asked, 'Then why did you write in your application that you received canal water once?'

Ramvilas said awkwardly, 'It came into the village, so I wrote that I had received it too.'

The official smiled for the first time. 'See? The village register does not take everyone's side either.'

Munilal said, 'If a register takes sides, what kind of register is it?'

The inspection continued until evening.

The engineer wrote three things on his measurement sheet: water was released into the main branch; there is a silt obstruction at the third bend; regular delivery to the lower seventeen fields could not be verified.

The official said, 'This is today's inspection. I cannot say yet whether the relief will be approved.'

Ramvilas's face fell again.

Munilal remained calm. 'At least this much has now been written down. It was not there before.'

Back at the panchayat house, the official placed the Banyan Register on the table again.

'Uncle, we need a copy of this.'

Munilal said at once, 'Not the whole thing.'

'Why?'

'It does not contain only irrigation turns. People exchange seed, bamboo, bullocks and pumps with one another too. Not everything in it is a matter for a government file.'

The official thought for a moment. 'Then only the canal pages.'

Sudha said, 'I'll make photocopies.'

Munilal agreed.

The next day the bench was set beneath the banyan again. The register lay open. Sudha had photocopied the canal pages and tied them together with red string.

As Mahendra set down the tea, he asked, 'Uncle, will the government register accept what your register says now?' Munilal said, 'Whether it accepts it or not is its affair.' 'Then what was the use?'

Munilal opened a fresh page and wrote the date. 'The use is that today, for the first time, an official paper recorded that releasing water and water

reaching the fields are two different things.' Sudha sat at the other end of the bench. 'And in your register?'

Munilal wrote: Today the third bend was measured again. Delivery to the lower seventeen fields was checked. Decision pending. He stopped his pen. 'My register will record that the decision is still pending.'

A dry leaf fell from the banyan onto the open page. Munilal did not remove it. When the breeze rose, the leaf slid on its own toward the edge of the register.

The canal was still dry. In the government register, water would remain recorded as having been released on eleven days. In the Banyan Register, it would remain recorded how many nights, how many bends and how many fields the water reached within those eleven days.

The two registers were not substitutes for one another. But now one had been placed before the other.

STORY 239

The Flood Mark

It was the last week of Jeth. The air remained hot until afternoon, but since the previous evening thin clouds had begun gathering in the eastern sky. Vinod had called Bhola the mason to scrape the old limewash from the western wall of the house.

A bamboo ladder lay beneath the wall. Bhola kept scraping away the lime with his trowel. Beneath the white layer, first a grey band appeared, then a straight brown line.

"Stop here," he said. "Is this a damp stain, or old floodwater?"

Sitting on the veranda sorting makhana, Sharda Devi raised her head. She narrowed her eyes and looked toward the wall.

"Water," she said. "That time it came up to here."

Vinod came in from outside. "Which time?"

Sharda Devi laughed. "Have all the floods become the same colour to you?"

Bhola scraped again. A second, fainter line emerged a cubit below the first. Beneath that, beside the doorway, was a third small stain, half hidden under the limewash.

Nikhil came with a measuring cord. "Let me measure the highest one. We'll keep the floor of the new room two bricks above it."

"Only that much?" Vinod asked.

"If it stays above the highest flood mark, it should be safe."

Sharda Devi set down the winnowing tray of makhana. "Measuring a wall is easy. Measuring a house is hard."

Nikhil smiled. "Another riddle today?"

"Not a riddle. The floor you're standing on now was not this high when the first flood came."

Nikhil stopped the measuring cord.

Vinod said, "True. It used to be an earthen floor."

"And before even that?" Sharda Devi asked.

Vinod fell silent.

Bhola slipped his trowel beneath the threshold. "There are old bricks here."

He removed the crust of lime. Beneath the present threshold the edges of two courses of old brick appeared. Below even those was a hard layer of packed earth.

"That was the first floor," Sharda Devi said. "When I first came to this house."

Nikhil bent his knees and looked. "So the doorway went down this far?"

"Not the doorway. The ground was lower."

Bhola said, "That is why the doorway looks short now. The floor has been raised again and again."

Vinod looked at the upper brown line on the wall. "Was this from the first flood?"

"No," Sharda Devi said. "This is from the second."

"Where is the first?"

She went to the other side of the doorway. "Where your father once built the bamboo platform for the paddy, the plaster was redone. The stain was rubbed away."

Nikhil asked, "So all three lines are from different years?"

"All three are different. But the house too was different each time."

Bhola stopped working and sat in the shade of the veranda. He understood that before deciding the floor level of the new room, they first had to understand the measurements of the old house.

Without any preamble, Sharda Devi began the story of the first flood.

Vinod had been ten then. The floor of the house was earth. Sacks of paddy were kept directly on the floor in the eastern room. The floodwater came not at night but in the afternoon. First the courtyard filled, then the veranda, then the room. Vinod's father, Maheshwar, built two bamboo platforms and lifted the sacks onto them.

"Were the sacks saved?" Nikhil asked.

"Half of them," Sharda Devi said. "As many as we could lift high enough."

After the water receded, Maheshwar brought soil from beside the pond. Four men from the village lent their bullock carts. For three days the floor of the house was raised. Vinod used a bucket to wet the soil.

Vinod laughed. "I did less work with the bucket than I did playing with the water."

"You played, but by evening your clothes were always covered in mud," Sharda Devi said.

The mark of the first flood had not survived on the wall, but the old bricks buried beneath the doorway still showed where that floor had been.

The second flood came much later. By then Maheshwar was gone. Vinod was earning in Punjab. Sharda Devi, Manju, and two small children were at home. The water seemed lower than in the first flood, but because the floor had already been raised, everyone assumed the danger was less when it entered the room. As night deepened, the water rose to the level of the cot.

Manju came out from inside. "The little one had a fever that time."

Sharda Devi said, "You had laid her on the bamboo platform. I sat all night with her head in my lap."

Manju looked at the brown line on the wall. "This one?"

"Yes. Up to here."

Nikhil was startled. "I thought this was the oldest one."

Manju said, "It was before you were born."

After that flood, Vinod returned home. Fired bricks were bought with his earnings. A brick floor was laid over the earth. The house rose by another course. The lower part of the old doorway disappeared into earth and brick.

"So this line appears much higher above the floor now than it did then," Nikhil said slowly.

"Yes," Bhola said. "The line stayed in the same place on the wall, but the level beneath people's feet changed."

Nikhil opened the measuring cord again. He measured from the present floor to the line, then added the distance down to the buried old floor. On the paper he drew two short marks.

"And the third?"

The third flood was not so long ago. By then the western part of the house had a brick floor, but the northern room was still earthen. Nikhil was in school. Vinod was not away in another city; the whole family was at home. The water rose slowly, so everything was lifted in time. Less paddy was soaked that year, but the lower part of the wooden trunk rotted. Nikhil's certificates survived because Manju had already put them in a brass box and raised it onto the platform.

"All I remember is that school was closed for two days," Nikhil said.

Vinod said, "A child whose things are saved remembers less of the hardship of those days."

Sharda Devi replied, "And the owner of whatever goes under remembers more."

After the third flood, the family did not raise the floor of the whole house. Money was short. Bricks were laid only in the northern room, the grain platform was raised by a cubit, and a new wooden shelf was fixed to the wall for papers and documents.

Bhola kept looking at the three lines on the western wall. "Then, to decide the floor of the new room, we cannot look only at the highest stain. We must also see where the house used to be and where it is now."

Nikhil said, "But the new room will be built on today's ground. We can keep it two bricks above the highest water line."

Bhola shook his head. "We can. But then the roof will sit lower, and the doorway will become short again. If we raise the whole house that high, the cost will go up."

Vinod looked toward a post of the veranda. "Then?"

Manju spoke first. "Why raise every room? Build one room high enough that when the flood comes, the papers, medicines, grain, and children can all be taken up there."

Sharda Devi looked at Manju. "The work the bamboo platform used to do—now a room will do it?"

"Four people cannot fit on a platform," Manju said.

Nikhil drew a square on the ground with his finger. "The north-west corner is higher. A small room can be built there. Three steps from outside. The inside floor three bricks above the highest mark."

Bhola got up and went to that corner. He dug into the soil and examined it. "The old fill underneath is hard. The foundation will have to be checked separately, but the place looks right."

Vinod began counting the cost: bricks, mortar, timber, roof. Less than raising the whole house, but still not a small sum.

"We'll do half this year," he said. "First the floor and walls. The roof next month."

Manju said, "The rain will not wait for next month."

For a few moments, everyone was silent.

Sharda Devi rose and went to the old trunk. From it she took out some money tied in a piece of cloth.

Vinod said at once, "Not this."

"What is this money for?"

"Your medicines."

"The medicines will be kept in that high room, won't they?" Sharda Devi said. "Then let the room be built."

Vinod did not take the money. But the reckoning was made again. Manju added her sewing savings. Nikhil said he would work as Bhola's labourer for the next two weeks. Bhola laughed and said, "I won't waive the wages. If you work, it will be entered in the accounts."

By evening, the measurements of the new room had been settled.

Nikhil measured all three lines on the wall separately. Then he measured the old floor buried beneath the doorway, the first brick floor,

and the present floor as well. He did not write years on the paper because no one in the house remembered the exact dates of all three floods with certainty. Instead he wrote—

First: Father alive, earthen floor.

Second: before Vinod returned from Punjab, Manju's little one had a fever.

Third: Nikhil in school, the trunk got wet.

Vinod looked at the paper and said, "Those are not dates." Sharda Devi said, "For a house, those are dates enough."

The next day Bhola began scraping the lime again. Nikhil wanted to photograph all three water lines. Sharda Devi neither stopped him nor showed any enthusiasm.

"Keep them if you like," she said. "But let the wall remain a wall." "The marks will be plastered over?" "They will." "Won't that trouble you?" Sharda Devi looked toward the western sky. The clouds had grown dense now. "Marks are not preserved merely to be looked at. If a mark teaches you something, its work is done."

Three days later, fresh limewash covered the western wall. The brown line, the grey line, the faint stain below them—all disappeared. In the north-west corner, the foundation of the new room began to rise. Its floor was kept three bricks above the old house. The first things carried inside were not photographs of ancestors, but a box of medicines, land papers, school certificates, two sacks of seed, a sealed box of matches, and a small brass bell that Sharda Devi kept to wake everyone on rainy nights.

Inside the doorway of that room, Nikhil made a small notch with the measuring cord. Beside it he wrote: upper water line of the old western wall. Three bricks of space were left above it. The first rain did not come that week. Twice the clouds gathered and then cleared. The new limewash dried.

In the evening, Sharda Devi sat on the veranda looking toward the western wall. The water lines had been covered. The old floor lay buried beneath the doorway, and in the north-west a new high room was rising. The family had understood: a flood leaves its mark on a wall, and afterward a family goes on changing the house.

STORY 240

The First Tractor

It was the first week after Ashadh had set in. Early in the morning, a long trail of dust rose along the eastern road of Simra village, and through that dust a red tractor came slowly towards the village. The company's name gleamed in white letters on its front, while behind it the new ploughshare caught the first light of the sun and flashed.

Naresh had been standing at the doorway for a long time. Since the night before he had come out three times to look down the road. The tractor had been bought with a bank loan, two years of savings, and a little money borrowed from his maternal uncle. Naresh's arithmetic was simple—plough his own twelve bighas, then take up hired ploughing in the village and neighbouring hamlets; save time, save labour, and pay the loan instalments on schedule.

Jagessar stood beside the doorway. In his hand was the old cord of the bullocks' bell. The previous evening he had untied Nandu and Karma from the cowshed and taken them to graze by the pond. Jagessar had been ploughing for this household since Naresh's father's time. In twenty-five years he had come to know the field ridges, the colour of the soil, the movement of water, and the temper of the bullocks as well as he knew the joints of his own body.

When the tractor entered the courtyard, the children came running. Some touched the bonnet; others tried to measure the huge rear wheels. Laughing, Naresh kept shooing them away.

"It's hot. Don't touch it."

Jagessar quietly folded the bell cord and put it into his pocket.

Naresh looked at him. "Kaka, now see for yourself—a day's ploughing in two hours."

Jagessar looked at the tractor's ploughshare. "Will the soil agree in two hours?"

"If the soil doesn't agree, the machine will make it agree." Naresh laughed.

Jagessar too gave a faint smile, but said nothing.

The first day was reserved for ploughing their own land. Naresh had called a driver from town—Ramakant. He had learned to operate the

machine at the company's depot. At seven in the morning the tractor entered the large western field.

Jagessar remained seated on the ridge. Nandu and Karma were tied in the cowshed. Earlier, by the time the bullocks completed one round of this field, they would be wet with sweat and Jagessar would have shifted his grip on the plough-handle twice. Now the tractor went growling round, turning in a single pass as broad a strip of soil as the bullocks would have turned in four.

Villagers gathered on the ridge. There was curiosity in some eyes, calculation in others.

"How much diesel does it drink?"

"What does one bigha cost?"

"What use are bullocks now?"

At this last question Jagessar looked once towards Nandu and Karma's shed.

By noon the field had been ploughed. Victorious fatigue showed on Naresh's face. He came over to Jagessar.

"Kaka, keeping bullocks is a losing bargain now. I'm thinking of selling both."

Jagessar kept rubbing a pinch of ridge-soil between his fingers. "Your bullocks, your decision."

Naresh paused for a moment. "Don't worry about your work. Loading sacks, unloading fertiliser, keeping the tractor clean—there's plenty to do."

Jagessar dusted the soil from his hand. "There is plenty of work, but not all work is the same."

The remark made Naresh slightly uncomfortable. He had expected Jagessar to thank him, or at least to feel reassured. Instead, Jagessar rose and walked towards the house.

Within two weeks Nandu and Karma were sold. The cowshed stood empty. Naresh stored two drums of diesel, grease, and a box of tools there. The old yoke remained hanging on the wall.

Work for the tractor increased rapidly. People from Simra, Barail, and the southern hamlet began coming to Naresh's courtyard to book dates for ploughing. In a notebook Naresh wrote down the field, the estimated time, and the payment.

Jagessar watched all this in passing, but he no longer appeared at the doorway every morning without being called, as he once had. Sometimes he cut bamboo, sometimes scattered paddy seed for another farmer, sometimes worked his own half-bigha sharecropped plot.

One day Naresh said, "Kaka, tomorrow at four in the morning we'll go to the field by the small channel. If we leave before daylight, we can finish two fields before nine."

Jagessar asked, "Tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Tomorrow I have already promised Ramcharittar that I'll split bamboo for him."

Naresh was surprised. "Can't you leave it for one day?"

Jagessar looked straight at him. "Earlier your father would say, 'Come at dawn,' and I would go. The way my work was arranged then was different. Now, if you need me, ask me first. My day is mine too."

No answer came at once to Naresh's lips.

"I was only..."

"I understand," Jagessar said, "but calling me 'Kaka' instead of by the old name does not change the old arrangement by itself."

Jagessar left. Naresh stood there for a long time. For the first time he realised that the tractor was changing not only the pace of the fields; it was also changing the way people came and went through his courtyard.

The next morning Naresh reached the field by the small channel with Ramakant. The owner, Sahdev Mahato, was waiting on the ridge.

The field was long, but there was a slight rise in the middle and, along the southern edge, the trace of an old drainage course almost hidden under grass. Ramakant drove the tractor straight in.

The first two rounds went smoothly. On the third, the rear ploughshare cut too deep along the southern side. From a distance Sahdev shouted, "Slow there!"

Ramakant stopped the machine.

Sahdev came down from the ridge. "There used to be an old watercourse on this side. If you cut too deep, all the rainwater will enter here."

Naresh looked at the soil. It seemed to him an ordinary slope. "We'll rebuild the ridge."

Sahdev shook his head. "The ridge is above. The water turns underneath. If Jagessar had been here, he would have seen it."

Naresh did not like that. "A tractor ploughs; it doesn't listen to stories."

But after the first heavy rain, the southern portion of Sahdev's field remained under water for two days. The ridge was intact, but the mouth of the old drainage course had opened again. Sahdev said nothing; he simply did not book Naresh for the next ploughing.

Two days later the soil at Barail was wet. Jagessar happened to meet them on the road. Naresh was taking the tractor there.

Jagessar picked up a little soil, squeezed it in his fist, then opened his palm. The earth remained stuck together like smooth dough.

"Not today," he said.

"The customer has booked the date."

"Wait till tomorrow afternoon."

"If we wait, the next three fields will all be pushed back."

Jagessar put the clod from his fist down on the ridge. "Then go. The soil doesn't read your booking dates."

That old thorn of discomfort rose again inside Naresh. He drove the tractor on.

The ploughing was completed, but the soil did not break into a fine crumb behind the machine; it turned into large sticky clods. Three days later the sun came out hard and those clods baked as solid as bricks. The landowner had to hire labourers again to break them. He did not deduct money from Naresh's payment, but the complaint travelled through the village.

That evening Naresh sat in the empty cowshed. A drum of diesel stood beside him. The old yoke hung on the wall. On its wood he could still see the polish left by years of Jagessar's palms.

For the first time Naresh wondered—had Jagessar's work been only to drive the bullocks, or had it also been to read the soil?

The next day he went to Jagessar's house.

Jagessar was shaving thin strips from a split bamboo in the courtyard. He saw Naresh, but did not stop his hands.

"Kaka, I had two things to say."

"Say them."

"I made a mistake at the small channel. At Barail too."

Jagessar put the shaved bamboo aside. "The machine didn't make the mistake."

"I did."

"Yes."

That 'yes' felt lighter to Naresh than he had expected. He had prepared arguments in his defence, but Jagessar did not enlarge the blame.

Naresh said, "If you agree, I want you to look at a field once before we take the tractor in. Where to turn, where to reduce the depth, whether the soil is ready—all that."

Jagessar asked, "What is this work called?"

Naresh laughed. "I haven't thought of a name yet."

"Then don't think of the name first. Think of the payment."

Naresh fell silent.

Jagessar went on, "When I was a ploughman, there was the year's paddy, clothes, sometimes cash, sometimes credit—everything mixed together. If the work is separate now, the payment should be clear too."

Naresh sat down on the ground. The two talked for half an hour. The rate would not be according to the size of the field, but according to time and distance. If Jagessar merely examined the soil, one rate; if he stayed on the ridge through the entire ploughing and gave directions, another. If he found the soil unsuitable, he would say so plainly; the final decision would belong to the customer and Naresh.

At the end Jagessar said, "And one more thing. If we are to leave at four in the morning, ask me the evening before."

Naresh smiled. "Is that the most important condition of all?"

"It is for me."

At first the village laughed at this new kind of work.

"Payment even for looking at a field?"

"Has Jagessar become a doctor now?"

"New diseases of the soil every day?"

Jagessar laughed the jokes away. When he reached a field, he first walked around it. Here he pressed the earth with his heel, there he cleared grass from an old ridge, elsewhere he asked the farmer—which way had the water stood after the last rain? Where had the bullocks turned before? Where were the roots of old trees buried in the field?

Naresh, in turn, taught him about the machine. How wide a strip the ploughshare cut in one pass, where the tractor needed more room to turn, at what depth it consumed more diesel, in which soils the wheels slipped.

Earlier, when Jagessar inspected a field, he thought only of soil and water. Slowly he began to measure with his eyes the turning circle of the machine as well.

One day he himself stopped Naresh. "On this ridge the old way of turning would be fine, but your tractor's rear plough is wide. Turn two cubits farther in and the ridge will be saved."

Naresh changed direction without arguing.

Within a few months the laughter diminished. There was no miracle behind it. Simply, less diesel was wasted, fewer ridges were broken, and the machine was not forced into wet fields. Sometimes Jagessar's judgement was wrong too. Once he thought a sandy field too wet and advised waiting half a day; by afternoon a wind rose and the soil was ready at once. Naresh joked, "The doctor's medicine missed its mark."

Jagessar replied, "Then stop calling me a doctor. The soil is older than I am."

Both laughed.

At the end of Sawan, the owner of a large field wanted urgent ploughing. It had rained at night, but the owner said, "If you don't plough today, I'll call another tractor." The payment was good. A loan instalment was near.

Naresh called Jagessar.

Jagessar walked around the field and returned. "Half of it can be ploughed today. Not the lower strip."

The owner flared up. "I'm paying for the whole field. Is the machine yours or this old man's?"

Jagessar said nothing. He looked at Naresh's face.

For a moment Naresh wanted to plough the whole field. The instalment date, the diesel debt, the fear of losing the customer—all rose together.

He climbed onto the tractor, started the machine, and entered the higher strip first. After one round he reached the edge of the lower ground and saw the slick mud flung from the wheels. It was sticking to the tyres in a thick layer.

Naresh stopped the machine.

"The upper half today. The lower half tomorrow."

The owner cursed, threatened to call another tractor, but Naresh did not take the machine down into the lower strip.

Jagessar offered no praise that day. In the evening he merely asked, "What time tomorrow morning?"

Naresh said, "What time are you free?"

A smile appeared in Jagessar's eyes. "Six."

"Then six."

By Kartik, dust and scratches had settled over the tractor's red paint. The first loan instalment had been paid. Nandu and Karma's empty shed had become a tool room, but Naresh had not taken the yoke down from the wall.

Jagessar's son Birju worked at a bicycle-repair shop. One day he came to watch the tractor's oil being changed. Ramakant taught him how to open the filter. Two weeks later Birju enrolled for a short diesel-engine training course at the district headquarters.

At first Jagessar said nothing. Naresh asked, "Don't you want Birju to learn machine work?"

Jagessar said, "Why wouldn't I? I only don't want him to go on being called somebody's 'own man' until he forgets the value of his own day."

This time Naresh did not answer at once. He understood what Jagessar meant.

The following year, in Phagun, an outside trader came to the village to buy seed. Seeing Naresh's tractor, he asked, "Is yours the first tractor in this village?"

"Yes."

At that moment Jagessar was examining the soil in a nearby field. Pointing towards him, the trader asked, "Is he your ploughman?"

The old answer almost came out of Naresh's mouth. He stopped himself.

"He used to plough for our household," he said. "Now I learn the movement of the fields from him, and he asks me about the movement of the machine. We agree on the work before we do it."

The trader probably understood half of this and not the other half. He turned back towards the sacks of seed.

Jagessar had heard from a distance. He came over to Naresh.

"You said something very grand," he said with a smile.

Naresh laughed too. "Was it wrong?"

"Not wrong. But no single person understands the movement of a field. The rains change, the canal changes, people change."

"The tractor too?"

"That has been changing since its first year—look, half its paint is gone."

They both looked at the tractor. Dust lay on the bonnet, there was a small dent on one side, and a dried crust of soil clung to the rear ploughshare. The machine was no longer a new object; its growl had blended into the village's everyday sounds.

That evening Naresh took the tractor to plough the western field. Jagessar walked along the ridge. Here he raised a hand to signal that the depth should be reduced; elsewhere he remained silent.

Earlier Jagessar had walked behind the bullocks with his hand on the plough-handle. Now Naresh was on the machine, but Jagessar did not walk behind him. He followed his own path parallel to the ridge—sometimes ahead, sometimes a little behind.

Between the two of them lay a broad strip of newly turned soil. Across that strip, neither the old line of ownership remained clearly visible nor was any new declaration of equality written. Only the way of working was changing, and with it the measure of the distance between the two men.

STORY 241

The Boundary Stake

It was the last week of Phagun. In the western hamlet of Hariharpur, the wheat ears were filling with milk, bees circled the mango blossom, and the old bamboo fence between two adjoining houses was being cut down and stacked to one side.

Nayan Jha had decided to raise a brick wall along the western edge of his courtyard. His reasons were simple: goats kept getting into the vegetable beds, children at play wandered into the neighbouring courtyard, and the bamboo fence had to be replaced every year or two.

His neighbour, Rameshwar Mandal, had not objected at first. "Build your wall, but let the old boundary remain where it is," was all he had said.

The trouble began when Budhan, the mason, stretched his measuring cord one morning.

Near the entrance stood an old brick pillar. At the rear, by the orchard, a thick sal-wood stake had been driven into the ground, and the bamboo of the old fence had been tied to it. Budhan stretched the cord from the pillar to the stake and marked on the earth the line along which the bricks were to be laid.

Rameshwar came down from the veranda. The moment he saw the line on the ground, he said, "You've come an inch onto my side."

Budhan looked up. "How much?"

"One inch."

Nayan laughed. "You measured an inch with your eyes?"

Rameshwar went inside, brought out an old measuring tape, and measured from the eastern edge of the stake to the marked line. "See for yourself."

Budhan placed his own tape against it. The difference really was close to an inch.

Nayan stopped laughing. "The cord runs through the middle of the stake."

Rameshwar said, "The boundary does not run through the middle of the stake. It is along the edge on your side. The stake was driven into my land."

"Who told you that?"

"My father did."

"My father said the stake stood on the boundary."

Budhan let the cord slacken. "Then first decide whether the boundary is the edge of the stake or its middle."

Within half an hour, the matter of one inch had spread through both houses and beyond. Rameshwar's son Manoj laughed and said, "All this quarrelling over a strip of land narrower than a finger?"

Rameshwar glared at him. "Land is not small or large. A line is a line."

The words stung Nayan. It seemed to him that Rameshwar was questioning not merely an inch of land but his father's word.

The two households had been neighbours for fifty years. The fence between them had at different times been made of bamboo, thorn branches, or jute stalks, built and rebuilt again and again. But the thick stake at the back had stood there for so long that the younger generation had come to think of it as a natural part of the ground itself.

Nayan went over to the stake. It was nearly two inches thick. Up to four cubits above the earth, the wood had been worn smooth. Here and there were thin knife-cuts, letters, and numbers.

Nayan had never paid attention to those marks before.

"What are these?" Manoj asked.

Rameshwar bent to look. Beside one line something like 'N 8' had been carved. Beside another, 'R 9'. Higher up was an 'S' and an incomplete year.

Nayan's expression changed. "Could this 'N' be for my name?"

Rameshwar looked once at him and once at the stake. "And the 'R'?"

Manoj burst out laughing. "Yours?"

Rameshwar did not laugh. His eyes had begun searching for something very old.

Someone in the gathering said, "Ask Aunt Jagatarini."

Jagatarini was Rameshwar's father's cousin. She was past eighty-five and walked slowly, but she remembered the old houses and courtyards with remarkable clarity.

They brought her to the stake. First she ran her hand over the wood; then she touched the knife-marks.

"Before you look for the boundary, look at the children's measurements," she said.

Nayan stared. "The children's measurements?"

"Yes. This 'N' is Nayan. Eight years old."

A smile slowly spread across Rameshwar's face.

Jagatarini touched the other line. "This 'R' is Rameshwar. Nine years old. He was a finger's breadth taller than Nayan then. Very proud of it too."

Laughter rose from the crowd. This time Rameshwar laughed as well, though he quickly composed his face.

Jagatarini began to explain. On the first Sunday of Chait, the children of both households used to stand with their backs against this stake. A straight piece of bamboo would be placed on each child's head and a thin mark cut with a knife. The first letter of the name and the age would be written beside it.

"Why?" Manoj asked.

"So we could see how much the child had grown."

"Why not mark it on the wall of the house?"

Jagatarini laughed. "Were the children of both houses jointly owned? Who would write the measurements of one household on the wall of the other?"

Manoj was left searching for an answer.

Nayan looked again at the lines on the stake. The 'S' was perhaps his sister Saroj's. A thin mark lay above it. On the other side was an 'M'—Rameshwar's sister Manju. The children of both households had climbed upward on the same piece of wood, line after line.

"But the boundary?" Rameshwar asked again. His voice was softer now, but the question remained.

Jagatarini said, "The boundary used to be taken through the middle of this timber."

Rameshwar immediately asked, "Why?"

"Because the fence was tied through the middle."

Nayan looked at Rameshwar. "Then Budhan's cord is right."

Jagatarini raised a hand to stop him. "I only said the fence used to be tied through the middle. Don't ask me exactly where the legal line of the land ran."

The look of victory on Nayan's face stopped halfway.

Budhan the mason, who was gathering his tools a little distance away, said, "An old bamboo fence has thickness. If one person takes the eastern edge as his and another the western edge, an inch or two of difference appears by itself."

Rameshwar looked at him. "You are a mason, not a surveyor."

Budhan answered calmly, "True. That is why I have stopped the wall."

No foundation was dug that day. The pile of bricks lay in the sun. The children played on the sand until evening.

That night Nayan kept remembering old things. A blurred memory returned: standing with his back to the stake beside Rameshwar in childhood; Rameshwar lifting his heels to appear taller; Nayan's father, Shivnarayan, laughing and saying, "A year doesn't grow just because you lift your heels."

In the morning Nayan went to Rameshwar.

"Do you remember?"

Rameshwar was silent for a moment. "The business with the heels?"

Nayan laughed. "Yes."

For a moment the tension left Rameshwar's face. "You started crying. You said Rameshwar had cheated his way into being taller."

They both laughed. Then, at the same moment, they looked towards the stake, and the laughter turned awkward again. The question of the land was still there.

Rameshwar said, "Memory has its place. Once the wall is built, I don't want another quarrel."

Nayan agreed. "Nor do I."

Both households began searching their old papers. They found field-area records, house-tax receipts, and partition slips, but nowhere was the thickness of the bamboo fence between them recorded. The old map was not precise enough to answer a question of one inch.

During that search, a thin, blackened piece of wood emerged from Rameshwar's granary. Sita Devi, Rameshwar's wife, first took it for an old shelf-board from the hearth. The moment Jagatarini saw it, she said, "This is part of the first measuring stake."

It too bore cut-marks. The letters had faded, but some could still be read—'Shi', 'Shya', 'J', 'P'.

Nayan's heart gave a start. 'Shi' was Shivnarayan—his father. 'Shya' was Shyamsundar—Rameshwar's father.

"Their measurements too?" Manoj asked in astonishment.

Jagatarini said, "Yes. In those days the stake stood in the middle of the bamboo fence. Your grandfathers marked their children's heights on it as well."

Manoj held the piece of wood in his hand and stared at it for a long time.

Rameshwar asked softly, "Then when was this newer stake put in?"

Jagatarini said, "When the old wood rotted at the bottom. Ramanand the carpenter made this one."

Ramanand Paswan was now close to eighty. The moment he heard, he came leaning on his stick. He smiled when he saw the stake, then

touched the grain of the wood and said, "I chose the sal timber myself. Shyamsundar and Shivnarayan were both there."

Nayan asked, "Exactly where the old stake had stood?"

Ramanand frowned and thought. "In the same place. But if you are going to ask me about one inch, I cannot say."

Rameshwar immediately said, "That is exactly what I am asking."

Ramanand laughed. "Then shall I pull a one-inch answer from my eighty-year-old head about something thirty-five years ago?"

The crowd laughed again. This time Rameshwar did not take offence.

Ramanand walked around to the back of the stake and looked at it. "One thing I do remember. The new timber was thicker than the old one."

Budhan, who had happened to return to look at the work, immediately measured the stake. "A little over two inches."

"The old one?" Nayan asked.

Ramanand measured the wooden fragment. "About an inch and a half."

For a few moments everyone was silent.

Then Budhan drew two lines on the earth—one showing the narrower width of the old stake, the other the thicker new one. "If the centre line remained exactly the same, the edges of the new stake would fall differently on both sides. If you treat an edge as the boundary, a difference is bound to appear."

Manoj said at once, "So the land didn't move—the stake just got thicker?"

Rameshwar cut in, "Don't reach a conclusion so quickly."

But his voice no longer had the hardness of the first day.

Nayan kept looking at the two lines Budhan had drawn on the ground. It slowly became clear to him that the two families might be calling different things the 'old boundary'—one meant the middle of the fence, another the edge of the stake on its own side. For years, while a flexible bamboo barrier stood there, the difference had served no practical purpose. The solid brick wall was making the question rigid for the first time.

"Why wasn't a wall built earlier?" Manoj asked Jagatarini.

"There was no money," she said simply. "And less need. The children ran through both courtyards. When a goat had to be caught, no one asked whose house it was in."

Rameshwar said, "Times have changed."

"They have," Jagatarini agreed. "So the old way cannot continue exactly as it was. But drawing a new line without understanding the old way is not right either."

At that, Nayan fell silent.

The next day both families had the land measured again from two fixed old points at the outer corners. The surveyor said plainly that the available documents confirmed the total width of the two house plots, but no paper could say to whom the one inch inside the old bamboo fence belonged. That question would have to be settled by agreement between the two families.

Rameshwar was disappointed. "So after all this measuring, we still have to decide it ourselves?"

"Yes," the surveyor said. "The papers tell you the area of the land. They do not know which edge of the timber in an old shared fence belonged to whom."

That evening the members of both households sat by the stake. There was no crowd from the village council, only the families.

Nayan said, "I am the one building the wall. If I keep the whole wall on my own land, I will leave this one inch aside."

Rameshwar immediately said, "Then tomorrow someone will say the strip outside the wall is mine. That will start a new quarrel."

Nirmala, Nayan's wife, spoke for the first time. "Then build a shared wall."

Everyone looked at her.

"Take the centre line through the middle of the stake. Half the thickness of the wall on this side, half on that. Split the expense too. Write it down that the wall is shared and that no other claim over either plot changes because of it."

Before Rameshwar could answer, Sita Devi said, "Why did no one think of this earlier?"

Manoj laughed. "Because everyone was pulling that one inch towards his own side."

Rameshwar glared at him, but even he could not keep from laughing.

After thinking for a while, Nayan said, "All right. But what about the stake?"

Budhan said, "It will fall inside the foundation of the wall. It has to come out."

At that, Jagatarini started. "Don't throw the stake away."

Rameshwar said, "If the boundary stake is removed, where will we keep it?"

Jagatarini looked at the lines cut into the wood. "It is not only a boundary anymore."

They did not uproot the stake that night. The next morning the children from both houses gathered around it—Manoj's daughter Khushi, Nayan's grandson Anshu, and two younger children from the neighbourhood. Jagatarini showed them the old cut-marks.

"See this—your grandfather was this tall at nine."

Khushi looked at her father and laughed. "So small?"

Manoj said, "My father, not me."

"Then how tall were you?"

Manoj had no answer. His own height had never been marked on the newer stake. By the time he was a child, the Chait tradition had already died out.

That made Jagatarini a little sad. "You people bought plenty of measuring tapes, but stopped cutting the children's growth onto the stake."

Khushi immediately stood with her back against it. "Mark mine."

Rameshwar laughed. "Let the wall be built first."

Three days later the stake was carefully removed. Budhan stretched a line through the middle on the ground. This time the cord did not follow either edge of the timber but its centre point. Nayan and Rameshwar both held the cord with their own hands when the first brick was laid.

The wall was built chest-high, with an open bamboo lattice above it. The two families agreed that it should keep animals out and small children safe, but not shut one courtyard completely from the sight of the other.

The expense was recorded half and half. On a small sheet of paper, both men signed: shared wall, shared repairs. No sentence was written about whose one inch it had been, because by the end both had understood that the answer depended on which edge of the stake one chose.

The old sal-wood stake was not thrown away. Beside the small shared gate between the two houses that opened towards the pond, it was planted again—not on the boundary line but inside the gate, where the children of both households could reach it.

On the first Sunday of Chait, Khushi and Anshu stood beside it. Jagatarini sat watching from a chair.

First a thin piece of bamboo was placed on Khushi's head. Rameshwar took the knife, then paused and looked at Nayan.

"You make the mark."

Nayan smiled. “The first mark is for your granddaughter.”

Rameshwar said, “The stake belongs to both of us.”

At last Jagatarini said, “Make the cut together, or you’ll quarrel over another inch.”

Everyone burst out laughing.

Nayan gripped the handle of the knife, Rameshwar placed his hand over Nayan’s, and a thin new line was cut into the wood. Beside it they wrote ‘Kh 7’. Then they measured Anshu.

By evening the shadow of the new wall fell half into each courtyard. Air moved through the bamboo lattice. The old fence was gone, and the old arrangement was gone with it. But beside the shared gate stood the stake on which the heights of the children of both families continued to climb up the same piece of wood.

Once the wall was built, the question of the one inch of land was, in practical terms, over. But the story it had opened was not really about land. It was about the way generations often give different names to the same thing. One generation calls it a boundary, another a fence-post, another the measure of its childhood.

And the wood, taking no one’s side, keeps every mark on the same body.

STORY 242

The Empty Cattle Shed

There was a time when mornings in the village of Belahi opened to the sound of bells in Baisakh. Somewhere a cow would be untethered, elsewhere a calf would tug at its rope, and somewhere a brass bell would tinkle as a bullock moved its neck. The smell of dung and water, the scrape of fodder being chopped, and the herdsmen's calls mingled in the lanes.

Now the sounds of morning had changed. Motors ran in a few houses, water tanks filled on rooftops, bicycles sped towards the main road carrying packets of milk. There were still animals, but not in even half as many homes as before.

In the eastern quarter of the village, Shivnath Jha's old cattle shed stood out amid this change: long mud walls, a sloping tiled roof, three posts driven into the floor, and a stone trough in one corner.

The cattle shed was empty.

Even so, Shivnath Jha swept it every morning.

First he swept the courtyard and poured water over the tulsi plant. Then he took an old bamboo broom into the cattle shed. Dry leaves, dust, bits of straw fallen from the roof, sometimes bird droppings—he gathered everything into one heap and left it outside near the compost pit.

One day his grandson Nachiketa asked, "Baba, what is there here now?"

Shivnath kept sweeping. "Dust."

"Then leave the dust. It will come back again."

Shivnath did not stop sweeping. "You bathe, don't you? Your body gets dirty again too."

Nachiketa burst out laughing. "Are a body and a cattle shed the same thing?"

"No. But sometimes the answer to a task is the same."

Nachiketa found the answer incomplete. He ran off.

Shivnath was seventy-eight. His back had bent a little, but when he swept there was still a rhythm in his hands: first the right-hand corner, then behind the trough, then circles around all three posts, and finally a long stroke towards the doorway.

No one had taught him that rhythm. Fifty-five years of practice had shaped it on its own.

At one time the shed had held as many as nine animals: two bullocks, three cows, two heifers, one calf, and for a whole year an old cow belonging to a neighbour who had gone away to earn.

In those days Shivnath did not clean the cattle shed alone in the mornings. His wife Devaki sprinkled water, his elder son shook out the straw, and his little daughter kept refilling the lota beside the trough.

It had been twelve years since Devaki died. Their daughter lived in Nepal with her family. The elder son, Pramod, was still in the village, but he no longer kept cattle.

First the tractor came. Then the number of bullocks declined. Later the milk-collection vehicle arrived, but fodder became expensive. Some families kept two better-breed cows and sold more milk; others gave up animal rearing altogether. In homes where young men had gone away to earn, space for a motorcycle became more necessary than space for cattle.

The change had not come in a single day. Shivnath had heard it in the diminishing sound of bells.

Earlier, forty-seven or fifty animals would return together every evening from the southern hamlet. Then the number fell to thirty, then twenty. Now sometimes five returned, sometimes seven. Even the animals that remained came back at different times.

"The village has emptied out," Shivnath's contemporary and friend Ramlochan said one day.

Shivnath smiled. "There are more people in the village than ever."

"More people, fewer animals."

"Then the village is not empty. It has changed."

Ramlochan looked towards his cattle shed. "This is empty, though."

Shivnath did not answer.

The last cow in the shed—Surti—had been sold four years earlier. She had grown old and gave very little milk. Pramod had calculated that fodder, medicine, and care cost more than the milk was worth.

Shivnath had not objected.

On the day Surti left, he had stroked her forehead, placed the rope in the new owner's hand, returned home, and cleaned the cattle shed.

He did the same the next day.

And the day after that.

Three months later Pramod asked, "Babuji, shall we store the sacks of paddy in the cattle shed?"

"Do."

"They will cover half the space."

"I won't sweep where the sacks are kept."

Pramod thought Babuji had finally accepted that the cattle shed was now a storeroom. But once the sacks were removed, Shivnath began sweeping the entire floor again.

A year later Pramod's wife Sudha suggested replacing the old roof tiles. "How much should we spend on the roof of an empty building?"

Shivnath said, "Replace two rows where it leaks. Not the whole roof."

"What purpose does that serve?"

"Only that water should not come inside."

Sudha laughed. "The trouble with your cattle shed is that it needs no cattle, yet it still needs a roof."

Shivnath laughed too. "Does every room meant for people always have people living in it?"

Small exchanges of this sort arose in the house from time to time and then ended. Shivnath quarrelled with no one. Nor did he tell sorrowful stories about the emptiness of the cattle shed.

That was why people found his daily cleaning all the stranger.

One Jeth afternoon, three village boys sat down in the cattle shed to play carrom. The shade was good there, and the floor was level and clean. Shivnath saw them but said nothing. In the evening, after the boys gathered up the coins and left, he swept away the spilled powder and scraps of paper.

They came again the next day.

On the third day Nachiketa asked, "Baba, they make a mess. Why don't you stop them?"

"They make a mess; I'll clean it."

"So has the cattle shed become a games room?"

Shivnath said, "When people sit in a place, that place acquires a purpose."

When the rains began, the boys stopped playing there. The cattle shed fell quiet again.

One evening in the middle of Sawan, the eastern sky turned black. A fierce wind rose. A newly built tin roof beside the main road blew away, and rain began slanting down.

At that very time Parvati Devi of the Chamar hamlet was returning home with her only cow. Part of her small cowshed had collapsed in the morning storm. There was no safe place to tie the cow indoors.

She stopped at Shivnath's doorway.

"Kaka, just for one night..."

Before she could finish, Shivnath opened the cattle-shed door. "Bring her inside."

Parvati stood there hesitantly. "The trough..."

"I'll fill the trough with water."

"I'll clean it in the morning."

Shivnath said, "In the morning, you look after your own house. I am here."

As soon as the cow entered the shed, she paused for a moment. Perhaps the smell was unfamiliar. Then she moved towards the trough, pressed her nose to the old stone and sniffed it, and was tied to a post.

Nachiketa stood watching from the doorway.

"Baba, there's a cow here again!"

Shivnath did not laugh at his excitement. "For one night."

It rained all night. Drops fell through the roof in two places, but the cow stayed dry.

At dawn Shivnath arrived with the broom and found fresh dung on the floor. After four years.

For a few moments he stood looking at it.

Nachiketa thought Baba would grow emotional. But Shivnath only picked up the shovel and said, "Take this to the compost pit. I'll do the sweeping."

Two days later Parvati's cowshed was repaired with bamboo and tin. The cow went back.

The cattle shed was empty again.

But after that incident, Nachiketa no longer saw only habit in Shivnath's broom.

For a school assignment, he was conducting a small survey on changing livelihoods in the village. His teacher had said, "Ask the older people in each household which kinds of work have declined over the past twenty years and which have increased."

Nachiketa went first to Shivnath.

"Baba, how many animals were there in the village earlier?"

"I don't remember the count."

"An estimate?"

"Writing down an estimate does not turn it into a fact."

Nachiketa made a face. "Then what will I give my teacher?"

Shivnath thought for a moment. "Ramsevak, the livestock worker, used to keep the old vaccination registers. He is retired now. Go ask him."

From Ramsevak's house, Nachiketa did not get photocopies of the three old registers, but he did get figures copied out by hand. Fifteen years earlier, Belahi had recorded one hundred and forty-two cattle and more

than sixty bullocks and calves. In the previous year's panchayat livestock-camp list, the total was forty-nine animals.

Nachiketa was startled by the numbers.

He told Shivnath.

Shivnath only said, "The sound of the bells was not lying."

Because of the survey, Nachiketa went from house to house. He realized there was no single reason for the decline in livestock. Some families had less land; some had settled elsewhere; for some, buying fodder had become too expensive; others were dissatisfied with the price of milk. In a few homes, on the contrary, one cow had become three because a milk-collection centre had opened nearby.

The village's change was not a straight line.

He wrote a separate page about the cattle shed: "New Uses of Old Animal Spaces."

Shivnath read it and said, "Don't make my cattle shed an example. A cow stayed here for one day, children played here for three days. That does not make a rule."

"But because you keep it clean, it can be used."

Shivnath looked at him. "That you may write."

In Kartik came a notice for the village livestock-health camp. This time the worker said vaccinations would not be given house to house; animals from each hamlet were to be brought to one clean, shaded place.

A question arose in the eastern hamlet: where?

The school was far away. The panchayat building had a paved courtyard but no shade. The temple side was crowded.

Someone mentioned Shivnath's cattle shed.

Pramod was taken aback at first. "That is private property."

Shivnath said, "Open it for one morning."

Sudha asked, "Eight or ten animals will come together. What if the walls get damaged?"

"Walls are damaged by water, not by animals. It was built for animals."

On the morning of the camp, the cattle shed was truly full for the first time in four years. Seven cows, two heifers, one old bullock, and Parvati's cow—eleven animals in all—were tied separately with ropes.

Their owners were there too: one from a landless family, one a teacher, one a grocer, one a cultivator. Earlier, keeping animals had been tied mainly to agricultural work; now the reasons varied—milk, household use, a small income, affection, sometimes tradition.

Shivnath sat by the doorway and watched.

Ramlochan came too. Laughing, he said, "See? The empty cattle shed has filled up."

Shivnath said, "For four hours."

"Even so."

"Empty and full—neither is permanent."

The vaccinations ended. The animals left one by one. Circular hoofprints, bits of chopped fodder, dung, and splashes of water remained on the floor.

The worker said, "Kaka, this was a very good place."

Shivnath replied, "The place was already here."

After everyone left, Nachiketa picked up the broom.

Shivnath said, "Leave it. It is heavy."

"I'll do it."

"For what purpose?" Shivnath asked deliberately.

Sweeping, Nachiketa said, "The dust will come back again."

A faint smile touched Shivnath's lips.

In December, Pramod considered laying bricks over the front half of the cattle shed. There was a plan to extend the rear room of the house. Before doing anything, he asked Babuji.

"What if we take half the space?"

Shivnath looked around the interior of the shed. Two of the three posts were useless now. One side of the trough was broken. The rear part of the roof sagged low.

He said, "Extend the house. But leave the front part open."

Pramod was surprised. He had expected Babuji to insist on keeping the entire cattle shed exactly as it was.

"How much?"

Shivnath drew a line on the ground with his stick. "This much. Enough for two animals to stand, ten people to sit, and goods to remain dry in the rains."

Pramod asked, "Then will it remain a cattle shed or become a veranda?"

Shivnath said, "Why quarrel over the name? The name will change according to the work it does."

The construction was carried out. The rear half of the old cattle shed was absorbed into a room of the house. One post was removed. The stone trough was shifted into the front section. The roof was made from a mixture of new tin and old tiles.

On the first day, Shivnath swept the new floor.

A few weeks later he fell ill. It was only an ordinary fever, but for two mornings he could not get up.

On the third day he came outside leaning on his stick. He looked towards the cattle shed. The floor was clean.

Nachiketa had swept it before leaving for school.

"Why?" Shivnath asked.

Putting on his shoes, Nachiketa said, "A lot of leaves fell yesterday."

"Is anyone coming?"

"No."

"Then?"

Nachiketa was silent for a moment. Then he completed the answer that, months earlier, had seemed incomplete to him.

"If an empty place stays clean, it can find a purpose again."

Shivnath said nothing.

Morning sunlight was sliding in from the edge of the new roof. The stone trough lay half in light, half in shade. From some distant house a cow lowed. From the other hamlet to the north came no answering animal call; only a child's voice, then the bell of a bicycle.

The village was no longer as it had once been. Neither was the cattle shed.

But the thin lines left by the broom were still visible across the floor—lines made not to preserve something unchanged, but to keep a place from closing itself off.

STORY 243

The Last Harvest

On a Kartik dawn, the sky to the east of Belahi had not yet turned blue. A thin veil of mist lay over the paddy fields, and dew clung to the tips of the leaves, ready to flash at the first touch of light.

Harinarayan Jha stood on the field ridge, leaning on his stick.

Before him lay two bighas of land. The paddy had ripened to gold. In places the ears bent under their own weight; elsewhere, because of the lingering water from the last rains, the stalks had remained short.

Beyond the ridge ran the new paved road. Stacks of bricks and sacks of sand lay along its edge.

The registration of this field was due three days later.

The buyer, Vinesh Sahu, had already said, "The crop is yours. Harvest it and hand over the field empty."

Harinarayan had replied, "All right."

The matter had seemed that simple.

But the previous week, when Vinesh mentioned calling the harvesting-machine operator, Harinarayan's daughter Rama suddenly said, "No machine. This time we will harvest it ourselves."

Harinarayan kept looking at her.

"We?"

"Yes. Once."

Rama's two brothers—Jagdish and Mithilesh—were sitting on the veranda at the time. Both laughed at first. Then neither objected.

Today was the day of that decision.

Mithilesh arrived first. He lived in the village itself, though farming was no longer his main work. He ran a small seed-and-fertiliser shop in the market. Most of the ploughing, transplanting, and threshing on his fields he now had done by hired labourers and machines.

He carried five sickles tucked under his arm.

"I had them sharpened," he said.

Harinarayan took one in his hand and touched the edge with the tip of his thumb.

"Very sharp."

"That is good."

"For a hand that is not used to it, too sharp can cause mistakes as well."

Mithilesh laughed. "Then shall I keep the blunt one for Bhaiya?"

Just then a car stopped on the road.

Jagdish got out with his wife Neelam and their son Aarav. He did accounts work in Darbhanga and came to the village two or three times a year.

He had new shoes on his feet and cloth gloves on his hands.

Seeing the gloves, Mithilesh asked, "What are those?"

Jagdish said casually, "They will protect my hands."

Harinarayan said nothing.

Rama arrived a little later with her daughter Sakshi. Her marital home was five kos away, but she now rarely took part in farm work.

Sakshi wanted to take a photograph of the field.

Rama said, "Work first."

Kaushalya Devi came slowly from the house carrying a bamboo basket and an old gamchha. Her waist had bent with age, but her gait was still measured.

She looked at everyone once.

"Two bighas with this many people?"

Jagdish said, "We have the whole day."

Kaushalya replied, "Having the whole day does not make the hands faster."

Harinarayan sat down on the ridge.

Mithilesh gathered the first handful of paddy and showed them where on the stalk it should be cut.

"If you cut too low, soil will come with it. If you cut too high, you lose straw."

Aarav asked, "What is the straw used for?"

Kaushalya looked at him.

"That question tells me you have not watched a harvest for a very long time."

Aarav laughed.

The number of cattle in the village had fallen, but straw was still sold. Some households stored it under their sheds, some traders carried it away, and some people chopped it in the field and mixed it into the soil.

Mithilesh took the first row.

Rama stood beside him.

Jagdish wanted to begin from the other side.

Harinarayan immediately said, "Not from two ends. One direction only."

"Why?" Jagdish asked.

"Where will you put the bundles? Where will the footpath remain? Will you walk again over what has already been cut?"

Without replying, Jagdish came over beside Rama.

The harvesting began.

Within the first five minutes everyone understood that memory and bodily practice were not the same thing.

Rama's grip returned quickly. With her left hand she gathered the paddy, with her right she drew the sickle, and she laid each cut handful behind her.

Mithilesh worked at a steady pace.

In the very first row Jagdish caught the sickle twice. Once a thick clump of weed roots snagged along with the stalks.

Neelam cut slowly, but the bundles she made were even.

At first Sakshi and Aarav were not allowed to cut. The two began gathering the harvested paddy into small heaps.

The sun climbed. The dew began to dry.

In a distant field, the growl of a machine began.

A red harvesting machine moved slowly through the yellow paddy. Behind it appeared even rows of short stubble.

Aarav kept watching it.

"How long would that machine take to cut this field?"

Mithilesh said, "Not even an hour."

"Then why are we—"

Before he could finish the sentence, Rama said, "Because today we did not call the machine."

Aarav went back to work.

Sitting on the ridge, Harinarayan watched the row they were cutting.

After a while he called to Jagdish.

"You are leaving the stalks too high."

Jagdish straightened up.

"My knees hurt."

"Then sit down. This is not work to be hurried."

"Babuji, do you still think I am twelve years old?"

Harinarayan laughed.

"When you were twelve, you did not leave stalks this high."

Rama burst out laughing.

Jagdish smiled too.

At twelve, Jagdish was always finding excuses to escape the harvest. Sometimes his stomach hurt; sometimes he had a school notebook to finish.

Rama was two years older than her brother then. She took her place in the row beside their mother.

"I remember," Rama said. "Once, over in that corner by the pond, you left your sickle in the field and ran away."

Jagdish said, "That is a lie."

Without lifting her head, Kaushalya said, "It is true."

Everyone laughed.

Kaushalya herself was not cutting. She was tying the harvested paddy into bundles.

Her fingers were still quick. She pulled out two small handfuls of straw, twisted them, folded them in the middle into a rope, and tightened them around the belly of a bundle.

Neelam kept watching her hands.

"Ma, teach me this knot."

Kaushalya said, "It is not a knot. It is straw holding straw."

Neelam tried. Her first binding came loose.

Kaushalya showed her again.

"Not too tight. Bend it at the right place."

By ten o'clock the first row had broken into different rhythms.

Mithilesh was ahead. Rama followed him. Neelam was steady. Jagdish straightened his back again and again.

Sakshi passed around water. Aarav gathered the heaps.

Harinarayan's stick lay on the ridge.

Suddenly he stood up and asked Mithilesh for the sickle.

Mithilesh tried to stop him.

"You sit."

"I will cut two handfuls."

"Your knees—"

"My knees are mine."

From a distance Kaushalya said, "Give it to him."

Harinarayan stepped into the field.

As he grasped the first handful, his hand trembled for a moment. Then the sickle entered the stalks.

The sound was very small—the dry whisper of many stems breaking together.

He cut three handfuls. At the fourth he stopped.

"That is enough," he said.

He handed the sickle back to Mithilesh.

Jagdish asked, "Only that much?"

Harinarayan said, "I was not trying to prove I could work."

He sat down on the ridge again.

Before noon, Phulkumari Devi came by on her way to her own field. For years she had worked with the village transplanting and harvesting crews.

Seeing the scene from afar, she laughed.

"So the old days have returned to the Jha household today?"

Kaushalya said, "If the old days had really returned, you too would be standing in the row."

Phulkumari stopped.

"If you call me, I can still stand there."

Laughing, Rama said, "Today the family itself will do the harvesting."

Phulkumari's smile faded a little.

She looked at the cut field.

"The family itself?"

Kaushalya understood the look in her eyes.

"They think that in the old days the family did all the work by itself."

Phulkumari said, "Include my mother, your aunt, Somni from the Musahari, Budhni from the western hamlet—then call it the family."

Rama laughed.

Jagdish's hand stopped.

Harinarayan said quietly, "That is true."

The harvests of the past had never been only the labour of one household. Days of exchanged work, lines of wage labourers, neighbours' hands, bullock carts, threshing crews—all of them together brought the crop home.

In memory, saying "we harvested it ourselves" was simple; an actual field had never been that simple.

Phulkumari did not pick up a sickle.

She merely looked at one handful Jagdish had cut.

"When you grip the stalks, do not keep your thumb inside. The blade will catch it."

Jagdish changed his grip at once.

"And this bundle?" Neelam asked.

Phulkumari examined the binding she had made.

"It is fine. Just do not press wet ears into the middle."

She went on her way.

Watching her go, Rama said, "Then what we are doing today may never have happened like this before."

Kaushalya said, "That is possible."

They ate their midday meal on the ridge.

Flattened rice, curd, potato curry, pickle, and jaggery.

Everyone left the row and sat in the shade.

The distant field worked by machine had already been cleared completely. Its owner stood beside the road talking to someone on his phone.

Aarav looked at his palm.

Even through the gloves, one patch had been rubbed red.

"Will it hurt tomorrow?"

Mithilesh said, "It will."

"The day after?"

"Less."

"Three days later?"

Harinarayan said, "The hand will forget."

Kaushalya immediately said, "Not the hand. The pain."

For a moment everyone fell silent.

After the meal Jagdish asked, "How much is left?"

Mithilesh swept his eyes across the field, measuring it.

"A little more than half."

Jagdish looked at his watch.

"Shall I tell Vinesh to send the machine? It will be difficult to finish by evening."

Rama looked at him but said nothing.

Gathering up the bamboo basket, Kaushalya said, "If you are tired, stop. Calling it the last time does not make the work easier."

Jagdish fell silent.

Harinarayan said nothing either.

After a while Jagdish stood up of his own accord and picked up the sickle.

"Come on."

This time he did not hurry.

In the afternoon sun the colour of the field changed. The golden ears lost their pale gleam and deepened to yellow. A small lizard darted along

the ridge. Two field mice shot out ahead of the advancing row and disappeared in the distance.

Sakshi took out her phone once, then put it back in her bag.

She began lifting the bundles with Neelam.

Rama asked, "No photograph?"

Sakshi said, "Later."

"Why?"

"My hands are not free."

Rama said nothing.

At three o'clock Vinesh Sahu arrived on a motorcycle.

He stopped at the edge of the field and looked at the scene.

"Still half left?"

Mithilesh said, "Not half. A quarter."

Vinesh said, "Shall I send two men? The work at my place is finished."

Harinarayan replied politely, "No. They will finish it today."

Vinesh looked at the family.

"All right. I am not in a hurry. The registration date remains the same."

He spoke about the papers, asked about the road measurement, and then left.

Jagdish watched his motorcycle recede.

"What will he build here?"

Mithilesh said, "At first he was talking about a warehouse. Now I hear three shops in front and storage behind."

Rama looked across the field.

"No paddy again?"

"Does not look like it."

Kaushalya said, "The one who bought it will decide."

There was no complaint in her voice.

That made the words feel heavier to Rama.

She began cutting again.

Evening drew nearer.

After so much fatigue, everyone's pace strangely began to resemble everyone else's. No one had strength left to hurry, so their separate rhythms dissolved into one slow tempo.

Mithilesh cut. Rama gathered the handfuls. Neelam tied the bundles. Jagdish cleared weeds from ahead. Sakshi and Aarav slid the bundles toward the ridge.

Now and then Kaushalya tightened a binding that had come loose.

Harinarayan was no longer on the ridge. He walked slowly behind the advancing row.

The final patch remained in the eastern corner.

The ground there was slightly lower. The paddy was short, but the ears were full.

Harinarayan stopped.

"Water used to stand here for a long time," he said.

Jagdish asked, "But there is a drain now."

"The drain came later."

That was all.

No one asked for the old story.

For the final row, Rama tried to hand the sickle to Jagdish.

Jagdish said, "Let us all cut it together."

Mithilesh laughed. "Five sickles for one handful?"

"Then leave five handfuls."

He divided the remaining patch into five small parts.

Harinarayan was invited too.

He declined.

"I cut my share this morning."

Kaushalya did not take a sickle either.

"My work was the tying."

So Rama, Jagdish, Mithilesh, Neelam, and Sakshi each grasped a handful.

Standing beside them, Aarav counted, "One... two... three."

The five sickles moved at different moments.

Some earlier, some later.

The last five handfuls did not fall together.

Everyone burst out laughing.

"This will not look right in a photograph," Sakshi said.

Rama replied, "We did not cut it for a photograph."

Aarav immediately asked, "Then why did we cut it?"

This time no one answered at once.

Climbing onto the ridge, Harinarayan said, "To finish the work."

The bundles were gathered to one side.

Kaushalya inspected the last binding. One was loose. She opened it and tightened it again.

The sun was setting. Traffic noise on the road had grown louder. The distant machine had already fallen silent.

The field now looked empty, but not even like the neighbouring field harvested by machine.

In some places the stubble was low, in others high. Here and there two or three stalks had been missed. Elsewhere the soil had been pressed down by feet.

Jagdish tried to identify the row he had cut. "Where did I begin?" Mithilesh waved his hand. "Over there." Rama said, "No, you were here." Neelam laughed. "Now no one can tell whose row was whose."

Harinarayan let his gaze travel across the field. "Once the harvest is over, the field does not keep that account." Rama looked at him. Harinarayan said nothing more.

Before returning home, Sakshi made everyone stand on the ridge for a photograph.

Kaushalya said, "I will not stand holding a sickle." "Why?" "The work is over. Put the tools down."

The sickles were laid on the ridge. The photograph was taken.

The next day the bundles went for threshing. On the third day, the registration was completed.

The document contained the area, the boundaries, the price, and the signatures. There was no mention of the harvest.

Rama read the document, signed it, and handed the file back to Mithilesh.

That evening, when everyone began leaving the village, the car passed beside that field on the road.

Looking out of the window, Aarav asked, "Which part was the one I cut?"

Jagdish tried to see, but the car moved on. No mark was clear anymore. In the falling light, stubble short and tall shone in the same colour. Nowhere on the field was it written that this had been the last harvest.

STORY 244

The Village of Certificates

The first thing one noticed on entering the village of Sonbarsa was the walls.

On one veranda wall hung, framed behind glass, a "Clean Courtyard Award"; in another house's sitting room, a certificate for "Advanced Seed Training"; at someone's doorway, "Water-Conservation Participant"; and inside another home, "Women's Group Excellence."

The paper of some certificates had yellowed, but the frames still shone.

In some houses, certificates hung beside the household shrine. In others, family photographs were placed beneath them.

People in the village used to joke, "Sonbarsa has become the Village of Certificates."

At first it had been a joke. Over the last two years, people had begun to say it almost as a matter of pride.

When a new guest came to a house, the wall was sometimes shown before tea was served.

"This one is my father's."

"This one belongs to the daughters' group."

"This is my grandson's—from the sports meet."

"Look at this—second place in the entire block."

Sometimes the family had forgotten which competition that second place had come from, but they never allowed dust to settle on the frame.

At the centre of the village stood the primary school—three rooms, a veranda, an old neem tree, and an iron gate.

Above the gate, the school's name was painted in blue letters. Beneath it hung five small plaques—"Full Enrolment," "Clean Campus," "Children's Assembly Participation," "Nutrition Awareness," and "Green Week."

There was no shortage of certificates inside the school either.

The only difference was that for three months there had been no teacher in the school.

After the previous teacher, Ramakant Mishra, had been transferred, no replacement had arrived. Twice they had been told that

"arrangements are being made," but no one in the village understood where, on paper, those arrangements were actually taking place.

The school key remained with Saroja, who cooked the midday meal.

Every morning she opened the gate, swept the veranda, checked the kitchen, and when the children arrived, opened the classrooms for them.

Sometimes the children came carrying notebooks; sometimes they came with a ball.

The little children of Classes One and Two sometimes copied letters after the older ones. Sometimes they sat beneath the neem tree for a while and then went back home.

The villagers understood the inconvenience, but they placed it among the ordinary troubles of daily life—like a broken field embankment, seed that arrived late, or a hand-pump whose stream had grown weak.

"The teacher will come."

That sentence had been in circulation for three months.

One day a notice arrived at the panchayat office saying that a team from the block would visit Sonbarsa the following week.

The reason was the unusually large number of training programmes, campaigns, and community-participation initiatives in the village.

The notice also said that the village would put up a "Community Achievement Exhibition."

The panchayat secretary, Navalkishore Jha, read the notice twice.

Then his face brightened.

"All our certificates will be displayed."

There was a stir among those present.

Ramdev Mahato immediately asked, "Where?"

"The panchayat building will be too small."

Ratna Devi said, "Two rooms in the school remain empty."

Someone said quite naturally, "They are empty anyway."

It was a small sentence, but a silence spread across the veranda for a moment.

Navalkishore changed the subject. "The school is clean. The walls are empty too. It will be a good place for the exhibition."

From the next day, certificates began to arrive.

Some people brought them still behind glass; others removed the frames and brought only the paper.

Some did not want to hand over the original.

"Take a copy."

"A copy won't have the same shine," Navalkishore would say.

And then the original would arrive.

The first classroom began to fill with certificates from house after house.

Saroja first rolled up the mats that had been spread on the veranda for the children.

"Keep these to one side," she said. "Where will the children sit?"

Ratna Devi replied, "For two or four days they can sit under the neem tree."

Saroja said nothing.

Gauri, who studied in Class Six at the neighbouring middle school, came there with her younger brother Chandan.

Chandan was a Class Three student at this primary school.

Seeing the heap of certificates by the doorway, he asked, "Are all these books?"

Gauri laughed. "No, certificates of honour."

Chandan tried to pick one up. Saroja stopped him. "Are your hands clean?"

Chandan looked at his palms.

Then he began sounding out the letters from a distance.

"Wa... ter..."

He stopped.

Gauri read it for him—"Water-Aware Family."

Chandan asked, "What does water-aware mean?"

Gauri thought for a moment.

"People who save water."

Chandan began reading the recipient's name, but when he got stuck halfway, Gauri read that for him too.

By evening, fifty-eight certificates from the village had been deposited at the school.

The next day the number crossed one hundred.

Navalkishore was making a list of all the certificates.

"Subject, year, recipient, institution."

He ruled four columns in the register.

Ratna Devi said, "Put the biggest honours in front."

Showing his own paper, Ramdev Mahato asked, "How will you decide which is biggest?"

"District-level first."

"Mine is state-level training."

"Training is not an award."

"Then why did they give me a certificate?"

Three people argued for half an hour over which word carried more weight—participation, training, selection, commendation, or award.

At last Navalkishore said, "Look at the size of the lettering. The bigger the title, the bigger the frame."

Everyone laughed, but the arrangement was settled almost on that basis.

The school's own certificates had already been hanging on the wall of the office room.

Ratna Devi wanted to add those to the exhibition as well.

Standing on a chair, Saroja began taking them down one by one.

The first was "Full Enrolment Achievement."

The second—"Clean School Commendation."

The third—"Children's Reading Week Participation."

The fourth—"School Garden Campaign."

A thin layer of dust lay on the fifth. It read, "Commitment to Continuous Learning."

Chandan stood below, watching.

He asked, "What does learning mean?"

This time Saroja remained silent.

Ratna Devi said, "Studying."

Chandan immediately asked, "Then who got this?"

"The school."

"The school studied?"

People in the room burst out laughing.

Ratna Devi laughed too, but Saroja did not.

She set the certificate down.

Three days later, the layout of the exhibition was drawn up.

First room—agriculture, water, cleanliness.

Second room—women's groups, health, nutrition, handicrafts.

Veranda—school and youth achievements.

Children beneath the neem tree.

Navalkishore wrote, "Living proof: our children."

Gauri read the slip and smiled.

"Where will the living proof sit?"

Navalkishore said, "Under the neem tree."

"And the teacher?"

Navalkishore's pen stopped.

"The teacher is a separate matter."

"How separate?"

"The appointment is in the hands of the block office."

Gauri said nothing more.

That evening she saw her father, Anand Yadav, taking certificates down from the wall at home.

There were three papers in Anand's sitting room—Dairy Group Training, Organic Manure Participation, and Farmers' Meeting Commendation.

He was choosing the one with the brightest frame.

Gauri asked, "Babu, there is no teacher in the school. Where is the certificate for that?"

Anand laughed. "A certificate for what?"

"For there being no teacher."

"You don't get a certificate for that."

"Then how will people believe it?"

Anand stopped wiping the frame.

"Everyone knows."

"The people from the block too?"

Anand gave no answer.

The next day Gauri went to the school office to look through the old files.

Saroja said, "Don't touch the papers."

"I'll only look."

The lower compartment of an iron cupboard stood open.

Inside were the attendance register, the midday-meal accounts, the inspection book, and copies of several letters.

Gauri saw one letter—an "Application for Replacement" sent after Ramakant Mishra's transfer.

It was dated three months earlier.

After that came two reminders.

All of them bore receipt stamps.

"This is proof," Gauri said.

Saroja took the file from her hands.

"This is not a certificate of honour."

"But it is a certificate."

"No. It is an office letter."

Gauri seized upon the words.

"What is the difference between a certificate and proof?"

Saroja said, "A great deal."

"How much?"

Saroja looked towards the window. Under the neem tree, Chandan was writing the letter 'ka' in the dust.

"One is hung on a wall," she said quietly. "The other lies in a file until something gets done."

Gauri carried that sentence home with her that day.

The day before the exhibition, the school was decorated.

Strips of coloured paper, an aripan on the floor, two bamboo arches, and rows of certificates on the walls.

Some of the frames knocked against one another.

Ramdev Mahato saw that his certificate had been hung low.

"Why is mine so far down?"

Ratna Devi said, "There is no room higher up."

"My training certificate carries the minister's signature."

"People can raise their heads to see the signature."

"Raise their heads, or strain their necks?"

Its position was changed again.

Meanwhile, the children sat beneath the neem tree.

Gauri said to Chandan, "Today write 'ksha'."

Chandan formed it incorrectly twice in the dust.

Raushan, sitting beside him, said, "I've forgotten 'tra' now."

Gauri tried to teach them.

After a while it was time for her to leave for her own school.

As she rose, she said, "Again tomorrow."

Chandan asked, "But tomorrow is the exhibition."

"Then the day after."

"Will the teacher come the day after tomorrow?"

Gauri wanted to answer, but she did not know.

On the morning of the exhibition, the villagers came to the school in clean clothes.

Three people came from the block—an assistant from the education office, a development worker, and a women's-group coordinator.

Two local employees accompanied them.

In his welcome address Navalkishore said, "Sonbarsa's special quality is that its achievements are visible not merely on paper, but in every home."

The sentence sounded excellent.

Ratna Devi whispered, "Write that down. It will be useful next time."

The team inspected the first room.

Agricultural training.

Water campaign.

Cleanliness.

Gardening.

One person asked about certificate dates. Another asked what work the recipient had done. Someone else took photographs.

Villagers stood beside their own papers.

Ramdev Mahato showed his signature to three different people.

The second room held the women's-group certificates.

Ratna Devi narrated the story behind each programme.

The visiting team seemed impressed.

Then everyone reached the veranda.

The school's five certificates hung there in a row.

The education-office assistant read the first one—"Full Enrolment."

He smiled.

"How many children?"

Navalkishore opened the register.

"Thirty-six."

"How many are present?"

Eyes turned towards the neem tree.

Twenty-three children were sitting there.

"Where is the teacher?"

It was a simple question.

Navalkishore replied, "The post is vacant at present."

"For how many days?"

Someone said three months. Someone else said four.

From inside, Saroja said, "Eighty-two days."

Everyone looked at her.

"Eighty-two?"

"I have been counting from the day after Ramakant Babu left."

The education assistant's expression did not change. He asked for the register.

Navalkishore went towards the school office.

Gauri, who had taken leave from her own school to see the exhibition, went and stood beside Saroja.

The education assistant examined the attendance register, copies of the letters, and the receipt stamps.

"Reminders were sent."

"Twice," Navalkishore said.

"Copies have been kept?"

"Yes."

He closed the file.

Meanwhile the development worker continued looking at the school's certificates.

"When was this 'Commitment to Continuous Learning' issued?"

Ratna Devi gave the year.

"There was a teacher then," someone said from behind.

"And now?"

No one answered.

Chandan rose from beneath the neem tree and came towards the veranda.

He tried to read "Children's Reading Week" on the wall.

"Chi... ld... rea..."

When he faltered, Gauri softly supplied, "Reading."

The education assistant looked at Chandan.

"Which class?"

"Three."

"Where is your book?"

Chandan pointed towards the neem tree. "In my bag."

"No lessons today?"

Chandan answered simply, "Today we are looking at certificates."

A few people on the veranda laughed.

It was a very small laugh.

No one could quite tell whom the laughter was aimed at.

The team moved on.

At the end of the programme, a small stage had been set up in front of the panchayat building.

Navalkishore gave a speech. Ratna Devi spoke about the achievements of the women's groups. Anand Yadav said a few words about changes in agriculture.

Then the block team announced that Sonbarsa would receive a new commendation—"Special Recognition for Community Participation."

There was applause.

A large frame was brought onto the stage.

Navalkishore stepped forward.

At that moment Gauri's eyes went to the children beneath the neem tree.

Chandan was forming 'ksha' in Raushan's notebook.

For the first time, he had made it correctly.

Gauri did not clap.

Saroja too remained silent.

Navalkishore accepted the frame. A photograph was taken.

After the programme ended, people began taking back their certificates.

The schoolrooms slowly emptied.

A nail had come loose from one frame. One paper had turned upside down. Someone put another person's certificate into his own bag, then saw the name and exchanged it.

Lifting his certificate, Ramdev Mahato said, "There is a scratch on my glass."

Ratna Devi said, "Wipe it when you get home."

By evening the walls were empty again.

The school's five old certificates began to be rehung.

Saroja stood holding "Commitment to Continuous Learning."

"Where does this go?" Ratna Devi asked.

Saroja looked at the old nail.

Gauri said, "One minute."

She brought a plain sheet of white paper from the office.

In large letters she wrote—

"Teacher's post vacant in the school."

Below it—"Today: 82 days."

Ratna Devi started.

"Why will you hang this?"

Gauri said, "For proof."

"This is not a certificate."

"No. It is evidence."

A faint smile came to Saroja's face.

Navalkishore, who was looking after the frame of the new commendation, came over.

He read the paper.

"This is not an official notice."

Gauri said, "Then let 'Today: 82 days' remain. Tomorrow we will make it 83."

Before Navalkishore could reply, Saroja asked, "Is it wrong?"

Navalkishore checked the date in the file.

"It is not wrong."

"Then?"

He looked at the wall.

On one side was "Full Enrolment," on another "Clean School," and on the third an empty nail.

Navalkishore said quietly, "Hang it lower down. The children should not be able to reach it."

Gauri hung the paper on the nail.

The certificate for "Commitment to Continuous Learning" was placed in the cupboard that day.

The block's new commendation was hung in the panchayat building.

The old certificates in the village homes returned to their former places.

The next morning Saroja opened the gate.

Chandan was the first to arrive.

He began reading the white paper on the wall.

"Scho... ol... has..."

Saroja listened from a distance.

He stumbled over the word "teacher."

This time Saroja did not supply the word.

Chandan sounded out the letters twice.

"Tea... cher."

Then he read the number below—"82."

Saroja brought a red pencil.

She drew a thin line through 82 and wrote beside it—"83."

Chandan asked, "What will we write when the teacher comes?"

Saroja closed the red pencil.

"That day the number will stop increasing."

Chandan looked at the paper again.

It was the only paper on the wall without a frame around it.

But that morning, it was the first sentence read aloud in the school.

STORY 245

Cleanliness Day

The paved road that ran through the middle of Belahi village had, at one bend, acquired a dumping place between an old peepal tree and a disused grain warehouse.

No official board gave the place a name, but everyone knew that sweepings from homes, leaf plates from the market, broken slippers, rotting vegetable peelings, and leftover thermocol from wedding feasts would eventually find their way there.

Across the road stood the primary school.

From the windows, the children would sometimes watch crows, dogs, and goats searching the heap for their respective shares.

By the end of Bhadau, the heap had grown large.

The village's small garbage-collection vehicle had not come for two weeks.

Sometimes people were told that its axle had broken, sometimes that it had been sent to another panchayat, and sometimes that the driver was ill.

Malti Devi kept the dates of all three explanations in a small file of her own.

She was the panchayat sanitation worker.

Every morning she swept both sides of the road, cleared the mouths of the drains, and gathered the rubbish at the one place where the vehicle normally stopped.

People called her the sweeper woman, but Malti called her work "keeping the road clean."

In the first week of Ashwin, a notice from the panchayat reached the headmaster of the school.

The following day would be observed as "Cleanliness Day."

Schoolchildren, teachers, women from local groups, panchayat employees, and shopkeepers from the market would all take part in cleaning the road.

At the end there would be a group photograph.

The headmaster read the notice and said, "A good thing. The children will get into the habit."

Malti was standing there, straightening the bamboo handle of her broom.

She asked, "Where will the rubbish be taken?"

The headmaster looked at the notice again.

"It doesn't say that here."

Malti smiled.

"It mentions cleaning, but not collection?"

The headmaster did not answer her question.

The next morning the road was unusually lively.

The schoolchildren were made to stand in pairs of rows.

Some held new brooms, some empty sacks, and some cloth gloves.

Dheeraj, the panchayat assistant, was unfolding a white banner and tying it to the peepal tree.

In large green letters it read: "Clean Village, Healthy Village."

Malti looked at the heap of rubbish beneath the banner.

"Will the letters stay up there, or will the rubbish be removed first?" she asked.

Dheeraj laughed.

"Today you'll be in the photograph too, Malti-di."

"I live with this rubbish every day. Will being in the photograph today get it a vehicle?"

Dheeraj began looking here and there.

"A vehicle has been requested. It will come."

"At what time?"

"By the end of the programme."

Malti opened her file and wrote down the date.

Dheeraj asked, "What are you writing?"

"Vehicle requested - no time stated."

Dheeraj laughed and moved on.

At nine o'clock, two guests arrived from the block office.

With them came a photographer, a black bag slung over his shoulder and a large camera in his hand.

The programme began.

It had been agreed beforehand that the speeches would be brief, but three people spoke in succession about cleanliness, discipline, and public participation.

The children stood in the sun holding their brooms and listened.

Then, at the signal, everyone spread out along the road.

Where the rubbish was thickest, Malti and two of her co-workers had already begun.

The children picked up leaf plates and filled sacks.

The shopkeepers swept the ground in front of their shops.

The women from the groups picked plastic from along the drains.

Within half an hour, a long stretch of the road truly did look clean.

The problem was the rubbish.

Seven sacks, two bamboo baskets, three heaps of wet leaves, and one broken plastic chair lay gathered by the roadside.

The vehicle had still not arrived.

The photographer called Dheeraj over.

"The view is good from this side, but the sacks show in the background."

Dheeraj looked at Malti.

"Put them behind the warehouse for ten minutes."

Malti stood still.

"The drain slopes that way. If it rains, all the muck will go into the drain."

"Only ten minutes."

"The vehicle?"

"It should be here any moment."

The photographer began arranging the children in front of the banner.

The guests took brooms in their hands.

On one of the brooms, even the binding cord had not yet been untied.

Malti looked at her co-worker Ramvilas.

Ramvilas said softly, "Let the photograph be taken first. We'll see afterward."

Two sacks went behind the warehouse.

Then the other five.

The baskets too.

The broken chair was placed out of sight behind the wall.

The heaps of wet leaves were pushed so far in with bamboo slats that they could no longer be seen from the road.

For a few minutes, the bend gleamed.

The photographer changed position three times.

"Everyone smile."

In one photograph, the children stood in front.

In another, the guests were in the middle.

In the third, the panchayat employees held brooms.

Dheeraj looked for Malti.

She was behind the warehouse, straightening the sacks.

"Di, come quickly. This one is for all the employees."

Malti came, but she did not take a broom.

"Take a broom," the photographer said.

"My broom is where the work is."

Everyone burst out laughing.

The photographer too.

The photograph was taken.

After that, packets of biscuits were distributed.

People were instructed to put empty water bottles into one sack.

The guests got into their vehicle.

Dheeraj walked to the end of the road to see them off.

The photographer's motorcycle sped away, raising dust.

The programme was over.

At that very moment, Bhola, the warehouse watchman, came running.

"Who put this rubbish at the back?"

Ramvilas said, "The vehicle is coming."

Bhola put a hand to his head.

"Grain sacks are to be unloaded here tomorrow. I need this place empty. And look - all the water will run into the drain."

Without arguing, Malti lifted the sacks.

"Where?" Ramvilas asked.

"Where the vehicle looks for them every day."

"Back by the road?"

"At the designated place beside the road. Otherwise the vehicle will come and go back empty."

Two children were still standing at the school gate - Kavita of Class Seven and Sonu of Class Five.

They watched all seven sacks that had just been removed from the photograph come back to the roadside.

The broken chair too.

The wet leaves too.

The bend that had gleamed ten minutes earlier looked as it had before.

Astonished, Sonu asked, "Malti-kaki, why are you making it dirty again?"

Malti set down the sack and looked at him.

"I'm not making it dirty. Did the rubbish go anywhere?"

Sonu looked behind the warehouse.

"There."

"Did putting it there make the place clean?"

Sonu fell silent.

Kavita said, "It was clean in the photograph."

Malti did not laugh.

"Then today the photograph has been cleaned. The road is still left to do."

A light rain fell in the afternoon.

The sacks got wet, but Malti raised them onto bricks so that they would not block the mouths of the drains.

She wrote another line in her file: "Photograph 10:17. Collection zero."

The next morning, a colour photograph had been pasted on the notice board of the panchayat building.

Under it was written: "Cleanliness Day successfully completed."

Dheeraj looked at the photograph with satisfaction.

The colours had come out well.

The banner could be read clearly.

There was no rubbish on the road.

Malti came sweeping in front of the building.

Dheeraj said, "See? You're standing at the back too."

Malti searched for her face in the photograph.

Indeed, she was standing at one edge, empty-handed.

"Did the vehicle come?"

Dheeraj's smile shrank.

"It will come today."

"At what time?"

"We've informed them by phone."

"Shall I write that down?"

"Why do you write down everything?"

Malti closed her file.

"Rubbish doesn't remember. Dates do."

At school that day, Kavita was given an essay to write: "Our Cleanliness Day."

Many children wrote that everyone had worked together to clean the village.

Kavita wrote the same thing in her first line.

In the second she wrote: "After that, the rubbish was put back by the road."

The teacher's red pen stopped.

"Is it necessary to write this?"

Kavita asked, "If I don't, will the essay be complete?"

Before answering, the teacher looked out of the window toward the road.

The heap was still there.

She did not strike out the sentence with her red pen.

She only put a question mark in the margin.

For three days, the vehicle did not come.

The heap of rubbish began to spread again.

Animals tore open the sacks.

The wind blew thin pieces of plastic as far as the school fence.

Every day Malti gathered them again.

On the fourth day, Sonu took a piece of chalk and wrote two short lines on the outside wall of the school:

"Cleaned - 2nd."

"Collected - _____."

The headmaster saw it.

"Who wrote this?"

Sonu raised his hand.

"Why?"

"Malti-kaki said the road was still left to do."

Malti was not there.

The headmaster looked at the wall for a few moments.

Then he said, "Draw the line straight. Your writing is crooked."

The children laughed.

All day, everyone who passed in front of the school noticed the two lines.

Someone asked, "Why is 'collected' blank?"

Someone said, "The vehicle must not have come."

For the first time, some people understood that sweeping and taking the rubbish away were two different jobs.

In the evening, Dheeraj too saw the lines on the wall.

"This isn't an official notice board," he told the headmaster.

"No," the headmaster said. "Think of it as a mathematics exercise. The first date is given; the second has to be found."

Dheeraj said nothing.

At noon on the fifth day, the rumble of a vehicle was heard in the distance.

Malti was cleaning a drain.

She raised her head.

The small garbage-collection vehicle was coming around the bend.

As soon as the driver got down, he asked, "A lot?"

Malti pointed toward the sacks.

"Five days' worth."

Dheeraj too came running when he heard the news.

He took out his phone.

"Let's get one photograph. The vehicle is here too."

Malti said, "Lift it first."

"We can take one while it's being lifted."

"Then half the rubbish will be left behind again."

The driver laughed.

He reversed the vehicle.

Ramvilas began loading the sacks.

Malti separated the wet leaves, put the pieces of glass into a separate container, and kept aside the metal from the broken chair.

Kavita and Sonu came to the gate.

They kept count: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven sacks.

The vehicle filled up.

For the first time, the ground at the bend was truly empty.

The packed earth underneath was black, and two thin blades of grass remained in the middle.

Dheeraj raised his phone.

By then the vehicle had begun to move.

"Wait! One photograph!"

Whether the driver heard him or not was impossible to tell.

The vehicle turned the bend and disappeared.

Dheeraj took a photograph of the empty road.

"How will people know the vehicle came?"

Malti opened her file.

"The date is written."

"A photograph is clearer proof."

Malti pointed toward the wall.

Sonu, chalk in hand, was filling the blank line:

"Collected - 6th, 2:40 p.m."

Dheeraj looked at the writing for a while.

Then he put his phone back into his pocket.

That week, the colour photograph from Cleanliness Day remained displayed in the panchayat building. In the photograph the road gleamed, everyone smiled, and no rubbish was visible anywhere. On the school wall, the two chalk lines slowly blurred under splashes of rain. But the children wrote a new date again the following week, because the vehicle came eight days later. The entries in Malti's file kept growing too.

A few months later, the headmaster added two new columns to the school's cleanliness register: "Cleaning done" and "Rubbish collected." The first column was marked almost every day. The second was marked only on the days when the vehicle actually came. No one made it for an award. No photograph was taken of it.

One day Sonu asked Malti, "Kaki, which day should we now say the road is clean?" Malti stopped sweeping and looked at the place where the heap used to be. There was nothing there that day. "When I no longer have to be asked that question," she said.

Whether Sonu fully understood her or not, Malti did not ask. She began sweeping again. Beneath the peepal tree, dry leaves gathered to one side. The school bell rang. There was no banner on the road, no guest, no photographer. But the bend was empty.

STORY 246

The Educated Gathering

Chairs had been set out on the veranda of Bardaha Middle School since morning.

A white cloth banner hung on the wall: "A Literate Village, an Empowered Village." Beneath it, in red letters, was written: "Read your own work, understand it yourself."

Deepak read the banner without smiling. He merely straightened the corner that hung crooked.

The headmaster, Ramanand Jha, called to him from behind. "Deepak, one minute."

He had a three-page application form in his hand.

"This is the application for repairs to the teachers' quarters. I have filled in the upper part, but I cannot make sense of the two boxes below. Have a look."

Deepak took the pages and read them.

"It says here: 'If benefit under this head has been received earlier, state the year and amount.'"

Ramanand Jha pushed his spectacles up. "Yes, I understand that. But I do not remember how much the earlier amount was."

"Then leave it blank. We can fill it after checking the file."

"It has to be submitted today. Just write something. Fill it the way you did last time."

Deepak handed the page back. "If I guess the amount and write it down, it may cause trouble later."

Ramanand Jha looked at his watch. "All right. We'll check after the meeting. Keep the application with you."

He went towards the dais. Five minutes later his voice boomed through the microphone: "Literacy is not merely recognising letters; it is understanding one's own rights and responsibilities."

Deepak sat at a small table beside the door of the school's old library. There was no pile of papers before him. Only a blue pen, a glass of water, and an empty register.

People in the village called him "Deepak of the applications."

He did not work in any office. After graduating and returning home, he sat near the panchayat office between rounds of competitive examinations and helped people read applications: old-age assistance, scholarships, caste and residence certificates, corrections to bank accounts.

At first he helped only the elderly. Gradually, people began coming to his table who themselves gave speeches at the school, conducted meetings, and drafted resolutions.

Today's meeting had been called before the village submitted its nomination at district level for the "Full Literacy Achievement."

Mukhiya Janaki Devi reached the dais. Ten minutes before the speeches began, she came to Deepak's table.

"This is my sister's widow-assistance application. I have filled in her name and address. You fill in the rest."

Deepak looked at the page.

"Here it asks for the family's annual income."

Janaki Devi said softly, "Write whatever keeps it within the limit."

"The actual income?"

"Who counts the actual amount? She has two katthas of land. She had a cow, not anymore. Her son works outside, but if we write how much he sends home, the application will get stuck."

Deepak laid the pen on the table. "I can write the words. I cannot invent the answers."

Janaki Devi looked at him for two moments, then gathered the papers. "We'll sit down and fill it after the meeting."

She climbed onto the dais and said, "In an educated society, no one needs to depend on another person."

The schoolchildren seated at the back applauded.

The third person to come to Deepak's table was Bhubaneswar Babu, chairman of the cooperative society. He had the application for renewal of the seed-distribution centre's licence.

"What is the difference between 'declared storage capacity' and 'actual available capacity'?"

Deepak explained it.

Bhubaneswar Babu scratched his head. "The godown can hold fifty sacks, but the register says one hundred. Which should I write?"

"What it can actually hold."

"Then it will not match the old register."

"Then the old register is wrong."

Bhubaneswar Babu laughed. "You keep very straight accounts. Government papers do not run on such straight accounts."

Deepak did not reply.

A little later Bhubaneswar Babu spoke for five minutes from the dais on literacy and "scientific thinking."

The meeting continued. The panchayat secretary read out literacy figures. Retired teacher Nandkishore Babu spoke of the old days when people used thumb impressions. Vikas, president of the youth club, said that the village's young men and women now read the whole world on their phones.

After stepping down from the dais, Vikas came straight to Deepak.

"Brother, fill out this grant application for the playground. I have to submit it at the block office by evening."

"But you're a graduate."

Vikas laughed. "I am, but if there is a mistake in the application the money will get held up. You understand all these boxes."

"Not all of them."

"Still, more than the rest of us."

Deepak read the page. The fifth box said: "Nature and estimated value of local contribution."

"What should go here?" Deepak asked.

Vikas answered at once, "Voluntary labour."

"How many people, for how many days?"

"You work all that out."

Deepak slid the page back towards him. "You tell me the number of people. You tell me the days. I'll multiply them."

Vikas's smile shrank. "Let the meeting end first."

Applications kept accumulating on the table.

Hardly anyone came on his own behalf; nearly everyone brought someone's "urgent work"—a daughter's scholarship, a group account, correction of a name in land records, a pension declaration.

Deepak no longer picked up his pen and filled everything as he once had. He read each paper, called the person concerned, asked for the answer, and placed the empty box before them.

"Write it here in your own hand."

"My handwriting is bad."

"Bad handwriting is better than a false answer."

"You write it. I'll sign."

"Above the signature it says that the information has been read and understood before being given."

Some people became irritated. Some laughed. Some looked for another table, but there was no one else at the school filling applications.

Meanwhile an elderly woman came to the table. Her name was Phulkumari Devi. For three months she had been attending the new-literacy class. In her hand was an old-age assistance application.

"Son, I have filled in 'permanent address.' Under 'present address,' should I write the same thing again?"

Deepak looked at the page. The letters trembled, but they were clear.

"If you still live there, yes, write the same."

Phulkumari Devi slowly wrote the name of her village again.

"Here it asks for the bank branch. How do I write 'branch'?"

Deepak read out the bank's name. "This word is difficult. I'll write it for you, but first read it yourself."

She read it letter by letter. She stumbled twice in the middle, then said, "This is what is written on that signboard at the bank."

"Yes."

"Then next time I'll write it myself."

She did not fold the application; she kept it flat.

On the dais, meanwhile, the main proposal was being read. The district office had invited villages to apply for the "Functional Literacy Award." Ramanand Jha announced that Bardaha would send its name this year.

There was applause.

The panchayat secretary brought a thick application form to Deepak. "This is the most important one. Fill it today. The vehicle leaves this evening."

Deepak read the first page. It contained figures for the village population, school, new-literacy classes, library, and women's groups. The secretary read out numbers from the register and Deepak wrote them down.

There were five questions on the second page.

The first: "How many adults can independently read and understand an ordinary public notice?"

The secretary said, "Write one hundred percent."

Deepak stopped. "What is the basis for that figure?"

"The village has been declared fully literate."

"The declaration and this question are not the same thing."

The secretary frowned. "Write the next one."

The second question: "How many adults can fill an ordinary application form without assistance?"

Deepak's blue pen rested on the paper but did not move.

The secretary said, "That too—one hundred percent."

Deepak looked towards the dais. Ramanand Jha, Janaki Devi, Bhubaneswar Babu, and Vikas were all sitting in the front row. The applications of all four lay on his table.

"I cannot write that number."

The secretary lowered his voice. "Why?"

Deepak pointed to the papers on the table. "The applications of four people who spoke at today's meeting are lying here. All four gave them to me to fill."

The secretary glanced around. "There is no need to say this from the dais."

"I'm not saying it from the dais. I have to write a number in the application."

"You are only the person doing the writing."

For the first time Deepak looked directly into the secretary's eyes. "Then who is the person giving the answer?"

For a few moments, both were silent.

At the microphone, Nandkishore Babu concluded his speech: "Literacy frees a human being from dependence."

Phulkumari Devi was still standing by Deepak's table. She was reading her application again.

The secretary said quietly, "Write seventy-five."

"On what basis?"

"If you keep asking for a basis, no application will ever get filled."

Deepak capped his pen. "Then this box will remain blank."

The secretary picked up the application and went behind the dais.

Ten minutes later Deepak was called over. Behind the dais the four speakers and the secretary stood in a circle. Ramanand Jha said, "Deepak, this award concerns the whole village. It is not right to stop the application over one box." Deepak asked calmly, "Has anyone counted how many people can fill an application without assistance?" "No." "Then what should I write?"

Bhubaneswar Babu said, "Write an estimate. Everything works on estimates." Phulkumari Devi, who had been listening from a distance, came forward. "Where will you count me?" Everyone looked at her. She opened her application. "I filled half of it myself. This young man explained one word. So am I 'filled it myself' or 'took assistance'?" No one answered at once.

Phulkumari Devi asked again, "And someone who can read but is afraid and gets another person to fill it—where will you place that person?" Deepak smiled faintly for the first time. Ramanand Jha remembered his teachers' quarters application. Janaki Devi remembered

the income box in her sister's form. Vikas remembered the number for voluntary labour. Bhubaneswar Babu remembered the godown capacity.

Whispers began among the students in front of the dais. The next part of the programme was being delayed. Janaki Devi said, "Let us end the meeting here. If the application does not go today, it can go tomorrow." The secretary was startled. "The vehicle is here today." "The award is not going to run away." She returned to the dais and took the microphone.

"There is one change," she said. "We have spoken a great deal today about literacy. But there is one question to which we do not have an answer: how many people in our village can read and fill an ordinary application form by themselves?" Silence fell across the veranda. She continued, "So the application for the award will not be sent today. First we will find that answer."

Someone at the back murmured, "For such a small matter?" Phulkumari Devi raised her paper. "The box was small. The matter turned out to be large." A few people laughed, but this time there was less mockery in it. The following Sunday, chairs were set out at the school again. This time there was no banner. There was no microphone either.

On the library table Deepak placed five kinds of blank forms—bank, scholarship, assistance, cooperative, and school. Ramanand Jha was not in the front row; he sat beside the table. In his hand was the application for repairs to the teachers' quarters. He had found the old amount in the file.

Bhubaneswar Babu had measured the godown—fifty-five sacks, sixty if packed tightly. He said, "The register says one hundred. I will also have to fill out an application to correct that." Vikas had measured the playground with three young men and counted the days of voluntary labour. Janaki Devi had brought her sister with her. The income calculation was still not perfectly clear, but this time they were working out the monthly average together.

Phulkumari Devi had arrived before everyone else. She wrote the bank branch's name in her own hand. The letters still trembled. Deepak did not pull anyone's application towards himself. He only read the questions, explained difficult words, and handed the pen back to the applicant. Two weeks later, the award application was opened again. "How many adults can fill an ordinary application form without assistance?"

This time the box was not blank, but neither did it say one hundred percent. The number was far lower than expected. The secretary looked once at Janaki Devi. "If we write such a low figure, we may not get the award." Janaki Devi said, "If a false figure brings us the award, it will not be an award for literacy." Deepak wrote the number, but stopped his pen at the final declaration.

"It says here: 'The above information is based on village-level verification.' Who will keep the verification register?" Ramanand Jha pushed an empty register towards him. "Not you this time," he said. "It will stay at the school. Whoever learns will fill in their own line." Deepak pushed the register back. "Then who will fill the first line?" Phulkumari Devi picked up the pen.

She wrote her name slowly. One letter went crooked in the middle. She did not strike it out. Beside it she wrote the letter correctly again. On the veranda wall the old banner still lay folded: "Read your own work, understand it yourself." No one suggested hanging it again. The sentence was no longer working on the wall; it was working among the open application forms on the table.

STORY 247

Model Square

It was the third week of Sawan. After rain had fallen all day, evening over Kusumpur's crossroads had turned grey. The pothole in the very middle of the square was full of water and looked like a small pond.

Jagdish Mistri had placed a blue signboard beneath the awning of his shop and was painting letters on it in white: "Model Square."

His granddaughter Sumedha sat nearby, copying the letters into her notebook. She was in Class Eight, and her interest in the shapes of letters had come from her grandfather.

"Grandfather, why are the letters in 'Model' so close together?"

Jagdish paused his brush. "If I space them too far apart, the name won't fit on the board."

Sumedha turned the board over and looked at the back. A few letters showed through beneath the old paint—'New Awa...'. She grew curious. "What was this square called before?"

"New Awareness Square."

"And before that?"

"Harmony Square."

"And before that?"

"Youth Square."

Sumedha laughed. "And before that?"

Jagdish looked out from the shop at the water-filled pothole. "Peepal Bend. There was a peepal tree here then. No signboard."

The peepal had fallen in a storm twelve years earlier. The tree was gone, but the four roads of the bend remained where they had always been. After that, the panchayat put up a permanent sign for the first time. The signs kept changing. The pothole appeared five years ago after a water pipe was laid, and slowly grew wider.

From beneath the awning of the tea stall she ran on the square, Budhni Devi called, "Brother Jagdish, when you write a new name, does the old pothole become new too?"

Jagdish did not smile. In five years he had heard that joke in many forms.

Sumedha looked at Budhni. "Auntie, can a pothole have a name?"

"Whatever lasts the longest, people give it a name of their own," Budhni said. "The bus conductors still call this 'Peepal Bend.'"

The next morning two panchayat employees came to remove the old sign and put up the new one. There was no ceremony. The secretary said Kusumpur's crossroads would now be entered in the district list as "Model Square."

While the sign was being fixed, one employee's foot sank into the mud beside the pothole. Irritated, he said, "Why hasn't anyone put bricks here?"

Straining tea, Budhni said, "That question doesn't come with the signboard."

Everyone laughed. So did the employee. Then he straightened the sign and left.

That afternoon a vegetable cart, trying to edge around the pothole, clipped the corner of Budhni's bench. Two baskets of aubergines toppled and scattered across the wet road. Kisun, who pushed the cart, picked up two aubergines and swore, then fell silent. Even swearing at the square had grown old.

"Why isn't it repaired?" Sumedha asked.

Kisun looked at her. "It keeps almost getting repaired."

"Who stops it?"

Kisun first looked toward the secretariat, then toward Budhni's shop. "That's a big question."

That week at school, the teacher asked the children to write the name of a place in their village whose name had changed over time. Sumedha wrote "Model Square." Beside her, Sonu wrote "Peepal Bend." Rehana wrote "New Awareness Square," because her father still called the place by that name.

The teacher looked at all three notebooks. "Three names for the same place?"

The class burst out laughing.

Sumedha said, "Five names, Ma'am. Harmony and Youth as well."

The teacher wrote five names on the blackboard—Peepal Bend, Youth Square, Harmony Square, New Awareness Square, Model Square. "Which of these names lasted the longest?"

"Peepal Bend," Sonu said.

"And the pothole in the middle of the square?" Sumedha added on her own.

The class laughed again. This time the teacher smiled, but immediately asked, "How long has the pothole been there?"

No child could give the exact answer.

"Go home and ask. If you can find the dates of the names, write them down—and the date of the pothole too."

That evening Sumedha told her grandfather about the homework at his shop. Jagdish laughed at first, then opened the back room. Three old signboards stood propped against the wall. On one, half the letters of "Youth Square" had flaked away; moss covered another that read "Harmony Square"; the third was "New Awareness Square," removed only the day before.

"Did you paint all of these?"

"Yes."

"Were you paid every time?"

Jagdish paused for a moment. "I did the work, so I was paid."

"Whose job was it to fill the pothole?"

Jagdish looked into the darkness of the back room. "The road people."

"Didn't they come?"

"They did."

Sumedha was startled. "When?"

Jagdish did not answer at once. "Once after Youth Square. Again when it was Harmony Square. And once after New Awareness Square had been put up."

"Then why wasn't it filled?"

"The day never worked out."

"How can a day not work out?"

Jagdish began washing his brush. "The crossroads has to be closed for half a day. They have to cut open the pothole and fill it from the bottom. Shops, carts, vehicles—everything has to stop."

"So?"

"So people said, 'Not today.'"

Sumedha kept looking at her grandfather's face. "Who do you mean by 'people'?"

Jagdish did not answer.

The next day Sumedha asked Budhni. At first Budhni tried to brush the matter aside. But the child's question was simple: "Auntie, did the road workers come or not?"

Washing tea glasses, Budhni said, "They came."

"Did you stop them?"

"Not only me."

"Did you stop them?"

Budhni's hands stopped. "The first time they came on a Monday. Mondays are crowded market days at my tea stall. I told them—do it on Tuesday."

"What happened on Tuesday?"

"On Tuesday they went somewhere else."

Kisun was arranging vegetables nearby and had been listening. He said on his own, "The second time, I stopped them. It was harvest season. If the road had been closed, I would have had to take the cart a mile and a half around. I told them—three days later."

"Three days later?"

Kisun kept straightening his pile of aubergines. "The crew never came back."

Sumedha looked toward her grandfather's shop.

Jagdish kept moving his brush.

That evening Sumedha asked again, "The third time?"

Jagdish's hand stopped. "The third time my signboard was to be installed."

"Which signboard?"

"New Awareness Square."

"So?"

"If the road had been closed for half a day, the ladder, bamboo, paint —everything would have been stuck in the middle. I said, put up the sign first; do the road the next day."

"And the next day?"

"The rains came."

Sumedha said nothing for a long time.

Jagdish said, "You think the pothole only causes trouble for everyone. But when the time comes to fill it, the trouble of half a day appears all at once before everybody."

"And the trouble of five years?"

Jagdish had no answer.

On Sunday the class discussed the homework. The children brought different dates, estimates and memories. No date was complete. But one thing became clear—the crew had come three times to fill the pothole, and all three times the work had been postponed.

The teacher asked, "Then whose fault was it?"

Sonu answered at once, "The panchayat's."

Rehana said, "The shopkeepers'."

A voice from the back said, "The rain's."

Sumedha remained silent.

The teacher said, "Don't rush to one answer. When everyone pushes a task forward for small reasons, five years later whose reason does it become?"

The class fell quiet.

That evening there was a small accident at the square. Thirteen-year-old Raju, carrying milk on his bicycle, slipped beside the pothole. The milk can overturned and his knee was scraped. The injury was not serious, but his mother came to the square and had plenty to say.

"We look at this pothole every day. What are we waiting for?"

People named the secretary. Someone named the road department. Someone else the panchayat.

The secretary arrived too. He first looked at Raju's knee, then at the crowd on the square. After listening for a while, he said, "Tomorrow we'll look at the register in the panchayat building. Three postponements are recorded there."

"Postponements?" Kisun's voice dropped.

The next day five or seven people went to the panchayat building. Sumedha was with her grandfather. The secretary opened the old meeting register.

The first entry read: "Repair of the square postponed until the next available day because of commercial crowding." Beneath it was the consent of the shopkeepers around the square. Budhni's thumbprint was there.

The second entry read: "Work postponed at local request because of disruption to harvest transport." Beneath it were seven signatures, including Kisun's.

The third entry read: "Local request that beautification of the square and installation of direction signs be completed first." Jagdish's signature was beneath that too.

Sumedha recognized her grandfather's signature.

Jagdish remained bent over the register. "That is my signature."

The secretary said, "This does not absolve me of fault. It was my responsibility to schedule the work again. But every time the objection rose from here."

Budhni said quietly, "We kept cursing the pothole, yet couldn't give up half a day."

Kisun reached out to close the register, then stopped. "Set the day now."

The secretary said, "Next Tuesday. From seven in the morning until one in the afternoon, traffic through the middle of the square will be closed. Small side routes will remain open in all four directions, but carts won't be able to pass."

Kisun immediately said, "A lot of vegetables come in on Tuesdays."

Everyone looked at him.

Kisun left the sentence unfinished. After a moment he said, "All right. I'll keep my cart on the southern road."

Budhni said, "I won't sell tea for half a day."

Jagdish said, "I'll keep my shop closed."

The secretary wrote the date in the register. This time the word "postponed" did not appear beneath the agreement.

Meanwhile an order also came for new direction signs for "Model Square"—four arrows pointing toward the school, health centre, market and pond. Jagdish got the job.

The secretary said, "Rewrite the central 'Model Square' sign neatly too. People from the district may come."

Jagdish looked at the new sign. "It's already neat."

"The letters are a little small."

For the first time Jagdish refused a job for which he would have been paid. "We'll look at the central sign after the repair. I'll make the four direction signs."

The secretary was surprised. "Why?"

"This time don't change the order of the work."

Sumedha looked at her grandfather. Jagdish did not look back at her, but his voice was steady.

The day before Tuesday, Jagdish himself put up small notices on all four shops around the square: "Tomorrow, repair of the square from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. Please bear the inconvenience."

Kisun read it and said, "Did it need 'Model Square' written on it?"

Jagdish said, "No. The name of the work is enough."

At six on Tuesday morning, Budhni did not light her stove. Kisun took his cart to the southern road. Jagdish pulled his shop shutter halfway down.

At twenty past seven, the repair crew arrived.

They first drained the water from the pothole. Then they cut back the edges and removed the loose soil. The pothole turned out to be wider below than it looked from above. The earth beside the old pipe had repeatedly subsided with the rains.

"If we only put gravel on top, it will sink again," the mason said. "It has to be filled from below and compacted."

The work continued. At eight, the first customer came to Budhni's closed shop. "No tea?"

Budhni pointed toward the road. "The pothole is being filled today."

"What harm could one glass of tea do?"

Budhni thought for a moment, then said, "If I light the stove, ten people will stand here. Not today."

Two of Kisun's customers came looking for his cart at its usual place. From a distance he called, "Southern road!"

At half past nine a jeep tried to move the bamboo barrier so it could cross the square. Jagdish came out of his shop and said, "Two hours later."

The driver said, "I'm in a hurry."

"Everyone has been in a hurry for five years," slipped out of Jagdish's mouth. He himself was startled. The driver understood some of it and some he did not; he turned the jeep around.

Before leaving for school, Sumedha stood at the square for ten minutes. She saw that Jagdish had brought the old "New Awareness Square," "Harmony Square" and "Youth Square" signboards out of his shop and propped them along three sides of the road. The written faces were turned inward, their blank backs outward. They served as temporary barriers.

"Grandfather, you're blocking the road with the old names?"

Jagdish laughed. "For the first time today, they're useful."

By noon the pothole had been filled and compacted. The top layer was to be laid the next day, so the bamboo enclosure would remain for now.

Budhni lit her stove. The first tea she made was for the repair workers. Kisun brought his cart back to the square.

"Half a day gone," he calculated.

Budhni said, "Small compared with five years."

Kisun did not argue.

By evening the new direction signs were up—school east, market south, health centre north, pond west. The central "Model Square" sign remained as it was. Jagdish did not touch its letters again.

That night it rained hard. Sumedha lay listening to the sound of water at the window. She worried that the filled spot would sink again.

At dawn she reached the square before her grandfather. Inside the bamboo enclosure the earth was wet, but no water had collected in the middle. It had drained toward the side channel.

Jagdish came up behind her. "What are you looking at?"

"It's all right for now."

"For now," Jagdish repeated.

The final surface layer was laid the next day. In the evening a bus stopped. Out of habit the conductor called, "Peepal Bend! Peepal Bend!"

An unfamiliar passenger read the new sign and asked, "Isn't this Model Square?"

The conductor laughed. "Call it Model, call it Peepal—the place to get down is the same."

Sumedha sat at Budhni's shop listening. She remembered her teacher's question—which name would last the longest?

She went home and opened her notebook. Beneath the five names she did not add a sixth. She wrote only one line: "Day the pothole was filled —Tuesday." Then she added the date.

Jagdish looked at her notebook. "Didn't you write a name?"

"What's the name of the work?"

Jagdish stood the old signboards up again behind the shop. "The name of the work doesn't need changing."

Sumedha asked, "Will you throw these old signs away?"

"No. If someone ever asks why the square's name changed so many times, I'll show them."

"And the pothole?"

Jagdish looked toward the new road. "It doesn't need a photograph. If it forms again, we'll write the date again. We won't change the name again."

Three days later Jagdish noticed a small scratch on the edge of the "Model Square" sign. The brush was in his hand. He opened the paint tin, filled the scratch, and stopped. He did not repaint the letters.

The new surface in the middle of the square still shone wet. No name was written on it.

STORY 248

The Ribbon of Development

It was the first Tuesday of Bhadau. A red ribbon had been stretched across the mouth of the new drain on the eastern side of Sonbarsa market.

The ribbon had come from Jagmohan the tailor's shop.

Jagmohan was sixty-five. The measuring tape for cloth usually hung around his neck; the red ribbon for ceremonies stayed separately rolled on top of the cupboard.

That morning a boy from the panchayat came running in. "Kaka, five cubits of red ribbon. Quickly."

Jagmohan asked, "For what?"

"The inauguration of the drain."

Jagmohan looked out through the window. For three months bricks, sand and mortar had been lying by the market; the drain had taken shape amid them.

"Is it finished?"

The boy laughed. "Once the ribbon is cut, it will be considered finished."

Jagmohan measured out five cubits and cut it. He put the remaining roll back on top of the cupboard.

His granddaughter Abha sat in a corner of the shop doing her school homework. She was in Class Eight.

Abha asked, "Does the inauguration happen because the drain is finished, or does the drain become finished because it has been inaugurated?"

Measuring the sleeve of a kurta, Jagmohan said, "In my work, the measurement is completed first. Only then do the scissors move."

Abha closed her notebook and went outside.

The drain ran almost across the entire market toward the old pond. New bricks gleamed along the upper stretch. In some places the covers had not yet been laid. At the far end, before joining the pond's old outlet, it stopped at a strip of earth.

That strip was no more than seven cubits long.

Abha measured it by counting her steps. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.

Once the drain water reached that point, it was supposed to enter the old earthen channel ahead. But the seven cubits between them were still only mud.

The ceremony was at the other end of the drain.

The mukhiya, the ward member, two people from the market committee and the school headmaster had come.

The ribbon was stretched between two bamboo poles.

In the speech it was said, "Sonbarsa market will now be free from waterlogging."

Jagmohan too stood in the crowd. He had no particular interest in watching a ribbon being cut, but he had an old habit of seeing how his material was used.

The scissors moved. Applause broke out.

Abha picked up the small red piece that had fallen after being cut.

Jagmohan asked, "What will you do with that?"

"Keep the measurement safe."

"The ribbon's measurement?"

"The drain's."

Jagmohan said nothing.

Three days later it rained.

Water from the market roofs poured into the drain. For the first half kos the flow ran well. But at the eastern end the seven cubits of earth stopped the water.

Slowly, the drain filled up.

Budhni, who sold tea, shouted as she lifted the bench in front of her shop, "The water is turning back again."

People tried to open an outlet with bamboo poles. Some of the water escaped by cutting through a field embankment.

The next day the matter came up in the market.

The secretary said, "The main drain has been completed. The final connection falls under the work of the old outlet. That belongs to another budget head."

Budhni asked, "Does water check the budget head before it flows?"

Everyone laughed. The secretary did not.

That day Abha tied the first red ribbon to the first bamboo pole beside the unfinished seven-cubit stretch.

Jagmohan saw it. "What is this?"

"So we remember that the measurement is still unfinished here."

A month passed.

All the covers were laid. Lime was applied along the sides of the drain. Small iron grilles were fitted at two places.

At a meeting, the market committee decided that the covered and secured drain should have a 'public-use opening.'

The panchayat boy came again to Jagmohan's shop.

"Kaka, five cubits of red ribbon."

Jagmohan looked over the top of his spectacles. "What is being inaugurated?"

"The drain."

The scissors stopped in his hand.

"That drain was opened last month."

"That was the inauguration of construction. This is the inauguration of use."

Jagmohan took the same roll down from the top of the cupboard.

Abha did not smile. She only asked, "Was the five cubits from the first time entered in the account?"

Jagmohan opened the old ledger. "It is written here—drain inauguration, five cubits."

"And this?"

"What shall I write?"

The boy said, "Public-use opening."

Jagmohan wrote in the ledger: "Same drain—public use, five cubits."

For the second ceremony, coloured paper pennants were hung as well.

Budhni did not go. Tea was boiling on her stove.

Abha went to the far end of the drain. The seven cubits of earth were still exactly as before.

The first red ribbon had faded in the rain.

After the ceremony ended, she picked up the second cut piece of ribbon too.

She tied both pieces to the same bamboo pole.

Jagmohan watched from a distance.

"A memory of two occasions?"

"Two inaugurations."

"The drain?"

"The same one."

Bhadau passed. In Ashwin the market stayed dry. The drain's defect again slipped from people's sight.

Children jumped across the unfinished seven cubits. During the night someone placed bricks there to make a crossing.

One day word came that an inspection team from the block office was coming.

People from the market committee had the sides of the drain cleaned. Leaves caught in the grilles were removed. The covers received another coat of white paint.

The inspection took place.

The officer looked at the beginning of the drain. The line was straight and the covers were properly set.

Abha wanted to follow the officer all the way to the end, but the crowd turned back midway.

Two weeks later a notice was posted: "Drainage system transferred to the market committee."

Another programme was fixed for the day of the handover.

The panchayat boy came to Jagmohan's shop for the third time.

This time, the moment Jagmohan saw him, he asked, "Five cubits?"

The boy smiled sheepishly. "Yes."

"The same drain?"

"Handover ceremony."

Jagmohan opened the cupboard. The red roll was now thinner than before.

He measured five cubits, but before he could use the scissors Abha said, "Baba, cut seven cubits."

The boy started. "The order is for five cubits."

Abha said, "Seven cubits are still missing from the drain."

The boy snapped, "What does the ribbon have to do with the drain?"

Jagmohan looked at his granddaughter. Then he cut only five cubits.

"My work is to give the measurement that has been asked for," he said quietly.

Abha fell silent.

Clouds had gathered on the day of the third ceremony.

This time the ribbon was stretched across the broad middle part of the market, where the fresh paint on the drain gleamed most brightly.

The speeches were kept short.

One speaker said, "Construction, use and handover—all three stages have been completed successfully."

Abha stood at the back of the crowd. Her eyes were on the line of the drain.

The first heavy drop fell.

The rain intensified along with the applause.

People ran toward the shop awnings.

The cut ribbon lay soaking on the ground.

Abha picked up the third piece.

Budhni was gathering things from the stove at her tea stall. "This time let us see how far the water accepts the inauguration."

Within ten minutes the drain began to fill.

The water entered the opening at a good speed, moved forward noisily beneath the covers, but stopped again at the final seven cubits.

The mud split and formed a small channel, then the earth caved in and blocked the mouth again.

The water began rising back toward the west.

People from the market were still standing under the awnings. Many of them had attended all three ceremonies.

No one made a speech.

Clutching all three red pieces in her fist, Abha ran toward the far end.

Jagmohan followed her without an umbrella.

Abha untied the first ribbon from the first bamboo pole. She joined the second and third pieces to it.

Joined together, the three red pieces formed a strip nearly seven cubits long.

She spread it on the ground parallel to the unfinished section of the drain.

Jagmohan stood watching.

"Baba," Abha said, "five cubits were cut three times. The leftover pieces together are enough for seven cubits. Please complete this much of the drain."

The arithmetic was not exact; each ceremonial ribbon had been a full five cubits, while the pieces that fell after cutting were small. But the image was clear—the red line lay across the unfinished earth.

Jagmohan picked up the ribbon. "A measurement is not made with symbols. It is made with a mason's line."

The mason unwound his alignment cord.

The cord was stretched across the strip of earth. The distance came to roughly seven cubits.

Budhni had arrived too. The secretary, members of the market committee and several shopkeepers came behind her.

The secretary said, "This section belongs to the old drainage scheme."

Jagmohan asked, "Does water change schemes?"

This time the secretary gave no answer.

The market committee president planted his stick in the earth and said, "If these seven cubits are not joined, how can I sign that we are taking charge of the drain?"

The handover register was still getting wet on the ceremonial table.

For the first time, the secretary left the final line of the document blank.

"Stop the signatures for today," the president said. "Join it first."

The next day no ribbon was stretched.

Four labourers, one mason and two market shopkeepers began work on the unfinished section.

The mouth of the old outlet was found blocked with earth and plastic. Clearing it took half a day.

From time to time Jagmohan stepped out of his shop to watch.

Abha returned from school and checked the knot in the alignment cord once more.

"Measuring again?" the mason asked.

"Not for an inauguration this time."

The seven-cubit section was completed. Its slope was matched to the old outlet.

In the evening two buckets of water were poured in from the upper end.

The stream ran all the way toward the pond without stopping.

Budhni said, "Now the drain understands where its road lies."

No one applauded.

On the third day the handover register was signed. The president asked, "Shall we hold a small programme?" Jagmohan was there. He said, "The work is complete. Now complete the paperwork." The president laughed. "No ribbon?"

Jagmohan pointed to the cloth-measuring tape around his neck. "Why should I cut, in a ceremony, the tape meant for measuring work?"

Word spread through the market that there had been no fourth inauguration of the drain. Some people joked, "One opportunity has been lost." Others breathed a sigh of relief.

Abha did not take the three red pieces home. She tied them to an old nail inside Jagmohan's shop. Below them, Jagmohan was looking at the three entries in his ledger—'drain inauguration', 'same drain—public use', 'handover ceremony'.

Beneath the third entry he added a fourth: "Final seven cubits—no ribbon." Abha read it. "Is this an account of expenses?" "No," Jagmohan said, "an account showing that the measurement was completed."

The first hard rain of Kartik fell at night. In the morning Budhni opened her shop and saw that no water had collected in front. She went to the mouth of the drain. The flow had passed through; only a few leaves were caught at the edge.

Jagmohan came too. Budhni asked, "Shall we cut a ribbon once now, to give thanks?" Jagmohan laughed. "Remove the leaves. That much thanks is enough."

On her way to school, Abha stopped at the far end of the drain. The bamboo pole where the red piece had once been tied was gone. In place of the mud, a straight seven-cubit stretch of brick gleamed. She did not count her steps. She only watched the water follow its own path, without any ceremony.

STORY 249

The Distinguished Family

On a bright morning in Ashadh, a new plaque, gleaming like brass, arrived at the gate of the Jha family home in Belatoli.

Two young men had brought it wrapped in cloth. As soon as the cloth was removed, bold letters appeared: "Distinguished Family."

Below, in smaller letters, it read: "For the social and cultural contribution of three generations."

Shashikant Jha wiped his spectacles and read the words again.

His wife Sudha called from inside, "Wipe the dust first. The paint on the gate is peeling too."

Ranjan, who was in Class Twelve, took out his phone and began taking photographs.

Thirteen-year-old Gauri kept looking at her own face in the plaque's shine.

Inside the veranda, eighty-two-year-old Subhadra Devi sat on a folded cot.

No one called her over to see it.

The application for this award had been submitted three months earlier.

The cultural forum had been looking, in the village and five nearby settlements, for families in which three generations lived under one roof, took part in public work, and maintained a link between old traditions and the new generation.

While filling out the application, Shashikant had written Subhadra Devi's name at the very top.

In the line marked "Contribution of the senior member of the family," he had written: "Folk songs, ritual tales, old wedding customs, and the living memory of the household's history."

Against the question "Does the senior member reside with the family?" the box marked "Yes" had been ticked.

There was no lie in that answer.

Subhadra Devi truly did live in that house.

The only question was where in the house she lived.

The house had been built nearly forty years earlier.

At that time Subhadra Devi's husband was alive, her two sons were small, and in the room on the eastern side of the courtyard she kept her trunk, spinning wheel, and bedding.

For many years after her husband died, that room remained hers.

Over the last ten or twelve years, the uses of the house had gradually changed.

First, Ranjan needed a quiet place to study.

Subhadra Devi said, "The boy will study. Let him take the room."

When Ranjan's examinations were over, Shashikant's files began to multiply.

For a few months the room was called "the papers room."

Then the younger son came from outside with his family for two months, and guests stayed in that room.

After that, certificates of honour, old copper plaques, mementoes, school trophies, and framed citations began to accumulate in the house.

One day Sudha said, "It would be better if all these things stayed in one place."

From that day, the old room became "the room of honours and memorabilia."

Subhadra Devi's trunk shifted to the wall of the veranda.

Her cot began to be folded away.

At night, wherever space was found, the cot was opened there.

By day it was folded and kept sometimes under the stairs, sometimes behind the sitting room, sometimes against the veranda wall.

No one in the family called this a problem.

Everyone called it an "arrangement."

Subhadra Devi too rarely protested.

Sudha gave her medicine on time.

Shashikant massaged her feet at night.

Ranjan brought her a cord for her spectacles, oil, and sweets from the market.

When Gauri returned from school, she told her the day's news.

There was care.

There was no fixed place.

On the day the honour plaque was to be fixed at the gate, cleaning began throughout the house.

People from the forum were coming in the evening to take photographs.

The two gateposts were repainted.

The curtains in the sitting room were changed.

The room of honours and memorabilia was opened and the frames were dusted.

Sudha selected the frames one by one and hung them on the sitting-room wall.

That day Subhadra Devi's folded cot stood behind the sitting room.

Sudha said, "This cot won't look good in the photograph here. Ranjan, put it inside."

Ranjan lifted the cot and carried it to the door of the room of honours and memorabilia.

Inside there were already three light chairs, a broken harmonium, two boxes, and piles of thick backing board from frames.

The cot would not fit.

"Ma, there's no space."

"Put it under the stairs."

Under the stairs were a broom, an old bucket, and an empty rice sack.

Ranjan moved them all out and stood the cot there.

Subhadra Devi watched the whole scene in silence.

Gauri came and sat beside her.

"Grandmother, why are they hiding your cot?"

"They're not hiding it, child. They're making room for the honour."

Gauri tried to laugh, but there was no smile on Subhadra Devi's face.

At noon, remembering her school homework, Gauri took out her notebook.

The geography teacher had said, "Draw a simple floor plan of your house. Write the main use of each room."

Sitting in the courtyard, Gauri began estimating the measurements.

First she drew the outer walls.

Then she marked the sitting room, kitchen, prayer corner, Ranjan's study room, her parents' room, the guest room, and the room of honours and memorabilia.

The veranda ran long through the middle.

She drew the staircase too.

The plan was almost complete.

Gauri's pencil stopped.

She looked at Subhadra Devi.

"Grandmother, which room is yours?"

Subhadra Devi closed her betel-nut box.

"Mine?"

"Yes. I have to write it on the plan."

For a few moments Subhadra Devi looked through the house as though the answer to the question might be written on its walls.

"Look at night and you'll know," she said at last.

Gauri did not find this answer useful for her homework.

She went to her mother.

"Ma, which room is Grandmother's?"

Sudha was wiping a plate.

"She stays on the veranda, doesn't she?"

"The veranda isn't a room."

"Then write the guest room. When there are no guests, she sleeps there."

"Uncle is coming tomorrow."

Sudha stopped her hand. "Then the cot will be opened in the sitting room."

"I've written 'place for guests to sit' for the sitting room."

Sudha laughed. "Your map follows stricter rules than the house does."

Gauri went to her father.

Shashikant was checking the nails around the honour plaque at the gate.

"Babu, which room is Grandmother's?"

"This whole house is hers, isn't it?"

"Should I write 'the whole house'?"

Shashikant laughed. "A floor plan doesn't have room for that much sentiment."

"Then which room?"

Shashikant gave a nail head a light tap with the hammer. "Wherever she is comfortable."

Gauri looked at an empty square in her notebook that did not actually exist in the house.

She thought of drawing a new room for Grandmother on the plan.

Then she remembered her teacher's words: "Show what is there, not what ought to be."

She erased the square.

In the evening, three people from the forum arrived.

One carried a register, another a camera, and the third a bouquet of flowers.

The family stood in front of the new plaque at the gate.

The photographer said, "The senior member should be in the middle. The award is about three generations."

Ranjan ran inside.

"Grandmother, come outside. They're taking photographs."

Subhadra Devi got up.

Sudha adjusted her sari and straightened the edge of her anchal.

Gauri picked up her walking stick and handed it to her.

At the gate, Subhadra Devi was given a chair in the middle.

The honour plaque gleamed a little above her head.

The photographer said, "Everyone come a little closer. Around Grandmother."

The family moved closer.

"Smile."

One, two, three photographs were taken.

The forum secretary wrote something in his register.

He said to Subhadra Devi, "You are the root of a family like this. May we take a separate photograph in your room? It would be good for the article if there were old objects with you."

Shashikant was silent for a moment.

Sudha said at once, "Yes, yes, come inside."

Everyone moved in.

They passed through the sitting room.

At the guest-room doorway, bedding was being laid out for Uncle.

Ranjan's study room was piled with books.

Sudha opened the door of the room of honours and memorabilia.

Inside were frames, trophies, thick papers, and old objects.

The forum secretary asked, "Grandmother stays here?"

Sudha said, "No, this is the room for things."

The secretary asked again, "Then hers?"

No answer came at once.

Subhadra Devi herself laughed.

"My room keeps moving. It is difficult to catch it for a photograph."

The secretary tried to laugh too, but the hand holding his register went still.

The photographer lowered his camera.

Gauri stood by the doorway.

Her homework notebook was tucked under her arm.

She said softly, "It can't be caught on the map either."

Shashikant heard her.

He said nothing.

No separate photograph was taken that day.

At night, Uncle arrived with his family.

The guest room filled up.

People sat in the sitting room until late.

The wind was strong on the veranda; raindrops blew well inside.

Subhadra Devi's cot stood folded under the stairs.

At half past ten, Sudha asked, "Ma, where should we open your cot tonight?"

Subhadra Devi said, "Wherever the map is empty."

Sudha could not tell whether it was a joke or weariness.

At last, when the sitting room emptied, the cot was opened there.

Five newly hung certificates of honour were on the wall above Subhadra Devi's head.

In the middle of the night, Ranjan got up to drink water.

Crossing the sitting room, his foot struck the corner of the cot.

Subhadra Devi woke up.

"Sorry, Grandmother," Ranjan whispered.

"It is your house. Go on."

Ranjan drank water and came back, but this time he walked more slowly.

In the morning the cot was folded again.

Tea had to be served to the guests; the sitting room had to be clear.

Subhadra Devi placed her pillow on the veranda bench.

Gauri did not submit her homework that day.

At school the teacher asked, "Why is the plan unfinished?"

Gauri opened her notebook.

Every room had a name written on it.

Beside the veranda in the middle was a small question mark.

"What is this?"

Gauri said, "I'm looking for Grandmother's place."

The class burst out laughing.

The teacher did not laugh.

She placed the notebook on her desk and studied it carefully.

"Does Grandmother live in the house?"

"Yes."

"Then why the question mark?"

Gauri repeated all the answers she had been given at home—the veranda, the guest room, the sitting room, the whole house.

The teacher did not give any mark with her red pen.

At the bottom she wrote: "A house plan is not only a map of walls; when you write the main use of a space, consider people's fixed needs too."

"Should I draw it again now?" Gauri asked.

"First look at the house. The map can come later."

That evening Gauri returned home with her notebook.

Two neighbours stood in front of the honour plaque, reading it.

One of them said, "The Jha family really is distinguished. They have kept the old people with them."

Gauri went inside.

Subhadra Devi was shelling peas on the veranda.

Two of Ranjan's old books lay on top of her trunk.

Gauri removed the books.

"Is this yours?"

"The trunk is mine."

"And the space on top?"

Subhadra Devi laughed. "The space on top belongs to whoever puts something there first."

Gauri showed her the red comment in her notebook.

Subhadra Devi read it slowly.

"Your teacher has written the right thing."

"Tell Babu that you need a room."

Subhadra Devi dropped the peas into the bowl.

"Asking is not difficult. It is more important that the people of the house see it for themselves."

"Does it trouble you?"

"Trouble is not always a hard cot, Gauri. Sometimes not being able to decide where to keep your own spectacles is trouble too."

For the first time Gauri noticed that Grandmother's spectacles, medicine, bottle of oil, and betel-nut box all stayed in one small cloth bag.

The bag moved with her all day long.

That night Gauri did not draw the plan.

She counted the fixed places of things in the house.

In the kitchen, the spice box had its fixed shelf.

Ranjan's books had their fixed cupboard.

Babu's files had their fixed drawer in the desk.

The certificates of honour had their fixed wall.

Even the broken harmonium had a fixed place in the room of honours and memorabilia.

Grandmother's spectacles were in the cloth bag.

Grandmother's cot was folded under the stairs.

Grandmother herself sat on the bench on the veranda.

The next day, before leaving for the office, Shashikant opened the door of the room of honours and memorabilia.

For the first time in many days, he stepped fully inside.

Against the wall stood an old certificate of honour belonging to his father.

In one box was a school trophy whose event no one remembered anymore.

The glass in three frames was broken.

One chair was missing a leg.

The bellows of the harmonium were torn.

In one corner, Subhadra Devi's old spinning-wheel frame was gathering dust.

Shashikant lifted it.

"How did this get here?"

Sudha came to the door. "It has been here a long time."

"It was Ma's."

"Yes."

Shashikant looked around the room.

"Are all these things necessary?"

Sudha did not answer at once.

Together they began sorting the objects.

Some of the frames could go on the sitting-room wall.

Photocopies could be made of some papers and the originals stored safely in a box.

The broken chair could be thrown away.

The harmonium could be sent for repair.

They thought of returning the school trophy to the school.

By noon, half the room was empty.

Subhadra Devi asked nothing.

She only took the spinning-wheel frame in her hands and looked at it.

"This had survived?"

Shashikant said, "We had forgotten it."

"When a thing has a place, people remember it."

Shashikant looked at his mother's face.

This time he did not search for an answer to the sentence.

In the evening Sudha swept and wiped the room and opened its window.

The western breeze came in.

The smell of old dust slowly faded.

Ranjan brought the folded cot from under the stairs.

The cot was opened.

Subhadra Devi stood in the doorway.

"What are you doing?"

Shashikant said, "Ma, this room is yours again."

Subhadra Devi did not go in at once.

"Where will all the honours go?"

Sudha laughed. "The things that are meant to be seen will go on the walls. The things that are only meant to be kept will go in boxes."

"And the guests?"

"Guests stay in the house for two nights. You stay in the house every night."

Subhadra Devi's eyes went to the window.

"Will the window open?"

"It will."

"Will the trunk come inside?"

"It will."

"The cot won't be folded again at night?"

Ranjan said, "No."

Subhadra Devi went inside.

The room was not large.

There was just enough space for a cot, a trunk, a small table, and the window.

Gauri placed Grandmother's cloth bag on the table.

A small box was placed by the window for her spectacles.

A shelf was cleared for her medicines.

Subhadra Devi did not put the spinning-wheel frame on top of the trunk; she leaned it against the wall.

"It won't work now," Gauri said.

"So what if it won't work? This time, at least, I'll know where it is."

Three days later, the secretary of the cultural forum came again.

He wanted a separate photograph of Subhadra Devi for the article.

Shashikant led him inside.

The secretary looked at the room.

The window was open.

Subhadra Devi sat on the cot cutting betel nut.

There was no certificate of honour on the wall.

Only an old family photograph and a clock hung there.

The secretary asked, "If there were some old cultural object here, the photograph would have greater impact."

Subhadra Devi looked toward the spinning-wheel frame.

"This is here. But not for effect; it is mine."

The secretary smiled.

The photograph was taken.

This time there was no honour plaque behind Subhadra Devi.

When the article was published, it also carried a photograph of the plaque at the gate, but Gauri's eyes stayed on the photograph from inside.

Behind Grandmother, the open window could be seen.

At school, Gauri submitted the plan of the house again.

This time the small room on the eastern side was clearly labelled: "Grandmother's Room."

The teacher made only a small mark of approval beneath it.

Gauri came home and showed the plan to Subhadra Devi.

"Is it right now?"

Subhadra Devi looked at the plan.

"Now the house has come into my map."

Gauri laughed. "Isn't that the other way round?"

"Both."

The rains of Sawan began.

Small water marks started appearing on the honour plaque at the gate.

One day Shashikant said, "We'll have to get another transparent coat put on this plaque, or its shine will fade."

Sudha said, "We'll have it done. What is the hurry?"

At that moment, inside, Subhadra Devi was wiping the frame of her own window.

Ranjan said, "Grandmother, I'll do it."

Subhadra Devi did not hand him the cloth.

"This is my window. Sometimes it feels good to wipe your own things yourself."

The plaque at the gate kept getting wet in the rain.

Inside, in the eastern room, the cot remained open through the night.

The trunk had its place, the spectacles their box, the medicines their shelf.

The household's objects of honour were now divided among different walls and boxes.

For the first time, the main use of one room in the house was not an object, a ceremony, or a guest.

That room belonged to a person.

STORY 250

The Day of Rumour

It was an evening in the middle of Sawan. After a day of sunshine, clouds were gathering in the west, but the rain was still far away.

Most people in Beltoli had already returned home from the fields, the market, and school.

At half past seven in the evening, a message appeared in the village WhatsApp group, 'Our Beltoli.'

The message was short, but its letters were large and bold.

'Tomorrow at eight in the morning there will be an inspection of tap connections. Only the houses with a blue bucket outside will have their names entered in the register. Do not remove the bucket. Forward this so no one's name is left out.'

There was no office name beneath it.

There was no date.

There was nothing to say who had issued it.

But the final line said—'Forward this so no one's name is left out.'

The message first reached Ramvilas Sah's phone.

Ramvilas kept a grocery shop at the square, and he had one number or another for nearly every family in the village.

He read the message and frowned slightly.

'An inspection of tap connections?'

His wife Nirmala, sorting rice, asked, 'Whose taps?'

'It doesn't say.'

'Why a blue bucket?'

Ramvilas read the message again.

Then he thought—if it turned out to be true and he did not forward it, people would say he had withheld the news.

He forwarded the message to the group.

Within five minutes, it had been forwarded nine times.

Within ten minutes, it had reached three separate family groups, two women's groups, the school parents' group, and the milk-collection group.

No one asked, 'Source?'

The first question was—'Where can we get a blue bucket?'

Beltoli had buckets of every colour—red, green, white, yellow, black.

All at once, a blue bucket ceased to be an object and became an opportunity.

The plastic-goods shop at the square closed at eight at night.

Before eight, five families had reached it.

The shopkeeper Murli had only seven blue buckets left.

'How many do you want?' he asked.

'One.'

'One for me too.'

'Give me two. My brother lives away; his house mustn't be left off the list either.'

Murli brought out all seven buckets.

When the eighth customer arrived, he said, 'No blue ones left.'

'Can you bring some by tomorrow?'

'The inspection is at eight.'

Those who already owned blue buckets suddenly found their houses had become important.

The handle of Kamla Devi's old blue bucket was half broken.

Two neighbouring families came to ask for it at the same time.

Kamla Devi said, 'And my own name won't be entered?'

Both fell silent.

Then one said, 'You have two earthen pitchers, don't you? You can manage with those for one night.'

Kamla Devi placed the bucket in her own courtyard.

In the eastern hamlet of the village, there were only three blue buckets.

Someone tied a blue cloth around an old white bucket.

Someone painted a thick blue band over a red bucket with leftover paint from the house.

Someone wrapped a blue plastic sack around a bucket.

By nine at night, blue had spread across the doorways of the village.

Neha, a ninth-class student, was placing a bucket at the door with her father, Manoj.

Neha had read the message twice.

She asked, 'Babu, who is coming to do this inspection?'

Manoj said, 'Someone from a department.'

'Which department?'

'The water people.'

'Name?'

Straightening the bucket, Manoj said, 'You need a name for everything.'

'There isn't even a date.'

'It says tomorrow, doesn't it?'

'Was this message written today, or is it an old one?'

Manoj was silent for a few moments.

Then he said, 'What harm is there in putting it out?'

Neha did not answer that sentence.

At half past nine, a second message appeared in the group.

'Those who do not have a photocopy of their Aadhaar ready will have their names entered later.'

This time, three folded-hands symbols appeared before the message.

Again, there was nothing to say who had written it.

Ramvilas's shop had no photocopy machine, and the copy shop at the square had already closed for the night.

People began opening old files at home.

Some looked for copies of Aadhaar, some for ration cards, some for old tap-tax receipts.

Anyone who found nothing asked a neighbour, 'Can your son make me a photocopy in the morning?'

By ten at night, the inspection of tap connections had changed shape across the village.

It was no longer only a matter of blue buckets.

Documents, numbers, doorways, presence—everything began to be prepared for an invisible inspection team.

Neha opened the group again.

The first message appeared under Ramvilas's name, but she knew Ramvilas could not have written it.

She sent him a private message—'Kaka, who sent this to you?'

Ramvilas replied—'Sanjay.'

When she asked Sanjay, the answer came—'Deepen sent it to me.'

Deepen wrote—'It came from the group in my maternal uncle's village.'

'Which village?'

For a while, there was no reply.

Neha's mother said, 'It's very late. Put the phone away now.'

Neha put down the phone, but even in sleep she kept seeing the colour of blue buckets.

When Ramvilas woke at five in the morning, the blue bucket outside his door was gone.

He panicked.

Ten minutes later it was found near the neighbour's mango tree. A dog had nudged it and dragged it away in the night.

As soon as news of this small incident spread, people began guarding their buckets.

Someone put a brick inside one.

Someone tied the handle to a post at the doorway with a rope.

Someone placed a slip of paper with the household name inside the bucket.

At six in the morning, the lanes of the village looked strange.

Outside every house stood some vessel or other in blue.

For those who had no real blue bucket, the improvised signs looked brighter from a distance.

Kamla Devi washed and wiped her old bucket and set it at the door.

She usually went for a walk by the pond at six.

That day she did not go.

'If the inspectors come, someone must be at home,' she said.

Two labourers delayed leaving for the fields by half an hour.

The women who delivered milk hurried to the collection point, handed it over, and returned quickly.

Seven schoolchildren were kept at home so that if the inspection team arrived, the adults could be called back from the fields.

At seven, the copy shop at the square opened.

Normally it opened at nine.

The moment its door opened, a queue formed for photocopies.

The shopkeeper, Naveen, asked, 'Which documents?'

The answers varied.

'Aadhaar.'

'Ration card.'

'Should we keep a copy of the bank page too?'

'Someone said a photograph is required.'

Naveen was startled. 'Who said so?'

No one could name anyone for certain.

At half past seven, Neha was dressed in her school uniform and ready.

Manoj said, 'Wait until eight. If the team comes, see them first and then go.'

Neha asked, 'If I don't go, my name will be marked absent.'

Manoj laughed. 'What can one day do?'

Neha looked at the blue bucket by the door.

'In one day, will my name be left out here, or at school?'

Manoj looked at her but did not answer.

Eight o'clock came.

No vehicle appeared on the village's main road.

It was ten past eight.

Ramvilas wrote in the group—'Where is the team? Does anyone know?'

Three thumbs-up symbols appeared, but no answer.

At twenty past eight, someone wrote—'They are checking the southern hamlet first.'

'Who told you?'

'Heard it.'

Someone from the southern hamlet wrote—'They haven't come here.'

At a quarter to nine, a third message spread—'The team will come at ten.'

This time the message said 'confirmed news.'

The source of the confirmed news was missing again.

Manoj did not go to the fields.

Kamla Devi did not go for her walk.

Ramvilas kept his shop half open and kept half his attention on the doorway.

The first school bell rang, but some of Beltoli's children were still at home.

Neha did not listen to her father.

At a quarter to nine, she left for school.

On the way, the blue buckets outside every door looked to her like the same question repeated over and over.

On reaching school, she went straight to Arun Sir, the library teacher.

'Sir, has the school received any notice about an inspection of tap connections?'

Arun Sir shook his head.

'No.'

Neha showed him the message on her phone.

After reading it, Arun Sir's first question was—'Where is the place named?'

'It isn't.'

'Date?'

'No.'

'Department?'

'No.'

'Contact?'

'No.'

Arun Sir said, 'Then this is less information than fear.'

Neha said, 'But the whole village believes it.'

Arun Sir looked out of the window.

'When no one is certain, the easiest thing is to do whatever everyone else is doing.'

He told Neha to go to class, but he himself called the panchayat secretary.

The secretary said, 'I have received no such notice.'

The coordinator of the water-supply committee said, 'Nor have I.'

They called the number of the block-level tap-scheme assistant.

The answer came—'No team has been sent to Beltoli today.'

Arun Sir wrote these four lines and sent them to the group.

The message was read, but the blue buckets did not immediately go indoors.

Ramvilas wrote—'A team could arrive suddenly from above.'

Someone wrote—'In government work, the secretary doesn't know everything.'

Someone else wrote—'Let's wait until ten.'

Ten o'clock came.

No team arrived.

At twenty past ten, Neha received Deepen's reply from the night before—'It wasn't my uncle's village Bishharia; I think it was the group from neighbouring Mejhaulia.'

Neha stopped at the word 'think.'

With Arun Sir's help, she called a student named Preeti at the school in Mejhaulia.

Preeti burst out laughing.

'Blue bucket?'

'Yes.'

'That was the sign for the plumber in our western hamlet yesterday.'

Slowly, the story became clear.

In Mejhaulia's western hamlet, the taps in fourteen houses had been giving little water for three days.

The plumber, Harinarayan, did not want to spend the whole day searching for all fourteen houses.

He had written in the local group—'If your tap has low water, put a blue bucket outside tomorrow at eight. I'll enter the names in my register and check the pipes.'

On someone's phone, the opening line of the message had been cut off —'If your tap has low water.'

In the next version, 'I' became 'the team.'

In the third, 'check the pipes' disappeared.

And a new line was added—'Forward this so no one's name is left out.'

After passing through four hands, a local sign meant for fourteen houses became a government rule for all of Beltoli.

The source of the second message about Aadhaar copies turned out to be even more ordinary.

Naveen's younger brother, who helped at the copy shop, had joked to a friend the night before—'Keep your Aadhaar with the bucket too; the government will move into your house.'

The friend cut off the first part of the sentence and forwarded it to a group.

When this news reached Beltoli, there was laughter at first.

Then the laughter faded.

Because everyone could see the blue bucket outside their own door.

By afternoon, people began carrying the buckets back inside.

The person who had painted a red bucket blue in the night kept staring at it.

Kamla Devi had missed her walk.

Two labourers had lost half a day's work.

Seven schoolchildren had been marked absent.

More than forty unnecessary photocopies had been made at the copy shop.

Murli's seven blue buckets had all been sold.

Someone wanted to blame him.

Murli said, 'I sold what people asked for. I didn't make the message.'

Ramvilas said, 'I only got it from Sanjay.'

Sanjay said, 'I only got it from Deepen.'

Deepen said, 'I only got it from my uncle's village.'

Everyone's sentence began with 'I only...'

Neha kept looking through the old messages in the group. She counted: in the first hour the message had been forwarded thirty-four times, but there had not been a single author.

In the evening, people gathered on the veranda of the panchayat building. It was not a formal meeting; after finishing their work, they had come to laugh about the incident, explain themselves, and count one another's mistakes.

Ramvilas said, 'Understand this—I didn't believe it. I forwarded it only so no one's name would be left out.'

Manoj said, 'I didn't trust it either. I put out the bucket only as a precaution.' From a distance, Kamla Devi said, 'For something you didn't trust, I gave up my walk?'

Some people laughed. Manoj laughed too, though his laughter was a little shorter.

Arun Sir gave no speech. He simply wrote four words on the blackboard—'Place. Date. Source. Person responsible.' 'And if those four are missing?' Neha asked. Arun Sir said, 'Then ask first, forward later.'

Ramvilas said, 'And what if it turns out to be true?' Kamla Devi replied, 'A true thing doesn't die because you ask about it.' Laughter rose again on the veranda. This time it was not aimed at anyone else, but at everyone's own haste.

The next day, the village returned to normal. Blue buckets again became ordinary things for bathing, washing clothes, and carrying water. Not one blue bucket remained in Murli's shop, though buckets of other colours were piled high.

At school, Neha wrote the four words on the last page of her notebook —place, date, source, person responsible. Three days later, another message appeared in the 'Our Beltoli' group.

It said—'From tomorrow, electricity will be completely shut off for three days. Finish all essential work today itself.' For ten seconds, no one replied.

Then Ramvilas wrote—'Which supply line?' Neha wrote—'Date?' Manoj wrote—'Source?' Kamla Devi's grandson wrote—'Number of the person responsible?'

Five minutes later, the sender wrote—'Wait, I'm asking.' That evening, nothing was arranged outside any doorway in Beltoli.

But the village's behaviour had changed again. This time, a message had not sent people running; it had taught them to stop and ask questions.

STORY 251

The Topper's Photograph

At the front veranda of Kanakpur High School stood a long wall. Half of it changed from time to time with examination notices, holiday circulars, and meeting dates; the other half remained fixed for gleaming glass frames.

Those frames held photographs of the boys and girls who had secured the highest marks in the school.

At the very centre was a photograph of Rashmi Kumari—white ribbons between her two braids, a fine sheen of sweat on her forehead, and the salwar-kameez she had prepared for Results Day after borrowing an iron from a neighbour's house.

Beneath the photograph, in bold letters, was written: 'Rashmi Kumari —Science—94 per cent.'

Directly opposite that wall, on the other side of the veranda, was a door. In blue paint it read: 'Science Laboratory.'

The paint on the door had faded. The padlock was still strong.

In three months, Naina of Class Nine had memorised the names beneath every photograph on the wall, but she did not know what was inside the laboratory.

In her science book she studied the cells in the thin membrane of an onion, drew diagrams of a microscope, and wrote down the names of mirrors, knobs, and glass slides as the teacher dictated them.

One day she raised her hand and asked, 'Sir, when will we actually look at an onion through the microscope?'

Vinod Sir looked at the clock.

'The laboratory is closed at present.'

'Why?'

'There is no room inside.'

Naina's eyes widened. 'In the laboratory?'

Vinod Sir closed his notebook. 'Yes. Let the class finish.'

After school, Naina went to the laboratory window. In one corner of the mesh, the paper covering had torn. Through the gap, what she could see looked nothing like the laboratory in her textbook.

Cardboard boxes stood on the tables. On one, in black ink, was written: 'Annual Examination 2022.'

Behind it was another: 'Half-Yearly Examination 2023.'

On a sack below was written: 'Old Result Registers.'

Naina pressed her eye to the gap.

'What are you looking at?' Bhola Kaka asked from behind her.

The elderly school attendant stood there with a broom in his hand.

'The laboratory.'

'Through the window?'

'The laboratory is full of examinations.'

Bhola Kaka laughed, then fell silent at once. 'That is well said.'

Naina asked, 'Why are the boxes here?'

Bhola Kaka looked towards the veranda roof. 'There used to be a records room behind the office. Five years ago, the roof began to leak in the rains. The boxes were brought here for three weeks to save the papers.'

'Three weeks?'

'Yes.'

'And they have been here for five years?'

Bhola Kaka began sweeping again. 'Some temporary things in a school learn very quickly how to become permanent.'

Naina looked towards the veranda wall. Beneath Rashmi's photograph, the 94 per cent gleamed.

That week, a notice went up for an 'Alumni Inspiration Day'. Five former students had been invited. Rashmi Kumari's name was first.

Headmaster Shashibhushan Jha told the classes that Rashmi was the pride of the school. She had studied science at the district college and was now working as a trainee at a diagnostic centre.

As soon as the notice went up, cleaning began on the veranda wall of photographs. Bhola Kaka took down the frames and wiped the glass. The '94 per cent' beneath Rashmi's photograph was darkened again in black paint.

The laboratory door remained closed that day as well.

Naina asked Vinod Sir, 'Was the laboratory open in Rashmi Didi's time?'

Vinod Sir said, 'I was not here then.'

'Bhola Kaka says the boxes came five years ago. Rashmi Didi's photograph is seven years old.'

Vinod Sir looked at Naina. 'Then ask her the question yourself.'

On the morning of Inspiration Day, chairs were arranged in the veranda. A white cloth was hung behind the stage. Rashmi's framed

photograph was lowered a little so that it would show clearly in the ceremony photographs.

At ten o'clock, Rashmi arrived.

In the photograph on the wall she was eighteen; now her hair was short, she wore thin-framed spectacles, carried a file of papers under one arm, and held a black bag in her hand.

The headmaster presented her with a small bouquet. 'The pride of the school, back in her school.'

Rashmi smiled. The moment she saw her own photograph on the wall, her smile changed slightly.

'It is still here?'

'Why should it not be?' Shashibhushan Jha said. 'The children draw inspiration from it.'

From a distance Bhola Kaka said, 'It is the photograph from Results Day. Your mother came with sweets.'

Rashmi walked up to the glass frame. 'You still remember?'

Bhola Kaka said, 'When you sweep the same wall every day, you remember the wall's stories.'

The ceremony began. Two speakers spoke about the importance of hard work. One former student described his experience in business. Then Rashmi's name was called.

In his introduction, the headmaster mentioned her 94 per cent three times—in science, in the school, and in the district merit list.

Rashmi stood on the stage. She opened the prepared sheet. She read two lines—about hard work, discipline, and the value of time. Then she folded the paper.

'I want to tell you something that is not written beneath my photograph.'

Naina sat up straight in the front row.

'In my first practical class in college, when the teacher handed me a microscope, I did not know how to adjust it properly.'

A faint murmur ran through the gathering.

Rashmi said, 'My marks were not false. I had studied. I knew how to write the answers. But I had done very few experiments at school. I understood that for the first time in college.'

Vinod Sir listened closely.

'In my time the laboratory did open,' Rashmi continued, 'but not regularly. Sometimes examination boxes arrived there, sometimes materials for a function, sometimes broken benches. Clearing a table before an experiment was itself a task.'

Naina looked at the question she had written at the back of her notebook: 'When will the laboratory open?'

Rashmi said, 'Today I would like to see inside, if I may.'

The headmaster leaned towards the microphone. 'Certainly. After the programme.'

When the programme ended, tea was taken to the office. Naina remained standing in the veranda. She feared that 'after the programme' might come to mean 'sometime later'.

When Rashmi came out, Naina stepped directly in front of her. 'Didi, shall we see the laboratory?'

Rashmi asked, 'Have you ever been inside?'

'No.'

That one word took the last trace of ceremony-smile from Rashmi's face.

The headmaster sent for the key from the office. Bhola Kaka opened the padlock. As soon as the door was pushed inward, it struck a box with a thud.

Four people together shifted the first box aside. Only then did the door open fully.

There were three tables inside, but their use had changed their names. One had become 'Answer Scripts', another 'Examination Materials', and the third 'Old Registers'.

In the glass cupboard against the wall, microscopes, glass vessels, measuring cylinders, and small pieces of science apparatus were still there. The objects had not disappeared; they had merely been buried behind the boxes.

Naina read the year on the first box—2021. The second—2022. The third—2023. Then she began recalling the years beneath the photographs on the wall.

'Sir,' she asked the headmaster, 'every year a new photograph went up on the wall. And every year a new box came in here?'

Before Shashibhushan Jha could reply, clerk Mahendra Babu said, 'Not every box can simply be thrown away.'

'Who said anything about throwing them away?' Vinod Sir asked.

Mahendra Babu opened the file he had brought with him. 'Some answer scripts have to be retained for a fixed period. Some result registers are permanent. Some examination papers may be disposed of according to rules after their retention period ends. The problem is that everything has been kept as though every box were the same.'

Rashmi asked, 'In five years, were they never sorted?'

Mahendra Babu looked slightly uncomfortable. 'At first the records-room roof was not repaired. Later the office ran short of space. Then the next examination came.'

Bhola Kaka said, 'The boxes could not go anywhere, but the years certainly kept moving on.'

Naina drew a line with her finger through the dust on top of one box.

Rashmi said, 'To me this is not only about a locked laboratory. The papers recording results are occupying the very place where science is supposed to be done.'

The headmaster looked at her. 'The papers are necessary.'

'Yes,' Rashmi said at once. 'That is precisely why sorting is necessary. What must be preserved should have a proper place. What has completed its retention period should be dealt with according to the rules. But calling everything "necessary" and letting it keep growing in the same room is not a solution.'

Vinod Sir opened the laboratory cupboard. He took out a microscope. A thin film of dust lay on its mirror, but the instrument seemed sound.

Naina stepped a little closer. 'Will we see the onion today?'

Vinod Sir smiled. 'First let the table become visible today.'

No experiment was conducted that day.

But the laboratory door was not immediately locked again.

In the afternoon Mahendra Babu returned with a list of examination records. Shashibhushan Jha, Vinod Sir, Bhola Kaka, Rashmi, and two other teachers began matching the years and contents written on the boxes.

No papers were thrown away. First, three categories were made: permanent records, papers to be retained for a specified period, and materials whose retention period had ended and on which a decision had to be taken according to rules.

Behind the old school library stood an empty metal cupboard. The librarian said the top two shelves could be given to records, provided the list remained clear.

A narrow metal rack in the office veranda was also cleared. The permanent result registers were arranged there in order.

For materials whose retention period had ended, it was decided that the list would first be placed before the school committee. Not a single page was removed without a decision.

The work continued for two days. Slowly, the laboratory tables began to recover their old shape.

On the second day Naina noticed that when the cardboard box marked 2023 was removed, a clean rectangular mark remained on the tabletop. Dust lay all around it; in the middle was a pale rectangle.

'Is this history too?' she asked Bhola Kaka.

Bhola Kaka said, 'Yes, but not the kind worth putting in a frame.'

On the third day Vinod Sir called ten students from Class Nine into the laboratory.

The tables were clean. The windows were open. The contents of the glass cupboard had been counted and arranged again.

'No one will take photographs today,' Vinod Sir said.

The students laughed.

The first experiment was very simple—a thin onion membrane, a clean glass slide, a drop of water, and a microscope.

Naina turned the mirror towards the light. At first she saw darkness. Then a blurred glow. When she slowly turned the focusing knob, the fine network of cells emerged.

Naina suddenly fell silent.

'Can you see it?' the student behind her asked.

Without lifting her eye she said, 'Smaller than the picture in the book... but I am seeing it with my own eyes.'

Vinod Sir said, 'Now let someone else see.'

At the end of the experiment that day, Vinod Sir opened a new register. Its title was: 'Laboratory Use Register.' Date, class, experiment, materials used, teacher's name.

Naina asked, 'Will this paper fill the laboratory again?'

Everyone laughed.

Vinod Sir said, 'No. This register will keep account of why the room is being kept clear.'

A month later, the last period on Wednesdays and Fridays came to be called the practical period. There was not an experiment every time; sometimes instruments were checked, sometimes samples prepared, sometimes an earlier experiment discussed. But the door no longer stayed shut merely because of examination boxes.

One day Rashmi came again. This time there was no ceremony. She had come to visit her mother, and so she stopped by the school.

Her photograph was still at the centre of the veranda wall. The lettering of 94 per cent was still dark.

Naina led her towards the laboratory.

There was a yellow stain from turmeric solution on a table. In one corner was a round mark where water had spilled. The glassware in the

cupboard stood in order. No examination boxes remained against the back wall.

Rashmi turned the pages of the use register. Naina's name appeared three times—onion cells, leaf stomata, solubility.

'And how much is your 94 per cent?' Rashmi asked with a laugh.

Naina said, 'The results have not even come yet.'

'Then what will you measure?'

Naina looked at the microscope. 'First I will learn to see this properly. Marks can come later.'

Rashmi looked once more at her own photograph on the wall. 'Do you feel like taking that photograph down?' Naina asked. Rashmi thought for a moment. 'No. It is a truth from that time. I got those marks—that is true too. I did too few experiments—that is also true. Why should one truth erase the other?'

The school bell rang for dismissal. Students began pouring out. Some children stopped before Rashmi's photograph, looked at her standing there in person, then looked back at the photograph. Bhola Kaka was sweeping the veranda. He said, 'Even the wall seems changed now.' Rashmi asked, 'New paint?' 'No. The door opposite stays open.' Rashmi turned to look.

The laboratory door stood open. Inside, Vinod Sir was showing two students how to wash glassware. Evening light fell slantwise through the window. On the veranda wall Rashmi's photograph was still fixed in the same old smile, but in its glass there was no longer a reflection of piled examination boxes; instead, the small moving figures of children inside the open laboratory kept passing through it from time to time.

STORY 252

The Cleanest House

As Sawan drew toward its close, a new announcement was made in Bishahariya panchayat: a "Cleanest House" competition. A white notice was pasted on the wall of the panchayat building, slips were handed to the schoolchildren, and an announcement over the microphone said that homes would be inspected three days later.

The prize was not very large—a brass water pot, two fruit-tree saplings, and a certificate from the panchayat. But it was the second line of the announcement that stayed more firmly in people's minds: "A photograph of the winning house will remain displayed in the panchayat building for one year."

The moment Sarita Devi read the slip, she said, "This time our house ought to be on that list."

Her husband, Devanath, smiled. "The house is already clean."

Resting the handle of her broom against the wall, Sarita said, "There is a difference between clean and the cleanest."

Her mother-in-law, Hemkali Devi, seated in a corner of the courtyard, heard this and laughed. "Does being the cleanest come with a different kind of dust?"

Sarita did not answer. From that moment her eyes began to notice things in the house she had never paid attention to before—the cobweb on a bamboo of the roof, dry leaves behind the tulsi altar, three broken earthen bowls in a corner of the veranda, a thin film of soot above the hearth, an old rope from the cattle shed, and a heap of half-broken bricks by the entrance.

When her twelve-year-old daughter Neetu returned from school, she brought another copy of the notice.

"Ma, they will inspect five things—the courtyard, water drainage, the toilet, separation of waste, and where the waste is disposed of."

Sarita took the slip and read it. She paused slightly at the last line, then said at once, "First make the house shine."

The next morning Devanath returned from the market with two new brooms, lime, and a small tin of blue paint. The lower wood of the gate was painted again. Old stains on the veranda wall were covered. Neetu and her younger brother Sonu kept bringing out old papers, empty oil packets, torn slippers, bits of wire, and broken toys one after another.

By noon, five heaps had formed in the middle of the courtyard.

Hemkali Devi asked, "Where will all this go?"

Devanath said, "We'll give it to Lalita when she comes."

Lalita went from hamlet to hamlet collecting household waste. Her cart carried two sacks—one for dry waste, the other for wet. The panchayat had also given her a register in which each household's name and the mark for collected waste were entered.

That day it was nearly evening by the time Lalita was due to arrive. By then the heaps in the courtyard had begun to trouble Sarita's eyes.

"The inspectors may start making rounds early tomorrow," she said. "What will they see if these heaps are lying at the door?"

Devanath said, "Lalita will come."

But the evening darkness deepened, and the bell of Lalita's cart was not heard.

Neetu sat with her book open. Sarita kept looking toward the courtyard again and again. At last she picked up an old basket.

"Beyond the bamboo fence at the back, Jaykali Kaki's field is empty. Put it there for two days. Once the inspection is over, we'll give it to Lalita."

Neetu looked up. "Did you ask Kaki?"

Sarita said, "We are only putting it there, not building a house on it."

Devanath said nothing at first. Then he lifted the basket. "Only the dry waste."

There was a gap between two bamboos in one place along the fence. Through that opening, Devanath emptied the baskets one by one into the fallow field of their neighbour, Jaykali Devi. Empty packets, torn paper, plastic bags, a broken slipper, bits of glass mixed with ash, and short pieces of old rope spread across the soil.

Sarita called from behind him, "Keep it in one place. Don't scatter it."

Devanath gathered the heap together with his foot. "We'll pick it up tomorrow."

Neetu stood by the fence. The field did not look "empty" to her. Jaykali Kaki had sown sunn hemp there two weeks earlier. Tender green stems were rising through the soil.

"There is sunn hemp here," Neetu said.

With a trace of irritation, Devanath replied, "I've put it along the edge, not among the crop."

It did not pour that night, but a fine rain fell. By morning some pieces of paper had slipped from the heap into the rows of sunn hemp.

Jaykali Devi came to inspect the field in the morning. She carried a small hand hoe. The moment she saw the coloured packets from a distance, she stopped.

She picked up one packet. It bore the stamp of the shop whose oil Sarita's household used. Sonu's name was also written on a torn page from a notebook.

Jaykali looked toward the fence. On the other side Sarita was mixing lime.

Their eyes met once.

Sarita said at once, "Kaki, we have kept it there only for two days. We'll remove it as soon as the inspection is over."

Jaykali folded the page in her hand. "I thought the wind might have brought it."

"No, it belongs to us."

"Then that is good. It is good to recognise what belongs to one's own house."

Saying only that, Jaykali walked farther into the field. She picked up two pieces of glass and placed them by the bamboo shelter. She left the paper and plastic where they were.

Sarita found that silence more uncomfortable than a scolding.

That day the cleaning grew even more vigorous. The toilet wall was washed. Leaves clogging the small drain were removed. Fresh earth was packed around the tulsi altar. The shoes by the gate went inside. Even an old sack used every day was put away in a room, out of sight.

Hemkali Devi said, "Are we cleaning the house, or hiding the things the house actually uses?"

Sarita laughed. "It's only for three days."

At noon Lalita arrived with her cart.

"Waste?" she called from the gate.

Sarita came out. "There's nothing today."

Lalita looked toward the courtyard. "You didn't give me anything yesterday either."

"We cleaned everything out."

Lalita smiled faintly. "If you cleaned everything out, where did the waste that came out go?"

Before Sarita could answer, Sonu called from inside, "Behind—"

Neetu shot him a look. Sonu stopped.

Sarita said, "We have separated some old things. We'll give them tomorrow."

In her register, opposite Sarita's household name, Lalita once again drew a small empty circle. "All right. Call me when there is something."

She moved on.

Neetu asked her mother, "Why is there an empty circle in the register?"

"Because we didn't give anything."

"Will the inspectors look at the register?"

Wringing the wet cloth in her hands, Sarita said, "They will inspect the house. Nobody looks at every register."

Hemkali Devi had been listening from the veranda. Quietly she said, "A thing does not disappear simply because its account is not inspected."

On the evening of the third day, two panchayat volunteers came to tell them the inspection time—ten o'clock the next morning. With them was Rekha Jha, the school's science teacher, because her name was on the competition's evaluation team.

Rekha Jha handed Sarita a copy of the notice. "We will also look at the arrangement for separating waste."

Sarita immediately placed two empty buckets by the entrance—one marked "wet" in charcoal, the other "dry."

Neetu noticed that both buckets were completely empty.

After dinner that night, Devanath said, "Shall we pick up the heap in the field early tomorrow?"

Sarita remained silent for a moment. "If we bring it back now, the waste will be visible near the house again. After the inspection."

"Did Jaykali Kaki say anything?"

"No."

"Then leave it."

Neetu kept mixing the rice on her plate. Jaykali's sentence returned to her: "It is good to recognise what belongs to one's own house."

At dawn Sarita sprinkled water across the courtyard. She made a white lime border. Not a single leaf remained under the neem tree. The sweeping extended all the way beyond the gate.

At ten o'clock the evaluation team arrived: panchayat member Chandresh, Rekha Jha, health assistant Manju, and two school students, one of whom was Neetu's classmate Savita.

Standing at the gate, Chandresh said, "Very good."

Sarita's face lit up.

The team inspected the courtyard, the drainage, and the toilet. Manju lifted the lids of the buckets. "Both empty?"

Sarita said, "There has been no waste this morning."

Savita burst out laughing. Rekha Jha signalled her to be quiet.

"And yesterday's waste?" Rekha Jha asked.

Sarita paused for a moment. "We disposed of it."

"Where?"

"To the collector."

Neetu's heart began to pound.

At that very moment the bell of Lalita's cart sounded outside. She was carrying waste from another house. Chandresh called her over.

"Lalita, was waste collected from this house?"

Lalita opened her register. "Not for three days."

The brightness vanished from Sarita's face in an instant. Devanath stood by a pillar of the veranda.

Chandresh looked at them questioningly.

Sarita said quickly, "It was old material. We have kept it temporarily behind the house. We'll give it after the inspection."

Rekha Jha asked, "Behind the house where?"

No one answered.

Neetu looked toward the fence. Just then a gust of wind rose. Above the bamboo fence, the corner of a white sheet of paper fluttered into view.

Savita said, "There?"

The team went to the fence. Through the gap between the bamboos, the field was clearly visible. Coloured waste lay scattered among the green rows of sunn hemp. The rain had spread the heap wider.

Chandresh said nothing. Manju only took a deep breath.

Sarita hurried to say, "This is Jaykali Kaki's fallow field. Just for two days—"

"It is not fallow," a voice came from behind them.

Jaykali Devi was coming from the far side of the field. In her hand she carried the small box in which she had kept the pieces of glass that day.

"I have sown sunn hemp," she said as she came closer. "And even if it were fallow, a field is not a rubbish bin."

Devanath lowered his eyes.

Chandresh said, "Why didn't you make a complaint?"

Jaykali replied, "The competition lasts three days. Neighbourhood lasts for years. I thought I would first let these three days pass."

For a moment after that, no one said anything.

Rekha Jha looked at her evaluation sheet. Courtyard—ten out of ten. Drainage—nine out of ten. Toilet—ten out of ten. Waste separation—two empty buckets. Waste disposal—her pen stopped beside that line.

She asked Chandresh, "How do we score this line?"

Chandresh said, "Improper disposal—zero."

Rekha Jha shook her head. “This is not a question about only this house. Our form is incomplete too. We ask whether a house is clean; we do not ask where that cleanliness becomes somebody else’s dirt.”

Lalita closed her register. “Mine too only records whether I collected waste or not. It says nothing about where a household dumped it on its own.”

For the first time Sarita looked at the two empty buckets. They no longer seemed clean to her. They seemed empty.

Through the gap in the fence Neetu saw the notebook page with Sonu’s name on it. The ink had spread in the night rain.

The evaluation team did not go immediately to the next house. A half-hour meeting was held at the panchayat building. The competition was not cancelled, but the result was postponed for a week. Every house would be checked again with one additional question: “Where does the household waste go?”

When the news spread through the village, people reacted in different ways.

Someone said, “If there are this many rules, what is the point of holding a competition?”

Someone laughed, “Cleaning your own house isn’t difficult. Finding a neighbour’s field is.”

Someone mocked Sarita by name.

For two days Sarita went out through the gate less often. It was not the lost prize that hurt so much as people’s laughter.

On the third morning Jaykali came to the gate.

“Come,” she said.

Sarita did not understand. “Where?”

“The field. Waste does not walk back by itself.”

Sarita picked up a basket. Devanath came too. Neetu and Sonu followed behind.

Jaykali had already made four heaps in the field—dry leaves and ash, glass and metal, plastic, and things that could be used again.

“I’ll keep this old rope,” she said. “It will be useful for training a bottle gourd vine.”

Hemkali Devi also arrived slowly. The moment she saw the pieces of the broken earthen bowl, she said, “This could have become a flowerpot.”

Sarita held a shard of the bowl in her hand. On the first day of the competition she had separated that very object as “waste.”

It took three hours. The glass and metal were given to Lalita. The plastic went into a separate sack. For leaves, ash, and kitchen matter that

could rot, a small compost pit was dug behind the house, within their own boundary. Things that could be used again were kept separately.

When the work was finished, Chandresh came to take a photograph.

Jaykali raised her hand and stopped him. "Not today."

Chandresh was surprised. "Why?"

"There was no photograph when the waste was thrown here. There is no need for one on the day it is picked up either. See whatever there is when you come for the competition inspection."

Chandresh put his phone back into his pocket.

Sarita smiled for the first time. There was embarrassment in the smile, but relief too.

A week later the inspection was held again. This time Sarita's courtyard did not gleam as it had before. The lid of the compost pit was plainly visible in one corner. A bamboo basket for dry waste stood inside the entrance. Lalita's register contained two collection dates.

In Jaykali's field, the sunn hemp was standing upright again. There were rain spots on a few leaves, but no coloured scraps of plastic.

The evaluation team spoke very little this time.

On the day the result was announced, Sarita's house did not come first. It did not come third either. The certificate went to another household, where kitchen waste had been composted for months and dry waste was regularly handed to Lalita.

Sonu was disappointed. "We worked so hard, and still no prize?"

Sarita stroked his head. "The first time we worked to make the house look right. The second time we worked to understand the house."

Hemkali Devi said, "At least this time we understood where the dust went."

In her school notebook, Neetu wrote a short piece about the competition. She wrote: "The boundary of a house may end at the wall; the boundary of its waste does not end there."

Rekha Jha circled the sentence in red ink, but did not write "Very good." In the margin she added only one question: "Then where does the boundary end?"

On the next page Neetu wrote her answer: "Wherever something we throw away can still alter another person's life."

A few weeks later the "Cleanest House" notice rotted in the rain and fell from the gate. Sarita picked it up and placed it in the basket for dry paper.

That morning the bell of Lalita's cart sounded. Sarita brought out the dry waste. Lalita entered the date in her register.

Beyond the fence, Jaykali was cutting the sunn hemp. She looked up once toward Sarita. Sarita raised a hand in greeting. Jaykali raised hers too.

Two or three dry leaves had fallen in the courtyard again. Sarita noticed them, but she did not immediately run for the broom. First she put the empty basket back in its proper place inside the gate. Then she picked up the broom.

STORY 253

The Felicitation Ceremony

It was a bright evening in Kartik. For two days, strings of coloured paper pennants had been going up along the veranda of the Belahi panchayat building.

Above the doorway hung a large cloth banner that read, "Public Service Felicitation Ceremony."

Five names were printed below it.

The first four names were correct.

The fifth read, "Harinandan Jha — Village Postal Service, Forty Years."

Raju, the young man hanging the banner, noticed nothing unusual in the name.

He tightened the rope and climbed down.

Panchayat secretary Ramakant Babu looked at the banner from a distance and said, "The letters are clear. The evening photographs will come out well."

No one read the names aloud again.

The man who was to be honoured was named Harinarayan Jha.

He was the village's old postal worker.

For forty years his work had been to deliver letters to houses that had neither house numbers nor street names.

If an address said only, "Jagdish, son of Rameshwar Jha, western hamlet," he would still get there.

Even "Shakuntala Devi, Belahi, near the pond" was enough to lead him to the right door.

If two people had the same name, he remembered the father's name, occupation, direction of the house, even the style of the sender's handwriting.

A joke ran through the village: "The post office may forget, but Harinarayan Kaka does not."

He had retired from service three years earlier.

Now he walked along the field embankments in the morning, sorted old papers in the afternoon, and sat on the veranda chatting with people in the evening.

He had received news of the felicitation three days earlier.

The panchayat youth committee had sent an invitation to his house.

The invitation said only, "Respected Sir, it has been decided to honour you for your long public service."

His name had not been written in by hand.

Harinarayan turned the card over and over.

"Where is my name?"

The young man laughed.

"Kaka, who here does not know you?"

Harinarayan laughed too.

"If everyone knows me, that is all the more reason to write it."

The young man took this for an old postman's habit and let the matter pass.

On the day of the ceremony, Harinarayan put on a freshly washed white kurta.

He strapped his old watch to his wrist.

His granddaughter Meera said, "Kaka, take your phone."

Harinarayan said, "At a felicitation, am I going to use a phone or receive the honour?"

Meera laughed and put the phone in her own bag.

The two walked to the panchayat building.

At the entrance, five paper name cards lay on the reception table.

The volunteers checked each guest's name and showed them to their seats.

Harinarayan said, "I have been invited."

One volunteer looked at the list.

"Name?"

"Harinarayan Jha."

Her finger moved down the page.

Once from top to bottom.

Then a second time.

"There is no Harinarayan."

Meera stared.

"Look at the list of those being honoured."

The volunteer opened another sheet.

"There is Harinandan Jha—village postal service."

Harinarayan gave a slight smile.

"Then seat Harinandan in front."

The volunteer did not understand.

Meera said softly, "There is a mistake here. Kaka is Harinarayan."

The volunteer immediately crossed out "nandan" in pencil and wrote "narayan."

"Done."

Harinarayan looked at the sheet.

"It is done on this page. Where else is it written?"

Before the volunteer could answer, the crowd behind them thickened.

She folded her hands and said, "Kaka, please sit inside first. We will check later."

Five chairs in the front row of the hall had name cards on them.

Four honourees sat in the chairs bearing their names.

The fifth chair read, "Harinandan Jha."

Meera picked up the card and showed it to Sonu, the secretary's assistant.

Sonu laughed. "Oh, it is only a mistake in the name."

Harinarayan went and sat in an empty chair in an ordinary row at the back.

Sonu hurried over.

"Kaka, please come to the front."

"That chair belongs to Harinandan."

"I will change it."

"Change it. Then I will sit."

Sonu turned the card over and wrote "Harinarayan Jha" on the back with a pen, then placed it on the chair.

Harinarayan rose and sat in the front.

Meera looked up at the main banner hanging over the stage.

It too said Harinandan.

She pointed it out to Sonu.

This time Sonu did not laugh.

"That has already been printed."

"Cover it."

"The banner will look bad."

"Will the wrong name look good?"

Sonu had no answer.

Five minutes remained before the ceremony began.

The chief guest, an officer from the block office, arrived.

A garland was placed around his neck.

Photographs were taken.

The microphone was tested.

Secretary Ramakant Babu sat on the stage with the programme sheet open before him.

Meera went up to him.

"Babu, Kaka's name has been printed incorrectly."

Ramakant Babu pushed up his spectacles and looked at her.

"Where?"

"On the main banner. It was on the chair card. It was on the list."

Ramakant Babu looked at the programme sheet.

There too it read, "Shri Harinandan Jha."

His brow tightened slightly.

"Have you seen the certificate?" Meera asked.

Ramakant Babu immediately pointed toward the small office room.

"Sonu, bring the fifth certificate."

A thick sheet in a red frame was brought out.

In the centre, in golden letters, it read, "Shri Harinandan Jha."

The description below was correct: "For forty years of devoted public service in Belahi village postal service."

Ramakant Babu scratched his head.

"How did this happen?"

Sonu said, "Everything was printed from the list that went to the press."

"Who made the list?"

"The youth committee."

Vikas, the youth committee coordinator, was called.

Vikas was arranging a tray of flowers behind the stage.

As soon as he saw the paper, he said, "I had written Harinarayan."

"Where had you written it?"

"On the nomination slip."

The slip was searched for.

A folded paper came out of the file.

It clearly said, "Harinarayan Jha."

Ramakant Babu asked, "Then who typed it?"

Sonu fell silent.

Vikas fell silent.

Pawan, who operated the computer, was contacted by phone.

From home he said, "I typed the five names exactly as they were sent to me on the phone."

"Who sent the message?"

"Sonu Bhaiya."

All eyes turned to Sonu.

Sonu opened his phone.

He found the three-day-old message.

It said, "Harinandan Jha."

Sonu lowered his head. "I did not type it from the slip. Vikas Bhaiya had told me the name over the phone. I heard it and sent it on."

Vikas said at once, "I said Harinarayan."

Sonu said, "I heard Harinandan."

Ramakant Babu looked at the clock.

The chief guest was already seated on the stage.

The audience was growing.

"We will trace the cause later," he said. "First, correct it."

Someone suggested pasting a white strip over the certificate and writing the correct name on it.

It was decided to paste a paper strip over the main banner as well.

The announcer would read the correct name from the programme sheet.

"That is enough," Ramakant Babu said. "Everything is fixed."

Meera asked, "And the news sent to the press and the reporters?"

Ramakant Babu went silent.

A short notice about the ceremony had already been sent to two local correspondents.

That too named Harinandan Jha.

One correspondent was sitting in the last row of the hall.

He had already copied the same name into his notebook.

Ramakant Babu beckoned him over.

"Make the fifth name Harinarayan Jha."

The correspondent asked, "Why was it wrong before?"

Ramakant Babu said, "A printing error."

Harinarayan sat in the front chair, watching and listening to all of it.

No one had yet asked him directly what his name was.

Everyone was correcting his name, while the person himself sat silent in the middle of the correction.

Meera bent toward him. "Kaka, will you say something?"

Harinarayan said, "For now, let us see whether Harinarayan reaches the stage."

The ceremony began.

There was a welcome address.

The panchayat's development work was discussed.

The first felicitation went to an elderly schoolteacher.

The second to a midwife.

The third to a weaver.

The fourth to the coordinator of a pond-cleaning team.

Each time, the name was read clearly.

A garland was placed.

A shawl was presented.

The certificate was handed over.

A photograph was taken.

When the fifth honour was announced, the announcer looked down at the programme sheet.

It still had Harinandan printed on it.

Along the margin, Ramakant Babu had written "Narayan" in blue ink.

The announcer faltered for a moment.

Then he said, "We now invite Shri Harinarayan Jha to the stage in recognition of forty years of service in the village postal service."

The hall broke into applause.

Harinarayan rose.

As he reached the front of the stage, his eyes went to the main banner.

A long strip of white paper had been pasted over the wrong name.

In black letters written by hand, it said, "Harinarayan Jha."

The edges of the old printed letters were still visible on both sides underneath.

The chief guest lifted the shawl.

Harinarayan folded his hands.

A garland was placed around his neck.

Then, when it was time to present the certificate, Sonu became a little nervous.

A white strip had been pasted over the certificate too.

The correct name was written on the strip, but one or two letters of "Harinandan" still peeped out from beneath the golden print.

Harinarayan took the certificate in his hands.

He did not immediately raise it for the photograph.

He read it first.

The chief guest smiled. "The name is correct now, isn't it?"

A few people in the hall laughed.

Harinarayan smiled too.

"It is correct on top now."

The chief guest looked at him questioningly.

The announcer said, "Kaka should say a few words."

Harinarayan went to the microphone.

He had prepared no speech.

He placed the certificate on the table.

"I delivered letters for forty years," he began. "If a name on a letter was wrong, sometimes the letter still reached the right house because the village was small. But I never corrected a name from my own head."

The hall grew quiet.

"First I asked: Is this so-and-so's letter? Who should receive it? Sometimes a single letter changes the person."

Ramakant Babu straightened in his chair.

Harinarayan continued, "The story printed on the honour I received today is correct—forty years of postal service. But another man's name was printed on it. That means the work was mine, the person was someone else."

A few people laughed again, but this time the laughter was smaller.

"Mistakes happen," Harinarayan said. "I have made them too. Once I mixed up the letters of two Ramji Yadavs. I realised it in the evening and walked another four kos to exchange them. There is less shame in a mistake if the correction reaches the right place."

He looked toward the main banner.

"A paper has been pasted there. Good. The certificate too. But correct the list from which all this was made. Correct the news as well. Keep the right name in the records. Otherwise next year Harinandan may be honoured all over again."

This time the hall laughed openly.

Harinarayan laughed too.

Then he stepped away from the microphone.

The speech had not lasted even two minutes, but after the programme it was discussed more than anything else.

The photographer stopped him and said, "Kaka, hold the certificate a little higher."

Harinarayan raised it.

The white correction strip was clearly visible.

The photographer said, "That strip shows too much. Cover it with your hand."

Harinarayan asked, "Why?"

"The photograph will look better."

"Is the mistake ugly, or the correction?"

The photographer had no answer.

Meera laughed.

Harinarayan kept holding the certificate as it was.

The photograph was taken.

When the ceremony ended, people moved toward the tea and pakoras.

Behind the stage, Sonu began peeling the white correction strip off the main banner.

Harinarayan noticed.

"Why are you taking that down?"

"The banner is of no further use. It will be thrown away."

"Give me the paper with the correct name."

Sonu stared.

"This?"

"Yes."

Sonu peeled the paper off carefully.

The edge tore slightly because of the glue.

Harinarayan did not fold it. He handed it to Meera.

"Keep it flat in the bag."

On the way home, Meera asked, "Kaka, why did you keep the paper pasted over the wrong banner?"

Harinarayan said, "I do not want the wrong name. But I want to remember how the right name came back."

After dinner that night, he opened his old postal box.

A few things from his service years remained inside—an old stamp, a bundle of red thread, two covers from undelivered letters, his retirement paper, and a small notebook in which he had written how to distinguish people who shared the same name.

"Ramji Yadav—southern hamlet—red gate."

"Ramji Yadav—near the bamboo grove—son Suresh."

"Shanti Devi—old pond—husband late Damodar."

Harinarayan placed the correction strip between the pages of that notebook.

Meera asked, "And the wrong certificate?"

Harinarayan looked at the certificate.

"This is no longer wrong. The correct name is on top. But the old letters underneath are still showing. That is all right too."

The next day at the panchayat office, Vikas placed the original nomination slip, the typed list, and the news copy on the table together.

Looking at the message on Sonu's phone, he typed the correct name again.

Ramakant Babu said, "Let us make one rule now—before printing, the name of every person being honoured must be read back and confirmed by that person or someone in the family."

Vikas asked, "Every time?"

Ramakant Babu looked at the cloth banner that had been taken down.

"Every time."

A new list was not printed.

On the old sheet, the wrong name was struck through in black ink, the correct name written above it, and the date added beside it.

The correspondent corrected his report and sent it again.

He wrote, "Shri Harinarayan Jha was honoured for his service in the village post."

The incident of the wrong name did not appear in the report.

Three days later, the photograph appeared in a local newspaper.

Harinarayan stood wrapped in the shawl, holding the certificate.

The white correction strip was visible even in the small photograph.

At the tea stall in the square, someone said, "The certificate looks a little untidy in the photograph."

Blowing on his tea, Harinarayan said, "The name looks good."

The people at the stall laughed.

A week later, Rajesh, the newly appointed postman, came to his house.

He was carrying a government envelope.

The envelope said, "Harinarayan Jha, Belahi."

Rajesh said, "Kaka, there was no house number, but as soon as I saw the name, I knew."

Harinarayan took the envelope in his hand.

"You read it first?"

"Yes."

"Read it correctly?"

Rajesh laughed. "Who would dare misread your name these days?"

Harinarayan laughed too.

Before opening the envelope, he looked at the name once more.

The letters were ordinary black.
No golden frame.
No garland.
No stage.
But this time, the name was right.

STORY 254

The Anti-Cheating Speech

In the first week of Phagun, a new cloth banner was hung over the main gate of Kalyanpur High School.

In bold letters it read: "Cheating-Free Examination Week."

Beneath the banner, two students stood holding a bamboo ladder steady.

Clerk Aniruddh Jha, perched above, was tightening the rope.

On the veranda, Headmaster Shambhunath Mishra was looking over the programme schedule.

The half-yearly examinations were to begin the following Monday.

The district office had instructed the school to hold an anti-cheating awareness programme before the examinations.

Shambhunath Babu did not want it to become a mere formality.

He said, "This time, do not merely frighten the children. Make them understand the reason."

Nirmal Jha, the school's Hindi-Maithili teacher, was given responsibility for the main address.

Nirmal Jha was known for discipline.

If he saw anyone's answer sheet tilted toward another student during an examination, he would call out the name from across the room.

Two years earlier, when a small slip of paper had been found in the pocket of a Class Nine student, he had had the entire examination cancelled.

So "the anti-cheating speech" seemed a natural assignment for him.

Nirmal Babu smiled when he heard of it.

"Ten minutes?"

The headmaster said, "Up to twelve. Keep it worth listening to for the children."

Nirmal Babu said, "The point is simple enough. Work hard. Do not cheat."

"It is difficult to say a simple thing well," Shambhunath Babu replied.

Nirmal Babu folded the schedule and slipped it into his pocket.

After school that day, he had to attend a block-level training session.

There was an inspection the next day.

On the third day, guests were due at his home.

Thinking he would find time for the speech later, he left.

The school also had a small literary circle.

Anupama, Ranjan and Salma of Class Ten were members of it.

They were asked to prepare a wall magazine for Anti-Cheating Week.

The librarian, Chandrakala Devi, gave all three a clear rule.

"Wherever you take an idea from, write the name of the source."

Ranjan asked, "Even if it is only two lines?"

Chandrakala Devi said, "Two lines or two pages—if the thought is not yours, show the road it came by."

Anupama looked through old magazines.

Salma selected a few points from a book on education.

Ranjan opened the internet on the school computer.

The connection was very slow.

A single page took so long to open that Ranjan went off twice to drink water while waiting.

Whatever the three found useful, they wrote down in their notebooks.

Alongside it, they also recorded the source.

Anupama stopped at one sentence.

It said: "Cheating may give you an answer, but it will not make you a friend of the question."

She said, "That is good."

Chandrakala Devi replied, "Then write the source below it."

On the wall magazine, the name of the webpage was written in small letters beneath the sentence.

Elsewhere Anupama wrote a sentence of her own: "Calling an answer mine when I do not understand it does not increase my knowledge."

There was no source beneath that line.

Ranjan laughed and asked, "Shall I put your name under this one?"

Anupama said, "No. It is a wall magazine, not my autobiography."

On Saturday evening, Nirmal Babu remembered the speech.

He had returned tired from the training session.

After dinner he opened a sheet of paper on the table.

He wrote the first line: "Dear students..."

Then his pen stopped.

He wondered how many times one could say "Do not cheat" over twelve minutes.

Then he picked up his phone.

On the internet he searched for "speech on the harms of cheating."

A number of articles on the same subject appeared.

Some were for students, some for teachers, some for colleges.

Nirmal Babu opened one page.

It had five points in sequence.

A second page contained a story-like example.

A third had several sentences about education and honesty.

He began copying them quickly onto paper.

He changed a few words.

He translated some sentences into Maithili.

Some he paraphrased almost as they stood.

Between them he inserted his own forms of address: "Children, remember..."

Within forty minutes, a five-page speech was ready.

He looked at the pages and breathed with relief.

"Done."

For a moment, the thought of noting the sources crossed his mind.

Then he told himself this was a speech, not a research paper.

He folded the pages and put them in his bag.

On Monday, all the classes assembled in the school prayer ground.

Two tables had been joined together in front to make a small stage.

Behind it, the banner reading "Cheating-Free Examination Week" fluttered in the wind.

To the right of the stage hung the students' wall magazine.

From a distance, Anupama could see the line she had written.

The headmaster gave the opening remarks.

He spoke about the effect cheating has on marks, confidence and learning.

Then Nirmal Jha was called to speak.

There was applause.

Nirmal Babu stood before the microphone.

He adjusted his glasses and opened the first page.

"Dear students, cheating is not merely breaking a rule; it is a lack of faith in your own intelligence."

The ground fell quiet.

Nirmal Babu's voice was clear.

He moved on: point one, point two, point three.

Anupama listened closely.

At one point, her eyebrow rose.

Nirmal Babu said, "Cheating may give you an answer, but it will not make you a friend of the question."

Ranjan immediately looked toward the wall magazine.

Salma lightly pressed Anupama's arm.

The three looked at one another.

On the wall magazine, the source was written beneath that sentence.

On the stage, the sentence had no source.

Nirmal Babu continued.

A little later he gave an example involving a "hostel honor code."

Kalyanpur school did not even have a hostel.

Ranjan whispered, "Where did that come from?"

Anupama whispered back, "It was on the webpage."

All three had read that page while preparing the wall magazine.

Nirmal Babu had changed the setting of the example, but the sequence was the same.

Then came a list.

All four points in the list were in the same order as on the webpage.

Anupama felt a strange tension in her head.

She did not want to laugh.

Nor was she wholly angry.

She could only remember Chandrakala Devi's sentence from Saturday: "If the thought is not yours, show the road it came by."

The speech ended.

There was applause.

The headmaster took the microphone.

He said, "You may ask questions now."

At first, no hand went up.

Smiling, Nirmal Babu said, "Are you afraid even to ask questions about cheating?"

A few children laughed.

Then a Class Eight student asked, "Sir, is asking a friend for an answer cheating?"

Nirmal Babu answered by explaining the context.

Another student asked, "What about looking at the book while practising at home?"

"Look at the book while learning; in the examination, write what you understand," he replied.

Then Anupama raised her hand.

Nirmal Babu knew her.

"Yes, Anupama?"

Anupama stood up.

"Sir, is it cheating to use a sentence written by someone else in one's own speech?"

A murmur ran through the ground.

Without hesitation, Nirmal Babu said, "If you take it word for word and do not give the source, it can be considered plagiarism."

Anupama asked, "What if a few words are changed?"

"If the idea is still someone else's and you present it as your own, the problem remains."

Chandrakala Devi was sitting beside the stage.

She looked at Anupama.

Anupama asked a third question.

"What if it is in a speech?"

This time Nirmal Babu's hand stopped on the paper.

The ground fell silent again.

The headmaster kept looking at Anupama.

Nirmal Babu said, "Even in a speech, it is proper to give the source."

Before Anupama could sit down, Ranjan called from beside the wall magazine, "Sir, that sentence is written here with its source."

Every eye turned to the wall magazine.

The same sentence that had been heard from the stage five minutes earlier was displayed there in black letters.

Below it, in small type, was the name of the webpage.

Nirmal Babu looked at it too.

Then he looked down at his five pages.

For the first time, the sentences written on the paper sounded separate from his own voice.

The headmaster moved the microphone toward him.

"Let the question be answered," he said calmly.

Nirmal Babu was silent for a moment.

He could have said that these were general ideas.

He could have said that a speech was not a research paper.

He could have said that he had been short of time.

All three arguments came into his mind together.

But at that very moment he remembered an earlier class.

Two years before, the student in whose pocket the little slip had been found had also said, "I did not have time, sir."

Nirmal Babu had replied then, "Lack of time does not make a wrong thing right."

That sentence now seemed to stand against him.

He took the microphone.

"Anupama's question is right."

No one in the ground laughed.

"I took a large part of this speech from different pages on the internet."

The headmaster's face grew slightly stern.

Nirmal Babu continued, "I changed some words, changed the language, but I did not cite the sources."

He raised the pages.

"That is a mistake."

A child sitting at the back in Class Six looked at his friend.

Perhaps he was surprised that a teacher too could publicly say, "I made a mistake."

Nirmal Babu said, "Perhaps the most useful line in today's speech is not any that I read out, but this: the rule I apply to all of you applies to me as well."

This time the applause did not come at once.

There were a few moments of silence first.

Then Chandrakala Devi began to clap.

Gradually, other hands joined in.

Anupama sat down.

It did not feel like a victory to her.

It only felt that the question had not been left unfinished.

After the programme ended, discussion began in the teachers' room.

One teacher said, "Was it necessary to admit so much in front of the children?"

Another said, "Now the children will start catching teachers out."

Setting down the tea, Chandrakala Devi said, "During Anti-Cheating Week, practice in catching things is not a bad idea."

Someone laughed.

The headmaster did not.

He asked Nirmal Babu, "How much of it came from outside?"

Nirmal Babu opened the five pages.

Taking a red pen, he began marking each paragraph beside the margin.

Three paragraphs on the first page.

Almost the whole of the second page.

Two lists on the third.

One example on the fourth.

Only the last five lines of the fifth page were entirely his own.

Seeing it himself made him uncomfortable.

"I thought translating it made it mine," he said quietly.

Chandrakala Devi replied, "The language changes, not the parentage."

Aniruddh Jha asked, "What happens now?"

The headmaster picked up the pages.

"Do not throw them away."

Nirmal Babu looked surprised.

"Why?"

"Because this has become the first proper lesson of the week."

The next day, a brief ten-minute gathering was held after prayer.

This time there was no stage.

Nirmal Babu stood on the ground among the children.

In his hand were the five pages from the previous day.

Their margins were covered with red marks.

He said, "Yesterday I advised all of you not to cheat."

"And while preparing yesterday's speech, for my own convenience, I made the same mistake."

He turned through the five pages.

"Everything on these pages that came from elsewhere now has its source written beside it."

He named no one and reread none of the borrowed sentences.

He explained only the method: read another person's idea, understand it, keep the source, and build your own argument from your own experience.

Then he closed the pages.

"Now five minutes without paper."

The children laughed softly.

Nirmal Babu said, "The first time I caught someone cheating, I felt very proud."

He told them an incident from his life as a teacher.

A student had copied an answer, but did not understand one word in the middle of it.

Nirmal Babu had struck out the answer then.

"Yesterday I read five pages, but if Anupama had not asked her question, perhaps I would never have applied the question of sources to my own speech."

He looked toward Anupama.

"This time, a question saved the teacher's answer."

Anupama lowered her head and smiled.

That week, the school started a new register.

It was called the "Source Register."

Sources for ideas taken from elsewhere in wall magazines, speeches, projects and the school magazine would be recorded in it.

Ranjan opened the first page.

He wrote the date at the top.

The first entry was not a student project.

He wrote: "Anti-Cheating Speech — Nirmal Jha — multiple internet sources; sources added later."

Nirmal Babu signed it himself.

Then Anupama wrote the second entry: the sources used in the wall magazine.

Closing the register, Chandrakala Devi said, "Now borrowed words will not lose the road they came by."

The examinations began.

On the first day, Nirmal Babu was invigilating in the Class Ten room.

Anupama sat in the third row.

The question papers were distributed.

After a while, a faint sound came from the back—the rustle of paper being moved.

Nirmal Babu turned and walked over.

One student covered the side of his answer sheet.

Nirmal Babu looked at him only once.

The student moved his hand away.

There was no speech.

There was no humiliation.

The room became quiet again.

Nirmal Babu returned to his desk.

On one corner of the desk lay a photocopy of the first page of the Source Register.

The headmaster had asked him to bring it to the inspection that afternoon.

Nirmal Babu looked at his own signature on the page.

Until yesterday, his speech had been kept in a file labelled "Final Copy."

Today the name of the file had changed: "Notes with Sources."

He opened his phone and, instead of deleting the old search history, left it as it was.

For now, that history was no longer a mistake to be hidden, but evidence of learning.

STORY 255

The Library Inauguration

The old seed-store room of Belauri Panchayat had been turned into a library in three months.

The walls had a fresh coat of lime, the windows had iron grilles, and on the door, in blue letters, was written—"People's Library, Belauri."

On the day of the inauguration, the village was so crowded that it was difficult to see the sixteen books inside.

There was the first lock on the gate. The second was on the veranda grille.

Inside were four book cabinets, each secured with two locks.

There was one on the desk drawer, one on the register box, one on the donation box, and five separate locks hung from the small door of the storeroom.

Naina, who was in Class Eight, reached eighteen as she went on counting.

Then she counted the books arranged on the table. Sixteen.

Naina nudged her friend Shikha with her elbow and said, "Two more locks."

Suppressing a laugh, Shikha said, "Count the photographs. There will be more of those than anything else."

An officer had come from the block office for the inauguration.

The village head, the school headmaster, the ward member, two donors, and the bookshop owner from the market were all seated around the small table on the stage.

A photographer kept making people stand up and sit down in turn.

First there was a photograph of the ribbon being cut. Then one of the door being opened.

Then one of a book being placed in the officer's hand. Then another book in the village head's hand.

Then the children were made to stand in a row, each holding five books.

The book Naina was holding was called "Our River—Our Village."

As soon as the photograph had been taken, the attendant took the book from her hand and put it back on the table.

Naina asked, "Can I take this home?"

The attendant replied, "The inauguration is still going on."

Naina decided it would be proper to ask after the inauguration was over. By afternoon, thirty-four photographs had been taken.

In the evening, all the books were placed in the four glass-fronted cabinets. The two locks on each cabinet were closed.

The keys were not kept in one place.

One pair went to the secretary of the library committee, one pair to the village head, one pair to the headmaster, and one pair to the principal donor, Ramvilas Babu.

The arrangement was that no one person should be able to open a cabinet on his own.

"There will be accountability," said the secretary, Maheshwar Jha.

Everyone agreed.

Naina still kept looking at the blue cover of "Our River—Our Village" behind the glass.

Two days later, after school, she went to the library.

The gate was open, but the grille was locked.

Inside the grille sat Janardan Babu, a retired teacher who had been appointed to run the library.

Naina said, "I want to borrow the book about the river."

Janardan Babu smiled.

"That is very good."

He searched for the keys in his shoulder bag.

He found the key to the main door and the key to the register box, but not the key to the book cabinet.

"The secretary has it," he said.

Naina went to the secretary's house. The secretary had gone to the market.

The next day she went again. The secretary was at home, but his key was only for the left-hand cabinet.

The river book was in the cabinet on the right.

"The other key to that one is with Ramvilas Babu," the secretary said.

Ramvilas Babu's house was half a kos from the library.

Naina reached there in the evening.

Before giving her the key, Ramvilas Babu asked, "Where is the man who runs the library?"

"There."

"Then how can I put the key into your hand? I will come myself."

He had guests that evening, so he could not go.

On the third day Naina went to the library again.

At the sight of her, Janardan Babu looked embarrassed even before she said anything.

"We will open it today," he said.

Ramvilas Babu came, and so did the secretary.

The two locks were opened.

The glass door of the cabinet creaked.

Naina reached for the blue book.

Just then the secretary said, "First open the issue register." Janardan Babu had the key to the register box, but the format for filling in the first page of the register had not yet been prepared.

Whose name, for how many days, the price of the book, the guardian's signature—the three men began discussing all this.

Naina stood waiting. Half an hour later it was decided that no book would be allowed to go home until the rules had been framed.

The book went back into the cabinet. The two locks were fastened again.

This time Naina said nothing. She sat on the veranda and began reading one of her schoolbooks.

Within two weeks, photographs of the library inauguration had been put up at three places in the village.

Eight photographs were displayed in the Panchayat building. Five on the school veranda.

There were eleven inside the library. In one photograph Naina was smiling, holding the blue book.

People who saw that photograph would say, "The children are making excellent use of it."

At first Naina would correct them: "I haven't read it. I only held it."

People would laugh. "You will read it too."

A month passed. The rules were framed, but a new difficulty arose.

To take a book home, two signatures were required—one from the librarian and one from a member of the committee.

The committee member came to the library only on Tuesdays.

On Tuesdays Naina had an extra mathematics class at school.

Twice she thought of missing the class, but she did not.

Meanwhile, a request came for new photographs of the library.

The block office's monthly report required proof of "reader activity."

Maheshwar Jha said, "Call the children on Sunday. Put books in their hands, take photographs, and we'll send them."

Janardan Babu said softly, "Shall we open the books for reading too?"

"Yes, yes, of course. First let the photographs be taken."

Ten children came on Sunday.

Once again, three people had to be gathered to open the book cabinets.

The photographer did not come, so Maheshwar Jha took the photographs on his mobile phone.

One child was given a geography book, another a book of poetry, a third a book on agricultural science.

Naina was given "Our River—Our Village" again.

She opened the book.

On the first page she read the printer's name.

On the second page there was a map of an old channel of the Kosi.

Maheshwar Jha said, "Look up. I am taking the photograph."

Naina did not look up.

She kept looking at the map. "Naina, smile once."

She asked, "May I read for ten minutes?"

Maheshwar Jha looked at her for a few moments, then said, "All right. But the book must not go outside."

In ten minutes Naina read three pages. Then the book was put back in the cabinet.

That day's photographs went into the monthly report. In the library register, the number of readers was entered as ten.

No one took a book home. In the second month, something strange happened.

Raghunath Sah, the village's old bookbinder, brought five old books for the library.

Their covers were worn, there were finger marks along the edges, and in two of the books children's old names had been written in pencil.

Maheshwar Jha looked at the books. "The donation is good, but these will not look good in the inauguration cabinet."

Raghunath Sah laughed. "Did I give the books to decorate a cabinet, or to be read?"

Maheshwar Jha gave no answer.

The five books were placed temporarily under Janardan Babu's desk because they had not yet been entered in the catalogue.

For that reason, no lock was put on those five books.

When Naina arrived that day, she pulled an old book called "The Ponds and Waters of Mithila" from under the desk.

"May I read this?"

Adjusting his spectacles, Janardan Babu said, "It is not on the list yet."

Naina could not understand whether that meant yes or no.

From the veranda Raghunath Sah said, "If it is not on the list, then it has no lock either. Read it."

Janardan Babu smiled.

Naina did not take the book home; she sat on the veranda and read half of it.

Shikha read it the next day. On the third day, Rajesh of Class Six read it.

Within a week, new folds had appeared on the pages of three of the five old books.

When one page seemed in danger of coming loose, Raghunath Sah stitched it back in with thread.

The sixteen books inside the glass cabinets still gleamed.

The five books under the desk slowly grew soiled.

At first Janardan Babu was worried by the dirt. Then one day he said, "This is not bad dirt. It is the mark of hands."

At the end of Phagun, word came that an inspection would be held by the block office.

The committee immediately became active.

The glass was cleaned. The locks were oiled.

The photographs on the wall were straightened. Maheshwar Jha said, "Remove those five old books for now. They look torn."

Naina was sitting there.

She asked, "Why?" "The inspector is coming. The library should look good."

Naina was holding a loose page of "The Ponds and Waters of Mithila."

"But these five have been read more than any of the others."

Maheshwar Jha said, "That is true, but look at their condition."

Naina looked at the wall.

There were eleven photographs from the inauguration.

Four new photographs of the monthly activities had also been added.

She looked at the glass cabinet.

Sixteen books.

Door, cabinets, register, drawer, storeroom—all together, eighteen locks. Fifteen photographs on the wall.

If the photographs in the Panchayat building and the school were added, the number went far beyond that.

Naina said softly, "There are fewer books, and more locks and photographs."

No one laughed.

Janardan Babu rose from his chair.

For the first time he looked at all the locks together, as though until then they had been separate objects and today they had become a single account.

The officer came on the day of the inspection.

Maheshwar Jha gave him an account of the library's establishment, inauguration, donations, and monthly activities.

The officer looked at the photographs on the wall. Then he asked for the register.

The register contained the number of readers, but the rows for books taken home were almost empty.

He asked, "How many books have gone out?" Janardan Babu said, "The system has become difficult."

The officer asked them to open one of the cabinets.

It took twenty minutes to gather the keys.

Meanwhile, the officer watched the children sitting on the veranda.

Rajesh was reading an old book. Shikha was carefully turning the pages of another.

The officer asked, "Which cabinet do these books belong to?"

Naina replied, "They don't belong to any cabinet." Raghunath Sah burst out laughing.

Janardan Babu told the whole story plainly. The inspector gave no speech.

He only said, "Security is not another name for preventing books from being used."

That evening the committee met. For a long time they discussed keys, responsibility, books being lost, pages being torn, and keeping accounts.

At last Raghunath Sah said, "If a book tears, I will stitch it. If it is never read, who will stitch up its silence?"

No one wrote that sentence in any register, but from that point the meeting changed.

It was decided that there would be one lock on the main door.

The locks inside the book cabinets would remain open while the library was open.

One signature from the librarian would be enough. A child could take a book home; the name and date would be entered in the register.

Responsibility for a lost book would be fixed according to the rules, but readers would not be stopped merely out of fear that a book might be lost.

The next day Janardan Babu opened the seventeen extra locks and put them into a cloth bag.

Naina asked, "Will you throw them away?" He said, "No. Let them stay in the storeroom. We will use them when they are needed."

Naina took out the blue-covered "Our River—Our Village."

For the first time, the name of the book and the date by which it was to be returned were written beside her name in the register.

She took the book home.

When she brought it back three days later, one corner had bent slightly. Straightening it, Janardan Babu said, "Now it is no longer new."

Naina became alarmed. "Did I spoil it?"

Janardan Babu said, "No. Now it has become a library book."

A year later, the anniversary of the inauguration came round again.

No one on the committee arranged a grand ceremony. Raghunath Sah brought two new books.

The children made a list of all the old books. The photographer came on his own.

He said, "All the children, take a book in your hands and look up once."

Laughing, Janardan Babu said, "Read first. Photographs later, if there is time left."

The old inauguration photographs were still on the wall. But on the shelf beneath them, the covers of the books no longer shone alike.

One had a bent corner, another a faint fingerprint on a page, another a slip tucked between its pages.

Naina did not count the photographs on the wall.

She wrote the name of the next book in the register and opened the glass door without a key.

STORY 256

The Caste Chair

After the rains, the roof of the village community hall had been repaired once again.

Along with the new roof came twenty-eight blue chairs, all the same colour.

The chairs looked so alike that from a distance it was hard to tell which was old and which was new.

But all the chairs were new.

What was old was the way they were arranged.

On the day of the first meeting, Bhola Kaka opened the community hall early in the morning.

He was seventy-eight, but the key still hung from the old cord tied around his waist.

As soon as he opened the door, he swept the floor first, then carried the chairs outside and set them in the sun.

At half past eight, Nilu arrived.

Nilu was in Class Nine at the high school.

Her mathematics teacher had asked her to prepare a small register of the number, condition, and placement of the chairs that had come to the panchayat community hall.

The reason was that the school students were going to use the same hall for a science exhibition the following month.

Nilu opened her notebook.

"Kaka, shall I write numbers on the chairs?"

Bhola Kaka said, "Write them underneath. If you write them on top, people will ask why the number of their chair has changed."

Nilu burst out laughing.

"Whose chair? They all belong to the village."

Bhola Kaka looked at her, then gave a small smile.

"Yes, they belong to the village."

Turning the chairs over one by one, Nilu began painting plain numbers underneath them—1, 2, 3...28.

She was enjoying herself.

When she had finished numbering them, Bhola Kaka began arranging the chairs inside.

Nilu saw that he placed six chairs in the first row, eight in the second, eight in the third, and six against the back wall.

"If we put seven in each row, it will look more even," Nilu said.

Bhola Kaka shook his head.

"This is fine."

"Why?"

"People have always sat like this."

Nilu drew a small map of the chairs' positions in her notebook.

First row: 1–6.

Second: 7–14.

Third: 15–22.

Back: 23–28.

At half past nine, people began to arrive.

Mahendra Babu came first.

Bhola Kaka seated him on chair 2.

Then came Shivji, Amarnath, Sudama, Harilal, and Rameshwar.

No one looked at the numbers written beneath the chairs.

But Nilu kept watching.

Chairs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 filled up.

The second row too filled gradually.

The six chairs at the back remained empty for a long time.

Then Mangal, Durga, Budhan, and Shambhu came from the southern hamlet.

At the doorway, all four first began taking off their sandals.

Bhola Kaka said, "There is no rule that sandals must be left outside."

Mangal said, "It is a habit."

All four came inside.

Two chairs in the second row were empty.

But they all went to the back.

Nilu wrote in her notebook—23, 24, 25, 26.

The meeting was about drain water and preventing soil erosion before the next monsoon.

On paper, the main issue was straightforward.

Where the drain needed deepening, where a small culvert was required, and near whose field the water should not be diverted.

But before the discussion could properly begin, the positions of people's bodies had already been settled.

Nilu noticed this for the first time.

Until then, she had thought only that whoever came early would sit in front and whoever came late would sit at the back.

Mangal had arrived late, so that made sense.

Durga too.

But Budhan had reached the doorway before Shivji.

He remained standing outside, talking to Bhola Kaka, until the chairs in the first row had filled.

Nilu drew a small question mark in her notebook.

In the middle of the meeting, the map of the drain was opened.

The village's three main roads, the pond, the school, the shrine, the southern hamlet, and the eastern fields were all marked on the paper.

Mangal stood and said, "If the water is diverted here, the courtyards of three houses near our hamlet will flood again."

Mahendra Babu could not see the map clearly.

He asked Mangal to come forward and show him.

Mangal came forward, but he did not sit on the empty chair 7.

He remained bent over the paper, pointing to it with his finger.

"Sit down," Nilu said without thinking.

Everyone's eyes turned towards her for a moment.

Nilu began looking at her notebook.

Mangal laughed and said, "I'm fine standing."

He remained standing for five minutes.

Then he returned to his chair at the back.

After the meeting ended, Nilu counted the chairs again.

Her mathematics assignment was complete.

But the question mark did not disappear.

The second meeting was two weeks later.

This time the subject was the repair of the community well and a new pulley for drawing water.

Nilu deliberately arranged the chairs in four rows of seven.

When Bhola Kaka arrived, he stopped short.

"What have you done?"

"It is easier to count."

"People will change them again."

"Then let them."

Bhola Kaka said nothing.

People arrived.

For the first five minutes, everything remained as it was.

Then Harilal dragged his chair two handspans forward.

Rameshwar turned the chair beside him.

No instruction was given.

No one told anyone where to sit.

But within ten minutes, the four even rows had taken the old form again—a short row in front, two wider rows in the middle, and six chairs clustered against the back wall.

Nilu looked at the numbers underneath.

This time chairs 1 through 6 were not in front.

The front row held 3, 8, 12, 16, 18, and 22.

The numbers had changed.

The pattern had not.

She drew a second map in her notebook.

After that, she wrote no names, only chair numbers.

After the meeting, she placed the two maps over each other and compared them.

The numbers were different, but the empty spaces, the distance between rows, and the direction people faced were almost the same.

At home, she copied the two maps onto paper in pencil.

Her mother asked, "What kind of lesson is this?"

Nilu said, "Mathematics too, perhaps history as well."

Her mother looked at the maps.

After a while she said, "Do not write any names."

"Why?"

"You are a child. People will draw their own conclusions."

"I won't write names. But even without names, the thing can still be seen."

Her mother did not answer.

On the day of the third meeting, it rained heavily.

The community hall's new roof was sound along the main side, but water began dripping through one joint in the back corner.

Exactly where the six chairs at the back usually stood.

Bhola Kaka placed a bucket there.

Chairs 23 through 28 had to be moved.

Nilu placed those six chairs in an empty space at the front left.

The meeting began.

Five people came from the southern hamlet.

They stopped near the doorway.

There was a bucket in their old place at the back.
There were six empty chairs in front.
Mangal moved towards one chair, then stopped.
Durga stood against the wall.
Bhola Kaka said, "Please sit down."
Mangal said, "Here?"
"The chair is dry."
"I'll stand."
This time Nilu said nothing.
The meeting went on.
After half an hour, Durga's knee began to hurt.
He slowly leaned his weight against the wall.
Mahendra Babu noticed.
"There is an empty chair. Sit down."
Durga said "no" again.
Mahendra Babu looked at Bhola Kaka with questioning eyes.
Bhola Kaka lowered his gaze.
The sound of the rain grew louder.
For a few moments, the discussion in the meeting stopped.
Nilu opened her notebook.
She had drawn the maps of all three meetings on a single page.
"May I show you something?"
Her voice was not very loud.
Mahendra Babu said, "Show us."
Nilu placed the notebook in the middle.
"This is the first meeting. This is the second. This is today."
No one immediately understood what it meant.
Mangal bent over to look.
"These are the chair numbers?"
"Yes."
"Where are the names?"
"I have not written any names."
Harilal said, "Then what does this show?"
Nilu turned the page.
On that page there were only square marks—six in front, rows in the middle, six at the back.
"The numbers kept changing, but this pattern did not."
No one said anything.

Nilu continued, "Today water is falling at the back. Even so, these six chairs are empty and five people are standing."

Durga gave a faint laugh.

"Forget my knee. Look at your mathematics."

A few people laughed.

The laughter was brief, but the knot of tension in the room loosened a little.

Mahendra Babu looked at Durga.

"Truly, why did you not sit?"

Instead of answering directly, Durga said, "The place that feels like mine is where the water is falling."

"Who decided that place?"

"No one."

"Then?"

Durga looked at Bhola Kaka.

Bhola Kaka said, "Ever since I was given the key, this is how I have seen it."

Mangal said, "My father too used to sit like this."

Harilal said quietly, "My father too, in front."

After that short sentence, the sound of rain inside the hall suddenly seemed much clearer.

No one had made a rule.

Each had inherited a place from his father.

And that place was stronger than the number written beneath a chair.

The meeting was about the well, but the discussion came to a halt over the chairs.

Mahendra Babu said, "We will not abandon today's subject. A decision about the well is necessary."

Mangal said, "First those who are standing will sit. Then we will talk about the well."

Durga looked at him.

"You sit first."

Mangal sat down on the empty chair 24.

Today that chair stood at the front left.

When he sat, no one applauded.

No one made an announcement.

Only all four legs of the chair came to rest on the floor at once.

Durga sat on 25.

Shambhu on 27.

Budhan on 28.

The fifth man, Chhotelal, sat on the empty chair 26 and drew his feet in, as though his body were still asking where its old boundary lay.

The meeting began again.

There were two opinions about the well's pulley.

Those who were accustomed to speaking from the back now spoke from the front.

For those sitting in front, it was not as easy this time to cut them off mid-sentence.

Nilu did not write that in her notebook either.

She wrote only the decision—the old pulley would be removed, a new iron pulley installed, and the cost shared by all four hamlets.

When the meeting ended, people got up.

Durga began carrying his chair back to its old place at the rear.

Nilu said, "There is still water there."

Durga stopped.

Then he left the chair where he had been sitting.

The following week, the joint in the roof was repaired.

Bhola Kaka called Nilu.

"Finish the chair register. The school people will ask for it."

Beside each of the twenty-eight numbers, Nilu wrote—"Good."

She left the column for permanent location blank.

Bhola Kaka looked at it.

"You won't write the location?"

"The location will keep changing."

"Will it?"

Nilu said, "Let it."

The fourth meeting was held two months later.

This time Bhola Kaka did not arrange the chairs.

He unlocked the door and sat to one side.

As people arrived, each brought out a chair from the storeroom for himself.

For the first five minutes, the old pattern began forming again.

Then Mangal placed his chair beside Mahendra Babu's.

Because he had to show him the measurements for the new drain.

Durga sat near the doorway, because that was where the breeze was strongest.

Harilal went to the back, because he wanted to rest his back against the wall.

No new rule was made.

The old rule had never been written down, so no written order was issued to strike it out.

But for the first time, the chairs began to move according to the work at hand.

Nilu sat at the back and opened her notebook.

She could have drawn a new map.

But this time she did not.

At the top of a blank page she wrote—"Meeting 4."

Underneath she wrote one line—"Chairs: twenty-eight. Permanent location—none."

Then she closed the notebook.

There were twenty-eight blue chairs in the community hall.

All the same colour, the same height, the same price.

The only difference was that now, merely by looking at them, one could no longer tell whose place was whose.

STORY 257

The Digital Village

A new signboard had been put up three months earlier at the western entrance to Bankatta village.

White letters shone against a blue background—"Fully Digital Village — Bankatta."

A small solar panel was fixed above the signboard.

All day it drank in the sunlight, and as soon as evening fell, two white lights began to shine on the letters.

Whether the village had electricity or not, the signboard glowed all night.

Whether there was a mobile network or not had nothing to do with it.

In Bankatta, there was almost never a network.

Now and then one bar would appear, then vanish before a conversation could even begin.

The villagers had long accepted this as though it were their fate.

After the signboard went up, the deficiency became much more visible to them.

For now, whenever "No network available" appeared on a mobile phone, at that very moment "Fully Digital" kept shining on the signboard to the west.

One day, the science teacher gave Aarti, who was in Class Eight, homework: draw a map on the subject "The New Facilities in Our Village."

Aarti came home and drew the road, pond, school, community hall, health room, and the new digital signboard on a sheet of paper.

Then she stopped.

Her mother asked, "What happened?"

Aarti said, "Where should I draw the digital facility?"

Her mother laughed.

"Draw it beside the signboard."

Aarti drew a small mobile phone beneath the signboard.

Then she took her own mobile phone there.

Her maternal uncle had given her an old phone for her studies.

Standing beneath the signboard, Aarti held the phone up.

Not a single bar.

She went to the roadside.

Nothing.

She went to the western embankment of the pond.

For a moment, one bar appeared.

Aarti marked a red dot in her notebook.

That evening, her homework took on a new form.

The next day, on her way to school, she opened her phone at three places and checked the network.

The school veranda—zero.

North of the old peepal tree—one bar, for only ten breaths.

At the culvert over the irrigation channel—two bars.

She marked three red dots in her notebook.

By the third day, Aarti had understood that Bankatta's digital map was not a map of buildings, but a map of the network's scattered breaths.

The culvert turned out to be the most dependable place.

At dawn, two bars could be found there.

At noon, one.

In the evening, sometimes all three bars lit up together.

The culvert was about half a kos east of the village's main road.

There was neither shade there nor any proper place to sit.

Fields lay on both sides, with a narrow brick culvert in between.

Earlier, people stopped there only to cross the channel.

Now it was gradually becoming a place for catching the network.

Mohan, who sold milk, stood there at dawn to see his payment message.

The schoolteacher wandered about holding his phone aloft so that he could download the examination list.

Rita, the seamstress, opened there the picture showing the measurements sent by her customer in the city.

Krishnadev's son saw the notice for his job interview there.

People gave the culvert a name—"Network Ghat."

The name existed in no official record.

But if anyone in the village asked, "Where can I get a network?" the answer came at once: "Go to Network Ghat."

Aarti drew a thick red circle around the culvert on her map.

When the science teacher saw the map, he smiled at first.

Then he asked, "What are all these red dots?"

Aarti said, "Places where the mobile phone gets a network."

"I asked you to draw facilities."

"Isn't this a facility?"

The teacher was silent for a few moments.

The other children in the class leaned towards Aarti's paper.

Sonu said, "One bar comes on our roof in the evening."

Phulkumari said, "Not in our courtyard, but it comes near the cattle trough."

Dilip said, "My uncle says if you climb the guava tree, you get two bars."

The whole class burst out laughing.

The teacher said, "We will not mark a tree-climbing point on the map."

Aarti asked, "Why?"

"It is dangerous."

Aarti wrote beside the red dot: "Not usable."

It was the first time her map had ceased to be merely homework.

The children began bringing reports about the network from their own hamlets.

Within a week, there were twenty-seven dots on the paper.

Some points worked at dawn, some in the evening, and some only when it was not raining.

Aarti began writing the time beside each dot as well.

"North of peepal tree—6–7 a.m."

"Channel culvert—5–9 a.m., after 5 p.m."

"School roof—sometimes."

"Beneath the Fully Digital signboard—zero."

She had written this last line as a joke.

But the teacher did not strike it out.

Meanwhile, a "Digital Assistance Corner" was set up in the community hall.

A table, a chair, an old computer, and a small network device were placed there.

A sheet of paper was pasted on the door: "All digital services here."

Ten people came on the first day.

The computer started.

The network did not.

The assistant, Ramesh, watched the device's light for half an hour.

The green light blinked once, then turned red.

Ramesh said, "Give it a little time."

An hour later, the people went home.

The next day, Ramesh placed the network device on the window.

On the third day, he tied it high on a piece of bamboo.

On the fourth day, he himself climbed onto the roof carrying the device.

The network came for two minutes.

One application opened, but could not be submitted.

On the fifth day, Ramesh told those ten people, "If the work is urgent, come to Network Ghat."

People laughed.

The community hall's "Digital Assistance Corner" remained indoors; the digital assistance moved to the culvert over the channel.

Ramesh made a cloth bag.

In it he kept the network device, a small power bank, two wires, and a sheet of plastic.

People with urgent work gathered at Network Ghat in the morning.

Some brought their own mobile phones, some brought papers, and some came only to receive a one-time password on an elderly father's phone.

Ramesh took no pride in this arrangement.

Nor was he ashamed of it.

He merely said, "Where there is a network, there the work gets done."

Aarti's map was hung on the wall of the community hall.

It was Ramesh, not the teacher, who hung it there.

He used the red dots.

Whenever Network Ghat failed, he looked at the map and searched for another place.

One day, two officials from outside came to the village.

They were there to inspect its "Fully Digital" status.

Seeing the signboard at the village entrance, one official said, "The signboard has been maintained well."

The other looked at its solar light.

"Does it stay on at night too?"

The mukhiya said, "Every night."

The officials were pleased.

When they reached the community hall, Ramesh switched on the computer.

Red light.

He placed the network device on the window.

Nothing.

One official asked, "How many services are handled here?"

Ramesh showed him the register.

The register recorded the date, the work, and its status.

The official asked, "Digital records?"

Ramesh said, "When the network opens, I'll show you."

The two officials looked at each other.

Then their eyes fell on Aarti's map on the wall.

"What is this?"

Ramesh said, "Our real network map."

Aarti was at school that day.

She was called.

She came carrying the new copy in her notebook.

The official asked, "Which department made this map?"

Aarti said, "Class Eight."

A faint laugh rose in the room, but the official did not laugh.

He asked, "Why the red dots?"

Aarti explained.

"Here there is a network in the morning. Here in the evening. This place works only in clear weather. I marked this tree point as unusable."

The official studied the map carefully.

"And zero beneath the signboard?"

"Yes."

"Never?"

"Not once in three months, as far as I have seen."

The mukhiya shifted slightly in his chair.

One official walked outside, all the way to the signboard.

Everyone followed.

Evening was falling.

The solar lights came on by themselves.

"Fully Digital Village" shone white again.

The official took out his mobile phone.

There was no network on its screen.

The other official checked his phone as well.

Zero.

Ramesh said softly, "The signboard has a different network here."

The official looked at him.

Ramesh explained, "The signboard's light runs on solar power. It does not need a mobile network."

No one laughed.

The signboard shone so clearly that the faces of everyone standing beneath it looked bright.

No announcement was made that day.

Nor was the signboard taken down.

The officials wrote something in the inspection register and left.

People in the village kept guessing whether a communication tower would now be installed, whether the lines would be changed, or whether another team would come.

For two weeks, nothing happened.

In the third week, a team arrived.

They went around with an instrument for measuring the network.

One by one, they stood at the red dots on Aarti's map.

They spent the most time at Network Ghat.

Returning from school, Aarti saw a man asking for the direction of the red circle drawn on her paper.

She felt pleased, but said nothing.

A month later, work began to improve the network.

Some poles were replaced, and a new small device was installed on the school roof.

The network did not change at once, as if by magic.

First, one bar became steady in the community hall.

Then two.

The crowd at Network Ghat began to thin.

Ramesh's bag began to stay in the cupboard.

But it was not thrown away.

One day at school, the teacher told Aarti, "Now change the old map."

Aarti took a new sheet of paper.

This time, the red dots became fewer.

She drew a green circle over the community hall.

A green circle over the school.

The southern hamlet still had a red dot.

At Network Ghat, she made a mark that was half red and half green.

The teacher asked, "Beneath the signboard?"

Aarti decided to check again in the evening.

After sunset, she went to the western entrance.

The solar lights came on.

White letters shone again on the blue signboard—"Fully Digital Village — Bankatta."

Aarti opened her mobile phone.

One bar appeared.

It remained for ten breaths.

Then it became two.

She wrote in her notebook: "Beneath the signboard—two bars, 6:12 p.m."

Then she looked at the word "Fully."

The southern hamlet was still red on her map.

She did not write "Fully."

At the top of the notebook she wrote only: "New map of the Digital Village—incomplete, until there is a network everywhere."

The signboard, by its own reckoning, kept shining as though complete.

By her own reckoning, Aarti left the map incomplete.

STORY 258

Proof of Poverty

It was at the school that Kamli Devi first learned that poverty, too, required proof.

Meera was studying in Class Nine.

That year the school had started a student assistance fund.

For families with very low incomes, the fund would pay the examination fee and part of the cost of books.

When Meera came home after reading the notice, there was hope in her eyes.

Kamli made leaf plates and, from time to time, also worked as a farm labourer.

When the rains were bad, farm work dwindled.

When the season of wedding feasts arrived, the demand for leaf plates rose.

The household income did not run on paper; it ran on the seasons.

Meera spread the notice before her mother.

"Ma, it says here—we have to submit an economic-status certificate."

Kamli asked, "Where do we get that?"

"From the circle office."

"How much will it cost?"

Meera read it again.

"Fee: zero."

Kamli smiled.

"Then that is good."

The following Tuesday, Kamli gave up half a day's farm work and went with Meera to the office.

A tempo from the village to the market, a bus from the market to the circle office.

After paying both fares, Meera took out the application form.

The employee at the first window said, "The application is in order. Attach a photocopy of the ration card, the first page of the bank passbook, two photographs, and proof of residence."

Kamli asked, "How much is the fee for this?"

The employee said, "Nothing here. The certificate is free of charge."

Outside the office was a photocopy shop.

Meera had four papers photocopied.

The shopkeeper charged twenty rupees.

The photographer asked for sixty rupees.

Kamli untied the knot in the end of her sari.

She counted the money.

Meera watched in silence.

That day they did not have the old residence document with them.

Kamli said, "It must be in the trunk at home."

The two of them went back.

By evening the farm work was already over.

Kamli did not receive that day's wages.

That night Meera opened an old mathematics notebook.

On the back she wrote—

"First day: fare 80. Photocopies 20. Photographs 60. Ma lost half a day's wages."

Kamli saw it.

"What are you writing?"

"An account."

"Of what?"

"Of the certificate."

Kamli laughed.

"But the certificate is free."

Meera closed the notebook.

Two days later they went again.

This time they had the residence paper with them.

The employee said, "Village verification is required. Get the revenue official's signature."

"Where is he?"

"He has gone out into the field today. You may find him tomorrow."

Weariness settled over Kamli's face.

Meera asked, "Do we have to come here again tomorrow?"

"Yes. That is the rule."

They came outside.

As they walked towards the bus stand, Kamli said, "I was supposed to cut five hundred leaves for plates today."

Meera said nothing.

That night a second line was added to the back of the notebook—

"Second day: fare 80. Ma lost one day's leaf-plate work. Papers not submitted."

For the third journey Meera insisted on going alone.

Kamli refused.

"You will miss school."

"And you keep missing work."

Kamli did not answer.

On the third visit they found the revenue official.

He looked at the papers.

"I will have to see the condition of the house."

Kamli said, "Now?"

"Not today. I will be making field visits this week. Stay at home."

"When?"

"The day is not fixed. I will let you know by mobile phone."

Kamli had a basic mobile phone, whose network often disappeared in the village.

She gave him the number of her neighbour Ramdulari.

For four days Kamli did not take work in distant fields.

"The inspector may come," she kept saying.

No one came the first day.

Nor the second.

At noon on the third day Ramdulari came running.

"Kamli! The man from the office is asking for you near the pond."

Kamli left the leaf plates and ran.

The revenue official inspected the house.

Mud walls, a tin roof, two cots, one trunk, bundles of leaf plates.

He asked, "Land?"

"Five dhurs behind the house."

"Cattle?"

"None."

"Income?"

Kamli thought for a few moments.

"If I get a day's work, wages. If I get leaves, leaf plates."

The official wrote something on the form.

Meera saw that a figure was being entered in one box for monthly income.

She asked, "How did you arrive at that figure?"

The official said, "Average."

"Average of what?"

"Work like this."

Kamli looked at her daughter.

Meera fell silent.

The inspection ended.

The official said, "Now come and collect the certificate after three days."

Kamli asked, "Any money to pay here?"

"No. Everything is free."

He left.

Meera wrote on the back of the notebook—

"Did not take distant work for four days because of the inspection. Inspection: half an hour."

After reading it, Kamli said, "Do not write half an hour. Write four days."

Meera looked at her mother's face.

"But you made leaf plates at home."

"I made leaf plates, but I gave up two days' farm work. Write that too."

For the first time, Meera handed the notebook to her mother.

With her finger Kamli drew two short lines in the empty margin of the page.

"These are the two days."

Meera wrote the words beside them.

Three days later the certificate was not ready.

The employee had signed it, but the officer who had to stamp it had gone to a meeting.

"Come tomorrow," they were told at the window.

This time Kamli asked nothing.

She came outside and sat down beside a pillar of the veranda.

Meera sat down too.

The two ate the flattened rice they had brought with them.

Kamli said, "How much school fee will this save?"

After Meera told her the amount, she opened the notebook.

By then, the cash expense had reached nearly a third of the assistance amount.

If lost wages were added, it was more than half.

For the next journey, there was not enough fare left in the knot of Kamli's sari.

She borrowed a hundred rupees from Ramdulari.

Meera wrote that down in the notebook too.

Kamli did not snatch the notebook away.

She only said, "Do not stop counting."

The next day the officer was there.

The stamp was affixed.

The certificate came into Kamli's hands.

Across the top, in bold letters, it said: "Economic-Status Certificate."

Below, one line read: "Issue fee: 0."

Kamli placed her finger on that zero.

Meera looked at her mother's face.

Kamli did not smile.

"The paper is not lying," she said.

Meera asked, "Then?"

"The paper states its own cost. Not ours."

When they reached the school, it was the last day for submitting assistance applications.

The clerk counted the papers.

"Certificate—yes. Bank passbook—yes. Photograph—yes. Signature—yes."

He accepted the application.

Meera asked, "Should I submit this notebook?"

The clerk looked startled.

"What notebook?"

Meera opened the pages at the back.

"The cost of getting the certificate made."

The clerk smiled.

"That is not required."

"But all this money was spent to prove poverty."

"It is not in the rules."

Meera closed the notebook.

The assistance committee met at the end of the week.

The headmaster, two teachers, and the member overseeing the fund were examining the applications.

Meera sat outside on the veranda.

Kamli had gone to the market carrying bundles of leaf plates.

Meera was called inside.

The headmaster asked, "Why did it take so long for your certificate to be made?"

Meera answered, "It was free."

For a few moments everyone looked at her face.

The headmaster asked again, "I asked why it was delayed."

Meera opened the notebook.

She read aloud everything she had written, from the first journey to the last.

Fare.

Photocopies.

Photographs.

The half-day lost.

Two days of farm work lost.

Waiting for the inspection.

Another journey for the stamp.

The teachers sitting in the room fell silent.

One member said, "But there was no fee for the certificate."

Meera showed them the zero on the certificate.

"There is a zero here."

Then she showed them the notebook page.

"There is no zero here."

No one answered at once.

The headmaster read the papers again.

The assistance was approved.

When Meera came home, Kamli had already returned from the market.

She put the certificate and the approval slip together in the same blue file pouch.

In the rear pocket of the pouch still lay the slip from the photocopy shop, the photographer's small receipt, and two torn bus tickets.

Kamli started to take them out and throw them away.

Meera stopped her.

"Let them stay."

"Why?"

"All of this is behind the zero on the paper."

Kamli put the tickets back inside.

A month later the school prepared the assistance notice for the next session.

The rule had not changed.

The economic-status certificate was still compulsory.

But the school added a new arrangement.

It would check the papers of applicant families at the school in a single day, send them to the circle office in a group, and have the verification day fixed in advance.

The headmaster said, "We cannot remove the certificate. We can reduce some of the running around."

Meera heard him.

The sentence did not seem like a complete solution to her.

But for the first time, the pages at the back of her notebook had found a place in an official process.

The following year, their neighbour Sunita considered applying for assistance for her son.

She came to Kamli.

"Sister, how much money does it take to get proof of poverty made?"

Kamli took out the blue file pouch.

She opened the certificate.

With her finger she pointed to "Issue fee: 0."

Then she opened the rear pocket of the pouch.

She took out the old receipts, the tickets, and Meera's folded account sheet.

Kamli placed her finger on the zero once more.

"Nothing here."

Then she handed the account sheet to Sunita.

"Look at the rest here."

Sunita read through it slowly.

Her eyes stopped on the last line—"Ma's four days."

Kamli said nothing.

A heap of leaf plates lay in the courtyard. Meera's certificate was still clean, flat, and free of charge. The days spent making it had remained folded behind the paper.

STORY 259

The Silent Committee

A new wooden box had been hung on the veranda of the Sonbarsa Sewing Cooperative Centre.

In white paint on the box were the words—"Complaint Box."

Below, in smaller letters—"Your matter will be kept confidential."

Eighteen women at the centre stitched school uniforms, bags, and pillowcases.

They were paid by the piece.

At the end of each week the bundles were submitted, the number was entered in the register, and payment was then prepared.

Sunita Devi had been sewing there for six years.

Her machine was old, but its stitches ran straight.

Twice she had been praised as the worker with the fewest returns.

In the last week of Phagun she submitted thirty-four girls' shirts.

Her bundle bore her mark: two knots of blue thread.

Everyone could recognize her bundle from a distance by that mark.

On payment day, the slip showed twenty-eight.

Six shirts missing.

Sunita went to the accounts desk.

"I submitted thirty-four."

Pramod Babu, who handled the accounts, turned the pages of the register.

"It says twenty-eight here."

"Was the bundle opened?"

"There is an inspection."

"Where did the other six go?"

Pramod Babu shrugged.

"If the register says twenty-eight, then twenty-eight must have been received."

Sunita took out her little notebook.

She had been recording the figures ever since she began the work.

How much cloth she received, how many shirts she made, how much thread remained—everything.

"Thirty-four on this date."

Pramod Babu looked at the notebook, then at the register.

"I cannot prepare your payment on the basis of a notebook you keep at home."

"Then what about my six shirts?"

"A complaints committee has been formed. Put it in writing and drop it in the box."

The box had been hung there a month earlier.

On the day it was inaugurated, the chairman of the centre had said, "No one's voice will be suppressed now."

For the first time, Sunita looked closely at the slot in the box.

The slot was so narrow that the folded paper had to be folded twice again.

That night she wrote out her complaint at home.

"On Phagun 23 I submitted thirty-four shirts. Payment was made for twenty-eight. I want an account of the remaining six shirts."

She wrote her name beneath it.

Hesitating all the while, she dropped it into the box the next morning.

Three days later she was summoned before the committee.

There were five people on the committee.

Chairman—the cooperative centre's vice-chairman, Harinandan Jha.

Secretary—accounts assistant Rita Kumari.

Two women members—Phulmaya Devi and Nasima Khatoon.

One outside member—retired teacher Badrinath Mishra.

There was a round table in the middle of the room.

Her complaint lay face down on the table.

Harinandan Jha said in a gentle voice,

"First understand one thing. Until the inquiry is complete, you must not discuss this matter with anyone outside."

Sunita asked,

"Why?"

"For confidentiality."

"It is fine if my complaint remains confidential. But I am not even to ask anyone anything?"

Rita Kumari said,

"The fewer people who know, the more impartial the inquiry will be."

Badrinath Mishra added,

"If word spreads, the centre's reputation may also suffer."

Sunita kept looking at the paper lying face down on the table.

"What am I supposed to do?"

Harinandan Jha said,

"Remain silent. The committee will look into it."

The sentence was short.

But it left the room with Sunita.

The next week Rukhsana came to borrow the belt from Sunita's machine.

As Sunita handed it over, Rukhsana said,

"Didi, did you get the right payment?"

Sunita's hand stopped.

"Why?"

Rukhsana smiled and tried to brush the matter aside.

"I was just asking."

Sunita remembered the committee.

"It was fine."

She lied.

Two days later Manju Devi said,

"The register is strange this time."

Threading her machine, Sunita asked,

"What happened?"

Manju said only,

"Nothing."

The two women looked at each other.

Then the machines started up again.

A week passed.

The committee summoned her again.

Rita Kumari said,

"The receipt register says twenty-eight. The stock register also says twenty-eight."

Sunita asked,

"Who counted the bundle when I submitted it?"

"Two employees."

"Have you asked them?"

"They are being questioned."

"My bundle had two knots of blue thread on it."

Harinandan Jha said,

"That mark is not official."

"The shirts were official."

For a moment the room fell silent.

Badrinath Mishra cleared his throat.

"Please be patient."

"And outside?"

Harinandan Jha said,

"Until the inquiry is over, it would be proper to remain silent."

Sunita returned to work.

That day, in the payment queue, Rukhsana stood for a long time looking at her slip.

Manju folded her slip and tucked it inside her blouse.

Kusum switched off her machine and went straight home.

Sunita saw everything.

She asked no one anything.

The centre's work went on as usual.

The rattle of machines, the snap of scissors, the hiss of the iron, the smell of cloth.

From time to time, the wood of the complaint box gleamed, warmed by the sun.

Three weeks later, one evening, the committee secretary Rita was opening the box.

The rule was that the box had to be opened in the presence of two members.

That day Phulmaya Devi was with her.

Five slips of paper came out of the box.

Rita wrote a serial number on each paper in turn and placed it in an envelope.

Phulmaya asked,

"Won't you write the subject?"

"The rule is to keep the name confidential."

"The name is one thing. The subject?"

Rita paused.

Under the old procedure, only the serial number was written on the outside of the envelope.

"If we write the subject, the person's identity may be revealed."

Phulmaya said,

"Then five complaints will remain five sealed envelopes. How will anyone know that three concern the same thing?"

Rita did not answer.

At the committee's next meeting, all five envelopes were placed on the table.

The first was opened.

Four pieces short in the wages.

The second.

The number submitted and the number paid for did not match.

The third.

Seven bags treated as missing.

The fourth.

An incorrect deduction for thread.

The fifth.

Payment delayed by two weeks.

Phulmaya Devi set the first three papers apart on the table.

"These three are the same kind of complaint."

Rita Kumari pulled the register towards her.

The three complaints were from different weeks.

On all three submission days, the same team of employees had been on duty.

Harinandan Jha said,

"This could also be a coincidence."

Phulmaya said,

"It could. But the three people did not even speak to one another."

Badrinath Mishra removed his glasses.

"Why?"

The room fell silent again.

Rita said softly,

"We advise everyone to remain silent."

Harinandan Jha immediately said,

"For the impartiality of the inquiry."

Phulmaya asked,

"Has that produced impartiality, or separate patches of darkness?"

No one answered.

That evening Sunita was summoned for the third time.

This time Rukhsana and Manju were also seated before the committee.

The three women looked at one another.

Rukhsana spoke first,

"You too?"

Sunita looked at the committee.

Harinandan Jha said,

"Now all of you may share the facts."

Sunita gave a faint laugh.

"Now?"

Rita Kumari lowered her head.

All three opened their notebooks.

Sunita's thirty-four had become twenty-eight.

Rukhsana's forty-two had become thirty-seven.

Manju's thirty had become twenty-five.

Three different days.

But the same team of employees had written the receipt register.

Rukhsana said,

"I had wanted to ask Sunita Didi. Then the committee told me—not to discuss it with anyone."

Manju said,

"Me too."

Sunita asked,

"So the three of us stayed separately silent for three weeks. What was the committee listening to?"

Badrinath Mishra had a pen in his hand.

He stopped writing.

Phulmaya Devi said,

"The committee was listening to papers. People were not listening to one another."

The nature of the inquiry changed.

The old unfinished bundles in the storeroom were counted again.

In a small room beneath the receiving desk, twenty-two finished articles without names were found.

They had been kept aside for three weeks marked "inspection pending," but their original bundle numbers had not been entered in the register.

Sunita's six shirts with the two knots of blue thread were in that pile.

Rukhsana's five bags bore small loops of red cord.

Manju's five shirts had triangles drawn on them in pencil.

Theft was not proved.

Nor was it immediately proved that the deductions had been made deliberately.

But the procedure was plainly wrong.

Items set aside for inspection were not treated as received in the register, and payment was prepared on that reduced number.

Pramod Babu said,

"It is the old practice. If we find a defect, we keep the item aside."

Sunita asked,

"Do you record the defect?"

"There is no time."

"Do you tell the worker?"

"Later."

"Do you deduct it from the payment?"

Pramod Babu fell silent.

For the first time, the committee did not advise him to remain silent.

A week later, the unpaid wages of all three women were added to their payments.

A new register was created for items kept aside—bundle number, worker's name, number of items, reason for setting them aside, date, and decision.

But Phulmaya Devi made another proposal.

"As important as the complaint box is, it is equally important to be able to see the status of a complaint."

Harinandan Jha said,

"The name must not go outside."

"Not the name. The subject."

Rita Kumari made a white notice board.

It had four columns—serial number, subject, status, and date of next hearing.

There was no column for the name.

The first three lines were entered—

"Wages/receipt count—inquiry complete."

"Wages/receipt count—inquiry complete."

"Wages/receipt count—inquiry complete."

Below them was written—"Confidentiality applies to a person's name; asking questions about facts is not forbidden."

Harinandan Jha kept his eyes on that sentence for a long time.

"This will encourage people to discuss things too much."

Badrinath Mishra said,

"The committee exists to listen. If people do not speak at all, what will it hear?"

The board was hung beside the complaint box. The next month the box was opened again. There were three new complaints. One about leave accounting. One about the cost of repairing a machine. One about a broken fan. Rita read the papers. Phulmaya wrote down the subjects.

Then Rukhsana called from the veranda, "Will the paper from my old complaint still be kept?" Rita said, "Yes. In the file." "And the advice to remain silent?" Rita thought for a moment. "That will not be kept."

Sunita was seated at her machine. A ball of blue thread lay before her. She tied two knots on the new bundle. Manju joked, "Didi, that mark is not official." Sunita laughed. "No. But it can be seen."

The complaint box on the veranda was still closed. It still had a lock. But the subject board beside it was open. People could put papers into the box, read the status of their complaints on the board, and ask one another questions about the facts.

At the committee's next meeting, an elderly worker quietly asked before stating his complaint, "Do I first have to remain silent?" Harinandan Jha opened his mouth to answer. Then stopped. Phulmaya Devi said, "No. First, you speak."

Everyone in the room fell silent. This time the silence was not part of the complainant's role. The committee was listening.

STORY 260

The Ideal Wedding

A red cloth banner had lain folded for five years on the veranda of the old panchayat building in Sarisab.

In white letters it read—"No dowry; we want equality."

The banner did not come out every day.

When the wedding season began, Shashibhushan Jha would spread it out in the sun.

The cloth had faded white along the fold lines.

But the letters were still clear.

Shashibhushan Jha was the coordinator of the "Dowry-Free Marriage Campaign."

He travelled from village to village holding meetings.

Sometimes on a school veranda, sometimes on the platform in front of a temple, sometimes at the market square on market day.

His voice carried far.

"Dowry is not only what is demanded aloud."

He said it again and again.

"A hint, pressure, a list, an expectation in the name of prestige—all of these can become forms of dowry."

People applauded at this sentence.

The line was printed in the campaign's little booklet as well.

On the last page of the booklet were five questions.

"Did the groom's side suggest the name of any item?"

"Was the size or number of gifts discussed?"

"Is there social pressure behind the word 'voluntary'?"

"Is there fear that the marriage may be stopped or that someone may be humiliated?"

"Are both sides equally free?"

Shashibhushan called these five questions "the five lamps."

"Whenever there is confusion, light all five lamps."

People remembered that line too.

That year, when the marriage of Shashibhushan's son Aniruddha was settled, all of Sarisab became curious.

People's first question was not the bride's name.

The first question was—"Let us see how the coordinator conducts a wedding in his own house."

Aniruddha was a bank assistant in Madhubani.

The bride, Mrinalini, taught mathematics at a high school.

The two families already knew each other.

Mrinalini's father, Jagdish Mandal, was a retired headmaster.

The match was settled quickly.

Shashibhushan told everyone,

"A completely simple wedding. The question of dowry will not arise."

People were pleased.

A few suppressed a smile.

Preparations began at home.

The northern room off the courtyard was cleared for Aniruddha.

The old cupboard was taken out.

The ceiling was whitewashed.

The window mesh was replaced.

Shashibhushan's wife, Vimala Devi, said,

"When the new bride comes, the room should be in proper order."

There was no dispute about that.

Two days later, Vimala Devi went to the market with her sister Manjula.

When she returned, she had a notebook in her hand.

On the first page was written—"Aniruddha–Mrinalini Household Arrangements."

Below it were the names of things.

Bed.

Mattress.

Cupboard.

Fan.

Refrigerator.

Mixer.

A small scooter was discussed on a separate page.

There were tick marks beside some of the names.

Others were blank.

Shashibhushan saw the notebook.

His brows drew together.

"What is this?"

Vimala Devi said evenly,

"Things for setting up the household."

"In our house?"

"Their house. The new couple's."

"Who is to provide them?"

"Jagdishji has said that whatever he gives his daughter, he will give of his own accord."

Shashibhushan closed the notebook.

"There will be no list."

Vimala Devi said,

"This is not a list of demands. It is for convenience, so that the same thing is not bought twice."

Manjula laughed.

"You people are afraid of words. This is not dowry; it is customary giving."

Shashibhushan said nothing.

The notebook remained on the table.

The next day Aniruddha came from Madhubani.

He looked at the room.

The smell of fresh whitewash still lingered on the walls.

He saw the notebook on the table.

He turned the pages.

"Scooter?"

His mother said,

"Your old motorcycle keeps breaking down."

"But why is this on the list?"

"We did not ask for it. The subject came up from their side."

Aniruddha looked at Shashibhushan.

Shashibhushan said,

"Nothing has been decided. Remove the notebook."

Vimala Devi picked it up.

But she did not throw it away.

She placed it on the upper shelf in the kitchen.

Shashibhushan's niece Komal also lived in the house.

She was an undergraduate student and often handed out leaflets at campaign meetings.

A few days later she found the notebook on the shelf.

She opened it.

That day a new printing of the campaign booklet had arrived at the house.

Komal placed the two papers together on the table.

On one side, "The Five Lamps."

On the other, "Household Arrangements."

She said nothing.

Taking a red pen, she drew five small circles beside the list.

Inside the first circle she wrote—"Were names of items suggested?"

In the second—"Number/size?"

In the third—"Voluntary?"

In the fourth—"Prestige?"

In the fifth—"Are both sides equally free?"

Then she put the notebook back on the shelf.

In the evening Vimala Devi took it down.

The moment she saw the red circles, she called out,

"Komal!"

Komal came in from the veranda.

"Did you do this?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I applied Kaka's five lamps."

Manjula was sitting there too.

She burst out laughing.

"Will there be a meeting inside the house now as well?"

Komal did not answer.

Shashibhushan came in from outside.

Vimala placed the notebook before him.

"Look at your pupil."

Shashibhushan read the red circles.

His hand came to rest on the first page.

Komal asked,

"Kaka, are these five questions only for other people's houses?"

Shashibhushan said,

"No."

"Then do they apply to this list?"

"They do."

"What are the answers?"

Shashibhushan did not answer at once.

After dinner that night, there was a small meeting in the house.

Aniruddha, Vimala, Shashibhushan, Komal, Manjula.

The notebook lay in the middle.

Shashibhushan read the first question.

"Did the groom's side suggest the name of any item?"

Vimala said,

"I did not say anything directly."

Komal asked,

"Then where did the names come from?"

Vimala said,

"In the course of conversation. Jagdishji asked—what does the room need?"

"And what did you say?"

"We talked about the old bed, the small refrigerator—things like that."

Shashibhushan read the second question.

"Was the size or number of gifts discussed?"

Manjula said,

"That naturally happens when a household is being set up."

Komal said nothing.

Shashibhushan read the third question.

"Is there social pressure behind the word 'voluntary'?"

This time the room fell silent.

Aniruddha said softly,

"Mrinalini told me that her father says, 'Your family will not take dowry, but my daughter cannot go empty-handed.'"

Shashibhushan raised his head.

"Why did you not tell us earlier?"

"I thought it was a matter for their family."

Komal said,

"Who decides how empty an empty hand is?"

No one answered.

The following Sunday there was a campaign meeting.

The subject was—"The Difference Between Voluntary Giving and Pressure."

The topic had been fixed two weeks earlier.

Even if he wished to, Shashibhushan could not change it.

The meeting was held at the panchayat building.

The red banner was spread out again.

The booklets lay on the table in front.

Shashibhushan began speaking in his usual way.

"Dowry is not merely the name of cash or goods..."

At that sentence his eyes fell on Komal in the front row.

The same notebook was in Komal's bag.

Komal did not take it out.

Shashibhushan's voice faltered for a moment.

Then he completed the speech.

After the meeting three young men surrounded him and said,

"Babu, your son's wedding will become an example."

Shashibhushan smiled faintly.

"Before making an example of it, we must examine the accounts of our own house."

People took this for modesty.

Shashibhushan knew the answer was only half the truth.

Two days later Jagdish Mandal came to the house.

He carried a box of sweets.

They discussed the wedding date.

Then Vimala said gently,

"We are not asking for anything. Whatever you give your daughter is entirely your wish."

Jagdishji breathed a sigh of relief.

"That speaks of your values."

At that moment Shashibhushan asked,

"Jagdishji, what if you give nothing at all?"

Jagdishji was startled.

"Nothing at all?"

"Yes. Clothes and jewellery, whatever your daughter wants for herself. But household goods, a vehicle—nothing."

Jagdishji said at once,

"How can that be? What will people say?"

Shashibhushan remained silent for a few moments.

Then he asked,

"Is fear of what people will say voluntary choice?"

Jagdishji kept looking at his face.

"I understand what you are saying. But am I not to give my daughter anything?"

Aniruddha, who was standing at the doorway, said,

"Babuji, whatever Mrinalini wants for herself is hers. We will meet the needs of our home together."

Jagdishji's eyes went to Aniruddha.

"The refrigerator?"

Aniruddha laughed.

"The old one still works."

"The scooter?"

"The bus works."

No one laughed.

Jagdishji did not open the box of sweets.

After a long time he said,

"I am afraid people will say—the schoolmaster gave his daughter nothing."

Shashibhushan said softly,

"I too was afraid people would say—the coordinator's son has an empty room."

The two older men looked at each other.

This time the conversation was less about the definition of dowry than about their own fears.

The date was fixed.

But the notebook was not finished with.

Vimala did not tear it up.

She said,

"A household will still need things to run."

Komal replied,

"Then make an account in which each pays half."

Vimala was annoyed.

"A marriage is not arithmetic in a textbook."

For the first time, Mrinalini joined the discussion directly.

She said to Aniruddha on the phone,

"Even half-and-half is not necessary. Each according to what they can afford. But the list must not go to my father's house."

Aniruddha asked,

"Will it stay in our house?"

"Yes. Our list. Not a condition of marriage."

Aniruddha bought a new notebook.

On the first page he wrote—"Expenses After the Wedding."

Below it he made three columns.

"Needed now."

"Later."

"Not needed."

The bed from the old list went under "Needed now."

The refrigerator under "Later."

The mixer under "Later."

The scooter under "Not needed."

Beside "cupboard," Mrinalini wrote—"There is an old one in the house; we will manage with that first."

Vimala looked at the notebook.

"You will buy all this after the wedding?"

Aniruddha said,

"Yes. When we have the money."

Vimala said,

"People will see the new bride in an empty room."

Mrinalini smiled.

"The room will not be empty. I will be there."

Vimala did not answer.

A week before the wedding, the campaign members decided that a plaque reading "Dowry-Free Marriage" should be presented at the ceremony.

Aniruddha and Mrinalini were the first names proposed.

Shashibhushan stopped them at once.

"No plaque."

His colleague Ramvilas asked,

"Why? This is a matter of pride for our campaign."

Shashibhushan said,

"A wedding is to take place, not an examination."

"But people will be inspired."

"First we must get the meaning of our own words right."

Ramvilas laughed.

"You are becoming very strict."

Shashibhushan replied,

"I became strict too late."

On the wedding day, the campaign's red banner was not put up at the gate of the house.

Shashibhushan did not want the wedding to become a display for the campaign.

The wedding pavilion was simple.

Jagdishji gave his daughter clothes, books, and an old brass plate from her maternal home.

Mrinalini had chosen the plate herself.

No other large item arrived.

Some guests whispered.

"Masterji gave nothing?"

Someone said,

"Because he was afraid of the coordinator."

Another said,

"No, it is a matter of principle."

The truth lay somewhere between the two remarks.

Jagdishji heard the whispering.

His face tightened slightly.

Mrinalini squeezed his hand.

"Babu, I wanted the plate."

Jagdishji nodded.

Three days after the wedding, Vimala took out the old "Household Arrangements" notebook again.

A few pages were blank.

The five red circles were still there.

She placed the notebook before Shashibhushan and said,

"Shall I throw it away?"

Shashibhushan said,

"No."

"Then?"

"I will keep it in the campaign file."

Vimala was surprised.

"Our household notebook?"

"Precisely because it is from our house."

"Will people read it?"

"Not the names. But the example will remain."

Komal was there.

She asked,

"What will you write?"

Shashibhushan thought for a long time.

Then, on a blank page of the new edition of the booklet, he wrote—

"Pressure does not disappear simply because a demand is renamed 'customary giving,' 'gift,' 'setting up a household,' or 'voluntary.' Apply the five questions to your own home as well."

Komal read it.

"Will this line be printed?"

"Yes."

"In whose name?"

Shashibhushan smiled.

"In the campaign's name. The mistake is not mine alone; it belongs to the custom. But I will write down my own part in it."

The next month the new booklet was printed.

On the first page was the old slogan—"No dowry; we want equality."

On the last page, the five lamps remained just as they were.

But a new line had been added below them—

"Ask these five questions first in your own home."

At a meeting, when Shashibhushan came to this line, a young man asked with a laugh,

"Coordinatorji, why this new rule?"

Shashibhushan looked toward the old notebook lying at the corner of the stage.

The notebook was closed.

Inside it, the red circles were safe.

Shashibhushan said,

"Because it is easy to speak of principles from a stage. At home, the things covered by those principles acquire different names."

The gathering fell silent.

He went on,

"And changing the name does not change the nature of a demand."

This time the applause did not come at once.

Some people kept looking down at their feet.

Then an elderly woman in the back row began to clap softly.

A few hands joined in.

Shashibhushan did not smile.

More than the applause, he remembered the moment when he had seen five red circles on the notebook from his own house.

A few months later, a new bed arrived in Aniruddha and Mrinalini's room.

The two of them had bought it with their own money.

The refrigerator was still old. No scooter came. The brass plate was on a shelf in the kitchen. From time to time Vimala took it down and polished it.

One day Komal joked, "Kaki, is this dowry?" Wiping the plate with a cloth, Vimala said, "No. It is the old plate Mrinalini chose."

Komal asked again, "The five lamps?" Vimala paused for a moment. Then she said, "Light all five. Then we can say." On the veranda, Shashibhushan heard this answer. He said nothing.

The campaign's red banner was drying in the sun on the wall. The old fold lines were still visible on it. But this time, before folding it, Shashibhushan placed the booklet containing the five questions inside. The banner and the booklet were folded together. For the first time, the slogan of the stage and the questions of the home lay within the same fold.

STORY 261

Everyone's Opinion

A strip of red cloth had hung on the veranda of Sonbarsa's panchayat building for a year and a half.

In white letters it read, "Open Discussion Meeting."

Below it, in smaller letters, was another sentence: "We all think independently."

The right corner of the strip had curled a little in the rain, but the sentence remained clear.

In the village, a meeting was held on this veranda on the evening of the second Sunday of every month.

Sometimes the talk was about tap water, sometimes about the market day, sometimes about the crowd near the school gate.

Shyamsundar Babu opened the meeting.

He was fifty-five, loud-voiced, and quick to fashion a sentence on any subject.

One sentence of his had almost become a proverb in the village: "We all think independently."

He would say it, and the people seated before him would nod.

The first time, someone had said, "Quite right."

The second time, two people had said together, "We all think independently."

After that, the reply became customary.

Shyamsundar Babu would say the sentence.

From row after row came the response: "We all think independently."

Sometimes someone arrived late, and then his neighbour would nudge him with an elbow and say, "Say it."

He too would say, "We all think independently."

Sudhanshu kept the meeting register.

Sudhanshu wrote in a neat hand, recording the date, the subject, the names of those present, the proposals, everything.

At the beginning of the register entry he invariably wrote one line: "The meeting was held in an atmosphere of complete freedom of thought."

No one questioned this line.

There seemed no need to question it.

For on the next page of the register were the signatures of everyone present.

One Sunday the subject was whether the weekly market should remain on Wednesday or be shifted to Friday.

Fewer buses ran on Wednesday, but more farm labourers were paid on Friday.

The shopkeepers were divided into two groups.

The milk sellers looked to the timing of the morning buses.

Some of the women said that when the market was held on Wednesday, in the middle of the school day, the road became crowded.

For some people, the crowd around the time of Friday prayers was a concern.

The matter was not a small one.

The veranda filled up.

Shyamsundar Babu rose.

He looked once at the red strip, then at the people.

"Look," he said, "there is no pressure on anyone here. We all think independently."

From the front row came the immediate reply: "We all think independently."

The second row too said, "We all think independently."

The boys sitting at the back repeated with laughter, "We all think independently."

Within three moments, the whole veranda was filled with the same sentence.

Shyamsundar Babu was pleased.

"That is why our meeting is different from those elsewhere," he said.

Then the discussion about the market day began.

The first speaker said, "Wednesday is the old custom. I see no reason to change it."

The second speaker said, "I think the same."

The third said, "Thinking independently, I say Wednesday is right."

The fourth said, "My independent opinion too is Wednesday."

The fifth speaker rose, thought for a moment, then said, "Since everyone independently says Wednesday, mine is Wednesday too."

Kanak was sitting beside one of the veranda pillars.

She ran the village tailoring shop and had come to the meeting for the first time.

A change in the market day would directly affect her work.

More customers came on Friday; Wednesday gave her time to deliver clothes.

She kept listening.

Eight people spoke in favour of Wednesday.

The first man to rise in favour of Friday said, "I prefer Friday myself, but since everyone says Wednesday, then..."

Before he could finish, someone from the back said, "Say your independent opinion."

People laughed.

The man laughed too, and in the end said, "All right, Wednesday."

Kanak raised her hand.

Shyamsundar Babu saw her.

"Speak, Kanak sister."

"I want Friday."

The veranda did not fall completely silent, but the direction of the sound changed.

A few people looked towards her.

Shyamsundar Babu smiled.

"Very good. That is what freedom means."

Kanak said, "But I will give my reason too."

"Certainly."

"On Friday, customers have their wages in hand. Women buy clothes, oil, salt, medicine, everything that day. When the market is on Wednesday, many people go to another market on Friday."

Sudhanshu wrote in the register: "Kanak Devi—Friday."

He did not write the reason.

Kanak kept looking at his hand.

There was no vote at the end of the meeting.

Shyamsundar Babu said, "The majority in favour of Wednesday is clear."

The register recorded: "After free deliberation, unanimous decision to retain Wednesday."

While signing, Kanak noticed the word "unanimous."

She asked Sudhanshu, "I said Friday. Then how is it unanimous?"

Putting the cap on his pen, Sudhanshu said, "Did you object at the end?"

"I said Friday."

"But you were silent when the decision was made."

Kanak looked at him for a few moments.

"So silence is a vote?"

Sudhanshu laughed. "That is how meetings work."

The next month Kanak came again.

This time the subject was whether the empty space behind the veranda should be used for parking two-wheelers or left for children to play.

Shyamsundar Babu began, "We all..."

Everyone completed it together: "think independently."

This time Kanak did not speak.

She kept watching Sudhanshu's register.

After the meeting she asked, "May I take the register home for a few days?"

Sudhanshu was startled.

"Why?"

"I want to look through it as I look through old account pages in the tailoring shop. I'll return it tomorrow."

At first Sudhanshu refused.

Hearing this, Shyamsundar Babu said, "The register is public. Take it."

That night, after closing the shop, Kanak opened the register.

On the page for the first month, the opening line was: "We all think independently."

The second month too.

The third month too.

After six months, Sudhanshu had begun adding in brackets after this sentence: "Supported by all members present."

On a page from a year later it was written: "Repeated in one voice."

Kanak counted the old pages.

Seventeen meetings.

Seventeen times the same opening.

Then she stopped at one page.

Under the heading "Individual Opinions" were the names of forty-two people.

Beside most names the same sentence had been written: "We all think independently."

In a few places only the order of the words had changed.

At the end Sudhanshu had written: "Total independent opinions—42."

Kanak placed her finger on the sentence and read it many times.

One sentence forty-two times.

Forty-two independent opinions.

The next day she returned the register.

She said nothing.

But a week before the next meeting, Shyamsundar Babu came to her shop.

He had freshly printed invitation leaflets in his hand.

"Kanak sister, distribute these among the people. This time the subject is important."

At the top of the leaflet, in red letters, was written: "Open Discussion Meeting."

Below it: "We all think independently."

Kanak asked, "Was it necessary to print this line?"

Shyamsundar Babu laughed.

"Why, this is the identity of our forum."

"If the discussion is open, why give people the sentence beforehand?"

At first Shyamsundar Babu did not understand the question.

"What do you mean?"

Putting the leaflet before him, Kanak said, "People read this sentence before they come to the meeting. As soon as they enter, you say the same thing again. Then everyone repeats it. In the register it is written—independent opinion."

Shyamsundar Babu's smile faded a little.

"Repeating a sentence and repeating an opinion are not the same thing."

"Right. So this time let us see without the sentence."

"What should we do?"

"Fold the banner and put it away. Strike this line from the invitation. Before the meeting begins, give everyone a small blank slip. Write only the subject. One line for the reason. No need to write a name."

Shyamsundar Babu kept looking towards the pillar.

Kanak said again, "If everyone still writes the same thing, I will accept that the sentence was not at fault."

Shyamsundar Babu picked up the leaflet.

"Shall we conduct an experiment?"

"Not on opinions. On the sentence."

That month the subject of the meeting was whether the village community hall should close at eight at night or remain open until ten.

The young men wanted ten o'clock.

The elders said there was noise late into the night.

The women's self-help group sometimes finished its meetings after eight.

Ramvilas, who looked after the hall, wanted to go home at eight.

There were genuinely different interests involved in the matter.

On the day of the meeting, the red banner was gone.

Only two old nails could be seen on the pillar.

People asked, "Where is the banner?"

Sudhanshu said, "It has gone to be washed."

That was half true.

The banner lay folded in a room at Shyamsundar Babu's house.

As each person entered the veranda, Kanak handed them a small white slip.

At the top it read: "Until what time should the hall remain open? Reason—"

There was no space for a name.

This time Shyamsundar Babu did not say his familiar sentence.

He said only, "First fill in the slips. Then we will talk."

The first five minutes were awkward.

Someone wanted to look at a neighbour's slip.

Kanak said, "Write your own."

Someone asked, "What is the right answer?"

Kanak said, "There is no right answer here."

A few people laughed when they heard this.

The slips were collected.

Sudhanshu began reading them one by one.

"Eight o'clock—the watchman's home is far away."

"Ten o'clock—the boys study here."

"Nine o'clock—a time between the two sides."

"Ten o'clock, but no music."

"Ten on the days the group meets, eight on the other days."

"Not a fixed time; let two people keep keys."

"Change Ramvilas's shift."

"Nine in winter, ten in summer."

Laughter rose in the veranda.

No two slips were exactly alike.

Shyamsundar Babu took the slips from Sudhanshu's hand.

He turned them over and over many times.

"Why did no one say so many different things before?"

A voice came from the back: "Before, you used to say it."

Everyone laughed.

Shyamsundar Babu laughed too, but not at once.

He asked, "What did I use to say?"

Four or five voices rose together: "We all think independently."

The laughter grew louder.

Kanak did not laugh.

She said, "See? The sentence is still ready."

Whether Shyamsundar Babu turned red or merely looked so in the veranda's yellow light, no one could say for certain.

He spread the slips on the table.

"Then today I will not say it. You all speak."

This time the discussion went on for a long while.

Ramvilas said that his home was two kos away, and if he stayed until ten, his evening meal grew cold.

Manoj, one of the young men, said that the hall's light was useful during examination months.

Rekha Devi of the self-help group said that twice a month her group kept accounts until after eight.

In the end a rule was made: nine o'clock on ordinary days; ten during examination months and on announced group-meeting days; and on late days the watchman's shift would be changed.

The decision did not entirely please everyone.

But this time Sudhanshu did not write "unanimous" in the register.

He recorded the three opinions separately.

Below them he wrote the reasons for the decision.

Kanak stood beside him.

"How many independent opinions in all?" she asked softly.

Sudhanshu stopped his pen and looked at her.

Then he wrote in the register: "The opinions were counted; the reasons were recorded separately."

The next month the red banner hung again on the veranda. It had not been washed; the old dust was still on it. But over the smaller sentence below, a narrow strip of white cloth had been sewn. "We all think independently" was covered. Only "Open Discussion Meeting" remained above it.

Shyamsundar Babu rose to begin the meeting. From old habit his mouth opened: "We all..." He stopped. The people on the veranda waited. No one completed the sentence.

Ramvilas, seated at the back, said, "What is today's subject?" For the first time, Shyamsundar Babu looked at the people's faces instead of at the red banner. He said, "First you tell me. What should the subject be?"

Not one voice rose. Many voices did.

STORY 262

Worthy of the Award

On the veranda of the block office, three things were almost always together on Naval Kumar's table—a blue pen, an old stack of carbon paper, and people's incomplete applications.

Naval was not a government employee.

In one corner of the panchayat building, the youth club had given him a table two cubits wide, where he filled out whatever applications people brought—old-age pension, scholarship, seed grant, caste and residence certificates, bank corrections.

Someone would leave five rupees for tea, someone vegetables, someone only say, "May God bless you," and go away.

Naval was not afraid of paperwork.

Where people saw six boxes, he saw six answers.

That was why the village said, "Go to Naval; the paper will find its way."

Saryu Kaka was the exact opposite when it came to paper.

He had an old tool bag made of red cloth.

The bag held two spanners, a cutter, a short length of rope, round leather washers, two or three nuts and bolts, and a thin iron wire.

Whenever a public hand pump in the village began to rattle, its handle came loose, or the water would not rise, someone or other went looking for Saryu Kaka.

If he was in the fields, he came from the fields; if he was at the market, from the market; if he was sitting down to eat, he went after his meal.

He took no wages.

If a part had to be replaced, the villagers pooled the cost.

There was no register.

No receipt.

Saryu Kaka would say, "Whether the pump works or not—that is the account."

One day in Ashadh, a notice arrived at the panchayat building.

The District Public Service Trust had invited applications for the "Jan-Sahara Award."

The notice said: “Continuous community service, solution of local problems, public participation, and lasting impact.”

Not the mukhiya, not the school headmaster, not the panchayat secretary—the first to say it was Ganesh the tea seller: “We should send Saryu Kaka’s name.”

When the suggestion spread, no one objected.

When Saryu Kaka himself heard, he laughed.

“If they give me an award, will the pumps repair themselves?”

Ganesh said, “No, but people will know.”

Lifting his bag, Saryu Kaka said, “People already know that if a pump breaks, they should call me.”

Even so, the people of the panchayat decided to send his name.

And the task of filling out the application naturally came to Naval.

The application ran to six pages.

The first page was simple—name, age, address.

On the second page was the question: “Year in which service began.”

Naval asked, “Kaka, since which year have you been repairing pumps?”

Saryu Kaka scratched his head.

“Since the first green pump was installed in the eastern hamlet.”

“The year?”

“The year Ramcharitar’s elder son was married.”

Naval stopped his pen.

“That answer will not fit in the box.”

The school’s old register was consulted.

The eastern pump had been installed twelve years earlier.

Naval wrote: “12 years.”

The next question: “Estimated number of beneficiaries per year.”

Saryu Kaka said, “Everyone who drinks water from the pumps.”

“How many?”

“Do people who drink water get counted?”

Naval did not laugh.

He counted the houses around the three public pumps, added the schoolchildren, and estimated the number for market days.

In the end he wrote: “Approximately 480 direct beneficiaries.”

Saryu Kaka looked at the page.

“When did so many people ever come to me?”

Naval explained, “Not to you. To the pumps.”

The third page was difficult.

"Innovation."

Naval asked, "What is new in the work you do?"

Saryu Kaka opened the red bag and took out a worn leather washer.

"If you turn old leather over, it lasts another two months. When a new one is not available."

Naval bent to write.

Saryu Kaka added, "But that is not new. My father did it too."

Naval stopped his pen again.

The box could not be left blank.

He wrote: "Low-cost maintenance using locally available materials."

Saryu Kaka could not read it; Naval read it aloud to him.

After a moment Kaka said, "What I do has such a grand name?"

The fourth page asked for "evidence."

Here the difficulty increased.

There was no photograph of Saryu Kaka repairing a pump.

No receipt.

No work order.

Ganesh the tea seller said, "I will testify."

The school cook said, "Take my signature too."

Thirty-two signatures were collected from three hamlets.

Naval found old notes recording the days when the school had been without water.

In shopkeeper Mohan's credit ledger, they found three old entries saying, "Leather for pump—Saryu."

Someone said, "Now the application has become strong."

Naval smiled as he arranged the papers in order.

On the fifth page was a box: "Project Head / Person Responsible."

Below that box it was mandatory to enter a mobile number, email address, and time of availability.

Naval looked at Saryu Kaka.

Kaka had a basic mobile phone, but he was usually in the fields and often did not hear it ring.

He had no email address.

Naval said, "I'll put my name here. If the people doing the verification call, I'll get the message to you."

Saryu Kaka asked, "It is my name that is being sent for the award, isn't it?"

"Yes, Kaka. Think of this as only the contact box."

Naval wrote his own name: "Naval Kumar."

Below it, his own number and email address.

In small print there was a line: "In a team application, this person shall be regarded as the official representative."

Naval read it.

He paused for a moment.

Then he thought—a representative was only a representative; Saryu Kaka's name appeared above as the person doing the work.

The sixth page contained the declaration.

Saryu Kaka did not use a thumb impression; he wrote his own name.

Slowly, he wrote "Saryu."

Naval filled in the date and submitted the application.

Two weeks later, two members of the trust came to the village.

At that time the handle of the pump in the southern hamlet had broken.

Saryu Kaka was there.

They found Naval at the panchayat building.

The verification team asked, "How was the figure of 480 beneficiaries calculated?"

Naval immediately opened the papers.

"Eighty-seven houses around the three pumps, 214 schoolchildren, and a separate average for market days."

"The innovation using local materials?"

Naval showed them the worn leather washer that Saryu Kaka had taken from his bag and left as evidence.

"This is Saryu Kaka's method."

The verifier kept writing.

"And the documentation?"

"I did it."

"Coordination?"

"Me."

"Reporting?"

"Me."

Just then Saryu Kaka arrived.

The sleeves of his kurta were wet.

A rusted spanner was in his hand.

The verifier asked, "What role do you play in the project?"

Saryu Kaka looked at Naval.

Then he said, "When a pump breaks, I repair it."

"And the records?"

"Naval keeps them."

"Beneficiary figures?"

"Naval does those too."

"Reports?"

Saryu Kaka laughed. "I look at the water, not the reports."

The verification team laughed too.

Naval felt vaguely uneasy, though he could not clearly say why.

A month later, a letter arrived.

The village's name had been selected.

The list said: "Jan-Sahara Award: Naval Kumar, Project Head, Kusumpur Community Water Facility Initiative."

At first Naval thought it was a printing error.

He took out the application.

The name was not wrong.

The paper was correct.

"Project Head"—Naval Kumar.

Below it, Saryu Kaka's name appeared in the list of "Field Work Associates."

Naval ran to the panchayat secretary.

The secretary looked through the entire application.

"You filled this in yourself."

"For contact purposes."

"The form treats the representative as the head."

"But the work?"

The secretary shrugged. "The marks for the work are separate; the structure of the application is separate."

The award ceremony was held at the district headquarters.

Saryu Kaka did not go.

"Why leave the pumps and sit there all day?"

Naval said, "Kaka, please come. I'll say on the stage that the work is yours."

"If it has to be said on the stage, why did you fill out the paper?"

Naval had no answer.

At the ceremony, his name was called.

Engraved on the brass-coloured plaque were the words: "For Outstanding Contribution to Community Water Service—Naval Kumar."

Naval went up to the stage.

He accepted the award.

He came to the microphone for a brief speech.

He said, "It is Saryu Kaka who does this work."

Smiling, the host patted his shoulder. "That is the mark of leadership —giving the credit to one's team."

The hall broke into applause.

Naval's next sentence was drowned in the clapping.

When he returned to the village, people congratulated him.

Saryu Kaka turned the brass plaque over in his hands and examined it.

"It is heavy."

"Kaka..."

"What?"

"I'll write to have the name changed."

Saryu Kaka handed the plaque back to him.

"First look at the southern pump. Then look at the name."

The next morning, a child came running to Naval's table.

"Naval Bhaiya, the school pump is not bringing up water."

Naval was about to say automatically, "Call Saryu Kaka."

The child said, "He has gone to the market. Master Sahib said the award was given to you, so you should look at it."

Naval remained silent for a few moments.

Then he picked up Saryu Kaka's red bag, which had been left at the panchayat building the previous evening.

The children gathered around him at the school pump.

Naval worked the handle.

A hollow sound came from inside.

He opened the bag.

Of the two spanners, he did not know which one to use first.

Of the three round leather washers, he did not know which size belonged to this pump.

It had been easy to write "low-cost maintenance using locally available materials" in the award application.

The sentence could not tell him which nut inside the pump was loose.

Saryu Kaka returned at noon.

He saw Naval sitting beside the pump.

He said nothing.

He took the bag.

He opened the handle joint.

He inserted the thin wire.

He drew out a worn pin.

"This has to be replaced."

Naval asked, "How did you know?"

"From the sound."

"How can that be written on paper?"

Saryu Kaka laughed. "Learn to listen first. Write later."

The pump was working again within half an hour.

The children began filling water.

Naval picked up the red bag and walked behind Saryu Kaka.

That evening he wrote to the award trust. Not the whole story. Only one question: "If the person who fills out the application and the person who performs the service are different, on what basis is the name for the award decided?"

Ten days later, the reply came. "The name of the official project head entered in the original application shall be treated as final. There is no provision for changing the name after the result has been announced." Below it was written: "In the next cycle, state the team structure clearly."

Naval read the reply twice. This time he laughed. The paper was saying that the paper was correct.

The Bhadon wind was strong. Applications fluttered on the veranda of the panchayat building. Naval set the brass plaque on the table to hold the papers down.

A few days later, a new notice arrived—nominations for the next Jan-Sahara Award. This time the women of the village wanted to send the name of Sushma Devi, who for five years had been running evening study sessions for the children.

Naval opened the application. The same box was there again: "Project Head / Person Responsible." Beneath it, on the same line, were spaces for name, mobile number, and email address. Sushma Devi had no email address.

Naval stopped his pen and looked outside. In the distance, Saryu Kaka was walking toward the eastern hamlet with the red bag.

Naval wrote in the box: "Sushma Devi." In the space for the mobile number, he wrote his own. Then, on the back page of the application, he added a separate line: "Application filled out by: Naval Kumar; service performed by: Sushma Devi." There was no designated box for that line.

The wind rose again. The brass plaque remained on top of the papers as a weight.

That day, for the first time, the award on Naval's table was not an ornament but a paperweight. And beneath it lay the page on which the

names attached to the work and to the application had been written separately.

STORY 263

The New Rule

It was the first Monday of Agahan.

The gate of the Bhairavpur cooperative seed storehouse opened before sunrise.

One hundred and twenty sacks of wheat seed had been unloaded from a truck during the night.

In the morning mist, the white mouths of the sacks seemed pressed against one another.

Beside the gate hung a large yellow board—"New Rules for Seed Distribution."

The board was old, but the word "New" still shone in thick black paint.

Seventeen rules were written below it.

Rule 1—No entry without a queue token.

Rule 2—One person from each family.

Rule 3—Wait behind the yellow line.

Rule 4—Do not bring empty sacks inside.

Rule 5—Do not bring children with you.

Rule 6—Do not hand your queue token to another person.

The list went on like this up to seventeen.

Neelima Kumari, the new assistant clerk, was reading the whole board for the first time.

She had been posted to this centre three days earlier.

Bhola Paswan, the storehouse's old attendant, said as he swept, "If you read them all, the time for distributing seed will be over."

Neelima laughed. "How did so many rules get made?"

Bhola rested his chin on the broom handle.

"One for every incident."

"The first incident?"

Before Bhola could answer, the crowd at the gate grew.

Ramphal Mandal arrived with the first queue token.

Behind him stood Phulkumari Devi, and behind her, Jaynarayan Yadav.

Everyone took their place by the yellow line.

At eight o'clock, Secretary Harinarayan Jha arrived.

He ran a hand over the board to wipe away the dust, opened the lock, and said, "Order runs on rules."

The entrance to the storehouse was four cubits wide.

But an old iron cupboard stood on the right in such a way that it blocked almost half the doorway.

One door of the cupboard did not close properly.

Its brass-coloured handle stuck out by about a finger and a half.

Ramphal went inside.

As a labourer lifted a sack of seed, he settled it under Ramphal's arm.

While turning, Ramphal's sack caught on the cupboard handle.

The sack tore.

Wheat seed spilled across the floor in a stream.

Ramphal tried to hold the sack together.

The people behind him moved forward.

The doorway became jammed.

The secretary called out sharply, "Move back! Haven't you read Rule Three?"

Phulkumari said, "The line is outside. The jam is inside."

Harinarayan Babu looked at her, then at the torn sack.

"From now on, lift the sack under your arm and go straight out. Do not drag it."

Neelima said, "That has become a new rule."

"Yes. Write it down—Rule Eighteen."

Neelima looked toward the cupboard.

"What if the cupboard were moved?"

The secretary's face took on the look of someone being asked about something very far away.

"It is entered in the asset register."

"If it is entered there, can it not be moved?"

"There is a procedure for changing its location."

Gathering the seed that had spilled on the floor, Ramphal said, "In which register is the procedure for my torn sack?"

A few people laughed.

Harinarayan Babu did not.

Neelima wrote down Rule Eighteen, but did not pin the paper to the board.

Ten minutes later, there was another complication.

Phulkumari Devi's queue token bore her husband's name.

Rule Two said—one person from each family.

But Rule Seven said—"The holder of the queue token must be present in person."

Phulkumari said, "The token is in the name of the holding. The land belongs to both of us."

The secretary opened the register.

"The seed goes to the person whose name is written here."

"He has a fever."

"Then write an application."

"The seed is being distributed today. When will the application be considered?"

The secretary thought for a moment.

"All right. There will be a separate declaration form for a family member."

Neelima asked, "Rule Nineteen?"

Harinarayan Babu said, "Write it down. Decisions made in a crowd are not remembered."

By noon, Rule Twenty had also been created.

The reason was that an elderly farmer could not see the yellow line.

Rule Twenty—"If the yellow line has faded, people shall keep a distance of two cubits on their own."

Bhola Paswan said softly to Neelima, "We'll paint the line again tomorrow."

Neelima asked, "Then Rule Twenty?"

Bhola smiled. "The paint will dry. The rule will remain."

By evening, not even half the distribution had been completed.

People kept reading the rules on the board, showing their queue tokens, filling out declaration forms, and turning one by one at the doorway as they went in and out.

The cupboard stood silently in its place.

Corners of old papers were stuck to its door.

Neelima looked more closely.

They were old copies of rules.

One bore the words "Rule 11," another "Temporary Arrangement," another "With Immediate Effect."

When the centre opened the next day, Harinarayan Babu brought new yellow paper.

"Write Eighteen through Twenty neatly."

Neelima asked, "Where is the original paper for the first seventeen?"

"It must be in the cupboard."

"The key?"

The secretary felt through his pockets.

Three keys came out.

The first did not fit.

The second turned halfway.

The third opened the cupboard.

There were fewer files inside than expected.

On the top shelf were five old books of queue tokens.

On the second was a dried stamp pad.

Below lay a bundle labelled "Orders Concerning Distribution Arrangements."

More than half the cupboard was empty.

Neelima opened the bundle.

The oldest sheet was eight years old.

Its heading read—"Temporary Arrangement."

Below it was written—"During roof repairs, the records cupboard shall be placed temporarily on the right side of the entrance doorway."

Neelima read it again.

"During roof repairs."

Bhola spoke from behind her. "That roof was repaired seven years ago."

Harinarayan Babu took the sheet in his hand.

"Why wasn't the cupboard moved back?"

Bhola shrugged.

"The secretary was someone else then. The repairs were completed. The next day there was seed distribution. There was a crowd. It was said—distribution first, cupboard later."

Neelima pulled out the second sheet from the bundle.

It contained the decision from the meeting held that day—"To reduce crowding at the doorway, only one person shall enter at a time."

That Rule Eight had by now become Rule Four on the present board.

The third sheet was from the following year.

"To make the order of entry clear, a yellow line shall be painted."

The fourth sheet—"One person from each family."

The fifth—"No empty sacks inside."

Neelima kept laying the sheets on the floor in order.

Eight years of rules spread across the floor like a thin river.

Every one of them had begun at the same doorway.

Not one sheet contained a decision to move the cupboard.

Neelima picked up the first sheet again.

"Temporarily."

Harinarayan Babu said, "Then it ought to be moved."

Bhola immediately said, "The asset register."

The secretary fell silent.

Neelima did not laugh.

She opened the asset register.

Cupboard Number 17.

In the location box it read—"Main room, right wall."

The main room was indeed on the right side of the doorway.

"The register is not wrong," Harinarayan Babu said.

Neelima asked, "The right wall is four cubits long. Why is the cupboard here in the doorway?"

They all went inside.

The rear part of the right wall was empty.

The cupboard could easily fit there.

But an old wooden plank lay on the floor.

Bhola moved the plank.

Beneath it, black letters showed through the whitewash—"Cupboard 17."

A rectangle had been marked around it.

Neelima bent her knees and examined the mark.

"This was its original place."

Bhola scratched his head.

"Yes. When the roof leaked, it was moved from here."

Harinarayan Babu looked in turn at the doorway, the cupboard, the rules spread across the floor, and the old rectangle.

"So twenty rules were made in seven years?"

Bhola said, "Twenty are written now. Two rules were removed in between as well."

The secretary stared at him.

"Why didn't you say this earlier?"

Bhola replied calmly, "No one asked. Every time, they asked about the rule."

Distribution was not stopped that day.

But at one in the afternoon, the secretary called three committee members.

The subject was—"Change of Location of Cupboard Number 17."

As soon as the meeting began, one member said, "This requires a written procedure."

Neelima pushed a sheet of paper forward.

"Make the procedure. But first look at the cupboard."

Everyone went to the doorway.

Ramphal had come again to collect seed; half a sack was still due to him to make up for yesterday's torn bag.

He pointed at the cupboard.

"My sack tore here."

Phulkumari was there as well.

"My form was made here."

The elderly farmer stood on the yellow line.

"I got Rule Twenty."

The committee members looked at one another.

Neelima brought a measuring tape.

The doorway measured four cubits and two fingers.

The cupboard occupied nearly two cubits of it.

The clear passage was less than two cubits wide.

"The rules kept managing the crowd," Neelima said, "but the crowd kept passing through half a doorway."

One member said, "The cupboard is heavy."

Bhola said, "Four men can lift it."

"The files inside?"

"Half empty."

"The asset register?"

Neelima opened the register. "Main room, right wall. The rear wall is also in the main room."

For a few moments, no one had a new rule.

Four labourers were called.

The cupboard was lifted.

Beneath its feet remained four black square marks from seven years of dust.

The cupboard was placed against the rear wall, inside its old rectangle on the whitewash.

The doorway suddenly began to look wide.

Bhola carried a sack under his arm from outside to inside, turned, and came back out without twisting his body.

Ramphal said, "What number is this rule?"

This time Harinarayan Babu laughed.

"No number."

The next morning, the yellow board was back at the doorway.

The twenty rules were still written on it.

People stood in line.

But the movement in and out had changed.

Two people could now pass each other side by side.

Sacks no longer caught on the cupboard.

Before a crowd could gather at the yellow line, the queue kept moving forward.

By noon, twice as much seed as the previous day had been distributed.

The paper for Rule Eighteen lay on Neelima's desk.

So did Rule Nineteen.

So did Rule Twenty.

In the evening, the committee met again.

Harinarayan Babu said, "The board needs to be revised."

One member proposed, "Cross out the rules that are no longer necessary."

Another said, "Crossed-out rules will cause disputes later. Make a new list."

A third pulled a sheet toward himself and began writing the heading —"Revised New Rules."

Neelima did not stop his hand.

She merely placed the first sheet, eight years old, in front of him.

"During roof repairs... temporarily."

For a while, the room was quiet.

Harinarayan Babu picked up his pen.

"Add one thing."

Neelima asked, "Another rule?"

"No. One question before writing a rule."

Above the board, just before "New Rules for Seed Distribution," he wrote one line—

"What is the root difficulty?"

A committee member said, "That too has become rather like a rule."

Harinarayan Babu thought for a moment.

Then he set back on the table the pen he had lifted to write "Rule 21."

"No number."

Bhola laughed from behind them.

"If you give it a number, people will start obeying instead of answering."

The following week was the final day of seed distribution.

The board was still there.

Of the twenty rules, some had red lines drawn through them, some bore the word "Necessary," and some "Reconsider."

At the very top was the question—"What is the root difficulty?"

Ramphal carried his final sack through the doorway with ease.

He did not stop to read the board.

Neither did Phulkumari.

The elderly farmer paused for a moment at the yellow line, then saw that the queue was moving and stepped forward.

At her desk, Neelima was folding the papers for Rules Eighteen, Nineteen and Twenty.

She did not throw the three sheets away.

She placed them with the old bundle.

On top she wrote a small slip—"Rules made before the cupboard was moved."

Harinarayan Babu read the slip.

"Why are you keeping these?"

Neelima looked toward the cupboard in its new place.

"So that next time, before someone makes a rule, they will look to see whether a cupboard is standing in the doorway."

Outside, as the gate was being closed, the yellow board trembled lightly in the breeze.

The twenty rules were still written there, but the doorway was fully open.

STORY 264

The Cupboard Inside

The Bhadon rain had stopped three days earlier. The western wall of the innermost room was still damp.

Across the white limewash, brown dampness had climbed from bottom to top. Suresh, the mason, tapped the wall and said,

"This time a coat over the top won't do. We'll have to open it up all the way behind." Dilip asked, "How do we open the back?"

Suresh pointed at the old iron cupboard. "This has to move first." The cupboard had stood in that same place for eleven years.

It had come to be known in the house as the cupboard inside, because it was not in the sitting room but in the innermost room of the house.

Kamla Devi slept there at night, Sushma sewed there in the afternoons, and in winter Parna studied there.

The cupboard's black-grey paint had been scraped away in many places.

In the middle of the right-hand door was a round mark where, years ago, Parna had struck it with a bowl while playing.

A small bloom of rust had broken out in the lower corner. Dilip said casually, "Empty it. It's a five-minute job."

Sushma was shelling peas on the veranda at the time. She raised her head and looked at the cupboard. "Five minutes?" Dilip laughed.

"Take out the clothes, take out the papers, that's all." Sushma began dropping peas into the bowl again. "All right."

Dilip heard no question in that "all right." In the afternoon, Abhay came home early from the office.

He said that before the cupboard was moved, it would be sensible to make digital copies of all the papers.

"What is the point of keeping so many old papers? We'll put everything on the phone." Meera heard him and came inside. "First let's see what is there."

Parna followed her in. Kamla Devi sat up on the cot. "Don't throw away my pension papers." Abhay burst out laughing.

"Grandmother, no one is going to throw away your pension." Sushma rose to fetch the key.

The key was not tucked into the fold of her sari, as Dilip had assumed. From a small wooden peg above the window, she took down a loop of blue thread.

There were two keys on the loop. When the cupboard opened, it was papers, not clothes, that came into view. On the narrow top shelf lay two blankets and three dhotis.

The other three shelves were filled with cloth folders, old envelopes, plastic bags and files tied with string. Parna exclaimed in surprise,

"Whose are all these?" Sushma said, "The household's." Abhay picked up a folder with a red border. Written on it was: "Kamla Devi—pension, bank, medicines."

On another: "Meera—education, bank, health." On a third: "Parna—school, birth, vaccination." On a fourth: "Sushma—originals."

Dilip peered into the cupboard. "Where are the men's papers?" Sushma took a thin green bag from the upper corner. "Here."

Dilip weighed the bag in his hand. "Only this much?" Meera laughed. "Three shelves for us, half a bag for all of you." Dilip said,

"We have fewer papers." Sushma said quietly, "Our names have changed fewer times." For a moment, the room fell silent.

Trying to lighten the mood, Abhay said, "Come on, today this mystery will be solved too." He spread a white sheet over the cot.

"We'll sort them person by person. Let each one make a pile of what belongs to them." Sushma said nothing. The folders began coming out one by one.

Kamla Devi's folder was the thickest of all.

It contained old ration slips from after her marriage, three old bank passbooks, her pension order, receipts for life certificates, medicine prescriptions, and her name written four different ways.

On one paper: "Kamla Devi." On another: "Kamli Devi." On a third: "Kamla Jha."

On an old letter there was only: "Kamla, wife of the late Raghunath." Kamla Devi put on her glasses and looked. "Who is this Kamli?" Sushma said,

"You." "When did I become Kamli?" "That is how the clerk wrote it in the first pension register." Kamla Devi shook her head.

"I don't remember." "I do." Sushma's reply was matter-of-fact, but Meera looked at her.

Abhay set the paper with "Kamli" written on it to one side. "It's wrong. Shall I throw it away?" Sushma said at once, "No." "Why?"

"The first pension account was opened using that paper. Later, the correction letter was attached to it." Abhay stopped his hand.

Sushma took out a thin sheet. "Look—Kamli to Kamla." Parna burst out laughing.

"Great-grandmother had to prove that Great-grandmother really was Great-grandmother?" Kamla Devi laughed too. "The government had more doubts about me than I did."

Meera opened her folder. Her B.A. certificate carried her parental-home address. Her bank passbook carried her address after marriage.

On one health document her name was "Meera Kumari." On another it was "Meera Abhay Jha."

A photocopy of the marriage registration was attached to one application. Meera frowned. "When did all this come to you?" Sushma said,

"It was in the trunk your father gave you after the wedding. Your mother-in-law said, 'Leave the papers with Sushma.'"

Meera asked directly, "Was I asked?" The room went silent again. Dilip coughed and began looking outside.

The phone remained in Abhay's hand. Sushma met Meera's eyes. "No." Meera looked at the papers for a while.

"Did anyone ask you either whether you would keep everyone's papers?" This time Sushma did not smile. "No." Kamla Devi said softly,

"Earlier, the daughter-in-law who lived in the inner part of the house kept the key." Sushma looked at her. "Was it the key she kept, or the work?"

For a few moments, the old days settled over Kamla Devi's face. "Both." Parna was looking at the inside of the cupboard door.

Suddenly she asked, "Why are all these knots here?" Twelve short threads were tied along the inner left side of the cupboard.

Some were red, some blue, some faded yellow. Some had only one knot, some had two. Abhay had never noticed them before.

Sushma rose and went to the cupboard. "Months." "Months?" "Twelve months." She touched the first knot. "Kartik—Mother's life certificate." The second.

"Agahan—Parna's school fee-waiver application." The third. "Pus—renewal of Meera's health document." The fourth.

"Magh—not the house insurance, the name-check on the electricity account." Dilip interrupted, "That is in my name." Sushma looked at him.

"Do you remember the date?" Dilip fell silent. Parna excitedly began counting the remaining knots. "Phagun, Chait, Baisakh..." Sushma said,

"Papers run less by names than by time." Abhay was still enthusiastic about making digital copies. He said,

"We'll put all these dates on the phone. The cupboard will become lighter." Sushma nodded. "Write them." She did not object.

That seemed simple enough to Abhay. From outside, the mason called, "How much longer?" Dilip answered, "Half an hour." Suresh laughed.

"Five minutes has become half an hour." Sushma heard him but said nothing. Abhay began making digital copies.

He straightened each paper, held the phone camera above it, and named the files—"Grandmother pension," "Meera bank," "Parna school."

Meera stopped him. "Add the date." Abhay said, "It will show when the digital file is opened." Meera looked at Sushma. "Write the date separately."

Abhay wrote it. Dilip opened his green bag and looked inside.

It contained land-revenue receipts, bank papers, an old challan book and two certificates. With satisfaction he said,

"See? Ours are straightforward." Sushma asked, "Where is the original of this old land receipt?" Dilip stopped. "Isn't this the original?"

"This is a photocopy." "The original?" From behind Kamla Devi's folder, Sushma took out a brown envelope.

"It bore your father's name. When Mother's pension papers were being prepared, this original was needed along with the genealogy certificate, so it came here."

Dilip took the paper. "So even the men's papers end up in a woman's folder?" Meera smiled. "Papers obey the rules of the house too."

Kamla Devi laughed. Sushma did not. She opened Parna's folder.

Birth certificate, vaccination card, three school slips, a small bank passbook, four copies of photographs.

On the back of one paper, in pencil, was written: "Original with Meera, copy at school." Meera read it and started. "The original is with me?" "It was."

"Where?" "In the bottom layer of your red trunk." Meera got up. Ten minutes later she returned with the original from the red trunk.

"I didn't remember." Sushma said, "That is why I wrote it." Meera kept the paper in her own hand. "From now on, this stays with me."

Sushma said only, "All right." In that "all right," neither protest nor relief was clearly visible. Parna went on reading her school slips.

Suddenly she picked up Sushma's folder. "Grandmother, yours?" Sushma laughed. "Yes, now look at mine too."

"Grandmother, why is your folder so thin?" Sushma's folder really was thin.

It contained an old school certificate, one bank passbook, a copy of her voter card, and two papers concerning land at her parental home.

That was all. Abhay asked, "The rest?" Sushma did not understand. "What rest?" "Your papers." Sushma thought for a moment. "These are all."

Meera turned the folder over and over. "Your health document?" "It was never made." "Why?" "I never got the time." Abhay said casually,

"We'll get it made." Sushma looked at him. "When?" There was no answer on Abhay's face. Parna counted the cupboard's twelve knots again.

"Which knot is yours?" Sushma laughed. "No knot is tied for my work." "Why?" "I remember."

Meera said at once, "Why would the person who keeps everyone else in mind remember her own work?" This time Sushma looked at Meera for a long while.

Outside, Suresh had begun knocking loose plaster from the wall with a hammer. The thud-thud came all the way into the room.

Dilip looked at the papers spread over the cot. "Were you handling all this alone?" Sushma said, "How was I alone? The work belonged to everyone."

"But the remembering?" "The remembering was mine." No one laughed. Kamla Devi laid her palm on her thick folder.

"All I remembered was that in Kartik I had to go to the bank. She used to tell me the date." Meera said,

"I remembered that the papers were in the cupboard inside. Which paper was which, she used to tell me." Abhay said softly,

"I remembered that Mother had everything." Dilip said nothing.

Sushma looked at the empty bowl that had held the peas, still lying on the veranda. Parna asked, "Do you like this work?"

The question was so direct that Sushma could not answer at once. "It wasn't a matter of liking or disliking." "Then?" "It was work that had to be done." Meera asked,

"Who had to do it?" Sushma looked at the fingers of her hand.

"At first Mother-in-law did it. Then the papers increased. Her eyesight weakened. One day she gave me the key. After that, everyone began giving their papers to me."

Kamla Devi said quietly, "I thought, the daughter-in-law is educated, she will manage." Sushma smiled. "I managed."

Kamla Devi lowered her eyes. "I didn't ask." "No." Meera pulled her own folder into her lap.

"The same thing happened on my wedding day. The trunk came, the papers came here." Abhay said, "I thought they were safe." Meera looked at him.

"They were safe. But no one asked whose responsibility it was." This time Abhay said nothing. Dilip looked at the shelves of the cupboard as they emptied.

"So what do we do now?" Before Sushma could answer, Meera said, "First, let each person be shown the papers that belong to them." Kamla Devi laughed.

"If you explain everything to us, it will be night."

"Let it become night," Meera said, "but next Kartik you won't be the only one running around."

Sushma said nothing, but her face softened. Abhay opened a new list on his phone.

Sushma stopped his hand. "Papers first." She placed Kamla Devi's folder in her hands.

"Mother, the life certificate is in Kartik. The bank passbook is inside here. Don't throw away the old paper with 'Kamli' on it."

Kamla Devi listened carefully. "I won't be able to remember." "One person will stay paired with another." Meera said, "I'll be with her." Sushma nodded.

"Then write two names on this folder—Mother and Meera." Meera wrote them. Parna lifted her own folder. "Who is with me?" "Your mother." "What about me?"

"Your name first." Parna was delighted. She wrote her own name at the very top. Meera wrote only her own name on her folder.

Abhay asked, "Me?" Meera said, "If I need you, I'll ask you—not the other way around." Kamla Devi laughed.

Dilip looked at his green bag. "The original land paper?" Sushma handed him the brown envelope. "Now it's yours."

Dilip took the envelope, then asked, "The date of the next land-revenue payment?" Sushma remained silent. Dilip waited a few moments.

Then he opened the old receipt. "Is it written here?" "Look on the back." Dilip turned it over. The date was written there in pencil.

He entered the date on his phone himself. Only then did Sushma say, "All right." The afternoon was fading. Suresh peered inside and asked,

"Has the cupboard become lighter?" Abhay said, "Not much lighter; we understand more." Suresh did not grasp what he meant. "I only have to move it."

This time everyone laughed. The papers went back into the cupboard, but not in the old order.

Kamla Devi's folder was placed not on the bottom but on the middle shelf, where her hand could reach it.

It was decided that Meera's folder would go into her own small box; only verified copies would remain in the cupboard.

Parna's school folder went into the drawer of her study table.

Dilip put his brown envelope in the wooden chest in the sitting room, where he himself kept the key. The twelve knots still remained inside the cupboard.

Parna asked, "Shall I untie all of these?" Sushma said, "Not yet." "Why?" "First let's see how everyone's months run now."

Meera cut a small piece of paper. On it she wrote the twelve months.

Beside each month she wrote no name, only the task—life certificate, school, health document, bank, land revenue.

Then, after each task, the people taking responsibility wrote their own names in their own hands. Beside Kartik: "Kamla + Meera."

Beside Agahan: "Parna + Meera." Beside land revenue: "Dilip." Sushma saw the blank space beside her health document.

Parna put the pen in her hand. "Here?" Sushma wrote: "Sushma." Meera asked, "With?" Sushma looked at Meera.

"For now, let one name remain." Meera smiled. "All right." This "all right" was different from the first one.

Suresh and his helper slid the cupboard out. After eleven years, the wall behind it came into view.

There were stains of damp on the wall, a few cobwebs, and the grey rectangular imprint of the cupboard's four corners. Suresh said,

"See? Because it stayed inside, you couldn't even see what condition the wall was in." Parna immediately looked at Sushma. Sushma understood the look.

"Don't turn me into the wall." Parna burst out laughing. For two days the cupboard remained on the veranda. The wall was dried, the plaster replaced, and fresh limewash applied.

Meanwhile, the papers were kept in different places. On the first day Dilip found his brown envelope himself. On the second day Kamla Devi said to Meera,

"How many days until Kartik?" Meera counted. Sushma opened her mouth to answer, then closed it again. Meera herself said,

"Twenty-seven." Kamla Devi nodded with satisfaction. Parna came home from school and put her slips straight into her own drawer.

In the evening Sushma asked, "Did you write the date on the back?" Parna stopped short. Then she ran off. "I've written it now." Sushma smiled.

On the third day the wall had dried. Suresh asked, "The cupboard back in its old place?" Dilip looked at Sushma.

No one had asked her such a question before. Sushma measured the wall. "Two finger-widths to the south. Air will pass behind it."

Suresh shifted the cupboard two finger-widths south. The cupboard remained in the inner room, but there were not as many papers in it as before.

One whole shelf had become empty. Dilip asked, "What will we keep here?" Sushma said, "Let it stay empty for now."

That evening she opened her thin folder again. Beneath the old school certificate was a folded paper.

It bore the stamp of the health centre from six months earlier. Sushma read: "Get a blood test."

She moved her hand to fold the paper again. Then she saw the new month-list fixed inside the cupboard door.

She read "health document" written beside her name. She did not fold the paper again. She placed it on top of her folder.

The next morning, while drinking tea, Dilip asked, "Going to the bank today?" Sushma said, "No. Today I'm going to the health centre."

Dilip asked casually, "Whose work?" Sushma looked at him. "Mine." After a moment Dilip nodded. "All right."

He did not raise the matter of the bank again. From the inner room Kamla Devi called, "Sushma, where is my old paper with 'Kamli' on it?"

Before Sushma could answer, Meera called back, "Mother, it's with me. In your folder." Kamla Devi said, "All right."

Sushma quietly finished her tea. The cupboard still stood inside.

The keys were still on the loop of blue thread, but now there were three keys on the loop. One was Sushma's. One was Meera's.

The third, a small brass key, was in a box behind Kamla Devi's pillow. The twelve knots were still inside the cupboard.

But the work of the coming month would no longer pass through the memory of one woman alone.

STORY 265

Two Hours on the Roof

It was a night in Jeth. The day's heat was still trapped in the walls, but by ten a light westerly breeze had begun to move across the roof.

The rest of the household had gone with the wedding party. Neeraj, Ramudgar Babu, Ritu and Vibhor - all four had left at seven in the evening. Shailaja Devi had not gone because of the swelling in her knee. Kanak had not gone either.

As he was leaving, Neeraj had said three times, "Kanak, come along. Urmila Kaki from next door will stay with Mother." All three times Kanak had given the same answer: "I'll stay here."

Shailaja Devi had then assumed that her daughter-in-law did not want to leave her alone. Kanak had not explained her reason.

Dinner was over by eight. Two plates, two glasses, that was all. On an ordinary day, that much crockery would increase three times over in the middle of the meal - someone wanted curd, someone a second roti, a child dropped a glass.

Tonight the kitchen was unusually quiet. As Kanak washed the dishes, she kept glancing towards the doorway, as though at any moment someone might call, "Mother," or "Kanak."

Shailaja Devi covered the pot of dal and said, "I don't like so much silence."

Kanak laughed. "At first I used to like it. Now I don't know what to do with it."

At half past nine the electricity went out. One fan could run on the battery, but Shailaja Devi said, "It's stifling downstairs. There'll be air on the roof."

Kanak remembered that two white sheets had been hanging on the line since evening. "We'll bring the sheets down too. They'll catch dew at night."

The two of them climbed the stairs. Shailaja Devi climbed slowly; Kanak would go two steps ahead and then stop to wait. On an ordinary day Shailaja Devi would have cut short that waiting with, "Hurry up." Tonight she said nothing.

When they reached the roof, Kanak unclipped one corner of the first sheet. The moment the breeze caught it, the whole sheet billowed and

flapped. Instead of opening the clips on the second sheet, she sat down on the woven munj stool near the parapet.

Shailaja Devi asked, "Aren't you taking them down?"

"Sit for two minutes. The breeze is lovely."

Shailaja Devi sat too. There was a hand's breadth of space between them. The white sheets on the line filled with wind and then collapsed again.

Now and then the sound of a motorcycle came from the road below. Somewhere far away music was playing - perhaps from the same wedding party.

For the first five minutes they spoke only about the house.

"Should we get two extra litres of milk tomorrow?"

"Ritu has an exam. We'll run short of curd."

"Ramudgar Babu has only three tablets left."

"I'll have them sent for in the morning."

Then the conversation stopped.

Kanak rested her palm on her knee and looked out at the dark houses in the distance. Shailaja Devi suddenly turned towards the stairway door.

"What happened?" Kanak asked.

"Nothing. I thought someone called."

Both fell silent again.

A little later Kanak too looked towards the stairs. She distinctly felt that Vibhor was calling "Mother" from below. Then she remembered - Vibhor was not at home.

Kanak laughed softly. "My ears are ringing too."

Shailaja Devi looked at her. "What?"

"I thought Vibhor called."

Shailaja Devi laughed as well. "The house is empty, but our ears aren't."

After that sentence, for the first time, their laughter rose together.

The clock at the nearby temple struck ten. Kanak took out her mobile phone and checked the time. There were messages, but she switched off the screen again.

Shailaja Devi said, "Look at the wedding photographs. Everyone must have sent them."

"I'll look tomorrow."

"You like photographs."

"I do. But not today."

Shailaja Devi watched her for a few moments. "What do you want today?"

Kanak did not answer at once. The question was unusual. At home she was often asked what would be cooked, what was needed, what was left, what had run out. "What do you want today?" sounded different.

"Nothing," she said. Then she laughed at herself. "That isn't the right answer either."

"Then?"

"Maybe just two hours when no one calls me."

Shailaja Devi raised her eyebrows. "Two hours?"

"Yes. Without 'Kanak, look at this,' 'Kanak, give me that,' 'Kanak, answer the phone,' 'Kanak, where is the child?'"

As she spoke, Kanak's voice filled with mild irony. Shailaja Devi first tried to laugh, then her face grew serious.

"Do I say 'Kanak, look at this' too often?"

Kanak looked for a way out. "We all do."

"Do I say it too often?"

This time Kanak answered directly. "Yes."

The breeze blew the corner of a sheet onto Shailaja Devi's head and then lifted it again. She brushed the corner aside.

"Does it bother you?"

"Sometimes. I feel as though I'm taking an exam all day. The spices must be right, the curd right, the child's notebook right, the clothes right."

Shailaja Devi opened her mouth, but Kanak spoke first. "I know you don't say it to find fault."

"Then why didn't you tell me?"

With a finger, Kanak drew a straight line through the dust on the parapet. "When would I have said it? You say, 'There's too little salt,' and I say, 'I'll watch it next time.' Before anything else can be said, another voice comes in between."

Shailaja Devi too looked towards the stairs. This time no one called.

"I used to think I was helping you," she said quietly.

"You are."

"Then why does it feel like an exam?"

"It can be both."

A faint look of surprise came over Shailaja Devi's face. Kanak added, "When someone is watched all day, even help can sometimes feel like inspection."

For a while only the wind made a sound.

Shailaja Devi straightened her knee. "In the first year of my marriage, there was one day when the milk didn't come. Your father-in-law's

father had gone to the market. He said he would bring milk back. He forgot."

Kanak listened in silence.

"There was no tea that evening. There were five people in the house. No one asked him why he had not brought the milk. I was asked, 'Didn't you remember?'"

Shailaja Devi laughed, but there was no amusement in it. "That was when I understood that whatever the house needs, remembering it in advance is a woman's job. Someone else's forgetting can become your own fault."

Kanak said, "Is that why you ask about everything beforehand?"

"Perhaps. Is there milk? Is there gas? Is there medicine? Was the fee paid? Did you take an umbrella? Before anyone can ask, I ask first."

"And you ask me."

"Yes."

"Then I ask Ritu."

They looked at each other.

Kanak said, "I ask her five times about her pencil, water, notebook, everything. She gets irritated."

Shailaja Devi smiled. "You test her?"

Kanak laughed. "Looks like it."

The distant music stopped, then began again. The air on the roof was cooler now. The white sheets were still on the line.

Kanak suddenly said, "I didn't stay back today only because of you."

Shailaja Devi looked at her.

"Neeraj kept telling me to come. I didn't. Half the reason was you. The other half was - I wanted the house empty."

"Empty of me?"

"No." Kanak laughed at once. "Empty of the house's voices. One evening when no one asks for anything."

Shailaja Devi adjusted the end of her sari. "I thought my daughter-in-law was devoted to serving me."

"There's nothing wrong with service. But sometimes, once it is called service, it becomes difficult to speak of your own tiredness."

Shailaja Devi remained silent over that sentence for a long time.

"People call me very devoted to serving others too," she said at last. "When my knee hurts, the praise is no use."

Kanak burst out laughing. Shailaja Devi laughed too.

"What do you feel like doing when no one asks you for anything?" Kanak asked.

"Sleeping," Shailaja Devi answered at once.

They both laughed again.

"And after sleeping?"

Shailaja Devi looked towards the dark neem tree beyond the roof. "Reading."

"What?"

"Whatever I can get. I can't even finish the newspaper. I look at the front page, then someone calls. I pick up a magazine and three months later half of it is still unread."

Kanak was surprised. "I see you reading, but I didn't know you wanted it this much."

"When did you ever get the time to ask?"

At that, both fell silent again. This time the silence was not uncomfortable.

From inside the cover of her mobile phone, Kanak took out a small folded slip.

"What is that?" Shailaja Devi asked.

"A new measuring-and-cutting class has started at the tailoring centre in the market. Saturdays from two to four."

"You want to go?"

"Yes."

"Then go."

Kanak did not laugh. "That simple?"

"What is difficult about it?"

"Ritu comes home between two and four. Babuji's medicine is at three. Vibhor's milk. The vegetable seller comes at four. Your knee hurts. Neeraj is at the shop even on Saturdays."

Shailaja Devi listened to each item. "You added all this up and cut out your own two hours?"

"I didn't cut them out. I just understood there was no room for them."

"Room can be made."

Kanak said at once, "And then you'll handle everything again?"

Shailaja Devi paused. "That wouldn't be right either."

They both fell into thought again.

After a few moments Shailaja Devi said, "Ritu is thirteen. She can come home and drink water by herself. Babuji can set an alarm on his watch for his tablet. Neeraj can give Vibhor a glass of milk if I tell him beforehand."

Kanak said slowly, "The vegetable seller will come again another time."

"Yes. The village won't run out of vegetables because of two hours."

Kanak laughed so loudly at this that her eyes went automatically to the stairway door. Then she remembered - no one was there.

The temple clock struck eleven.

Shailaja Devi said, "Has it been an hour?"

"Yes."

"So quickly?"

"Because we've been talking without interruption."

Shailaja Devi rubbed one hand over the other. "I have a slip too."

"For what?"

"The library."

Kanak's eyes widened.

"Urmila told me that on Sundays from three to five women sit there, read and talk. She told me two months ago. I never went."

"Why?"

Shailaja Devi looked at Kanak. "I didn't like the thought of leaving you alone with the house."

Kanak stared at her for a few moments, then held her head and burst out laughing. "You didn't go because of me, and I didn't go to the class because of you."

"We kept doing each other good."

"And swallowed up each other's two hours."

This time Shailaja Devi's laughter came freely.

The wind grew stronger. One corner of a sheet came loose from the line and began to hang over the parapet. Kanak placed a hand down to rise, but Shailaja Devi said, "Leave it. It won't fall."

Kanak sat back down.

The small incident surprised them both. On an ordinary night, if a corner of a sheet hung even half a hand below the line, Kanak would get up at once. Shailaja Devi herself would say, "It'll catch dew."

Tonight they both kept watching. The sheet continued to drink in the wind.

Shailaja Devi said, "Do I stop you too much?"

Kanak thought before answering. "Not directly, very often. But I read your face and stop myself."

"What kind of face do I make?"

"When I say I'm going out, you first begin calculating - the child, the meal, Babuji, milk. You don't say, 'Don't go.' But as soon as I see the calculation, I say, 'Leave it.'"

Shailaja Devi turned her face and looked into the distance. "I think I am warning you about the difficulties beforehand."

"As soon as I hear the difficulties, I take them like a refusal."

"Then?"

"Maybe first ask, 'How long will you be out?' Not, 'How will the house run?'"

Shailaja Devi slowly nodded. "And you do this for me too."

"Me?"

"If I say I'm going to the library, don't begin with 'your knee.'"

Kanak smiled. "All right."

"And on Saturday I won't begin your class with 'Babuji's tablet.'"

"All right."

"But the tablet?"

"We'll teach Babuji to set the alarm on his watch."

Their laughter rose again.

After a while Kanak said, "There's one more thing."

"Say it."

"When you get tired, you don't tell me to sit down. You go and find more work for yourself. Then it feels almost wrong for me to remain seated."

Shailaja Devi was startled. "Do I stop you from sitting?"

"No. But you don't sit yourself."

Shailaja Devi looked at the woven munj stool beneath her. "I'm sitting now."

"That's why I'm saying it."

After a while Shailaja Devi said, "I remember my mother. After meals she would lie down on the cot for five minutes. I used to think - Mother rests a lot. After marriage I understood how five minutes are saved."

Kanak's eyes softened. "Did you forget to give your daughter-in-law those five minutes?"

"Perhaps."

"Will I forget to give them to my daughter too?"

"You might, if she doesn't remind you."

"Then I'll tell her - correct me."

Shailaja Devi laughed. "She already corrects you without being told."

The night deepened. The music now sounded very far away. The concrete roof was releasing the heat of the day and turning cool.

With one hand on the parapet, Kanak asked, "What did you misunderstand about me?"

Shailaja Devi did not laugh at the question. "Many things."

"Tell me one."

"I used to think you looked at your mobile phone too much because you were less interested in the house."

Kanak was silent.

"And now?"

"Now I understand that on the phone you are looking at tailoring measurements, school messages, bank notices, photographs of medicines - half the time you're looking at the house itself."

Kanak said, "And half the time I'm escaping."

"Where?"

"For five minutes where no one calls. I listen to songs. Sometimes I just stare at the screen."

Shailaja Devi nodded. "I didn't have a mobile phone, so I used to open the spice box for no reason and close it again."

Kanak laughed loudly. "What was that?"

"In the kitchen no one would ask why I was standing there. It looked as though I was working."

They laughed for a long time.

The temple clock struck twelve.

Kanak checked the time in surprise. "Two hours."

Shailaja Devi looked towards the sheets on the line. A faint dampness of dew had settled along the edges of both.

"Look," Kanak said, "because of me the sheets got damp."

Shailaja Devi touched them. "They're not wet. It's only dew."

"We'll have to dry them again in the morning."

"They'll dry."

Shailaja Devi said it so simply that Kanak looked at her face. They both stood up.

This time the sheets were taken down. Kanak folded one; Shailaja Devi the other. On the way downstairs, Shailaja Devi went first and Kanak followed.

Below, the house was exactly as it had been - the pot of dal, the medicine box, the school notebooks, the half-filled water bottle, everything in its place. Even without their attention for two hours, the house had not fallen apart.

Before going to sleep, Kanak asked, "Will we tell everyone tomorrow?"

"Tell them what?"

"What we talked about on the roof."

Shailaja Devi straightened her pillow. "Does every conversation need an announcement?"

Kanak smiled. "No."

"What has to change, we'll change and see."

The next morning the members of the wedding party woke late. Neeraj came into the kitchen looking for tea. Kanak was kneading dough. Shailaja Devi had the newspaper open.

Neeraj said, "Kanak, tea -"

Without lifting her eyes from the newspaper, Shailaja Devi said, "The water is on the stove. The tea leaves are in that tin. Make it."

Neeraj stood there for two moments, then opened the tin. Kanak kept kneading the dough.

A little later Ritu, searching for a school notebook, said, "Mother, my science -"

Before Kanak could answer, Shailaja Devi said, "Look in the second drawer of your desk."

Ritu went away. Kanak looked at Shailaja Devi.

"Am I testing her again?" Shailaja Devi asked with a smile.

"This time you gave her the answer."

"Next time we'll let her search."

On Saturday afternoon Kanak changed her clothes. It was ten minutes to two. Neeraj asked, "Where are you going?"

Kanak said, "Measuring-and-cutting class. Until four."

Neeraj asked casually, "Vibhor?"

Before Kanak could answer, Shailaja Devi said, "Vibhor is a child of this house, not Kanak's private possession. I'm here, and you'll be back from the shop at three."

Neeraj looked at Shailaja Devi. "I was only asking."

Folding the newspaper, Shailaja Devi said, "We have all spent too many years only asking."

Kanak suppressed a smile and went out.

The following Sunday at three, Shailaja Devi picked up her small bag. Kanak asked, "The library?"

"Yes."

Kanak did not ask anything about her knee. She only said, "Until five?"

"Yes."

"All right. Bring a magazine on your way back."

Shailaja Devi started towards the stairs. At the door she stopped and asked, "For you?"

"No. Whatever you want to read."

Shailaja Devi went out.

The sounds of the house did not cease. Vibhor kept asking for milk, Ramudgar Babu forgot the time for his medicine, and the vegetable seller called out at exactly four. Some work still came back onto Kanak's and Shailaja Devi's heads.

But now, sometimes, one waited for the other to finish her sentence. Sometimes one of them would say, "Finish what you were saying first."

And those two white sheets on the roof? The next morning they were spread in the sun again for half an hour. No one asked why they had caught dew during the night.

While taking the sheets down, Shailaja Devi said to Kanak, "See? They dried."

Folding a sheet, Kanak replied, "Yes. Not every task has to be done at once."

For a moment they looked at each other. Then they carried the sheets inside. The roof was empty again, but the space of those two hours had begun, little by little, to make room for itself inside the house as well.

STORY 266

The Daughter-in-Law's Room

On the day they received the keys to the new house, Sudha Devi first opened the rear veranda.

Just inside the large gate, Jagdish Babu's book room was on the right, Mukul's room on the left, the guest room ahead, and upstairs was Trisha's small study. Standing at the turn of the staircase, Sudha Devi said proudly, "This time no one will be able to say there is no space in the house."

Madhavi smiled.

When she had married two years earlier, they had all been living in the three rooms of the old house. Jagdish Babu and Sudha Devi in one room, Mukul and Trisha in the second, Madhavi and Aniket in the third. One corner of the veranda was always cluttered with Aniket's papers and mobile-phone wires.

In that house Sudha Devi had often said, "When the new house is built, I'll give you a separate room. A daughter-in-law needs a place for her own clothes, her own things, her own mind."

Madhavi had not taken that sentence as a joke.

While the new house was being built, she too had come to the site two or three times. But amid the masons, sand, gravel, paint and pipes, it had never been clear to her which wall would belong to whom.

Today the house was ready.

Sudha Devi came down the stairs and went behind the kitchen. There was a narrow passage. At its end stood a blue door.

"This is yours," she said, placing the key in Madhavi's palm.

Madhavi opened the door.

The room was not large, but it had a window. Through the south-facing window she could see the neighbour's guava tree. The walls still gave off the smell of fresh paint.

Madhavi's eyes went first to the window, then to the floor.

Three tin trunks stood in the middle of the floor.

In one corner were two sacks of rice, one sack of wheat, a box containing an old lantern, four folded iron chairs, a brass cauldron used for pujas and festivals, two extra mattresses, and four quilts tied up in plastic.

Madhavi laughed. "All this?"

Sudha Devi laughed too. "It's only here for now. We're moving house, aren't we? It'll be gone in two days."

Aniket came up behind them. He had a coil of electrical wire in his hand.

"Your separate kingdom," he said, standing in the doorway.

Madhavi tossed the key up and caught it. "Half the kingdom is ruled by sacks of rice."

Mukul called from the veranda, "Put my cricket bag in that room too. There's no space left upstairs."

Sudha Devi answered at once, "Keep it there for two days. After that everything goes to its own place."

Madhavi tied the key into the end of her sari.

On the day of the housewarming, the house filled with people.

Whoever came to see the new house, Sudha Devi took them around and showed them everything.

"This is Babuji's book room. This is Mukul's. Upstairs is Trisha's study. The guest room is in front. And at the back, a separate room for the daughter-in-law."

"A separate room for the daughter-in-law?" the aunts would ask approvingly.

"Yes, a daughter-in-law needs a place of her own too."

Madhavi was mostly in the kitchen at such times. But whenever she heard "the daughter-in-law's separate room," she thought of the blue door—and inside it, the quilts, sacks, chairs and cauldron.

Three days later, one of the tin trunks was removed.

It went into Jagdish Babu's book room, because it contained his old magazines.

The other two trunks remained.

"These have Trisha's childhood books in them," Sudha Devi said. "How can we throw them away?"

"Don't throw them away," Madhavi said. "Put them in Trisha's room."

Trisha spoke up at once. "My study is so small. Let them stay there until my exams are over."

Madhavi fell silent.

Two of the four folded chairs went to the guest room. Two remained.

As for the brass cauldron, Jagdish Babu said, "Don't touch it until Durga Puja. We'll need it."

The quilts were to stay until winter.

Within fifteen days the sack of wheat was half-empty, but another sack arrived and was placed beside it.

A month later the amount of stuff in Madhavi's room had not diminished; it had merely changed.

Her small cot was placed beneath the window. An old wooden cupboard came for her clothes, but on top of it were piled the household's empty tins, oil lamps, Chhath winnowing trays, and two bags of artificial flowers left over from a wedding.

Madhavi did not sleep alone in that room on the first night. She and Aniket slept in the main bedroom. The "separate room" was called Madhavi's during the day—for changing clothes, sitting sometimes, keeping her things.

Aniket had a work room of his own as well. In the small room at the front were a desk, chair, computer and drawers for papers. No one in the house went into that room very often without calling him first.

Madhavi noticed this difference gradually.

Her own door opened and closed all day long.

Sudha Devi needed rice.

Trisha needed an old school-certificate file, and no one remembered exactly which trunk it was in.

Mukul needed his cricket bag.

Jagdish Babu needed an old bronze lota kept inside the festival cauldron.

Bindo, who came during the day to sweep and mop, had her spare broom handle stored there too.

At first Madhavi handed the key to everyone.

Then she realised there was no point. Sudha Devi had a duplicate key made.

"It's household stuff," she said casually. "If you're out, the work shouldn't get held up."

Madhavi said, "Yes."

The door to the room could now be closed, but the room was not private.

One afternoon Madhavi had bathed and was changing her clothes. The bolt was fastened from inside.

Mukul knocked twice from outside.

"Bhabhi?"

"What is it?"

"I need my bag. The match is at four."

"Wait five minutes."

There was silence for a moment.

Then Mukul said, "It's just behind the door. Open it and I'll take it out."

Madhavi's hand stopped at the hook of her blouse.

She tried to laugh. "Cricket won't cease to exist in five minutes."

Mukul laughed too, but remained standing outside.

Madhavi changed her clothes and opened the door.

Mukul kept his eyes lowered as he took out the bag. On his way out he said, "Bhabhi, I'll keep this upstairs."

That evening the bag really was removed.

Madhavi felt pleased, but the next day Sudha Devi had two large canisters placed in the empty space.

"Only until the rains are over," she said.

For the first time Madhavi asked, "Ma, how long does 'only' last in this room?"

Sudha Devi did not understand the question. "What?"

"Nothing."

There was a small iron hook above the door. Madhavi hung her clothes bag from it. It was the only thing in the room that no one ever asked for.

Two weeks later the carpenter came.

Showing him the back room, Sudha Devi said, "Put wooden shelves all along this wall. Things get dirty when they stay on the floor."

Madhavi was sitting by the window shelling peas.

The carpenter measured the wall. "How deep?"

Jagdish Babu said, "Deep enough for the cauldron."

Trisha said, "And my box of books."

Mukul called down from upstairs, "One corner for my old sports things."

Sudha Devi added, "Make a closed compartment at the top for quilts."

The carpenter looked at Madhavi. "What do you need to keep?"

Madhavi had a pea in her hand.

She looked around the room.

"Mine?"

Sudha Devi said easily, "Yes, it's your room, isn't it? Have it made to suit you as well."

Madhavi laughed. "First decide how much of the wall will be left for me."

She had said it as a joke, so everyone laughed.

The carpenter did not. He went on writing measurements on his sheet of paper.

The wooden shelves were built.

The room looked better than before. The sacks were lifted off the floor, the quilts went up, the cauldron gleamed on a shelf, and the trunks slid underneath.

Sudha Devi was very pleased.

"See? Your room looks so much more open now."

It was true: in the middle there was now a strip of empty floor about five handspans wide.

Madhavi spread a mat over that empty floor.

In the afternoons she sometimes sat there drinking tea, sometimes dried her hair there, sometimes simply watched the guava tree through the window without doing anything.

The shelves had organised the household things, but now people could find what they wanted more quickly; instead of decreasing, the sound of the door opening increased.

One afternoon an electrician was changing wires in Aniket's work room. Aniket brought his computer into Madhavi's room.

"I'll work here for a while," he said.

Madhavi rolled up the mat and gave him a corner for his table. Aniket shut the door.

Twenty minutes later Sudha Devi knocked for rice.

Ten minutes after that Trisha came looking for an old notebook.

Then Jagdish Babu needed the bronze lota.

The fourth time, Mukul came to the door and asked, "Would my white cap be behind the cauldron?"

Aniket lifted his head from the computer. "Why is everyone's stuff in this room?"

Looking towards the window, Madhavi said, "Because this is my separate room."

Aniket did not reply.

His work was interrupted again and again that day. In the evening he picked up his computer and went back to the front room.

Madhavi did not close the door. She only kept looking at the empty strip of floor in the middle.

In the first week of Ashadh, a municipal surveyor came.

For the assessment of property tax on the new house, the approved plan was being checked against the house as built.

Jagdish Babu took out the file and sat on the veranda. The surveyor went from room to room.

"This is the bedroom."

"This is the study."

"This is the guest room."

"The store room at the back."

Madhavi heard the words from the kitchen.

Sudha Devi immediately called out, "No, no, that is the daughter-in-law's room."

The surveyor looked at the plan. "The approved plan says 'store'."

"Whatever the paper says," Sudha Devi replied, "we gave it to our daughter-in-law."

The surveyor opened the door and looked inside.

Canisters, cauldron, quilts, trunks, winnowing trays, old notebooks, spare bulbs and festival decorations all sat in their proper places on the shelves.

Madhavi's mat lay in the middle.

The surveyor said nothing. He made a mark on the paper and moved on.

Madhavi was standing half-hidden behind the door.

She was surprised: for the first time, an outsider who had never heard the household's story had given the room its proper name.

No one discussed the matter that evening.

Madhavi said nothing either.

The next morning the carpenter came to collect the balance due to him. Two leftover wooden planks were leaning against the veranda.

Madhavi showed him the empty floor beneath the window. "Could you make a low platform from these two planks?"

The carpenter measured the space. "For storing things?"

"No. For sitting."

Trisha heard and laughed. "There's already a mat here."

Madhavi said, "The mat can be folded up, and then everyone puts things on it. A platform can't be folded."

The carpenter asked nothing more. By afternoon a low platform, four feet long and three feet wide, stood beneath the window.

Madhavi wiped its wooden top and spread a thin seat on it.

That evening Sudha Devi came in carrying two empty oil tins. She moved towards the platform, then saw the seat spread there.

"Shall I keep these here?"

"This platform is for sitting, Ma," Madhavi said.

Sudha Devi slid the tins beside the shelves. "Then this surface will stay empty?"

"Not empty. I'll sit here."

Two days later Jagdish Babu too noticed the platform. "A sitting place in the store room?"

Looking towards the window, Madhavi said, "If it has two names, let it have two uses as well."

Jagdish Babu pushed his glasses up, seemed about to say something, then quietly walked towards his book room.

Once or twice over the next week a bag or tin was left on the platform, but whoever came to sit there moved it beside the shelves. Gradually the platform ceased to be a permanent place for storing things.

In Sawan, Trisha's exams ended.

She took her box of old books upstairs.

"I have room now," was all she said.

The quilts remained.

The cauldron remained.

The rice canister remained.

Madhavi's platform by the window remained too.

One evening Sudha Devi's sister came from her parental home. While being shown around, she reached the blue door.

"Whose is this?"

Without thinking Sudha Devi began, "The stor—"

She stopped halfway through the word.

Madhavi was sitting inside.

Sudha Devi looked at her for a moment, then said, "Madhavi's room. Some household things are kept here too."

Her sister peered inside. "There's quite a lot of stuff."

Setting down the tea, Madhavi said, "When a house grows bigger, its things grow bolder too."

The two sisters laughed.

Even after that day there was no family meeting. No one said, "Empty the room."

But the movement of things began to change.

People had begun sitting more often on the veranda in the evenings, so the two remaining folded chairs went outside.

Jagdish Babu moved one bundle of magazines into his own book room. Mukul gave away some of his old sports equipment to children.

The Chhath winnowing trays went to the upper shelf in the kitchen. The scrap dealer took away two empty tins.

Not everything could be removed. The quilts and the rice canister were still there. Madhavi did not insist that everything must go either.

Two months later, the autumn breeze began to blow.

The platform now held a thin mattress, a glass of water, and a small tulsi plant in the corner by the window.

A new bolt that could be fastened from inside had been fitted to the door as well.

Mukul had fitted it with his own hands.

While installing it he had said, "Bhabhi, cricket can wait five minutes."

Madhavi looked at him. She remembered that afternoon behind the closed door.

"And ten minutes?"

"We might lose the match, but it'll wait."

They both laughed.

Before winter began, Sudha Devi brought two new blankets from the market.

She came as far as the door. She opened her mouth to say in the old way, "Keep these in your room—"

Then she stopped.

Madhavi was writing something on the platform.

Holding the blankets in her arms, Sudha Devi asked, "Where should I keep these two?"

Madhavi looked up.

It was a small question.

The room had not suddenly become completely empty. There were still quilts on the shelves, one canister, and a Chhath basket that had been forgotten there.

But for the first time, new belongings had stopped at the door before coming in.

Madhavi got up and pointed to an empty compartment on the upper shelf.

"Keep them here. Until winter is over."

Sudha Devi put the blankets away and went out through the door.

Madhavi sat down on the platform again.

Two leaves of the guava tree trembled in the breeze beyond the window. One corner of the platform was empty; no one's bag, tin or canister had yet been placed there.

The room was still half a store room. But that day, before crossing the doorway, two new blankets had paused and listened for the answer from inside.

STORY 267

The Key to Her Parents' Home

Anima's key ring held five keys.

Two were for her own house—the main door and the upstairs grille. One was for the cupboard at the school, where she kept science laboratory materials. One was for the vehicle. The fifth key was the oldest—the brass worn dull and tarnished, a faded dot of red nail polish on its head, and one corner of its teeth slightly bent.

One Sunday, Ajit took the ring in his hand and asked, "What does this old key still open?"

Anima was bringing tea from the kitchen. Without thinking, she replied, "My parents' home."

"Still?"

"Yes."

Ajit laughed. "They haven't put in a new lock?"

"The lock is old, stubborn like me."

"You're new enough."

Anima handed him his cup. "The key is old. Why are you turning me old along with it?"

The matter dissolved into laughter.

But the key really was old.

Ramlochan Babu had given it to Anima in the year when she was leaving home every morning at half past seven for teacher training and sometimes returning later than everyone else in the evening.

"No need to stand waiting at the door," Babuji had said. "It is your own home. Open it and come in."

At the time, her mother, Sushila Devi, had marked the head of the key with a dot of red nail polish. There were four or five keys in the house then; this was her way of knowing which lock each key opened.

On her wedding day, while sorting her clothes, books, certificates, and small belongings, Anima had picked up the key ring as well.

No one told her to return the key.

No one told her to keep it either.

The key simply went with her.

Nine years after the wedding, it was still on the ring.

In those nine years, much had changed in her parents' house.

Anima's old room had first become Raghav's study; after Raghav's marriage it was given to him and Purnima; and now Raghav and Purnima's son Anshu occupied most of the space with his books, coloured pencils, and toys.

Anima's old wooden table had moved to the veranda. Two boxes of her books were in the upstairs room. A small bed now stood by the window where she had once studied for her examinations.

These changes caused Anima less sorrow than wonder.

How could a house go on by keeping only memories?

If people lived in it, places would change.

Even so, the old lock on the main door was still the same.

And so was the key with the red dot.

When Anima reached her parents' house, she usually did not ring the bell.

She would put in the key, open the door, step inside, and call loudly, "Ma!"

Sushila Devi would answer from the kitchen, "You're here?"

Ramlochan Babu, folding his newspaper on the veranda, would ask, "Straight from school?"

If Raghav was at home, he would say, "Didi, will there be tea?"

Purnima would laugh and say, "Now that Didi is here, tea will make itself."

And Anima would feel that the key opened not merely a lock, but an old sentence: "It is your own home."

One day, on her way back from school, she suddenly turned towards her parents' house.

She remembered that the packet of medicine she had bought for her mother had been lying in her bag for three days. She did not feel like calling. The house was only two lanes in from the road.

It was nearly two in the afternoon.

Raghav's motorcycle was not outside. Babuji's slippers were not by the door.

Anima inserted the key.

As usual, the old lock caught at first. She lifted the key a little and turned it. It opened with a 'click'.

She opened the door quietly.

There was an unusual silence inside.

"Ma?"

No answer.

She called again.

Then Purnima's voice came from the inner room. "Who is it?"

"Me."

A few moments later Purnima came out. Her hair was loose, the corners of her eyes red. A mobile phone was in her hand.

"Oh, Didi! You?"

"Yes. I came to give Ma her medicine. Where has everyone gone?"

"Ma and Babuji have gone to Mama's. Raghav is at the bank."

Purnima immediately switched off the mobile screen.

Anima asked, "Everything all right?"

"Yes, yes."

The answer came too quickly.

Anima put her bag on the table. "Shall I make tea?"

"No, I'll make it."

Purnima went towards the kitchen.

Anima kept watching her go.

She felt she had interrupted something.

A little later, she heard Purnima's low voice from the kitchen. She was on the phone again.

"No, Ma, I won't say anything now... yes... I was just feeling low..."

Anima stopped in the middle of the veranda.

Deliberately, she walked further towards the veranda so that she would not hear the rest.

Five minutes later Purnima came with the tea. Her eyes looked freshly washed.

Anima asked nothing.

Purnima said nothing either.

They drank their tea. When it was nearly time for Anshu's school bus to arrive, Anima got up to leave.

At the door, Purnima said, "Didi, next time, give me a call."

Anima asked naturally, "Why? Do you need anything?"

Purnima smiled at once. "No, just... if I'm at home, I'll keep the tea ready."

Anima smiled too.

As she locked the door from outside, the key with the red dot was between her fingers.

"Give me a call"—those three words stayed in her mind.

But three days later she again went in the old way, putting the key into the lock and walking inside.

A habit of eight or ten years does not change after a single hint.

This time both Ma and Babuji were on the veranda. Purnima was in the kitchen. No one said anything.

Anima herself was not prepared to attach too much importance to what had happened that previous afternoon.

"It is home," she said to herself.

"My own home."

Then a month passed.

In the last week of Sawan, Ajit's sister Deepa came with her two children for three days. Deepa had married two years before Anima. She lived at the other end of the city.

Ajit had already given his sister a spare key to the house. The reasons were straightforward—sometimes she had to leave the children there, sometimes Ajit was away, sometimes she needed to keep something at the house.

Anima had never objected to this.

The next day, Anima had a half-day training session at school. She returned at half past twelve. Ajit was at the office. Deepa had gone to the market with the children.

Anima bolted the door from inside, changed her clothes, warmed her food, and then, because her head hurt, sat on the sofa and closed her eyes.

She had hardly fallen asleep when she heard the lock turn.

The door opened.

Deepa came in with the children.

"Bhabhi, you're back?"

Anima sat up with a start. Her sari end had slipped from her shoulder; her notebook, school papers, and a half-written private letter lay open on the table.

Deepa's son ran towards the inner room. Anima quickly folded the papers.

"Yes, the training ended early."

"I thought the house would be empty."

"You could have rung the bell."

Deepa stopped. "I had the key, didn't I?"

The answer was entirely ordinary.

Anima knew, too, that no offence had been committed here.

Even so, in that moment, inside her own house, her body, her papers, her silence—all of it suddenly seemed exposed.

That evening, after Deepa had gone upstairs with the children, Anima said to Ajit, "Deepa came straight in with the key."

Ajit asked while taking off his shoes, "So?"

"I was at home."

"How was she to know?"

"She could have rung the bell."

Ajit, drinking water, said, "She thinks of it as her own home."

Anima's hand stopped on the table.

Ajit looked at her face. "What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Are you angry?"

"No."

The truth was that Anima was not angry with Deepa.

She was hearing one of her own sentences: "It is home. My own home."

Before going to bed that night, she placed the key ring on the table.

The red dot on the fifth key was still visible, though more than half the colour had worn away.

She picked up the key.

A piece of metal.

A tool for opening a lock.

A permission.

Or entry without permission?

Anima grew irritated with her own question.

Why measure a relationship in terms of keys and doors?

But the next time she went to her parents' house, the moment she reached the door, her hand moved into her bag by itself.

The key came into her fingers.

She moved it towards the lock.

She could hear the sound of utensils from inside.

Purnima was at home.

Anima's hand stopped.

She turned the key back and put it into her bag again.

She rang the bell.

A few moments later Purnima opened the door.

Her face was genuinely full of surprise.

"Didi?"

"Yes."

"Didn't you have the key?"

"I do."

Purnima opened the door fully. "Then why the bell?"

Taking off her slippers, Anima said, "You were inside."

Purnima looked at her for a few moments. Then she said only, "Come in."

Sushila Devi was cutting aubergine in the kitchen.

"Who came?"

"Didi," Purnima said.

Sushila Devi came out. "Why were you standing there ringing the bell like that? You have a key, don't you?"

Anima smiled. "I do, Ma."

"Then?"

"There were people inside."

It was not clear whether Sushila Devi understood the question. She said, "They are our own people."

Anima took the knife from her mother's hand. "I'll cut the aubergine."

The matter returned to the kitchen again.

That day Purnima was not unusually quiet.

She talked about Anshu's school, about prices in the market, and even about her younger sister's admission back at her parents' home.

Anima did not mention the telephone call from the previous afternoon.

When Anima was leaving, Purnima came to see her to the door.

"Didi."

"Yes?"

"That day... when you came suddenly..."

Anima stopped.

Purnima said again, "Nothing. Leave it."

Anima too said, "All right."

Purnima smiled faintly. "The bell felt good today."

Anima smiled back.

On the way home she thought—what a strange thing. Having a key was one kind of closeness; but ringing a bell was not distance. Sometimes it was respect.

After that day, Anima did not make a rule.

She did not write on a piece of paper that she would call before going to her parents' house.

Nor did she remove the key and put it away in some box.

Only the habit of her hand began to change.

If she heard sounds inside the door, she rang the bell.

If the house was empty and Ma had said, "Come and leave the packet there," she opened it with the key.

If she saw Babuji reading the newspaper, she sometimes tapped on the window.

At first Ramlochan Babu would say, "What is the use of keeping a key if you still have to ring the bell?"

Anima would laugh. "Its use is for when you are not at home."

Babuji would shake his head. "Too many rules now."

"Not rules."

"Then what?"

Anima would not answer. She herself could not find the word.

One afternoon she rang the bell. There was no reply from inside.

She rang a second time.

Then she called.

Ma said, "I'm on the roof. Open the door and come in."

Only then did Anima use the key.

The lock caught, as before. She lifted the key and turned it.

'Click.'

She felt an odd satisfaction—the key still recognised her hand.

During the autumn Navratri, the house began to be repainted.

Opening the door leaf, the workman said, "The lock is very old. Shall I replace it?"

Ramlochan Babu said at once, "No. It works."

Raghav laughed. "Babuji, this lock opens less according to the key and more according to the door's mood."

Purnima said, "Didi can open it."

The workman looked towards Anima. "Your hand is used to it?"

Anima showed him the old key. "Its teeth are bent, yet it still works."

The workman said, "If the lock is changed, this key will become useless."

Anima replied naturally, "If the lock works, let it stay for now."

Ramlochan Babu said with satisfaction, "See? A daughter understands the value of old things."

Purnima was closing a tin of paint. For a moment she looked towards Anima. Neither of them said anything.

The lock was not changed.

With the repainting, the door became green; the lock remained the same black-brown.

The key with the nail-polish mark continued to turn in the green door just as before.

In Kartik, Sushila Devi went to her parents' home for two days. Ramlochan Babu went with her. Raghav had to go to Patna for office work. Purnima and Anshu were at home.

Anima came in the evening to deliver some items for worship.

She rang the bell.

Anshu ran to open the door. "Bua, you have a key!"

"I do."

"Then why did I open it?"

Anima stroked his head. "Because you are at home."

Anshu was not satisfied with this answer. "A key is faster."

Purnima laughed from behind him. "The bell is more civilised."

At the word "civilised," Anima laughed too.

"Don't make such a big thing of it," she said.

After dinner that night Purnima said, "Didi, tomorrow I'm taking Anshu to the dentist. We'll be back by two. A book parcel is due to arrive. If you happen to come this way from school, could you receive it?"

Anima asked, "The house will be empty?"

"Yes."

"Then the key will be useful."

Purnima nodded.

The next day Anima arrived at half past one. The house really was empty.

Without ringing the bell, she used the key.

The lock opened.

She went inside; the man delivering the book parcel arrived, she received the parcel and placed it on the table.

There was no one in the house.

For a few moments she stood on the veranda.

All the sounds of an old house are different when no one is inside—the ticking of the clock is louder, a bicycle bell on the road sounds clearer, the whirr of the fan carries farther.

She remembered her adolescence, when she would return from school, open this door with this key, and the first sound in the empty house would be the thud of her book bag.

Back then, the key had been an object of freedom.

For some years after her marriage, she had continued to think of it as a sign of her right.

Now she understood—the key said only that the lock recognised her hand. The minds of the people inside, their rest, their conversation, their silence—those needed a different signal.

Anima laughed at herself for the thought.

"The things I think about," she said to the empty veranda.

She left the books on the table and closed the door.

While locking it, the key caught again.

She lifted it and turned it.

'Click.'

After winter began, Deepa came one day to give them a few things. Ajit was not at home.

Anima was inside, in the kitchen.

The doorbell rang.

She came out.

Deepa was standing there with a bag in her hand.

Opening the door, Anima said, "Oh, you have the key."

Deepa laughed. "I left it. I thought, since you're at home, I'd ring."

For a moment Anima looked at her.

"You did right."

Deepa came inside. That was all there was to it.

Later Anima did not ask Ajit whether he had said anything to Deepa about it.

Nor did she feel any need to.

One evening in Magh, Sushila Devi called.

"Anima, we have all gone to Raghav's in-laws' house. Purnima will go straight to the market with Anshu after his extra class. Your Babuji's thick spectacles have been left on the sitting-room table. He'll need them tomorrow morning. Can you pick them up on your way back from school?"

"Yes."

When Anima arrived, the house was empty.

She used the key, took the spectacles, and closed the door.

As she was leaving, she ran her hand over the lock. The old metal was cold.

Suddenly she remembered—during the first month after her marriage, Ma had once said, "Keep the key safely. If it gets lost, another one can be made, but it won't work as quickly as the old key."

At the time, Anima had understood that sentence as being only about the lock.

Even now she did not want to turn it into some great meaning.

The value of some things lies in their use, of some in habit, and of some in the fact that, over the years, they come to know the shape of one's hand.

She put the key back on the ring.

When she went to her parents' home in Phagun, the door was open from inside.

Purnima and Anshu were ready to go out. Sushila Devi had gone to a neighbour's house, and Babuji was sitting in the sun behind the veranda.

Purnima said, "Didi, I'm going to the market for half an hour. Babuji is at the back. When you leave, please lock the main door."

"All right."

Purnima went out with Anshu.

Anima sat with Babuji for a while. They had tea. They talked about the school's annual examinations. Babuji spoke about an old colleague.

Evening was falling.

Anima got up.

"I'm leaving."

Ramlochan Babu said, "Lock the door. Purnima has a key."

Anima pulled the main door shut from outside.

She took her old key from her bag.

The red dot had now dwindled to no more than a thin line.

She put the key into the lock.

Her fingers, of their own accord, lifted it to suit its bent tooth.

'Click.'

The lock closed.

She drew the key out and held it in her palm for a moment.

It was the same key that had once brought her inside without making her wait.

Now it opened the door when the house was empty, locked it when the people of the house went out, and, when someone was inside, usually remained silent in her bag.

Anima put the key back on the ring.

The bell was still outside the door.

The key was in her bag.

Both were exactly where they belonged.

STORY 268

Sewing Expenses

Sudha's sewing machine was like a clock in the house.

Once after the milk had boiled in the morning.

Twice after the midday meal had been cleared away.

Again in the evening, after the rush of customers had thinned.

Sometimes the steady hum of the motor, sometimes the slow rhythm of a foot on the pedal.

The people in the house were so used to the sound that when the machine was silent, at first no one even noticed that something was missing from the house.

Sudha sat sewing in a corner of the veranda.

There was a low table, a box of thread, scissors, a measuring tape, tailor's chalk, four small boxes of buttons, and bundles of cloth.

In the table drawer lay a thick notebook.

On its first page, Sudha had written in her own hand: "Measurement Register."

Below it she had made five columns—name, measurements, cloth, advance, amount due.

Pramod called this notebook "Sudha's little account."

Kusum Devi, Sudha's mother-in-law, called her earnings "sewing expenses."

"The main household expenses run on Pramod's salary," she often said. "Sudha's sewing expenses take care of the little things."

There was no contempt in her voice when she said this, only a kind of easy certainty.

As though small expenses somehow found small earnings for themselves.

Sudha usually said nothing.

She wrote down measurements.

She cut cloth.

She straightened seams.

And after midday she circled in red ink the dates on which customers' clothes had to be delivered.

One Monday, Pramod stopped on the veranda on his way to the office.

"Sudha, do you have fifteen hundred?"

Sudha stopped the machine.

"Why?"

"Today is the last day for the motorcycle insurance. The card payment isn't going through. I'll withdraw it this evening and give it back."

Sudha opened the drawer.

She took three five-hundred-rupee notes from an envelope and handed them to him.

Folding the notes, Pramod said, "Your little earnings come in very handy at important times."

Sudha smiled.

"Don't forget to give it back this evening."

"I won't."

Pramod came home tired that evening.

He had the insurance papers, two office files, and a bag of vegetables with him.

The matter of the fifteen hundred did not come up again that day.

Sudha did not bring it up either.

The next day Kusum Devi's medicine ran out.

"Daughter-in-law, I need eight hundred and twenty rupees. Pramod will be late tonight."

Sudha gave it to her.

On Thursday a message came from Naman's school—the materials for the science exhibition had to be submitted by the next day.

"Ma, four hundred and fifty rupees."

"So much?"

"I have to buy the motor, wire, board, all of it."

Sudha gave it.

On Friday the milkman came with the old account.

One thousand two hundred and ten.

Kusum Devi called from inside, "Daughter-in-law, there are still three days before Pramod's salary comes. If you have it, pay him."

Sudha paid him.

That week the advance column of the Measurement Register held several figures.

Sumitra—800.

Neelam—500.

Rekha—1,200.

Uniforms for four schoolgirls—2,000.

These were all advances customers had paid so that lining, thread, hooks, zips, elastic, and some extra cloth could be bought.

Earlier, Sudha did not keep advances separate from her own earnings.

Whatever notes came into her hands went into the envelope in the drawer.

Whatever expense appeared before her was met from the same place.

At the end of the month, all she knew was that she had done a great deal of work, but how much money was left—she had no clear idea.

She was not greatly troubled by this either.

The household ran.

The machine ran.

Customers kept returning.

Then one day the machine began skipping stitches now and then.

Sudha changed the needle.

She changed the thread.

She filled the bobbin again.

She cleaned the machine.

Even then, on the back of the cloth three stitches would be right and the fourth missing.

She slowed the pedal.

For a while it worked properly.

Then the same thing again.

While making Rekha's blue blouse that afternoon, the cloth puckered in one place.

Sudha immediately unpicked the seam.

That day, for the first time, the sweat on her forehead came not from work but from worry.

In the evening, Shambhu, the sewing-machine mechanic, was called.

Shambhu opened the machine cover and examined it for a long time.

"The shuttle is worn out. The motor belt is loose too. It will run for now, but if the workload increases it will ruin the cloth."

"How much will it cost?"

"Replacing the parts will be about two thousand eight hundred. Cleaning and labour are extra."

"Total?"

"Allow three thousand two hundred."

Sudha fell silent.

Pramod was there too.

In an easy tone he said, "Put off that expense for now. Use the hand pedal for a few days. It doesn't make sense to spend three thousand two hundred all at once on a small income."

Shambhu closed the machine cover.

"Sister does a lot of work. If you delay, the shuttle plate may be damaged too."

Pramod said, "We'll see next month."

Shambhu left.

Sudha spread the cloth over the machine again.

That night she completed two blouses using the hand pedal.

Her speed was cut in half.

The next day the manager of a school came.

"Sudhaji, the new session begins next month. Can you make thirty-six skirts and eighteen kurtis?"

Normally, for a job like that, Sudha would immediately begin counting dates.

This time she looked at the machine.

"I can't take it on just now."

"Why? Last time you delivered on time."

"The machine isn't right."

"How many days?"

"I don't know."

The manager paused for a few moments.

"I need a decision within a week. Otherwise I'll have to give it somewhere else."

"Give it somewhere else."

It was not easy for Sudha to say that sentence.

The thirty-six skirts and eighteen kurtis would have been her biggest income for three weeks.

The manager left.

Kusum Devi had heard from inside.

"How much work was it?"

"A lot."

"Tell Pramod to get the machine repaired."

"He said next month."

Kusum Devi was silent for a moment.

"Yes, there are a lot of expenses this month."

Sudha opened the notebook.

That day, for the first time, she added up the figures in the advance column.

Four thousand five hundred.

She opened the drawer.

Two thousand one hundred and thirty.

The difference—two thousand three hundred and seventy.

For a while she kept counting the notes.

Then she opened the last blank page of the notebook.

At the top she wrote: "Went to the household."

Below it she began writing by date.

Monday—motorcycle insurance 1,500.

Tuesday—Ma's medicine 820.

Thursday—Naman's exhibition 450.

Friday—milk 1,210.

Total—3,980.

Sudha looked at the figures for a long time.

Some of the money among those four amounts had been her own earnings; some had been customers' advances.

The problem was not that money had gone into the household.

The problem was that no one knew which money belonged to whom.

That night, after dinner, Pramod was watching television.

Sudha came carrying the notebook.

"Look at something."

Pramod adjusted his glasses.

Sudha placed the page in front of him.

"What is this?"

"What went from the sewing drawer into the household this week."

Pramod read it.

"I was supposed to return the fifteen hundred for the insurance."

"Yes."

"I forgot."

"All right."

"Medicine is a household expense anyway."

"Yes."

"So is milk."

"Yes."

Pramod looked up.

"Then?"

Sudha opened the advance column of the notebook.

"These four thousand five hundred rupees are advances from customers. I was supposed to buy materials with them. There are two thousand one hundred and thirty in the drawer now. The machine needs three thousand two hundred for repairs. I turned down the large school order because the machine can't be trusted."

Pramod looked over the accounts for a while.

"Are you saying you shouldn't contribute to household expenses?"

Sudha did not immediately shake her head.

"No. Household expenses have to be met. But customers' advances are not my earnings. That is money for the work. Between us, we have been treating it as expenditure money."

"Between us?"

"Me too."

Hearing that answer, Pramod's face relaxed a little.

Sudha went on, "I wasn't keeping proper accounts either. Whatever came in, whatever went out. Now that the machine needs repairing, I can see it."

Pramod looked at the notebook again.

"How much do you earn in a month?"

Sudha laughed.

"I don't know exactly."

"It's your own notebook."

"This notebook has measurements and amounts due. It doesn't have all the expenses."

"Then all these days..."

"I just kept working."

The two of them were silent for a while.

The news continued on television.

Kusum Devi coughed in her room.

Naman had a book open, but his ears were turned towards the sitting room.

Pramod said, "Tomorrow we'll sit down and work out the accounts."

Sudha picked up the notebook.

"I have two garments to deliver tomorrow. I'll have to finish them tonight."

She went towards the veranda.

The machine began running again on the hand pedal.

The next evening Pramod came home early from the office.

He had brought a small calculator as well.

Sudha laughed.

"It isn't such a big account."

"We'll see."

The two of them sat down with the Measurement Register.

The first difficulty appeared at once.

Sudha had written down amounts due for many customers, but cloth, lining, hooks, zips, thread, electricity, machine oil—all of these existed separately in memory.

"This eight hundred is Sumitra's advance."

"Yes."

"Total due?"

"Thirteen hundred."

"Materials?"

"The lining is hers. The hooks are mine. The thread is mine."

"How much?"

Sudha estimated.

"Fifty or sixty."

"No estimates. We'll write it down."

"Who remembers now?"

Pramod smiled.

"So the little account has turned out to be quite difficult."

Sudha looked at him.

Hearing his own words, Pramod looked slightly embarrassed.

They began adding up the accounts for the previous three months.

Sudha took out the credit slips from Kailash, the thread seller.

She checked the amounts written on the small packets of zips and hooks.

They looked through old mobile-payment messages.

Many expenses could not be remembered.

Even so, a broad picture emerged.

Total receipts over three months—forty-two thousand seven hundred.

Materials and direct work expenses—around thirteen thousand.

Amounts that had gone separately into the household—more than seventeen thousand.

Sudha silently stared at the figures.

Pramod pressed the calculator again.

"Out of this seventeen thousand, my fifteen hundred, medicine, milk, the children..."

"Two gas cylinders."

"Those too?"

"Yes."

"And Ragini's dance costume?"

"The cloth was hers."

"You did the sewing for free."

"She's family."

Pramod said nothing.

Neither did Sudha.

There was no column in those accounts for domestic labour.

Cooking meals, giving an elderly mother her medicine on time, keeping track of the children's school notices, folding clothes—neither of them felt any wish to turn these things into figures.

The argument was not about fixing a price for Sudha's labour.

This time they were only trying to trace the money that had gone on changing hands until it lost its name.

Pramod said, "Tomorrow I'll return the fifteen hundred for the insurance. Also write down how much we have taken from the sewing money for household expenses this month."

Sudha said, "First the machine."

"Yes. The machine."

The next day Pramod offered to give the full three thousand two hundred.

Sudha refused.

"Why should you pay the whole amount?"

"The money fell short because of household expenses."

"Some of it is my earnings too."

In the end they decided that Pramod would first return the fifteen hundred. Milk and medicine would be counted under shared household expenses. Sudha would put in the rest from her own savings.

Once the matter was put on paper, there was less room for quarrel.

The amount was no longer anyone's honour; it was simply an amount.

Shambhu came again.

He changed the shuttle.

He tightened the belt.

He opened the motor and cleaned it.

He ran the machine.

The first seam was completed without a single skipped stitch.

Sudha ran her hand over the back of the cloth.

"It's fine now."

Shambhu said, "You work a great deal. Give it some rest from time to time too."

Sudha laughed.

"The machine?"

"Both of you."

Shambhu left.

Meanwhile, the order for thirty-six skirts and eighteen kurtis had already gone to another tailor.

Sudha made no attempt to win it back.

It was a loss.

It was also the first clear lesson of the accounts.

Sudha added two new columns to the Measurement Register —"Materials" and "Went to the household."

Ragini stood by the table watching.

"Ma, why so much accounting?"

"So I can see where the money from the work went."

"Couldn't you see before?"

"Roughly."

"And now?"

"Now it's a little clearer."

Ragini read the words "Measurement Register" written at the top of the notebook.

"It should be called 'Sewing Accounts.'"

Sudha said, "The accounts won't work without the measurements either."

Ragini laughed.

A few days later, as Kusum Devi was leaving for the market, she came to the veranda.

"Daughter-in-law, do you have five hundred? I need to buy a few things for the puja. Pramod is at the office."

Sudha opened the drawer.

There were now two envelopes inside.

On one was written: "Advance/Materials."

On the other: "Income."

Sudha opened the second envelope.

She took out five hundred.

Kusum Devi looked towards the first envelope.

"There's more in that one."

"That is customers' advance money, Ma."

"Oh."

Kusum Devi took the five hundred.

"Will you write this under household expenses?"

Sudha looked at her for a moment.

"Yes."

Kusum Devi left.

Sudha wrote the date in the notebook.

"Puja items—500."

She wrote nothing beneath it.

Not "small."

Not "large."

The month changed.

The sound of the machine became regular again.

Now, before taking on a job, Sudha thought not only about the date but also about the expense.

How much thread would be needed.

How much lining.

How much time.

How much advance she should ask for.

Earlier, when a customer said, "Why so much advance?" Sudha would become self-conscious.

Now she simply said, "The money for materials is separate."

There was no harshness in that sentence.

Only a boundary.

One evening, two of Pramod's colleagues came to the house.

Tea was made.

In the course of conversation, one colleague looked at the machine on the veranda and asked, "Bhabhiji, does she sew as a hobby, or does she take paid work too?"

Pramod opened his mouth to answer.

Sudha was straightening the edge of a piece of cloth.

Pramod paused for a moment.

"She takes work."

That was all he said.

"She must make a decent amount?"

Pramod looked at Sudha again.

Sudha said, "It depends on the month."

The conversation moved to another subject.

There was no announcement in the house after that brief reply.

Nor did Kusum Devi immediately stop using the words "sewing expenses."

Even now, from time to time, she would say, "Pay it from the daughter-in-law's sewing money."

The only difference was that Sudha now looked at the envelope first.

Whose money was it?

For the work?

Income?

How much could reasonably be taken out as the household's share?

One night Pramod came with the household-expense notebook.

"Next month Naman's school fees, Ma's check-up, and the electricity bill all fall in the same week."

Sudha stopped the machine.

"Yes."

"How much do you expect to save from sewing this month?"

Sudha opened the Measurement Register.

She looked at the list of work.

"If everyone pays on time, around five thousand. But I'll have to leave two thousand for materials."

Pramod wrote something in his notebook.

"Then we shouldn't count on more than three thousand for the household?"

"Not for now."

"All right."

He got up and left.

Sudha started the machine again.

Ragini was doing her homework there.

She looked up.

"Ma, Papa doesn't call your earnings small anymore?"

Sudha cut the thread with scissors, not with her teeth.

"It takes time for people's words to change."

"Then?"

"The accounts changed first."

Ragini bent over her notebook again.

Sudha took out the bobbin.

It was almost empty.

She fitted a new spool of thread and began winding the bobbin.

The fine thread spun rapidly, building itself up around the little tube.

From a distance, its thickness had seemed almost nothing.

When the machine stopped, the bobbin was full.

Sudha placed it on her palm, looked at the date of the next job on the open page of the Measurement Register, and then fitted it back into the machine.

STORY 269

The Examination Form

In Prabhakar Jha's house in Sonpura village, two dates had been chasing each other since the second week of September.

September twelfth.

September thirteenth.

September twelfth was the last day for Ragini to fill out her B.Sc. third-year examination form.

September thirteenth was the date for depositing the second instalment of Roshan's competitive-exam coaching fee in Darbhanga.

There was only one night between the two dates, but in the eyes of the household they did not carry equal weight.

Ragini kept the printed sheet of her examination form between the pages of a book.

The university's name was printed at the top; below it were her registration number, subjects, choices of examination centre, and the final date in bold type.

The total amount due was three thousand four hundred and sixty rupees.

One corner of the sheet had bent slightly because several times a day Ragini would take it out, look at the date, and put it back inside the book.

Roshan's fee slip lay openly on the table in the sitting room.

Second instalment: twelve thousand five hundred rupees.

The first instalment had been paid two months earlier by borrowing from their maternal uncle and adding Prabhakar Babu's savings.

Roshan was preparing for bank, railway, and Staff Selection examinations.

At home, his coaching was called “preparation.”

Ragini's college was usually called simply “college.”

No one had written down this distinction as a rule.

But the words had made their own chairs in the house.

Prabhakar Babu's main income came from the milk collection centre.

Payment came every fifteen days.

This time the next payment was due on September seventeenth.

There was about six thousand rupees in cash at home.

There were also two old dues for oil, medicines, and provisions.

In the morning, counting money on the table, Prabhakar Babu said, "We won't be able to arrange Roshan's instalment by the thirteenth."

Putting tea on the stove, Neera Devi asked, "What about Ragini's form?"

Prabhakar Babu's fingers stopped on the notes.

"How much?"

"Three thousand four hundred and sixty."

"That much?"

"Form fee, laboratory fee, and old dues—all together."

Prabhakar Babu counted one of the notes again, as though counting it a second time might make the sum grow.

"We'll see."

In that house, "we'll see" was the sort of sentence spoken both before making a decision and in order to postpone one.

Ragini was sitting on the veranda with her chemistry notebook open.

She heard the conversation from the kitchen clearly.

Her hand went to the examination form tucked inside the book, but she did not take it out.

That afternoon Shashibhushan Kaka arrived.

He was Prabhakar Babu's younger brother and ran a seed-and-fertiliser shop in the market.

Whenever money was short in the household, his advice arrived even without being asked for.

After serving tea in the sitting room, Ragini was turning to go inside when Shashibhushan Kaka said, "First decide the priority."

"What priority?" Prabhakar Babu asked.

"Roshan's age is passing. Two or three years matter a great deal in competitive examinations. If his coaching breaks midway, even the first instalment will have been wasted."

Neera Devi stopped beside the doorway.

Kaka went on, "Ragini is studying anyway. What harm will there be if she waits a year? She can sit the examination next year."

For a moment such silence fell over the sitting room that even the tap-tap of the grinding stone outside could be heard.

Ragini forgot to go inside.

Prabhakar Babu lowered his eyes.

Roshan moved a finger over his phone screen, though the screen had gone dark long before.

Neera Devi asked softly, "What do you mean by making her wait a year?"

"Don't have her fill the form. Don't pay the fee now. Later, when the household's condition improves."

"Her year?"

"A year isn't going to run away, is it?"

By then Grandmother Bindeshwari Devi had also come in from the courtyard. She said, "The girl has studied. She's reached B.Sc. Let her stay home for a year; she'll see to the household work too."

For the first time, Ragini entered the sitting room.

She looked at no one.

She placed her examination form on the table beside Roshan's fee slip.

The two sheets touched each other.

On one: twelve thousand five hundred.

On the other: three thousand four hundred and sixty.

On one: the thirteenth.

On the other: the twelfth.

Ragini said only, "My date comes first."

Suppressing a smile, Shashibhushan Kaka said, "Just because the date comes first doesn't mean the need comes first."

Ragini did not answer.

She left the sheet on the table and went to her room.

Her room was really a space she shared with her grandmother.

Grandmother's cot stood on one side, an iron trunk on the other, and between them Ragini's small study table.

She sat at the table but could not open a book.

Outside, voices rose again in the sitting room.

Neera Devi was saying, "Stopping is an easy word. Starting again is difficult."

Grandmother said, "In our time, which daughter studied this much?"

Neera Devi replied, "Her time is not your time now."

Grandmother's voice sharpened a little. "So does money grow on trees in this house?"

Roshan spoke for the first time. "Don't quarrel because of me."

Kaka immediately said, "Not because of you. Because of your future."

Roshan fell silent again.

By evening the household had not split into two rows, but everyone's sentences had chosen a side of their own.

Grandmother and Kaka said Roshan's preparation must not be interrupted now.

Neera Devi said stopping Ragini's studies was not an option.

Prabhakar Babu was caught between money and dates.

Roshan stayed silent.

Ragini listened.

At dinner, Ragini served rice as usual.

Grandmother's plate first.

Then Babuji, Kaka, Roshan, Ma, and finally her own.

No one noticed that order.

After dinner, while Neera Devi was tidying the kitchen, she asked Ragini, "What are you thinking?"

Ragini kept wiping the plates for a while.

"First I want to understand what actually closes after which date."

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone says that if Roshan's instalment isn't paid on the thirteenth, the first payment will be lost. Has anyone asked?"

Neera Devi did not answer.

"If I don't fill my form, no one has asked when I will be able to take the next examination either."

Wringing out the cloth, Neera Devi said, "Go and ask tomorrow."

The next morning Ragini went to college.

The college veranda was crowded with students filling out forms.

Someone was searching for a photocopy of an Aadhaar card, someone for a registration number, someone for the amount of the fee.

Ragini helped her friend Nutan fill out her form.

After the form had been submitted, Nutan asked, "Yours?"

Ragini said, "Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow is the last day."

"I know."

A notice was pasted outside the college office.

Regular fee until eleven fifty-nine at night on September twelfth.

September thirteenth and fourteenth with a late fee.

After that, the portal would close.

Ragini photographed the notice on her phone.

She asked the office clerk, "If I don't fill the form this time, then next time?"

Pushing his spectacles upward, the clerk said, "You'll have to wait until the next examination cycle. We'll have to see the university schedule. It may affect the continuity of your scholarship as well."

"A year?"

"I can't say exactly right now. Whenever the next cycle opens."

Ragini asked no second question.

After leaving the college, she called the office number of Roshan's coaching centre.

No one answered the first time.

The second time, a young man answered.

Ragini did not give her name.

She asked, "If the second instalment isn't paid on the date, is the student expelled?"

The reply came from the other end, "No. There is a seven-day grace period. If an application is submitted, there is also a facility to change batches. Practice tests can continue separately."

"Will the first instalment be wasted?"

"No."

"Where can I find the written rule?"

"You can collect the fee policy from the office."

Ragini ended the call.

There was no miracle in that short conversation.

Twelve thousand five hundred was still twelve thousand five hundred.

The household's shortage was still a shortage.

But for the first time, the fear that "if not by the thirteenth, everything is over" grew a little smaller.

When Roshan returned from coaching that evening, Ragini stopped him on the veranda.

"Your instalment has a seven-day grace period?"

Roshan was startled.

"Who told you?"

"The office."

"I didn't know."

"Had you asked?"

Roshan remained silent.

He had looked only at the date printed in bold on the fee slip.

"There is also a facility to change batches," Ragini said.

Roshan's face did not change, but for the first time he asked the date on his sister's examination form.

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"And after that?"

"Two days with a late fee. After that, the portal closes."

Roshan leaned his back against a pillar of the veranda.

"The milk payment will come on the seventeenth."

"If it comes on time."

"Usually it's a day early or late."

"Then it should come within seven days."

For the first time, Roshan looked at his fee slip not as a crisis but as a paper carrying a date.

That night the family gathered in the sitting room again.

This time Ragini herself said, "I want to speak for five minutes."

Shashibhushan Kaka was still at the house.

Grandmother was sitting on the cot, propped against a pillow.

A small bundle of notes lay in front of Prabhakar Babu.

Ragini showed the college notice on her phone.

Roshan opened the photograph of the fee policy he had obtained from the coaching office.

Ragini said, "I'm not saying Roshan's coaching isn't necessary. It is."

Kaka nodded.

"All I'm saying is this: before deciding, look at which expense will immediately close something if it isn't paid today, and which one allows seven more days."

Prabhakar Babu read the fee policy.

"Did Roshan know this rule?"

Roshan said, "No. I asked today. It's correct."

Kaka looked at him. "What if the coaching people make excuses later?"

Roshan said, "I'll submit the application in writing. I'll take a receipt."

Ragini placed the college notice on the table.

"My regular fee is valid until tomorrow. There is a late fee for two days. After that, the portal closes. Then I have to wait for the next examination cycle. It may affect my scholarship too."

Grandmother asked, "How much is the scholarship?"

"Six thousand a year."

For the first time, a calculation seemed to enter Grandmother's eyes.

Shashibhushan Kaka said, "But even a week lost from Roshan's preparation is a loss."

Ragini looked at him.

"Maybe. Even so, would it be right to stop my entire examination cycle out of fear of losing seven days?"

Kaka did not fall silent.

"A boy has an age limit for competitive examinations."

"My university session has limits too."

This time Neera Devi spoke in between. "At least let the one whose studies we are talking about stopping finish what she has to say."

For the first time, Ragini sat down on a chair in the sitting room.

Until then she had been standing by the doorway.

The small change happened without anyone announcing it.

Prabhakar Babu asked, "Then what's the solution?"

Ragini said, "There is about six thousand in the house. Pay for my form. The rest will cover the essential household expenses. Roshan will submit an application tomorrow for the seven-day grace period. The milk payment will come on the seventeenth. Even if it is delayed by a day or two, it will still be within seven days."

Prabhakar Babu did the sums in his head.

"What if the payment is five days late?"

Roshan said, "Then I'll take the option of changing batches. I won't stop studying. I'll keep using the library and taking the practice tests."

Kaka immediately said, "If you change batches, the teacher will change."

In a calm voice Roshan said, "If one week can break my preparation, what have I learned from six months of coaching?"

The sentence was not loud.

That was why it was heard clearly.

Grandmother looked at Ragini.

"Can't you stay at home for a year and study?"

Ragini said, "I can study. But without the examination, that study won't move to the next stage."

Grandmother was silent for a while.

Then she asked, "When is the examination after the form is filled?"

"Two months later."

"Will you pass?"

Ragini did not smile.

"If I study, the chances will improve."

The corner of Grandmother's mouth moved slightly.

The decision did not come from any speech.

Prabhakar Babu counted the notes again.

He set aside three thousand four hundred and sixty.

Giving the remaining money to Neera Devi, he said, "Run the house for five days with this."

Neera Devi asked, "Roshan will submit the application tomorrow?"

Roshan said, "First thing in the morning."

As he rose from his chair, Shashibhushan Kaka said, "I only said what I thought was proper."

Without smiling, Neera Devi replied, "Even what seems proper can change when you look at the time and the date."

Kaka said nothing.

The next day the cyber centre was crowded.

Ragini reached there at nine in the morning.

The server stalled twice.

Once, an error appeared in the spelling of her name.

She corrected it.

She selected her laboratory subject.

The photograph uploaded.

When it was time to pay the fee, her hand trembled slightly.

A circular symbol kept spinning on the screen for a long time.

Then the words appeared: "Payment successful."

The man at the centre printed two copies for her.

Ragini did not fold the first sheet.

She went straight to the college, had it verified, signed it, and deposited one copy in the file.

She kept the second copy to take home.

At that same time, Roshan was standing in a queue outside the coaching office in Darbhanga.

He wrote an application: payment from the milk collection centre was expected on September seventeenth; he requested a seven-day extension for the instalment.

The office clerk changed the date and wrote September nineteenth.

Roshan did not leave without taking a receipt.

By the evening of September seventeenth, the milk payment had not arrived.

For the first time, Prabhakar Babu became worried.

Kaka said over the phone, "I told you."

On the morning of September eighteenth, a message came from the collection centre: the payment had reached the account.

Prabhakar Babu withdrew the money from the bank and brought it home.

Roshan deposited the instalment before the nineteenth.

The coaching teacher did not change.

The batch did not change either.

No one in the house celebrated the matter as a victory.

The crisis had passed, that was all.

But the calendar hanging on the sitting-room wall had changed.

Earlier, Roshan had drawn a red circle around September thirteenth.

There had been no mark on Ragini's twelfth.

On the night the form was filled, Neera Devi made a small blue tick on the twelfth.

Roshan drew a thin line through his red circle on the thirteenth and made a new circle around the nineteenth.

The next morning, looking at the calendar, Grandmother asked, "Why did this date move?"

Roshan said, "The fee date moved."

Grandmother looked toward the blue tick on the twelfth.

"And this?"

From the veranda, Ragini answered, "The form was filled."

Grandmother asked nothing more.

The calendar remained hanging on the wall as before.

The blue tick on the twelfth stayed where it was.

The red circle on the nineteenth stayed where it was.

The two dates no longer crossed each other's path.

STORY 270

The Kitchen Door

The kitchen door in the old house at Rambagh was the busiest door of all.

It did not open toward the road.

It opened onto the courtyard.

Even so, from five in the morning until ten at night, someone or other would be standing at its threshold.

"Tea first."

"Porridge without salt."

"Pack a dry vegetable dish in the lunchbox today."

"I have to leave at seven."

"Make the eggs later; the worship is still to be done."

From inside the kitchen, all these voices belonged to different people.

But there was only one stove.

The second burner of the gas stove had been out of order for three days.

The repairman had said a part would have to be ordered.

Kiran had been a daughter-in-law in this house for twelve years.

She knew the kitchen sequence by heart.

Her father-in-law Harimohan Babu's porridge.

Her mother-in-law Vimala Devi's milk for worship.

Her husband Shailesh's flatbread and vegetable dish.

Her brother-in-law Neeraj's eggs.

Her daughter Ritu's school lunchbox.

Phulo's tea.

Phulo washed the dishes and swept and mopped for two hours every morning, then went to work in another house.

Kiran's own tea was not written anywhere in the sequence.

She usually managed two sips while changing pans.

On the first morning after the second burner failed, the whole sequence went awry.

While Harimohan Babu's porridge was on the stove, Shailesh came to the door.

"My train is at half past six. Can you make two flatbreads?"

Kiran looked at the clock.

Ten past six.

Ritu's school vehicle came to the bend at six thirty-five.

Her potato-and-chickpea dish was only half cooked.

Kiran took down the porridge and put the griddle on the flame.

From the veranda Vimala Devi called, "Has onion touched the griddle?"

"No."

"Boil the milk for the offering first. After that, make whatever you have to."

Kiran took the griddle off.

She put the milk on.

Ritu came to the door with her schoolbag on her back.

"Ma, my lunchbox?"

"It's being made."

"The vehicle will be here."

Shailesh was looking at the clock.

Neeraj stood at the threshold holding two eggs.

"My workout is at seven."

Kiran looked at him.

"Not the eggs now."

Vimala Devi came inside.

"Eggs will not go on the stove before the worship."

Neeraj put the eggs in a bowl.

"Then I'll eat outside."

Vimala Devi's face tightened a little.

"Outside, when there is food at home?"

Neeraj said nothing.

Ritu's vehicle sounded its horn at the bend.

Kiran filled the lunchbox with the potato-and-chickpea dish.

The flatbread had not been made.

She put in two slices of dry bread as well.

Ritu ran off.

For one moment, the space by the door was empty.

Then Phulo came and stood there.

"Didi, I have to leave at seven ten."

Kiran looked toward the stove.

The milk was about to boil over.

Shailesh's flatbreads were still to be made.

Harimohan Babu's porridge was cooling in the bowl.

She said to Phulo, "Could you have tea at the next house today?"

Phulo said, "All right," and turned away.

That evening Kiran took down the old black slate hanging on the kitchen door.

The slate had once been for the milkman.

How many litres of milk had come and how much was due used to be written on it.

For a long time there had been nothing on it but white chalk smudges.

Kiran washed it and wiped it clean.

The next morning she wrote—

5:45 — Babuji's porridge

6:05 — milk for the offering

6:15 — Ritu's lunchbox

6:30 — Shailesh's flatbreads

6:50 — Neeraj

7:05 — Phulo's tea

She did not write her own name.

She hung the slate outside the door.

Things ran a little better on the first day.

Harimohan Babu ate his porridge at seven, but it was ready at five forty-five.

Vimala Devi was pleased that the offering was ready on time.

Ritu's lunchbox was closed by six twenty.

Shailesh left on time.

Neeraj looked at his phone until his eggs were made.

Phulo's tea was ready at seven ten.

On the second morning Kiran saw that "Shailesh's flatbreads" had moved upward on the slate.

6:30 had been struck out and 6:10 written in its place.

Ritu's lunchbox had been pushed to 6:25.

Kiran asked no one about it.

She began work according to the new sequence.

At six twenty Ritu was standing at the door again.

"Ma, my lunchbox?"

"Five minutes."

"The vehicle won't wait five minutes."

Kiran did not reply.

Taking his flatbreads, Shailesh said, "It worked out properly today."

Ritu's lunchbox was ready, but she had to run to the bend.

The vehicle had already left.

Shailesh took her to school on his motorcycle.

That evening he said, "So much trouble over this?"

Taking off her shoes, Ritu said, "The trouble was five minutes."

Shailesh did not laugh.

On the third day there was another change on the slate.

"Milk for the offering" had moved from 6:05 to 5:50.

"Babuji's porridge" was at 6:15.

Early that morning Vimala Devi said, "It is Ekadashi today. I'll do the worship early."

Kiran nodded.

Harimohan Babu was reading the newspaper on the veranda.

When the porridge was brought to him, he looked at the clock.

"So early?"

Kiran said, "The sequence said six fifteen."

Harimohan Babu pushed his glasses up onto his forehead.

"When did I say six fifteen?"

Kiran paused.

"It was already like that in the sequence."

"When do I ever eat before seven?"

From the door of the prayer room Vimala Devi said, "That is how it has always been done."

Harimohan Babu put the lid back on the bowl.

"If it has been done that way, must it always be done that way? What sort of rule is that?"

Vimala Devi said nothing.

For the first time Kiran turned and looked at the slate again.

Times were written on it, but the reasons for those times were not.

The stove repairman came in the afternoon.

He opened the stove and examined it.

"The part will be available tomorrow."

Kiran asked, "Will it run on one burner?"

"It will, but changing vessels again and again will take time."

Vimala Devi said, "If it takes time, wake up earlier in the morning."

Kiran said nothing to that sentence.

She woke at four forty-five in the morning.

That night after dinner, everything on the slate was written again.

This time Kiran left the chalk on the doorframe.

Whoever wanted whatever time could write it themselves.

In the morning the slate was full.

5:30 — offering

5:45 — Babuji

6:00 — Shailesh

6:10 — Neeraj

6:20 — Ritu

6:40 — tea

No one had written "why."

Kiran lit the stove.

First she put the milk on.

Then the porridge.

Then the flatbreads.

Then the eggs.

Ritu's lunchbox came last.

At six twenty-three Ritu came to the door.

She read the slate.

"My vehicle is at six thirty-five."

From inside Neeraj said, "My workout is at seven too."

Ritu said, "You can walk there five minutes late."

Neeraj laughed.

"You'll decide that?"

Ritu fell silent.

Kiran was filling the lunchbox with the vegetable dish.

Again the flatbread could not be made.

That night, while doing her homework in her room, Ritu brought up the slate.

"Ma, does whoever writes a time first get their food first?"

Folding clothes, Kiran said, "For now, that's what it seems like."

"Then I'll write five o'clock the night before."

Kiran burst out laughing.

"Then everyone will write four o'clock."

Ritu laughed too.

Then she asked seriously, "Where is your name?"

Kiran's hands stopped for a moment.

"I'm the one who makes it all."

"But your tea?"

Kiran straightened the fold in the clothes.

"Tea happens somewhere in between."

Ritu asked nothing more.

The next morning Kiran's name was not on the slate.

But "Phulo's tea" had disappeared too.

Reading the slate, Phulo said, "Who erased what I wrote?"

Kiran was startled.

"You had written it?"

"I wrote it last night when I was leaving."

6:40 was still written on the slate, but in the place where the name had been there was a grey chalk smear.

Vimala Devi came out and asked, "What happened?"

Phulo said, "Nothing."

She picked up the broom.

Kiran did not stop her.

But that day she made Phulo's tea at five past seven.

Lifting the cup, Phulo said, "I don't need to write my time, Didi."

Kiran asked, "Why?"

Phulo shrugged.

"I work here. I'm not family."

The sentence was short.

Inside the kitchen it remained for a long time.

Kiran went on wiping the griddle.

Outside the door Shailesh was talking about office matters on the phone.

Neeraj was tying his shoes.

Ritu was looking for her schoolbag.

Vimala Devi was pouring water at the tulsi plant.

Kiran did not know whether anyone had heard Phulo's sentence.

That afternoon the second burner of the stove was repaired.

The repairman lit the flame and tested both burners.

"Now the work will go faster."

Kiran smiled.

"It used to go fast before too."

The repairman did not understand what she meant.

He gathered his tools and left.

Once the second burner had been repaired, everyone assumed the slate would no longer be needed.

Vimala Devi said, "Take it down now. It makes the door look bad."

Kiran did not take the slate down.

She only wiped it clean.

That evening Harimohan Babu looked at it and asked, "Has tomorrow's sequence been written?"

Kiran said, "You all write it."

Harimohan Babu picked up the chalk.

Before writing anything he asked, "What time is Ritu's vehicle?"

"Six thirty-five."

"Shailesh?"

"Seven ten."

"My medicine?"

From inside Vimala Devi said, "After seven fifteen."

Harimohan Babu did not write anyone's name on the slate.

He wrote—

6:00 — school lunchbox

6:25 — office flatbreads

6:50 — porridge for medicine

Then he handed the chalk to Kiran.

Neeraj was watching from outside.

"And mine?"

Harimohan Babu said, "Your workout place is five minutes away. Run there on an empty stomach and eat when you return."

Neeraj laughed.

"Babuji, are you making the rules now?"

Harimohan Babu laughed too.

"Not rules. I'm measuring distances."

Vimala Devi came to the slate.

She took the chalk to write "offering."

She paused for a few moments.

"Can the milk be boiled at night and kept ready?"

Kiran said, "It can."

"Then there's no need to hold up the stove in the morning."

Saying this, she put the chalk back.

Kiran felt no sense of victory rise within her.

She only thought that in twelve years, this question had been asked for the first time.

The next morning there were fewer names on the slate, because most places had times written instead. Kiran made Ritu's lunchbox first, then Shailesh's flatbreads.

Harimohan Babu's porridge stayed warm until seven. Neeraj's eggs were made when he returned from his run, and by then Vimala Devi had finished her worship.

Phulo washed the dishes and was about to leave, but she stopped at the door.

There was an empty line at the bottom of the slate, and the chalk lay on the doorframe. Phulo picked it up.

Slowly she wrote—

7:05 — Phulo's tea; 7:15 next house

After writing it, she put the chalk back where it had been. Kiran stood by the stove; she read the slate and said nothing.

At three minutes past seven, she put the water on to boil. The door was open.

Morning light from the courtyard was reaching all the way inside.

STORY 271

The Red Box

Bhagirathi Devi's room stood at the very back of an old neighbourhood in Saharsa.

For years, a red iron box had been kept beneath the cot in that room.

The red paint was no longer as bright as it once had been.

The corners had blackened, and a long scratch ran across the middle of the lid.

Even so, everyone in the house still called it simply "the red box."

No one called it the old-clothes box, or the jewellery box, or the chest of papers.

Just the red box.

Bhagirathi Devi herself never listed its contents in front of anyone either.

Within the family, this was more a habit than a mystery.

The problem began when it was decided that the floor in the back room had to be replaced.

During the rains, damp rose in that part of the house, and two planks near the cot had rotted underneath.

The carpenter said every heavy object would have to be moved out for two days.

As Umesh Babu looked over the things in the room, his gaze stopped at the red box.

"This should be emptied first," he said. "Then it will be easier to lift."

Bhagirathi Devi remained seated on the cot.

"Why empty it?"

"It is heavy."

"Four people can lift it."

Umesh Babu laughed, but Bhagirathi Devi did not.

Just then Sushma came in from the kitchen.

She was Umesh Babu's wife and had lived in this house for thirty-six years.

"Ma, the damp should be checked too," Sushma said. "If there are clothes inside, they may have been ruined."

Bhagirathi Devi glanced once at the box.

"If anything is ruined, I will see to it."

For a moment, something like hurt crossed Sushma's face.

In thirty-six years of running the household, she had taken care of everything from Bhagirathi Devi's medicines to her spectacle case.

But the red box lay beyond the reach of her hands.

"I am not insisting that it be opened," she said softly. "I am talking about something practical."

Aditi, standing by the doorway, had been listening to all this.

Aditi was Umesh Babu and Sushma's daughter; she studied in Delhi and had come home for the holidays.

At once she said, "If Grandmother does not want it opened, why does it need to be?"

Umesh Babu turned toward her.

"A household does not run by rules from books."

Aditi said, "A private thing can remain private even inside a family home."

"Private?" Sushma repeated the word.

This time there was more weariness than hurt in her voice.

"What is there in this house that I can call private, Aditi?"

Aditi fell silent.

The matter rose from the red box and spread through the whole house.

Umesh Babu said that in an old family home, ownership of every object could not be determined separately.

Sushma said that those who cared for the family ought at least to know what was kept where in case of an emergency.

Aditi said that caring for someone did not mean opening things without permission.

Bhagirathi Devi listened to all three of them.

She took no one's side.

She said only, "Replace the floor. The box will be lifted closed."

The next day two labourers and the carpenter arrived.

The cot was carried out, the table was moved, and the old chest was placed on the veranda.

It took four pairs of hands to lift the red box.

It was heavier than they had expected.

As they lifted it, something metallic inside gave a faint clink.

The sound was very small, but everyone present in the house heard it.

Umesh Babu said nothing.

Neither did Sushma.

Aditi instinctively looked at the lid of the box.

Bhagirathi Devi caught her glance.

Aditi immediately looked away.

The box was placed against the veranda wall.

By afternoon, piles of other things had gathered around it, yet the red box continued to stand apart.

As though a closed object could speak more loudly than all the open ones.

The subject came up again over lunch.

This time the reason was a phone call from the younger uncle.

He wanted an old family silver bowl, which he believed Bhagirathi Devi had with her.

After putting down the phone, Umesh Babu said, "See? Everyone thinks you have something or other."

Bhagirathi Devi went on mixing dal into her rice.

"Let them think what they like."

"Do you have the bowl or not?"

"Is this question about the bowl, or about the box?"

Umesh Babu did not answer.

Aditi wanted to smile, but stopped when she saw Sushma's face.

That night, while folding clothes, Sushma said to Aditi, "You must think I want to open the box."

Aditi said, "That is what you said."

"In this house I have taken Ma through two operations, counted out her medicines, brought her pension from the bank, but nowhere else has a boundary like this been drawn."

"So?"

"So sometimes this boundary feels like distrust of me."

For the first time, Aditi understood that the same closed lid was saying three different things to three generations.

For Grandmother, it meant a place of her own.

For her mother, it was a line drawn just beyond belonging.

For her father, it was one more uncertain object among countless others in the house.

And for her, it was a principle whose value she had read about in books but was testing at home for the first time.

The next morning, the carpenter was prying up the rotten planks.

Bhagirathi Devi sat on a chair on the veranda, looking at the red box.

Sushma brought her tea.

After a while Bhagirathi Devi said, "Sushma."

"Yes?"

"Do you remember the sari with the red border that I wore on the second day after your wedding?"

Sushma looked startled.

"Yes."

"It is in that box."

Umesh Babu looked up from his newspaper.

Aditi heard her too.

Bhagirathi Devi went on, "Come with me this afternoon. I will take it out. I want to give it to you."

For a few moments Sushma said nothing.

"To me?"

"Yes. But receiving the sari does not mean you have the right to look through the box."

The sentence was not harsh.

Bhagirathi Devi said it in an ordinary tone, as if she were remarking that there was too little sugar in the tea.

That afternoon Sushma went with her into the half-finished part of the room.

The door was not shut, but Aditi and Umesh Babu stayed outside.

A little later Sushma came out carrying the old sari with the red border.

Aditi could not tell whether her eyes were wet or whether dust had got into them.

The box was closed again.

"The silver bowl?" Umesh Babu asked, half joking.

Sushma laughed for the first time.

"Ask your younger uncle."

The work on the floor continued until evening.

The next day new planks were fitted and covered with a layer of earth and cement.

The carpenter asked, "Will the box go under the cot again?"

Umesh Babu answered naturally, "Ask Ma."

At those three words, Aditi looked at her grandmother.

Bhagirathi Devi pointed out the right-hand corner beside the cot to the carpenter.

"Here. There will be less damp underneath now."

Four people lifted the box again.

This time no one mentioned its weight.

The box was placed in its new position.

Sushma did not send the sari with the red border to be washed.

She folded it and placed it on top of her own cupboard.

That evening Aditi came into her grandmother's room.

"Grandmother, what is really inside?"

The question had barely left her mouth when she herself burst out laughing.

Bhagirathi Devi laughed too.

"You want to know?"

"Very much."

"All right."

Aditi was startled.

Bhagirathi Devi did not open the box.

From beneath her pillow she took out an old cloth pouch containing several buttons.

"Choose two from these. They will suit your kurta."

Aditi kept looking at the buttons.

The red box lay quietly beside the cot.

After a while she chose two blue buttons.

Bhagirathi Devi tied the pouch again.

Aditi got up to leave, then paused at the doorway.

She turned back and looked not at the box, but at her grandmother.

Bhagirathi Devi was cleaning her spectacles just then.

The red box was closed, but for the first time in that house, its remaining closed did not seem like anyone's defeat.

STORY 272

The Sister's Phone

In Vidyanand Jha's house, the sound of a phone after ten at night was an event in itself.

All day long Abhishek's mobile kept ringing—office, clients, bank, friends, motor mechanic.

People called Vidyanand Babu too until evening—sometimes about the electricity bill, sometimes insurance, sometimes to ask after an old colleague.

Malti Devi's small phone usually lay by the kitchen window, and once or twice during the day her sister or some woman from her parental home would speak to her on it.

But the timing of Mrinalini's phone was measured by a different standard in the house.

She was the younger daughter of the family, twenty-four years old, and a temporary teacher at the nearby girls' school.

Three evenings a week, she taught the village's adolescent girls free of charge.

Her phone held the numbers of students, colleagues, the school head, the bookshop, and sometimes the mothers of students.

Even so, if her phone rang after ten at night, even the turning of a newspaper page in the sitting room would stop for a moment.

This rule was written on no piece of paper.

The rule was written into the habits of the household.

At ten, Malti Devi would say, "Mrinal, put your phone on charge."

The charger was by the sitting-room window.

Mrinalini would leave her phone there.

Abhishek took his phone into his own room, because his "office work" might come even at night.

Vidyanand Babu kept his phone beside his pillow, because "I am getting old; there might be an emergency."

Sometimes Mrinalini asked, "And my emergencies?"

The answer was usually laughter.

"Who is going to call you this late?" Abhishek would say.

"And whoever does should be questioned first," Vidyanand Babu would add.

Everyone understood what that sentence meant.

A few months earlier, there had been a great deal of talk in the lane about a teenage girl in the neighbourhood speaking on her mobile at night.

No one knew the whole story, but everyone had an opinion ready.

From that day on, Vidyanand Babu began using the word "propriety" more often.

Mrinalini did not argue.

She knew that some rules reveal their weakness not through argument but in an unexpected moment.

That moment came one night in Ashwin at eleven forty-two.

The house was almost ready for sleep.

The courtyard bulb had been switched off.

Malti Devi was checking the kitchen door.

Vidyanand Babu was turning off the radio in the sitting room.

Abhishek had come out to drink water.

Then Mrinalini's phone, lying on charge by the window, rang.

It was not very loud, but in the stillness of the night the sound reached the whole house.

Abhishek was nearest.

He looked at the screen.

An unknown number.

"Mrinal!" he called.

The phone rang a second time.

Mrinalini was coming out of her room when Abhishek answered it.

"Hello?"

A man's voice came from the other end.

"Is Mrinalini Didi there?"

Abhishek's face changed at once.

"Who are you?"

"I am Ranjit Sah. I have a medicine shop at Shankar Chowk. There is a girl—"

Abhishek cut him off. "At this hour?"

Mrinalini had reached them by then.

"Give me the phone."

"Wait. Let me understand first."

Vidyanand Babu had come over too.

"Who is it?"

Covering the mouthpiece with his hand, Abhishek said, "Some man. He is asking for Mrinalini."

Mrinalini took the phone from his hand.

"Hello, this is Mrinalini."

Ranjit Sah spoke quickly from the other end. "Didi, one of your students is sitting at my shop. She says her name is Kajal. I am giving her the phone."

Mrinalini was silent for a moment.

Vidyanand Babu asked, "Who is Kajal?"

Mrinalini gestured with her hand—wait.

Very faint breathing could be heard on the phone.

Then came the trembling voice of a teenage girl.

"Didi?"

"Yes, Kajal. Tell me. Where are you?"

"Shankar Chowk... at the medicine shop."

"Why are you there so late? Did you tell anyone at home?"

Kajal did not answer at once.

Mrinalini moved toward the veranda.

From behind her Vidyanand Babu said, "Put it on speaker so we can all hear."

Mrinalini turned and looked at him.

"No, Babu."

That small word suddenly became enormous in the house.

Vidyanand Babu's brows tightened.

"Why?"

Keeping the phone to her ear, Mrinalini said, "She called me."

"Why should anything in the family be kept secret from the family?"

"First let me hear what she has to say."

She walked to the other end of the veranda.

Malti Devi stood by the door.

Abhishek looked at his father.

Vidyanand Babu wanted to say something, but just then he saw Mrinalini's expression change.

On the phone, Kajal was slowly telling her something.

Mrinalini asked only short questions in between.

"When did it happen?"

"Is there any woman at the shop?"

"Are your clothes very wet?"

"Is the pain severe?"

"Do you remember your home number?"

At the last question, Mrinalini fell silent again.

A few moments later she said, "All right. Don't tell anyone anything. I am coming now."

After ending the call, she went straight to her mother.

"Ma, come with me."

One look at her eyes told Malti Devi that this was not an ordinary matter.

"What happened?"

Mrinalini whispered something very softly into her ear.

Malti Devi stopped for a moment, then, without asking another question, turned toward the kitchen.

"Where is the old dark-blue salwar kept?"

"In my wardrobe."

"Take a large shawl too. And I will pack what else is needed."

Vidyanand Babu watched all this.

"What exactly is the matter?"

Mrinalini said, "Kajal has started her period and is having difficulty. Her clothes are stained. She cannot go home alone."

The hardness in Abhishek's face eased a little.

Vidyanand Babu said at once, "Then call her family."

"Her mother does not have a phone. She is afraid to speak to her father on his phone."

"Why is she afraid?"

Mrinalini looked directly at her father.

"Because she has been out late. He will first ask why she is late, and only after that, perhaps, what has happened to her."

Vidyanand Babu fell silent.

After the evening study session, Kajal had stayed at a tailoring shop to finish edging a wedding garment in place of her mother.

The owner wanted the work quickly.

When the shop closed, she set out for home.

On the way, her period began.

She was not prepared.

A stain spread across her salwar.

Two young men passed by laughing.

Kajal turned back and went into the medicine shop at Shankar Chowk.

Ranjit Sah's wife was in the rear of the shop, so Kajal found somewhere to sit.

Kajal did not have her own phone with her.

She remembered the number at home, but did not want to call her father directly.

Once at school, Mrinalini had made all the girls write down her number—"If you ever face trouble on the road, with your studies, or with your health, call me."

Kajal had memorized that number from the back of her notebook.

Vidyanand Babu kept listening.

"And that is why it has become eleven at night?" His voice was no longer as hard as before.

"Trouble does not ask permission from the clock before it comes," Malti Devi said as she took clothes from the wardrobe.

Abhishek picked up the car keys.

"I will drive."

Vidyanand Babu did not stop him.

Malti Devi prepared a small bag.

Into it she put the salwar, the shawl, a plastic bag, a clean cloth, and the things needed during a period.

Mrinalini kept her phone in her hand.

Suddenly Vidyanand Babu said, "I will come too."

Abhishek looked at him.

"All four of us?"

"Yes. It is night."

Mrinalini said nothing.

The car set off toward Shankar Chowk.

The road was almost empty.

The shutters of the shops were half down.

Dogs lay asleep in the middle of the road and moved aside slowly when the headlights fell on them.

No one spoke in the car.

Only once did Vidyanand Babu say, "Her father must be informed."

Mrinalini replied, "First we will ask Kajal."

"She is a minor."

"That is why we must take her home. But there is no need to tell the whole street about her body."

Vidyanand Babu began looking out of the window.

The medicine shop's shutter was half open.

Ranjit Sah stood outside.

Abhishek stopped the car.

"Didi?" Ranjit Sah said when he saw Mrinalini. "She is sitting at the back. My wife is with her."

Malti Devi and Mrinalini went inside.

The men remained outside.

In the small room at the back, Kajal sat curled up on a plastic chair.

Her face was not wet with tears, but her eyes looked as though she had been holding back her crying for a long time.

Ranjit Sah's wife had tied an old towel around her waist.

As soon as Mrinalini entered, Kajal tried to stand.

"Stay seated."

Malti Devi opened the bag.

"Change your clothes first."

Kajal looked at Malti Devi.

"Auntie, at home—"

"We will deal with home when we reach home. Your body first."

Mrinalini bolted the door from inside.

A little later Kajal came out in the blue salwar and dark shawl.

Her old clothes were in the plastic bag.

Vidyanand Babu stood at a distance.

Abhishek was asking Ranjit Sah about the shop's hours.

Kajal came over to Mrinalini.

"Didi, don't tell Babu that..."

She could not finish the sentence.

Mrinalini said, "We will say only as much as you feel is right. But someone at home must be informed."

Kajal said softly, "Ma can be told. Babu keeps the phone. Ma may answer if I ring twice—cut once, then call again."

That was the signal used in their home.

Mrinalini dialled the number.

The first time the phone rang, no one answered.

She cut the call.

The second time, after three rings, a woman's voice answered.

"Hello?"

Kajal's mouth trembled.

Mrinalini handed her the phone.

"Ma..."

The first question from the other end was, "Where are you?"

Kajal said nothing.

Then Mrinalini took the phone.

"Auntie, this is Mrinalini. Kajal is with me. She suddenly fell ill. We are bringing her home."

The woman's voice became very quiet.

"Very ill?"

Mrinalini said only, "You will understand. We have brought clothes with us."

There was silence on the other end for a few moments, then came the reply, "Bring her. I will wait by the gate."

The call ended.

In the car, Kajal sat between Malti Devi and Mrinalini.

She had pulled her shawl tightly across her knees.

Vidyanand Babu sat in the front seat.

As they reached the turn into the village, he suddenly said to Abhishek, "Don't sound the horn. Stop the car in front of the house."

Mrinalini looked at him.

That small act of care did not escape her notice.

The gate of Kajal's house stood half open in the darkness.

Her mother was outside.

The moment the car door opened, she caught hold of her daughter.

"What happened?"

Kajal whispered something into her ear.

Her mother closed her eyes for a moment.

Then she took the bag from Malti Devi.

"Thank you so much."

Just then a man's voice came from inside. "Who is there?"

Kajal flinched.

Her father came as far as the veranda.

"At this hour? What is all this?"

There was concern in his voice, but anger could be heard before the concern.

"The tailoring shop till this late? I had told you—"

Vidyanand Babu got out of the car.

Kajal lowered her head.

Mrinalini thought he would now tell him everything.

But Vidyanand Babu said only, "The child became unwell on the way. Take her inside first. The rest can wait until morning."

Kajal's father knew him.

"Oh, Vidyanand Babu! You all—"

"Mrinalini received a call. So we brought her home."

"What happened to her?"

Vidyanand Babu looked at Malti Devi for a moment.

"The women understand. The child is tired."

That was all.

For the first time, Mrinalini saw her father know something and still choose not to make it public.

The car turned back toward home.

It was past one in the morning now.

On the way, Abhishek reached to turn on the radio, then withdrew his hand without doing so.

After some distance, Vidyanand Babu asked, "What if I had put the call on speaker for everyone to hear?"

Before answering, Mrinalini looked at her mother's face.

Malti Devi was looking out of the window.

"Then perhaps Kajal would not have spoken at all," Mrinalini said.

Vidyanand Babu said nothing.

After reaching home, everyone went toward their own rooms.

Mrinalini started to put the phone back by the charger.

At that moment Vidyanand Babu said, "It is very late now. Take the phone with you."

Mrinalini looked at him.

"The battery is low."

"We will put another cable there tomorrow."

Abhishek almost laughed, but did not.

There was no formal family meeting the next morning.

Vidyanand Babu made no speech titled "Last Night's Incident."

He simply drank his tea and read the newspaper as usual.

Mrinalini was getting ready to go to school.

Abhishek ate breakfast while looking at messages on his phone.

Then the electrician arrived.

Mrinalini was startled.

"So early?"

Without folding the newspaper, Vidyanand Babu said, "The plug in your room is loose. Have it fixed."

The electrician went inside.

He installed a new socket by the study table.

Abhishek smiled.

"Well, special treatment."

Vidyanand Babu looked up from the newspaper.

"Your phone has always stayed beside your pillow. Who had the special treatment?"

Abhishek's smile stopped halfway.

Malti Devi kept stirring sugar into the tea, but the corner of her mouth lifted slightly.

Mrinalini said nothing.

Kajal did not come to school that afternoon.

Mrinalini looked at her empty bench but did not call.

She thought, let her have one day to breathe at her own pace.

In the evening, a short message came from Kajal's mother—"She is fine."

Mrinalini replied with only, "Good."

At ten that night, the old habit stirred again.

With the phone in her hand, Mrinalini came to the sitting-room window.

The old charger cable hung there.

She stood for a few moments.

Vidyanand Babu was listening to the news on the radio.

His eyes fell on Mrinalini.

"Why are you standing there?"

"I was going to put the phone on charge."

"Isn't the socket by your table fixed now?"

Mrinalini said only, "Yes."

She went back to her room.

She plugged the phone in by the table.

The door was half open.

A little later the screen lit up.

It was a message from Kajal—"Didi, I will come to class tomorrow."

Mrinalini read the message and lowered the phone screen.

The sound of the radio continued in the sitting room.

No one asked whose message it was.

STORY 273

The Tenant Girl

In that lane of Laheriasarai, the clink of the gate-chain at night could be heard more clearly than the daytime bell.

By day, rickshaws, vegetable sellers' calls, children's bicycles, and the whir of sewing machines blended all sound together. After ten at night, if the chain on the old blacksmith-made gate clinked even once, curtains stirred at the windows of three houses.

When Anamika Jha came to live as a tenant in that lane, Ram Pyari Devi showed her the gate on the very first day and said, "I fasten the chain at ten at night."

Anamika stood beneath the staircase with two trunks and a cloth bag beside her.

"I'm a nurse at the hospital," she said. "My shifts keep changing. Sometimes I'll return at midnight; sometimes I'll have to leave at five in the morning."

Ram Pyari Devi's hand stopped on the chain.

Her son Pramod had been showing Anamika the upstairs room. He came down and said, "It'll be difficult to keep opening the gate at all hours of the night."

Anamika said calmly, "If I can get a second key, I'll open and lock it myself."

Ram Pyari Devi did not answer at once. The upstairs room had been empty for three months. Her pension did not cover all the household expenses, and the income from Pramod's notebook-and-book shop rose and fell with the season.

At last she took out an old brass key and handed it to her.

"Don't ever leave the gate open."

"Never."

That second key became the lane's first piece of news.

That evening Lalita Kaki, who lived opposite, asked Sudha, "A separate key for the tenant girl?"

Sudha laughed. "Her work is like that."

"Work is work. But night is still night."

Sudha gave no reply to that sentence.

Anamika's routine matched no one else's.

Sometimes she came down the stairs at half past four in the morning, a small steel lunch box in her hand, a blue bag on her shoulder, her hair tied tightly back. Even the milkman had not arrived by then.

Sometimes she returned at one in the afternoon and slept through the evening.

Sometimes, at eleven at night, the hospital vehicle dropped her at the turn of the lane. She walked in and opened the gate with the brass key.

The clink of the chain became a clock for the households.

"She came at half past eleven last night."

"No, it was already midnight."

"My clock said eleven fifty-five."

They never agreed on the time, but there was always a discussion.

At first Anamika noticed none of this. Returning from the hospital, she would wash her hands and face, change her clothes, put rice on the small stove, and go to sleep.

Two weeks later she realized that even her sleep was a subject for the neighbourhood.

One afternoon she came downstairs to fill water. Lalita Kaki was there too.

"Slept this late today?"

Placing her bucket under the tap, Anamika said, "I was on night duty."

"I can never sleep in the daytime."

"You can after staying awake all night."

Lalita Kaki laughed, but the questioning did not end.

"Are there women at the hospital at night too?"

Anamika looked at her.

"Whether the patient is a woman or a man, the nurses have to be there."

She lifted the bucket and went upstairs.

The following week, one night, the hospital's small vehicle came all the way into the lane. It was raining hard. The driver opened an umbrella and escorted Anamika to the gate.

By morning, it was the driver's umbrella that had become the subject of discussion, not the rain.

"A man came all the way to the gate to drop her."

"It was the hospital vehicle," Sudha said.

"Does a man become a hospital just because 'hospital' is written on the vehicle?"

Sudha fell silent again.

That day Ram Pyari Devi went upstairs for the first time without any particular reason.

Anamika was not looking at a prescription on the table but at the printed schedule of her shifts.

Ram Pyari Devi stood at the door.

"Did you want to say something?" Anamika asked.

"No, only... it rained a lot last night, didn't it?"

"Yes."

"The vehicle came all the way in."

Anamika folded the schedule.

"The driver dropped me here. The road was under knee-deep water."

Ram Pyari Devi had her next sentence ready, but it did not come out.

She only said, "There are clothes spread out on the roof, and I can see clouds gathering again."

Anamika got up.

"I'll bring them down."

"No, you've been awake all night. I'll do it."

It was the first time Ram Pyari Devi had treated Anamika's daytime sleep not as laziness, but as sleep after work.

But the rest of the lane's clock kept ticking.

Customers began coming to Pramod's shop and asking for news of the tenant.

At first Pramod laughed it off. Then it began to make him uncomfortable.

One evening he said to his mother, "We could rent the room to someone else. All this coming and going at night isn't right."

Ram Pyari Devi was picking through rice.

"She pays the rent on time."

"It isn't about the rent."

"Then what is it about?"

Pramod searched for an answer.

"It's a neighbourhood. What will people say?"

Ram Pyari Devi picked a small stone from among the grains and set it aside.

"Will the people pay the rent?"

Pramod grew irritated.

"Ma, not everything is about money."

Ram Pyari Devi looked at him.

"Exactly. Then understand the hours of her work as work, not in terms of money."

Pramod said nothing.

Even so, the pressure did not end.

One day Shivnarayan Jha from the house opposite stopped Ram Pyari Devi near the gate.

"My daughter is grown up. This sort of coming and going at all hours of the night affects the conduct of the household."

Ram Pyari Devi asked, "Until what hour does a household's conduct remain proper?"

Shivnarayan Babu did not understand the question.

"I'm saying there ought to be a fixed time."

Ram Pyari Devi did not argue that day.

That night she called Anamika.

"What if the gate isn't opened after ten at night?"

Anamika was silent for a few moments.

"Then I won't be able to do night duty."

"Can't you change your shifts?"

"I can change one or two. Not every time. Everyone at the hospital has to do nights."

Ram Pyari Devi lowered her eyes.

Anamika said, "If it's difficult for you, give me a month. I'll find another place."

The sentence came more easily than Ram Pyari Devi had expected. She had thought Anamika would argue, become angry, list her rights.

She merely spoke of finding a new place.

For the next ten days, along with going to the hospital, Anamika also went looking for a room.

One landlord asked, "You'll live alone?"

"Yes."

"What time will you return at night?"

"Depends on the shift."

"Then it's difficult."

At another place she was told, "If you were a woman living with a family, that would be different."

At a third place the room was good, but the gate was locked at nine every night.

One day, sitting in the hospital rest room, Anamika crossed out three numbers.

Meanwhile, a letter arrived at Shivnarayan Babu's house.

His daughter Neelima, having completed her nursing training, had received a six-month appointment at a hospital in the city.

Her schedule for the first week included two night shifts.

Shivnarayan Babu read the paper three times.

"Night?"

"Yes, Babujee," Neelima said. "I did them during training too."

"That was in the hostel."

"The work is the same."

That evening, for the first time, the meaning of a time limit changed in Shivnarayan Babu's house.

When Neelima left for her first night shift, her father himself walked her to the turn of the lane.

As he returned, Anamika was leaving for the hospital.

Shivnarayan Babu stopped when he saw her.

"Your hospital vehicle drops employees home at night, doesn't it?"

Anamika stopped too.

"Our hospital vehicle does. Neelima's hospital may have a different arrangement. She should get the number from the hospital office."

"A reliable driver..."

"First find out what the hospital provides. An outside vehicle can come later."

Shivnarayan Babu nodded.

Anamika went on her way.

She neither reminded him of the old conversation nor smiled.

Two days later Neelima returned at a quarter past midnight.

The gate of the house opposite was already open. Shivnarayan Babu was sitting on the verandah.

That night Ram Pyari Devi was awake too.

Anamika was at the hospital then.

A vehicle stopped in the lane, Neelima got out, and the gate closed.

The curtain at Lalita Kaki's window stirred faintly.

In the morning she said to Sudha, "Neelima came home late last night."

Kneading flour, Sudha asked, "She was on duty, wasn't she?"

Lalita Kaki was silent for a moment.

"Yes, it was work."

It was the very sentence Sudha had once used for Anamika. This time no question followed it.

That day Ram Pyari Devi went upstairs.

In the room Anamika had set two empty boxes on a spread-out newspaper and was sorting her things into piles—things to keep, things to throw away, things to take with her.

"Found a place?" Ram Pyari Devi asked.

"I found one. It's far from the hospital, but there's no restriction on coming and going at night."

Ram Pyari Devi placed a hand on the doorframe.

"There'll be no restriction here now."

Anamika kept putting the books in her hand into the trunk.

"I understand."

"Then stay."

This time Anamika looked at Ram Pyari Devi.

"Maaji, the rule has changed—that is a good thing. But now, whenever the chain clinks, the first thing I wonder is which window will move. When I come back from work, before I remember my own room, I remember people's eyes."

Ram Pyari Devi remained silent.

Anamika continued, "At the new place, at least I'll be able to begin afresh."

There was sorrow on Ram Pyari Devi's face, but she did not invent another argument to stop her.

On the last Sunday of the month, Anamika's belongings were loaded onto a small tempo.

Pramod settled the final rent account. Sudha packed puris and vegetable curry into a box for her.

Ram Pyari Devi stood by the gate.

Anamika placed the brass key on her palm and handed it to her.

Looking at the key, Ram Pyari Devi said, "I had another copy made. You could have kept this one."

Anamika smiled.

"The key belongs to the house."

"It stays in the hand of whoever lives in the house."

"Someone else will live here now."

Ram Pyari Devi closed her fist around the key.

The tempo drove out of the lane.

For a few days, Ram Pyari Devi's gate remained silent after ten at night.

Out of habit, she sometimes woke at midnight. She would lie waiting for the sound of the chain, then smile at herself.

One night, at about half past one, there came a clear metallic clink.

Ram Pyari Devi sat up in bed.

For a moment she thought—Anamika has returned.

Then she realized that the sound had not come from her gate, but from Shivnarayan Babu's gate across the lane.

Neelima was returning from night duty.

Ram Pyari Devi did not go to the window.

She lay down again.

The chain clinked once more in the lane, and then the night returned to its old silence.

STORY 274

The Gift Sari

In a lane off Nehru Marg in Laheriasarai, Arun Jha's house was one where the custom of giving gifts went back a long way. Books on birthdays, clothes at festivals, sweets for the children after returning from a journey —some object or other was always changing hands.

When Madhulika came into the family after her marriage, Renu Didi was the first to explain this custom to her.

Renu was Arun's elder sister. She had never married. She taught history at a girls' school in town and quietly met many of the household's small and large expenses from her own earnings.

When Madhulika first arrived at her marital home carrying her school appointment letter, it was Renu who had a monthly bus pass made for her, showed her the route on the first day, and even wrote down the headmistress's name.

"In a new place, the first month brings more questions," Renu told her. "Don't hesitate to ask."

Madhulika really did ask her a great many things.

Which market had good Maithili books, which tailor delivered clothes on time, which road flooded less in the rains—Renu always had an answer.

For this reason Madhulika began to regard her not merely as a sister-in-law, but as an elder sister of her own.

On Madhulika's first birthday after the wedding, Renu returned from school in the evening carrying a long paper bag.

"Wash your hands first," she said. "Then open it."

Madhulika laughed. "So many rules?"

"It's something nice. Not with hands smelling of oil and spices."

Inside the bag was a deep-blue cotton sari. Along the border ran a fine red stripe, and the pallu was patterned with tiny fish motifs.

The moment Madhulika unfolded the sari, she stopped short.

"I love this colour."

Renu's face lit up.

"I know. That's why I had the shop keep it aside for two weeks."

From behind them Arun said, "Didi had been looking at it for herself. In the end she gave it to you."

Renu immediately looked at Arun.

"Do you have to tell everything?"

Holding the sari against her chest, Madhulika said, "Then I won't take it. You had chosen it for yourself."

"It's yours now," Renu said. "Once something has been given, it isn't passed back again."

Maya Devi, Arun's mother, ran a hand over the sari and said, "The colour is lovely. It will look very good at pujas and festivals."

Renu immediately added, "The first time she wears it will be next month, at Rashmi's upanayan feast."

Madhulika looked at her.

"I was thinking I'd wear it to the school's annual function."

"The annual function is only ten days away. Wear it first among the family. After that, wherever you like."

The last part of the sentence was light, but the first part was clear.

Madhulika said nothing.

Renu folded the sari again and separated out the blouse piece.

"Give this to me. I'll have it stitched by Shanti, the seamstress. She'll match the border and put on a red edging."

"My old red blouse will do."

"No. Such a lovely sari with an old blouse?"

Renu put the cloth into her own bag.

Madhulika laughed at this then. She thought—this was Renu's way of loving: to give something and then make sure it was complete.

Two days later Renu returned from the seamstress and said, "She asked for your measurements. I'll take you on Saturday."

"I can go myself on my way back from school."

"Tailors are careless with measurements. If I'm there, she'll make it properly."

Madhulika laughed again, but this time her laugh was smaller.

On Saturday they both went.

As Shanti took her measurements, she asked, "How long should the sleeves be?"

"To the elbow," Madhulika said.

Renu answered at once, "Not that long. Four fingers shorter. The sari isn't heavy; short sleeves will look better."

Madhulika looked at the seamstress's eyes. The woman had paused with her scissors, waiting for an answer from the two of them.

"At school I have to raise my arm to write on the board," Madhulika said. "Long sleeves are more comfortable."

Renu was silent for a few moments.

"All right, to the elbow. But don't make the neck too high."

Softly Madhulika said, "I'll tell her about the neck."

Shanti marked the measurement slip with her pencil.

On the way back, the two of them ate kulfi. Their conversation became ordinary again.

But for the first time a small question stayed in Madhulika's mind—if the sari was hers, whose decision should its sleeves and neckline be?

The annual function drew near.

That year the school had also arranged a literary gathering for teachers from across the district. Madhulika had been given charge of conducting the Maithili story-reading session.

Looking over the list, the headmistress said, "Madhulika, wear a colourful traditional sari on stage. There will be photographs too."

Madhulika's mind went at once to the blue sari.

That evening she asked Renu, "Is the blouse ready?"

"Half done. Shanti said by Wednesday."

"The gathering is on Tuesday."

Renu said casually, "Wear another sari. This one is to be worn first at Rashmi's feast."

This time Madhulika did not laugh.

"Didi, did you give me the sari for my birthday, or for Rashmi's feast?"

For a moment Renu looked startled.

"I gave you the gift. But the first wearing has a meaning too."

"Who decides that meaning?"

From the veranda Maya Devi called out, "What are you arguing about?"

Renu said, "Nothing, just clothes."

Madhulika did not take the matter any further that day.

Early Tuesday morning, before leaving for school, she took out her old paddy-green sari.

The blue sari lay folded in the trunk. Its blouse piece was in Renu's bag along with Shanti's measurement slip.

Madhulika put on the paddy-green sari.

The gathering went well. The headmistress praised the way she conducted it.

She was happy on her way home, but the moment she opened the trunk and saw the blue, something like a faint scratch ran across that happiness.

Rashmi's upanayan feast was postponed by two weeks because Rashmi's father fell ill.

Renu brought the finished blouse home.

"Look how well the fit has come out."

Madhulika tried it on. The sleeves came to the elbow as she had asked. The neckline was simple too.

She looked at Renu.

"You told the seamstress what I had said?"

"It's your blouse, isn't it?" Renu said. "Whatever feels right to you."

Something in Madhulika softened.

But Renu immediately added, "Don't send it to the washerman yet. After you wear it the first time, I'll tell you how it should be washed."

Madhulika fell silent.

Time passed.

The sari remained in the trunk.

Sometimes Renu would ask, "You've kept neem leaves with it, haven't you?"

Sometimes she would say, "Don't fold the border over; it will leave a crease."

Sometimes Maya Devi would say, "Has Renu given you the sari, or is she keeping the sari herself?"

Everyone would laugh.

Renu would laugh too, but by now Madhulika no longer added her own answer to that laughter.

One evening news came from school. The next day, at the district book fair, Madhulika was to be honoured on stage as a teachers' representative. The headmistress herself said, "Be there on time tomorrow. Dress formally."

Arun was out of town. Maya Devi had gone to her brother's house.

Renu returned late because of examination work at school.

Madhulika took the blue sari out of the trunk.

She put on the blouse, ran an iron over the border, and wore two red glass bangles.

Standing before the mirror, for the first time the sari truly felt like her own.

She went to the door of Renu's room.

Renu was tired and was checking exercise books.

Madhulika said, "I'm wearing this to the book fair tomorrow."

Renu stopped her pen.

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Rashmi's feast still hasn't taken place."

In a calm voice Madhulika said, "The feast may be postponed again. My occasion is tomorrow."

Renu looked at the sari.

"I had wanted to see you in this sari the first time you wore it."

"See me now."

Renu said nothing.

Madhulika spoke again. "Didi, when I wear something you gave me, I'll remember your love. But if you also decide the day I wear it, when will the sari become completely mine?"

Renu's face tightened slightly.

"I'm only saying it out of love."

"I understand it as love too. That's why I'm saying this."

Silence settled between them.

Renu lowered her eyes to the exercise book again.

"Wear it wherever you like."

The sentence sounded like permission.

For that very reason, Madhulika was not pleased.

The next day she wore the blue sari to the book fair.

Her name was called on stage. She received a certificate. Photographs were taken. Her colleagues asked about the sari.

"My sister gave it to me," Madhulika said.

She felt proud as she said it.

By evening, the photographs had appeared in the school group.

Renu saw them too.

When Madhulika returned home, Renu asked in an ordinary tone, "Did the programme go well?"

"Yes."

"Under the stage lights, the colour of the sari looks even deeper."

"I thought so too."

Nothing more came of it.

Madhulika took off the sari and left it out to air.

The next day Renu picked it up and examined it.

"There's a small pin mark on the pallu."

Madhulika was silent for a moment.

"Yes, the pallu kept slipping while I was walking on stage."

"You shouldn't use a thick pin on cloth like this."

The old tone had returned.

This time Madhulika did not explain the pin.

She only asked, "Didi, if the sari tears, will it hurt you more, or me?"

Renu did not answer.

Madhulika folded the sari and put it away in her own trunk.

That night Arun called during dinner. Madhulika told him about the programme. Renu answered in a normal voice now and then as the conversation went on.

Laughing, Arun said, "So Didi's sari has finally been inaugurated."

Renu was listening from that end of the phone.

"The sari is Madhulika's," she said quietly.

Arun probably did not notice. The conversation moved on.

A few days later Rashmi's feast took place.

Maya Devi asked Madhulika, "Will you wear the blue sari?"

Madhulika said, "I'll wear the yellow one today. I've already worn the blue one at the book fair."

Maya Devi looked at Renu.

Renu was sorting flowers into a plate.

"Let her wear whatever she wants," she said.

This time the sentence did not sound like permission, only like an ordinary statement.

In the bustle of the feast, the matter ended there.

Two weeks later, when Madhulika returned from school, she found a small brown envelope on her table.

There was no name on the envelope. Inside were a narrow strip of leftover cloth from the blue sari's blouse piece, an extra hook, and Shanti's old measurement slip.

Madhulika took the slip in her hand and went to Renu.

Renu was checking her students' answer books on the veranda.

"You had these?"

Without looking up, Renu said, "Yes. The seamstress gave me the leftover cloth. I thought if it was ever needed, it would be with me."

"And now?"

Renu put the cap on her pen.

"Now I thought—why should the leftover cloth from your sari be with me?"

For a few moments Madhulika looked at the little strip of cloth.

"Maybe I'll make a bangle pouch out of it."

Renu smiled.

"Tear it, cut it, make a pouch—don't ask me."

Madhulika burst out laughing.

Renu laughed too, but she did not immediately add what colour thread should be used.

That evening Madhulika took the blue sari out of the trunk and left it to air.

The small pin mark was still there on the pallu.

She ran a finger over the mark but made no attempt to remove it.

On the veranda, Renu was checking exercise books.

Madhulika placed the leftover strip of cloth beside the scissors.

This time, before she picked up the scissors, no permission came to mind.

STORY 275

The Dining Table

The dining table came to Nagendra Babu's house very late.

For years, meals in this house had been eaten on low wooden stools on the veranda outside the kitchen. First the children, then the men, and then the women. No one called this order a rule. The rule seemed to have made a place for itself without ever being spoken.

When Deepak received a bonus from his office, he bought a four-chair teak dining table for the house.

The table got stuck twice while being brought in through the door. The labourers tilted its legs and carried it inside. Mira kept clapping.

"Now our house is like a city house too," Ayush said.

Sumitra Devi ran her palm over the table's smooth surface.

"Such a big thing in this small room?" she worried.

Deepak laughed.

"There are four chairs. We are seven people. We will eat in two sittings. Nothing difficult about that."

Kumud had just returned from school. A bag of answer sheets hung from her shoulder.

"We used to eat in two sittings before as well," she said, taking off her shoes.

Deepak heard her, but did not reply.

The table was placed near the kitchen door, with a wall on one side and a window on the other. A cushion belonging to Nagendra Babu was tied to the back of one of the four chairs because his lower back hurt.

Deepak began hanging his office bag on the back of the second chair.

Ayush's schoolbag was often left on the third.

Mira was always the first to claim the fourth chair.

On the first night, there was something festive in the house when dinner was served at the table.

Madhavi brought plates from the kitchen. Sumitra Devi set out the water. Kumud opened the pickle jar.

"Mother, you sit too," Mira said.

Sumitra Devi laughed.

"I'll eat later. Let the children eat first."

"I'm not a child," Ayush protested.

"Then get up," Kumud said.

Everyone burst out laughing.

In the first sitting, Nagendra Babu, Deepak, Ayush and Mira sat down.

Madhavi kept moving between the kitchen and the table.

Kumud stood by the window, reading a message from school.

Sumitra Devi kept saying, "Eat while it's hot."

Twenty minutes later, the first sitting got up.

Then Sumitra Devi, Madhavi and Kumud sat down.

There were four chairs at the table. The fourth remained empty.

"Who will sit on the fourth?" Mira asked, peeping in from the doorway.

"Your doll," Kumud said.

There was laughter again.

In this way, the table became part of the house.

For a few days no one noticed whether the two sittings existed because there were too few chairs, or because the old order of the house was stronger.

At breakfast too, the order was almost the same.

Nagendra Babu's medicine had to be taken on time, so he came first.

Deepak had to hurry to the office, so he came first.

Ayush's bus arrived at seven twenty, so he came first.

Mira's school vehicle came five minutes later, so she too came first.

Sumitra Devi would say, "Where do I have to go?"

Madhavi would say, "Let me send everyone off first."

Kumud would say, "I'll eat something at school."

These three sentences were repeated so often that, little by little, they ceased to be reasons and became identities.

Kumud taught science at a secondary school. The school was fifteen minutes away by bicycle.

One Monday, the headmaster sent a message saying that examinations were near and the teachers had to arrive half an hour early.

Kumud was ready by half past six in the morning.

Madhavi was cooking parathas in the kitchen.

"Please give me mine quickly," Kumud said.

Madhavi prepared a plate for her.

When Kumud went to sit at the table, Ayush's bag was lying on the third chair, Mira was tying a ribbon in her hair on the fourth, Nagendra

Babu sat on the first chair with his newspaper open, and Deepak was still bathing.

Deepak's chair was empty.

Kumud sat there.

Sumitra Devi stopped at the kitchen door.

"Deepak sits there."

Kumud looked at her.

"He's still bathing. I'll get up in five minutes."

Sumitra Devi said nothing.

Madhavi set down Kumud's plate.

When Deepak came in, he stopped for a moment.

"Where should I sit?"

Ayush immediately picked up his bag, but the chair did not become free - he himself was sitting there.

Kumud had eaten half a paratha.

"Your five minutes," she said. "I'm getting up now."

Plate in hand, she stood at the window ledge and ate the rest of her meal standing up.

There was no quarrel with anyone.

But on the way to school, for the first time she understood that a chair in the house was not merely an object made of wood.

Some chairs had owners.

Some people did not.

That evening Kumud did not mention it.

Two days later, the matter surfaced again.

Ayush had an extra mathematics class. He was to return at half past eight at night.

Dinner was ready at eight.

Nagendra Babu sat in his chair. Deepak in the second. Mira in the third.

The fourth chair remained empty.

Kumud came with a bundle of answer sheets from school.

"May I sit?"

Sumitra Devi looked at the clock.

"Ayush must be coming."

"He said half past eight."

"How long is it now until half past eight?"

Kumud placed the answer sheets on a corner of the table.

"Half an hour."

Deepak said, "Sit down. When Ayush comes, I'll get up."

Again Sumitra Devi said nothing.

Kumud sat down.

That night Ayush came at ten past nine.

By then Kumud had eaten and was checking answer sheets in her room.

Ayush came to the table and sat in the fourth chair.

No one told him that Kumud had sat there.

For the next few days, the order at meals returned to the old pattern.

That is how small rules work in a house - they shift once, then slip back into their old grooves.

One Sunday, two of Deepak's office colleagues arrived with their families.

Madhavi spent the whole afternoon preparing the meal.

Deepak borrowed three folding chairs from the neighbour's house.

Mira kept opening them and arranging them around the table.

"Look," she said happily, "now there are seven chairs."

Kumud was standing at the door.

"Seven chairs for seven people," she said.

"But today we have guests as well," Deepak replied.

The table was moved a little away from the wall. The room that had seemed full with four chairs now held seven.

The guests sat down.

Nagendra Babu sat down.

Deepak sat down.

Ayush and Mira sat down too.

Madhavi remained in the kitchen.

Sumitra Devi kept serving water.

Kumud kept bringing plates.

There were seven chairs.

Even then, not one of the three women sat down at that time.

Kumud did not want to count this, but her eyes counted by themselves.

After the guests left, the three folding chairs remained propped against the wall.

Dinner was ready.

Deepak reached out to open one of the folding chairs.

Sumitra Devi said, "These all have to be returned tomorrow. Don't open them; we'll only have to fold them again."

Deepak drew back his hand.

The first sitting again consisted of four people.

This time Kumud said nothing.

Madhavi looked at her once.

That was all.

The next morning the neighbour's son took the chairs away.

The room became a four-chair room again.

At school, Mira was asked to draw a picture on the theme "My Family."

That evening she sat at the dining table with coloured pencils.

She drew a house, a tree, and seven people.

Then she began to draw the dining table.

After drawing four chairs, she stopped.

"Aunt Kumud," she called, "there are seven of us, aren't there?"

"Yes."

"Then why are there only four at the table?"

"Because the table is for four people."

"What about the other three?"

Before Kumud could answer, Madhavi called from the kitchen, "The other three eat in the second sitting."

Mira drew three small figures behind the table.

One had a plate in her hand, the second a jug, the third a notebook.

"Who are these?" Kumud asked.

Without looking up, Mira said, "Grandmother, Mummy, and you."

Kumud said nothing.

That night the picture was fixed to the refrigerator door with a magnet.

Nagendra Babu saw it when he went to get water.

"Why is my moustache so big?" he laughed.

Mira came running.

"So people can recognise you."

"And why are these three at the back?"

Mira said naturally, "They eat in the second sitting."

Nagendra Babu's laughter stopped for a moment.

Then he said, "All right. It's a good picture."

That was all.

But the picture remained on the refrigerator.

A week later, Nagendra Babu's old friend Ramanand Jha came to visit.

The two talked on the veranda for a long time.

Ramanand Babu stayed until mealtime.

Madhavi said, "Have your meal before you go."

Ramanand Babu refused at first, then agreed.

There were four chairs at the table.

Deepak had gone to the market.

So one chair was empty.

Nagendra Babu, Ramanand Babu, Ayush and Mira sat down.

By then Kumud had returned from school.

She washed her hands and face and came in.

Madhavi asked, "Will you eat?"

Kumud looked toward the table.

All four chairs were occupied.

"Later."

Ramanand Babu said casually, "Come now, let the daughter sit. I'll sit on a low stool."

Nagendra Babu immediately said, "No, no. How can a guest sit on a stool?"

Kumud smiled.

"I've got used to it."

The moment the sentence came out, it sounded strange even to her.

Used to it.

Used to what?

Putting off hunger?

Waiting for the owner of an empty chair?

Keeping her own time behind someone else's?

She went into the kitchen.

Madhavi was standing by the stove.

Kumud said quietly, "I didn't like that phrase, 'used to it.'"

Keeping her eyes on the griddle, Madhavi asked, "Why?"

"Because it isn't a habit I chose."

Madhavi took the griddle off the stove.

After a few moments she said, "Neither did I."

The two fell silent again.

Sumitra Devi had heard everything from behind them.

She took no side.

That night, after Ramanand Babu had left, Sumitra Devi looked again at the picture Mira had drawn and pinned to the refrigerator.

"Why has she put a jug in my hand?" she asked.

Mira said, "You serve the water."

"And a plate in your mother's hand?"

"She serves the plates."

"A notebook in Aunt Kumud's hand?"

"She looks at notebooks."

"All right."

Sumitra Devi looked away from the picture.

The next day, a small incident occurred at mealtime.

Mira had sat down in the first sitting, but she was not hungry.

She kept playing with her food.

Madhavi was in the kitchen.

Kumud had come home from school hungry.

She said to Mira, "If you're not hungry, may I sit?"

Mira got up at once.

"Yes."

Sumitra Devi said, "If the child eats later, it'll create trouble again."

Kumud stopped.

Mira stood there with the chair half pulled out.

Deepak looked up from the newspaper and said, "Mother, look at who is hungry."

Sumitra Devi looked at Deepak.

Deepak lowered his eyes to the newspaper again.

Kumud sat down.

Mira happily stood behind her and began untying her hair.

"Aunt Kumud, is this your chair now?"

Kumud laughed.

"No. It was empty just now."

Sumitra Devi said nothing.

That night, for the first time, the order of the sittings shifted a little according to hunger rather than names.

But change does not move in a straight line.

The next day, when Deepak came home tired from the office, Ayush had spread his books over Deepak's chair.

"Move these," Deepak said.

Ayush moved them at once.

Kumud stood at the door and watched.

The chair had an owner again.

On the third day, when Nagendra Babu came late for dinner, everyone waited for him.

On the fourth day, Mira was hungry, so she ate first.

On the fifth day, Madhavi had a headache; Sumitra Devi told her to sit down first.

It was as though the house was not making a new rule, but practising how to forget the old one.

Meanwhile, one leg of the table began to wobble slightly.

Deepak called a carpenter.

As the carpenter turned the table over and tightened the leg, he said, "The table is good. It must be taking too much weight on one side."

Everyone laughed.

"Even the table knows who sits where," Ayush joked.

Kumud did not laugh.

The carpenter removed all four chairs and put them out on the veranda.

Because of the repair, dinner that night was again eaten on low stools spread on the floor.

There were not seven stools.

Everyone sat wherever they found a place.

Nagendra Babu by a pillar.

Sumitra Devi beside him.

Deepak and Madhavi facing each other.

Kumud with the children.

There was no first sitting.

When Madhavi got up once toward the kitchen, Sumitra Devi said, "Sit. Whoever needs something can get it themselves."

Deepak got up and brought the water.

When the meal was over, Mira said, "It would be nice if the table stayed broken."

Everyone burst out laughing.

Nagendra Babu too.

The next day the repaired table returned to its place.

Four chairs around it once again.

But it was as though the memory of the night of the repair had remained somewhere in the wood.

A few days later, it was a rainy evening.

Deepak called from the office to say there was water on the road and he would be late.

Ayush had gone for extra lessons.
Mira had gone to study at the neighbour's house.
At home were Nagendra Babu, Sumitra Devi, Madhavi and Kumud.
Four people.
Four chairs.
Dinner was ready.
Madhavi said naturally, "Shall we sit?"
Sumitra Devi looked at the clock.
"Deepak?"
"He'll be late."
"Ayush?"
"Half past nine."
"Mira?"
"She said she'll eat there."
Sumitra Devi looked at the clock again.
Nagendra Babu had already sat down in his chair.
Kumud pulled out one chair.
Madhavi sat in another.
One chair remained empty.
Sumitra Devi stayed standing.
"And you?" Kumud asked.
"I'll eat later."
This time Madhavi did not look toward the kitchen.
"After whom?"
A faint bewilderment crossed Sumitra Devi's face.
Really - after whom?
Deepak would be late.
Ayush would be late.
Mira was out.
The fourth chair was empty.
Sumitra Devi looked toward Nagendra Babu's cushioned chair.
Folding his newspaper, Nagendra Babu said, "This one is here."
He got up from his chair.
Sumitra Devi was alarmed.
"Oh, why are you getting up?"
"I'll sit in the other one."
"No, no."
"Changing the chair won't change my back."

Kumud smiled.

Nagendra Babu sat down in the ordinary chair beside it.

Sumitra Devi slowly sat in the cushioned chair.

Her hand rose automatically toward Madhavi's plate, as though there were something she ought to serve.

Madhavi said, "I have everything."

Sumitra Devi drew her hand back.

All four ate together.

The conversation was entirely ordinary.

The leak in the school roof.

The price of potatoes in the market.

Deepak's phone call.

The neighbour's electricity.

There was no announcement.

No decision was written down.

When the meal ended, Sumitra Devi got up and began gathering the plates.

Kumud picked up her plate.

"I'll put this away."

This time Sumitra Devi did not object.

When Deepak returned that night, his meal was covered and kept for him.

He sat down at the table.

Madhavi brought his plate from the kitchen.

"Has everyone eaten?"

"Yes."

Deepak paused for a moment.

"Mother too?"

"Yes."

"Earlier?"

Madhavi looked at his face.

"On time."

Deepak said nothing.

He began to eat.

No new rule was announced in the house the following week.

There were still only four chairs.

There were still seven people.

For many days, meals continued to be eaten in two sittings.

But the names attached to the chairs slowly began to fade.

Sometimes, if Nagendra Babu was late, Sumitra Devi sat in his cushioned chair.

Sometimes, if Kumud was in a hurry, she ate in the first sitting and left for school.

Sometimes, if Mira was absorbed in play, Madhavi sat in her place.

At first Ayush would ask, "My chair?"

Mira would immediately say, "It's yours when it's empty."

One night Ayush returned from extra lessons.

Madhavi, Sumitra Devi, Mira and Kumud were sitting at the table.

All four chairs were occupied.

Deepak was talking on the phone on the veranda.

Nagendra Babu was listening to the radio in his room.

Ayush stopped for a moment at the doorway.

Madhavi was sitting in the chair that had once been called his.

His plate lay covered on a corner of the table.

An old folding chair stood against the wall - the one that was brought out whenever guests came.

Ayush opened it.

He placed it at the corner of the table.

The chair legs made a faint sound on the floor.

No one looked up.

Madhavi merely drew her elbow a little inward to make room for him.

Ayush sat down.

The table no longer looked like a four-chair table.

STORY 276

The Silent Mami

Everyone in the house held the same opinion about Sharda Mami—she was very quiet.

It was said as though silence were not part of her nature but proof of a weakness.

"What is the point of asking Mami? She will agree to whatever we say," Nikhil would say with a laugh.

"She does not like fuss," Anjana would add.

Mamaji, Raghunath Jha, would generally nod at this.

Only Anvi, the sixteen-year-old granddaughter of the house, sometimes watched Sharda Mami's face closely. She noticed that while Mami listened to everyone, her eyes were never silent.

During the summer holidays, Rashmi came to stay in that house for two weeks. Rashmi was Sharda Mami's niece. As a child she had followed Mami everywhere, but after marriage and a job, their meetings had grown infrequent.

On the very first evening, Rashmi heard a curious sentence in the house.

Anjana said, "From now on we shall have dinner at eight. It will be better for Mami."

Nikhil agreed at once.

Raghunath Mamaji said, "Yes, eating late is not good."

Sharda Mami was rolling rotis in the kitchen. No one asked whether eight o'clock was convenient for her.

Rashmi thought—perhaps it was a small thing.

The next morning, Nikhil called a workman to cut two thick branches from the neem tree in front of the house.

"There is dampness under so much shade," he said. "Mami needs sunlight now."

Sharda Mami stood on the veranda looking towards the neem tree.

"Could these branches not be left uncut?" she asked softly.

Nikhil did not hear her, or heard her and chose to act as though he had not.

The workman set the saw to the wood.

When the branch fell, the courtyard suddenly flooded with light.

Rashmi saw Sharda Mami stand for a long time in the place where, until yesterday, there had been shade.

On the third day, Anjana had two old brass flowerpots placed on the loft above.

"Mami should not keep bending so much to tend plants now. I am moving them for her sake."

Sharda Mami again said nothing.

That evening Anvi quietly brought one flowerpot down.

"Grandmother, you used to water this tulsi yourself, didn't you?"

Sharda Mami smiled.

"Watering it is not difficult. What is difficult is knowing when someone will decide that it is difficult for you."

Anvi did not laugh.

Rashmi paused over that sentence.

A great many things in the house were done "for Mami."

The morning milk was made without sugar—for Mami.

The box of sweets was kept on a high shelf—for Mami.

The door was shut from inside at seven in the evening—for Mami, so that the sounds of the night would not disturb her.

Anjana went less often to the evening gatherings of the neighbourhood women because "Mami would be left alone."

Nikhil brought a large quantity of vegetables from the Saturday market in one trip because "Mami should not have to keep going to the market."

Raghunath Mamaji did not like guests staying for more than two days because "Mami would get tired."

Amid all these sentences, Rashmi was finding it difficult to understand where Sharda Mami herself was.

Gradually, Rashmi began to notice a difference.

Sharda Mami was asked many questions in the house—"Where is the rice?", "Has Kunal drunk his milk?", "Have you seen Mamaji's spectacles?", "How much dal should I soak today?"

Whenever the answer concerned work, everyone needed her voice.

But when the question concerned her own life—where she would go, when she would rest, whom she would meet, what she would keep, what she would give up—the answer was formed before the question could become a sentence.

One afternoon, Usha Kaki from the neighbourhood came by. In the course of conversation she said, "Sharda sister is truly fortunate. Her family takes such good care of her."

Anjana said happily, "Yes, we do not let her worry about anything."

Usha Kaki turned towards Sharda Mami.

"You have nothing but rest and comfort."

Sharda Mami held out a cup of tea to her.

"When someone else decides what your rest should be, even rest can sometimes begin to feel like work," she said.

Usha Kaki laughed as though it were a joke.

Anjana laughed too.

Rashmi did not.

She was beginning to understand that Mami's sentences were often tucked away inside laughter so that no one would have to answer them.

One afternoon, the postman delivered a thick invitation card.

It had come from Rajbiraj. The granddaughter of Sharda Mami's younger sister Bimala was getting married.

The wedding date was printed in red—the twelfth of the following month.

Sharda Mami held the invitation in her hands for a long time.

"How many years has it been since you went to Bimala's house?" Rashmi asked.

"Six."

"Then will you go this time?"

Before Sharda Mami could answer, Raghunath Mamaji came onto the veranda.

Seeing the card, he said, "So far away? How will you manage such crowds now?"

When Nikhil returned from the office, he too saw the invitation.

"Ma, the journey will be too much for you. If we go by car, I will need two days' leave. You cannot go by bus."

Anjana said, "Where will you get any rest at a wedding? We will send a gift from here."

The three sentences were different; the conclusion was the same.

Sharda Mami folded the invitation and set it above the doorway.

No one asked her—do you want to go or not?

This time Rashmi did not remain silent.

"What does Mami herself say?"

Nikhil replied easily, "We know what is best for her."

Rashmi looked at Sharda Mami.

Mami began sifting flour.

That night, while studying, Anvi came into the kitchen for water.

Sharda Mami was sitting alone. The invitation lay open before her.

"Grandmother, do you want to go?" Anvi asked.

After a long pause, Sharda Mami said, "Yes."

"Then why didn't you say so?"

"To whom?"

"To Papa."

"He had already said what I wanted before I could."

Anvi fell silent.

Straightening a corner of the invitation, Mami said, "When other people know your wishes before you do, you have to speak very loudly to be heard. I never learnt to speak loudly."

Anvi closed her book.

The following week, a new problem arose for Nikhil's household.

Anjana had to go to Muzaffarpur for three days of training. Nikhil had the annual accounts at his office. Anvi's school examinations were near. The younger son, Kunal, had music class in the evenings.

Everyone's schedules began to be fitted together in the sitting room.

Nikhil said, "Ma will be here anyway. She can get Kunal ready at four, give Anvi something to eat, and give Baba his medicine on time."

Anjana breathed a sigh of relief.

Raghunath Mamaji said, "If Sharda is at home, there is nothing to worry about."

Rashmi listened.

The woman who three days earlier had been declared "too weak" for a bus journey was now the natural choice to manage two children, meals, medicine, and the entire household day.

Sharda Mami said nothing this time either.

Only Anvi looked at her.

That night, Anvi came to her grandmother.

"Grandmother, won't you get tired?"

"From the work?"

"Yes."

"Work makes you tired. The tiredness that comes from giving up your own wishes lasts much longer."

Anvi fell silent again.

Two days later, Rashmi was getting ready to go to the market when Sharda Mami called her.

There was a small piece of paper in her hand.

"Rashmi, will you do something for me?"

"Tell me."

"Find out the timings of the buses to Rajbiraj."

Rashmi stared at her.

"You are going?"

"Yes."

"Nikhil Bhaiya—"

For the first time, Sharda Mami interrupted Rashmi mid-sentence.

"Nikhil will not decide the bus timings."

Her voice was not loud. But the sentence was complete.

Rashmi opened her phone.

There was a bus at seven in the morning that went as far as Jayanagar. From there, transport across the border was easy to find. There was another bus in the afternoon.

Sharda Mami chose the morning one.

"It will be less crowded," she said.

"The ticket?"

"I'll buy it."

"Alone?"

"Rashmi, I came to this house alone when I was twenty-two. No one thought I was weak that day."

Rashmi laughed, but Mami did not.

She merely opened her small iron trunk and took out some notes.

Inside the trunk were an old cloth bag for journeys, a folded umbrella, a small box of medicines, and Bimala's previous letter.

Rashmi arranged the ticket for her.

Sharda Mami said, "Do not tell anyone yet."

"Why?"

"Because then everyone will start making decisions for me again."

Five days before the wedding, Anjana returned from her training. The household routine became normal again.

That evening, after dinner, Sharda Mami placed her ticket on the table.

"On the twelfth, I am going to Rajbiraj."

Nikhil looked first at the ticket, then at his mother.

"Ma, who bought this?"

"I did."

"You didn't tell me?"

"I am telling you now."

Raghunath Mamaji pushed his spectacles up and said, "You're going alone?"

"By bus as far as Jayanagar. Bimala's son will meet me there."

"But your convenience—"

Sharda Mami's eyes settled on Mamaji.

Raghunath Mamaji left the sentence unfinished.

Nikhil pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Ma, I am saying this for your own good."

"What is good for me and what I want are not the same thing, Nikhil."

This was perhaps Sharda Mami's longest protest ever heard in that house—just one sentence.

Anjana asked softly, "What if you have trouble on the way?"

"I'll call."

"What if you get tired?"

"I'll sit down."

"What if—"

Mami smiled.

"All the 'what ifs' will travel with me. You all stay here."

Anvi suppressed a laugh.

Disagreement was plain on Nikhil's face. But the ticket lay before him.

For the first time, the decision was not "for Mami"; it was Mami's.

The next day, a strange air of caution spread through the house.

No one directly told her not to go, but everyone kept looking for some new reason.

Raghunath Mamaji checked the weather.

Nikhil checked the road reports.

Anjana made a list of clothes.

Sharda Mami quietly packed two saris, a shawl, her medicine box, and a yellow chunari for Bimala into her small bag.

Rashmi noticed that there was no haste in her preparations.

On the morning of the journey, Nikhil himself took her to the bus stand.

On the way he asked three times, "Ma, if you change your mind, we can still turn back."

The third time, Sharda Mami looked out of the window and said, "If you change your mind, you turn back."

Nikhil fell silent.

The bus arrived.

Sharda Mami climbed aboard. She took a seat by the window.

Nikhil stood outside.

As the bus began to move, Mami waved.

There was no weakness in that hand.

Sharda Mami returned five days later.

She brought back stories from the wedding at Bimala's house—who had danced well, whose paag had sat crooked, which vegetable dish had too little salt, which child had cried all night.

Everyone in the house listened in surprise at how much Mami noticed.

In truth, she had always noticed everything. It was only that everyone heard so little of what she said.

After the journey, all the household rules did not change in a single day.

Nikhil would still sometimes begin, "Ma, for you—"

But halfway through the sentence he would remember.

Then he would turn it into a question.

"Ma, would you like...?"

Sometimes Mami said "yes."

Sometimes "no."

Sometimes she said, "I'll think about it and tell you."

For the first time, the family understood that "I'll think about it and tell you" was also a form of answer.

Two weeks later, new green leaves appeared where the neem branches had been cut.

Anvi called her grandmother.

"Look, the leaves have come back."

Sharda Mami came outside.

There was sunlight in the courtyard, but the neem's new leaves had begun to make small patches of shade.

At that moment, Anjana was bringing down the two flowerpots from the loft above.

"Mamiji," she asked, "where should I put this tulsi?"

Earlier, the house would have supplied the answer to such a question by itself.

Sharda Mami looked at three places in the courtyard.

Then she pointed towards the new shade beneath the neem.
"Here."
Anjana placed the flowerpot there.
No one said that this place was good for Mami.
Only Mami had said—here.

STORY 277

The Parlour Mirror

Twelve days before the wedding, Surabhi sat for the first time before the large mirror at Aabha Parlour.

It was no ordinary mirror.

Around it ran a slender brass-like frame, and small pieces of coloured paper were tucked along its edges.

One slip said "pale pink", another "low bun", another "don't thin the eyebrows"; on some, there was only a name.

As soon as Surabhi sat down, she looked at those slips before she looked at her own face.

Malati, the owner of the parlour, stood behind her, parting her hair with a comb, and asked, "How do you like it?"

Before Surabhi could answer, her mother, Sudha Devi, said, "Keep the colour very light. She has been running around for work for so many days; her face looks tired."

Surabhi's cousin Rashmi immediately added, "And make the line of kohl at the eyes a little longer. It will look good in photographs."

Isha, her future sister-in-law, sitting on the sofa opposite, opened a photograph on her phone and showed it to them.

"Bhaiya said not to make the make-up too heavy. Something natural-looking like this."

Malati glanced once at the photograph on the phone.

Then at Surabhi.

"You?"

Surabhi laughed.

"You decide first. I don't understand much about all this."

Malati said nothing.

She tucked a yellow slip into the left side of the mirror's frame —"light colour—Mother."

Below it, a pink slip—"longer eyes—Rashmi."

A third, green one—"not too heavy—Isha."

Surabhi looked at her reflection.

Three coloured slips hung around three sides of her face.

"Why all these?" she asked.

Malati laughed.

"If I forget later who said what, there is an argument. When it comes to a bride's make-up, everyone remembers exactly what they said."

Sudha Devi laughed too.

"You are right. In a wedding house, memory is sharpest of all."

The first day was meant to be only for advice about hair and skin care.

But within half an hour Surabhi's face had turned into a small conference.

"Don't make the hair lie too flat on the forehead," Rashmi said.

"A centre parting looks good," Sudha Devi said.

"Isha, in your family, how is the veil usually worn over the head?" Malati asked.

Isha rose enthusiastically and came to stand behind Surabhi.

"I have a sample like that."

The phone was raised before the mirror again.

Surabhi kept looking alternately at the unfamiliar bride inside the phone and at her own face in the mirror.

Malati added two new slips.

That evening, on the way home in the car, Rashmi asked, "How did you like it?"

Surabhi said, "Fine."

"Just fine?"

"What else should I say?"

Rashmi looked at her.

"What kind of hairstyle do you like?"

Looking out of the window, Surabhi said, "When I go to the office, I tie it up."

"A wedding isn't the office."

"I know that."

Rashmi burst out laughing.

But the question remained where it was.

Over the next three days, amid saris, jewellery, invitations and guest lists, Surabhi's face too became a list.

Her aunt said, "Tell them to cover the little mole on the left side of her nose."

Another aunt said, "Why the mole? That is what makes her face recognisable."

The photographer called and said, "No very shiny base; under the strong camera light, the face can look too pale."

Isha sent a message—"Bhaiya says he doesn't like red lips."

Surabhi replied with only, "Fine."

At night, while folding clothes, Sudha Devi asked, "What will you do about the mole?"

"Let it stay."

"Your aunt was saying it will look large in photographs."

Surabhi went to the mirror and looked at the mole.

It was above her left cheek, two finger-widths below the eye, smaller than a lentil.

"How can something this small become large in a photograph?"

Sudha Devi laughed.

"In wedding photographs, there are plenty of people whose job is to make small things look large."

Both of them laughed.

The matter ended there, but the mole did not.

On the sixth day, Surabhi went to the parlour a second time.

This time only Rashmi was with her.

The five slips from the previous visit were still tucked into the mirror's frame.

Malati had not removed them.

"Your slips are safe," she said.

Rashmi joked, "Our family constitution is being drafted here."

Malati said, "In some families, it becomes bigger than the constitution."

She took a slim file from the table drawer.

Against every bride's name were written the date and a brief note.

"Why do you write so much?" Surabhi asked.

"Because make-up is not merely a matter of colour. Someone's mother will say—cover the head. Someone's sister will say—leave it open. Someone's groom will say—natural. And then five people understand 'natural' in five different ways."

Rashmi laughed aloud.

"True."

Running a thin brush along Surabhi's eyebrow, Malati asked, "What does 'natural' mean to you?"

Surabhi did not answer at once.

"I... don't want my eyes to look smaller."

Malati's hand stopped.

"Smaller?"

"Rashmi says the kohl should be drawn longer. But when it is too long, my eyes begin to look like someone else's."

Rashmi looked toward the mirror.

"I only said it for the photographs."

"Yes, I know."

There was no quarrel in Surabhi's voice.

For the first time, Malati tucked a white slip into the frame.

"Eyes in their own shape—Surabhi."

Surabhi read the slip.

It felt strange to her.

Perhaps seeing her own name beside an instruction about her own face was the first new thing that had happened that day.

Rashmi said softly, "All right, not long."

Malati drew a light line on one eye and left the other undecorated for the moment.

"Look."

Surabhi studied the difference between the two eyes.

"This one on the left looks better."

"The one with less?"

"Yes."

"Fine."

No second white slip was made.

On the first slip, Malati added in small letters—"light."

On the way home that day, Rashmi remained silent for a long time.

Then she said, "If you don't like something I say, tell me at once."

Surabhi smiled.

"I don't dislike everything. Some things simply aren't mine."

Rashmi nodded.

"I'm beginning to understand the difference."

Five days before the wedding came the jewellery trial.

Sudha Devi brought out the old maang-tikka from her own wedding.

It was wrapped in yellow cloth, with a small red stone at its centre.

"I want you to wear this."

Surabhi placed the ornament on her forehead and looked in the mirror.

"I like this too."

Sudha Devi's face lit up at once.

"Really?"

"Yes. But I won't part my hair in the centre; I'll keep it a little to one side."

For a moment, Sudha Devi looked at the ornament.

"If you wear it to one side, it won't look like it did in my time."

Surabhi laughed.

"It will look like my time."

Sudha Devi laughed too.

"All right."

There was no defeat in that small "all right".

The old ornament was finding a new place on a new forehead.

Three days before the wedding came the final make-up trial at the parlour.

This time Sudha Devi, Isha and Rashmi all went with her.

Looking at the mirror's frame, Malati said, "Settle everything today. I don't want a courtroom here on the wedding day."

Everyone laughed.

Malati began reading the slips.

"Light colour—Mother."

Sudha Devi said, "Not too pale. Let her own complexion remain."

Malati struck a line through the yellow slip and wrote—"her own complexion."

Surabhi looked at her mother.

Sudha Devi looked back as if it were nothing remarkable.

"Longer eyes—Rashmi."

Rashmi herself said, "Cross that out."

Malati crossed it out.

"Not too heavy—Isha."

Isha said, "Let that stay. But I won't decide what 'too heavy' means."

"Then who will?" Malati asked.

Isha pointed at Surabhi.

"She will."

The slips on the frame began to grow fewer.

Malati picked up the next one.

"Centre parting—Mother."

Sudha Devi said, "That has changed too. To one side."

"The maang-tikka?"

"That stays."

Surabhi said, "Mother's one."

For the first time, Malati smiled at Sudha Devi.

"That is a joint decision."

Then came the matter of the mole that her aunt had mentioned.

Malati asked, "Cover it or leave it?"

Sudha Devi was silent.

Rashmi was silent.

Isha too.

All three faces were visible behind Surabhi in the mirror.

Surabhi looked at her mole.

"Let it stay."

On a white slip Malati wrote—"mole stays—Surabhi."

Isha said softly, "Bhaiya probably won't even notice."

Surabhi smiled.

"He doesn't have to notice."

At that sentence, everyone fell silent for a moment.

Then Malati returned to her work.

When the trial was finished, Surabhi remained seated before the mirror.

The make-up was light.

The maang-tikka sat slightly to one side.

The mole was visible.

Her eyes had kept their own shape.

The colour on her lips was a shade deeper than the sample Isha had sent, because Surabhi had said she liked it.

Rashmi raised her phone to take a photograph.

Malati stopped her with a hand.

"One minute."

She began removing all the old slips still left on the mirror's frame.

Surabhi asked, "Why?"

"The work is settled now."

"You'll throw them away?"

"Yes."

Malati gathered the slips in her hand.

Yellow, pink, green, white.

Surabhi looked at them for a moment.

"Give them to me."

Malati asked in surprise, "These?"

"Yes."

Surabhi took the slips.

Laughing, Rashmi asked, "Keeping them as souvenirs?"

"Maybe."

Surabhi put them into her purse.

On the morning of the wedding, voices, the clatter of utensils, the scent of flowers and ringing phones filled the house all at once.

When Surabhi reached the parlour, Malati was already prepared.

"Today's rule," Malati said. "Only the bride sits in front of the mirror. Everyone else stays behind."

Sudha Devi sat down on a chair outside.

Rashmi and Isha did the same.

For the first half hour, no instructions came.

Malati worked according to what had already been decided.

Surabhi kept watching her face in the mirror.

At times she closed her eyes, at times she opened them.

Near the mole, Malati paused with the brush and asked, "Sure?"

"Yes."

The brush moved around the mole, not over it.

While her hair was being arranged, Sudha Devi once rose as if to come inside, then stopped herself.

"Something?" Malati asked.

"No. I only wanted to see whether the maang-tikka was straight."

Surabhi said, "Come and look."

Sudha Devi came and stood behind her.

Malati set the ornament slightly to one side.

Sudha Devi reached out and adjusted one tiny prong.

"Is it right here?"

Surabhi looked in the mirror.

"Yes."

Sudha Devi went back outside and sat down.

Isha took out her phone and read a message from her brother, but said nothing.

Surabhi saw her in the mirror.

"What has he written?"

Isha laughed.

"He's asking whether you're ready yet."

"Reply."

"What should I say?"

"Tell him—it's happening."

Isha typed it out.

Two hours later, Malati turned the chair slightly.

"Done."

Surabhi first looked at her own face.

Then, in the mirror, at her mother, Rashmi and Isha seated behind her.

All three looked as though they were ready to say something, yet no words came immediately from any of them.

Malati asked, "Change anything?"

Surabhi looked at the mirror's frame.

Today it was empty.

Not a single coloured slip remained.

"No."

Sudha Devi said softly, "The maang-tikka looks very beautiful."

Rashmi said, "The eyes too."

Isha laughed. "Whatever Bhaiya meant when he said 'natural', I doubt this is what he had in mind."

Everyone burst out laughing.

Surabhi too.

Long after the wedding, when she finally reached her room at night, she opened her purse while taking off the heavy jewellery.

The old slips from the parlour were still inside.

One read "light colour—Mother", another "longer eyes—Rashmi", a third "not too heavy—Isha."

Some had lines struck through them.

Some had new words added.

On two white slips was her own name.

Surabhi did not tear them up.

She put them into a small envelope.

Then she picked up the small round mirror lying on the table.

The wedding make-up was still on her face, but the kohl had smudged a little at one corner of an eye.

The mole was still there.

With a finger, Surabhi wiped away the smudged kohl.

Now the mirror held not only her face—the day's exhaustion, laughter, traces of tears, the scent of flowers, her mother's old maang-tikka, and the colours she herself had chosen were all there together.

She placed the small mirror back on the table.

The large parlour mirror was not here.

Nor were anyone's slips tucked into a frame.

And for the first time she understood that an empty frame did not make a face smaller; it showed it whole.

STORY 278

The First Month on the Job

When Sanjana started going to work, for the first three days everyone at home remembered the time of her bus.

At seven forty-five in the morning, her mother would call from the kitchen, "Have you taken your lunch box?"

Her father would say from the veranda, "Leave ten minutes early. The crossing gets crowded."

Her younger brother Anup would come as far as the door, and if he saw one end of her dupatta caught in the zip of her bag, he would free it.

Her grandmother always had the same question—"You do eat lunch, don't you?"

Sanjana would answer all the questions with a smile and leave.

Her work in the office of a private school involved the ledger, the fee register, and applications from parents.

During the first week, what she found hardest was not that the work was new.

What was hard was that even after sitting in a chair all day, by evening her body would be so tired that climbing the stairs at home felt like one more task.

On the first Monday evening, when she reached home, her mother made tea for her.

On the second Monday, when she came home, her mother said, "I've made tea, but from tomorrow make it yourself. My work increases in the evening too."

Sanjana said, "Yes."

It seemed natural to her.

A job changes not only one's income but one's routine as well—Sanjana understood that.

By the third week, the family too had understood that Sanjana came home tired every day.

But in the meantime, something else had quietly changed.

Earlier, whenever her expenses came up, her father would say, "Study for now. I'll take care of the money."

Now, while she was getting her bus pass made, he said, "You've started earning now."

Sanjana laughed.

She liked paying for her first monthly pass from her own account.

When her shoe tore, her mother said, "Buy a new pair. You earn now."

Sanjana liked that sentence too.

She did not buy new shoes.

She had the sole of the old pair stitched instead.

Before her first salary came, she had thought of saving something.

How much, she had not decided.

Only this much—that at the end of the first month her account should not be empty.

On the nineteenth day of her job, the principal came into the office and said, "This time the salary will reach you by the fifth."

A small smile appeared on the faces of the employees.

Sanjana too looked at her phone, on which no message had arrived yet.

That evening at dinner, her father asked, "What date will the salary come?"

"The fifth."

"Good."

That was all.

The next day, her mother looked at the empty gas cylinder and said, "This will have to be refilled this time."

Sanjana said, "Get it refilled."

Her mother paused a little and said, "I was thinking, once your salary comes, it can be paid from that."

Sanjana kept stirring the dal with her spoon.

"All right."

That was the first "all right."

The day after that, Anup came back from coaching and said, "Didi, my headphones have stopped working."

"So?"

"I can't hear anything in the classes on the phone."

"Can they be repaired?"

"The shopkeeper said it would be better to buy new ones."

Her mother called from inside, "Didi's salary is coming, isn't it? She'll see about it."

Sanjana looked at Anup.

Anup immediately said, "No, no, I didn't say that."

Sanjana smiled.

"First see if they can be repaired."

On Sunday, her aunt came over.

In the course of conversation, talk turned to a wedding the following month.

Her mother said, "Sanjana has a job now. She'll give Chachi a sari."

Sanjana was straining the tea at the time.

Her aunt laughed and said, "I don't want anything. Let her keep her first earnings for herself."

Her mother laughed too.

"What will she keep for herself? A daughter of the house will spend on the house."

The sentence was spoken lightly.

No one wanted an argument.

As Sanjana poured the tea, she saw that one cup had filled almost to the brim.

She poured a little of it back into the saucepan.

At half past ten on the morning of the fifth, her phone vibrated.

It was a message from the bank.

Her salary had been credited to her account.

It was less than the monthly amount she had read in the appointment letter.

The school accountant explained it to her—provident fund, no deduction for absence but a proportional deduction because of the date on which she had joined, and a one-time fee for the employee identity card.

Sanjana read the figure again.

She was not disappointed.

For the first time, she simply understood that "salary" was not one number; it reached one's hand only after several smaller numbers had been cut and divided out of it.

At lunch, her colleague Meera asked, "First salary?"

Sanjana nodded.

"Sweets at home?"

"Maybe."

"Buy something for yourself first."

Sanjana laughed.

On her way home that evening, she bought half a kilo of peda.

As soon as the sweets reached home, Grandmother fed the first piece to Sanjana.

Her father said, "This is the sweetness of your first salary."

Anup clapped.

Her mother, her eyes shining, said, "May God take you very far."

At that moment, Sanjana felt that the first month of work had been successfully completed.

After dinner that night, her father asked, "How much came?"

Sanjana told him the amount.

Her father was silent for a moment.

"The appointment letter mentioned more than that."

"There were deductions."

"How much for what?"

Sanjana opened her phone and showed him the salary slip.

Her father read it carefully.

"All right. Provident fund is not a bad thing."

Her mother asked, "Shall we refill the gas cylinder?"

"Yes."

"It'll be refilled tomorrow."

Anup said nothing.

Neither did Grandmother.

Sanjana herself said, "I was thinking I'd give six thousand for the house."

Her father immediately said, "No. Why so much in the first month?"

Her mother too said, "See to your own needs first."

Sanjana felt relieved.

She said, "The bus pass, phone, shoe repair—all that is separate. Giving six thousand won't cause me any difficulty."

Her father did not insist much.

"All right. But only because you want to."

"Yes."

That night, Sanjana transferred six thousand to her mother's account from her phone.

As soon as she saw the message, her mother came into Sanjana's room.

"Now you really are an earning woman."

There was pride in her voice.

Sanjana smiled.

The gas cylinder was refilled the next morning.

Two days later, Grandmother's medicines were bought.

After getting the medicines, her mother said, "I paid for these from the six thousand for the house."

Sanjana liked that no one had asked her separately for the money.

But that evening, her father was speaking to the insurance agent on the phone.

"Yes, keep the next instalment date as the tenth. Now the daughter earns too, so cash at home will be a little easier."

Sanjana heard the sentence while taking off her shoes in the veranda.

Her father did not see her.

She went inside.

On the third day, her mother said, "We won't buy Chachi's sari from here. We'll get a good one from the market. We'll give it in your name."

Sanjana asked, "In my name?"

"Yes. Your first customary gift after getting the job."

"The money?"

Her mother looked at Sanjana's face.

"It'll be from your side, won't it?"

Sanjana said nothing.

Her mother immediately added, "Not very expensive. We'll get a good one for fifteen hundred or two thousand."

That night, Anup was opening up his broken headphones and placing the screws on the table.

"Fixed?" Sanjana asked.

"Half."

"How can it be half?"

"There's sound in one ear now."

They both laughed.

Then Anup said softly, "Ma said I should get new ones, that Didi would pay."

Sanjana looked at him.

Anup kept turning the screw.

"I told her no. It feels bad to me."

"If you need headphones, you can say so."

"I do need them. But why should it already be decided that you'll pay?"

For the first time, Sanjana heard that question from outside herself.

That night, she opened her account.

It had been five days since the salary had come.

Six thousand for the house.

The monthly bus pass.

The monthly phone expense.

Extra lunch on two days when she had not been able to take her lunch box.

The shoe repair.

Two simple kurtas for school, which her father had said he would buy before she started the job, but which Sanjana had paid for herself.

There was still money in the account.

But the amount she had thought of as "savings" now had words gathering all around it—sari, insurance, headphones, medicine, gas.

Some of these were necessities.

Some were affection.

Some were convenience.

Some were merely assumptions.

The problem was not the size of the amount.

The problem was that before those assumptions were made, no one seemed to feel any need to ask Sanjana.

The following week, the rush to deposit fees increased at the school.

Sanjana reached home at seven in the evening.

As soon as her mother opened the door, she said, "Wash your hands and face quickly. Guests are coming."

"Who?"

"Your Mama and Mami. They'll eat here."

Sanjana put down her bag.

"Is there anything I need to do?"

"Just cut the salad and help with the rotis."

Sanjana used to do these things anyway.

But that day, for the first time, she felt that although she had started working, her old time at home was still assumed to be available.

She cut the salad.

She rolled the rotis too.

Over dinner, Mama asked how the job was going.

"How much is the salary?"

Before Sanjana could answer, her father gave the amount from the appointment letter—the figure before deductions.

Sanjana looked at her father.

He did not notice.

Mama said happily, "Wonderful! The house will have a great deal of support now."

Her mother said, "Yes, the girl is standing on her own feet now."

Sanjana turned the roti on the griddle.

That night, after Mama and Mami had left, Sanjana asked her father, "The amount you mentioned doesn't actually come into my hands."

Her father folded the newspaper.

"How much difference can there be?"

"Whether the difference is small or large, people form expectations on the basis of that figure."

Her father looked at her.

"I said it with pride."

"I understand."

"Then?"

Sanjana did not answer at once.

"Just let me understand the accounting of what actually comes into my hands too."

Her father opened the newspaper again, but did not read it.

The next day was Sunday.

Sanjana had planned to sleep late.

At eight, her mother called, "Get up. We have to go to the market to buy Chachi's sari."

Sanjana sat up.

She did not suddenly become angry.

Instead, she felt an odd calm.

"Ma, is it necessary to give the sari?"

"How is it necessary? It's a customary gift."

"Am I giving the gift, or are you giving it in my name?"

Her mother did not understand the question.

"Aren't they the same thing?"

"Not to me."

Her mother sat down on the edge of the bed.

Sanjana said, "If I'm giving it, then I'll choose it, decide how much to spend, and when to give it. If you're giving it, why use my name?"

Her mother was silent for a while.

"So much accounting as soon as you get a job?"

The sentence stung Sanjana.

But she did not raise her voice.

"Why did all the accounting start being put in my name as soon as I got a job?"

For a few moments, there was only the sound of the fan in the room.

Her mother got up.

"All right. Forget the sari."

This "all right" was not a pleased one.

Sanjana did not take it as a victory either.

Until afternoon, both of them spoke very little.

In the evening, Grandmother came and sat beside Sanjana.

"Is your mother angry?"

"A little."

"And you?"

"Me too."

Grandmother laughed.

"At least being angry costs nothing. That's something."

Sanjana burst out laughing.

Then Grandmother grew serious again.

"When someone earns money for the first time, people do not see the money. They see their own shortages."

Sanjana remained silent.

"Your mother too has been looking at shortages for a long time."

"I understand."

"Understanding and filling every shortage are not the same thing."

Sanjana looked at Grandmother's face.

Grandmother got up.

Perhaps that was all she had wanted to say.

On the twenty-fourth day of the month, her father brought up the insurance matter again.

"This instalment is a little heavy. If, over and above your six thousand, I could get another two thousand..."

Sanjana did not interrupt him.

Her father finished what he had to say.

"I'll return it next month."

Sanjana asked, "Is this a regular household expense, or only for this month?"

Her father looked surprised.

"Only this month."

"Then I can give it."

"All right."

"But next month, my share for the house will still be six thousand."

Her father looked at her for a moment.

"You've decided that?"

"Yes."

"Did you ask me?"

Sanjana did not smile.

"I'm asking this time—is six thousand regularly all right?"

Her father slowly nodded.

"All right."

It was the first time that "Sanjana's money for the house" had ceased to be a vague phrase and become a fixed amount.

That night, Sanjana printed her salary slip.

At the top of the paper was not the basic salary from the appointment letter, but the actual amount she had received.

The deductions were listed below.

Sanjana did not take the paper to her father.

She put it in her file.

Beside it, she placed the receipt for the monthly bus pass.

Then, on a small piece of paper, she wrote, "House—6000."

Below that, she wrote another line: "Own savings—first."

As soon as she wrote it, the sentence seemed a little harsh.

She crossed out "first."

Then she wrote, "Own savings—regular."

There seemed to be less of a quarrel in that word.

In the final week of the month, Anup's headphones stopped working altogether.

This time he came directly to Sanjana.

"Didi, I really do need new ones now."

"How much?"

He showed her three options.

Sanjana chose not the most expensive one, but the middle one.

"I'll pay half. You pay half from the money left from your tuition."

Anup made a face.

"I have very little tuition money."

"My salary isn't three salaries either."

Anup laughed.

"All right."

Two days later, he brought his half of the money.

Sanjana added the rest and ordered the headphones.

When the package arrived, Anup first handed the box to Sanjana.

"You open it."

"It's yours. You open it."

Anup opened it himself.

Sanjana liked that small thing.

On the last day of the month, the file for the next salary cycle was being prepared at the school.

The accountant joked, "The first month is over. Now even the salary is old."

Sanjana laughed.

On the bus home, she thought—the job had not grown old in the first month.

Only the language of the people around it had quickly slipped into an old pattern.

"You earn now."

Within those four words there was congratulations too.

There was relief too.

There was entitlement too.

And sometimes there was also a list of expenses drawn up without the earning person being present.

When Sanjana reached home, her mother was in the kitchen.

"You're back?"

"Yes."

"Tea?"

Sanjana put down her bag.

"I'll make it."

Her mother said, "Sit down first. I'm making it."

It was not a great change.

Her mother had made tea for her many times before as well.

Sanjana did not want to turn it into a sign.

She simply sat down.

Her mother brought the tea.

As she set down the cup, she said, "I bought Chachi's sari."

Sanjana looked at her mother.

"Good."

"In my name."

Sanjana smiled faintly.

Her mother did too.

"If something is to be given in your name, I'll ask you."

Sanjana did not immediately say thank you.

She picked up the cup.

The tea was hot.

On the fifth of the next month, her phone vibrated again.

Sanjana was matching the fee register in the office at the time.

A bank message had arrived.

This time the amount was a little higher than in the first month, because there was no deduction on account of her joining date.

Sanjana read the message and placed the phone face down on the desk.

When she reached home that evening, her mother asked, "Has the salary come?"

"Yes."

Her mother did not immediately mention gas, sari, medicine, insurance—anything.

She only asked, "When will you send the six thousand for the house?"

Sanjana said, "Tonight."

"All right."

Anup was studying with his new headphones on.

Her father had folded one corner of the newspaper and was looking for the insurance agent's number.

Grandmother was watering the tulsi plant.

The house was the same house as before.

The shortages had not vanished either.

Sanjana went to her room.

She opened the file and placed the second salary slip beside the first.

A day-old crease had formed on the first sheet.

The second was perfectly straight.

She took out the small paper marked "House—6000."

This time, she wrote nothing new beneath it.

She put the paper back in the file.

From outside came her mother's voice—"Sanjana, dinner in ten minutes."

Sanjana answered, "I'm coming."

She closed the file.

The first month was over.

The salary was now a part of the household.

But not the whole household.

STORY 279

The Old Petticoat

Before the rains withdrew, it was customary in the house to sort through the old clothes.

This time they began with the loft upstairs.

Nira said, "Clothes fit to be worn, on one side. Things that can still be put to some use, on the other. Whatever is completely worn through, in a third pile."

Three sheets were spread out in the courtyard.

On the first went saris, kurtas, and clothes the children had outgrown.

On the second went torn towels, old pillowcases, curtains, and scraps saved for sewing.

On the third went all those things at which everyone said at once, "This is of no use to anyone now."

Sudha Devi was sitting on the veranda, picking through neem leaves.

She was in no hurry.

For everyone else in the house, this was cleaning.

For her, sorting clothes was nothing new.

For thirty years, which garment had torn when, whose size had changed, which sari had become which pillowcase - her hands seemed to remember all of it on their own.

But today Nira was the one making the lists.

She was Sudha Devi's daughter-in-law.

With her was Anvita, the granddaughter, who was in college.

"Grandmother, this?" Anvita asked, lifting a faded brown garment.

Sudha Devi looked at it from a distance.

"Leave it."

"Fit to wear?"

"No."

"Then the second pile?"

Breaking the stems off the neem leaves, Sudha Devi said, "Keep it separate for now."

Anvita unfolded the garment completely.

It was a petticoat.

Its colour was hard to make out.

Perhaps it had once been a deep maroon.

Now it was brownish in places, muddy in others, with a faint trace of red here and there.

The hem was not all of one kind.

In one place, a blue piece of cloth had been attached.

In another, a green one.

Near the seam at the back was a yellow, flowered patch.

The waistband was of a cloth different from the original fabric.

Nira laughed.

"Mother, does this get a separate pile of its own?"

Sudha Devi said, "Make one."

"What shall we call it? Historical artefacts?"

Harinarayan Babu, sitting on the veranda, folded his newspaper and laughed.

"This is your mother's museum."

Sudha Devi did not answer.

Anvita placed the petticoat in her lap and sat down.

Her eyes remained fixed on the hem.

"Grandmother, has this been sewn this many times?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you throw it away?"

Sudha Devi gathered the pile of neem leaves together.

"The cloth would tear. The work would not stop."

Hearing this, Anvita turned the petticoat over again.

The inside of the hem was more interesting than the outside.

Seam upon seam.

Some stitches had been done by hand.

Some by machine.

In one place, thick cloth had been folded twice.

Elsewhere, an old seam had been opened and joined again.

"What cloth is this blue patch from?" Anvita asked.

Nira bent down to look.

"I think this is from Dhiraj's school shirt."

Dhiraj came out of the inner room.

"Mine?"

He came over to the petticoat.

The moment he saw the blue cloth, his face changed.

"Yes, my shirt in Class Five was this colour."

Harinarayan Babu said, "That year the school had changed the shirt to blue."

Dhiraj laughed.

"I tore two shirts that year."

Everyone remembered Dhiraj's shirts.

Sudha Devi remembered the night she had sewn on that patch.

She said, "It was cloth left from the back of the shirt after it tore."

"You put it on this?" Anvita asked.

"That summer, the tap in the lane had gone dry."

No one understood at once.

Sudha Devi took the petticoat in her hands.

She placed a finger on the blue patch.

"I used to bring water from the hand pump by the railway line. One day this hem caught on a broken brick and tore. That night I cut up Dhiraj's old shirt and patched it."

Dhiraj fell silent.

He remembered his blue shirt.

He did not remember his mother's petticoat as she carried water.

Harinarayan Babu tried to open the newspaper again, but did not.

Anvita asked, "So this patch isn't from Class Five. It's from the year of the water?"

Sudha Devi smiled.

"If you want to give it a name, write whatever you like."

Nira was lifting an old towel from the second pile.

Anvita said, "And this green one?"

Sudha Devi pulled the petticoat closer to herself.

The green patch was small, but the stitching around it was dense.

"That was Pinki's frock," Nira said at once.

Pinki was Sudha Devi's daughter; she now lived in Madhubani.

Harinarayan Babu said, "She was very fond of green."

Sudha Devi nodded.

"It was a frock."

"When was it patched?"

"Pinki had fallen ill."

Nira stopped.

"Typhoid?"

"Yes."

Everyone in the house knew the story of Pinki's illness.

The fever had risen.

The doctor had arrived late.

Harinarayan Babu had kept a wet cloth on her forehead all night.

That story had been told again and again.

No one had heard Sudha Devi's version.

"Her bedsheet had to be changed four times a day," she said.

"Washing the bedding over and over, the edge of this petticoat wore against the stone. After Pinki recovered, I patched it with a frock she had outgrown."

Harinarayan Babu said softly, "I don't remember that."

In an even voice, Sudha Devi said, "You remember the fever."

Anvita ran her palm over the green patch.

"And you remember the washing."

Sudha Devi did not answer.

The sunlight in the courtyard had moved from one corner of the sheets to another.

All three piles kept growing.

But the petticoat was no longer in any pile.

It lay open before Anvita.

The waistband had been remade with thick red cloth.

Looking at it, Nira said, "This must be the border of one of Mother's old saris."

Sudha Devi laughed.

"My sari."

"Which one?"

"The one I wore in the first year of your marriage."

Nira looked startled.

"My marriage?"

"Not yours. Your brother-in-law's."

Nira burst out laughing.

"I've lost track of the reckoning altogether."

Harinarayan Babu corrected her this time: "At Dhiraj's wedding, Sudha wore a red-and-black sari."

From inside, Dhiraj said, "That sari lasted a very long time."

"It did," Sudha Devi said.

Anvita opened the waistband and looked inside.

There were two layers of old cloth within it.

"Why was this changed?"

Sudha Devi was silent for a moment.

"The waist changed."

Nira was about to laugh, then stopped.

Sudha Devi herself laughed.

"Does a person's body remain the same size forever?"

Anvita smiled too.

"When?"

"After Dhiraj's wedding."

Harinarayan Babu joked, "Once the daughter-in-law came, you must have got some rest."

Sudha Devi looked at him.

Her gaze was neither sharp nor gentle.

Only direct.

"The daughter-in-law had come, and still getting up at four every morning was my work."

Nira looked at Harinarayan Babu.

Harinarayan Babu began straightening the corner of his newspaper.

Sudha Devi said, "That year Babu's knee went bad. Dhiraj had just started a new job. The younger son was away. There were more people in the house, and more work too."

A thread in the waistband caught on Anvita's fingernail.

She freed it carefully.

"So the waistband is a record of your waist growing?"

"No."

Sudha Devi folded the cloth and opened it again.

"This waistband is a record of the fact that there was no time to buy new cloth."

Nira said softly, "A petticoat could have been bought."

"It could have."

"Then why?"

For a few moments Sudha Devi kept untangling the drawstring at the waist.

"The list of household expenses was long. This one was still serviceable for me."

It was a very ordinary sentence.

Even so, the courtyard fell silent for a moment.

Anvita asked, "Grandmother, do you remember every single seam in it?"

"Not all of them."

"You remember so many."

"When the hand does the same work again and again, some trace of it remains in the hand."

Nira now stopped sorting the third pile and came to sit beside the petticoat.

She looked at the yellow flowered patch.

"This isn't from any of my clothes."

Sudha Devi said, "No."

"Pinki's?"

"No."

Harinarayan Babu guessed, "A curtain?"

Sudha Devi nodded.

"An old kitchen curtain."

Nira immediately said, "When did the kitchen ever have a curtain?"

"Before you came here."

"How did this patch get put on?"

Sudha Devi smiled.

"That isn't a good story."

Anvita grew eager.

"Then you must tell it."

"Once, a tin of mustard oil fell."

Harinarayan Babu laughed.

"Such a small incident?"

"It seems small to you."

There was laughter in Sudha Devi's voice too.

"The whole kitchen was covered in oil. I slipped. The hem caught on the corner of the stove and tore."

Nira asked, "Were you hurt?"

"I scraped my knee."

"Did anyone see?"

"Everyone was busy saving the oil."

This time Harinarayan Babu did not laugh.

Anvita noticed a small black stain beside the yellow patch.

"From that day?"

"Could be."

"You didn't say anything?"

"What was there to say? The oil had spilled. It had to be cleaned."

Anvita turned the petticoat over again.

For the first time she understood that a tear in cloth was not merely an event in the life of cloth.

Behind every torn place there was a body.

Behind the body, work.

Behind the work, time.

And behind time, a house.

Dhiraj had now come fully into the courtyard and sat down.

He looked again at the patch from his blue shirt.

"Ma, how old is this petticoat?"

Sudha Devi did the arithmetic in her head.

"Older than your Class Five days."

"Meaning thirty years?"

"About that."

Anvita was startled.

"The same petticoat for thirty years?"

Sudha Devi corrected her at once: "It hasn't remained the same cloth."

"What do you mean?"

"Half of it has changed."

She ran a finger along the inside of the hem.

"The original cloth is here and here. The rest was added later."

Anvita laughed.

"Then this petticoat is like a ship - one plank after another keeps being replaced, but the name remains the same."

Dhiraj said, "You've been reading too much in college."

Sudha Devi did not ask what she meant.

She only said, "What difference does changing the name make?"

Nira lifted the lower hem of the petticoat.

"Mother, why are there three folds in this hem?"

"It used to be longer."

"Then?"

"I shortened it."

"Then?"

"Then I lengthened it again."

Anvita burst out laughing.

"Did the body change again?"

"The body, the work, everything."

Sudha Devi said, "When the children were small, if the hem hung low it gathered water, ash, mud - everything. So I turned it up."

"Why lengthen it again?"

"The children grew up. I began going out more. I opened the old fold."

Slowly, Nira separated the three layers.

The cloth inside was less faded than the outer part.

As though time had remained preserved within it.

On one layer was an old white soap stain.

On another, a black trace of smoke.

On the third, many tiny needle holes.

Anvita said, "These really are layers."

Sudha Devi said, "When cloth stays folded, the part inside wears less."

"And life?"

Harinarayan Babu smiled. "Now the philosophy begins."

Anvita laughed.

Sudha Devi did not.

She simply put the folds of the petticoat back together.

The sorting began again.

A little while later, Pinki called.

Jokingly, Nira said, "We found your old frock here."

Pinki laughed over the phone.

"My frock?"

Anvita picked up the phone as if to take a photograph, then stopped.

She looked at Sudha Devi.

"May I take a picture?"

Sudha Devi said, "Of the cloth?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Anvita thought about her answer.

"For remembrance."

Sudha Devi said, "Talk to Pinki first."

The phone was handed to her.

Pinki's voice could be heard out in the courtyard.

"Ma, you've kept that petticoat till now?"

Sudha Devi laughed.

"You people are only finding out now."

Pinki said, "I loved that green frock."

"Everyone remembers the frock."

"Then?"

"Nothing."

Sudha Devi handed the phone back to Anvita.

Anvita did not take a photograph.

She kept looking at the petticoat with her own eyes.

The afternoon declined.

The clothes on the first sheet were packed into sacks.

The scraps on the second were put away in the sewing corner.

Some clothes from the third pile were to be cut up for wiping the floor.

Nira brought the scissors.

"Come, now for the third pile."

Anvita pulled the petticoat closer to herself.

Nira asked, "Which pile does this go in?"

Anvita looked at her grandmother.

Sudha Devi said, "Give it to me."

Nira handed her the petticoat.

Harinarayan Babu asked, "Back into the trunk?"

"No."

"Then?"

Sudha Devi went over to the sewing machine.

A dust cover lay over the machine.

She spread the petticoat on the table.

One seam along the hem had begun to come completely apart.

"First this has to be mended."

Surprised, Nira asked, "You'll wear it again?"

"No."

"Then why sew it?"

Sudha Devi said, "If I leave it torn, the cloth will unravel further."

Anvita pulled up a chair and sat beside the machine.

"Shall I sew it?"

Sudha Devi looked at her.

"Can you sew a straight seam?"

"I can learn."

Sudha Devi opened an old box.

There were many spools of thread.

Brown, maroon, black, blue.

Anvita picked up a yellow spool.

Nira said, "That doesn't match the colour at all."
Anvita looked at her grandmother.
"Shall I use one that matches?"
Sudha Devi looked at the old seams on the petticoat.
Every one of them had been sewn with thread chosen to match.
So that no one's eye would fall on them.
For a few moments she was silent.
Then she put the yellow spool back into Anvita's hand.
"Use it."
Anvita tried to thread the machine needle.
The first time, the thread would not pass through the eye.
Nor the second time.
Sudha Devi did not take the needle from her hand.
She only said, "Wet the end of the thread."
Anvita did so.
This time the thread went through.
The wheel of the machine turned slowly.
The yellow seam showed clearly against the old brown hem.
From a distance Harinarayan Babu said, "Such bright thread?"
Sudha Devi answered, "Let it show."
Dhiraj looked at the patch from his blue shirt.
Nira at the yellow flowered patch.
No one had anything to say.
Anvita completed the seam.
Her line was not perfectly straight.
At one place the thread veered slightly crooked.
Nervously she asked, "Shall I open it and do it again?"
Sudha Devi touched the seam with a finger.
"No."
"It's crooked."
"Leave it."
Anvita removed the petticoat from the machine.
Very little sunlight now remained in the courtyard.
Sudha Devi shook out the cloth and lifted it to fold it.
First the waist went inside.
Then the hem.
Then the blue patch disappeared within the folds.
The green one too.

The yellow flowered piece as well.

At the end, the new yellow seam remained facing outward.

Anvita said, "It shows even when it's folded."

Sudha Devi opened the cloth again.

This time she folded it so that the yellow seam did not go inside.

The small bright line remained on top.

Nira asked, "Where shall we keep it?"

Sudha Devi pointed to the basket beneath the sewing machine.

"Here."

"Not in the trunk?"

"No."

"Not in the throwaway pile?"

"No."

"Then what will it become?"

Placing the petticoat in the basket, Sudha Devi said, "Nothing for now."

After dinner that night, Harinarayan Babu came onto the veranda carrying his old white kurta.

One sleeve of the kurta was torn.

He put it beside Sudha Devi and said, "Does this too have thirty years of history, or does it go straight to wiping the floor?"

Sudha Devi picked up the kurta.

She gave it one look.

Then she laughed.

"This doesn't carry so many marks of work. It carries more marks of rest."

Harinarayan Babu laughed too.

Anvita was listening from inside.

The next morning, before leaving for college, she went to the sewing machine. The petticoat lay folded in the basket. The crooked yellow seam was clearly visible on top. Anvita did not touch it; she simply stood there for a moment.

Inside the house, her mother was making tea. Grandmother was sweeping the courtyard. Babuji was looking for the newspaper. Dhiraj was taking out the motorcycle. Every task had already begun in its own voice.

Anvita walked toward the gate. From behind, she looked once more at the basket by the sewing machine. She no longer saw the blue shirt, the green frock, the red sari, or the yellow curtain as separate things.

What she saw were the seams - old, dense, almost invisible. And one new one - yellow, crooked, deliberately visible.

STORY 280

The Guest Room

There were four bedrooms in Devaki Devi's house.

Even so, if anyone asked her, "Which room is yours?" she would pause for a moment.

The reason for that pause was not that the house was small.

The house was, in fact, large.

Madhav Babu had built it in the old quarter of Laheriasarai five years before his retirement: a veranda in front, a square courtyard in the middle, two rooms on the right, two on the left, the kitchen at the back, and an open terrace above.

While the house was being built, Devaki Devi had counted the bricks, kept account of the masons' wages, and, when the rains came, had had sacks spread over the half-built walls.

Madhav Babu would joke, "The house may bear my name, but every brick has been counted by you."

Devaki Devi would reply, "Let the name be yours; just make sure the roof doesn't leak."

Madhav Babu had been dead for seven years now.

The elder son, Prabhat, lived in the house with his wife Nirmala, their daughter Isha, and their son Manav. The younger son, Alok, worked in Pune and came home twice a year.

The four rooms had never been divided on paper; habit had divided them.

The front room belonged to Prabhat and Nirmala.

The one beside it was Isha's room for studying and sleeping.

The smaller room at the back was Manav's, where there were more cricket bats, shoes, and wires than books.

The fourth room was the cleanest of all.

A small brass-coloured plaque hung on its door: "Guest."

Nirmala had bought the plaque in Janakpur.

The guest room was always ready: a white sheet, two matching pillows, a light curtain at the window, an empty table, a water jug, and two empty shelves in the cupboard.

It was a matter of pride for the household.

Nirmala would say, "If someone arrives unexpectedly, they should feel that the house was waiting for them."

Devaki Devi never objected to that sentence.

The only difficulty was that the woman who had lived in the house for forty years had no room permanently waiting for her.

While Madhav Babu was alive, he and Devaki Devi had lived together in one of the two front rooms.

After his death, Prabhat said, "Ma, what will you do alone in such a large room? Nirmala and I have more things. Stay in Isha's room. The two of you will have each other's company too."

Devaki Devi agreed.

Isha was ten then. At night she would fall asleep listening to stories from her grandmother.

Three years later, Isha's final school examinations drew near.

One evening Nirmala said, "Maaji, Isha needs privacy at night too, just for three months. Please move into the guest room."

Devaki Devi agreed again.

She liked the guest room on the first night. From the window she could see the upper branches of the neem tree.

She set her little clock on the table, placed her tulsi beads beside the pillow, and put the red medicine box behind the water jug.

The next day, while folding the white sheet, Nirmala said, "This one is for guests. I'll put the flowered sheet on for you."

Devaki Devi said, "All right."

Three weeks later, Nirmala's maternal uncle and aunt were coming to stay for two nights.

Devaki Devi's bedding was tied up again.

A folding cot was opened in Manav's room.

Manav objected. "If Dadi stays in my room, where will I study at night?"

Prabhat said, "It's only for two nights."

Devaki Devi said, "I'll sleep on the veranda."

Everyone said, "Why on the veranda?"

But in the end, for those two nights Devaki Devi slept on the veranda, because the veranda lay outside every dispute.

From that day on, her bedding remained permanently tied up.

A mattress, a thin quilt, two sheets, and a pillow—in a blue cotton cover.

By day the blue bundle stayed under the stairs; by night it was opened wherever space happened to be available.

Devaki Devi did not call it "my room." She called it "my bundle."

Isha would laugh.

"Dadi, your house walks around with you."

Devaki Devi would laugh too.

But gradually her belongings also began to settle in different parts of the house.

The red medicine box sat on top of the food cupboard.

Her old spectacle case lay beside the kitchen window.

Two good saris were kept in Prabhat's room, because Isha's cupboard was full.

Her woollen shawl was on the upper shelf of the guest-room cupboard.

Three letters from Madhav Babu were in an iron trunk kept under the stairs behind the blue bundle.

At night, when she needed her medicine, she first had to remember: where is the red box today?

Sometimes Nirmala would say, "Maaji, why don't you keep your things in one place?"

Devaki Devi would smile.

"If I find one place, I will."

Nirmala took it as a joke.

One winter, Alok came from Pune with his wife and child.

They were given the guest room.

Manav gave his room to Alok's child.

Manav spread a mattress on the floor of Isha's room.

Devaki Devi slept on a folding cot in the sitting room.

The sitting room had to become a sitting room again every morning, so she had to put away her bedding before sunrise.

One day Manav slept until seven. His mattress was still lying in Isha's room.

No one woke him.

Devaki Devi had already folded her quilt into the blue cover at five.

That day, for the first time, she saw the difference clearly: the person who had a room could make the household's timetable bend around their sleep; the person who had no room had to make their sleep obey the household's timetable.

She said nothing to anyone.

In Phagun, her old friend Janki Jha came to visit.

Janki Devi was a widow and lived in Patna with her younger daughter.

The two sat on the veranda talking for a long while.

Janki Devi said, "Your house is beautifully done up now. Come, show me your room."

Devaki Devi rose, then stopped.

"Which one?"

Janki Devi laughed. "Your room. The one where you sleep."

Devaki Devi tried to laugh too.

"At present, in Manav's room."

"At present?"

"He has gone to the hostel, you know."

This time Janki Devi's laugh grew shorter.

She asked nothing more.

The two went into Manav's room. There were photographs of cricketers on the wall, mathematics books on the table, and Manav's jacket on a hook. Devaki Devi's blue bundle had been pushed under the bed.

Janki Devi said only, "Where are your things?"

Devaki Devi moved her hand in a circle.

"All over the house."

At that answer both women laughed, though both understood the reason for the laughter.

In Baisakh, Manav returned from the hostel.

Devaki Devi moved back into the guest room, because no guest was expected for three weeks.

This time she did not fully open her blue bundle.

She took out only the quilt and the pillow.

Instead of setting the clock on the table, she kept it on top of the bundle.

At night she took out the medicine box; in the morning she put it back inside.

Isha noticed.

"Dadi, if you're staying here, why don't you unpack your things?"

Devaki Devi said, "Once things are opened out, it is hard to pack them again."

"Are guests coming?"

"Not yet."

"Then?"

Devaki Devi went on wiping the glass of the clock.

"They may."

Two weeks later Nirmala brought news: her aunt's son from Samastipur was coming with his wife for three days.

They were due on Friday.

On Tuesday itself Nirmala said, "Maaji, please get the guest room ready. The sheet has to be changed and the curtain washed."

Devaki Devi asked, "They are coming four days from now, aren't they?"

"Yes, but it is better if the room is ready beforehand."

Devaki Devi tied up the blue bundle.

This time Isha watched her lift it.

"Dadi, where will you stay for these four days?"

"In the sitting room."

"But the guests aren't here yet."

Devaki Devi said, "Their room has arrived before they have."

Isha said nothing.

On Wednesday, the cot was opened in the sitting room.

On Thursday, a phone call came from Samastipur—the aunt's daughter's child was ill, and the journey had been postponed.

Nirmala put down the phone and said, "All right, they aren't coming now."

The guest room remained clean, white, and empty.

Devaki Devi's blue bundle remained in a corner of the sitting room.

In the evening she began to open the cot.

Isha said, "Dadi, the guest room is empty."

From the kitchen Nirmala called out, "Let it be, Maaji. A fresh sheet has just been spread. It'll get spoiled again."

Devaki Devi's hand stopped on the leg of the folding cot.

For a few moments she looked toward the white door.

Then she opened the cot.

That night sleep came late.

No one's behaviour was harsh enough to be given the name injustice.

Prabhat bought her medicines. Nirmala served her meals on time. Isha massaged oil into her hair. Manav brought her favourite sugar crystals from the market.

They all loved her.

But inside that love was a question so small that no one noticed it: where in the house would her night come to rest?

The next morning Devaki Devi did not tie up the blue bundle.

After folding the cot in the sitting room, she went straight to the guest room.

The white sheet was exactly as it had been.

She opened the cupboard. Two empty shelves were in front of her. Above them were two guest towels, a box of soap, and an extra pillow.

Devaki Devi put her red medicine box on the lower empty shelf.

Beside it she placed the spectacle case.

Then she opened the iron trunk under the stairs, took out Madhav Babu's three letters, and placed them there too.

Nirmala came and stood at the doorway.

"Maaji?"

Devaki Devi turned.

Nirmala looked at the cupboard, then at the white sheet.

"Are you looking for something?"

"No. I'm putting things away."

"What things?"

"My things."

Nirmala fell silent.

Devaki Devi's voice was neither sharp nor complaining.

She was simply putting her things away.

Nirmala said softly, "What if guests come?"

Devaki Devi closed the cupboard door.

"Then they will stay in the house."

Nirmala remained silent, as if searching for an answer.

Devaki Devi went on, "So will I."

There was no family council that day.

Prabhat went to the office. Manav went to college. Isha sat down with her books. Nirmala ground spices in the kitchen.

In the afternoon Devaki Devi brought her two saris from Manav's room and put them in the guest-room cupboard.

In the evening she opened the blue bundle.

The mattress was spread on the bed. The flower-printed sheet went over it. The white guest sheet was folded and placed on the upper shelf.

The brass plaque on the door still said "Guest."

Devaki Devi did not take it down.

Three days later, Prabhat's maternal uncle arrived without notice.

Nirmala looked at Devaki Devi for a moment.

Out of old habit, the words had nearly left her mouth: "Maaji, for two nights..."

But the sentence was never completed.

Prabhat himself said, "I'll open the folding cot in the sitting room. Mama will get better air there too."

Mama laughed and said, "As long as I get a cot, that's enough. I'm not a king just because I'm a guest."

The matter ended there.

That night Mama slept in the sitting room.

Devaki Devi slept in the guest room.

No one's dignity diminished.

The following week Isha brought home a small wall clock from the market.

"Dadi, your old clock keeps falling over. Shall I hang this one up?"

Devaki Devi looked at the wall.

There was no nail in the guest-room wall, because Nirmala used to say that a clean wall looked beautiful.

Devaki Devi asked for a small hammer.

Isha held the nail.

The first tap was light.

At the second, the nail went into the wall.

Hearing the sound from the doorway, Nirmala came over.

She looked at the clock, looked at the nail, and looked at grandmother and granddaughter.

She said nothing.

Isha hung up the clock.

Devaki Devi stepped back two paces.

The clock was running.

The blue bundle was empty now. It was folded and placed at the bottom of the cupboard.

The plaque on the door still read "Guest."

But inside, the clock had found its place on the wall.

And for the first time, when Devaki Devi woke in the morning, she did not have to wonder where her bedding would be opened that night.

STORY 281

Secret Savings

Malati Devi's savings were not kept in any box.

Not inside the cupboard, not beneath the mattress, not knotted into an old sari.

Even if the people of the house had searched her room ten times, they would not have found even five hundred rupees together in one place.

Even so, Malati Devi was firmly certain that if a need arose, she had money.

That certainty lay scattered along her daily route.

In that small neighbourhood of Laheriasarai, on the one-and-a-half-kilometre road from her house to the market, her invisible savings lay in four places—Gopal Sahu's grocery shop, Shambhu the milkman's ledger, Savitri Pharmacy, and the torn red notebook of Revati, the vegetable seller.

Sometimes seven rupees.

Sometimes twenty-three.

Sometimes forty-two.

At times a full two hundred.

Malati Devi would buy something, settle the bill, and if the shopkeeper said, "I don't have change; take it next time," she would reply, "Write it under my name."

Even if change was available the next day, she did not immediately take it.

"Let it stay. Let it keep adding up."

At first Gopal Sahu used to laugh.

"Auntie, have you opened a bank?"

Malati Devi would say, "What is in the bank will come by the bank's route. This is money on the road."

Gopal Sahu did not understand what she meant by that answer, but on one page of his ledger he wrote "Malati Jha" and kept adding the small amounts.

At home, the matter was never discussed.

Jagdish Babu, Malati Devi's husband, worked in the accounts section of the electricity department. Accounts were his profession. On the first

day of every month he gave Malati Devi the money for household expenses and took it for granted that the family's finances ran on his earnings and his bank account.

"Twelve thousand went on groceries and milk this month?"

He would say.

Malati Devi would answer, "Yes."

"Last month it was eleven thousand seven hundred."

"Mustard oil became more expensive this month."

Jagdish Babu would open the calculator, add two or four figures, shake his head, and the matter would end there.

He never asked why Gopal Sahu had charged thirty-five rupees less than the price printed on the tin of mustard oil, or how Malati Devi had compared prices at two shops for a five-kilo sack of rice and saved fifty-eight rupees.

Malati Devi did not tell him either.

To her, saving meant this: from a sum that was already destined to be spent, something should remain in her own hands as a choice she could make herself.

The money was small.

The choice was not.

There were two children in the house—twenty-three-year-old Pranav and nineteen-year-old Mansi. Pranav was preparing for competitive examinations, and Mansi was in her second year of college. Paying by phone, banking, QR codes, and the new ways of keeping accounts all came very naturally to them.

One day, while buying vegetables from Revati, Mansi heard her mother talking.

Revati said, "Didi, thirty-four from last time and sixteen from today —that makes fifty."

Malati Devi said, "Let it stay written down."

On the way home Mansi asked, "Ma, why did you leave fifty rupees there?"

"I didn't leave it. It's mine."

"Then bring it home."

"What do I need it for right now?"

Mansi laughed. "You're asking what fifty rupees is for? If money stays at home, will it go bad?"

Malati Devi laughed too. "Small money disappears fastest at home."

"Who takes it?"

"No one. The house takes it."

Mansi laughed again at that answer, but Malati Devi was serious.

No one stole the five-, ten-, or fifty-rupee notes in the house. Sometimes Pranav would say, "Ma, give me twenty for the auto." Sometimes Jagdish Babu would say, "Do you have change? The tea seller can't break five hundred." Sometimes an extra packet of milk would arrive. Sometimes the broom would break. Sometimes a guest would turn up without warning.

Small money, once it stayed at home, took the shape of the household.

Written in a market ledger, it retained its own name.

Malati Devi had not devised this method after a great deal of thought.

Years earlier, when Mansi was five, she had developed a high fever one night. Jagdish Babu was away on tour. There were one hundred and thirty-seven rupees in cash at home. The pharmacy was open at night, but the two medicines the doctor had prescribed cost two hundred and ten rupees.

That night Harinarayan, the owner of Savitri Pharmacy, had said, "Give me what you have. Pay the rest later."

Malati Devi had never forgotten that sentence.

A few days later, when she paid the balance, she gave ten rupees extra. When Harinarayan tried to return it, she said, "Let it stay. Under my name."

Those ten rupees later became forty-seven.

Then one hundred and twenty-two.

Slowly, a small sum began to remain under Malati Devi's name at Savitri Pharmacy.

The memory of that night's fear was not money, but the money became its form.

Malati Devi never added up the total of all four places at once.

She kept only a rough estimate in her mind.

Around two thousand, perhaps, with Gopal.

Less than a thousand in the milkman's ledger.

At the pharmacy, sometimes more and sometimes less—because the amount also went down whenever she bought medicines there.

Five or seven hundred with Revati.

Besides this, she deposited two hundred rupees a month in the neighbourhood women's savings group. The money was in her name, but there was a rule for withdrawing it—in an emergency, the signatures of three members were required.

Jagdish Babu knew about the women's group, not about the savings.

To him, those meetings were merely "neighbourhood gossip."

"You all sit for two hours drinking tea," he would joke.

Malati Devi would say, “We drink the tea with our own money.”

One Tuesday morning, Jagdish Babu's phone rang.

It was a message from the bank: because an unusual transaction had been attempted on the account, transactions had been temporarily blocked for security reasons.

At first Jagdish Babu assumed it was some ordinary technical problem.

He tried to pay the electricity bill by phone. It did not go through.

He went to an ATM. The card was declined.

At the branch he learned that during the night, two unsuccessful attempts had been made to transfer large sums from his account. The bank had frozen the account. An application, identity documents, a written complaint, verification—the whole process had to be completed. The officer said, “It may take three to seven working days.”

“Seven days?” Jagdish Babu almost shouted.

“It is a security matter.”

“But all my salary money is in this account.”

“You will have access to everything once the block is lifted.”

That answer was sufficient for the bank. It was not sufficient for the household.

When Jagdish Babu returned home, his face had changed.

It was the eighteenth of the month.

There were one thousand three hundred and twenty rupees in cash at home.

The gas cylinder was on the verge of running out.

The last date for Pranav's examination application was four days away. The fee was eighteen hundred.

Mansi's college bus-pass renewal was due in two days.

There were three days' worth of Jagdish Babu's mother's blood-pressure and diabetes medicines left.

There was enough rice in the house for five days.

The milkman's account for the previous week also had to be paid—or so Jagdish Babu believed.

He sat down in the sitting room and spread papers out before him.

“First Pranav's form,” he said. “Can we delay the bus pass for two days?”

Mansi said, “If we delay it, there will be a fine.”

“Then whom do we borrow from?”

Pranav said quietly, “Mama?”

Jagdish Babu's face tightened.

Only the previous month they had borrowed ten thousand from Mama while buying the refrigerator, though it had been repaid within two weeks. Jagdish Babu did not like the thought of holding out his hand again.

"An advance from the office?" Malati Devi asked.

"The procedure takes at least five days."

"And the bank account will take five to seven days."

"Yes."

For a few moments, everyone was silent.

Then Jagdish Babu said, "I'll take five thousand from Shambhunath. He'll give it."

Malati Devi looked up at once.

Shambhunath was the man in the neighbourhood who lent money at interest. Five hundred a month on five thousand. If the date was missed, there was a separate penalty.

"No," Malati Devi said.

Jagdish Babu looked at her. "Then?"

"Wait until tonight."

"What will waiting change?"

"Let me see."

Irritation entered Jagdish Babu's voice. "Malati, this isn't a vegetable bill. We have to run the house for seven days."

Malati Devi did not answer.

In the afternoon she took her shopping bag and went out.

Mansi asked, "Where are you going?"

"To the market."

"With what money?"

"I have money."

The first stop was Gopal Sahu's shop.

Malati Devi said, "Gopal, how much is there under my name?"

Gopal Sahu took out his ledger and turned the pages.

"Two thousand seven hundred and twenty-six."

Malati Devi herself was surprised. Her estimate had been lower.

"Give me goods worth one thousand today. Leave the rest written down."

Gopal Sahu did not strike out her name. He wrote the new balance below—one thousand seven hundred and twenty-six.

Rice, lentils, oil, salt, potatoes, and soap went into the bag.

The second stop was Savitri Pharmacy.

"Harinarayan ji, how much is there under my name?"

"One thousand one hundred and seventy."

"Give me a full month's medicines for Maaji."

The medicines came to nine hundred and eighty.

"One hundred and ninety remains," Harinarayan said.

Malati Devi folded the slip and put it into her bag.

The third stop was Shambhu the milkman.

His ledger showed eight hundred and forty rupees deposited in Malati Devi's name.

"Deduct this week's milk from that," she said.

Shambhu laughed. "Auntie, you really do run a bank."

This time Malati Devi did not laugh.

"When the bank shuts, this bank stays open."

Shambhu too fell silent.

There were six hundred and twenty-five rupees with Revati. Malati Devi bought vegetables for three days, then told Revati, "Don't return the rest yet."

Revati asked, "Is there trouble?"

"A little."

"Then take all of it."

"No. Let the trouble remain little; that's why I won't take all of it."

When she returned home, Mansi was astonished by the weight of the bag.

"Ma, where did the money come from?"

"Mine."

"How much?"

For the first time, Malati Devi tried to add up in her mind what still remained at all four places.

Even after deducting the groceries and medicines, the total came to somewhere around five thousand.

When Jagdish Babu returned from the office, he saw the medicines, provisions, and milk slip on the table.

"Is all this on credit?"

"No."

"Then?"

"Money paid earlier."

Jagdish Babu picked up the slips one by one.

"Two thousand seven hundred and twenty-six with Gopal?"

"There was."

"Eight hundred and forty with the milkman?"

"There was."

"One thousand one hundred and seventy at the pharmacy?"

"There was."

The surprise in his voice slowly hardened into something like accusation.

"You were keeping all this money hidden from me?"

Malati Devi remained calm.

"Not from you. I was saving it out of the household expenses."

"Aren't those the same thing?"

"No."

Jagdish Babu was about to say something, but Malati Devi spoke first.

"If fifty rupees were lying at home, Pranav would ask for auto fare. You would ask for change. An extra packet of milk would come. It would be nobody's fault. The money would be spent. When it stays under my name at the shop, it still serves the household, but it doesn't dissolve away all at once."

Pranav kept looking at the slips on the table.

Mansi looked at her mother's face.

Jagdish Babu said, "But I should have known the accounts."

Malati Devi asked softly, "Why?"

It was not a loud question.

But everyone in the sitting room heard it.

Jagdish Babu did not answer at once.

Malati Devi continued, "You give me the money for the household provisions. Saving from it was part of my work. If there is a shortfall, you ask why. If there is a saving, does every right over that already belong to you as well?"

Jagdish Babu put the slips back on the table.

The conversation did not turn into a quarrel.

Because at that moment the problem had still not ended.

Pranav's examination fee was still unpaid.

So was Mansi's bus pass.

Malati Devi said, "The women's group meets tomorrow."

Jagdish Babu was startled again. "There too?"

"I deposit two hundred a month."

"How much has it become?"

"Seven thousand four hundred."

This time such silence spread through the sitting room that the bell of a rickshaw outside could be heard clearly.

Jagdish Babu sat upright in his chair.

"Seven thousand four hundred?"

"A little at a time, for three years."

"And I..."

Malati Devi did not interrupt him.

She waited for him to complete the sentence himself.

Jagdish Babu did not complete it.

The next day Malati Devi went to the women's group meeting. Under the group's rules, in an emergency a member could immediately withdraw part of her savings. Three members signed. Malati Devi withdrew four thousand.

From those four thousand, Pranav's examination fee was paid. Mansi's bus pass was renewed. A gas cylinder arrived.

Malati Devi left the remaining money in the group.

Jagdish Babu said, "If you had taken it all out, we would have been more comfortable."

"Why?"

"What if the bank takes longer?"

"Then we'll see again."

"It is better to see to it now."

Malati Devi smiled. "I don't like keeping all the money in my hands at once."

Jagdish Babu said nothing to that.

On the fifth day, the bank called. Verification was complete. The account had been unblocked.

Jagdish Babu went straight to the ATM. He withdrew money and brought it home.

The crisis could have ended there.

But afterward a new discomfort remained in the house—everyone now knew that Malati Devi's financial world was larger than the four walls within which the family had long regarded her merely as the person who spent the household money.

That evening Jagdish Babu placed a sheet of paper on the table.

"I was thinking," he said, "we should open an emergency account. A joint one. We'll deposit a thousand every month."

Pranav immediately said, "That's good."

Mansi nodded too.

Malati Devi looked at the paper.

"Joint with whom?"

"You and me."

"That will do."

Jagdish Babu's face relaxed.

Then Malati Devi added, "But my small savings will remain separate."

His expression faltered again for a moment.

"Why?"

"Because the emergency account will belong to the household. This is money I decide how to use."

Before Jagdish Babu could answer, Mansi burst out laughing.

"Babu, you've started asking again."

Jagdish Babu looked at his daughter, then at Malati Devi.

This time his smile came slowly.

"All right. But at least I'll know that something is there."

Malati Devi said, "Knowing that much is enough."

On the first day of the next month, Jagdish Babu gave Malati Devi the money for household expenses.

Along with it, he gave her a white envelope.

On it was written—"Emergency."

Malati Devi did not open the envelope to look inside. She placed it on the upper shelf of the cupboard.

In the afternoon she went to the market. From Revati she bought okra, pumpkin, and coriander. The total came to one hundred and eighty-two rupees. Malati Devi gave her two hundred. Revati began to return eighteen rupees. Malati Devi looked at the two notes for a moment. "Write it under my name." Revati opened the red notebook.

"Starting again?" Revati asked. Malati Devi said, "When did it ever stop?" Revati laughed. She wrote the date in the red notebook and entered the amount—eighteen. Malati Devi picked up her bag and started home.

Along the way stood Savitri Pharmacy, the milk cart, and Gopal Sahu's shop. At all four places, little numbers would begin gathering again. At home, the white envelope would remain in its place, and Malati Devi's savings would once again not be kept in any one place.

STORY 282

The Woman Missing from the Photograph

Manjari Devi's face did not appear in any of the family's old albums.

At first, no one found this surprising, because no member of the family had ever opened all the albums together.

While preparations were being made for Babuji's eighty-fifth birthday, the task fell to Ishani.

Ishani studied in Delhi and had come to Darbhanga for the holidays. She was told to choose old photographs and make a slideshow that would be projected on the wall on the evening of the birthday.

"Start with Dada and Dadi's wedding," her father, Nachiketa, said. "Then our childhood, the weddings, the children... Keep the order right."

"Don't worry about the order," Manjari Devi called from the kitchen. "The blue album has the first five years. The green one goes from Nachiketa's upanayan to Rashmi's wedding. The dates in the red album are in reverse order."

Ishani laughed. "Kaki, you remember all of it?"

Manjari Devi came out. There was turmeric on her hands. "If I don't remember, who will date all the photographs in this house?"

Until then, the sentence had sounded ordinary to Ishani.

She opened the first album.

Black-and-white photographs. Babuji young. A large bindi on Dadi's forehead. Three trees in the background. On the second page, four brothers standing in a row. On the third, Nachiketa's annaprashan.

On the back of the photograph, in pencil, someone had written: "Annaprashan, 12 March 1987. Date asked from Manjari."

Ishani paused.

She turned over the next photograph. On the back it said: "Housewarming of the new house. Bhadon. Manjari knows the exact day."

Further on: "Rashmi's farewell. Original negative with Manjari."

Then: "Feast for Nachiketa getting a job. Photographs selected by Manjari."

Ishani kept turning the pages. Manjari Devi's name appeared again and again on the backs, but her face was nowhere.

The green album had more than forty photographs from Rashmi's wedding. The bride, the groom, parents, maternal and paternal uncles and aunts, neighbours, the confectioner - even the driver standing beside the groom's car appeared in one photograph.

Not Manjari Devi.

The red album contained three naming ceremonies, two mundans, one retirement function, five weddings, and a house-warming.

Not Manjari Devi.

Ishani's curiosity turned from a game into a question.

She went to the kitchen. Manjari Devi was tempering cumin.

"Kaki, where are your old photographs?"

"Mine?"

"Yes. I haven't found even one in these albums."

Manjari Devi stirred the ladle. "I was never very fond of having my photograph taken."

"Not even one?"

"There must be one somewhere."

"Where?"

"The dal will burn now. Look at this first."

Ishani understood the answer - there was no time for this subject just then.

That evening, when everyone in the family was sitting on the veranda, she raised the question again.

"Why isn't there a single photograph of Kaki?"

Rashmi Mausi burst out laughing. "She never sat still long enough."

Nachiketa said, "At every function, it was as if Manjari had wheels on her feet."

Babuji pushed up his spectacles and said, "Whenever it was time for a photograph, she would remember some job or other."

"Did she remember the jobs herself, or did everyone remind her of them?" Ishani asked.

For a moment, the veranda fell silent.

Rashmi Mausi tried to lighten the matter. "This girl has started doing research."

Manjari Devi came carrying tea. "Leave the research. Have the cups and plates been counted? Fifty extra people may turn up for the birthday."

Ishani looked at her. Once again, the answer to a question had become a task.

The next day, she was taking down four old boxes from the top of a cupboard. One contained cards, invitation letters, bills, and receipts.

Under them she found a thick register bound in cloth. Its corners were worn. On the cover, in blue ink, was written: "Functions."

Ishani opened it.

The first page: "Rashmi's Wedding."

Below was a list: confectioner - advance paid. Utensils - count. Groom's party lodging - sheets. Dadi's medicine - nine at night. Groom's garlands - two. Rashmi's slippers - in the car before the farewell. Photographer - from two in the afternoon. Nachiketa - station. Digambar - bank. Manjari - keep all slips together.

The second page: "Nachiketa's Upanayan."

Manjari - priest's materials. Manjari - children's food. Manjari - guest room. Manjari - Dadi's insulin. Manjari - photographer's remaining payment.

The third: "Babuji's Retirement."

Manjari - garlands. Manjari - sound system. Manjari - tea. Manjari - sweets. Manjari - house key.

Ishani kept turning the pages. Nowhere was there "Manjari - photograph."

Her name was always beside the work that took place outside the photograph.

An old envelope slipped out from the middle of the register. Inside were five photographic negatives and a sheet of paper.

The sheet contained the photographer's account. At the bottom was written: "Group photograph, two copies. Younger daughter-in-law paid."

The younger daughter-in-law was Manjari Devi.

Ishani searched for the group photograph. She found it.

Everyone was there. Not the younger daughter-in-law.

She took the register to Manjari Devi.

"Is this yours?"

The moment Manjari Devi saw the register, she laughed. "These old papers still haven't been thrown away?"

"Did you write down all these functions?"

"Someone had to write them down."

"And in every one, your name is beside a task."

"There was work to do."

"You aren't in the photographs."

This time Manjari Devi was not stirring a ladle. She was picking dry leaves from the tulsi plant. Her hand stopped for a moment.

"Not being in a photograph does not mean a person is outside the event."

"But how will someone looking at it later know?"

Manjari Devi threw away the leaf. "Whoever needs to know will know."

"I didn't know."

At those words, Manjari Devi looked at Ishani.

She said nothing.

Responsibility for Babuji's eighty-fifth birthday had once again settled on Manjari Devi - this time without any formal announcement.

Babuji had only said, "Keep it simple."

Nachiketa said, "The food will be catered from outside, so Manjari will have less work."

Rashmi Mausi said, "I'll take care of the flowers."

Digambar Kaka said, "I'll arrange the chairs."

Three days later, the caterer was calling Manjari Devi. The florist was asking Manjari Devi about colours. The chair supplier was asking Manjari Devi for the count. Babuji's medicine, a room for the maternal uncle coming from out of town, milk for the children, electrical wiring, where to keep the cake - every question ultimately reached her.

Ishani made a new page. At the top she wrote: "Babuji 85."

Below it she assigned a name to each task.

Nachiketa - catering.

Rashmi - flowers.

Digambar - chairs and electricity.

Ishani - photographs and slideshow.

Manjari - Babuji's medicine and the guest room.

Manjari Devi looked at the list.

"Does Nachiketa know the headcount for the meal?"

"He'll find out."

"Will the florist answer Rashmi's phone?"

"He'll have to."

"Does Digambar know where the electrical board is -"

"Kaka will find it."

Manjari Devi smiled. "Are all of you putting me on leave?"

Ishani said, "No. We're only checking whether the word 'leave' applies to you too."

Until noon on the day of the function, the list worked very well.

At three, the first crack appeared. The caterer brought twenty plates fewer than required. Nachiketa immediately began looking for Manjari Devi.

Ishani showed him the list. "Your name."

Nachiketa laughed, but made the call himself.

At four, the florist brought garlands in the wrong colour. Rashmi Mausi first called, "Manjari!" then stopped herself mid-sentence and spoke to the florist.

At half past four, an electrical connection came loose. From the veranda, Digambar Kaka called, "Manjari, the pliers -"

Then he looked at Ishani.

"Where are the pliers?"

In an easy voice, Manjari Devi said, "Yellow box under the stairs."

Ishani understood: work could be divided, but memory could not be reassigned at once.

At five, Babuji's old friends began arriving. Manjari Devi stood at the door, recognising names and directing people to their places inside.

Ishani thought of taking a photograph of her, then stopped.

She did not want to quietly turn Manjari Devi into an image of "the woman at work" and once again make that old place outside the frame permanent.

At seven in the evening, the cake was cut. There was applause. The children gathered around Babuji.

The photographer said, "Now the whole family together."

At that one sentence, the old arrangement of the household sprang instantly back to life.

"Manjari, clear the plates."

"Manjari, where is Dadi's shawl?"

"Manjari, hold the little child."

"Manjari, have the cake taken inside."

Her name came from four directions.

Quite naturally, Manjari Devi began moving away from the place for the photograph.

This time Ishani did not catch her hand. She only said loudly, "Whoever's job it is should do it. Kaki belongs in the group."

Nachiketa picked up the plates. Rashmi brought the shawl. Digambar took the child in his arms. The caterer's boy carried the cake inside.

Manjari Devi was left standing in the middle of the veranda.

Her hands were empty. Perhaps for that reason, she seemed not to know where to put them.

The photographer said, "Maaji, you stand here."

Manjari Devi stood at the edge.

Ishani said, "Kaki, a little further in."

"This is fine."

"There is room inside."

Manjari Devi took two steps inward.

Just then, Babuji's cap slipped to one side. Manjari Devi raised her hand, then stopped herself. Nachiketa straightened the cap.

The photograph was taken.

The camera flashed the first time.

The second time, one child closed his eyes.

The third time, Babuji burst out laughing because the child in Digambar Kaka's arms was tugging at his garland.

Three photographs were taken. Manjari Devi was in all three.

By the time the function ended, it was eleven at night. Everyone was tired.

Manjari Devi got up to collect the last cup. Rashmi Mausi said, "Leave it. Tomorrow."

Manjari Devi looked at the cup.

"It can stay till tomorrow?"

"It can."

She sat down again.

To Ishani, this scene looked more unusual than the group photograph.

The following week, the photographer delivered the prints. Ishani placed all three group photographs on the table.

In the first, everyone was serious. In the second, a child's eyes were closed. In the third, everything was slightly out of order - a garland crooked, Babuji laughing, Digambar managing the child, Rashmi's shawl half fallen, and in Manjari Devi's hand the small paper slip on which the time for Babuji's medicine was written.

Nachiketa said, "The first one is clearer."

Rashmi Mausi said, "Everything is untidy in the third."

Babuji picked up the third photograph.

"In this one, people look alive," he said.

Manjari Devi looked at the third photograph.

"Why is there a slip in my hand?"

Ishani laughed. "Because that was the one moment when you had nothing else in your hands."

At first Manjari Devi placed a finger over the slip in the photograph as though to hide it, then moved her finger away.

"Let it stay."

Ishani put the third photograph in the album.

When she began writing the names on the back, her pen stopped.

On the backs of the old photographs there had been sentences such as: "Ask Manjari for the date," "Original negative with Manjari," "Manjari knows the account."

This time she wrote everyone's names in order.

Babuji. Rashmi. Nachiketa. Digambar. Manjari. Ishani. The children.

Only names. No tasks.

Manjari Devi read what was written on the back.

"You haven't written the date?"

Ishani handed her the pen.

"You write it."

Manjari Devi wrote the date. Beneath it, unlike before, she added no account, instruction, or reminder.

She turned the photograph face-up again.

In the third row, between Babuji's crooked garland and a child's raised hand, her face was clear.

Before closing the album, Manjari Devi looked once more at her own name on the back.

It was the first time that the name had not been written after some task.

STORY 283

The Nameplate

It was an evening in Bhadon. Rain had been falling on and off all day. One screw of the brass-coloured nameplate fixed to the right-hand gatepost had come loose. Whenever the wind blew, the plate knocked against the post with a tap-tap sound.

Shailaja Devi went out twice and straightened it by hand. The third time, when a strong gust rose, the plate sagged to one side.

From inside, Naveen called out, "Ma, leave it. I'll have a new one put up tomorrow."

Shailaja Devi cupped a hand beneath the plate. A green film of moss had gathered over the letters—"Shridhar Jha, Retired Headmaster."

She took the plate down and placed it in a corner of the veranda.

At dinner that night, the nameplate came up in conversation.

Naveen said, "This time we'll get a good one made. Black stone, gold lettering. Babuji's name, and mine underneath. We'll have our designations written too."

Mixing ghee into his rice, Shridhar Jha said, "Leave out my 'retired'. It makes the whole thing too long."

Naveen laughed. "No, Babuji, let it stay. People know you by that."

Setting down a glass of water, Archana asked, "And my name?"

Naveen looked at her and smiled. "You're with me, aren't you?"

Archana laughed, but Shailaja Devi's hand paused for a moment.

She said, "And mine?"

A brief silence settled over the table.

In an easy tone, Shridhar Jha said, "Why would your name be needed? A nameplate is for identification."

"Whose identification?"

"The house's."

Shailaja Devi said nothing more.

Early the next morning, Gopal, the man who made nameplates, arrived. With a thin measuring tape he measured the width of the gatepost.

"Fourteen inches will look good here," he said. "Two lines will be clearly visible. If we make it three, the letters will have to be smaller."

Naveen immediately wrote on a sheet of paper—

"Shridhar Jha — Retired Headmaster."

"Naveen Jha — Assistant Engineer."

Looking at the paper, Gopal said, "This won't fit in two lines. If the names and designations are separate, it will take four lines."

Shailaja Devi was sweeping just inside the gate.

Gopal asked, "Are these the only two names of the owners?"

Shailaja Devi stopped sweeping.

Naveen said, "Yes, write only these."

Shailaja Devi asked quietly, "How many people live in the house?"

Naveen looked at her. "Ma, are we going to put everyone's name on the plate?"

Gopal was about to laugh, but seeing Shailaja Devi's face, he fell silent.

She began sweeping again.

At noon the overhead water tank did not fill. The motor ran, but the water did not rise upstairs.

From the veranda Shridhar Jha called, "Shailaja, is the lower tap open or not?"

Shailaja Devi came out of the kitchen and brought the key to the meter room.

Naveen was checking the motor wiring. "Ma, what did the mechanic say last time?"

"Air gets trapped in the lower pipe. Open this small tap first, then run the motor."

Within five minutes the water began rising upstairs.

Gopal had returned just then to show a sample. He watched everything.

Then the milkman arrived.

"Madam, are two days missing from last month's account?"

Shailaja Devi brought the ledger from inside and showed him the dates.

Then the boy from the pharmacy arrived.

"One strip is missing from the medicine ordered for Shridhar Babu."

Shailaja Devi opened a file and took out the old prescription.

Then Archana said, "Ma, the gas man said our number will come tomorrow. Where's the old receipt?"

"Blue file, second compartment."

By evening Gopal had heard the word "owner" three times, yet every practical question in the house had made its way to Shailaja Devi.

As he was leaving, he unfolded the paper again.

"Mataji, what name should I write for you?"

Naveen said at once, "Oh, nothing has been decided yet."

Shailaja Devi took the paper from Gopal's hand.

She wrote nothing. She only looked once more at the width of the gatepost.

Rain began again at night. The old nameplate lay in the corner of the veranda, gleaming faintly.

Shailaja Devi went to pick it up. On the back were two old holes filled with rust.

She remembered—this had not been the first nameplate.

The house's old things were stored in the upstairs room. She lit a lantern and climbed the stairs.

In an old tin trunk, the earlier nameplates from the gate had been kept.

The first wooden plate read—"Raghunath Jha, Village Worker."

The second—"Vinodanand Jha, Teacher."

The third—"Shridhar Jha, Headmaster."

And the fourth, now lying downstairs—"Shridhar Jha, Retired Headmaster."

All four plates belonged to different times; every name on them was a man's.

Shailaja Devi ran a finger over the back of the first wooden plate. In charcoal someone had written—"Left screw short."

The handwriting was her mother-in-law's.

On the back of the second plate, in chalk, was written—"Paint after the rains."

Shailaja Devi recognised that handwriting as her own.

On the back of the third plate was a date—the day the gate had been painted. That date too was in her hand.

Men's names on the front; women's memories of repair on the back.

For a long while Shailaja Devi did not look at the plates. She simply put them back into the tin trunk, one by one.

After breakfast the next day, Naveen brought home a sample of black stone.

"Look, Ma. Isn't it good?"

Shailaja Devi took the sample in her hand.

"How large will the letters be?"

"Babuji's name, an inch and a half. Mine, an inch and a quarter. The designations smaller."

"Why?"

Naveen laughed. "Babuji is senior."

"Will seniority in the house be shown by the height of the letters?"

Shridhar Jha folded his newspaper. "What is it you want? Say it plainly."

Shailaja Devi placed the sample on the table.

"I'm asking—is this plate an introduction to the household, or to our posts?"

"Both."

"Then where is the introduction to the people who run the household?"

Naveen said, "Ma, you're back to the same thing."

"Not the same thing. Yesterday—the tank, the milk, the medicine, the gas—everything inside the house was running through my name. Outside, on the gatepost, there wasn't a single letter of my name. I had never thought about it before. Now I have."

Shridhar Jha remained silent.

Archana stood listening at the kitchen doorway.

Looking at her, Shailaja Devi said, "Your name isn't there either."

Archana said softly, "I'm still new to this house."

"Does a name require seniority too?"

Archana did not answer.

At noon Gopal returned.

This time he had brought four different samples.

The first had only Shridhar Jha.

The second had Shridhar Jha and Naveen Jha.

The third had four names—Shridhar, Shailaja, Naveen, Archana—but Shridhar's name was the largest.

The fourth sheet was blank.

Gopal said, "Whatever you say, I'll make that."

Naveen picked up the third sample. "This is fine. Ma's name has been included now."

Shailaja Devi looked at the sample.

"My name has been included, but the question hasn't gone away."

"What now?" There was weariness in Naveen's voice.

"Why aren't the letters the same size?"

"Babuji is the head of the family."

For a moment Shailaja Devi looked at Shridhar Jha.

Shridhar Jha himself bent over the paper.

"Will you write 'head of the family'?" he asked Naveen.

"No."

"Then why should the letters be larger?"

Naveen said nothing.

No great quarrel broke out in the house over this small question.

Only the evening tea went cold for a little while.

Gopal left the fourth, blank sheet behind and went away.

That night Archana came to Shailaja Devi's room.

"Ma, do you want your own name put on it?"

Folding clothes, Shailaja Devi said, "Yes. But the matter won't be complete merely by adding my name."

"Then?"

"I don't like it that a man's position is written outside the house, while the work a woman does inside has no name at all. The work can't be written on the plate. So at least the names of the people should stand equally."

Archana sat down on the edge of the bed.

"If my name is written there, my people from my parents' home will see it."

Shailaja Devi smiled. "Is that why your name matters?"

Archana laughed too. "No. But it will feel good."

The next morning Shridhar Jha himself brought all four old nameplates downstairs.

For a long time he looked at the first wooden plate.

"This is from Babuji's time," he said.

"Yes," Shailaja Devi replied.

"This writing on the back—is it Ma's?"

"Yes."

With his finger Shridhar Jha traced the words 'Left screw short.'

"I had never noticed this writing on the back."

"A nameplate is viewed from the front," Shailaja Devi said.

After saying it, she herself fell silent. She felt the remark had come out sharper than she meant.

But Shridhar Jha did not take offence.

He simply laid all four plates in a row.

At noon everyone gathered again on the veranda.

On the blank sheet, Naveen wrote four names.

Shridhar Jha. Shailaja Devi. Naveen Jha. Archana Jha.

Then, of his own accord, he struck out 'Retired Headmaster'.

Shridhar Jha said, "And your engineer?"

Naveen paused with his pen.

"Shall I strike that out too?"

"As you wish."

Naveen struck out 'Assistant Engineer'.

Archana laughed. "Now the plate will become very small."

Shailaja Devi said, "Let it be small, as long as the letters can be seen."

When Gopal came that evening, he took the measurements away. All four names fitted into two lines in letters of the same size.

He asked, "Who goes on the first line?"

Shridhar Jha said, "The two of us old people."

Shailaja Devi glared at him. "You are the old one."

Laughter rose on the veranda.

In the end they decided on Shridhar Jha · Shailaja Devi on the first line, and Naveen Jha · Archana Jha on the second.

The plate arrived three days later.

It was not black stone but ordinary grey metal. Gopal said the black stone would be too heavy, and the old holes in the gatepost were weak.

Naveen was a little disappointed at first, then brought out his tools to tighten the screws himself.

Shailaja Devi stood just inside the gate.

Gopal held the plate straight. Naveen tightened the screws. Shridhar Jha stepped back two paces to look.

Archana said, "Half an inch higher on the right."

"You all wanted the names equal, and now the spacing has to be equal too?" Naveen laughed.

Archana said, "Yes."

The plate was straight.

There was no applause. No ritual was performed.

By noon the house had returned to its old rhythm.

Shailaja Devi checked the milk account. Archana put away the gas receipt. Shridhar Jha looked through his pension papers. Naveen replaced the broken switch on the motor.

In the evening, it rained.

Drops of water gathered on the nameplate. Shailaja Devi went outside and began wiping it with an old cotton cloth.

At first, almost by habit, her hand moved towards Shridhar Jha's name.

Then she stopped.

She moved the cloth from one end to the other—Shridhar, Shailaja, Naveen, Archana—all four names wiped clean in the same sweep.

The screws Gopal had fitted were tight. This time the plate did not rattle even when the wind blew.

STORY 284

The Third Step

Kedar Mishra's house in an old neighbourhood of Jhanjharpur stood a little below the road and a little above the courtyard. Two black-stone steps led from the courtyard up to the veranda on the eastern side.

The first step was broad, the second a little narrower.

In the thirty-seven years since the house had been built, those two steps had been worn down countless times, splashed with lime countless times, and endured countless monsoon rains - but two had never become three.

Kedar Mishra could say this with such certainty that even with his eyes closed he knew he had to bend his knees twice to reach the veranda.

His wife Girija Devi's knees were no longer what they had once been.

In the mornings she placed the tip of her walking stick on the first step, then on the second, and only then climbed onto the veranda.

"One day these two steps will be the death of me," she often said.

The family would laugh.

Her son Alok would say, "Ma, let the winter pass. I'll have a ramp built."

They had been talking about the ramp for three winters.

The third winter passed, then Phagun, then Chait.

It happened one night in Jeth.

Alok's wife Nivedita was returning from a neighbour's house carrying a pot of hot milk. Their cow had calved, and that day they had distributed the first milk.

The electricity had gone out in the courtyard.

A small oil lamp burned inside the veranda, but its light did not properly reach the steps.

Nivedita climbed the first step.

She climbed the second.

Then her right foot rose again of its own accord.

Certain that her foot would meet only empty air, she drew her body back to steady the pot.

But her sole came down on something solid.

Perfectly level.

Cold like black stone.

She rose a third time and found herself on the veranda.

The milk trembled to the rim of the pot but did not spill.

She took two steps forward, then looked back.

In the darkness the shape of the steps was not clear.

She set the pot in the kitchen and came back carrying the lamp.

There were only two steps below.

Nivedita kept looking at them for a long time.

Then she told herself she must have stumbled in the space between the two steps.

In the morning she told no one.

At noon, when the courtyard was being washed, she deliberately counted the steps.

One.

Two.

Veranda.

She laughed.

Who could trust the body at night?

Two nights later Alok returned late.

He shut the gate and crossed the courtyard with his shoes in his hand, because Girija Devi had gone to sleep and she disliked the clack-clack of shoes.

As his foot touched the steps, he counted softly - one, two -

Then his knee bent a third time.

He reached the veranda and stopped.

The shoes fell from his hand.

From inside Nivedita asked, "What happened?"

Alok replied, "Has something changed in these steps?"

Nivedita came to the doorway.

"What?"

"I climbed three times."

Nivedita was silent for a few moments.

"So did I."

At first Alok laughed, then he saw that Nivedita was not laughing.

They both took the lamp and went down.

One.

Two.

Courtyard.

Then they climbed again.

One.

Two.

Veranda.

"A trick of the dark," Alok said.

Nivedita asked, "The same trick for both of us?"

"It's the same staircase."

The matter was left there.

Nothing happened for the next seven days.

On the eighth night, at ten o'clock, Mili wanted a drink of water. Mili was Alok and Nivedita's twelve-year-old daughter.

She went down from the veranda to the tap in the courtyard.

Then she came back inside and said, "Baba, have the steps grown?"

Alok had a book in his hand. He looked up.

"How many are there now?"

"Three."

Nivedita came out of the kitchen.

"Did you see them?"

"No. I felt them with my feet."

Mili started to go outside again.

Alok stopped her. "Not now."

"Why?"

"That's enough."

Mili pulled a face, but did not go.

At dawn everyone gathered by the steps.

Girija Devi stood there leaning on her walking stick.

Kedar Mishra ran a hand over the stone.

"There are only two," he said.

Mili immediately said, "In the daytime."

Kedar Mishra laughed.

"Are stones born at night?"

Mili replied, "Does it have to be stone?"

At that question Kedar Mishra's laughter stopped midway.

That day Alok wrote '1' in lime on the edge of the first step and '2' on the edge of the second.

Nivedita asked, "What's that for?"

"So we can count them at night."

Girija Devi said, "Don't catch this disease of counting. Have the ramp built."

Alok said, "Let me understand it first."

There was electricity that night. The courtyard light was on.

Alok went up and down four times.

Two steps.

Nivedita went three times.

Two steps.

Mili went once.

Two steps.

"See?" Alok said.

Mili said, "It's not here today."

As though she were speaking of some lizard that had gone into hiding.

Three days later it happened again.

This time with Kedar Mishra present.

His cough medicine had run out that night. When Alok returned from the shop with the medicine, Kedar Mishra had come as far as the veranda.

Alok was climbing up from the courtyard.

In the light of the lamp Kedar Mishra could see clearly - the first step, the second step, the veranda.

Alok stepped onto the first.

Then onto the second.

Then his body rose a third time.

Before Kedar Mishra's eyes, his head reached exactly the height it should have reached in two rises.

But the motion had happened three times.

Alok came onto the veranda and said, "It happened this time."

Kedar Mishra said nothing.

He lowered the lamp and looked at the stone.

Only two.

"Did you see it?" Alok asked.

"I saw your body," Kedar Mishra said. "Not the step."

The next day a measuring tape was brought.

The total height from the courtyard to the veranda came to thirteen inches.

The first rise was six and a half.

The second, six and a half.

There was not even an inch left for a third.

Alok wrote the measurement on a sheet of paper.

Mili said, "Measure it at night."

They measured it at night.

Thirteen inches.

That night no one found a third step.

Alok grew irritated.

"Whenever we measure it, it disappears."

Nivedita said, "You can call it disappearing only if someone has seen it before."

Kedar Mishra said quietly, "No one has seen it."

Girija Devi grew impatient with the whole affair.

"Even two steps are hard enough for me, and all of you are searching for a third."

Then Alok actually called a mason to have the ramp built.

The mason's name was Jabbar.

He looked at the stones, measured them with a tape, looked at Girija Devi's walking stick, and said, "I'll remove both stones and make a ramp. I'll put iron handrails on both sides as well. Three days."

Mili asked, "Will you work at night?"

Jabbar laughed. "Do I build houses for ghosts at night?"

Mili remained serious.

Alok glared at her.

On the night before the work was to begin, Nivedita deliberately went into the courtyard barefoot.

The stones had been hot all day, but by night they had cooled.

She placed her foot on the first step.

Then on the second.

Then on the third.

This time she stopped.

For a few moments both her feet rested on a level, cold surface that was not there before her eyes.

She bent and reached out a hand.

Her hand touched the edge of the veranda directly.

What was beneath her feet was not beneath her hand.

She climbed up at once.

She called out to no one.

At dawn Jabbar prised up the first stone.

Beneath it lay old bricks, sand, and a layer of lime mortar.

He lifted the second stone.

The same lay beneath that one too.

Mili sat nearby the entire time.

"Anything third?" she asked.

Jabbar said, "Third what?"

"Nothing."

For three days the place where the steps had been smelled of earth, brick, and mortar.

The ramp was completed.

A gentle slope, with iron handrails on both sides.

For the first time Girija Devi climbed slowly up it, leaning on her walking stick.

She was pleased.

"No more counting now?" she asked Alok.

Alok said, "No more."

The lime-painted '1' and '2' disappeared along with the two stones.

Jabbar placed the old stones in a corner of the courtyard.

Mili wanted to write 1 and 2 on them again, but Nivedita stopped her.

"Leave it now."

For a few days the house truly remained quiet.

Everyone grew accustomed to the ramp.

Girija Devi even began going down into the courtyard in the evenings.

The tip of her walking stick slid and tapped along the ramp.

One night the first heavy rain of Sawan arrived.

There was water in the courtyard. Lightning flashed again and again.

Mili stood on the veranda watching water pour from the roof drain.

Nivedita went to call her inside.

Just then Kedar Mishra's old friend Janardan Babu arrived at the gate.

Alok took an umbrella and crossed the courtyard to bring him in.

Janardan Babu saw the ramp.

"Ah, you've had it made nicely. Convenient for old people."

From inside Kedar Mishra said, "Everyone finds it convenient to call me old."

They all laughed.

Janardan Babu went toward the tap to wash his slippers.

Then, while climbing the ramp, he suddenly stopped.

"Why have you left a little rise in the middle here?"

The umbrella in Alok's hand went still.

"Where?"

Janardan Babu felt the middle of the ramp with his foot.

"Here. Now it's gone."

He moved his foot over the place again.

"Strange. It felt as though there was a step."

Kedar Mishra and Girija Devi looked at each other.

Mili quietly went inside from the veranda.

After dinner that night, Alok went to the ramp again.

Nivedita said, "Don't start again."

"Just once."

"If you keep saying 'just once', the whole house will be counting again."

Alok stopped.

Then he came back inside.

This time no one measured anything.

No one wrote numbers in lime.

No one called Jabbar.

But the matter did not end either.

Some nights no one felt anything at all.

On some nights Girija Devi's stick made three distinct taps on the ramp, though she crossed the gentle slope in one continuous climb.

Sometimes Mili's foot would rise once in the middle and come down again on the same level surface.

Sometimes Alok's body would give a small, unexplained jerk.

One day Kedar Mishra said, "If the step was never in the stone, then what exactly did we remove?"

Nivedita did not answer.

She remembered the night when the edge of the veranda had been beneath her hand while a third cold surface had been beneath her feet.

Gradually the family learned to live with it.

At night, when climbing from the courtyard to the veranda, no one counted anymore.

Not even Mili.

One day at school she was given an assignment to draw a picture on the theme 'My Home'.

She drew the gate, the tulsi plant, the tap, the veranda, and the ramp.

Nivedita looked at the picture.

Mili had drawn three short horizontal lines across the ramp.

"What's this?" Nivedita asked.

Mili looked at the drawing.

"I don't know."

"Why are there lines on the ramp?"

Mili raised her hand to erase them, then stopped.

"Let them stay."

One evening in Kartik, Girija Devi's knees were hurting badly. She had not gone down into the courtyard.

After everyone had gone to sleep, she remembered the lamp by the tulsi plant.

Nivedita had already extinguished it, but Girija Devi was not convinced.

Taking her walking stick, she came to the doorway.

The courtyard was clear in the moonlight.

There was no water on the ramp.

She slowly went down, checked the lamp, and turned back.

Holding the handrail, she began to climb.

The tip of the stick sounded - tap.

She took one step forward.

Again - tap.

She reached the middle of the ramp.

Again - tap.

Girija Devi stopped.

She looked down.

A smooth ramp.

The veranda was only one step away above her.

She lifted the stick, held it in the air for a moment, then placed it on the veranda.

This time there was no sound.

In the morning no one asked her about the night.

Girija Devi said nothing either.

Morning sunlight fell on the ramp Jabbar had built.

There was not a single step on it.

But on the tip of Girija Devi's walking stick, resting in a corner of the veranda, were three very small rings of dried mud.

STORY 285

The Upside-Down Calendar

The date for leaving the old house in Laheriasarai had been fixed long ago.

On the morning of 7 October, the keys were to be handed over to Shambhunath Chaudhary.

Nilmani Jha had put a copy of the sale deed in a red file, the gate of the new house had already been locked, and even the movers had been told the date.

So there ought to have been nothing uncertain left in the house now.

But when one is leaving a house, it is the things thought settled that create the greatest obstacles.

Where the tulsi from the courtyard would go, whether Father's old chair should be taken or left behind, which brass plate was useful and which was only a memory—no sale deed could be drawn up for such matters.

A thick calendar hung on the north wall of the sitting room.

In blue letters at the bottom it said, "Harihar Cloth Store, Gudri Bazaar."

At the top were the date, day, lunar date, sunrise and moonrise; below were two lines of advertising.

Nilmani Jha had an old habit of tearing off the calendar page each day.

In the morning, before drinking tea, he would pull off yesterday's page and put it in the basket.

When the children were small, they used to write multiplication tables on the backs of those torn-off pages.

Padma Devi would sometimes write the market list on them.

Rachna had once written short formulas on them while making her college notes.

Saurabh had even used them to make kite tails.

The calendar did not merely tell the date in that house; its pages performed all sorts of small household tasks as well.

After the decision to sell the house, Nilmani Jha found the page for 7 October and circled it in red ink.

"We hand over the house on this day," he said.

Saurabh had joked, "And from 8 October onward, we'll be guests in this house?"

Nilmani Jha laughed.

Padma Devi did not.

She only kept looking at the calendar.

From 25 September onward, Saurabh began counting each day how many pages remained before the one with the red circle.

Twelve.

Eleven.

Ten.

"The days are shrinking," he would say.

Padma Devi would reply, "The belongings aren't."

By 27 September, the books from the first room had been packed.

On the twenty-eighth, half the kitchen utensils were sent to the new house.

On the twenty-ninth, the iron trunk on the veranda was emptied.

By the evening of 30 September, the house looked unusually open.

On the walls, where photographs had hung, square white patches remained.

When the cupboard was moved, the paint behind it looked different from the rest of the wall.

For the first time, the old cobweb in the corner under the eaves could be seen in full.

"Now the house really is becoming empty," Rachna said.

Padma Devi answered at once, "The spices, the tulsi, the grinding stone, Father's chair, three flowerpots, the puja box, and the files upstairs are still left."

Saurabh counted the calendar pages.

"Seven days."

"Seven days is a long time," Nilmani Jha said.

That night everyone went to bed early.

On the morning of 1 October, Nilmani Jha walked up to the calendar with his tea.

He raised his hand to tear off yesterday's page, but stopped midway.

At the top, in large red numerals, was written—31.

Below it—September.

He removed his glasses and wiped them.

Then put them on again.

The date did not change.

"Padma!"

A voice came from the kitchen. "What happened?"

"Did September have thirty-one days this year?"

Padma Devi came out.

First she looked at Nilmani Jha, then at the calendar.

"It must be a printing error."

Hearing the voices, Saurabh came over.

"Wonderful! An extra day."

Nilmani Jha tried to lift the page to see what lay underneath, but the calendar was bound at the top.

He raised the 31 September page halfway.

Beneath it was 32 September.

Saurabh stopped laughing.

"There's a thirty-second here too."

Rachna checked her phone.

The phone said 1 October.

The newspaper said 1 October.

Even the milk packet was stamped 1 October.

Only the calendar on the wall was unwilling to leave September behind.

Nilmani Jha gripped the lower corner of the calendar and began counting the pages.

The page for 7 October with the red circle was still inside.

But yesterday it had been seven pages away; today it was eight.

Saurabh counted again.

"Eight."

Rachna counted a third time.

"Eight."

"An extra sheet of paper will not postpone the date on which we hand over the house," Padma Devi said.

Nilmani Jha said slowly, "But yesterday there were seven pages."

That day two dates ran through the house.

Outside, it was 1 October.

On the wall, it was 31 September.

For the first part of the day, everyone treated it as a joke.

Saurabh stuck a label on the spice tin: "Use by 31 September."

Rachna wrote on her box of books: "Outside date: 1 October."

Padma Devi paid no attention to any of this.

She went on sorting the old spices.

That night Nilmani Jha tore off the page for 31 September.

"Tomorrow we'll see what comes next."

In the morning, 32 September faced them.

"We saw this yesterday," Rachna said.

"We saw it yesterday, but yesterday it was paper. Today it has become a date," Saurabh said.

Nilmani Jha stared at him after that sentence.

Outside, it was 2 October.

On the household calendar, 32 September.

The page for 7 October with the red circle was now nine pages away.

"Instead of decreasing, the days are increasing," Rachna said for the first time without laughing.

Nilmani Jha reached up to take down the calendar, then stopped himself.

"Let's first see how far this goes."

"Are you going to watch the calendar or pack the belongings?" Padma Devi asked.

That day the files upstairs were opened.

Nilmani Jha separated old electricity bills, land records, Saurabh's school certificate, Rachna's first appointment letter—everything into separate piles.

Some papers were meant to be thrown away, but he began reading them all.

"Keep this?" Rachna asked.

"We'll see tomorrow," Nilmani Jha said.

Rachna looked at the calendar.

She said nothing.

That same evening Padma Devi brought up the matter of changing the soil in the tulsi pot.

"Not today," she said herself. "Tomorrow."

Saurabh burst out laughing at once.

"If we go by this calendar, 7 October will never come any nearer."

Padma Devi scolded him.

"Don't talk nonsense."

On the third morning, it was 33 September.

Outside, it was 3 October.

This time no one laughed.

Saurabh silently counted as far as the page with the red circle.

Ten pages.

Rachna went to the basket to look for the pages torn off over the last two days.

She found 31 September.

And 32 September as well.

Both were real sheets of paper.

The same colour, the same lettering, the same advertisement.

On the back of the thirty-first, Padma Devi had written a market list —cumin, soap, thread.

On the back of the thirty-second, Saurabh had written, "Outside: 2 October."

"This page wasn't created yesterday," Rachna said. "It remained even after it was torn off."

Nilmani Jha tried to open the metal strip at the top of the calendar.

The strip was stuck with old rust.

Saurabh brought tools to loosen the screws.

Together, the four of them opened the calendar's binding.

The pages spread out across the table.

September was normal up to the thirtieth.

After that came thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-three, thirty-four, thirty-five, thirty-six, thirty-seven...

Then came 1 October.

Then 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 October.

Nilmani Jha's red circle remained intact on the page for 7 October.

"These extra pages weren't here yesterday," he said.

"Are you sure?" Saurabh asked.

Nilmani Jha paused before answering.

"I had counted them."

"So had I," Rachna said.

Padma Devi kept looking at the pages spread across the table.

"How many extra ones are there?"

Saurabh counted.

"Eight. But whether there were six or seven yesterday, I can't say now."

Nilmani Jha arranged the pages back in order.

"Shall we remove all the extra pages?"

"Why?" Padma Devi asked in an ordinary voice.

"Because they're wrong."

"If you remove the wrong pages, will the date become right?"

Nilmani Jha fell silent.

In the end, the extra pages were not removed.

The calendar was hung back on the wall.

From then on, the way everyone looked at it changed.

In the morning, they no longer looked first at the date but at the thickness of the stack.

Saurabh would press it with his fingers and estimate.

Rachna would count the distance to the red-circled page.

Nilmani Jha would write the outside date separately on a piece of paper.

Padma Devi simply went on working.

Outside, it was 4 October; inside the house, 34 September.

That day Shambhunath Chaudhary phoned.

"I'll come at ten in the morning on the seventh."

"Yes, that's settled," Nilmani Jha said.

After hanging up, he looked at the calendar.

34 September.

The red circle lay eleven pages inside.

For the first time he gave an uneasy laugh.

"By this calculation, 7 October is very far away now."

"By Chaudharyji's calculation, three days," Padma Devi said.

That night Rachna decided to make another test.

She took the calendar down from the wall.

With a red pencil, she drew a straight line down the right edge of the bound pages, from top to bottom.

The line cut across the edges of all the pages at once.

"If a new page appears in between, there'll be a white break in the red line," she said.

Saurabh wrote the first letter of his name, very small, on the metal strip at the top of the calendar.

"This time we won't open the binding," Nilmani Jha said.

"Are we testing the date or the paper?" Padma Devi said, and nothing more.

No one answered.

The calendar was hung back on the wall.

That night the files upstairs were sorted.

The tulsi pot was sent to the new house.

A decision was made about Father's chair—it would go with them.

The three old flowerpots were given to a neighbour.

Half the tins of spices were distributed.

The puja box was packed.

By eleven at night, the house was almost empty.

Padma Devi pointed toward the upper shelf in Saurabh's room.

Two bamboo sticks from a kite and a reel of red kite string had been left there.

Saurabh immediately took them down and put them in a box.

Nilmani Jha walked through the house and looked around.

A few files, two pairs of clothes, the utensils they used every day, the bedding—that was all.

Everyone went to sleep.

In the morning, it was 35 September.

Rachna looked first not at the date but at the right edge of the pages.

The red line drawn the day before ran from top to bottom, but in the middle there was one very thin white gap.

Saurabh used his fingernail to separate the page at that gap.

There was not a trace of red on the edge of the page for 35 September.

It was as though that page had been slipped into the stack after the red line was drawn.

Saurabh's tiny initial on the metal strip at the top was unchanged.

There was no sign that the binding had been opened.

Nilmani Jha stood holding the calendar for a long time.

At last he hung it back on the nail.

"Now what?" Saurabh asked.

"Now we won't forget the outside date," Nilmani Jha said.

Outside, it was 5 October.

Inside the house, 35 September.

When Rachna went to college, she wrote 5 October in the attendance register.

When Nilmani Jha went to the bank, he signed a slip dated 5 October.

When Saurabh met a friend, he said it was 5 October.

But the moment they stepped through the gate, everyone's language changed.

"It rained on the evening of 35 September," Saurabh would say.

"On the thirty-fifth, the tulsi went to the new house," Padma Devi would say.

One day Rachna was startled by this.

They were no longer treating the impossible dates as a joke; they were turning them into memories.

"Why are we accepting this?" she asked.

"How are we accepting it? The outside date is separate," Nilmani Jha said.

"But when we talk about the house, we say thirty-five."

No one answered.

The evening of 6 October was their last night.

By the outside reckoning.

On the household calendar, it was 36 September.

Nearly everything had been packed.

Only the calendar still hung on the wall.

"Shall we take this down too?" Rachna asked.

"We'll take it down last. In the morning I want to compare it with the outside date," Nilmani Jha said.

The four of them looked at one another.

"So the last thing left in the house will be this calendar," Padma Devi said softly.

That night the house sounded very empty.

Whenever someone spoke, the voice came back from the rooms.

In the kitchen there was only one pot, four glasses and some tea leaves.

On the veranda, Father's chair stood tied with rope, ready to go.

The old tulsi platform in the middle of the courtyard was empty.

Padma Devi poured a little water over it, though the plant had already gone to the new house.

"Why are you watering empty soil?" Saurabh asked.

"There was dust blowing," she said.

Rachna knew there had been no dust blowing.

At midnight, the phone changed to 7 October.

Rachna got up and went into the sitting room.

On the calendar, 36 September remained exactly as before.

She did not tear off the page.

She only touched it.

The paper was ordinary.

Its back was blank.

In the morning, Nilmani Jha was the first to wake.

On the wall, it was 37 September.

Outside, 7 October.

Without saying anything, Saurabh counted to the page for 7 October with the red circle.

Thirteen pages.

"Today is the day we hand over the house," Nilmani Jha said.

"By whose reckoning?" Saurabh asked.

This time no one laughed.

The movers arrived before ten.

The bedding, trunks, chair and utensils were loaded onto the vehicle.

At last, only the four of them, a broom, a bunch of keys and the calendar remained in the house.

Shambhunath Chaudhary arrived at exactly ten.

He walked through the house and looked around.

"Everything empty?"

"Yes," Nilmani Jha said.

Padma Devi looked toward the wall of the sitting room.

"One thing is still here."

Everyone's eyes went to the calendar.

Chaudharyji read the date.

"37 September?"

He laughed.

"What printing press produced this marvel?"

Nilmani Jha tried to laugh as well.

"Think of it as a printing error."

"Throw it away."

It was a very ordinary sentence.

But the four of them remained silent for a few moments.

Rachna went over to the wall.

She took the calendar down from the iron nail.

Behind it, the paint on the wall was darker—where dust and sunlight had not reached for years.

Below the nail were also two old pencil marks from childhood—Saurabh's height had once been measured there.

Rachna tried to fold the calendar, but the thick stack of pages would not bend.

She put it into a cloth bag just as it was.

Nilmani Jha placed the keys in Chaudharyji's hand.

As she stepped out through the gate, Padma Devi turned back once to look at the courtyard.

The empty tulsi platform, the sunlight on the veranda, the open window.

Then she came out.

At the new house everyone immediately became busy.

Where the trunks should go, where the cot should stand, which shelf should hold the kitchen utensils, against which wall the books should be placed.

The bag containing the calendar lay in a corner of the sitting room.

No one opened it that night.

On the morning of 8 October, Padma Devi made tea.

Out of habit, Nilmani Jha looked toward the wall.

There was no calendar there.

"Where is the calendar?"

Rachna brought the bag.

Once again the four of them gathered in one place.

Rachna took out the calendar.

The moment he saw the top page, Saurabh said, "But this is..."

At the top was 8 October.

An ordinary 8 October.

Below it, 9 October.

Then 10.

Rachna began turning the pages quickly.

From 1 October through 7 October, everything was in normal order.

Nilmani Jha's red circle was still there on 7 October.

No 31 September.

No 32.

No pages at all through 37.

"We had torn those pages off," Saurabh said.

Rachna searched the small bag of papers meant to be thrown away, which had accidentally come with them from the old house.

Inside were electricity bills, cancelled receipts, scraps of newspaper.

At the bottom she found two small calendar pages.

31 September.

32 September.

Only those two.

No 33, 34, 35, 36 or 37.

"The rest?" Saurabh asked.

No one knew.

Nilmani Jha picked up the page for the thirty-first.

On the back was Padma Devi's list—cumin, soap, thread.

On the back of the thirty-second was Saurabh's writing: "Outside: 2 October."

It was evidence enough, but evidence of what was not clear.

Padma Devi placed both pages on the table.

"Throw them away?" Nilmani Jha asked.

"Why?" Padma Devi said.

In the same tone in which she had once asked why they should remove the extra pages.

The two pages were not thrown away.

Rachna tucked them behind the calendar in the new house.

The days began to pass.

In the new house came 9 October, then 10, then 11.

The calendar was normal.

The stack of pages kept shrinking.

The belongings found their places one by one.

Padma Devi's spices were arranged on a shelf.

Nilmani Jha's files went into the new cupboard.

Saurabh's kite went onto the upper shelf.

The tulsi took root in the new courtyard.

A few weeks later, one day Rachna was looking at photographs of the old house.

One photograph had been taken on 30 September.

The calendar on the wall was clearly visible.

Rachna enlarged the photograph.

At the top was 30 September.

The edge of the page beneath it projected slightly beyond it.

Only half of a red numeral could be seen.

It could have been a 1.

It could also have been a 3.

Rachna closed the photograph.

That evening Nilmani Jha sat in the sitting room of the new house and tore off the calendar page.

The date was normal.

He put the page in the basket.

Rachna looked at the calendar.

The two impossible pages tucked behind it could not be seen from the front.

After everyone had gone to sleep that night, the wind began to blow.

The lower corner of the calendar trembled lightly.

The page for 31 September tucked behind it slid halfway out.

There was no new date on its blank front.

Only the reverse impression of Padma Devi's old list showed faintly through the paper.

In the morning, Nilmani Jha tore off that day's page.

One day was gone.

The two impossible pages tucked behind it remained exactly as they were.

STORY 286

The Air in the Locked Room

It was the last week of Kartik.

In Darbhanga's Balbhadrapur neighbourhood, the days had begun to shorten, but winter had not yet fully arrived.

There was still a little warmth in the midday sun, though by evening one felt like drawing a gamchha over one's shoulders.

The inner room of Shivkant Jha's house seemed to have nothing to do with this season.

That room had been locked for three months.

After the roof had leaked, the plaster on the inner wall had flaked away, so Bhola the mason had said it should be allowed to dry completely.

Two trunks of old books, a bamboo stool, a broken brass lamp, and a few utensils left over from a wedding were kept in the room.

There was no window.

There was a small ventilator opening to the outside, but it had already been bricked up before the rains.

The door was made of thick wood.

During the day no one paid it any attention.

Meera noticed the first thing.

Meera was Shivkant's seventeen-year-old daughter.

Early one morning, while she was sweeping the courtyard, the dust lying beneath the locked door suddenly slid towards her.

She stopped short.

A scent came with the dust as well.

Like fresh mango blossom.

Meera bent down and placed her palm beneath the door.

The air was mild.

Neither cold nor warm.

It held the soft dryness of Phagun.

It was Kartik in the courtyard.

Phagun was blowing from beneath the door.

At first Meera did not trust her own nose.

She called her mother.

Malti Jha was washing rice in the kitchen.

She came out and laughed.

"Someone must have pressed flowers inside one of those old books."

Meera placed her palm beneath the door again.

The air was still there.

Malti bent down too.

The smile slowly left her face.

"It is coming from inside."

Shivkant was called.

Since retiring from his government office, he spent much of his time at home going through old ledgers and papers.

He examined the doorframe, the latch, the gap below the door, and all the walls.

"The ventilator at the back must not have been sealed properly."

"But the neighbour's wall is right against the back," Malti said.

"Air can find its way through a crack."

Shivkant's explanation sounded reasonable.

By noon, the mystery of the morning had become a household repair problem.

But the next day the problem changed again.

In the morning Meera deliberately went to the door.

This time a hot gust came out from underneath it.

It was so hot that she pulled her hand away at once.

The smell carried dust, dry grass, and the acridness of bricks baked in the sun.

"Jeth," Meera said softly.

Malti stood in the courtyard wrapped in a shawl.

There was dew on the neem tree outside.

The hot wind of Jeth was blowing beneath the locked door.

This time Shivkant did not laugh.

He cut three thin strips of paper and hung them by thread beneath the door.

All three strips kept trembling outward.

He proposed opening the door.

Malti stopped him.

"The plaster has fallen. Dust will rise inside."

Meera said, "Let us watch the air first."

They all sat outside.

For half an hour the hot air kept bending the thin strips of paper outward.

Then it stopped all at once.

No sound.

No smell.

The paper strips hung straight down.

On the third morning, the ground beneath the door was wet.

It had not rained.

The courtyard was dry.

Dust crunched beneath Malti's feet.

But beside the gap under the door, a strip two fingers wide was damp.

The air was cold and heavy.

With it came the smell of raw earth, wet leaves, and the distant night-call of frogs.

Malti shivered.

"This is Sawan."

This time Shivkant did not name any season.

He merely accepted that the air inside was different from the air outside.

At noon Bhola the mason was called.

Bhola put his ear to the doorframe.

Nothing.

He placed his palm beneath it.

There was a faintly damp breeze.

"The wall must be hollow inside."

He tapped the wall with the handle of his hammer.

The same sound came from every part of it.

They reached the bricked-up ventilator from outside.

The joints between the bricks were firm.

Bhola plastered clay around the entire doorframe once more.

He stuffed a thick cloth into the gap at the bottom.

"Now let us see."

No air came until night.

On the fourth morning, Meera woke to find the cloth bulging outward.

As though someone inside were gently blowing against it.

She pulled the cloth out.

Cold air touched her fingers.

So cold that pain rose beneath her fingernails.

With it came the smell of smoke, mustard oil, and ash from a fire.

Paus.

This time Meera did not call her mother.

She filled a brass bowl with water and placed it directly in front of the door.

Ten minutes later, a fine mist had gathered over the surface of the water.

When Shivkant woke, he found his daughter sitting beside the bowl.

"Have you been doing this since last night?"

"Not me. The air."

Shivkant decided to open the door.

Bhola was called again.

Everything nearby was moved away.

Malti held the end of her sari over her mouth.

Meera stood an arm's length back from the door.

Shivkant lifted the latch.

The swollen wood made the door stick.

Bhola put his shoulder against it.

With one shove, the panel opened.

No cold air came out from inside.

Only the stale smell of a room shut for three months.

Dust.

Lime.

Old paper.

And, in one corner, the dry trace of damp.

Meera went inside.

She stretched out her hand, feeling the air.

The room felt like the courtyard.

No Paus.

No Sawan.

No Jeth.

No Phagun.

"You see?" Shivkant said, but there was no triumph in his voice.

Bhola ran his hand over the bricks sealing the ventilator.

"Nothing can come through here."

The room was not emptied completely.

They merely swept away the dust, gathered the fallen plaster, and carried the two trunks outside.

The door remained open all day.

No unusual air came that day.

The door remained open the next day as well.

Nothing.

On the third day Malti said, "Close it. A cat will get in."

The door was closed in the evening.

In the morning, the strip of paper below it was covered with fine yellow pollen-dust.

The air was gentle and sweet.

Phagun had returned.

This time Meera was not pleased.

Her faith had been shaken more than anyone else's.

While the room remained open, it was ordinary.

The moment it was closed, the season inside it changed.

Shivkant kept avoiding putting this into words.

He would say, "The temperature in the gap must be different."

He would say, "The wall must be holding the day's heat."

He would say, "Smell is a trick of the nose."

But on the fifth morning, a hot wind blew from beneath the door and softened a small piece of wax left there the night before.

After that he did not call it "a trick of the nose."

Meera began a register.

The first column was for the date.

The second for the air outside the house.

The third for the air from the locked room.

The fourth for the smell.

The fifth for some small piece of evidence.

Kartik 27 — Phagun — mango blossom — paper bent outward.

Kartik 28 — Jeth — sun-baked dust — palm warmed.

Kartik 29 — Sawan — wet earth — threshold damp.

Kartik 30 — Paus — fire ash — mist on bowl.

Phagun did not come again the next day.

This time the air was that of Sharad.

Clear, dry, light.

It brought to mind kans grass in flower, though the kans fields were far from the house.

Meera wrote in the register: "No sequence."

Malti asked, "Why must there be a sequence?"

Meera did not answer.

Slowly, separate rules for this air took shape in the household.

Whoever woke first in the morning placed a palm beneath the door.

If the air was wintry, Malti tightened her shawl before watering the tulsi, even though the courtyard might be warm.

If the air was from Jeth, Shivkant set his chair two arm's lengths away from the door.

If it was rainy-season air, Meera gathered up her notebooks, though not a drop fell from the roof.

The family themselves sometimes laughed at all this behaviour.

"Which weather do we believe in—the one inside the house or the one outside?" Shivkant said one day.

Malti replied, "If there are two, believe in both."

Hearing this, Meera thought of writing something in the register, then did not.

One Sunday Shivkant's younger brother Pramod came to visit.

He lived in Delhi and had laughed heartily when he heard about the room over the phone.

Now he wanted to see for himself.

There was a mild sun outside that day.

Cold, damp monsoon air was coming from the locked room.

Pramod placed his palm against the gap.

The smile on his face was the first thing to change.

Then he immediately said the door should be opened.

The door was opened.

The air vanished.

Pramod went inside.

He inspected the ceiling.

He tapped the walls.

He put his ear to the floor.

Nothing.

"It must be a matter of pressure," he said.

"Whose pressure?" Meera asked.

Pramod laughed. "That is what I would need to be an expert in air and wind to explain."

The door remained open until evening.

At night Pramod insisted on closing it himself.

He pressed a thick flexible strip along the bottom.

He stuffed cotton into the keyhole.

He pasted paper over the joints of the frame.

"Now where will the air come out from?"

In the morning, no air came from underneath.

The paper did not tremble either.

Pramod came into the courtyard wearing a victorious look.

Then Malti said, "Come here and see."

The old spiderweb hanging near the top of the frame was fluttering outward.

The air was coming from above.

It was not warm.

Nor was it cold.

It smelled of new rice, drying straw, and earth warmed by the sun.

Aghan.

Pramod stared upward for a long time.

Then, without saying anything, he removed the flexible strip.

That evening he returned to Delhi.

As he was leaving, he said to Meera, "Keep writing in the register."

Meera asked, "Why?"

"The day this stops, we will know it was truly happening."

Meera did not like that answer.

She thought: why should the ending of something be the proof that it had been real while it lasted?

As December approached, Bhola fixed a date to begin the repairs.

The damp in the ceiling had dried.

The plaster would be redone.

The doorframe would be replaced.

The bricks sealing the ventilator would also be removed and checked again.

What frightened Meera most was the replacement of the doorframe.

She said, "If the door is changed, the air may stop."

Shivkant said, "The air cannot be inside the door itself."

Malti remained silent.

Bhola first removed the old door panel.

Then he took out the frame.

There was no longer any boundary between the room and the passage.

The masons worked for three days.

For three days no separate air appeared.

Meera left three lines blank in the register.

On the fourth day the new frame was fitted, but the panel had not yet been hung.

The air was normal.

On the fifth day the new wooden panel was fitted.

It remained open all day.

The air was normal.

In the evening, after the paint had dried, Bhola closed the panel.

The new latch gleamed.

The gap at the bottom was much narrower than before.

Meera got up three times during the night to look.

Nothing.

She fell asleep before dawn.

Malti was the first to wake.

On her way to the kitchen, she stopped beside the new door.

No air was coming from underneath.

She placed her palm there.

Nothing.

She did not call Meera.

She put water on the stove.

The sun rose.

Meera woke and went straight to the door.

She bent down.

Nothing.

"Finished?" she asked her mother.

Before answering, Malti looked upward.

In the middle of the new panel, the grain of the wood had naturally left a hairline seam.

A very faint breath of air was coming through it.

So faint that one could not feel it without putting a cheek close to the wood.

Meera pulled over a chair and brought her face near the seam in the panel.

The air was cool.

It carried the soft scent of silk-cotton fluff, new leaves, and something like the imagined call of a distant cuckoo.

Malti smiled.

"This time?"

Meera said, "Spring."

Shivkant had come over too.

He looked at the new door.

"Not from below—from the middle?"

Meera nodded.

She brought the register.

After the three blank lines she wrote: "New door. Boundary made again. Air returned."

Shivkant read what she had written.

"Boundary?"

Meera said, "While the room is open, nothing happens. The moment it is closed, the air changes."

Shivkant looked at the door for a while.

Then he lifted the latch.

The panel opened.

The spring air stopped at once.

The room was ordinary.

New plaster, two trunks, a bamboo stool.

Meera went inside.

There was only the ordinary chill of the season between Kartik and Paus, the same as outside.

She came out.

Shivkant closed the panel again.

The three of them stood there for a while.

At first, nothing.

Then the corner of Malti's sari near the hairline seam in the panel stirred.

The air had returned.

This time Meera could not identify its smell at once.

The earth was not warm.

The leaves were not wet.

There was no ash from a fire.

No sweetness of mango blossom.

It was simply different.

Meera left the season column blank in the register.

She left the smell column blank as well.

Only in the evidence column did she write: "Door closed."

From that day on, no new rule was made in the house for the air from the room.

Some mornings someone placed a palm beneath the door; some mornings no one did.

Sometimes it was Jeth, sometimes Sawan, sometimes winter, and sometimes an air for which no one in the house had a name.

The moment the room was opened, everything stopped.

A little while after it was closed, it began again.

Bhola took his payment for the repairs and left.

Pramod called from Delhi and asked, "Did the air survive?"

Meera told him, "The door survived."

Whether Pramod laughed or not was impossible to tell clearly over the phone.

One night in Paus, Malti was putting the kitchen in order late. Everyone else had gone to sleep. As she passed the locked room, warm air was coming through the hairline seam in the panel. She stopped.

This time the air carried no smell of earth, flowers, or dust. Only warmth. Malti placed her palm against the panel. The wood was cold. The air coming through the seam was warm. She reached for the latch to open the door. Then she stopped her hand. The door remained closed.

It was winter in the courtyard. To know what season lay inside the locked room, one had to open it. But the moment it was opened, that season ceased to exist. Malti quietly switched off the kitchen light. In the darkness, the hairline seam in the door could no longer be seen. Only the air continued to touch her cheek.

STORY 287

The Ownerless Shadow

At noon, Madhubani's old market became almost another place altogether.

The morning commotion subsided.

Wet sacks were laid over the vegetable baskets.

The saris hanging outside the cloth shops grew still.

The tea seller lowered the flame under his stove.

And people drew themselves in beneath awnings, umbrellas, tarpaulins, and leafy shade.

That day in Jeth was just such a day.

The sun was almost directly overhead.

The shadows were all small, dense, and pressed close to the feet.

Sulochana Devi was inside her stationery shop counting the ledger entries.

The shop was called "Vidyapati Writing Store."

Her late father-in-law had given it that name.

Now Sulochana ran the shop.

At that moment she saw a black shape in the middle of the road.

At first she thought someone was walking through the noonday sun.

But no person was visible.

There was only a shadow.

It was shaped like a human being—a head, shoulders, two arms, two legs.

It was moving slowly from east to west.

Sulochana narrowed her eyes.

The road was empty.

A rickshaw stood far off at the bend.

Two dogs lay drowsing beside a water trough.

And in the middle of the road the shadow kept walking.

Its pace was so ordinary that it took Sulochana a few moments to grasp what was extraordinary about it.

The shadow put one foot forward.

The other lifted from behind.

Its arms swung lightly.

But there was nothing above it.

Sulochana came to the threshold of the shop.

"Sattar bhai!" she called to the key-maker across the road.

Sattar Mian came out from inside.

"What happened?"

Sulochana pointed toward the road.

Sattar first looked at the sunlight.

Then at the shadow.

"Whose is it?"

"That is my question too."

Both of them looked upward.

There was no one on any rooftop.

There were electric wires, but their shadows fell in another direction.

There was a bamboo pole, but it stood still.

The sky was perfectly clear.

By then the shadow had reached the front of Sattar's shop.

Sattar stepped into the road.

He placed his foot near the shadow.

His own shadow was a small black patch to the right of his feet.

The two shadows came close to each other.

But they did not meet.

The ownerless shadow suddenly turned left.

Sattar also moved left.

The shadow straightened again.

Sattar laughed.

"It got frightened of me."

"Not of you," Sulochana said.

She was looking at Sattar's feet.

"Of your shadow."

Sattar looked down.

It had turned not before his body, but before his shadow.

That could not be tested at once.

First five people gathered.

Then ten.

Parvati Devi, the vegetable seller, left her basket and came over.

Ramlochan Babu, who repaired watches, kept wiping his spectacles and peering.

A schoolboy stopped his bicycle.

Everyone's first question was the same—"Whose shadow is it?"

People began looking at one another's feet.

No one's shadow was missing.

No one's shadow matched it.

Meanwhile, the ownerless shadow did not stop walking.

It kept moving ahead down the middle of the road, making small turns to left and right.

Then Parvati Devi noticed that the shadow went around the shadow of her weighing scale.

The scale stood at the roadside.

Its body was not in the shadow's path.

Only the scale's thin shadow lay ahead.

"Did you see that?" Parvati said.

No one had seen it clearly.

Sattar Mian brought a long bamboo pole from his shop.

He laid the bamboo on the ground.

The ownerless shadow crossed over it.

Nothing happened.

Sattar lifted the bamboo.

He rested one end on his shoulder and extended the other over the road.

The bamboo itself was in the air.

Its thin shadow made a black line on the ground.

The ownerless shadow reached that line and stopped.

It had stopped for the first time.

It seemed as though the market too had stopped.

Sattar raised the bamboo a little.

The black line shifted.

The ownerless shadow took one step forward.

Sattar lowered the bamboo.

The line came before it again.

The shadow stopped again.

"It does not heed the body," Sulochana said softly.

"It heeds the shadow."

The schoolboy grew excited.

He laid the bicycle down on the ground.

The shadows of the wheels and frame fell across the road like a lattice.

The ownerless shadow did not go straight through.

It went around the edge of the wheel's circular shadow and came out on the other side.

Its foot did not strike the iron wheel.

For the iron wheel itself was not in its path at all.

It avoided only the black circle drawn on the ground.

There was no laughter in the crowd now.

People began looking at their own shadows.

What until then had been merely an effect of light had suddenly become an obstacle in a road.

Ramlochan Babu said, "It can be stopped."

"Why should we stop it?" Sulochana asked.

"For an experiment."

Ramlochan brought two old white sheets from inside his shop.

Four people stretched them on bamboo poles and held them over the road.

The shade of the sheets made a broad black band on the ground.

The ownerless shadow came to that band and halted.

It turned right.

There Sattar stood making a shadow with the bamboo pole.

It turned left.

There the schoolboy stood the bicycle upright.

There was shadow on three sides.

The way behind was open.

The ownerless shadow turned around.

It began walking back the way it had come.

"It does not get trapped," Sulochana said.

"It changes its route."

Ramlochan said, "Close the way behind too."

Sulochana stopped him.

"First let us see what it does."

The sheets were lifted away.

The bicycle was moved.

The bamboo was lowered.

The black bands broke apart.

The ownerless shadow turned again.

It resumed its original direction and walked westward.

That day it went as far as the end of the market.

At the end stood a peepal tree.

The peepal's dense shade covered much of the road.

The ownerless shadow reached the tree's shade and stopped.

The people had followed behind it.

The shadow went around to the right.

The peepal's shade spread all the way to the right.

It went around to the left.

There too was dark shade.

For a few moments it paced back and forth inside a small patch of light.

Then a wind blew.

The peepal leaves stirred.

A thin crack of light opened within the shade.

The ownerless shadow entered that bright crack.

The crack moved with the leaves.

The shadow too moved crookedly with it.

Once, its head fell beneath the dark leaf-shadow.

That part vanished from sight.

The rest of the body remained visible on the bright patch.

The next moment the head came back into the light.

The shadow became whole again.

In this way, breaking into pieces, it crossed the peepal's shade.

Then it turned into the lane behind the market and disappeared from sight.

By evening, word of the first day's event had spread through the market.

Someone said it must be some trick with a mirror on a rooftop.

Someone said it was an illusion caused by the heat.

Someone said such a thing might have happened before in the old market, only no one had written it down.

Sulochana offered no conclusion.

On the last page of her ledger she wrote only: "12:17 p.m. East to west. No obstacle from bodies. Obstacle from shadows."

Before noon the next day, people began to wait.

Sulochana did not like that.

"This is a market, not a playhouse," she said.

Yet she herself placed a chair at the threshold.

At twelve ten, nothing happened.

At twelve fifteen, nothing happened.

Ramlochan held his watch to his ear and checked it.

Sattar stood holding the bamboo pole.

At twelve seventeen, the black shape appeared near the eastern bend.

The same gait.

The same head.

The same shoulders.

The same two swinging arms.

A single sound rose through the crowd like a breath.

"It has come."

This time Sulochana stepped into the road carrying a piece of chalk.

She made a small mark beside the shadow where it had first appeared.

Then, every ten cubits, she drew a small line at the side of the road.

The shadow kept walking at the same pace.

Ramlochan kept noting the time.

From time to time Sattar placed the shadows of different objects in its path.

A bamboo pole.

An umbrella.

A wooden frame.

Even the shadow of an empty rope.

The ownerless shadow avoided them all.

But bricks, rope, baskets, and wood lying on the ground could not stop it.

At one spot three bricks lay on the road.

The shadow went straight over them.

Its black foot did not rise onto the surface of the bricks.

Wherever it had been visible on the road, that part vanished for a moment because of the bricks, then appeared again on the other side.

Seeing this, Sulochana wrote: "A change of surface makes no difference."

On the third day the sky was overcast.

People waited.

There was no sunlight until afternoon.

No shadow was distinct.

The ownerless shadow did not come either.

On the fourth day, half the sky was clear.

At twelve seventeen, it came again.

This time, as it reached the middle of the market, a cloud passed over the sun.

All the shadows on the road began to fade at once.

Sattar's shadow turned grey first.

The umbrella's shadow grew pale.

The peepal's shade began to dissolve into the earth.

The ownerless shadow too grew thin.

It was one step ahead.

The next step appeared only halfway.

Before it could lift the third step, it vanished completely.

People kept staring at the spot.

Five minutes later the sunlight grew strong again.

Sattar's shadow returned beside his feet.

The shop awnings cast clear shadows on the road again.

And the ownerless shadow reappeared at the very place where it had vanished.

One of its feet was still halfway forward.

As though those five minutes had not passed for it at all.

It completed the step and walked on.

Sulochana wrote in the ledger: "It does not move in darkness. When light returns, it resumes from the same place."

Sattar read it and said, "The shadow is afraid of the dark."

Sulochana said, "Where does a shadow exist in darkness anyway?"

"Then why call this a shadow?"

No one had an answer to that question.

On the fifth day, the boys in the market decided to conduct an experiment.

They gathered four old umbrellas, two sheets, and three bamboo poles.

They made shade all around the road, leaving only a narrow corridor of light.

The ownerless shadow entered that corridor.

It took the winding path.

Where the light bent left, it turned left.

Where it bent right, it turned right.

At one point the corridor was so narrow that half its shoulder fell into shade.

That half vanished.

The remaining half of the black figure moved forward.

The corridor widened again.

The shoulder became whole again.

The boys applauded.

Sulochana scolded them.

"Make a path for it, not a game of tormenting it."

"Does it feel pain?" one boy asked.

Sulochana fell silent.

That was not a question for the ledger.

Over the next few days, a new custom took hold in the market.

Around twelve seventeen, shopkeepers made sure not to cast unnecessary shade across the middle of the road.

If an umbrella jutted out too far, they pulled it inward.

Sattar would joke, "Keep the road clear. The noonday traveller is coming."

Ramlochan had already measured its pace.

It was like the slow walk of an ordinary person.

Neither hurried.

Nor sluggish.

It never stopped in front of any shop.

It never followed anyone.

It never turned its head toward anything.

There were no features on its shadow-face.

There was only the gait.

After two weeks, people's curiosity began to wane.

The market returned to its work.

The shadow did not come every day, but on clear afternoons it appeared often.

Some people watched it.

Some did not.

Sulochana kept recording the dates in her ledger.

One day she noticed that the shadow was not always the same size.

Under Jeth's fierce overhead sun, it was short and dark.

As Ashadh approached and the sun angled slightly, its body grew longer.

That would have been natural, if it had had a body.

But where was the body?

Sattar said of this, "Perhaps its owner is not here, but somewhere else."

"Why would the shadow of a body elsewhere fall here?"

"Not everything in this market has an explanation."

Sulochana smiled.

She did not write the word "owner" in the ledger.

It seemed to her that insisting on finding an owner turned the sight into the wrong question.

One day the municipality began installing a new cloth canopy over the middle of the market.

The heat had been severe.

For months the shopkeepers had been asking for shade.

Long bamboo poles were planted.

Thick cloth was stretched from east to west.

Almost the entire middle of the road came under shade.

Everyone was pleased.

The afternoons became somewhat bearable.

But on the first clear day, at twelve seventeen, Sulochana looked eastward.

The ownerless shadow appeared at the bend.

It walked through the light until it reached the first edge of the canopy.

And stopped.

This time there was not a strip of shade merely a few cubits wide before it.

Almost the whole market lay ahead like a long black river.

There was canopy over the mouth of the lane to the right as well.

To the left were the fruit sellers' umbrellas.

Behind it lay open sunlight.

The shadow turned back.

Sulochana thought it would return the way it had come.

But it did not.

It began moving north along the edge of the canopy.

Where the cloth ended, there was a strip of sunlight two cubits wide.

The shadow took that thin band of light.

Leaving the market's main road, it began moving close along the shop thresholds.

People stopped their work and watched.

It had never taken this route before.

It came in front of Sulochana's shop.

The awning's shadow fell near the threshold.

Only half a cubit of sunlight remained between them.

The ownerless shadow tried to pass through that half-cubit strip.

Most of its body vanished.

Only a thin black streak could be seen moving.

Without thinking, Sulochana raised the bamboo support of the awning a little.

The strip of sunlight widened.

The shadow became whole again.

Without stopping, it moved on.

Sattar too tied up the hanging mat outside his shop.

Parvati pulled the vegetable sacks inward so their shadows would not fall across the path.

No one gave anyone an order.

Only a narrow path of light began opening along the edge of the market.

The shadow followed that path and reached the western peepal tree.

The peepal's shade was still there.

This time there were very few patches of light between the leaves.

The shadow moved along the edge for a while.

Then it found a bright slit.

It passed through it.

In the evening a municipal worker came and asked, "Why have you left so many gaps along the sides of the canopy?"

"For air," Sattar said.

Sulochana said nothing.

After Ashadh, the rains began.

The sky remained overcast for days at a time.

For many weeks the ownerless shadow did not appear.

The lines for dates in the ledger remained empty.

Rainwater came through the gaps in the canopy, so the shopkeepers gradually covered them again.

The market returned to its normal routine.

The schoolboy now came only occasionally.

Ramlochan stopped looking at the clock.

Sattar's bamboo pole went back to resting above the key shop.

Sulochana put the ledger away in the cupboard.

At the end of Bhadav, one day the sky cleared as though it had been washed.

The afternoon sun was fierce again.

Sulochana did not think of the ledger.

She was tying a bundle of notebooks for a customer.

Then a stranger's voice came from outside: "Whose shadow is this?"

Sulochana's hands stopped.

She came outside.

A man who looked like a traveller stood in the middle of the road.

A cloth bag hung from his shoulder.

He was looking down.

The ownerless shadow was approaching him.

The traveller was perhaps seeing it for the first time.

He stepped back twice.

The shadow did not change its pace.

"Whose is it?" he asked again.

No one answered.

Sattar Mian kept filing a key.

Parvati went on weighing okra on her scale.

Ramlochan was wiping the lenses of his spectacles.

The traveller remained standing in the middle of the path.

The ownerless shadow reached directly in front of his body.

The traveller thought of moving aside, but it was too late.

The shadow did not collide with his body.

It did not heed bodies at all.

But the traveller's own shadow fell to the left of his feet.

The ownerless shadow reached that black shape and turned.

It passed so close to the traveller's body that its black shoulder seemed to go beneath the bag.

Even so, it kept an inch of distance from the traveller's shadow.

Then it straightened and moved on.

For a long while the traveller kept looking down.

His own shadow remained just as it was beside his feet.

He raised his head and looked at Sulochana.

"Are none of you afraid?"

Sulochana watched the black figure moving westward along the side of the market.

"At first there were more questions," she said.

"And now?"

Before answering, Sulochana noticed that the mat outside Sattar's shop was hanging out again.

Its shadow lay across the path.

Without saying anything, Sattar tied the mat up.

A narrow strip of sunlight opened.

The ownerless shadow took that strip and moved ahead.

Sulochana said, "Now we simply know its way."

The traveller turned again and looked at his own shadow.

It was moving with his body.

The market's other shadows too were with their own bodies.

Only one shadow belonged to no one, yet little by little everyone in the market had learned its path.

STORY 288

The Station Not on the Map

For Prabhakar Mishra, a train journey was not something to look at but something to count.

The time he left home at dawn, the time the train arrived at the little station, the time it crossed the bridge after Sakri, the time he reached Darbhanga and marked his attendance at the office—everything sat inside him like the hands of a clock.

He was a clerk in the district archives. He spent his days among old files, torn maps, and dates. So whenever something new appeared along the way, his eyes tried to place it, in his mind, somewhere within the old order.

He first saw Kadambbari station on a Monday.

He wrote the name in his notebook later. In that first instant, there had not even been time enough to read it.

The train was running at full speed between two familiar stations. Outside the window, paddy fields, two ponds, electric poles, and a small brick kiln went past in turn. Then, all at once, a platform with a yellow signboard filled the frame of the window.

In the middle of the platform, black letters on the yellow board read —Kadambbari.

A blue bench. An iron hand-pump. A small tin shelter. Beneath the shelter, an old man with a red gamchha over his shoulder.

The train did not slow down. No whistle sounded. No door opened.

Within eighteen or twenty seconds, everything had fallen behind.

Prabhakar looked at Shekhar Thakur, who was sitting beside him. Shekhar was reading a newspaper.

"Has a new station been built here?" Prabhakar asked.

Shekhar did not lift his eyes from the paper. "Where?"

"The one we just passed—Kadambbari."

This time Shekhar looked outside. There were fields.

"You have spent so long looking through old files that now you have begun looking for files even on the railway tracks," he said with a laugh.

Prabhakar laughed too. The matter ended there.

The next day Prabhakar deliberately took a seat by the window. His coach was almost the same one—the third general coach from the front, the fourth window on the left.

Between the two familiar stations he began counting electric poles. After the fourteenth pole came the pond, then the thicket, then the little culvert.

And then the yellow board again.

Kadambbari.

This time he read the name clearly. The old man from the previous day was not on the platform. A girl was working the handle of the hand-pump up and down. Three yellow canisters stood beside the bench.

Again the train went on without changing speed.

Prabhakar immediately took out his notebook and wrote: 'Between two stations. Pond after the fourteenth pole. Name: Kadambbari. Train does not stop.'

On reaching the office, he found his archival habits useful for the first time. During lunch he searched for old district maps of the railway line. The archives did not hold every railway department file, but they did have old land-acquisition maps.

A straight line ran between the two stations. The little culvert was marked midway. Kadambbari was not marked.

He thought—it must be a new station. How could it appear on an old map?

That evening, at the enquiry window of his own station, he asked about the name.

The clerk turned the pages of the timetable. "Kadambbari?"

"Yes, in between."

The clerk turned more pages. "There is no station by that name on this line."

"A new halt?"

"No."

"An old station that was closed?"

"Not that either."

Prabhakar did not argue. It was not in his nature to argue with records about something that could not be found in the records.

On the third day he asked Shekhar to fold away his newspaper.

"Today just look out of the window. When I tell you."

Shekhar smiled, but agreed.

As soon as the pond slipped behind them, Prabhakar said, "Now."

Shekhar looked out through the fourth window.

The yellow board was in front of them.

"Kadambbari," Shekhar said softly.

This time a goat was tethered on the platform. A thin strip of sunlight fell from the edge of the tin shelter. A woman in a green sari sat on the bench with a bundle of clothes in her lap.

After the station had gone by, Shekhar did not reopen his newspaper.

"I have travelled on this line for eight years," he said. "I have never heard of a station by this name."

"Neither had the enquiry clerk yesterday."

"Then what is this?"

Prabhakar did not answer. In his notebook he wrote a third line: 'Shekhar saw it too.'

The investigation began the next day.

Prabhakar left the fourth window and sat at the fifth. The same pond, the same thicket, the same culvert came into view. But Kadambbari did not. The fields continued without interruption.

He got up and moved toward the fourth window, but by then the train had already passed that stretch.

On the fifth day he sat at the fourth window again. Kadambbari was there.

On the sixth day he kept shifting his gaze between the three gaps formed by the iron bars of the window.

That was when he noticed the most unsettling thing of all.

Seen through the middle gap of the fourth window, the station was there. At the very same moment, if he moved his head two inches to the right and looked through the side gap, there was no station—only paddy fields.

Back to the middle gap—the yellow board, the pump, the bench.

Back to the side gap—the fields.

Both views existed at the same time in the same direction.

For the first time, a faint shiver ran through Prabhakar. More than fear, it was the kind of unease he felt when two different owners appeared against the same plot number in a file.

With his fingernail he made a small scratch on the window frame.

On the seventh day Shekhar was absent. Facing Prabhakar sat Manjula Kumari, a college student he often saw on this train.

For a long time Prabhakar said nothing. As the station drew near, he gave up his seat and said, "Would you look out through this window?"

Manjula looked at him questioningly, but changed places.

A few moments later she read the name herself. "Kadambbari?"

"What do you see?" Prabhakar asked.

"A small station. A child is peeping from behind the signboard."

Prabhakar looked through the middle gap. The child was indeed there.

"And through the side gap?"

Manjula shifted her head. Her brows drew together.

"Fields."

The station fell behind. Manjula remained silent for a long time.

"Will you tell anyone?" she asked.

Prabhakar closed his notebook. "Let me first understand it myself."

He could not understand it.

Through a clerk he knew in the railway office, he informally examined the records for the distance between the two stations. Distance posts, culverts, bends in the track, land acquisition—everything was recorded. The name Kadambbari was nowhere.

"There is hardly room for a station here either," the clerk said, running a finger over the map. "Fields on one side, low-lying land on the other. There was never even an old proposal."

Prabhakar asked, "Any temporary halt? During a fair?"

The clerk shook his head. "No. Where did you come across the name?"

"I heard it from someone."

As he gave that answer, Prabhakar felt that for the first time he was lying about Kadambbari.

On the eighth day he tried to take a photograph with his phone.

With his eye at the middle gap, the station was perfectly clear. When he held the phone screen in the same direction, there were only fields. He took the photograph. Later, when he looked at it, he saw paddy, a white egret, and a distant palm tree.

That day, after reaching home, he drew a small sketch of the station from memory: the yellow board, the blue bench, the hand-pump, the tin shelter. The drawing was still the same the next day.

On the ninth day the hand-pump was gone from the station. In its place, two labourers were digging the earth.

On the tenth day a new pump stood half-buried in the ground.

On the eleventh day the earth around it was wet.

Prabhakar understood that this was not some fixed image. Days passed there.

But he could not tell how much time passed there.

A week later the order of the coaches changed. The third coach from the front was new. The old fourth window was gone.

Prabhakar sat in the corresponding place. Between the two stations he saw the fields, the pond, the thicket, the culvert. Kadambbari did not appear.

That day he felt emptiness more than surprise. He could not prove that the place existed, yet its absence began to trouble him as well.

For three days the station did not appear.

On the fourth day Shekhar asked, "Where has your station gone?"

Prabhakar said, "Perhaps with the coach."

Shekhar tried to laugh, but the laugh did not quite come.

That evening, returning from the office, Prabhakar was crossing the footbridge beside the Darbhanga railway yard at a slow pace. Below him, several old coaches stood on separate tracks.

On the frame of one coach he saw the small scratch he had made with his fingernail.

He stopped.

It was the same coach.

In the railway yard, there should have been the wall of the goods shed behind that coach. From the bridge above, Prabhakar looked toward the middle gap of the fourth window.

There was no wall.

There was Kadambbari.

The yellow board stood in the sunlight. The earth beneath the new pump had dried now. On the blue bench sat not the same woman in the green sari, but an old man. A child was drawing a circle in chalk along the edge of the platform.

Prabhakar stood motionless on the bridge. The coach below was motionless too. Yet inside the station small movements continued—cloth fluttered, the child's hand rose and fell, a goat's ear twitched.

He took two steps to the right and looked through the next window of the same coach. The wall of the goods shed. Then through the middle gap of the fourth window—Kadambbari. This time a boy standing beside the yellow board raised his head and looked toward the bridge.

Prabhakar felt like raising his hand. He did not. He placed his notebook on the iron railing of the bridge and opened the page with the map. Between the two stations, where he had earlier made a dot for Kadambbari, he struck the dot out.

Instead, in the margin of the page, he drew a small rectangle—the shape of a window. Inside it he wrote: 'Kadambbari.' Below, in the railway yard, the coach stood perfectly still. There was still no place for the station on the map; but there was a place for the window.

STORY 289

The Clock That Struck Half

In the drawing room of Devanand Mishra's house in an old Laheriasarai neighbourhood, a wall clock had hung for eighteen years. It had a square wooden case, a white round face, black numerals, and below, behind glass, a brass pendulum. One corner of the glass had long been cracked, but that had never affected the clock's running.

Many things in the house changed. The radio went, the table was replaced, a cupboard took the place of the tin trunk, and the children grew up. But the clock remained where it was.

When it came to time, Devanand Babu trusted the clock. A phone might be five minutes fast or slow, a neighbour's clock might stop, the electricity might fail—the drawing-room clock kept moving in its own rhythm.

His wife Kumud would say, "This clock is more regular than the people in this house."

Their daughter Vaidehi would laugh and say, "Then give it food too."

Devanand Babu would reply, "It gets wound once every seven days. That is all."

Everyone would laugh at that.

One evening in Bhadau, before dinner, the clock told a time no one had ever known before.

Kumud was heating milk. Devanand Babu was checking old accounts of the cooperative store at the drawing-room table. Vaidehi sat by the window writing an essay. Bhubaneswari Devi, Devanand Babu's mother, was mending a torn seam in a pillowcase.

The clock reached nine twenty-six. The pendulum swung right, then left. The minute hand left the mark for twenty-six and moved forward.

But before it reached the mark for twenty-seven, it stopped midway.

Not stopped—stood still. Vaidehi was the first to notice the distinction.

The pendulum kept moving. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

The short hour hand was where it ought to be, between nine and ten. The long minute hand stood between two fine marks, at a place where there was no line at all on the clock face.

Vaidehi stopped writing. "Babu, has the clock got stuck?"

Devanand Babu looked up. "The pendulum is moving. Why has the hand stopped?"

He rose and went beneath the clock.

Just then a very faint metallic sound came from behind the glass—ting—

The sound did not ring out fully. It was as though a bell had been struck and someone had caught its echo halfway.

Bhubaneswari Devi stopped sewing. "What time did that strike?"

From the kitchen Kumud said, "Why would it strike again after nine?"

Devanand Babu took out his phone and looked. Nine twenty-six.

Vaidehi checked hers. It too said nine twenty-six.

The pendulum kept moving.

Devanand Babu began counting—one, two, three...

At the twentieth tick the phone still showed nine twenty-six. At the fiftieth tick, the same. At the eightieth too.

Suddenly Kumud called from the kitchen, "The milk!"

Everyone ran in.

The milk had risen to the lip of the pot. White froth pressed right against the rim, yet did not spill over. The flame was burning. The surface of the milk trembled, trying to rise, yet remained poised at that fine boundary.

Kumud quickly turned down the flame. The stove knob turned, but the flame did not immediately grow smaller.

"What is this?" she exclaimed.

Vaidehi bent over the pot. One bubble in the froth was on the verge of bursting, but did not burst.

Just then a full chime sounded from the drawing room—ting.

The kitchen flame diminished. The bubble burst. A drop of milk slipped over the rim and fell on the stove.

Vaidehi ran to the drawing room.

The minute hand stood on the mark for twenty-seven.

The phone showed nine twenty-seven.

For a while no one in the house spoke.

Devanand Babu was the first to say, "The clock is faulty."

Bhubaneswari Devi asked, "The phone too?"

He had no answer to that.

The next morning everything was normal. Devanand Babu opened the clock's glass and gently moved the hands. Nothing caught. He wound the clock and listened to the movement of the pendulum.

Nothing happened that afternoon. Nothing that evening either.

At around half past ten that night, Kumud was fastening the inner bolt of the door. Vaidehi was gathering up her notebooks. Devanand Babu was taking his medicine.

The clock showed ten forty-two.

Then came the same half-chime.

Kumud's hand did not stop on the bolt. She pushed it upward, but the iron piece would not go all the way into its slot. She pressed harder. The bolt reached the mouth of the slot and no farther.

"Has it jammed?" Devanand Babu asked.

"No. Something is stopping it."

He went over himself. He pushed with both hands. The bolt did not move even a fraction farther into the slot.

Vaidehi looked towards the drawing-room clock. The long hand stood between forty-two and forty-three.

"It's in between again," she said.

Bhubaneswari Devi was tying a knot in the thread at the pillow. She pulled both ends, but the knot would not tighten. However hard she pulled, the knot took shape and then remained loose.

Vaidehi tried to laugh. No laugh came.

"This time it isn't the milk," she said softly.

Devanand Babu checked his phone. Ten forty-two.

He began counting. Thirty-one ticks. Thirty-two. Thirty-three.

Kumud let go of the bolt. "Leave it."

Bhubaneswari Devi set the thread down in her lap.

Vaidehi wrote on a page of her notebook—'The second time today.'

She touched her pen to the page to put a full stop. A small dot of ink appeared, but it did not become round; it was as though half the dot remained caught inside the paper.

At the fifty-seventh tick the clock chimed fully.

The bolt slid straight into the slot—though Kumud was not even touching it.

The knot in the thread lying in Bhubaneswari Devi's lap did not tighten by itself, but when she pulled it once more, it tightened at once.

Vaidehi's full stop became round.

The phone showed ten forty-three.

This time Devanand Babu did not say, "The clock is faulty."

From the third day onward, Vaidehi kept a separate page. At the top she wrote—'The Time Between.'

Devanand Babu felt like striking out the heading, but he did not.

For three days nothing happened.

On the fourth morning, at six eleven, the half-chime sounded. Kumud was closing the lid of the rice tin. The lid turned and turned until it reached the final thread, but would not tighten. Devanand Babu was tying his shoelaces; the knot formed, but loosened at the last pull.

Vaidehi opened the page at once.

She wrote—'A task continues, but does not finish.'

Devanand Babu said, "Don't make a rule so quickly."

Vaidehi replied, "Then tie your shoe."

Devanand Babu tried again. The lace would not tie.

When the half-time ended, the lid tightened in a single turn and the shoelace tied.

After that incident the family began observing it not as a game, but as an investigation.

On a sheet of paper Devanand Babu made two columns—'Begun In Between' and 'Completed In Between'.

The 'Completed In Between' column remained empty for many days.

Once Bhubaneswari Devi folded a betel leaf. The leaf folded, the lime and catechu stayed inside, but she could not pierce it with a clove and close it.

Once Vaidehi wrote a letter and folded the envelope; the gum stuck, but the final corner of the flap remained raised.

Once Kumud turned on the tap to fill a bucket. The water rose until it was half an inch below the rim, then trembled at that level. The tap was open, water was still coming, yet the bucket would not fill.

Devanand Babu turned off the tap. The knob turned, the stream grew thin, but it would not stop completely.

The moment the full chime sounded, the stream stopped and the surface of the bucket stirred once and became still.

"So a task can be begun during the time between," Vaidehi said, "but it cannot be completed."

Devanand Babu said, "If it is time, why can there be no completion?"

Bhubaneswari Devi put the betel leaf in her mouth and said, "Perhaps the time itself is not complete."

It was the simplest sentence of all, and so everyone fell silent.

That day Devanand Babu took the clock down.

"Now we'll see," he said. "If the clock isn't here, where will this half-time come from?"

The clock repairer Brijmohan had a shop near the tower. He opened the case and examined the wheels, spring, hammer, bell—everything.

"The hand stops in between?" Brijmohan asked.

"Yes."

"The pendulum?"

"Keeps moving."

"The bell rings only halfway?"

Devanand Babu looked at him closely. "Why did you ask that?"

Brijmohan laughed. "In a clock that catches, the hammer can rise halfway and slip. Quite ordinary."

Devanand Babu felt relieved.

Brijmohan said, "Leave it with me for a night."

Without the clock the drawing-room wall looked strangely empty. A pale circular mark remained where dust had not settled for years.

At dinner Kumud said, "At least we won't hear the half-bell now."

Vaidehi folded the page and put it inside a book.

At eleven five that night, Bhubaneswari Devi was threading a needle. Kumud was turning off the kitchen tap. Devanand Babu was pulling the window shutter closed.

No clock chimed.

But the window shutter came to a halt as though caught, one inch before the frame.

The stream from the tap thinned to a thread and kept falling; it did not stop.

Bhubaneswari Devi's thread passed halfway through the tiny eye of the needle, but however much she pulled, the other end stayed where it was.

Devanand Babu looked at his phone. Eleven five.

He said nothing.

Vaidehi came running from her room. She glanced at the window, the tap, the needle. Then at the empty wall.

"The clock isn't here," she whispered.

No one answered.

After a while the tap suddenly stopped. The window shutter settled against the frame. The thread came all the way through the needle.

The phone showed eleven six.

The next day Devanand Babu went to Brijmohan's shop.

Brijmohan had the clock on the table. "I found nothing wrong. It ran all night. Kept correct time too."

Devanand Babu asked, "The bell?"

"Rang properly on the hour."

"Halfway?"

Brijmohan laughed. "What clock rings half a bell?"

Devanand Babu picked up the clock.

Back home, he hung it on the wall again himself. Vaidehi asked, "If it isn't the cause, why put it back?"

Straightening the clock, he said, "At least it tells us when the in-between has begun."

After that, the family stopped trying to prevent it.

The time between did not come every day. Sometimes after two days, sometimes after seven. Sometimes in the morning, sometimes at midnight. Its duration was not fixed either—sometimes twenty-three ticks, sometimes more than a hundred.

Once Devanand Babu thought he could use that time to make considerable progress on unfinished accounts. He kept paper, calculations and pen ready. The moment the half-chime sounded, he sat down to write.

He added line after line. Everything was fine until the final total. But when he reached the last digit, his pen kept touching the paper and no numeral would form.

The clock chimed fully. The numeral appeared.

After that day he no longer regarded the time between as saved time.

Once Vaidehi thought of using it for study. At the half-chime she read three pages of a lesson. Her eyes kept going over the final line of the fourth page, but the meaning would not become complete. After the full chime, one reading was enough for the sentence to make sense.

Kumud said, "This time completes no one's work."

Bhubaneswari Devi replied, "Why only the work? Perhaps it has not itself become complete."

One night in Ashwin, rain fell heavily. The electricity was out. A lantern burned in the house. In the darkness, the wall clock showed only the faint glimmer of its swinging pendulum.

A little before twelve, the half-chime sounded.

This time no one was alarmed.

Kumud was folding a cloth and placing it along the threshold so that rainwater from the veranda would not come inside. The cloth reached one end of the threshold, but its other end would not lie flat.

Devanand Babu stood by the window. Vaidehi came beside him.

Outside, a drop was swelling at the edge of the roof. As water gathered, the drop had grown heavy, but it did not fall. Inside it the courtyard lantern shone upside down.

Vaidehi asked, "Babu, what time is it now?"

Devanand Babu looked at the clock. In the darkness the minute hand stood between two marks.

He said, "A time no clock has struck."

Vaidehi smiled.

The drop still hung from the edge of the roof. The tiny inverted house of lantern-light trembled inside it.

A few ticks later the wall clock chimed fully.

The drop fell. The cloth at the threshold lay flat. Outside, the rain could once again be heard in its ordinary sound.

Vaidehi opened her page titled 'The Time Between'. It held dates, times, numbers of ticks, and a long list of unfinished tasks.

She placed her pen on the final line.

First she wrote—'Before twelve struck.'

Then she thought, and struck it out.

Beneath it she wrote only—'Half struck.'

STORY 290

The Second Door

A little way in from Benta Chowk in Darbhanga, in a narrow lane, stood a new four-storey building. Mahendra Jha had lived with his family in a rented flat on the third floor for five years.

The flat was not large—a drawing room, two bedrooms, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a narrow veranda. But Aarti liked the house. From the window she could see the crown of a peepal tree; in the morning the milkman rang his bell below, and in the evening clothes fluttered on the terrace opposite.

Mahendra Babu would say, "It may not be our own house, but the way we live in it has become our own."

Their daughter Mrinal was in Class Eight. Their son Anshuman was in Class Five. Mahendra Babu's elderly mother, Shyama Devi, came from the village to stay with them for two or three months each year.

The west wall of the drawing room was bare. No window, no cupboard, no picture. Aarti had once thought of hanging a Madhubani painting there, but after noticing a faint damp patch on the wall, she had let the idea drop.

According to the landlord's plan, the drawing room of the neighbouring flat lay behind that wall.

One night in Katik, after midnight, the electricity went out.

Aarti came into the drawing room carrying a candle. Anshuman had got up for a drink of water. Mahendra Babu stood by the window because, in the darkness, the lane outside seemed unusually quiet.

The candle flame trembled against the west wall.

At first Aarti thought the damp patch had grown. Then the flame steadied, and the outline of a frame became clearly visible on all four sides.

There was a door in the wall.

Its wood was neither old nor new. A pale grey. A small brass handle on the right. At the bottom, the frame met the floor so neatly that it looked as though the door had been there since the house was built.

Mahendra Babu remained silent for a while.

Then he said, "Was this here yesterday?"

Aarti looked at him. "Are you asking me?"

Anshuman said, "I bounce my ball against this wall. If there had been a door, the ball would have gone through it."

Mrinal too came out of her room. She raised the candle and examined the frame.

"Sharmaji's house is behind this wall," she said.

Mahendra Babu placed his hand on the handle.

Aarti said at once, "Not now."

"Why?"

"It is midnight. A door grows out of the wall by itself, and you want to open it at once?"

Anshuman laughed softly, but Shyama Devi's voice came from behind them—"This is no laughing matter."

She came past them to the frame and touched the wood with her fingers.

"The wood is cold," she said.

Mahendra Babu turned the handle again. This time Aarti did not stop him.

The door opened inward without a creak.

Behind it was not Sharmaji's drawing room.

It was their own kitchen.

The stove was out. A brass ladle hung from a hook on the wall. On the kitchen platform stood the bowl used for kneading flour. A small blue mat lay on the floor.

The candle trembled in Aarti's hand.

"This kitchen..." Mrinal whispered.

The kitchen was ten steps away, reached by turning left from the drawing room. There was no possible way it could lie behind this wall.

Anshuman began to lean his head through the doorway. Mahendra Babu caught him by the shoulder and pulled him back.

"Let us look first."

Everyone ran to the kitchen's actual door.

The kitchen was there.

Aarti went inside. She looked towards the new door in the drawing room. There was no second door in that kitchen wall—only a shelf holding three spice tins.

Mahendra Babu stood at the new doorway in the drawing room. Before he could ask whether Aarti could see him clearly from there, the door closed by itself.

Mahendra Babu pulled at the handle. It would not open.

Aarti came out of the kitchen.

The moment she reached the drawing room, the handle turned easily again.

The door opened.

This time, beyond it, was Mrinal's room.

Mrinal started. "My room?"

Her open book lay on the bed, a green pen beside the pillow, her schoolbag on the chair.

Mrinal immediately ran towards her room. The moment she entered it, the new door closed again.

After a little while Mrinal came out. Mahendra Babu opened the door.

Once again, Mrinal's room lay beyond it.

Mahendra Babu said slowly, "Whichever room is empty..."

Aarti completed the sentence. "It opens there?"

No one slept properly until four that night.

By morning the door was still there. In daylight it looked even more ordinary—so ordinary that the fear of the previous night seemed almost ridiculous.

Mahendra Babu telephoned the landlord, Krishnakant Chaudhary.

Chaudhary Babu arrived at ten. At first he thought his tenants were playing a joke on him. The moment he saw the west wall, his face changed.

"There was no door here," he said.

"I know that too," Mahendra Babu replied.

Chaudhary Babu went to the neighbouring Sharma family's flat. There he found the wall completely smooth. When he knocked on it, it gave the ordinary solid thud of brick.

The distance between the two flats was measured. The thickness of the wall came out exactly as shown in the original plan.

Chaudhary Babu returned to Mahendra Babu's drawing room and opened the door.

Shyama Devi's room appeared beyond it.

At that moment Shyama Devi was sitting in the veranda, warming herself in the sun.

Chaudhary Babu stood with his mouth open.

"How can this room be here?"

Anshuman said proudly, "The door goes to whichever room is empty."

"Every empty room?"

Mahendra Babu said, "Perhaps the one that most recently became empty."

That day they understood the rule completely.

Aarti came out of the kitchen—the door began to show the kitchen. Mrinal came out of her room—the door began to show Mrinal's room. Shyama Devi came out of the bathroom—the door opened there.

If someone entered that room again, the door closed. It waited for the next room to become empty.

"So it is a door of emptiness," Shyama Devi said.

Chaudhary Babu did not like the phrase.

He called a carpenter. The carpenter tapped the frame and examined it. The wood was real. Nails went into it. The paint could be scraped. But when he chipped the plaster away from the edge of the frame, he found not brick underneath, but more wood.

"Shall I cut it out?" the carpenter asked.

Aarti said at once, "No."

Mahendra Babu stopped him too. "Let us understand it first."

The attempt to understand it continued for several days.

Anshuman was the most excited. He would slide a small toy counter through the doorway into the empty room. The counter really did turn up on that room's floor.

One day he tried to put his foot through.

The moment the front of his slipper crossed the frame, the view beyond blurred. The handle went rigid.

Mahendra Babu pulled him sharply back.

The door closed.

"People cannot cross through it," Mrinal said.

Anshuman protested, "But the toy goes through."

Shyama Devi said, "A room does not become occupied because a toy enters it. It does when a person enters."

That seemed natural to everyone, as though the door's rules were old rules of the house.

After a few days, the fear diminished.

The new door became part of the household's daily life.

Sometimes Aarti would leave the kitchen empty and look in from the drawing room to check whether she had turned off the stove. After leaving his room, Mahendra Babu would look through the door to see whether he had left his spectacles on the table. Anshuman had turned it into a game.

Mrinal did not like the game.

One evening she came out of her room. At once the drawing-room door began to show her room.

Aarti looked inside without thinking.

An open notebook lay on Mrinal's bed. Across the top, in large letters, she had written—'Things I Cannot Say.'

Aarti looked away.

Mrinal saw that her mother had already looked. She immediately shut the door.

"Just because my room is empty does not make everything in it everyone's," she said.

The drawing room fell silent.

Aarti answered softly, "You are right."

From that day a rule was made: if the door showed someone's private room, no one would look inside without need.

Mahendra Babu said with a laugh, "The door does not know its own rules. We have to know them."

Mrinal did not laugh, but her face softened.

The new door continued to do its work all the same.

Sometimes it showed Shyama Devi's empty bed, her spectacles resting on the edge of the pillow. Sometimes the wet floor of the bathroom. Sometimes a half-cut sponge gourd in the kitchen. Sometimes the marbles scattered on the floor of Anshuman's room.

Gradually, the people of the house began to understand that an empty room was not empty. It retained the trace of a body that had only just risen, unfinished work, a smell, a fold, a scattering of things.

One day Mrinal said, "This door does not show people. It shows what remains after people."

Shyama Devi replied, "Sometimes that shows a person more clearly."

At the end of Margashirsha, Shyama Devi returned to the village.

Her room became empty. All day the new door opened onto it, unless someone happened to leave another room empty in between. One corner of the bed remained pressed down, a bottle of oil stood by the wall, and a dried tulsi leaf lay in the window.

That day Aarti opened the door less often.

By Phagun, the family had grown accustomed to its presence.

Then the landlord informed them that the flat was to be sold. Within three months Mahendra's family would have to move elsewhere.

Mahendra Babu was angry at first. Then began the rush to find another house.

The door, as though unaware of the change, continued to follow its rule.

Packing began. First the boxes of books were filled, then the clothes, then the pots and utensils. As the rooms emptied, they looked barer and barer through the new door.

There had once been a map on the wall of Mrinal's room. When it was taken down, a rectangular pale patch remained. The door showed that mark so clearly that Mrinal said, "The house is showing its real colour now."

Anshuman asked, "Will this door work in the new house?"

No one had an answer.

Moving day was a hot morning in Baisakh.

The labourers carried the boxes downstairs. The kitchen was emptied first. The new door showed the kitchen—only the darkened wall, a faint stain of smoke from the stove, and a yellowed corner by the tap.

Then Anshuman's room became empty. The door began to show it.

Then Mrinal's.

Then Mahendra and Aarti's.

Each time, stripped of its belongings, a part of the house looked strangely larger through the door.

Aarti swept the kitchen one last time. Mrinal closed the window. Anshuman checked three times that none of his red marbles had been left in a corner.

By noon, every room except the drawing room was empty.

Only two stools, a bag, and a bunch of keys remained in the drawing room.

The new door was opened. Beyond it lay Mahendra and Aarti's empty room.

Anshuman asked, "When all of us go outside, which room will it show?"

Mahendra Babu said, "It will show something only if there is someone here to open it."

"Can the door open by itself?"

Mahendra Babu laughed. "It has not opened by itself all these days."

Even after giving that answer, he himself did not like it.

Everyone went downstairs.

Halfway down the stairs Aarti said, "The file with the old gas receipts is still on the upper shelf in the drawing room."

Mahendra Babu said, "I'll get it."

He climbed back to the third floor and opened the main door.

For the first time, the flat was almost completely empty.

An empty house has a different sound. The thud of a foot goes around all the walls and comes back. Even the traffic outside the window sounds like a noise from within.

Mahendra Babu entered the drawing room.

The second door in the west wall was closed.

He took the file down from the shelf and put it in the bag. Then, almost despite himself, he looked towards the door.

The thought came to him—let me open it one last time.

He turned the handle.

The door opened.

Beyond it was the drawing room.

Mahendra Babu stopped dead.

On the other side was exactly the same drawing room—empty. No two stools. No bag. No Mahendra Babu himself. And on the west wall, no second door either. Only a flat wall with the faint old damp patch.

Afternoon light fell through the window. On the floor was the square outline in the dust where a trunk had stood for five years.

Mahendra Babu turned and looked back at the real drawing room.

Here the two stools remained. The shelf stood open. The bag lay by his feet.

He looked through the doorway again. Everything on the other side was empty.

He remembered Anshuman's question—when all of us go out, which room will it show?

Mahendra Babu placed his hand on the doorframe.

For the first time, the wood was not cold. It was warm, like the wall of the house.

He did not step forward.

He slowly closed the door.

The labourers came upstairs again to carry down the two stools. Mahendra Babu sent all the remaining things out with them.

At the end, before closing the main door, he looked once towards the west wall.

The second door was still there.

He stepped outside and locked the main door.

As he went down the stairs, the empty third-floor corridor remained above him.

By the time he reached the second floor, he heard a very faint sound from above—as though a wooden handle had turned once.

He did not stop.

Downstairs, Aarti asked, "Did you find the file?"

Mahendra Babu patted the bag. "Found it."

Anshuman asked, "Did you open the door one last time?"

Mahendra Babu looked at him.

Before he could say anything, the driver of the vehicle taking them to the new house called out.

Mahendra Babu said, "The house is empty now."

They all got into the vehicle.

As it turned out of the lane, the third-floor window was visible for a moment.

The west wall could not be seen from outside.

Mahendra Babu wondered—how, after all, would a door that showed an empty room see an empty house?

The vehicle turned the corner. The question remained behind in the old flat, perhaps beyond that second door, where now no one stood in the drawing room.

STORY 291

The Lane That Changed Its Name

That lane in Madhubani's old quarter was not very wide. If two bicycles passed each other face to face, a third person had to press against the wall.

At the eastern entrance to the lane hung a blue tin name-board. Beneath it, in white letters, were written the municipal block number and the sequence of the houses.

Ira Jha had lived in that lane since childhood. More than the lane's name, she remembered the triangular patch of rust at one corner of the board.

One morning, when she stepped out to buy milk, the board read: "Neem Lane."

Ira read it once, then held out her bucket.

The milkman, Jagdish, asked, "Since when has this been its name?"

Ira was surprised. "Its name? Neem Lane is its name."

Jagdish looked toward the board. "I remember another name."

"Which one?"

Jagdish scratched his head. "Wait... Barki Pokhar... yes, Barki Pokhar Lane."

Ira laughed. "There must be a lane by that name somewhere else."

Jagdish said nothing. He measured out the milk and moved on.

At noon the postman delivered an envelope. Ira's house number was correct, but the address read: "Barki Pokhar Lane."

Ira showed the envelope to her father, Devnarayan Jha.

Devnarayan Babu cleaned his spectacles and said, "The post office must have copied it from an old file."

"Was the old name Barki Pokhar Lane?"

Devnarayan Babu answered at once, "No. I remember no such name."

Her mother, Pushpa Devi, shook her head as well. Their neighbour Salma Khatoon said, "I have lived here for thirty years. I have never heard any name other than Neem Lane."

That evening Ira brought out a bundle of old electricity receipts. On a receipt from five years earlier, the address was clearly written: "Barki Pokhar Lane, House 17."

A receipt from three years earlier said the same.

So did a file from one year earlier.

After looking at the receipts, Devnarayan Babu said, "The municipal people must have kept printing the wrong name."

Ira asked, "The same wrong name for five years?"

No one answered.

That night Ira wrote in her notebook: "12 June. Today the name-board says Neem Lane. The old receipts say Barki Pokhar Lane. Everyone in the lane believes Neem Lane to be the old name."

Below it she had Devnarayan Babu, Pushpa Devi, and Salma Khatoon sign their names.

The next morning Ira stepped outside. The board read: "Kaner Path."

As soon as she read it, she thought quite naturally: yes, Kaner Path.

After walking two steps, she remembered the notebook from the previous night. She ran back inside.

She opened it. "Today the name-board says Neem Lane..."

Ira read "Neem Lane" twice. She understood the words, but they did not feel like the name of her own lane.

Devnarayan Babu recognized his signature. "Why did you make me write this?"

"Yesterday we all wrote down the name together."

"Neem Lane?" He laughed. "There is no lane by that name in this neighbourhood."

Ira took him to the name-board. "And this?"

"Kaner Path. That is the name of our lane."

Salma Khatoon said the same. She accepted yesterday's signature as her own, but not yesterday's name.

When Jagdish the milkman arrived, he called out from a distance, "It has changed again today!"

Ira caught hold of his arm. "Do you remember Neem Lane?"

"Neem Lane was yesterday. Before that it was Barki Pokhar. I leave the dairy at three every day; I read the name as I pass."

For the first time Ira listened carefully to someone who came from outside the lane.

From that day Ira began keeping a register of names. She wrote the date, the name on the board, and below it three things—the weather, the first sound heard in the lane, and the rust mark on the board.

13 June—Kaner Path.

14 June—Matikuan Lane.

15 June—Sonbarsa Way.

16 June—Champa Lane.

Every morning the residents spoke the new name as though it were the old one. Every evening they wrote down the previous name and signed beneath it. The next morning they recognized their signatures but refused to believe the name.

Ira made a test. She scratched a red mark on the back of the board.

In the morning the name had changed to "Harsingar Path," but the red scratch was still there.

So no new board was being put up. The letters themselves were changing on the same sheet of tin.

Salma Khatoon said, "The painter must come at night."

Ira asked, "Then why does none of us remember yesterday's name?"

Salma Khatoon fell silent.

One night they tied a thick cloth over the board. Devnarayan Babu dripped wax onto the knot and pressed his seal into it.

In the morning the cloth was exactly as they had left it. The seal was unbroken.

They removed the cloth. The board read: "Kamla Path."

Pushpa Devi said at once, "Why, that is its name."

Ira asked, "The board was covered all night. How do you know the name?"

Pushpa Devi stood with her mouth open.

That day Jagdish the milkman recited the six earlier names. Everyone inside the lane looked at him as though he had spoken the names of six unknown places in a single breath.

The municipal office was informed. Three days later, a municipal surveyor named Nakul Mandal arrived.

Nakul carried a thick file and an old map. He read the board—"Kamla Path"—and opened the file.

"The official name is Barki Pokhar Lane. It has not changed for thirty-eight years."

Devnarayan Babu said, "There is no place called Barki Pokhar Lane here."

Nakul looked at him for a long time.

He went from house to house asking questions. Every resident gave the current name in one voice. No one could tell him the name from the day before.

Nakul read Ira's register of names. "You wrote all this?"

"Yes. But even to me, when I read it, it looks like a list of different lanes."

"Then why do you keep writing them down?"

Ira said, "Because the signatures are ours."

Nakul did not laugh. In his own notebook he wrote down the current name, photographed the board, and recorded the measurement of the red scratch.

He returned the next day. The board read: "Piyari Lane."

Nakul said at once, "Yesterday it was Kamla Path."

Everyone in the lane was silent.

On the third day it became "Bel Path." Without looking at his notebook, Nakul recited both yesterday's and the day before yesterday's names.

On the fourth day he tried to remove the board. The four screws turned, the sheet of tin came away, and a faded blue mark of the same shape remained on the wall.

Nakul took the board to the municipal office. The entrance to the lane was left bare.

In the morning, when the residents woke, they all said quite naturally, "There is a lot of sunshine in Madhukunj Lane today."

There was no name-board on the wall.

Jagdish the milkman arrived and stopped short. "Where is the name-board?"

Pushpa Devi said, "It has gone for repairs."

"And the name?"

"Madhukunj Lane."

Jagdish shook his head. "Yesterday it was Bel Path."

Pushpa Devi said, "Your memory is badly muddled."

That evening Nakul brought the board back. The tin now bore the municipal office seal. Even there, during the day, its lettering had changed to "Madhukunj Lane."

Nakul said, "I kept the board on my desk all day. Until noon it said Bel Path. When I looked at one o'clock, it said Madhukunj Lane. No one had touched it."

Ira asked, "Do you remember Bel Path?"

"I remember."

"Why?"

Nakul gave no answer.

That night Nakul decided to stay in the lane and watch until dawn. A mat was spread for him in the vacant upstairs room of Salma Khatoon's house.

Until eleven at night Nakul sat on a chair facing the board. Ira, too, stood there for a while with her notebook.

The board read: "Madhukunj Lane."

At midnight it was the same. At one it was the same. At two, Nakul told Ira to go inside and sleep.

"Will you stay awake?"

"Yes."

At five in the morning Ira came outside. Nakul was sitting in the chair, his eyes red. The board read: "Sheetal Lane."

Ira asked, "When did it change?"

Nakul looked at the board. "What changed?"

The notebook in Ira's hand suddenly felt heavy.

"What was the name yesterday?"

Nakul narrowed his eyes and thought. "Sheetal Lane... the name is Sheetal Lane."

Ira opened his notebook. Four days of names, times, photograph numbers, and measurements of the red scratch—all in Nakul's handwriting.

Nakul read each line. His face slowly drained of colour.

"This is my handwriting."

"Yes."

"Bel Path..." He read the words, then shook his head. "Where is that?"

Ira said, "Until yesterday, you knew."

Nakul stood holding the veranda pillar. The first smoke from cooking fires was rising in the lane.

That day one of Nakul's colleagues came from the municipal office. Nakul could not tell him yesterday's name, but he showed him his file.

The colleague asked, "You spent a night here?"

Nakul silently nodded.

From that day a note was added to the municipal file: "Verify addresses by house number and municipal block; the lane name has been observed to be variable."

The residents did not stop preserving the names, but they changed how they used them.

At Ira's suggestion a second, smaller board was fixed below the name-board: "Municipal Block 12 · House Nos. 1–36."

The small board did not change the next day.

It did not change the day after that either.

The postman now looked at the house numbers. Jagdish the milkman read the name and smiled, but did not argue.

Ira continued writing in the register of names. The only difference was that beside each name she now made a small sketch—the awning of

the betel shop, the crack in the red wall, the handle of the public tap, the grille of her own house.

The names kept changing. The things in the place slowly grew old.

One morning the board read: "Chandni Lane." Nakul, who had by then rented Salma Khatoon's upstairs room for a month or two, came outside.

He looked at Ira's register. On the previous page was written "Sheetal Lane," beneath his own signature.

Nakul said, "Where is this Sheetal Lane?"

Ira placed a finger on the page. "The record says—it was here yesterday."

For a while both of them kept looking toward the mouth of the lane.

On the blue board, "Chandni Lane" gleamed. Directly beneath it, the small permanent board carried only numbers.

Jagdish the milkman stopped his bicycle and asked, "A new name again today?"

Nakul opened his mouth to answer, then looked at the register.

Ira said nothing.

Jagdish pedalled on. The blue board shone in the sunlight. When the wind blew, its rusted corner trembled lightly, but the smaller board beneath it—"Municipal Block 12 · House Nos. 1–36"—remained exactly as it was. On the open page of Ira's register, yesterday's name was written clearly, but she could no longer remember the sound of it.

STORY 292

An Extra Window

The talk of selling the house began inside it, but the first trouble appeared on the outer wall.

Vaidehi and Neelabh's house in Allalpatti, Darbhanga, was not very large. Seen from the front, three windows were clearly visible—the sitting-room window on the left, the small room's in the middle, and the kitchen window on the right. The woodwork of all three had been replaced in the same year, and all three bore the same shade of green.

Neelabh had retired from his job. Vaidehi's knees could no longer manage the stairs to the upper floor. Their son Nachiketa lived in Bengaluru and their daughter Aparna in Madhubani. After much thought, the two had decided to sell this house and buy a smaller, single-storey one.

The broker, Rakesh, came for the first time on Tuesday afternoon. He went from room to room, wrote down measurements, turned on the taps, counted the cracks in the roof, and at last crossed the road to take a photograph of the front.

"This front photograph is what everyone will see first," he said. "The house looks good."

Vaidehi laughed. "Don't erase the stain on the wall."

"No, no. It will stay as it is."

That evening Rakesh sent a draft of the sale listing to Vaidehi's phone. Vaidehi first read the price, then the number of rooms, then looked at the photograph of the front.

Her finger stopped on the photograph.

"Neelabh, how are there four windows here?"

Neelabh put on his glasses. There really were four: four identical green windows from left to right, all spaced at almost equal intervals.

He went outside and counted the windows on the wall. Three. He came back in and looked again at the windows of all three rooms. Three.

Rakesh was called.

"Did you make any changes?" Neelabh asked.

"Only brightened it a little, that's all. Why would I add a window?"

"There are four in the photograph."

There was silence for a few moments. Then Rakesh laughed. "Phone cameras sometimes make mistakes when they stitch a wide photograph together. I'll take it again tomorrow."

The next day Rakesh came with an ordinary camera. This time Vaidehi stood in front and watched. He took the photograph with all three windows in view. On the camera screen, the image that appeared at once showed three.

"See?" Rakesh said.

He uploaded that same image to the sale page that evening. Five minutes later Vaidehi opened it and looked—four windows.

This time Neelabh did not laugh.

Rakesh sent the original photograph again. The original had three. The image on the sale page had four.

"It must be some sort of glitch," Neelabh said, but there was little confidence in his voice.

Aparna came on her day off. She opened the two images separately and studied them for a long time.

"It hasn't merely added one new window," she said.

"Then what?"

Aparna brought a ruler. She measured the width of the house on the screen. In the original photograph with three windows, the spaces between the windows were wider. In the four-window image, the entire wall was exactly as wide, but the gaps between all four windows had somehow narrowed on their own.

In other words, the fourth window had not been inserted into one fixed empty patch of wall. The whole front wall had rearranged itself in the photograph.

"So there is no need to look for a fourth room inside," Aparna said. "None of the window positions here exactly matches its real position."

This did not reassure Vaidehi.

That night she opened and shut the shutters of all three windows from inside. The sitting-room window opened. The small room's opened. The kitchen window opened. There was no fourth.

The next day Rakesh took down the sale page.

Neelabh opened the saved image from that sale page again. It now showed three windows.

They looked at one another.

"Put it up again," Aparna said.

Rakesh made the sale page again. He entered the price, wrote the address, and selected the original photograph of the front.

The moment the page went public, there were four windows.

This time Rakesh did not laugh on the phone.

Over the next two days, they began testing it. The same original photograph was sent to a private family group—three. Neelabh sent it to an old friend with the words "our house"—three. Rakesh attached the same image to his office's sales listing—four.

Aparna had the image printed. On paper there were three windows.

Under the image, in red ink, she wrote only: "For sale · Price 58 lakh."

Nothing happened. It remained three.

"Paper doesn't understand what is written on it," Neelabh said.

Rakesh had the image and the price printed together on a one-page sales brochure. There were four windows on it.

Vaidehi took the brochure in her hand and went outside. Three on the actual house. Four on the paper. The afternoon sun fell on both at the same angle.

"Buyers will see this and ask questions," she said.

The question came on the third day. A family from Samastipur came to see the house. The man stood in front with the brochure in his hand.

"Which room is the fourth window for?"

Rakesh looked at Vaidehi for a moment.

Neelabh said, "The house has only three windows."

The man looked again at the brochure, then at the house. "There are four in the photograph."

"Yes."

"Then the photograph is wrong?"

Before Neelabh could answer, Vaidehi said, "The sale photograph is wrong. The house isn't."

The family walked through the house, but their attention stayed on the windows more than on the rooms. When they had left, Rakesh said quietly, "Selling it this way will be difficult."

Neelabh grew irritated. "I can't add a window just to make the photograph correct."

Rakesh said, "Shall I remove the front image?"

They removed it. Only the rooms inside, the courtyard, the kitchen and the roof remained.

The sale page looked normal.

But two days later a buyer asked, "Why is there no photograph of the front?"

Rakesh lied. "The lane is too narrow to get the whole house into the camera."

The lie bothered Vaidehi.

"Why hide something just because we don't understand it?" she said.

In a tired voice Rakesh said, "Not every mystery is written into a property listing."

"This isn't a mystery. It's four windows."

Aparna suggested tying different-coloured cloths to the three real windows and taking another photograph.

A red strip on the sitting-room window, yellow on the middle one, blue on the kitchen window.

In the private photograph: red, yellow, blue—three windows.

Rakesh uploaded that same image to the sale page.

Four windows. Red. Yellow. No strip. Blue.

The fourth window stood in the middle, but the wall of the house had not grown to make room for it. The other three windows had shifted slightly.

"At least now it's clear that the fourth isn't real," Aparna said.

Rakesh shook his head. "Are we going to tell buyers this?"

"We'll tell them the truth," Vaidehi said.

The next buyer was a retired school headmaster. He looked at the brochure with four windows, counted three on the house, and then listened to the story of the coloured-strip test.

He stood outside for a long time.

"Are the house papers in order?" he asked.

"Yes."

"The measurements?"

"They match."

"The wall?"

"Three windows."

The headmaster looked again at the brochure. "Then I'm buying the house, not the photograph."

For the first time that day, Rakesh's face relaxed.

Bargaining began, but the sale was not settled at once. Verification of the house papers, municipal tax, the old map, the lending institution's valuation—all proceeded in their own order.

When the lending institution's valuer came, he too saw the sale photograph of the front.

"Four?"

Aparna burst out laughing. "Count them yourself."

He counted three. He measured. In his report he wrote: "Actual front windows: 3. Visual discrepancy in promotional image."

"Have you ever written a sentence like that before?" Vaidehi asked.

He said, "No. But I write what the measurements show."

The day of the sale drew near. The house slowly began to empty. The sitting-room cupboard was taken away. The bed in the small room was dismantled. The brass utensils from the kitchen went into boxes.

The strange thing was that as the house emptied, the number of windows did not change. There were still three.

In the final week Rakesh asked for a new photograph. "The house is clean now. We'll keep this image with the papers."

Vaidehi said, "Take it."

Rakesh crossed the road. Vaidehi, Neelabh and Aparna stood on the veranda. The camera was raised.

At that moment there were three windows on the house.

There were three on the camera screen as well.

Rakesh sent the image to Neelabh. Three.

Then he added the price and the words "Agreement Finalised" to the final sale page and attached the same image.

Four.

This time there was no strip on the fourth window. The strips had already been removed from the three real windows, but the green shutters of the fourth looked so fresh that they seemed to have been painted only yesterday.

Aparna stared at the image for a long time. "This window doesn't belong to any room," she said softly.

"Then whose is it?" Vaidehi asked.

Aparna did not answer.

On the day of the sale registration, the headmaster came with his wife. The papers were signed. The keys were counted—the main gate, the back door, the roof, the cupboard. There was no key for any window.

Before handing over the house, Vaidehi walked through it once more. She opened all three windows. Air from outside came in. Then she shut them one by one.

She stepped outside. The headmaster's wife was standing on the veranda.

"I want to ask you something," she said. "Was that story about the fourth window true?"

Vaidehi smiled. "It was true in the photograph."

"In the house?"

"Three in the house."

For a few moments the two women stood looking at the front wall.

The day after the registration, Rakesh closed the sale page.

Out of curiosity, Aparna opened the saved copy of the old sale page. The image now showed three windows.

She called Rakesh at once.

"Look at the old brochure."

Rakesh took the sales brochure from an office drawer. The four windows were still there, exactly as before.

Three on the web page, four in the printed sales brochure.

"Has the rule changed?" Rakesh asked.

Aparna said, "The house isn't for sale anymore."

Her voice sounded like a question, not an answer.

Three weeks later the headmaster's wife sent Vaidehi a photograph. The whole family stood in front of their new house—flowerpots on the veranda, a ball by the gate, pale curtains at the windows.

Three windows.

Vaidehi sent the image to Aparna.

Aparna had a print made of it. She placed it beside the old sales brochure's image with four windows.

In both images, the wall was exactly as wide. The crack in the eaves was in the same place. The bend in the drainpipe was in the same place.

Three windows in one. Four in the other.

Aparna left a blank strip of paper between the two images. She wrote nothing on that empty strip.

Outside, Vaidehi's new little house had two windows. They remained open all afternoon.

STORY 293

The Room of Voices

The front room of the old house in Laheriasarai had stood completely empty for three days.

Bipin Babu had lived there before as a tenant. His iron cot, two chairs, a trunk, a clothesline, and the little stove kept in one corner had filled the room so completely that the true colour of the walls could hardly be seen. When Bipin Babu moved to Samastipur, Raghunath Jha had the room cleared and whitewashed, and said they should let the air into it for a few days before looking for a new tenant.

On the first night, Kamla Devi was folding up the bedding on the veranda. The inner door stood open. No electric light was burning in the empty room, but the yellow glow from the street fell inside through the bars of the window.

Just then a woman's voice came from inside the room, very clear, as though someone were standing close to the wall and saying, "No more than ten children will sit here."

The sheet in Kamla Devi's hands went still.

At once another, younger voice said, "Put the table near the window. The afternoon light will fall nicely there."

Then came a little laughter, very faint. After that, silence.

Kamla Devi went to the door. The room was empty. The smell of fresh lime. A fine layer of dust. The window was shut. There was no crack in the rear wall.

She called Raghunath Jha. At that moment he was turning off the tap in the courtyard.

"Someone spoke in the room."

"Who?"

"A woman. Then some girl."

Raghunath went inside. He inspected all four corners. He opened the window and looked out. The tea stall across the road had already closed. The roof of the neighbouring house was empty.

"The sound must have come round from outside," he said.

Kamla Devi did not answer. She remembered the direction of the voice clearly: not from the street, but from the very place where Bipin Babu's cot had stood.

On the second night, Raghunath Jha deliberately remained seated on the veranda. Kamla Devi was in the kitchen inside. Their daughter Meenakshi was reading in her room.

At around half past ten, the voice came again. This time it was a man's: "If I pay before the fifth of every month, that will be all right."

Raghunath rose and went to the doorway. The voice did not stop.

A woman said, "Look at the room first. We will discuss the money afterwards."

Raghunath stepped inside.

At that very instant all the voices were cut off. They did not fade away gradually; it was as though a cord had been snipped with scissors.

He stepped back and returned to the veranda. Ten or fifteen moments later, the same woman's voice came again: "We won't hang a clock on the wall. The ticking will echo too much here."

A shiver ran down Raghunath's back.

He called Kamla Devi. The two of them stood outside the doorway. No one was inside. Yet now and then short fragments of conversation kept coming: sometimes a child's laughter, sometimes a sound like a chair being dragged, sometimes a woman saying, "Open the page."

Meenakshi came as well. She listened carefully.

"I can't hear anything," she said.

At that very moment, both Kamla Devi and Raghunath heard a child's voice say, "Give me the red pencil."

Meenakshi said again, "Nothing at all."

The three of them stood silently for a while.

Raghunath brought an old bamboo stool and placed it in the middle of the room.

No more voices came that night.

In the morning the stool was taken outside. Nothing happened until afternoon. As soon as evening fell, two unknown voices came again.

Kamla Devi put the stool back inside. The voices stopped. She took it out. After some time, the voices returned.

"It speaks only when it is empty," Meenakshi said.

Raghunath looked at her. "But you cannot even hear it."

"You two say you can. And the moment the stool is put in, both of you fall silent."

Meenakshi laughed, but there was less mockery than curiosity in her laughter.

From that day, the three of them told no one about the room. Raghunath made a small ledger. Whenever a sentence was clearly audible, he wrote it down, adding the time beside the date.

In the first three days, twelve fragments were recorded: "No more than ten children will sit here." "Put the table near the window." "I will pay before the fifth of every month." "We won't hang a clock on the wall." "Give me the red pencil." "Open the window; the dust is flying."

Meenakshi said, "These must be conversations that happened here before. The sounds have somehow got trapped in the walls."

Kamla Devi objected at once. "Bipin Babu never taught children. Where would a red pencil come into it?"

Raghunath said, "And if these are old voices, why did we never hear them before?"

The question remained.

On the fourth afternoon, a young woman named Supriya Karn came to see the room. She taught at a nearby school and was thinking of teaching eight or ten children separately in the evenings somewhere outside her home.

Meenakshi had gone to the market at the time. Kamla Devi and Raghunath showed Supriya the room.

Supriya stood at the doorway and looked inside. She measured the window. She examined the width of the wall. Then she said –

Her lips moved. No sound came.

Kamla Devi looked at Raghunath.

At the same instant, both understood where the silence had fallen. From the movement of her lips, they could recognise the sentence: No more than ten children will sit here.

Without pausing, Supriya spoke a second sentence, this time clearly audible: "With ten, there will still be enough air and space."

Raghunath's palm turned cold.

Supriya did not seem to notice that her voice had vanished. She continued measuring the room as naturally as before.

Kamla Devi asked softly, "That first thing you just said...?"

"No more than ten children will sit here?" Supriya repeated casually. This time the sentence was perfectly clear.

Kamla Devi gripped the back of a chair.

When Meenakshi returned in the evening and heard what had happened, she laughed at first. Then she looked at the first sentence in the ledger.

"So you two had heard this sentence four days ago. Today, when Supriya Didi actually said it, you two couldn't hear it. I wasn't even there then."

"Yes."

"If I had been there, perhaps I would have heard it."

Raghunath closed the ledger. This was no longer a matter of old voices.

That night Meenakshi insisted that they listen separately once. It was the only way to understand the rule.

Kamla Devi did not agree. "It isn't right to sit listening for something from someone's future."

Meenakshi said, "We don't even fully know yet whether it is from the future."

At last Raghunath sat alone on the veranda. The stool was outside. Kamla Devi and Meenakshi stayed in the inner courtyard.

Half an hour later, Supriya's voice came from inside the room: "Not this yellow curtain. Put up a white one."

Raghunath wrote it in the ledger. No one else heard the sentence.

Six days later, Supriya decided to take the room. While choosing curtains, Kamla Devi, Meenakshi, and Raghunath were all present. Supriya looked at two pieces of cloth and said -

For Raghunath, there was again a moment of silence.

Kamla Devi answered at once, "If you put up a white one, the room will feel more open."

Meenakshi heard it too. Only Raghunath did not.

Raghunath understood. The sentence he had heard in advance had already given him its sound; when that future moment arrived, there was none left for him to hear. Everyone else could still hear it.

That night the three of them discussed it for a long time.

Meenakshi said, "The room isn't playing voices from the future. It gives our ears their share of those voices in advance."

Kamla Devi said, "Then hearing them beforehand is not a gain but a loss. When the real moment comes later, you will not hear that part of it."

Raghunath opened the ledger. He looked at the twelve sentences. Suddenly he understood: whenever those sentences were spoken in the future, small gaps would open in what he and Kamla Devi heard.

The next day he placed the stool permanently in the middle of the room.

Supriya settled the rent. The question of paying before the fifth of every month came up. The sentence returned - and for Kamla Devi and Raghunath, silence fell in the middle. Meenakshi heard it normally.

"Enough now," Kamla Devi said. "What we have already heard is more than enough."

Two days later, Supriya moved in her things: one table, ten small stools, two bookracks, and a white curtain. The room was no longer empty. The voices stopped.

During the first month, five sentences from the ledger appeared one by one in real conversations. For whichever listener had heard a sentence at night, that sentence fell silent for that person when its later moment arrived. Everyone else heard it normally.

At first Raghunath was alarmed each time. Later he began to recognise those small patches of silence. Supriya would go on speaking, and for half a moment her lips would move without sound for Raghunath; then the next words would become clear again.

It felt as though the future had already cut a small notch out of his hearing.

A month passed. Supriya's classes continued. The room filled with children's voices, the rustle of turning pages, questions, laughter, and sometimes quarrels. It had become an ordinary room now.

Kamla Devi put the ledger away in the cupboard.

A year later, Supriya was given more evening work at the school. She decided to close the tuition class. Her things were removed. The white curtain came down. The table, stools, and racks all went out.

The room was empty again.

That evening Raghunath reached the doorway, but the moment the first whisper rose from inside, he covered his ears and stepped back.

Kamla Devi immediately placed the old stool in the middle. The voice stopped.

"Not this time," she said.

Meenakshi smiled. "Now we understand the rule."

Raghunath did not take out the ledger.

For several days the room remained empty, but silent because of the stool. No one sat on it. It was like a small guard: it stopped neither future nor present, only the exchange of sound between the two.

One day one leg of the stool cracked. It was sent to the carpenter. Kamla Devi went to the market. Meenakshi was at school. Raghunath was alone at home.

At noon, the room became completely empty again.

Raghunath was crossing the veranda when an unfamiliar child's voice came from inside: "Ma, here..."

He stopped.

Before he could hear the rest of the sentence, Raghunath took two steps back and went towards the courtyard. He was curious, but by now he knew something that mattered more than curiosity: whatever sentence

he heard today, his ears would not receive that part again when its real moment came tomorrow.

He picked up an empty earthen water pitcher from inside the house and placed it in the middle of the room.

The voice stopped.

That evening, when Kamla Devi returned, Raghunath told her about the child's half-sentence.

"Whose child?"

"I don't know."

Kamla Devi looked at the pitcher. "Perhaps the next tenant's."

Raghunath said, "Perhaps someone who will live here after us."

At that sentence, both fell silent. For the first time it occurred to them that the room's future stretched far beyond the house's present owners.

Two months later, Raghunath and Kamla Devi decided to sell the house. They were growing older, its upkeep was becoming difficult, and Meenakshi had found a smaller house near the school.

The buyers were Arun Mishra, his wife Vibha, and their eight-year-old daughter Nupur.

On the day they came to see the house, the pitcher stood in the middle of the room. Nupur went inside and spun around. "Will you give me this room?" she asked.

Vibha laughed. "Let us buy the house first."

The unfinished voice from that afternoon flashed through Raghunath's mind: "Ma, here..."

He did not wait for Nupur's next sentence. He changed the subject.

The house was sold. Their belongings were moved out little by little. On the last day, the cupboard, cot, utensils, ledger, everything went. Only the earthen pitcher remained in the front room.

Just before handing over the keys, Kamla Devi asked, "Shall we take the pitcher or leave it?"

Raghunath thought for a moment. "Take it. We should leave the house empty."

He picked up the pitcher.

The room became completely empty.

At once the air inside seemed to tremble lightly. Raghunath was near the doorway. An unfamiliar woman's voice rose: "Put the table here..."

Raghunath stepped away from the door without hearing the rest.

He crossed the veranda and reached the gate, where Arun Mishra's family was arriving to take the keys. Nupur came running in front.

"My room!" she cried, and ran inside.

Kamla Devi looked at Raghunath. "Did a voice come?"

Raghunath nodded. "Half of one."

"The rest?"

"I didn't listen."

Nupur said something from inside. Kamla Devi heard it clearly. Raghunath heard it too, because this was a sentence he had not heard beforehand.

"Ma, what you say here echoes a lot."

That unfinished "Ma, here..." from the afternoon rose again in Raghunath's mind. He understood that if he had heard the whole sentence then, part of this child's voice would have been silent for him now.

He placed the gate key in Arun Mishra's hand.

The room behind them was no longer empty. Nupur was running about inside, Vibha was opening the window, and Arun was measuring the wall.

The voices were arriving at their proper time.

Raghunath stepped out onto the road. There was no future in his ears, only the whole conversation of the present.

STORY 294

Bus Number Zero

It was a quarter to midnight. The iron gate of the old bus stand had already been lowered halfway, the tea seller was turning his glass tumblers upside down and putting them into a tin box, and five or seven people were still waiting beneath the veranda for their respective rides.

Ishani Mishra had a cloth bag, a small case, and a brown file folder in her hands. All day she had been handing over the school's old accounts. Today was the last day of her temporary appointment; she had also vacated her rented room that evening.

The question was only where she should go now, at this hour of the night. But it was not a small question.

For three days her mother had been saying, "The work is over. Come home now." Her colleague Kusum had said, "Stay with me until your next appointment." And in Ishani's bag lay an appointment letter from a new school in Purnea, to which she had to reply by the day after tomorrow.

If she went home, her mother would take it to mean that all these wandering jobs were over now. If she went to Kusum's, the possibility of accepting the next appointment would remain open. If she went to the railway station, she could catch the morning train and postpone the decision for a while.

She knew the roads to all three places. It was the destination that was not one.

The clock at the stand showed 11:47. The last regular bus had left ten minutes earlier. The rickshaws were beginning to thin out.

Just then an old yellow-and-green bus came out of the dark end of the road and stopped. Where its route number should have been, a single black digit appeared on a white rectangular plate: "0".

The sound of the engine was ordinary. There was mud on the wheels. Drops from the previous day's rain had dried on the windscreen. Only the number was unusual.

An elderly man standing beneath the veranda stepped forward first. The conductor opened the rear door.

"Where to?" the conductor asked.

"Laheriasarai Chowk."

The conductor shook his head. "Not this bus."

The old man grew irritated. "Then what is the point of writing zero?"

The conductor pulled the door shut. "Your destination is already decided."

The bus moved a few feet forward and stopped again. This time two college students came running. The first said, "Railway station." The second said, "Donar." Neither was allowed to board.

Ishani kept watching this oddity. It seemed to her some complicated rule of a private bus.

The conductor looked at her. "You?"

Ishani opened her mouth. "I..."

She could have said Laheriasarai. She could have said the railway station. She could have named Kusum's neighbourhood. No word came out.

The conductor asked again, "Where to?"

Ishani said softly, "I don't know yet."

The door opened all the way. "Get on."

There were eleven people inside the bus. No row of seats was full, yet everyone sat in a different row, as though even one another's uncertainty required distance.

Ishani sat by a window. The conductor tore off a small paper ticket and gave it to her. It bore the boarding time, 11:51, and the words "Old Bus Stand." The space for the destination was blank.

"The fare?" Ishani asked.

"When you get off."

"How much?"

"Not how far. How long."

Ishani did not understand. The conductor moved on.

The bus started. The first turn was familiar: the chemist's shop, the closed sweet shop, the peepal tree beside the pond. The second turn was familiar too. Nowhere had the city changed.

There was no route list on the wall inside the bus. A small clock above the driver's head showed 11:55.

Opposite Ishani, a thin young man held a small iron box on his knees. He kept opening and closing his ticket.

"Is the destination blank on your ticket too?" Ishani asked.

The young man smiled. "Everyone's is, on this bus."

"Where are you going?"

The young man looked out of the window. "If I knew, it wouldn't let me board."

His name was Neeraj. The printing press where he had worked for three months had shut down that day. The owner had told him not to come from tomorrow. Neeraj was two months behind on the rent for his room. He had not found the courage to tell his family.

"Have you ridden this bus before?" Ishani asked.

"Once."

"Then where did you get off?"

Neeraj was about to answer when the conductor called from behind, "That is not spoken of on this bus."

Neeraj laughed, but did not answer.

At the next stop three people signalled the bus. The conductor got down and asked each the same question. One woman said, "Sadar Hospital." A young man said, "Kadirabad." Neither was allowed to board. The third, an elderly woman, remained silent for a long time.

"Where to?"

The old woman tightened her grip on her bundle. "Far from here."

The conductor let her board.

The bus moved on again.

Ishani noticed that the bus was following no fixed route, but neither was it taking any impossible road. Sometimes it left the main road through a narrow lane; sometimes it returned to the same road from another end.

Neeraj said, "Have you understood one thing?"

"What?"

"This bus does not take you anywhere."

Ishani looked at him.

"The first time, I thought that if someone didn't know where to go, the bus would find the place for them. But it isn't like that."

"Then?"

Neeraj fell silent before answering. Perhaps because of the rule that one could not speak of a previous journey on this bus, or perhaps because he did not fully understand it himself.

A man sitting at the back suddenly called the conductor. "I've decided."

Several heads inside the bus turned toward him.

"Where to?" the conductor asked.

"My maternal uncle's house. Belwaganj."

The conductor pulled the bell cord once. The bus stopped at the next ordinary stop. A sign outside read, "Municipal Library Turn." Belwaganj was about three kos from there.

The man stared in surprise. "Here? I said Belwaganj."

"Now you know your destination," the conductor said. "The rest of the journey is yours."

"The fare?"

The conductor looked at his ticket. "Four rupees."

The man got off. The bus had not taken him to Belwaganj. It had merely put him off the bus.

For the first time, a line of the bus's rule took shape in Ishani's mind. As long as there was no answer, the bus would keep moving. The moment an answer was found, the journey ended, however far away that answer might be.

The elderly woman sat silently with her bundle in her lap. After a while she spoke on her own. "I'll go to my sister."

"Where to?" the conductor asked.

"Mirzapur, behind the Durga temple."

The next stop was the milk market. The old woman got off without protest. The moment she stepped down, her gait seemed quicker than before.

There were now nine people inside the bus.

Midnight had passed. The city's shops were dark, but a few cooking fires, chemist's shops, and watchmen's lanterns were still awake. The bus number "0" appeared reversed on the inside of the glass.

Ishani opened her file. In red ink at the top of the Purnea appointment letter were the words: "Acceptance due by the day after tomorrow." She closed the paper again.

An old letter from her mother was in the bag: "This time come home on a long leave." On a small slip Kusum had given her were the name of her lane and the watchman's name.

The three papers seemed like three separate stops.

Neeraj asked, "Is any name coming to your mind?"

"Three."

"Then it is difficult."

"And yours?"

Neeraj ran his palm over the iron box. "There were two. Now only one is left, but I don't have the courage to say it."

"Why?"

"If I say it, the bus will put me off."

Ishani asked with a smile, "Is staying inside the bus so pleasant?"

Neeraj looked into the darkness outside. "No. But the moment I step outside, the answer will become true."

The sentence stayed in Ishani's mind.

Over the next half hour three passengers got off. One student said, "My uncle's house"; a seamstress said, "To the superintendent of the women's hostel"; an elderly man said, "The railway-station waiting room." The bus did not leave any of them at those places. It put each of them off at the next stop.

There was no happiness on anyone's face. But as they got off, every hand seemed to hold its ticket less tightly.

Ishani noticed something new. When a passenger named a destination, the conductor wrote nothing in the blank space on the ticket. The blank remained blank.

"Then why is this blank space here?" Ishani asked.

"To remain blank," the conductor said.

"Even after the destination is found?"

"The ticket proves that you boarded the bus, not that you arrived."

After hearing this, Ishani thought the man seemed less like a bus conductor and more like a clerk in some old office. Yet there was nothing mysterious in his expression. In an ordinary way he kept counting coins, pulling the bell, and opening and closing the door.

At twenty-five past one the bus crossed the river bridge. Ishani realised that this route led neither toward home, nor toward Kusum's, nor toward the railway station.

"Where are you taking us around?" a young man who had just boarded asked irritably.

The conductor asked as before, "Where do you want to go?"

"That is what I'm asking you," the young man said.

"Then sit down."

The young man sat.

After a while he began listing many places: "Not home, not the office, not my uncle's, not the railway station..."

The conductor did not stop him.

Ishani understood: this bus was not affected by "where not." It wanted only "where."

At two o'clock Neeraj suddenly lifted his box.

"I'm ready," he said.

The conductor came over to him.

Neeraj took a deep breath. "I'll go to Madhubani. To my younger uncle's printing press. Tomorrow morning I'll stand before him."

The bell rang. The next stop was the old post office.

Before getting off, Neeraj showed Ishani his iron box. "The first time, I got off leaving this box behind. When I tried to board again, the bus would not take me, because I already knew where I had to go to pick up the box. This time the box is with me."

Ishani did not fully understand the rule, but she understood this much: the bus carried a person only as far as the decision, not through its consequences.

Neeraj got off. He still had to find transport to Madhubani at dawn.

There were now five passengers left on the bus, including Ishani.

The silence of the night deepened. The driver coughed once, and the conductor sat on the front seat counting the tickets. The air flowing through the windows grew cold.

Ishani counted her three options again. Home. Kusum. Railway station.

The railway station was not really a destination; it was a place for postponement. This was clear to her now.

Home was a destination, but once she reached it she would have to say the first sentence: "I'll give my answer about going to Purnea the day after tomorrow." Her mother might fall silent.

Kusum's house was also a destination, but going there would be almost the same as having made the decision already.

The bus passed a closed cinema hall. An old poster on the wall was torn. Ishani remembered the empty classroom at the school: today, for the last time, she had straightened the chairs before walking out and had left the key on the headmaster's desk.

At that moment she understood for the first time that the real question was not "Where will I stay?" but "Where will I say tomorrow's first sentence?"

She called the conductor.

"Where to?"

Before answering, Ishani looked out of the window. The bus was not on an unfamiliar road; it was near the same old oil depot from where one could also get the morning bus toward home.

"Home," she said. Then immediately added, "Piprahi, beside the Madhubani road. But when I reach at dawn, the first thing I'll tell Ma is that I will accept the Purnea appointment."

Whether the conductor heard only the first word or the whole sentence, Ishani could not tell. The bell rang.

The next stop was "Kachahari Turn." Piprahi was very far from there.

"Do I get off here?" Ishani asked.

"Now you know your destination."

"But the bus home comes in the morning..."

"Then wait until morning."

The conductor took the ticket and said five rupees. Ishani gave him the coins. She asked for the ticket back.

The conductor showed no surprise. "Keep it."

Ishani got down. The road was deserted. The court gate was closed, and the shutters of the paan shop were down. In the distance a tea seller was arranging coal for the dawn fire.

The bus moved off. Ishani turned to look back. The number "0" was clear in the dim yellow light.

The bus had reached the next turn when a young man by the roadside raised his hand. The bus stopped.

The conductor got down and asked the same question: "Where to?"

The young man remained silent for a long time. Ishani was too far away to hear his answer. But the door opened.

The young man got on.

The bus moved again.

The ticket in Ishani's hand was still blank. Apart from the boarding time and the words "Old Bus Stand," the destination box remained empty. She no longer felt any wish to fill that empty space.

There was still an hour and a half before the first ordinary bus arrived at Kachahari Turn. Ishani sat down on her case.

The first milkman's bicycle passed along the road. A little later came a bundle of newspapers. The city began waking again into its everyday route numbers, stops, and fixed places.

Ishani took the Purnea appointment letter out of her bag. She placed the paper for her reply on top of it. She did not write yet.

First she had to reach home. First she had to say the first sentence. Then she would write.

Far, very far away, from behind some turn, the engine of Bus Number Zero was heard once more—or perhaps it was only the sound of the first freight vehicle of the morning. Ishani could not be certain.

STORY 295

A Rain of Paper

It was the first thunder-laden day of Ashadh. By afternoon the sky had closed in so heavily that the shopkeepers of Laheriasarai lowered their awnings halfway. People thought—this time the rain would come properly.

The first thing to strike the tin roof of Vibha Chaudhary's printing press was not a raindrop.

There was a rustle. Then another. Then a sound as though a swarm of dry leaves were falling on the roof.

Vibha came outside. The sky was grey, the air heavy. But not a drop of rain lay in the lane. Instead, white, yellowish, blue sheets of paper—some thick, some very thin—were wheeling and drifting down.

Some papers caught on roofs, some on electric wires, some over the drains, some on people's heads. One sheet landed on Vibha's shoulder.

She picked it up and looked. In the middle of the page only one line was written—

"The wedding procession will leave at seven in the evening."

Vibha stared at the line for a long time.

That morning the proof of Shyamsundar Jha's daughter's wedding invitation had come to this very press. The first draft had said "seven in the evening." Shyamsundar himself had struck it out in red ink and written "half past five," because the time had been brought forward after seeing the rain and the condition of the roads.

There was no trace of seven o'clock in the final invitation.

"How can this be?" the pressman Nandu asked.

Vibha turned the paper over. There was nothing on the back. No printer's mark, no paper merchant's stamp. The handwriting was not Shyamsundar's, but the sentence was exactly the line that had been struck out.

The commotion in the lane grew.

Bhola, the paan seller, came running with a sheet in his hand. On his page was written: "Ramnath's account—three hundred and twenty."

"I struck out three hundred and twenty and wrote two hundred and eighty," he said. "Yesterday I made a mistake while adding up the oil account."

Two children ran over from the school opposite. On one sheet was written: "The Ganga flows westward." Laughing, one child said, "I made a mistake. Teacher crossed it out and wrote east."

Within ten minutes the lane was covered with sentences that were no longer anyone's present truth, but each of them had at some time been written.

The rain of paper lasted half an hour. No water fell. When the clouds cleared, sunlight came out, and people took brooms to their roofs, courtyards and drains.

Vibha set five sheets aside.

The next day the clouds came again.

This time people were waiting in advance. Some children climbed onto roofs with baskets. A few old men carried cots into the lane and sat there. When the first sheet fell, everyone ran towards it.

This time Vibha had decided to test it.

In the morning she had written on a blank sheet: "The printing press will remain closed for seven days from tomorrow." Beneath it she drew a thick line through the entire sentence. Then she wrote: "The printing press will open at its usual hours."

At two o'clock the clouds closed in.

At twenty-seven minutes past two, Nandu picked up a sheet from beside the roof and brought it in.

It said: "The printing press will remain closed for seven days from tomorrow."

Not the final sentence. Only the one that had been crossed out.

"So the sky reads proofs?" Nandu asked, half laughing.

Vibha did not answer. She made another test. This time she wrote on a page: "Nandu will eat five kilos of jalebi today." She left the page on the table without striking the sentence out.

By evening no such sheet had fallen.

Then Nandu himself wrote: "I am the owner of the printing press." He ran his pen over the line three times and crossed it out.

A little later came a rustle on the roof. A sheet fell: "I am the owner of the printing press."

Nandu became so solemn when he saw it that everyone burst out laughing.

For the first time the rule became clear: whatever was written and then struck out, the clouds preserved. The marks of cancellation vanished; only the sentence rained down.

By the third day the news had spread through the whole neighbourhood. On the fourth day reports began coming from other parts of the town as well.

Someone's old crossed-out account figure fell. Someone's wrong school answer. Someone's changed invitation date. Someone's cancelled price on a shop list. Half a sentence from someone's letter.

The greatest difficulty was that the sky did not say the sentence had been cancelled.

A sheet that fell to the ground looked cleanly written. No line through it, no "cancelled," no mark of correction.

On the fifth day the crisis reached the school.

In the first draft of the examination notice at the Town Girls' School, the mathematics examination had been written for the 18th. The headmistress crossed it out and changed it to the 19th. The final notice posted on the board showed the 19th. But in the evening paper-rain, sheets reading "Mathematics examination on the 18th" fell in the school field, the road, the tea shop, the hostel roof—everywhere.

The next day half the students sat convinced that the 18th was correct.

The headmistress came to the printing press.

"Did all this get out from your proofs?"

Vibha showed her the sheets she had collected over five days.

"There are lines here that were written in my press, but this paper is not mine. And three of the school sheets never came here at all. The clouds are not reading only my shop."

The municipal council held a meeting about it.

After the meeting a notice was issued: "Avoid unnecessary crossings-out on overcast days."

That sentence itself had been revised three times. The first draft said "during rain," then "during paper-rain," and finally "on overcast days."

That evening three versions of the notice rained over the town.

"Avoid unnecessary crossings-out during rain."

"Avoid unnecessary crossings-out during paper-rain."

And the final, correct notice remained posted on the municipal wall —the sky did not rain it down.

People laughed at the irony for two days, but the problem was not small.

Shopkeepers began to stop correcting accounts by striking figures out. Children began taking a new sheet instead of drawing a line through a mistake. In offices, clerks, afraid to cancel an old sentence, began tearing off the whole page and setting it aside.

But tearing off a page did not break the rule. If the sentence remained untouched on the torn page, the sky stayed silent. If a line had been drawn through the sentence, it rained down.

Instead of striking out words, people began circling them and writing "no" around them.

Two days later the clouds rained the entire line, "no" included.

Writing in the town gradually became inconvenient.

Vibha's work at the printing press changed more than anyone's. Proofreading meant finding an error, striking it out, changing it. Now clients said, "Leave the mistake, but don't cross it out."

Vibha would answer, "If we leave the mistake, then the printed thing itself will become wrong."

On one wedding invitation, the groom's father's name had come out as "Jagdip" instead of "Jagdish." The client said, "Leave it this time. Let his father's name not rain from the clouds."

Vibha lifted her red pen and crossed the name out.

"The name has to be corrected."

That evening a dozen sheets bearing "Jagdip" fell over the neighbourhood. Jagdish Babu himself picked one up and laughed.

"That name belongs to the sky now," he said. "As long as the wedding invitation has the right one."

Not everyone took it so lightly.

On the sixth day one of Vibha's own crossed-out sentences rained down.

At noon a sheet came to rest against the threshold of the press. Nandu picked it up. His face changed as soon as he read it.

The sheet said: "I am thinking of selling this printing press."

Nandu said nothing. Vibha took the sheet from his hand.

That sentence had been written three months earlier. One night, after adding up the loan instalments, the repair of the printing machine, and the rising price of paper, Vibha had written it on the back of an account sheet. Ten minutes later she crossed it out. On the next line she had written: "I will not sell it; I will get rid of the small printing machine."

The small printing machine really had been sold. The press had not.

But the sky did not rain down the final decision.

Nandu asked quietly, "Then this...?"

"It was considered. It was not decided."

"But on the sheet it reads as if, even now..."

"That is why it was crossed out."

That day, for the first time, Vibha understood that the true nuisance of the paper-rain was not litter but time. A sentence that for one moment had been truth, fear, conjecture, error or an option fell from the sky and became the present.

A crossed-out sentence came down to earth stripped of the mark that had cancelled it.

On the seventh day the municipal council summoned Vibha.

The proposal before the meeting was that crossings-out in official work should be forbidden whenever clouds were present.

Vibha asked, "Then what if there is a mistake?"

"We will write a new page."

"The old page?"

"Destroyed."

"What does destroyed mean?"

No one had an answer.

Vibha placed on the table the municipal notices from the previous five days. One had the wrong date, another the ward number, a third the name of the lane to be cleaned. All had been made correct in their final form because something had been struck out along the way.

"If we stop crossing things out, the sky will stay clean. The paper will stay dirty."

The meeting remained silent for a while.

In the end no prohibition was imposed. Instead the council made a new rule: in every public document, a small number was to be written after each cancelled sentence, and a correction register was to be kept with the final copy, so that if a sheet fell from the sky people could tell that it was discarded text.

The rule was practical, but the sky did not rain the number.

It rained only the sentence.

People laughed again.

On the eighth day the clouds grew very thick. The air was completely still. Vibha placed a bucket outside the shop—perhaps this time water would fall.

First one sheet fell. Then another. Then a thousand.

Such a rain of paper fell over the town that the eaves turned white, the leaves of the peepal were covered, and bicycle wheels began crushing sheets under them.

Some pages were funny—wrong addition, wrong spelling, half a poem. Some held someone's old anger. Some were lines from letters that had never been sent.

People no longer ran to read every sheet as they had at first.

Many simply took brooms and kept their own thresholds clear.

Vibha picked up one sheet. It said: "I will never speak to you again."

Whose sentence it was, she did not know.

She turned the page face down.

A little farther away lay another sheet: "Five kilos of potatoes."

A third: "Monday holiday."

A fourth: "I am afraid."

A fifth: "Two hundred and twenty-seven."

All had fallen from the same sky.

By evening the paper in the lane was not knee-deep, but had gathered thick enough to brush the ankles. Municipal cleaners began carrying it away sack after sack.

Then the first drop of water fell.

An entirely ordinary drop.

Onto Vibha's palm.

Then another.

The sheets of paper began to get wet. The written lines bled and blurred. Some letters ran into one another. Some disappeared altogether.

People ran under the eaves. Children began stamping on the wet papers and splashing water.

Nandu came out of the press carrying a proof. It was the cover of the school booklet for the next day. In the date he had written "29 June," while the correct date was "30 June."

He stood there holding the red pen.

"Shall I cross it out?"

Outside, the rain was growing heavier. On the wet road, old discarded sentences were running away in blue-black streams.

Vibha looked at the page.

"Cross it out."

Nandu drew a line through "29 June" and wrote "30 June" beside it.

A few moments later there was a light rustle of paper on the roof.

Nandu did not run outside. Neither did Vibha.

Rain kept beating steadily on the tin roof.

A small sheet fell near the threshold. It probably said "29 June," but as soon as the drops touched it, the ink spread.

Water in the drain folded it, soaked it halfway, and slowly carried it off with the other wet sheets in the lane.

Inside the printing press, the correct date was still clear.

STORY 296

The Pond on the Map

At the land-records office in Madhubani town, opening an old map was almost a small ceremony in itself. First the table had to be cleared, then brass weights placed on all four corners, and finally the paper, folded year after year, had to be eased slowly flat.

Mridula Karn was the most patient of them all at this work.

In the last seven days of Jeth, the municipal council drew up a plan to lay a drain towards the old southern quarter. The new survey sheet showed roads, houses, shops, and the school, but to understand which way the water had once run along the old gradient, the original map of 1934 was called for.

As soon as the map was opened, Mridula's eyes fell on a blue patch near its centre.

A fine black line ran around the blue. Inside, in small letters, was written: "Matiyahi Pond."

Plot numbers surrounded it, but there was no number within the pond itself.

Mridula called the survey worker Ramlochan.

"Was there a pond here?"

Ramlochan bent over the map.

"On paper, there is."

"On the ground?"

"On the ground there is the old market. Half paved, half earth. I have never even heard the pond's name."

Before evening, the two of them went there with a long measuring rope, a copy of the old map, and the plot register.

Where Matiyahi Pond was shown, there were now the awnings of vegetable sellers, two betel shops, a public hand pump, an open space for bicycles, and, in the middle, a broad dusty ground.

On the southern edge of the map, where a small notch like a bathing ghat had been drawn, there now stood Jagdish Mahto's tea stall of matting and sheet metal.

Mridula asked, "Babu, was there once a pond here?"

Filtering tea as he spoke, Jagdish said, "My father used to say there was water here long ago. Ever since I came to my senses, I have seen only dust."

"How long ago?"

"He used to say it was being filled in when he was a child. How old it was before that, I don't know."

Ramlochan stretched the rope across the ground. By the scale of the map, the outer line of the blue patch fell across the field, two lanes, the rear of the tea stall, and towards the school's southern wall.

Mridula laughed.

"If the pond were still here now, half the town would be swimming."

Ramlochan said, "The map is old. The land changes."

That day, the remark sounded ordinary.

It did not rain that night. No clouds came either.

At dawn, when Jagdish arrived to open the tea stall, he lifted the matting and for the first time heard his own feet splash.

He thought the hand-pump pipe must have burst.

But the ground near the hand pump was dry.

The water began from the middle of the field and spread as far as the bend in the lane. In some places it was ankle-deep, in others knee-deep. Its surface was perfectly still, as though not even a breath of wind had moved all night.

By the time the sun was high, people had gathered.

No water had entered any house, but it had come up to the thresholds and stopped. Whether the floor was paved brick or an earthen courtyard, the water stopped precisely along the edge of an invisible curve.

The moment Ramlochan reached the office, he heard the news.

Mridula ran there with the map.

Standing at the edge of the field, she opened the copy. The blue patch and the water on the ground fell, more or less, in the same place.

"Matiyahi Pond," Jagdish said softly.

No one laughed.

Municipal workers came. The drains were checked. The hand-pump pipe was checked. The tanks of the neighbouring houses were checked.

Nowhere was there a source capable of supplying that much water.

The water had no smell. When someone suggested tasting it, everyone looked at one another; finally Jagdish took a little in his palm and smelled it.

"It is like pond water."

"How do you know what pond water is like?" Mridula asked.

Jagdish laughed. "That I don't know either."

By noon it was decided that the water should be pumped out towards the drain.

A pump arrived. A thick hose was laid into the field. The machine roared, and the water began to fall.

Mridula returned to the office, because it was not wise to leave the original map in the sun for too long.

She opened it and spread it across the table to compare it.

The blue patch was gone.

At first Mridula thought the colour had faded in the sunlight.

But the name was still there—"Matiyahi Pond."

The black outer line was there too. Only the inside had the faded yellow of old paper.

She opened the copy. On the copy, the blue pond remained exactly as before.

She looked again at the original map. No blue.

Ramlochan came in the evening.

"We have lowered the water by half," he said. "By night we will dry it out."

Without saying anything, Mridula slid the map towards him.

Ramlochan blinked twice.

"Where has the colour gone?"

"I was about to ask you."

For some time, both of them stared at the empty pond inside the paper.

Mridula searched the old photographic register beside the table. A month earlier, photographs had been made of all the original papers for conservation. In that photograph, Matiyahi Pond was a deep blue.

"Can paper change?" Ramlochan asked.

"The paper is here. The copy is here. What has changed?"

There was no answer.

The pump ran through the night. By dawn, the field had been almost completely dried out.

The next morning, the moment the office opened, Mridula unfolded the original map.

The blue colour had returned.

Thin first along the edges. Darker in the middle.

As though the paper had drunk water all night.

She called Ramlochan at once.

Ramlochan came from the field. The edge of his dhoti was dry.

"Has the ground dried?"

"Yes. Only three or four hollows are still damp."

Mridula showed him the map.

This time Ramlochan did not laugh.

That day, the two decided to conduct a small test.

The original map was left open under glass in the office. The copy was kept at the field. The pump was not removed.

By afternoon, water began seeping again into a low patch of the field.

First as large as a plate. Then as large as a mat. Then as large as the floor of two rooms.

At that moment Ramlochan sent word to the office.

Mridula looked at the map.

A pale mark had appeared at the exact centre of the blue patch.

As the water rose in the field towards evening, the blue on the map grew lighter.

By night, the water had again spread as far as the old boundary.

The next morning, the pond on the map was once more almost white.

Mridula wrote the date in pencil: "12 Jeth—water at full extent on the ground; colour nearly zero on the original map."

Beside it Ramlochan wrote: "13 Jeth—half the water pumped out; colour half as deep on the map."

"How did you measure half?" Mridula asked.

"With my eyes."

"That is not measurement."

So they began laying a transparent grid sheet over the blue patch to mark the depth of colour. In the field, small bamboo stakes were driven in to measure the water's edge.

Three days of testing made one strange fact clear.

When the water increased on the ground, the blue colour on the map decreased.

When the water decreased on the ground, the blue colour on the map increased.

But this happened only on the original map. Its copy, photograph, and duplicate—all showed the pond unchanged in blue.

"Then is this map a reservoir for the water?" Ramlochan said once.

Mridula immediately shook her head.

"It is too soon to say that. Shall we tear the map and see?"

Ramlochan was alarmed.

"No, no. It is an original government map."

They both burst out laughing.

But the question remained.

The municipal council was told about the changing colour on the map. At first, the officer did not believe it.

So he was summoned to the office in the morning. The pond on the map was deep blue. The field was dry.

In front of him, the pumping hose was left switched off. By afternoon water began rising from the ground. By evening, half the blue colour on the map had faded.

The officer remained silent for a long time.

"This could be a chemical property of the paper."

Mridula said, "Then why does it keep time with the water in the field?"

"Coincidence."

The next day, the officer came again.

The coincidence repeated itself.

On the third day as well.

The story spread through the town.

People began coming to see the pond. Some said the old body of water was reclaiming its place. Some said groundwater had risen. Some said there was a spell in the map.

Serving tea, Jagdish would say, "For me, it is water. Whatever the reason."

The schoolchildren wanted to float paper boats, but the municipal council stopped them, because no one knew exactly how deep the water was.

The second part of the wonder appeared a week later.

A paved road ran through the middle of the pond. The road had been built thirty years before. Water covered it too, but only to a depth of two fingers. On both sides of the road, it reached the knees.

Where the old map showed the mark of a ghat, the ground was now level; even so, the water grew gradually shallower there and ended.

As though the water obeyed the present height of the land, yet had not forgotten its old shore.

Mridula wrote this sentence in the register and then crossed it out.

The crossed-out sentence did not remind her of the rain of paper in Story 295; in this world, that story did not exist. She was afraid only of writing conjecture as though it were fact.

She wrote: "The outer boundary of the water corresponds approximately with the boundary on the old map; the depth varies according to the present ground level."

This time she did not cross out the sentence.

The municipal council's chief concern was not the cause, but access. The market remained closed. Water reached the thresholds of two shops. The southern lane used by the schoolchildren was blocked.

The water was pumped out again.

In two days, the pond had almost vanished from the ground.

The original map turned blue again.

The market reopened.

People breathed in relief.

On the fourth morning, the water returned.

The cycle repeated three times.

At last, the council left the pumping machine permanently beside the field.

The machine ran all day. All day, the map grew bluer. At night the machine was switched off, the water slowly returned, and the map grew pale.

Jagdish would say, "By day the pond lives on paper; by night it lives on the ground."

Everyone laughed when they heard this, but little by little people began arranging their lives according to the rule.

The vegetable sellers removed their goods before dawn. The children went to school along the dry path at noon. The bamboo platform of the tea stall was raised by half a cubit.

Every morning Mridula opened the map.

One day, she noticed something new.

The blue did not return evenly across the whole pond.

Where the water dried first on the ground, that part of the map turned blue first.

Where the last of the water remained in the field, that part of the map stayed pale until the end.

It was not merely an inverted image. It was as though there were an accounting of water between the two places.

This time Mridula wrote nothing.

The rains came.

In the first heavy rain of Sawan, the whole town was drenched. The real rainwater mingled with the water of Matiyahi Pond.

That day, the rule became difficult to read. The map was half blue, half pale. There was rainwater in the field as well.

Ramlochan said, "Now which water belongs to the map, and which to the sky?"

Mridula said, "Perhaps water does not make that distinction."

When the rains passed, the old rule became clear again.

At the end of Bhadon, the municipal council built a permanent drain so that the pond water could be removed more quickly.

On the day the work was completed, the officer said proudly, "Now the problem is over."

The next morning, there was less water.

The map was bluer.

On the third day, the field was completely dry.

On the map, Matiyahi Pond had become such a deep blue that it seemed darker even than the original colour of 1934.

Mridula was startled.

She checked the conservation register. The earlier colour had been recorded as pale sky-blue. Now it had deepened almost to indigo.

"The more water we drain away, the more the paper will drink?" Ramlochan asked.

Mridula did not answer.

In the dry market, life returned to normal: heaps of vegetables, bicycles, running children, tea, dust.

The pond survived only on the map.

Jeth returned the following year.

This time the heat was severe. The water level at the hand pumps fell. Many wells in the town dried up. Matiyahi market too filled with dust.

One afternoon, Mridula opened the original map.

In the southern corner of the blue patch, she saw a thin white line.

She bent close to look. The colour had indeed begun to recede there.

Taking Ramlochan with her, she went to the field.

At the southern corner—where the old map showed the ghat and where there was now bare earth behind Jagdish's tea stall—a narrow crack in the ground was damp from within.

A few minutes later, a glint appeared in the middle of the crack.

No pipe had burst. The sky was perfectly clear.

Mridula bent down and placed her palm on the ground.

The earth was cool.

That evening, only a palm-sized patch of water appeared on the ground.

On the office map, the same-sized patch in the pond's southern blue corner had turned pale.

Mridula did not write a cause in the register that day.

She wrote only two things: "Original map: southern corner pale."

And beneath it: "Ground: southern corner damp."

When she closed the office that night, she did not fold the map. She left it open beneath the glass.

At dawn the next morning, as Jagdish put the tea on to boil, he saw that a small round pool of water had gathered in the earth behind his stall.

At that same moment in the office, beneath the glass, the southern corner of Matiyahi Pond's blue colour was quietly turning white.

STORY 297

The Reversed Reflection

In the old lane that ran inward from Benta Chowk in Darbhanga, a long mirror hung on the veranda of Shashank Jha's two-storey house. It was not a new mirror; beneath the worn sheen of its wooden frame, old scratches showed through, and in the left-hand corner the silvering had gone slightly dim.

No one in the house regarded it as anything special. It was simply something in which to check, before stepping out, whether one's hair was in place, one's sari-end straight, or the mark on one's forehead had slipped to one side.

Meera stood before that mirror most often in the mornings.

That day too, before leaving for college, she was tying up her hair. A comb was in her right hand. She raised it toward her head.

In the mirror, the hand stayed down.

Meera froze.

A moment later she moved a lock away from her forehead with her fingers.

Only then did the Meera in the mirror raise the comb toward her head.

Meera lowered the comb.

In the mirror, the reflection moved the lock away from her forehead.

She stood bolt upright.

The Meera in the mirror lowered the comb.

The real Meera did nothing now.

The reflection too stood still.

Meera thought: an illusion of the eyes.

She moved her right hand sharply up and down three times. The mirror moved too, but not exactly with her. The first movement came as Meera began the second. The second came with the third. The third remained suspended until Meera made a fourth movement.

Meera stepped back.

Only then did the reflection complete the third movement.

She ran from the veranda toward the kitchen.

"Ma!"

Kiran Devi turned after lowering the flame under the stove.

"What happened?"

"Come and look at the mirror."

"What new thing has sprouted in the mirror this early in the morning?"

Meera took her by the hand and brought her to the veranda.

"Raise your hand."

Kiran Devi laughed. "What sort of game is this?"

"Just raise it."

Kiran Devi raised her left hand. In the mirror, her hand stayed down.

Her laughter stopped.

"Do something else."

She adjusted the end of her sari on her shoulder.

In the mirror, the reflection raised its left hand.

Kiran Devi remained there holding the sari-end.

"Has it gone bad?"

"If a mirror went bad, the face would look distorted. This one is moving behind us."

"How far behind?"

Instead of answering, Meera looked at the clock on the wall.

The two of them began testing it.

Kiran Devi counted to five. She raised her hand. One, two, three, four, five—the reflection did not raise its hand.

She counted to ten. No.

Not even after a long while.

Then Kiran Devi scratched her nose.

At that instant the reflection raised its hand.

Meera said softly, "It isn't behind in time."

"Then?"

"It is one action behind."

Kiran Devi scratched her nose again. The reflection repeated the first nose-scratching movement.

"When we do a second thing, it does the first," Meera said.

Kiran Devi took two steps back. The reflection scratched its nose, then moved backward after a delay.

Just then Nayan came onto the veranda rubbing his sleep-heavy eyes.

"What spectacle is going on?"

Meera said, "Look into the mirror and blink once."

Nayan blinked.

The reflection blinked at the same instant.

All three fell silent.

"Now raise your hand," Meera said.

Nayan raised his hand. The reflection stayed still.

Startled, he turned his head. The reflection raised its hand.

Kiran Devi pulled over a chair and sat down.

Nayan grew excited. "Blinking follows a different rule!"

Because of this discovery they were late getting to college that morning. But a list of rules took shape in the house.

Blinking—together.

Sneezing—together.

Coughing—together.

Swatting away a mosquito that had landed unexpectedly on the face—sometimes together, sometimes behind; it was hard to know whether awareness arrived before the hand rose.

Deliberately raising a hand—on the next deliberate action.

Deliberately smiling—on the next action.

Deliberately closing the eyes—on the next action.

Meera wrote on a sheet of paper: "The mirror is not one step behind in time, but in decision."

Nayan wanted to strike out "decision" and write "desire."

Meera pulled the sheet away. "Understand it first. Name it afterward."

When Shashank Jha returned from the office in the afternoon, the three of them showed him the mirror.

At first Shashank did not believe them.

He raised his left hand, then immediately his right. The reflection raised the left first. The third time, he brought both hands together at once; the reflection raised the right hand.

He remained still with both hands joined.

The reflection stayed suspended without joining both hands.

There was sweat on Shashank's forehead. Without thinking, he wiped it with his palm.

At once the reflection joined both hands.

"Take this mirror down," he said.

Nayan protested immediately. "Why? What does it do?"

"Why keep something in the house that does not follow the rules?"

Meera said, "There is a rule. It just isn't our rule."

Shashank Jha looked at his daughter. "There is no need to search for profound meaning in this."

Kiran Devi intervened. "Let us cover it for one night first."

That evening an old sheet was hung over the mirror.

The next morning the sheet was removed.

Kiran Devi was the first to stand before it. She remembered her last deliberate action before the mirror had been covered the previous night —pointing a finger toward it and telling Nayan, "Enough now."

As soon as the sheet came off, the reflection stood there normally.

Kiran Devi deliberately drew the end of her sari over her head.

The Kiran Devi in the mirror raised a finger and made the old "Enough now" gesture.

Only on the next action did the sari-end go over her head.

Nayan cried out with delight, "It remembered all night!"

There was no delight on Kiran Devi's face.

"What do you call remembering? I still remember doing it myself."

"But the mirror does too."

"Does the mirror remember, or does it simply remain stuck?"

No one had an answer to that question.

Over the next few days, the people in the house began changing the way they behaved in front of the mirror.

After every deliberate movement, Nayan would snap his fingers once so that the reflection could finish the previous movement. In the mirror, his life went on as though every sentence required a punctuation mark at the end.

Shashank Jha stopped looking at the mirror altogether. He crossed the veranda with his eyes lowered to the floor.

Kiran Devi still adjusted her sari-end as before, but immediately afterward she would give her head a small shake so that the reflection's pending action could be cleared.

Meera did not do that.

She wanted to see how many days a single action could remain suspended.

One Monday morning, standing before the mirror, she tucked her hair behind her right ear. Then she left the veranda without making another deliberate movement.

For two days she did not go in front of the mirror.

On Wednesday evening she quietly came back before it.

The reflection stood there normally.

Meera deliberately slipped the bag from her left shoulder.

The Meera in the mirror tucked her hair behind her right ear.

The two-day-old action had remained exactly as it was.

For the first time, Meera felt a little afraid.

Not because the reflection was independent. On the contrary, it was utterly obedient.

It did nothing of its own accord.

The problem was that it did not forget.

Then another thing came to light.

One day Meera and Nayan were standing together in front of the mirror. Meera raised her hand. Nayan bowed his head.

Both reflections remained still.

Nayan snapped his fingers again. Only Nayan's reflection bowed its head.

Meera remained still.

Then Meera smiled. Only her reflection raised its hand.

So the mirror did not keep the family's actions in a single sequence.

Each person had a separate backlog.

"My account is separate, yours is separate," Nayan said.

Meera said, "Not an account. A queue."

"In a queue, when the person behind arrives, the one in front moves forward."

Kiran Devi did not like the comparison.

"Do not turn people's actions into bookkeeping," she said.

But little by little, the word "pending" came into use in the house.

"Ma, do you have anything pending in the mirror?"

"Nayan, finish your studies first."

"Babuji must have days and days of pending actions by now."

Shashank Jha would grow irritated whenever he heard it.

A month later, Meera received a selection letter for six months of training at the Book Conservation Centre in Patna.

There was happiness in the house, and worry too.

Kiran Devi began setting clothes aside. Nayan made a list. Shashank Jha kept asking again and again about the journey, the place where she would stay, and the arrangements for food.

Meera was excited, but it would be the first long stretch she had ever spent away from home.

Two days before she was to leave, the mirror on the veranda came up in conversation again.

Kiran Devi said, "Once you are gone, we will cover it."

Meera asked, "Why?"

"Just because. I do not feel like looking at it."

"Because of me?"

Kiran Devi did not answer.

Meera understood.

By then the mirror was no longer a game for the people in the house. It could preserve an unfinished movement belonging to any one of them. If someone did not come before it again, that pending action could remain for a day, seven days, a whole month.

Kiran Devi was now troubled by the thought that after her daughter left, some movement of hers might remain suspended in the mirror.

Meera said, "I will clear it before I go."

"How?"

"A small movement after the final movement. And then after that one too?"

Meera herself laughed.

Nayan said, "The final action will still remain pending."

No one could step away from the mirror with every action completed.

The final deliberate action would always wait for the next one.

It was raining on the morning of her departure.

Meera stood ready with her bag. Kiran Devi kept asking, "Have you packed the ticket? The papers? Your shawl?"

Shashank Jha had gone outside to check the car. Nayan was impatient to carry the bag downstairs.

Meera paused for a moment before the mirror on the veranda.

Her reflection paused too.

Meera tucked her hair behind her ear.

The reflection stayed still.

Meera smiled faintly.

The reflection tucked its hair behind its ear.

Then Meera raised her right hand and waved to her own face inside the mirror as though saying goodbye.

The reflection merely smiled.

Meera did not lower her hand.

She understood—if she lowered it now, the reflection would make the farewell wave.

Deliberately keeping her hand raised, she took one step back and then left the veranda.

From behind her, Nayan called out, "Didi, you left something pending!"

Meera turned and laughed, but she was no longer in front of the mirror.

Kiran Devi kept looking at it.

After Meera left, the mirror was not covered that day.

Kiran Devi thought several times of hanging the sheet over it. But she did not.

Days passed. Nayan's pending action changed every day. So did Kiran Devi's. Shashank Jha usually crossed the veranda without looking at the mirror.

Meera did not appear in it.

Over six months, many small things changed in the house. The veranda wall was painted again. The old yellow light was replaced with a white one. The nail in the frame was replaced.

The mirror stayed where it was.

Once Kiran Devi asked Nayan, "When Meera comes back, what will it show first?"

Nayan had no answer ready.

"Her hand," he said at last. "That farewell wave."

Kiran Devi said nothing.

Meera returned at the end of Magh.

That day too there was a light drizzle.

As soon as the door opened, Kiran Devi embraced her. Nayan took the bag from her. Shashank Jha kept asking, "The journey was not too difficult, was it?"

Meera came inside the house.

At the turn of the veranda, the mirror came into view.

She stopped.

The same frame as six months before, the same dim left-hand corner.

In the reflection Meera now looked a little thinner. The way she tied her hair had changed. A new bag hung from her shoulder.

Kiran Devi came to stand behind her. Nayan did too.

Meera deliberately made her first movement before the mirror—she wiped two drops of drizzle from her forehead with her right hand.

The Meera in the mirror did not wipe away the drops.

She raised her right hand.

Just as she had six months before.

And slowly waved goodbye.

Kiran Devi caught her breath.

Nayan fell completely silent.

The real Meera stood there now with her forehead already wiped.

The reflection was finishing a six-month-old farewell.

The waving stopped.

Meera then deliberately slipped the bag from her shoulder.

The reflection wiped the drops from its forehead.

Nayan said softly, "Is the pending action cleared now?"

Meera looked into the mirror.

The reflection still had the bag on its shoulder.

She smiled.

"No."

The reflection then took the bag off its shoulder.

Meera left her smile unfinished and walked from the veranda into the house.

In the mirror, the smile was still pending.

STORY 298

The Missing Wednesday

The first time Wednesday disappeared, no one in the house believed it at once.

On Tuesday night, sitting at the dining table, Sudhanshu Jha had said, "Tomorrow morning I have to go to the university records office. I'll leave before ten."

His wife, Malati, had said, "I have a women's group meeting too."

Their daughter Richa reminded them, "I have an oral examination in the first period at college on Wednesday."

Their younger son Nachiketa laughed and said, "And I have nothing. I'll sleep."

Chandrakala Devi, seated at the head of the table, scolded him. "Your mathematics tutor comes on Wednesday."

All five ate together. That in itself was a little unusual. For several months now, sometimes Sudhanshu came home late, sometimes Richa stayed at the library, sometimes Nachiketa ate at a friend's house. That night it was raining, so everyone was at home.

There were five wooden chairs around the table. Everyone sat in their old places. Chandrakala Devi to the east, Sudhanshu to the south, Malati to the west, with Richa and Nachiketa facing each other.

After dinner, Richa put the papers for Wednesday's oral examination into her bag. Sudhanshu hung a dhoti and kurta separately. Malati left the accounts register for the meeting on the kitchen platform.

That night everyone went to sleep as usual.

When Malati opened her eyes in the morning, sunlight was already in the courtyard.

She thought—such brightness after the rain! Then she looked at the wall clock. Seven twenty.

"Richa! Get up! Your exam!"

All at once the house was in a rush.

Richa got up, looked at the calendar, and stood still.

The page showed Thursday's date.

She turned the page back. Wednesday's page had already been folded over, as though it had passed the day before.

"Ma, who did this?"

Malati grew irritated. "I don't have time for jokes now."

Sudhanshu opened the outer door. Two packets of milk lay on the threshold. One had swollen in the heat, the other was cold.

There were also two newspapers—one for Wednesday, one for Thursday.

Sudhanshu picked up the first paper. Wednesday's date was printed clearly on it.

He came back into the house.

"Today is Thursday."

Richa said, "Last night was Tuesday."

"Yes."

"Then where did Wednesday go?"

No one had an answer.

The first half hour was spent trying to prove that someone was reading the date wrongly.

Sudhanshu called their neighbour, Baijnath Babu. Baijnath said casually, "Yesterday was Wednesday, wasn't it? Your door was shut all day. I thought you had all gone somewhere."

"We were at home."

"Then why didn't you answer the bell? I called out twice in the afternoon."

Sudhanshu fell silent.

When Richa reached college, the oral examination was already over. In the register, "absent" had been written against her name for Wednesday. Her friend Kaveri said, "I sent you three messages yesterday. You didn't reply."

Richa said, "I never even saw yesterday."

Kaveri laughed, then saw Richa's face and stopped.

Sudhanshu reached the university records office. The work he had meant to do on Wednesday had been postponed for another seven days.

Malati had been marked absent from her women's group meeting.

Nachiketa's mathematics tutor had knocked on the door and gone away.

Only Chandrakala Devi remained silent for a long time.

In the evening she said, "My body does not carry the fatigue of an entire day."

Sudhanshu asked, "What do you mean?"

"If I had slept in the house all day yesterday, I would have drunk water, risen and sat down, felt heaviness in my body. It feels to me as if Tuesday night went straight into this morning."

Malati objected, "But Wednesday happened outside."

Chandrakala Devi said, "Outside, yes. Not inside."

At that sentence, silence settled over the house again.

That night everyone read Wednesday's newspaper. The world had gone on normally. It had rained, the Legislative Assembly had sat, schools had opened, trains had run. Only in the home of these five people was there no memory of Wednesday.

As Sudhanshu threw away the swollen packet of Wednesday's milk, he saw that the milk inside had gone sour.

"A day passed for the milk," he said.

Richa replied, "Not for us."

For the next seven days, Wednesday remained the subject of conversation in the house.

Sudhanshu said perhaps some contaminated air had affected all of them at once.

Malati said that if it had been contaminated air, something from the middle of Wednesday would have remained in their memory.

Richa said that five people forgetting an entire twenty-four hours at exactly the same time was not ordinary.

Now and then Nachiketa laughed and said, "If next Wednesday disappears too, I'll escape my mathematics lesson again."

The moment Chandrakala Devi heard him, she scolded him.

The following Tuesday, Sudhanshu decided to conduct a test.

After dinner, dry flour was spread over the courtyard threshold. If anyone went out during the night or on Wednesday, their footprints would remain.

A scratch was made inside a brass lota filled with water to mark the level.

A raw banana was placed on the kitchen table so that any change in colour could be seen.

The mechanical wall clock was set exactly right.

Richa opened her notebook and wrote the heading "Wednesday"—"The moment I wake, I'll write the first sentence here."

Nachiketa said, "I'm going to stay awake."

He really did stay awake until eleven.

What happened after that, he did not know.

When his eyes opened, it was Thursday morning.

Not a single letter had been added beneath "Wednesday" in the notebook.

The flour was exactly as it had been.

The water level in the lota had fallen slightly.

The banana had grown yellower.

The wall clock had advanced to the correct date.

Wednesday's packet of milk on the threshold had gone sour again.

For all five people in the house, Wednesday had not happened, but for the water, the fruit, the milk, and the clock, it had.

This time fear became unmistakable for the first time.

Malati said, "This isn't sleep either. A sleeping person turns over. There isn't a single mark in the flour."

Richa took Chandrakala Devi's hand and felt her pulse. "The body is normal."

Nachiketa tried to laugh, but no sound came out.

On Thursday evening, the family held a meeting.

Sudhanshu said, "Next Tuesday, none of us will stay in the house."

Malati objected at once. "Where will we take Ma at night?"

Chandrakala Devi herself said, "I'll go to my younger sister's house. We'll see whether Wednesday happens there or not."

The following Tuesday evening, Chandrakala Devi took a rickshaw to her younger sister's house in Laheriasarai.

For the first time, her chair at the dining table remained empty.

Sudhanshu, Malati, Richa, and Nachiketa—the four of them ate together.

Everyone went to bed tense.

Malati's eyes opened at five in the morning.

The calendar on the wall showed Wednesday.

She called out loudly, "Get up! It's Wednesday!"

Never before had there been such joy in the house over a Wednesday.

Laughing, Richa went out into the courtyard. Nachiketa kept looking at the clock. Sudhanshu immediately said they should check on Chandrakala Devi.

Wednesday was normal at Chandrakala Devi's sister's house too.

She returned home in the afternoon.

"So it has something to do with all five people being in the house," Sudhanshu concluded.

Richa said at once, "Don't draw a conclusion so quickly."

The next Tuesday, all five decided to remain in the house, but because of a toothache Chandrakala Devi ate early in the evening and went to her room.

The other four sat down at the table later. Her chair remained empty.

In the morning, Wednesday was present.

This time Chandrakala Devi had been in the house too.

Richa looked at the table.

"Five people being in the house is not the cause."

Nachiketa asked, "Then?"

Richa put a hand on Chandrakala Devi's empty chair.

"Maybe this is."

Sudhanshu disagreed.

"A chair makes a day disappear?"

"Not the chair. Maybe every place being occupied?"

Malati said, "Who has ever heard of such a thing?"

Richa smiled. "Had we ever heard of Wednesday disappearing?"

The next Tuesday, the family deliberately tested it.

All five were at home. All five ate together. But Nachiketa did not sit in his chair; he brought a small low stool from the kitchen and sat on it beside the table.

His wooden chair remained empty.

Sudhanshu said, "Don't let this performance make you late for university tomorrow."

Richa tied a red thread around the back of the empty chair.

The night passed.

In the morning, Wednesday was there.

The red thread was exactly as it had been.

Nachiketa announced, "The chair eats Wednesday."

Malati gave him a light tap on the head.

But now everyone's eyes were on the table.

For the next seven days, the house had a rule: at Tuesday night's dinner, one of the five wooden chairs would remain empty. Someone would sit on the low stool.

In the first week, Malati sat on the low stool. Wednesday came.

In the second week, Sudhanshu did. Wednesday came.

In the third week, Richa. Wednesday came.

For an entire month, not a single Wednesday disappeared.

Gradually, the fear diminished.

One empty chair at the table became a regular sight in the family. No one called it inauspicious. No one worshipped it. On Tuesday nights, one person simply pulled over the low stool.

The problem arose on the day Malati's maternal uncle's son Manoj arrived unexpectedly in the evening.

He had come to Darbhanga on business and said he would stay the night.

Malati happily served dinner.

There were five chairs at the table. Of the five family members, that week Sudhanshu was sitting on the low stool, leaving one chair empty.

Manoj naturally sat down in that empty chair.

Richa became instantly alert.

She looked at Malati.

Malati understood too, but the words—"Don't sit on this chair, or tomorrow Wednesday will not happen"—would not come out of her mouth to a guest.

Sudhanshu said softly, "Manoj, I'm sitting on the stool. You sit comfortably."

Richa cut in. "I'll bring another chair."

"Why?" Manoj laughed. "There's room."

Nachiketa kept looking at Richa.

The meal began.

All five wooden chairs were occupied. Sudhanshu sat on the low stool. Six people in all were around the table.

That night Richa stayed awake for a long time.

She could have emptied a chair after dinner if she had wanted to. But did the rule apply at mealtime, or through the night? No one knew.

She tied the red thread around the back of one chair again, but now the chair was not empty.

When she woke in the morning, Manoj was opening the window and saying, "Oh, everyone has slept so late?"

Richa looked at the calendar.

Thursday.

Manoj laughed and said, "But yesterday I had work at the deposit office!"

Then his face changed.

"Yesterday was Wednesday, wasn't it?"

No one answered.

Manoj too had forgotten Wednesday.

This time the rule became clearer—when all five wooden chairs at the table were occupied, Wednesday could disappear for anyone who had taken part in that meal. They did not have to be a member of the family.

At first Manoj did not believe it.

On Thursday afternoon, when the deposit office told him that he had not come in on Wednesday, his laughter ended.

He had slept in another house that night, but it had made no difference. Whether Wednesday would still have disappeared if he had left the house immediately after dinner remained unanswered. No one had the courage to test it again.

After that, the family became more careful.

Before dinner began on Tuesday night, one wooden chair was moved two handspans away from the table. No plate was placed before it.

Whoever's turn it was sat on the low stool.

If there was a guest, a woven stool was brought in from outside.

Wednesday became regular again.

Months passed.

Richa's oral examination was held again, and she passed. Sudhanshu's work at the office returned to its routine. Wednesday meetings were no longer a problem for Malati's women's group. Nachiketa began looking for some other excuse to escape his mathematics tutor.

Now and then Chandrakala Devi kept looking at the empty chair.

One day Richa asked, "Dadi, what are you thinking?"

She said, "Earlier, whenever I saw an empty chair in the house, I used to think—who hasn't come? Now I think—it is necessary for this to remain empty."

Richa said, "Does it frighten you?"

"At first it did. Not now. We understand the rule."

"Do we understand the whole rule?"

Chandrakala Devi laughed. "When does a human being ever understand the whole rule?"

Autumn came.

One Tuesday evening, there was no electricity. An oil lamp burned in the courtyard. A light breeze stirred outside.

Malati was serving dinner.

That week it was Nachiketa's turn to sit on the low stool.

Nachiketa pulled it over, but one of its legs was loose. The moment he sat down, it wobbled.

"If I sit on this, I'll fall," he said.

Sudhanshu said, "Bring the other stool from the veranda."

Nachiketa got up.

Just then Baijnath Babu called from outside, "Sudhanshuji!"

Sudhanshu went out.

Malati was taking rotis off the griddle. Richa was pouring water. Chandrakala Devi was in her chair.

Nachiketa took time searching for the other stool.

Sudhanshu remained outside talking to the neighbour.

Three chairs at the table were occupied, two empty.

The meal was delayed.

At last Nachiketa returned with the stool. Sudhanshu came back too.

Everyone sat down.

Suddenly Richa noticed that in her tiredness Malati had forgotten and placed Sudhanshu's plate in front of his wooden chair. Sudhanshu had naturally sat down in it.

Nachiketa was on the low stool.

One wooden chair was still empty—Nachiketa's.

Richa breathed with relief.

Halfway through the meal, Baijnath Babu called again. Sudhanshu got up and went outside.

Nachiketa said, "Babuji's chair is empty now. Can I sit there?"

Richa said at once, "No."

"Why? We weren't all five sitting together anyway."

Richa stopped.

He was right. Did the rule apply at the beginning of the meal? What if all five chairs were occupied at some point in the middle? How long did they have to remain occupied?

Chandrakala Devi said, "Don't test it."

Nachiketa stayed on the low stool.

That night, for the first time, Richa understood that the family was not saving Wednesday; they were only avoiding a boundary whose exact shape was still unknown.

Even so, Wednesday came in the morning.

After this incident, the empty-chair rule became stricter. From six on Tuesday evening until Wednesday morning, one wooden chair would remain separate from the table.

No one touched it.

A full year passed.

Not a single Wednesday disappeared again.

On the final Tuesday of the year, there was talk in the family about Richa's marriage. The prospective groom's family was to come the following month. Painting the house, cleaning rooms, and removing old things had begun.

Malati said, "After the wedding, there will be only four people left at the table."

Nachiketa said at once, "Then one chair will stay empty by itself. We won't have to worry about Wednesday."

Richa glared at him.

Chandrakala Devi said softly, "Who knows whether the rule counts people or places?"

Everyone fell silent again.

The wedding took place. Richa went to Patna.

On the first Tuesday, there were indeed only four people in the house. The fifth wooden chair was empty. No one needed to pull over the low stool.

Wednesday was normal in the morning.

The second week too. The third as well.

Gradually, the empty fifth chair came to be called Richa's chair.

Malati never used it to pile clothes on. Nachiketa did not throw his bag there either.

A month later, Richa came to her parents' home.

It was a Tuesday.

Dinner was served in the evening.

Richa moved toward her old chair.

All four of them looked at her at once.

Richa stopped.

Trying to laugh, Nachiketa said, "Didi, welcome to the low stool."

Malati grew irritated. "Has she become a guest now?"

Richa said, "Not a guest. The keeper of Wednesday."

She pulled over the low stool and sat down.

The fifth wooden chair remained empty.

In the middle of the meal, no one said whose chair it was.

That night Richa slept in her old room.

At dawn, light came through the window. Outside, a vegetable seller called out. In the kitchen, Malati's utensils clattered.

Richa opened the calendar.

Wednesday.

She came out onto the veranda. The dining table was empty now. All five wooden chairs had been pushed back into their usual places—after the night's meal, Malati had cleaned and set them all evenly.

Richa stopped for a moment.

All five chairs were empty now.

Then she smiled.

The problem was not five empty chairs.

The problem was when, on Tuesday night, not a single one remained empty.

She ran a hand over the back of her old chair, then moved it a little away from the table.

The people in the house were waking.

Wednesday had begun normally, outside and inside alike.

STORY 299

The Fifth Corner

From outside, Saroj Mishra's ancestral house in an old neighbourhood of Madhubani still looked square.

A veranda ran around all four sides of the courtyard, rooms lay behind the veranda, and in the north-west corner stood a small room that everyone in the house called "the paper room."

It had acquired that name because, for thirty years, anything no one had the courage to throw away was stored there.

Old land records, school certificates, wedding invitations, medicine receipts, Babuji's service book, the brass handle from a broken doorframe, two empty trunks—all of it was in that room.

After Saroj's father died, the question of dividing the house arose.

Her two brothers had settled elsewhere. Saroj lived in Madhubani, and the care of the house was largely her responsibility.

When the roof leaked during the last rains, her younger brother Naveen said, "Sell the part no one uses. Why pour money into repairs?"

Saroj did not answer.

She postponed the decision, but resolved to clear out the room in the north-west corner.

Her plan was to sort the old papers, keep what was necessary, remove the rest, and turn the room into a place for reading.

On the first day, the carpenter Kedar came.

Kedar was an old hand around the house. Since Saroj's father's time, he had been the one to repair its doorframes, cupboards and windows.

He stood in the middle of the room and looked around.

"Twelve cubits by twelve?"

Saroj said, "About that."

Kedar took out his measuring tape.

The eastern wall measured twelve cubits and two finger-widths.

The southern wall measured twelve cubits and two finger-widths.

The western wall measured twelve cubits and two finger-widths.

The northern wall was the same.

Kedar smiled. "Not about. It is exactly square."

Saroj felt lighter. The work of clearing the room now seemed straightforward.

Within two days, the old trunks had been taken out, the papers divided into bundles, and the walls had come into view.

On the third day, Kedar placed a long bamboo pole against the northern wall to brush off the limewash.

The pole did not sit flush against the wall.

A gap a finger's width wide remained in the middle.

"The wall has developed a belly," Kedar said.

Saroj ran her hand over the wall.

Beneath the limewash there truly was a slight curve that had earlier been hidden behind bundles of paper.

"It is an old house," Saroj said. "Walls bend."

Kedar went outside on the northern side.

He stretched a string along the outer wall.

Outside, the wall was perfectly straight.

"A curve inside, straight outside?"

Saroj laughed. "The limewash must be thick."

Kedar tapped it gently with the flat back of his hammer.

The sound was equally solid everywhere.

They did not stop work that day.

The northern wall was whitewashed. Beneath the fresh whitewash, the curve remained like a faint shadow.

The next morning, when Saroj went into the room with a broom, the shadow seemed larger.

The curve that had been a finger's width deep the previous day now projected inward by about two finger-widths.

She telephoned Kedar.

Kedar came, set the tape against the wall, then measured the corners.

The north-eastern corner was ninety degrees. The north-western corner was ninety degrees.

But midway along the northern wall, a small angle was now taking shape—like two straight lines meeting at a point.

"It is turning into a corner," Kedar said softly.

Saroj looked at him.

"Not a bulge in the wall?"

"A bulge is round. This is forming an edge."

With a pencil, Kedar made two small marks on the limewash, one on either side of the bend.

Then he drew a line on the floor up to the point the bend had reached.

"We'll see tomorrow."

By the next day, the bend had moved half a finger-width beyond the line.

The distance between the two marks had increased as well.

From outside, the room had not changed.

Saroj and Kedar measured the northern outer wall again.

Twelve cubits and two finger-widths.

Inside, the two sections of the northern wall were measured together —more than twelve cubits and three finger-widths.

Kedar set the tape again.

Again.

A third time.

"How has the inside wall become longer than the outside wall?"

Saroj had no answer.

She called her brother Naveen.

When Naveen came from Patna, he laughed when he first heard the matter.

"Walls do not grow. The measurement is wrong."

He brought his own steel tape.

He measured outside.

He measured inside.

Then he fell silent.

"The plaster has swollen," he said at last.

"And this edge inside?" Saroj asked.

"Break it open and see."

Kedar was not willing.

"It is an old load-bearing wall. Not without an engineer."

The next day, Shashank, an engineer from town, came.

He tapped the wall, checked for damp, went up to the roof, and looked for cracks outside.

Nothing.

"Structurally, this wall should not be moving inward like this," he said.

Naveen grew irritated. "What do you mean should or shouldn't? It is moving."

Shashank drew the outline of the entire room on the floor with chalk.

All four old corners were clear. In the middle of the northern wall was the new edge.

"Technically," he said, trying to laugh, "this is now a five-cornered room."

No one laughed.

That day, the fifth corner projected three finger-widths inward from the wall.

Four days later, seven finger-widths.

Seven days later, nearly a handspan.

The corner did not slowly grow sharper; it grew deeper. The northern wall divided into two sections, both inclining toward the new point.

The floor area was shrinking, though very slowly.

Every morning Saroj drew a new chalk line.

Seven parallel marks appeared on the floor, each a little farther forward than the one from the day before.

Meanwhile, another strange thing came to light.

Saroj had left an old trunk beside the northern wall as a test.

The wall advanced, but it did not push the trunk.

In the morning, the trunk stood two finger-widths farther south than it had the previous day.

Its old square mark in the dust remained behind on the floor.

"Did someone move it?" Naveen asked.

At night the room had been locked. Saroj had the key.

The following night, they drew a chalk outline around all four feet of the trunk.

In the morning, the trunk stood outside the outline.

All four feet had shifted an equal distance south.

There was no drag mark, and the chalk was undisturbed.

It was as if the trunk had left its place during the night and been set down elsewhere in a single movement.

Kedar no longer wanted to enter the room alone.

Saroj wanted to understand the rate at which the corner was advancing.

Near the northern wall, she placed different objects—an earthen water jar, a wooden low stool, and an empty iron trunk.

In the morning, all three had shifted south by exactly as much as the wall had advanced.

The wall did not crush the objects.

The empty space in front of it simply diminished, and the objects moved along with that diminishing space.

"If this goes on," Naveen said, "one day it will eat the whole room."

Saroj kept looking at the northern corner.

"In how many days?"

Shashank calculated. The rate was not constant. Sometimes half a finger-width, sometimes one and a half.

"No calculation can be trusted."

Naveen raised the matter of selling the house again.

"Sell it now?" Saroj's voice hardened.

"Now it is all the more necessary."

"What will we tell the buyer?"

Naveen fell silent.

For the first time, the thought came to Saroj that perhaps the house itself was changing its measurements, but she did not say the sentence aloud.

That night she opened the old bundles from the paper room again.

Her father used to record the measurements of every repair.

In an old notebook she found the dimensions of the rooms: "North-west paper room: 12 cubits 2 finger-widths × 12 cubits 2 finger-widths."

It was dated thirty-two years earlier.

Below it, measurements from repairs two years later were the same.

On the last page of the notebook was a small sketch.

A square room.

Four corners.

Saroj placed the page before Naveen.

"It used to be like this."

Naveen said, "From outside, it is still like this."

Brother and sister looked together toward the northern wall.

The fifth corner had now come so far inward that a separate little space had formed around it—not a room, not a cupboard recess, only a pointed emptiness between two slanting walls.

Saroj put her father's old chair there.

Naveen asked, "Why?"

"To see whether this moves too."

In the morning, the chair had shifted south.

But one thing was different.

The corner had not advanced even a finger-width from the previous day.

Saroj looked at the chalk line. It was exactly where it had been.

On the second night, the chair was put there again.

In the morning, the corner had not advanced.

Nor on the third night.

Naveen said with delight, "That's it! We've found the answer. The chair has stopped the corner."

Kedar narrowed his eyes.

"The chair moved like the trunk at first. Then why did the corner stop?"

Saroj sat down in the chair.

It had been her father's reading chair—a palm-sized patch worn smooth on the back, an old ink stain on the right armrest.

She sat there for a while.

The two walls of the fifth corner slanted on either side of her.

The place was not uncomfortable; on the contrary, it seemed to invite concentration.

That day Saroj spent two hours there reading old papers.

The chair was not removed that evening.

For a week, the corner remained still.

The family's fear slowly dissolved into routine.

Saroj changed her plan for the reading room.

Inside the fifth corner she placed her father's chair, a small lamp beside it, and a narrow plank in front.

"An odd corner, but useful," Naveen said.

Saroj did not answer.

Ten days later, Naveen returned to Patna with his family.

That night Saroj was tired. Instead of sitting in her father's chair, she went straight to sleep in her own room.

In the morning, the fifth corner had advanced another half finger-width.

The chair too had shifted half a finger-width south.

For a long time Saroj stared at the new distance beyond the chalk line.

That night she sat in the chair again.

For an hour.

In the morning, the corner was still.

The next night she sat there for only five minutes.

In the morning, the corner was still.

On the third night, she left a book on the chair but did not sit there herself.

In the morning, the corner had advanced.

A shiver ran through Saroj.

An object was not enough.

The use of the place—perhaps.

She did not write down a rule. She simply kept experimenting.

One night Kedar sat in the chair for half an hour.

In the morning, the corner was still.

One night Saroj placed a low stool on the floor and sat inside the corner, leaving the chair outside.

In the morning, the corner was still then too.

One night she left the lamp burning inside the corner, but no one sat there.

In the morning, the corner had advanced.

"A living person?" Kedar whispered.

Saroj said, "Do not name it so quickly."

They did not fully understand the rule.

How long one had to sit there, whether one had to stay awake, whether one person or several were needed—nothing was certain.

But one thing appeared again and again: if someone spent some time inside the fifth corner after dusk, the next morning the wall generally remained still.

If the corner was left untouched all night, it advanced.

Hearing this, Naveen devised a practical plan.

"Make a roster. Someone from the house will sit there for half an hour every day."

"Standing guard over a corner?" Saroj laughed.

"The house will be saved."

The arrangement began.

Monday Saroj, Tuesday Kedar, Wednesday the neighbouring aunt who came to chat in the evening, Thursday Saroj again.

For several days, everything went well.

Then one night there was heavy rain.

Kedar could not come. Saroj had a fever.

The corner remained empty.

In the morning, they found that it had advanced three finger-widths in a single night.

For the first time, the pace had been so great.

The distances between the old chalk lines on the northern floor looked uneven.

Along with fear, anger rose in Saroj.

"This is not a house anymore. It has become something that makes demands."

Kedar said softly, "Call it a demand or a rule."

Saroj did not sit in the corner that day.

"Let us see how far it goes."

Naveen tried hard to stop her over the telephone.

"Do not be stubborn."

Saroj said, "I am not the servant of this house."

The second morning, the corner had advanced another two finger-widths.

The third morning, one.

The fourth morning, half.

The fifth morning, two again.

The room now clearly looked like an irregular pentagon—four old right angles and, on the northern side, one new edge thrust inward.

Outside, the wall was still straight. Its outer measurement was still twelve cubits and two finger-widths.

After five days, Saroj did not admit defeat; she simply grew tired.

She sat inside the fifth corner.

The wall stopped again.

This time she understood that her fear was not only of the advancing wall. It was the fear that one part of the house had become dependent on her presence.

She opened her father's notebook again.

On the back of the square sketch on the last page was something written that she had not noticed before.

The ink had faded.

"Do not leave the north-west room empty."

That was all.

No reason. No date.

Saroj's hand became still.

Naveen came the next day. He looked at the page.

"Babuji knew?"

"Perhaps."

"Then why did he never tell us?"

Saroj looked toward the fifth corner.

"Perhaps for him this was never a corner. Because he never left the room empty."

Her father had spent almost every evening there, sorting old papers, writing accounts or reading the newspaper.

The family had always thought it was merely a habit.

Perhaps the habit had not been merely a habit.

A few days later, Saroj decided that for now, all talk of selling the room was over.

But she also ended the guard roster.

She truly turned the room into a reading room.

Children from the neighbourhood began coming there to study in the evenings.

One sat on the chair inside the fifth corner, another on the floor, another beside the plank.

The corner remained still for three weeks.

The children quickly made the strangeness of the place ordinary.

"This fifth corner is mine," little Ruchi would say, because the breeze reached it less strongly.

Another child would say, "No, tomorrow is my turn."

Saroj did not explain the rule to them. She only said, "There is no need to leave the place empty."

A month later, Naveen came again.

He looked into the room. Two children were bent over the same book inside the fifth corner.

"Have you measured it lately?"

Saroj said, "No."

"Why not?"

"Measurement mattered while it was growing. Now it is being used."

Naveen looked at the old chalk lines on the floor.

He put a hand into his pocket to take out the tape, then stopped.

In the evening, the children left.

Saroj came to close the room.

Ruchi's small pencil had fallen inside the fifth corner.

Saroj bent and picked it up.

At the foot of the wall she found the first chalk line, where the corner had reached a month earlier.

The line now lay far behind.

She picked up the chalk to draw a new line.

Her hand stopped halfway.

The room now had five corners inside.

From outside, the house was still square.

And Saroj could no longer see any use in measuring the difference between those two facts.

She set the chalk down on the plank.

Then she pulled the small low stool into the fifth corner and sat down herself.

Night air was coming in from the veranda.

She did not stay awake until dawn to see whether the wall remained still.

She simply opened her book and began to read.

STORY 300

An Unfamiliar Home of One's Own

Vinay Jha returned to his home in Darbhanga at half past nine at night after a three-day journey.

The lock on the main gate was the same.

The brass key caught in the same old notch and turned.

The veranda bulb gave the same flickering light, for which he had been meaning to call an electrician for three months.

Everything seemed his own.

As soon as he opened the door, the first thing that felt unfamiliar was not a smell, not a sound, not some strange object.

It was the arrangement.

The large table in the sitting room had moved over to the window.

Two cane chairs, which had always stood on either side of the table, now faced one another, with a small round stool between them.

The bookcase had moved from the western wall to the northern wall.

The radio, which always bore a layer of dust, had not been cleaned; but its place had changed.

It was now on the three-legged stand below the window.

Vinay did not go farther in.

First he looked at the whole room from the doorway.

Nothing seemed to have been stolen.

On the contrary, the idea that a thief would patiently move an old bookcase, books and all, was absurd.

He set his travel bag on the floor and went straight to the bookcase.

It was not locked; the bookcase was never locked.

History books on the top shelf.

Magazines on the second.

Old files below.

All of them were his.

He took out a book and examined it.

On the back cover was the same small blot of blue ink left when a pen had burst five years earlier.

It was his book.

He picked up the brass bell from the right-hand corner of the table.

That too was his.

When he rang it, the cracked sound inside gave the same ordinary rasp.

No one had replaced any of the objects.

Only all the objects were arranged differently.

Vinay's first thought was that Mira must have come.

Mira was his younger sister, who lived in Laheriasarai and had the second key to the house.

He took out his mobile phone and called her.

"Did you come to the house?"

Mira was startled.

"No. Why?"

"Nothing. The table has moved."

"Did the table walk there by itself?"

"Maybe the cleaner came."

"But you gave Budhiya Kaki leave for the whole trip."

Vinay remembered.

That was true.

"All right. I'll see tomorrow."

He ended the call and went toward the kitchen.

There the strangeness was more obvious.

The wooden spice box was not beside the stove but on the window ledge.

The plates were on the upper shelf, the bowls below.

The rice tin was in the left corner instead of the right.

The water pitcher stood by the door.

For a moment Vinay felt that he was not in his own house, but in some house where everything had been borrowed from his.

He opened every tin in the kitchen and looked inside.

The turmeric was the same.

The lid of the salt tin had the same small bend in it.

The back of the brass plate bore the same scratch.

The rim of an old glass had the same nick that made him always keep it away from guests.

Everything was his.

But the kitchen was arranged as though someone lived there whose hand naturally went to the left.

Vinay worked with his right hand.

So had his wife, Lata.

Lata had been gone for seven years.

Vinay's hand suddenly stopped on the rice tin.

When Lata was alive, she had once suggested rearranging the kitchen.

"Keep the tins on the left," she had said. "There is too much smoke by the stove."

Vinay had replied then, "Things are fine where they have stood for years."

The matter had ended there.

Now the tin was on the left.

That night Vinay began putting everything back in its old place.

The bookcase was hard to move.

He could not move it all the way by himself.

The table, chairs, radio, kitchen tins, plates—whatever he could, he restored to the old arrangement.

He left the bookcase alone.

"Tomorrow I'll call Ramsevak," he said to himself.

When he reached the bedroom, he saw that the head of the bed had also been changed.

The bed had formerly stood against the southern wall.

Now it faced east, where the morning light fell directly on the pillow.

Lata had liked the morning light.

Vinay did not.

For seven years he had kept the bed to the south.

Now he was tired.

Instead of moving the bed, he lay down facing east.

When he opened his eyes in the morning, the light was falling straight on his face.

For the first moment he wanted to blame Lata.

Then he remembered at once—Lata was not there.

He got up and went into the sitting room.

The table he had returned to its old place the night before was once again by the window.

The chairs were once again facing each other.

The radio was once again on the stand.

This time Vinay stood still in the middle of the room.

If anyone had come in during the night, the main door had been bolted from inside.

The back door was latched from inside.

The windows had iron bars.

And the bookcase, which he himself had not been able to move, was no longer against the northern wall.

It stood diagonally in the eastern corner.

That meant its place too had changed during the night.

Vinay went outside and looked around the house on all four sides.

The wall was intact.

The gate was intact.

There was no scratch anywhere.

There were no fresh drag marks in the earth.

Ramsevak the carpenter was called.

The moment Ramsevak saw the bookcase, he said, "How did this move by itself?"

"That is what I called you to ask."

"It would take four men."

Two labourers were brought.

The bookcase was put back against the western wall.

With chalk, Vinay made small marks around all four feet.

He did the same around the table legs.

And around the radio stand.

Ramsevak laughed.

"Getting ready to catch a thief?"

"To catch the objects."

Ramsevak looked at Vinay's face and stopped laughing.

Vinay did not leave the house that day.

Everything remained still until noon.

Until evening too.

After dinner, he sat in the sitting room reading a book.

At ten he turned off the light and went to the bedroom.

In the morning, all the chalk marks stood empty.

The bookcase had moved again.

This time it was not against the northern wall but to the left of the doorway.

The table was in the middle, with four chairs around it.

The radio was not on the stand.

It was in the small corner outside the kitchen where Lata used to cut vegetables in the evening.

Vinay touched the radio.

The same dust.

The same rasp.

But this time the arrangement was not like Lata's old proposal.

It was entirely different.

The four chairs around the table immediately brought one thing to Vinay's mind.

When his son Anshuman was small, meals in the house were always eaten on the kitchen floor.

Once Anshuman had said, "Why don't we all eat at the table?"

Vinay had answered, "That isn't the custom here."

Lata had laughed and said, "Customs are made."

But the table had never become a dining table.

Now the four chairs stood as though the family had been eating there for years.

Vinay examined the surface of the table.

In one corner was an old yellow stain, like turmeric.

He could not say for certain whether the stain had been there before.

He was about to take an old photograph from the bookcase, then stopped.

A photograph would not prove the arrangement.

The objects were all the same.

The question was not where the objects had come from.

The question was why they had been arranged this way.

He started a file.

On the first page he wrote, "Arrangement of the House."

The date.

Measurements of the sitting room.

The position of the table.

The direction of the chairs.

The wall against which the bookcase stood.

The order of the kitchen tins.

The head of the bed.

Day by day he began recording the measurements.

Gradually, certain rules began to emerge.

No new object ever appeared.

No old object disappeared.

Even the contents of closed boxes did not change.

Only the arrangement of objects left out in the open changed.

The walls, doors, windows and dimensions of the rooms remained fixed.

The changes took place at night.

But night alone was not enough.

One night Vinay stayed awake in the sitting room until dawn.

Nothing changed.

Another night he went to the bedroom but left the door open.

By morning, there had been a change.

So being watched was not the cause.

One night he locked all the small objects inside a box.

By morning the heavy furniture had moved, while the box remained exactly as it was.

That meant the house did not add objects; it made new arrangements out of whatever was available.

On the seventh day Mira came.

The moment she saw the sitting room she said, "So you finally moved the table?"

Vinay looked at her.

"Does this look right to you?"

"It's fine. The light is better by the window."

"How was it before?"

Mira answered readily, "Against the wall."

"And what about the way it is now?"

"You must have moved it."

"I didn't."

Mira was about to laugh again, but then she saw Vinay's file.

Ten pages of measurements, dates and diagrams.

She fell silent.

"Does someone get in at night?"

"Then why doesn't anything get stolen?"

"Aren't you frightened?"

Vinay thought for a moment and said, "At first I was. Now I'm more curious."

Mira went into the kitchen.

The spice box was now on the low wooden stool.

"Sister-in-law wanted to keep it this way," Mira said softly.

Vinay turned toward her at once.

"You remember?"

"She said it once. You wouldn't agree."

"And this table?"

Mira looked at the table.

"Wasn't this Anshuman's insistence? That everyone should eat together at the table."

Vinay's hand tightened sharply around the file.

"The bookcase by the doorway?"

Mira shook her head.

"No. I don't remember that."

No immediate conclusion emerged.

But from that night on, Vinay stopped merely measuring the arrangements and began writing down their possible causes.

One night the study desk moved into the bedroom.

He remembered that twenty years earlier he had considered leaving his job and writing from home.

Lata had said, "Put the desk inside. It will make a separate corner for work."

Vinay had not left his job.

The desk had never gone inside.

Another night the sewing machine stood in the well-lit part of the sitting room, with the clothes trunk beside it.

After their marriage, Lata had spoken of wanting to teach sewing to the girls of the neighbourhood.

Vinay had said, "The house will turn into a school."

The classes had never begun.

On the third night, Anshuman's old study board was on the veranda, with flowerpots around it and the radio nearby.

Before leaving for college, Anshuman had said, "Let's make the veranda an open place to study."

Vinay had answered, "Everything will get wet in the rain."

That too had never happened.

The arrangements the house created all resembled proposals from Vinay's life that had never been fulfilled.

But not all of them.

Some arrangements were things Vinay had no memory of at all.

One night two cane chairs stood outside the bedroom as though two people had sat there talking late into the night.

Vinay could remember no such proposal.

One day the books were arranged not by subject but in the order in which they had been read.

Vinay had never used such an order.

And yet, from the wear on the books, the sequence looked natural.

One night the dinner plates were arranged as though the table had been set for only two people—the plates had not actually been taken out of the cupboard; just two plates had been shifted to one side at the top of the stack.

Which two people?

Vinay could find no answer.

From this point on, the labels "Lata's proposal," "Anshuman's proposal," and "my unfinished idea" appeared less often in the file.

He made a new heading: "Unfamiliar Possibility."

Mira said, "Don't think about it so much. The things in the house move; let them move."

Vinay asked, "What if all these are arrangements from lives I never lived?"

Mira did not answer at once.

Then she said, "In that case, why would those lives arrange your house?"

Vinay did not write that question in the file.

It stayed in his mind.

A week later Anshuman came from Delhi.

The moment he saw his old room, he laughed.

"Babu, you finally put my desk by the window!"

Vinay was startled.

"You wanted it this way?"

"When I was at school. You used to say the sunlight would ruin the books."

Vinay could not remember.

Anshuman opened the desk drawer.

Inside were his old compass, two tickets, an unfinished letter, and a small wooden whistle.

All old things.

"Were all these already here?" Vinay asked.

"They were in the drawer. I don't remember the order."

Vinay understood that the house was not merely reading the catalogue of his memories.

At least some of its arrangements also matched the forgotten wishes of other people.

That night father and son stayed awake for a long time.

Anshuman was told all the rules.

"Shall I try an experiment?" he asked.

"What?"

"Today let's not touch anything. Let's see what happens by morning."

"I hardly touch anything now."

"No, I mean—let's accept things where they are. Don't put anything back in its old place."

Vinay agreed.

In the morning the sitting room had not changed.

The kitchen had not changed.

Anshuman's room had not changed either.

Vinay grew excited.

"See? If we don't change things, it stays still."

Before answering, Anshuman went into the bedroom.

There, the small bedside table had moved to the window.

Only one object had changed.

Anshuman said, "Not still. Slower."

For the next four days they did not return anything to its old place.

The changes in the house diminished.

Earlier, an entire room would change in a single night.

Now, one or two objects changed in a night.

Sometimes only the direction of a chair.

Sometimes a single flowerpot.

Sometimes the position of the clock.

Vinay felt as though the house were merely searching for whatever empty space was available.

On the fifth day Anshuman left for Delhi again.

Before leaving, he asked his father, "Why did you keep returning everything to its first place?"

"Because that was where it was."

"That answers where it was before. It doesn't answer why it was there."

Vinay grew irritated.

"You don't need to philosophize."

Anshuman laughed.

"All right. But the things in the house philosophize more than you do."

There was a train to catch. The matter ended in laughter.

After Anshuman left, the house grew quiet again.

Vinay read the file.

Thirty-three days.

Thirty-three arrangements.

Some familiar possibilities.

Some unfamiliar.

One thing had remained constant so far—no arrangement had repeated Vinay's actual present arrangement.

It was as though the house ignored "what is" and moved only among "what might have been."

As soon as he wrote that conclusion, Vinay stopped his pen.

"What might have been"—the phrase was too easy.

There was too little evidence.

He put a question mark on the page.

That night, for the first time, Vinay deliberately made a change that was not meant to restore an old arrangement.

He picked up one of the cane chairs in the sitting room and placed it in the eastern corner of the veranda.

A chair had never stood there.

Nor could he remember any old proposal to put one there.

He placed it there only for the evening breeze.

On the small stool beside the chair, he set the radio.

He had never before even thought of putting the radio there.

Then, deliberately, he took a stack of books and placed it behind the chair.

In the file he recorded this arrangement as: "Today's."

"Not old."

"Not anyone's unfinished proposal."

"I made it just now."

In the morning Vinay went straight to the veranda.

The chair was still there.

The radio was still there.

The stack of books was still there.

He was ready to smile.

Then he saw that opposite the chair, in the other corner of the veranda, a second chair had come from inside the house.

The same cane chair that had been in the sitting room the day before.

The two chairs faced each other.

A small empty space lay between them.

Vinay stood there for a long time.

He had not made this arrangement.

But it did not feel entirely old either.

One chair was his present decision.

The other was the house's answer.

That day, for the first time, he crossed out the words "Unfamiliar Possibility" in the file.

In their place he wrote, "Incomplete Arrangement."

Mira came that evening.

The moment she saw the two chairs on the veranda, she sat down on one of them.

"This was a good idea," she said.

Vinay sat in the other chair.

The radio was switched on.

After the old static, a Maithili song began on All India Radio.

Mira said, "If Sister-in-law were here, she would have liked sitting here."

Vinay did not answer.

After a while he got up and went inside.

He brought the file.

On the last page he drew a diagram of the veranda.

Two chairs.

The stool between them.

The radio.

He wrote the date.

He left the space for the reason blank.

At night Mira left.

Vinay locked the main door.

He did not draw chalk lines around the feet as before.

He took no measurements.

He returned no object to its old place.

In the morning the bookcase in the sitting room was against a third wall.

The order of the plates in the kitchen had changed.

In the bedroom, the bed had turned to face east.

The house was unfamiliar again.

Vinay looked at each object one by one.

Everything was his.

He placed the file on the table in the sitting room.

He turned the pages.

The measurements from the first day.

The diagram from the second.

Lata's possibility.

Anshuman's forgotten wish.

An unfamiliar order.

An incomplete arrangement.

The last page was blank.

Vinay picked up his pen.

His hand moved to write, "Today the house changed again."

Then it stopped.

He went out to the veranda.

The two cane chairs were still facing each other.

One chair was the one he himself had placed there the day before.

The other had been brought by the house.

Vinay sat not in the first chair, but in the second.

The chair opposite him remained empty.

The light of dawn was slowly falling across his back.

Inside the house, every object was his own.

He still did not know to which life the arrangement belonged.

But for the first time, he was in no hurry to decide how the house had stood before.

The radio was off.

On the veranda there was only the sound of birds.

After a while Vinay rose, moved the empty chair one finger's breadth forward, and sat down again.

One hundred stories.
One hundred small doors.

A blue mug. A stalled lift. A flood mark on a wall. A bus that bears the number zero.

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FIVE MOVEMENTS

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> *"A story lives as long as its people and their language live."*
>
> — GAJENDRA THAKUR

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