

STORIES OF MITHILA · VAJJI · ANGA

SELECTED STORIES

VOLUME I

THREE STREAMS OF STORIES

*Three hundred selected stories —
the first hundred.*



GAJENDRA THAKUR

TRANSLATED FROM THE MAITHILI BY THE AUTHOR

VIDEHA

THREE STREAMS OF STORIES

Volume I

Three Hundred Selected Stories by Gajendra Thakur

Stories 1–100

Gajendra Thakur

Translated from Original Maithili into English by the author himself

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Three Streams of Stories

Gajendra Thakur's three hundred selected stories offer a vivid mirror of life in Mithila, Vajji, and Anga: their folk worlds and human relationships, changing times, village and town, sorrow and joy, tradition and modernity, nature and society, women and men, the minds of children, old age, migration, memory, struggle, and hope.

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

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

— *Gajendra Thakur*

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The Bell That Never Rang

At the doorway of the old house in Laheriasarai was a round brass button. The wood around it had been polished smooth as yesterday by years of touch, but the button itself was always dull. In the rains, green moss crept out around its rim; in winter it was cold as ice; and in summer a touch made the fingertip flinch. Yet one thing about it had not changed in all those years: no matter how often it was pressed, it never rang.

When Madhavi was a child, she would press and press the button until she tired of it. Her mother would open the door from inside and say, "Leave the bell alone; call out your name and ring." Then Madhavi would rap on the door three times with her fist—knock, knock, knock—and her mother would come laughing from within. Time passed. Madhavi went away to study, found a job, married, had a daughter, was widowed, and finally settled in Pune. Her parents died, one after the other. The house remained—and, at its door, the same bell that never made a sound.

After the first anniversary of her mother's death, Madhavi decided to sell the house. It was not a mansion, but without care it was slowly growing weary. The roof gutter had broken, a fine crack ran through a pillar of the rear veranda, and the tulsi altar in a corner of the courtyard had begun to lean. Her daughter, Ira, had taken leave and come with her. The expense of higher studies lay ahead; Madhavi still had a loan on her own flat. "Memories don't pay taxes," Madhavi had told Ira while working through the figures on paper. Ira had replied, "But while paying taxes, don't sell every memory as well."

Madhavi had laughed. At the time it had seemed merely a clever line from her daughter.

The first prospective buyers came on Sunday. The broker, Diwakar Jha, led the way, followed by a couple and their college-going son. Reaching the door, Diwakar pressed the bell button from sheer habit.

There was no sound.

He pressed it again.

"Doesn't this work?" he asked, turning back.

Madhavi smiled. "It has hardly worked since I was born."

"We'll replace it. Such a big house, and the bell is mute!"

Everyone laughed at Diwakar's remark. Madhavi did not. She herself did not know why. The moment she saw Diwakar's finger pressing the button, something seemed to drop away inside her for an instant—as though a familiar name had risen to the tip of her tongue and turned back before it could be spoken.

While they were being shown around, the woman who was considering buying the house noticed a white tile set upside down on the western wall of the kitchen. "Why is this one tile upside down?" she asked.

Madhavi stopped still.

She had seen that tile since childhood: pale blue flowers around the edges, smooth white at the centre. It was inverted—the stems of the blue flowers pointed upward. There had surely been a reason for it once. Nothing in that house had survived so many years without a reason.

"This..." Madhavi began, and then stopped.

Ira looked at the tile. "Did Nani have it put in like that deliberately?"

"Yes," Madhavi said at once.

"Why?"

The question remained suspended there in the air.

After the buyers left, Madhavi went straight to Sukanya Kaki next door. Kaki was past eighty, yet her memory was astonishingly sharp. Madhavi brought up the tile.

Kaki burst out laughing. "You've forgotten even that?"

"What?"

"Your mother had a gas stove installed for the first time. The mason was setting the tiles. That day your father said every flower must be upright. Your mother deliberately had one fixed upside down. She said, 'If everything in a house is perfectly straight, people will begin to think themselves gods.'"

Madhavi fell silent.

Kaki went on laughing. "Your father glared at that tile for three days."

Madhavi could hear the sentence, but not see the scene. She remembered her mother in the kitchen, remembered her father, remembered the wall; but the incident of the inverted tile, which Sukanya Kaki narrated with such ease, stirred nothing inside her.

As soon as she returned home, she told Ira everything.

At first Ira thought it was fatigue. Then she looked at her mother's face and fell quiet.

"Diwakar pressed it twice," Madhavi said softly.

Ira looked towards the door. In the fading evening light, the dull button resembled a small eye.

"Twice," Ira repeated. "If one memory went, what was the other?"

They did not find the answer that night.

In the morning, the answer presented itself.

Ira went to bathe in the old bathroom. Five minutes later she called her mother. A thick iron grab bar was fixed to the wall at waist height. Its paint had worn away, and in the middle the metal shone where hands had rubbed it smooth.

“This was installed for Nanaji, wasn’t it?” Ira asked.

Madhavi answered immediately, “Yes.”

“When?”

The word caught somewhere inside Madhavi.

She remembered the last two years of her father’s life only in blurred fragments—medicines, hospital visits, his evening cough, the chair on the veranda. Ira had been in school then and spent several weeks each summer with her grandparents. But the day this bar was fixed in the bathroom, the first time her father used it to steady himself as he went in, her mother standing outside the door—nothing.

Ira stood holding the bar. “I remember this being here, but I don’t remember when it was put in.”

Madhavi called her aunt, who had stayed in the house for two months during her father’s illness.

“That bar?” her aunt said. “It was installed while I was there. That very day Ira went to the market and chose a pair of rubber slippers for her grandfather.”

Ira stood behind the phone, her face drained of colour.

Her aunt suddenly asked, “What has happened to you two?”

Madhavi made an excuse and ended the call.

Now it was no longer a coincidence.

Madhavi brought out a thick notebook. On the first page she wrote: “Memories of the House.” Under it she began listing, in order, the incidents she remembered clearly: her mother drying mango pickle, her father listening to cricket on the radio, a quarrel over a severed kite on the roof, her mother’s sewing machine in the hall, the brazier on winter nights, Grandmother’s low wooden seat beneath the tree at the back, and the year of the flood when a tub in the courtyard had been turned into something like a boat.

Ira added her own memories—potatoes and pointed gourd cooked by Nani, doing homework on the veranda, evening walks with Nana, the red dress Nani had made for a school play, climbing the mango tree for the first time. Some events belonged to Madhavi’s childhood, some to Ira’s, some to both of them.

Ira photographed every page and sent the images to her friend Tanvi, who had never been to the house. She wrote: "Keep these pages. If I ask, read them back to me."

Ira looked at the button. "Shall we test it once?"

Madhavi was afraid, but alongside the fear was a strange stubbornness. If this was true, it seemed necessary to understand the rule.

"I won't press it," she said. "Maybe it affects only those who have lived in this house. Let someone from outside press it."

At noon Vicky, the teenage milk boy, came. He belonged to a new generation and had no connection with the house's old stories. Madhavi stopped him at the door. "Press this button once."

Vicky laughed. "The bell doesn't ring."

"Press it anyway."

He pressed it once.

Nothing happened.

Vicky handed over the milk and left.

Madhavi and Ira went inside and began reading their lists.

First line—Mother's mango pickle. Clear.

Second—Father's radio. Clear.

Third—the kite on the roof. Clear.

Fourth—Mother's sewing machine in the hall.

Madhavi stopped.

The sewing machine stood in the room opposite—black iron, decorated with golden flowers, worked by a foot treadle. She knew her mother had sewn. Her frocks, pillowcases, curtains—everything had been made on it. But when she read the line "Mother's sewing machine in the hall," the scene that should have risen before her did not come.

Ira lifted the machine's cover. Inside lay a reel of red thread and an old pillowcase, half finished.

"Mumma," Ira said softly, "the red dress?"

Madhavi looked at her.

"No."

Ira's eyes filled. "Me neither."

Together they called Tanvi. Ira said, "Read that line from the list—the school play."

Tanvi read, "For Ira's school play, Nani made a red dress. She got the waist measurement wrong twice, and Ira spun around on the stage three times to try it out."

Ira held the red reel in her hand. "I can hear the words. I can't see the scene."

They ended the call.

Madhavi looked towards the doorbell as if it were not a button but someone's sealed mouth.

"One press—one memory," Ira said.

Madhavi corrected her. "One memory of the house. Nothing happened to Vicky."

"But it happened to both of us."

"Because both of us had lived that moment."

They decided that no one would press the button again. Madhavi taped a note outside: "BELL OUT OF ORDER. PLEASE KNOCK."

That night the rain began. Drops kept striking the wooden door. Madhavi could not sleep. How many memories did it take to make a house? Brick, timber, tiles, paint—those might be the body of a house; but what of the moments lived within it? If they were lifted away one by one, would the body left behind still be a house?

At about two in the morning, Ira came to the door of her mother's room.

"Mumma."

"Hmm?"

She came in and sat on the floor. In her hand was a photocopy of the list.

"Shall we test it once more?" she asked.

Madhavi shook her head at once. "No."

"We'll write everything down first. Tanvi will keep a copy. This time we'll learn whether the bell erases only things that happened in this house or things from outside it too."

"The price of finding out is a memory."

"If we don't understand the rule, how can we sell the house? Tomorrow some child may press it."

Madhavi looked at the line in the notebook—Mother's sewing machine in the hall. The words remained; the scene did not.

"Has the red dress come back to you?" she asked.

Ira was silent.

"Not to me either. Paper saved the event, not the lived moment."

Ira folded the photocopy. "Then we're not going to know everything?"

"We don't need to know everything."

"But what is this, why is it—"

"The more we press it out of the hunger to understand, the less of the house will remain."

For a long time Ira stared at the floor. Outside, the rain softened. At last she rose.

"All right. Tomorrow I'll cover the note with a transparent sheet."

Madhavi watched her leave. For the first time she understood that preserving a house did not mean preserving only its walls; sometimes it also meant refusing to hunt down the answer to a question.

More people came to see the house the next day. Madhavi warned everyone in advance: “Don’t press the bell. Knock on the door.” Some laughed; some obeyed without asking why.

In the afternoon a woman arrived with her small son. The child was tired after being taken through the house. As everyone stood outside discussing the price, he slipped a finger beneath the paper notice and pressed the button.

Madhavi saw him.

“No!”

It was already too late.

The bell did not ring.

The frightened boy ran to his mother. The woman kept apologising. Madhavi could say nothing. Which memory had vanished from within her was not immediately clear.

The prospective buyers left.

Madhavi and Ira sat down with the notebook. They read it line by line. Everything seemed intact. Then Ira’s finger stopped at one entry.

“First letter.”

Madhavi read it. “What?”

Ira said softly, “You wrote: ‘Madhavi’s first letter—Mother taught her to write it with rice in the courtyard.’ Nani told me this story too.”

Madhavi’s breath caught.

She knew her mother had taught her her letters. But the first letter? The courtyard? Rice? There was no scene.

Ira called Tanvi. “Read the line about the first letter.”

Tanvi read, “Mother drew the letter ‘M’ in a plate of rice. Madhavi traced it from the wrong side. Mother said, ‘A letter is not a road; it is like a house. Learn how to enter it.’”

Tears slipped from Madhavi’s eyes.

That might indeed have been her mother’s sentence—Tanvi was reading from the written page. Ira retained fragments of the story as something she had been told; but Madhavi had nothing: not her five-year-old hand, not the grains of rice, not her mother’s voice.

She began to cry—not loudly, but in silence. Ira sat beside her.

“Paper doesn’t bring a memory back,” Madhavi said.

Ira’s voice broke. “I know.”

“Words survive. Experience doesn’t.”

That evening they decided to remove the bell.

Ira brought a screwdriver. Two rusted screws held the round brass rim. The first came loose with difficulty. When she turned the second, the whole button slackened and came away into her hand.

They stared in astonishment.

There was no wire behind it.

There was not even a hole in the wall through which a wire could have passed.

There was only a round hollow in the wood, about a finger-joint deep. No dust inside it, no insect, no cobweb—as though that little portion had been cut out only yesterday.

“This is impossible,” Ira whispered. “The bell was real. Nani used to say the electrician came again and again.”

“His name?”

Ira shook her head. “I don’t remember.”

Madhavi searched for the name as well. Nothing.

Even the story of the bell’s installation had now grown indistinct in her mind. Whether the bell itself had eaten that memory, or time had, was impossible to say.

Madhavi took the button in her hand. It was surprisingly heavy. The brass at the back was perfectly flat: no maker’s name, no number. Only very fine scratches, visible when light struck at an angle. The marks resembled a count—one, a second, a third... but with breaks between them.

“Should we throw it away?” Ira asked.

Madhavi looked beyond the door towards the drain. Rainwater was moving slowly along it.

She could throw the button away. But fear stopped her. What if it still worked after being separated from the house? What if someone picked it up and pressed it? What if the cause was not the object at all, but simply that place on the door?

“Don’t press it,” she said. “We’ll decide the rest tomorrow.”

They put the button in an old steel box, packed cloth over it, and locked the box inside her mother’s trunk.

A round empty hollow remained in the door.

The next morning, the first thing Madhavi did after waking was go to the door.

The hollow was gone.

The wood was smooth, as though no button had ever been fixed there.

Madhavi called Ira. Ira came running. Both touched the wood. There was no mark.

“The box,” Ira said.

They opened her mother's trunk. The steel box was there. The cloth was inside.

The button was not.

They looked at each other.

Then came knock-knock-knock at the door.

Three times.

Sukanya Kaki stood outside with her walking stick. "Won't you have tea? You've been staring at the door since morning."

Madhavi invited her in. Kaki looked at the wood of the door.

"Oh! Where did the bell go?"

Madhavi and Ira turned towards her together.

"You remember the bell?" Madhavi asked.

"Why wouldn't I? Your father had it installed."

"When?"

Kaki narrowed her eyes. "When your grandmother's hearing had grown weak. He thought a louder bell would help. But once it was installed, it never rang at all. The electrician came five times. In the end your mother said, 'Leave it. Anyone who reaches this house can knock on the door.'"

"Who was the electrician?"

"Bisesar. He had a shop near the station."

The instant Madhavi heard the name, a faint light flickered in her mind—a thin man with a moustache, a coil of wire over his shoulder. The image appeared for a moment, then blurred again.

"Kaki," Madhavi asked, "when that bell was pressed... did anything happen?"

Kaki laughed. "No sound. That was all."

She drank her tea and left.

For a long time Madhavi and Ira said nothing.

Selling the house had become a question again. Ira said, "What if new people live here and the bell appears again?"

Madhavi said, "What am I supposed to tell them? That there is a bell at the door that eats memories?"

"The truth."

"Will they believe it?"

Ira did not answer.

They told Diwakar, the broker, that the old bell had been removed and a new one could be installed later. Nothing more. It was as much truth as the market could bear.

Three days later a family agreed to buy the house—a couple who were both teachers, their two children, and the husband's elderly father. They

liked the courtyard, liked the mango tree, and liked the fact that although the house stood in the middle of the city, it was quiet within.

The day for signing the papers drew near.

Madhavi began dividing the belongings. She decided to take her mother's sewing machine with her. Her father's radio was set aside for Ira. The inverted tile stayed in the wall—it would break if they tried to remove it. The iron bar in the bathroom stayed too. Some things are not sold; they are simply left behind.

The notebook now contained twenty-three filled pages. Whenever another memory surfaced, Madhavi wrote it down. But she had already understood that written words were no insurance against forgetting. Paper could draw a boundary around an empty place; it could not restore the scene within it.

On the last evening before they were to leave the house, Ira used her phone to show it to her aunt far away. Madhavi walked from room to room naming things. "This was my room... Grandmother used to sit here... this is the upside-down tile..."

Her aunt asked, "Why was it upside down?"

Madhavi paused. She now knew the reason from Sukanya Kaki's story, not from her own memory.

"Mother had it put in deliberately," she said.

"Why?"

Madhavi smiled. "Kaki says Mother used to say that if everything in a house were perfectly straight, people would start thinking themselves gods."

Ira looked at her mother. Their eyes met for a moment. They both now understood how great a distance lay between "Kaki says" and "I remember."

On the final day all the belongings were loaded onto the vehicle. The new owners would move in two days later. Once the house was empty, its sound changed—the thud of footsteps carried in long echoes. Where a picture frame had been removed, the wall was lighter. A strand of thread clung to a corner of her mother's room. On the veranda were four round marks where the feet of her father's chair had stood.

Ira stepped forward to close the main door.

At that moment Madhavi saw the round dull button again on the wood.

Exactly where it had always been.

Both of them froze.

"This..." Ira's voice would not come.

The button sat there with such naturalness that it was as though everything that had happened between—unscrewing it, locking it in the box, its disappearance—had never happened at all.

Madhavi moved slowly closer. A film of dust lay on the button. Green moss edged its rim. The brass was cold.

Behind her Ira said, "Don't touch it."

Madhavi stopped her hand.

Outside the door, the new owner's elderly father was standing near the gate. He had come to ask about something in the paperwork. When he reached the door, he lifted his hand towards the bell.

Madhavi immediately thrust her hand between them.

"Not this one," she said.

The old man looked startled. "Is it broken?"

"Yes," Madhavi said, "and let it stay broken."

He smiled, perhaps taking it for one of the eccentricities of an old house. Then he raised his fist and knocked three times on the door—knock, knock, knock.

A tremor went through Madhavi's body.

With those three sounds a scene returned with perfect clarity: she is five years old, rain outside, a paper boat in her hand; the door will not open; her mother calls from within, "Call your name and ring"; she knocks three times; the door opens; her mother wipes her wet hair.

Madhavi held her breath, trying to keep hold of the scene. This was not one of the memories erased by the bell; perhaps it was one that had survived. Perhaps the sound of knocking had opened some locked room inside her.

The old man said again, "There's one signature left on the papers."

Ira went outside.

Madhavi turned once and looked back at the house: the empty rooms, the inverted tile, the iron bar, the pale rectangles on the walls, and at the door, the bell that never rang.

She did not press it.

She laid her palm against the door, knocked softly three times—knock, knock, knock—and stepped outside.

STORY 2

The Road That Turned Back

Archana Jha worked at measuring roads, and for that reason she trusted them.

A map could be wrong, a milestone could be old, two villages could have bridges with the same name; but one quality of a road seemed beyond dispute to her—wherever you set out from, it would take you somewhere.

After the first heavy spell of monsoon rain, the district office assigned her to inspect three alternative roads. The waters of the Kamla and Bagmati were rising, one section of the main bridge was closed for repairs, and a new route sheet had to be prepared to show where ambulances, milk vans and school buses could pass in an emergency.

Archana's parents lived in an outlying neighbourhood of Benipur. The office had asked her to stay there that week and measure the roads in the surrounding area. For eight years her job had kept her moving between rented rooms in Patna and Darbhanga; now even five uninterrupted days in the old house felt almost like a holiday.

That afternoon, after lunch, her father said, "The clouds are gathering again. Measure it tomorrow."

Putting her survey notebook into her bag, Archana said, "The water will rise further tomorrow. Why waste today while it's still dry?"

From the veranda her mother called, "Be back before four."

Archana laughed. "I'm going to measure a road, not enter a jungle."

She reset the motorcycle's odometer to zero. On the first page of her survey notebook she had written: Route A: Benipur outer neighbourhood to Shivnagar turn, then along the old canal embankment; estimated total distance, 18.6 kilometres.

As soon as she left the gate, the road turned east. Two hundred metres farther stood a peepal tree, then the milk-collection centre, then a small culvert. Archana had known that sequence since childhood.

Nothing unusual happened during the first five kilometres.

At the sixth kilometre, water shone on both sides of the road. Archana slowed down. At the seventh she passed a new brick kiln. At the eighth, a thicket of bamboo. She entered everything in the survey notebook.

Near the tenth kilometre the road forked. To the right lay newly laid black asphalt; to the left, the old whitish-grey surface. According to the office map, the right-hand road led towards Shivnagar.

Archana turned right.

Three minutes later she felt that the air had suddenly brought her a familiar smell—not boiling makhana, not mud; it was the sharp pre-rain scent of leaves from the guava tree behind her house.

She laughed at herself. Smells had no maps.

The road curved once to the left, then to the right, and crossed a narrow bridge. A small red temple appeared ahead. Archana stopped the motorcycle.

That temple stood half a kilometre west of her house.

She looked in the rear-view mirror. The road behind her ran straight towards the milk-collection centre.

“Impossible,” she said softly.

The odometer showed 13.4 kilometres. The normal distance from the house to the temple was 0.6 kilometres.

When Archana reached the gate, her father was sitting on the veranda reading the newspaper.

“Back so soon?”

“I haven’t come back,” Archana said.

Her father peered at her over his spectacles. “Then what is this?”

Archana did not switch off the motorcycle. “I took the wrong road. I’m going again.”

This time she wrote in red ink on the survey page: First circuit, 13.4 km. End point: west gate of home.

The moment she wrote the word circuit, she struck it out. In its place she wrote: route error.

On the second attempt she left home and, at the first turn, went south instead of east. This road led to the market. From the middle of the market, a lane running north joined the canal embankment. It was a longer way, but there was less chance of a mistake.

Archana looked at her watch—3:47.

Fruit sellers, a tea stall, bicycle repair, the smell of vegetables, the cries of hawkers—everything in the market was ordinary. She stopped at one place and bought some lime. The shopkeeper asked, “Whitewashing a wall?”

“Remembering a road.”

The shopkeeper laughed. “Is the road going to run away?”

Archana laughed too, though her own laughter tasted faintly bitter.

As she left the market, she marked the first electric pole with a small white circle of lime. At the second turn she drew two lines. Near the canal,

three dots. If the route turned her around again, the marks would tell her where she had already been.

Four kilometres on, an old mustard-yellow granary stood by the roadside. At the fifth was a primary school. At the sixth, a broken culvert. The map was correct.

The sky had grown heavy now.

At the seventh kilometre Archana was riding parallel to the canal when a white circular mark flashed on a pole ahead.

She braked.

It was the first electric pole in the market—the one on which she had made the lime mark.

But why was that pole in front of her now?

Archana got down and touched it. The lime was still dry. On the wall of the shop beside it was the same soap advertisement in red letters. The shopkeeper came out and asked, “Come round again?”

“Did I leave from here?”

“Ten minutes ago.”

“Which way?”

“Towards the canal.”

“And which direction have I come from now?”

The shopkeeper looked down the road behind her. “From the canal.”

Archana stared at his face for a moment. There was no curiosity in it. To him, it seemed, both ends of the road simply led towards the canal.

“Where’s home?” the shopkeeper asked.

“The outer neighbourhood of Benipur.”

“Then keep straight on. You’ll be there in half an hour.”

“I don’t want to go home.”

The shopkeeper laughed again. “What can you tell a road?”

Archana did not answer.

She set off marking the road for a third time. This time, instead of a circle, two lines and three dots, she wrote the Maithili numerals १, २ and ३ in sequence. Distance, time, direction of each turn—she recorded everything in the survey notebook.

३:५९—१.

४:०४—२.

४:११—३.

At ४:१७ she found १ again—but this time on the other side of the pole.

She parked the motorcycle at the roadside and studied the map for a long while. On paper the line was straight. On the ground the line was catching its own tail.

She opened the map on her phone. The blue dot placed her north of Shivnagar, though the market shop stood directly in front of her. The phone compass pointed north behind her. Archana switched the phone off.

“A machine can go wrong,” she told herself. “The earth cannot.”

She did not believe that sentence immediately.

Jitan Mian was sitting at the market tea stall. He drove a small goods vehicle and knew every road in the surrounding area by heart. Archana had known him since childhood.

“Jitan Kaka, will you take me to Shivnagar?”

“What about your motorcycle?”

“It can stay here. Take me in your vehicle.”

Jitan Mian drained his cup and stood up. “Now?”

“Right now.”

Archana left the motorcycle with the shopkeeper and took her survey notebook and the lime with her.

Jitan Mian drove north out of the market. “By the old canal embankment?”

“Yes. But one thing—you choose the road. Don’t ask me.”

“That is a driver’s dream.”

He took the first turn to the right, the second to the left. Archana said nothing. Five minutes later the vehicle reached the grain warehouse at Shivnagar. Archana looked at her watch. Everything was right.

Her body relaxed. “All right. Now take the district road.”

At the next turn Jitan Mian swung the vehicle around. “Which district road? The eastern one or the station road?”

“The station road. Towards the main office.”

Whether anything changed after that answer, Archana could not say. The road was the same. The paddy fields were the same. The betel shop, the peepal beside the pond, the dog, the milk cans on a bicycle—everything was ordinary.

But ten minutes later Jitan Mian pressed the brake.

Ahead stood the west gate of Archana’s house.

On the veranda her father had folded his newspaper and risen to his feet.

Jitan Mian sat with both hands on the steering wheel and said nothing.

“Did you take a wrong turn?” Archana asked.

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“I took the station road from Shivnagar. I did not miss a single turn on the way.”

“Then?”

Jitan Mian looked at the gate and then into the rear-view mirror. "How did my vehicle come here?"

Her father came out onto the road. "What happened?"

Jitan Mian got out and looked around as though someone had lifted the house bodily and set it down in this place.

Archana opened the survey notebook. From Shivnagar to the house, the vehicle's odometer had advanced 11.2 kilometres. The normal distance was 7.8.

"Let's go again," Archana said.

Jitan Mian looked at her. "Where?"

"The station."

"No."

"Kaka—"

"If a vehicle breaks down, we repair it. If a road is damaged, people can be told. But when a thing cannot even be understood, testing it again as night is falling is not wisdom."

Irritation rose in Archana. "Are you frightened?"

"Yes," Jitan Mian said plainly. "I am frightened. If you are not, perhaps that is your special quality."

He turned the vehicle around. "I'm going to the market. Are you coming?"

Archana got in.

This time Jitan Mian himself named the destination—"The market." The vehicle went straight to the market. No loop. No detour.

Archana got down. "Now go to the station by yourself."

"Why?"

"Just go."

Jitan Mian shook his head, but he went. Twenty minutes later he phoned. "I've reached the station."

"The road was all right?"

"Perfectly."

Archana ended the call.

The shopkeeper asked, "Home now?"

"No."

"Then?"

Archana looked across the road at the paddy fields. From the market to the station there was an old footpath along the field embankments, not a motor road. In childhood people had used it to walk to the weekly market; now fewer people went that way.

She left the motorcycle with the shopkeeper and slung her bag over her shoulder.

"Where are you going?"

“To the station by the field path.”

“It’s going to rain.”

“Let it.”

Within the first five hundred metres, mud had climbed the sides of her shoes. The embankment was broad in places and no wider than two feet in others. Newly planted paddy trembled in the water. Lightning flashed in the distance.

Archana kept looking back. The market grew smaller. There was no sign of the house.

A kilometre later she crossed the canal. There was no bridge—only a bamboo footbridge. A motorcycle could not have crossed it.

Reaching the other side, she looked at her watch. In the survey notebook she wrote: 4:58, left the road; 5:23, crossed canal; direction stable.

Writing direction stable made her laugh.

The clouds broke open.

The rain came down so hard that she had to put the survey notebook inside her bag. She ran beneath a dry thatched shelter where two cowherd boys were already standing.

One of the boys asked, “Didi, why did you leave the road and come this way?”

Archana said, “Because the road won’t leave me.”

Both boys burst out laughing. Archana laughed too. This time the laughter came easily.

When the rain eased, she walked on. In the first darkness of evening she saw the station signboard. At five fifty-six she was standing on the platform.

By road, the station was nine kilometres from the house. Across the embankments and fields, it was roughly five.

Archana bought a ticket—to Darbhanga.

The ticket clerk asked, “Luggage?”

“Only this.”

“Motorcycle?”

“It will find its way home,” Archana said absently.

The passenger train arrived half an hour late. Archana sat by the window. When the train began to move, a strange relief came over her—as though the metal wheels had simply refused to acknowledge the road’s enchantment.

The train passed the edge of the village. Through the window Archana looked towards her neighbourhood in the distance. Behind the curtain of rain, nothing was clear.

On reaching Darbhanga she telephoned her colleague Rashmi.

“I’m near the office. Can I stay in your room tonight?”

Rashmi was startled. “Weren’t you in Benipur?”

“I was.”

“How are you here?”

“By train.”

“That doesn’t answer the question.”

“For now, that is the only answer I have.”

That night in Rashmi’s room, Archana spread out her survey notebook to dry. The wet pages had buckled into waves. The sequence of lime marks—1, 2, 3—was still legible. When she added up all the distances, the total came to 41.7 kilometres—and the result, three times, was home.

Rashmi laughed when she first heard the whole story, then stopped when Archana remained silent.

“You must have been tired,” she said.

“Ask Jitan Kaka.”

“Then both of you were tired.”

“The odometer?”

“A machine.”

“The lime marks?”

“The wrong pole.”

Archana smiled. “Those were all my answers too.”

Straightening a pillow, Rashmi asked, “So what will you do tomorrow?”

“Measure the road.”

“Which road?”

“I’ll go towards home. The road seems to behave properly in that direction.”

The next morning Archana reached the office. The maps in the file were checked again. The assistant engineer said that a vehicle had travelled all three routes only the previous week. There had been no loop.

Archana said nothing. She took an office vehicle and told the driver to go to Benipur by way of Shivrinar.

The journey was entirely ordinary.

At half past nine she stood at the gate of her house. Her father’s first question was, “Where is the motorcycle?”

“In the market.”

Her mother’s first question was, “Where were you last night?”

“At Rashmi’s.”

Their second question was the same—“Why?”

Archana said, “First, one test.”

The office vehicle stood outside the gate. The driver was drinking tea. Archana told him, “Now take me back to the office.”

The driver turned the vehicle around. Her father stood on the veranda watching.

The first kilometre was right. The second was right. At the third, Archana saw the peepal tree that stood near the temple west of the house.

She did not close her eyes.

At the fourth kilometre came the red temple. At the fifth, the gate.

The driver pressed the brake slowly. "Madam, isn't this your house again?"

Archana looked at her watch. Nine fifty-six.

Her father was still standing on the veranda. There was no curiosity on his face now.

Archana got out of the vehicle.

"Do you understand now?" she asked her father.

Her father looked at the road. "Understand what?"

"Wherever I try to go, the road turns me back here."

Her mother came as far as the doorway. "Since yesterday?"

"Yes."

Her mother asked simply, "On foot?"

"On foot I reached the station by the field embankment."

"Then the fault lies with the road, not with you."

Archana wanted to laugh at that sentence, but did not.

Her father said, "Leave vehicles alone for a few days."

"My work is to measure roads."

"Then measure from somewhere else."

The sentence was utterly simple. Archana had spent the whole night thinking in such complicated ways that the simple solution felt almost insulting.

Even so, she tried it.

From behind the house she followed the embankment between the fields for half a kos. There a dirt track joined the government road. Archana phoned the driver and called him to that spot.

The vehicle came. She got in.

"Office."

The vehicle went straight to the office.

All day Archana tested roads from different starting points. Shivnagar to the station, the station to the canal, the canal to the market—every route behaved normally. The problem arose only when the journey began at the gate of her house and the destination lay outside home.

That evening she defined the limits of the test.

She stepped from the gate onto the road and walked south for ten minutes—then found herself at the temple west of her house.

She walked south for ten minutes along the embankment behind the house—she was in the middle of the paddy fields, exactly where she ought to be.

She came out through the gate onto the road thinking only of going to the market—five minutes later she was home.

She came out through the gate intending to visit the neighbour's house—she reached it, because the neighbour lived only forty paces away on the other side of the road.

From there she set off towards the market—and returned home again.

Archana wrote in the survey notebook: The boundary is not distance. It is the act of 'going outside.'

She stared at the sentence for a long time after writing it. No survey notebook had any place for a statement like that.

For three days she worked alongside this private impossibility. In the morning she walked half a kos along the embankment behind the house, caught the office vehicle on the road, spent the day surveying, and returned home by vehicle in the evening. The return journey was normal every time.

On the fourth day the assistant engineer asked, "Why don't you have the vehicle come all the way to your house in the morning?"

Archana said, "I like walking on the dirt path."

It was not the whole truth, but neither was it a lie.

A week later the alternative-route sheet was ready. The distances of all three roads, the culverts, waterlogging, weak edges—everything had been recorded. Archana did not put the 41.7 kilometres of her first day into any official document.

Only on the last page of her survey notebook did she draw a separate figure: a small square house at the centre, three curved roads around it, every arrow pointing inward. Not one arrow pointed out.

The rains intensified. Twice the water rose over the road, then receded. Repairs to the main bridge were completed. The office work shifted to another area.

Archana decided to return to Darbhanga. She had only one bag of clothes and books. Her mother asked, "When will the vehicle come?"

"It won't come to the house."

Her mother no longer asked questions. She simply packed some fried tilkor leaves into a small box.

Her father reached for the bag to carry it. Archana did not hand it over. "It's only this much."

Outside the gate the road glittered in the sun. It had not rained for three days. There was no water anywhere on the surface. The road looked straight for a long distance—so straight that, for a moment, Archana considered trying once more.

Her motorcycle had been brought from the market and stood by the gate. She turned the key. The engine came alive.

Her mother waved from the veranda. Her father said, "If you go by the embankment, what about the motorcycle?"

Archana did not answer.

She wheeled the motorcycle onto the road, closed the gate, and set off towards Darbhanga.

Past the first turn.

Past the peepal tree.

Past the milk-collection centre.

Past the small culvert.

Archana's breathing slowly eased. For a moment she thought—the episode is over. Water, exhaustion, direction, machines—perhaps together they had created some confusion which three days of fear had merely prolonged.

Three kilometres on, the road curved left.

Archana saw the red temple ahead.

She did not stop the motorcycle.

She passed the temple. Half a minute later the west gate of the house stood in front of her.

Her mother and father were still standing on the veranda.

Archana switched off the motorcycle. For a few moments no one spoke.

Then she herself began to laugh—a laughter that made her mother laugh too, and then her father. None of them knew what exactly was funny, but the impossibility of the past three days had suddenly become familiar, like an old member of the household.

Archana put the motorcycle inside. She slung the bag over her shoulder.

"Now?" her father asked.

"Now I won't take the road."

She opened the small door at the back of the house. Ahead lay the paddy fields, a narrow embankment running through them, the canal in the distance, and beyond it the dirt track.

Her mother said, "Call when you reach, by evening."

Archana stepped down onto the embankment.

From that day it became her rule. The road was for coming home. The embankment was for leaving home. Half a kos away, the road she joined behaved again like any other road. Whenever she had to go out, she began leaving the motorcycle at the house of an acquaintance in the market.

People asked, "Why walk so far?"

Archana gave different answers. Sometimes exercise, sometimes the need to inspect mud, sometimes convenience with the motorcycle. If she told the real answer, people would laugh, or become frightened, or hunt for an explanation. All three reactions seemed useless to her.

Months passed. The paddy ripened. The embankment dried and turned yellow. The water in the canal fell. Fresh white lines were painted on the road.

One day a new employee from the district office came to Archana's house to get her signature on some papers. He rode his motorcycle straight to the gate, completed the work, and rode away again along the same road.

Archana watched from the veranda. For him, the road was straight.

That evening Archana had to return to Darbhanga. She lifted her bag, opened the back door, and stepped onto the embankment.

For a moment she turned and looked towards the front gate. Beyond it the road lay straight for a long distance in the last light of the sun. No bend was visible. No circle. No mark.

Even so, Archana knew that within that straight line, for her alone, a curve was hidden.

She walked on along the embankment.

Behind her, the road remained where it was, shining straight.

STORY 3

The Night's Second Sky

Kailash Mandal was the school's night watchman. Looking at the sky was nothing unusual in his work.

By day he rang the bell, swept the veranda, checked the latches on the classroom doors, and did whatever small tasks the headmaster asked of him. At night, once all the pupils had gone home, the school remained in his care.

Open fields surrounded the school. To the east lay a pond, to the north a thicket of bamboo, to the west the first houses of the village, and to the south the metalled road. The electricity failed often, so the sky was usually clearly visible.

Kailash was not in the habit of counting stars, but since childhood he had known enough constellations to find his bearings. Where the Pole Star was, where the Saptarshi lay, where the bright evening star appeared—that was enough for him.

One humid September night he had spread his cot on the school veranda. Sleeping without a mosquito net was difficult, but the room inside stayed hot from the whole day's heat.

It was nearly midnight. He rose and crossed the courtyard to drink water from the tap by the pond.

The sky was clear. There was not a scrap of cloud.

Kailash bent over the tap, drank two mouthfuls of water, then straightened.

At that moment his gaze caught and held on the sky.

He did not recognize what was there.

No Pole Star. No Saptarshi. No familiar slanting row of stars in the east.

There were no fewer stars. On the contrary, it seemed as though some unknown hand had arranged the heavens afresh. A cluster of stars curved like a bent sickle; beneath it three bright points stood in a straight line, and high in the west seven small stars formed a circle.

Kailash rubbed his eyes.

First he closed his right eye, then his left. The sight remained the same.

His first thought was that his eyes were deceiving him. His second, that clouds had hidden the familiar stars. His third, that he was looking in the wrong direction.

But the school veranda was where it had always been. The pond was where it had always been. The bamboo to the north stood motionless in the windless night.

The clock showed two minutes past twelve.

Kailash went back to the veranda and picked up his spectacles. He put them on and looked up again.

The same unknown sky.

He stood beside the cot and watched it for five minutes.

At five minutes past twelve, without any flash, sound, or passing cloud, the familiar sky returned.

The Saptarshi was there again. The Pole Star was there again. The bent sickle had vanished. The circle of seven stars had vanished.

Kailash had spent many nights alone. He had heard jackals, mistaken shadows for thieves, found cattle straying into the bushes, seen sheets of tin torn loose in storms. But he could fit what had happened that night into none of those familiar categories.

He sat on the cot with his watch held against his ear, as though the watch might tell him something.

At dawn he told no one.

As the day advanced, the school filled. The children said their prayers, the teachers taught their lessons, and the midday meal was cooked in the kitchen. In the brightness of afternoon, the night's event began to seem to Kailash like a joke he had played on himself.

Even so, at dusk he set the hands of his watch by the time announced on the radio news.

At eleven fifty-five that night, he was standing not on the veranda but in the school courtyard.

Eleven fifty-eight.

Eleven fifty-nine.

Twelve.

For the first instant, nothing happened.

Then it was as though a curtain turned over somewhere inside his eyes.

The familiar constellations vanished. The bent sickle returned. The three bright points were again beneath it. In the west, the circle of seven stars.

A shiver ran through Kailash's body.

He ran to the headmaster's room and fetched a piece of chalk left beside an old blackboard. On the veranda floor he began drawing the stars.

First the bent sickle. Then the three points. Then the circle.

Five minutes past twelve.

The familiar sky again.

This time Kailash did not erase the chalk drawings.

The next day his granddaughter Ragini, who was in Class Nine at the school, came in the evening to bring him his meal. Her home was half a kos from the school.

Seeing the chalk marks in the courtyard, Ragini asked, "What have you drawn here?"

Kailash tried to brush it aside. "Nothing. I was passing the time last night."

Ragini bent to study the drawing. "This looks like a sickle."

Kailash looked at her.

"When are you coming home?" Ragini asked.

Kailash said, "Can you stay here tonight?"

"Why?"

"There's something I want to show you."

Ragini smiled. "A ghost?"

"If it's a ghost, I'll leave you behind and run first."

That night grandfather and granddaughter sat on the veranda. Ragini had a book open, but Kailash kept looking at his watch.

Two minutes before midnight Kailash said, "Close the book. Look at the sky."

Ragini looked up. "What?"

"Just keep watching."

Midnight came.

At first Ragini said nothing. Then, softly, "Dada..."

Kailash's voice had gone dry. "Can you see it?"

"These... where did these stars come from?"

Kailash did not answer.

Pointing towards one part of the sky, Ragini said, "That one looks like a bent sickle."

Kailash's hand froze on his watch.

"Who told you that name?"

Ragini turned to him. "Name? I only said what it looks like."

"Last night I called it the same thing."

Ragini did not laugh.

For five minutes they studied the clusters one by one. Ragini marked dots on a sheet of paper. She named one cluster 'Three Staves'. Kailash stopped her.

"What is it?"

"Nothing."

The truth was that the previous night Kailash had silently called those three bright points 'Three Staves' in his own mind. He had told no one.

At five minutes past twelve, the sky changed again.

Ragini kept looking from the paper to the familiar sky.

“Shall we watch again tomorrow?”

Kailash said, “Don’t tell anyone yet.”

“Why?”

“Because I still don’t know myself what there is to tell.”

Ragini kept quiet for half an hour, but keeping a secret for more than one night was difficult for a girl in Class Nine.

The next day, around noon, her science teacher Shashibhushan Babu came to see Kailash.

“Ragini says the stars change at twelve.”

Kailash cursed Ragini in his mind, but all he said aloud was, “Come and see tonight.”

Shashibhushan Babu laughed. “For five minutes the stars follow the school timetable?”

“All I’m saying is: come and see.”

That night the teacher arrived with a small telescope, a mobile phone, and a tripod. The school’s mathematics teacher, Naseem Ansari, came with him.

At eleven fifty-five Shashibhushan aimed the telescope north. The familiar stars were perfectly clear.

Midnight came.

Kailash and Ragini looked up together. The second sky was there.

For a moment Shashibhushan Babu too fell silent.

“This is impossible,” escaped his lips.

Naseem Ansari said, “If it is impossible, then what is it that we are seeing?”

Shashibhushan immediately put his eye to the telescope.

“But the Saptarshi is here.”

Kailash started. “Where?”

“In the telescope. See for yourself.”

Kailash went to the telescope. Inside the round glass was the familiar sky. The Saptarshi stood exactly where it ought to be.

He lifted his eye. With the naked eye the bent sickle gleamed overhead.

The telescope again. The Saptarshi.

The naked eye again. The second sky.

Ragini took a photograph with the mobile. The screen showed the ordinary stars.

She lowered the phone. Before her own eyes were not the ordinary stars but the other constellations.

Naseem Ansari said quietly, “The instrument sees one sky; the eye sees another.”

Shashibhushan Babu said, “The instrument does not lie.”

Kailash asked, “Are all our eyes lying together?”

No one found an answer to that question before five minutes past twelve.

Over the next three nights the story spread through the whole village.

Seven people came the first night. Twenty-two the second. On the third, nearly fifty people gathered in the school field.

Someone brought a mat, someone a lantern, someone a mobile phone. For the children it became a festival. The elders grumbled that with such a crowd, who could see the stars at all.

Kailash did not like the crowd. What had first been five minutes of silence was now filling with whispers, guesses, and laughter.

Yet the moment midnight struck, the crowd fell silent by itself.

Now everyone could see the second sky.

On his first night, Bhola Sah, the village grocer, pointed to one cluster and said, “Look at that bent sickle.”

Ragini immediately gripped Kailash’s arm. No one had told Bhola Sah that name.

A little later Saguna Kaki, who rarely came even to school functions, pointed towards the three bright points and said, “The Three Staves are shining very brightly tonight.”

This time Shashibhushan Babu said nothing.

The next day he proposed an experiment.

Twenty-three people were chosen. Each was made to sit in a separate room. At midnight they were taken outside one at a time and allowed to look at the sky for one minute. No one was given a chance to hear what anyone else had said.

After five minutes past twelve, each person was asked to draw on paper the shape of the cluster they had seen and write the name that had come to mind.

Of the twenty-three, nineteen wrote ‘sickle’ or ‘bent sickle’ for the curved line of stars. Seventeen called the three bright points ‘Three Staves’. The seven stars in a circle drew different names—‘Seven Grains’ from some, ‘Round Bowl’ from others, ‘Seven Lamps’ from still others.

Shashibhushan Babu spread the papers across a table and sat looking at them for a long time.

“If the shape is the same, the names can resemble one another,” Naseem Ansari said.

“The sickle, yes,” Shashibhushan said, “but why should three points become staves? They could have said steps, posts, lamps, eyes—anything.”

Ragini asked, “Then where do the names come from?”

Instead of answering, Shashibhushan counted the papers again.

Gradually the rules of the second sky became clearer in the village, though not one cause did.

It began exactly at midnight. Five minutes. If it rained, the clouds hid everything, but on the next clear night after the clouds had gone, the same thing returned.

The telescope showed the ordinary sky. Mobile photographs showed the ordinary sky. Through a thick glass window, some people saw the familiar stars and some the second sky; no consistent rule emerged from that.

The school field, the pond steps, a rooftop, the road—wherever one looked from within the village boundary, the new constellations appeared for five minutes.

One night Shashibhushan Babu took Kailash on his motorcycle to the village's southern boundary. On one side of the road were the village fields; on the other began the land of the neighboring panchayat.

It was almost midnight. They stood beside the boundary marker.

When midnight struck, Kailash stepped two paces inside the village side. The second sky.

He crossed the road and went twenty paces into the neighboring panchayat. The familiar sky.

Back towards the village. The second sky.

Shashibhushan tried it himself. The result was the same.

"The boundary belongs to a map," Kailash said. "Why should the sky obey a map?"

Shashibhushan did not answer.

The following week four young men from the block science club arrived. They brought a large telescope, a compass, a thermometer, and an instrument for measuring brightness.

The villagers hoped that now something would finally be proved.

The young men set up their instruments and worked through the night. At twelve they too saw the second sky with their naked eyes. The telescope and the instruments continued to record the ordinary sky.

After five minutes one of them said, "I have no instrument with which to measure what the eye saw."

Another said, "It will be difficult to write this in the report."

Bhola Sah grew irritated. "You all saw it, and still it is difficult to write?"

The young man answered calmly, "Seeing and evidence are not the same thing."

Kailash did not like the sentence, but he did not argue.

The next day the science club left. The village's name did not appear in their public note. There was no news report.

Two days later Bhola Sah pasted a notice outside his shop: 'Tea for Watching the Second Sky—Until Eleven at Night.'

Naseem Ansari read it and laughed. "The sky lasts five minutes, the tea lasts an hour."

Gradually the crowds thinned. The wonder that had drawn people in the first week began, by the second, to become part of ordinary routine.

Some people climbed to their roofs before midnight, watched for five minutes, then went to sleep. Some said, 'I'm tired tonight. I'll watch tomorrow.'

Kailash found this change strangest of all.

The sky that had driven sleep from him on the first night was becoming, in the village, another fixed time like the milkman's hour, the electricity cut, or the closing of the market.

Only Ragini did not miss a single night.

She had begun keeping a thick notebook. Date, weather, temperature at midnight, the constellations seen, the ordinary constellations five minutes later—she wrote down everything.

Kailash asked, "What will you do by writing so much?"

"Someday it may be understood."

"And if it never is?"

Ragini thought for a moment, then said, "Then at least it will remain known that I saw it."

Kailash liked that answer.

One evening Ragini came to the school with an envelope in her hand. She had been admitted to a residential school in Darbhanga. She was to leave the following Monday.

Kailash showed his happiness. Ragini smiled, but her eyes were on the notebook.

"I'll look at twelve there," she said.

"Do."

"What if it doesn't appear there?"

"Then it doesn't appear."

"And what if it stops here after I leave?"

Kailash laughed. "Does the sky report for duty on your account?"

Ragini did not smile.

That week she measured the sky even more carefully. One night she said, "Dada, the circle of seven stars has shifted a little to the left."

Kailash looked. He could make out no difference.

"Look at the drawing from the first night in the notebook."

They compared the two drawings. The difference was tiny, but it was there.

The next night, again. The circle had moved a little farther left. The bent sickle too was a hair's breadth higher.

When Shashibhushan Babu heard, he became excited again. He said that if there was movement in the second sky, then it must have a mathematics of its own time.

Ragini plotted the positions from three nights on a single page. The lines did not match the normal motion of stars.

“Perhaps our measurements are not accurate,” Shashibhushan Babu said.

Kailash laughed. “The instruments cannot even see this sky. What are we supposed to measure it accurately with?”

Ragini said, “With our eyes.”

For the first time, Shashibhushan Babu did not immediately contradict her.

On Sunday night, Ragini’s last night in the village, the school field was empty. The crowd no longer gathered as it once had.

Kailash and Ragini sat on the steps of the pond. The water was still. The ordinary stars trembled in its surface.

Ragini asked, “Can you see the second sky in the water?”

Kailash said, “We’ll test it tonight.”

Midnight came.

Above them, the second sky appeared.

They both leaned towards the water.

In the pond was the familiar sky.

Ragini watched without breathing. The Saptarshi in the water. The bent sickle overhead.

She stirred the water with her hand. The reflection shattered into little fragments of light, but when it gathered itself again, it was still the ordinary sky.

“Telescope, mobile, water,” Ragini counted. “All of them see the ordinary sky.”

“And we?”

“The second one.”

Kailash asked, “Then which one is true?”

Ragini began to answer, then fell silent.

At five minutes past twelve, the sky above once again matched the sky in the water.

Ragini wrote the last line for that night in her notebook: ‘The reflection does not change.’

The next morning she left for Darbhanga.

Kailash returned to keeping the night watch alone.

On the first night, at twelve, he stood in the courtyard as usual. The second sky came. Ragini was not there.

He took out his mobile and called her.

In the hostel Ragini was still awake. She immediately went up to the roof.

“There?” Kailash asked.

Ragini looked up. “The ordinary sky.”

“Here it’s the other one.”

For a few moments both were silent.

Ragini said, “Point the mobile upward.”

Kailash aimed the mobile camera at the sky. On the screen Ragini could see the Saptarshi.

“It’s the same here,” she said.

Kailash looked at the mobile screen. On the screen, the ordinary sky. Directly above the screen, before his own eyes, the bent sickle.

“Dada, are the Three Staves there?”

Kailash looked up. “Yes.”

“The circle of seven stars?”

“Yes. A little farther left than before now.”

Ragini searched her own ordinary sky in the direction her grandfather was describing. She could see nothing there.

On the mobile screen, the skies in both places looked exactly the same.

To their eyes, the skies were different.

Twelve oh four.

Ragini said, “Tell me when it changes.”

Kailash did not look at his watch. He kept looking up.

A moment later the bent sickle was gone. The Three Staves were gone. The circle of seven stars was gone. The familiar stars stood once more in their old places.

Kailash said softly, “Now they are one.”

At the other end of the phone Ragini said nothing.

She kept looking at the ordinary sky above her hostel.

Kailash kept looking at the ordinary sky above the school courtyard.

On the small mobile screen, the two skies had been the same all along.

The only difference was those five minutes—recorded by no instrument, yet present in full, the whole time, in the silence between the two of them.

STORY 4

The Woman Cutting Onions

Saroja Devi was not in the habit of crying while cutting onions.

If an onion was sharp, her eyes burned, water streamed from them, and her nose tingled; but she regarded all that as a natural part of the work. Just as a palm draws back of its own accord near a hot pan, just as the colour of the water changes while rice is being washed, so tears come from the eyes when onions are cut. There was no story in that water.

That day, too, there was no story at the beginning.

By nine in the morning, a long rectangle of sunlight had come through the kitchen window and fallen across the old wooden cutting board. The board was grey in the middle, dark brown around the edges, and its surface was crossed by countless knife marks cutting through one another.

Saroja placed the first onion on the board and cut it in two.

A hammer was sounding out on the veranda.

From the following week, the kitchen was to be rebuilt. The old limewash would be stripped from the walls, the sink moved to the other side, the wooden cupboard below replaced by metal drawers, and an extractor fitted above the stove. Her son had said, “Ma, have it done properly this once. The kitchen is thirty years old.”

Saroja had said, “Have it done.”

The mason had taken measurements the day before. Today the carpenter had come to inspect the old planks and decide which could be saved and which could not.

“Are we keeping this cutting board too?” her daughter-in-law Neelima asked, standing in the doorway.

Without stopping the knife, Saroja said, “It’s worn down this far. Throw it away.”

Neelima looked at the board. “I thought you would say—don’t throw this one away.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s old.”

“If every old thing is kept, there’ll be no room left to walk in the house.”

Neelima laughed and went outside.

Saroja returned to cutting onions.

Today's meal was not an ordinary one. That evening the family would gather for the first time since Yogendra Babu's retirement. He had been free of his job for three weeks, but their son had been away and their daughter caught up in examination work at her school; so everyone was coming today.

Yogendra Babu had said, "Don't make anything elaborate. Just what we normally eat at home."

For Saroja, 'what we normally eat at home' meant a list: arhar dal, fried potatoes and onions, pumpkin curry, rice, curd, papad, and a little kheer for Yogendra Babu.

Neelima had said, "Ma, cut three dishes from the menu."

Saroja cut two. Not three.

The work went on.

The carpenter's hammer on the veranda, granddaughter Anu's voice in the courtyard, the radio murmuring the news inside. Without needing thought, Saroja's hands peeled onions, cut away the roots, halved them, and sliced them thin.

"Nani!" Anu came running in.

"Have you washed your hands?"

"Yes."

"Then pick the bad leaves out of this coriander."

Anu pulled up a low stool and sat down. At school she had been given an assignment called 'Three Generations of My Family'. For the past two days she had been going around asking everyone questions.

"Nani, you still haven't answered me."

"Answered what?"

"Five major events in your life."

Saroja slid the onion pieces into a separate plate for the pan and said, "What major events have there been in my life?"

"Everyone has to write five."

"Your Nana got his job. Your mother was born. Your uncle was born. This house was built. Nana retired. There—five."

Anu shook her head. "Those aren't your events."

Saroja laughed. "I was there in all of them."

"Madam said that when we write about someone's life, we should ask about the things that person did."

"Then write—I was born, I got married, I had children..."

"That happens to everyone."

"Not everyone has children."

Anu thought for a moment, then repeated the question: "What did you do?"

The knife stopped for an instant.

Saroja looked at the child. Anu genuinely wanted an answer. There was no argument in her question, no accusation. She held a coriander leaf in her hand and was separating the yellowed part with her fingernail.

"Pick the coriander first," Saroja said. "I'll answer later."

Anu accepted that.

Saroja picked up the second onion.

This onion was smaller than the first, and a green shoot had emerged from its top. Ordinarily Saroja cut such shoots away. Sometimes they altered the taste.

She trimmed the root and halved the onion.

As the knife came down through the middle, Saroja's hand stopped of its own accord.

Inside the onion were rings of white and purple, but their centre was not in the middle. In the direction where the green shoot had grown, all the rings were slightly stretched, pressed, bent. The structure within was not nearly as even as the roundness visible from outside.

Saroja had cut onions like this many times before.

Today she saw it.

That was the only difference.

"What happened?" Anu asked.

"Nothing."

Saroja turned the half onion around on her palm.

The sprout had not asked for a path through the centre; it had risen wherever it found room. Because of it, the rings inside had shifted, little by little.

For some strange reason, Saroja felt the sight was worth looking at for a long while.

She put the half onion back on the board and raised the knife, but did not cut.

The rectangle of sunlight had now moved from the middle of the board towards its right edge. In that light, the old knife marks stood out clearly.

Some lines were straight. Some slanting. Some deep. Some so faint that they disappeared into the grain of the wood.

Without thinking, Saroja ran the fingers of her left hand over the board.

The board had not come with her when she married. Five years after she entered this house, when the old kitchen was first made, a carpenter had fashioned it from a leftover teak plank. The moment Saroja saw it she had said, "It's far too big."

The carpenter had said, "Big is better. The vegetables won't spill off."

At the time she had disliked the board. Heavy. Hard to wash. Slow to dry.

A few years later, working without it began to feel inconvenient.

Saroja noticed a long diagonal scar across the top of the board. She remembered—Meera had been in Class Eight when she first held a knife. While cutting cucumber, the knife had slipped and run all the way to the edge of the board. Frightened, Meera had dropped it.

Saroja had not scolded her. She had only said, “Curl your fingers inward when you hold it.”

How many times Meera had cut things on this board after that, Saroja could not remember.

There was a deep round burn on the board’s left corner. Once a hot pan had been set there by mistake. Who had put it down—Yogendra Babu, Meera, or Saroja herself—the memory was no longer clear.

The board had kept the scar; not the name of the culprit.

That made Saroja laugh.

“Nani?”

“Nothing. Pick the coriander.”

Now Anu was watching her.

Saroja began cutting the onion again, but her hands no longer moved at the old pace.

Somewhere inside her, Anu’s question rose again: What did you do?

The first answer came back unchanged: marriage, children, house, husband’s job, children’s education.

But now the subjects of the sentences began to change.

The house was built—that was one thing.

The kitchen window would face east—that was Saroja’s thing.

While the house was being built, the mason had set the window frame into the south wall. That was where the plan showed it. For three days Saroja kept saying that the neighbours would raise a high wall to the south and the kitchen would become dark. No one had time to listen. On the fourth day she had the bricks removed herself and made them shift the frame to the east wall.

Yogendra Babu came home that evening and said, “You changed the plan?”

“Yes.”

“What did the mason say?”

“He’ll get his wages. I am the one who has to look out of the window.”

Yogendra Babu had remained silent for a few moments, then said, “All right.”

For thirty years the morning sun had entered through that window.

Saroja picked up a slice of onion. Light gleamed along its edge.

Anu asked again, “Nani, did you make the window?”

Saroja started. She realised she must have spoken half a sentence aloud without noticing.

"The mason made it. I changed where it was put."

Anu sprang up and fetched her paper. "Shall I write that?"

"You'll write such a small thing?"

"You said it yourself, didn't you?"

Saroja did not answer.

As she cut the third piece of onion, another scene returned to her.

Meera was in Class Ten when Yogendra Babu was transferred to Supaul. Everyone in the family said the children should go with him. There would be government quarters.

Meera was not crying, but her board examinations were four months away. Changing schools would have been difficult.

Yogendra Babu had said, "What can we do? It's an order."

Saroja had said, "You go. I'll stay here with the children until the examinations are over."

"Alone?"

"What jungle is this?"

Four months later, the family moved to Supaul. For years the episode was remembered as 'Yogendra's transfer'. No one ever said, 'Saroja ran the house alone for four months.'

Saroja herself had never thought of it in those terms either.

Nothing extraordinary had happened in those four months. Children to school in the morning, market, kitchen, electricity bill, once a leaking roof, once a high fever at night, twice to the bank.

But inside 'nothing extraordinary' there had been so many decisions.

Saroja stopped the knife and looked at the board.

Its lines too had not been made by one great event. One cut, one day at a time.

The wood had slowly changed its colour.

"The second thing?" Anu was ready.

"Coriander first."

"The coriander is done."

Saroja looked. It really was.

"Then wash your hands again."

Anu made a face, but went.

Once Saroja was alone, the kitchen suddenly seemed very quiet. The hammer was still sounding outside, but the sound within had changed.

She thought—must the events of a life be large for the life itself to become large?

At once the question sounded contrived to her.

She did not want a philosophical answer. There were onions still to cut. The dal had to be put on. Milk had to be reduced for the kheer.

And yet, as she worked, memories no longer came to her as they had before.

Earlier, whenever a memory came, someone else's name was attached to it—Meera's examinations, Naveen's job, Yogendra's transfer, her mother-in-law's illness.

Now, within those memories, Saroja could see her own hands.

When her mother-in-law fell ill, Saroja spent fifteen days running between the kitchen and medicines. It had not been service alone; she had decided to change doctors when the first medicines made the condition worse. The men of the house had said, "We'll see tomorrow." Saroja had called a rickshaw that very night and taken her to hospital.

When Naveen got his first job, everyone said, "The boy has succeeded."

Saroja remembered that on the last day for submitting the form, one copy of his certificate had been missing. Naveen had sat down in despair. Saroja borrowed a neighbour's bicycle, rode to the market, and had the copy made before the shop closed.

All these things sounded small when spoken aloud.

Left unspoken, they vanished.

Saroja caught on that word.

Vanished.

Had her life truly remained invisible, or had she herself gone on storing it under other people's headings?

The pan on the stove had grown hot. Saroja poured in oil. Cumin seeds crackled. The moment she added the onions, a hiss rose from the pan.

There was still water in her eyes, but the cause was still the onions. Saroja understood that perfectly. No tragic revelation had come upon her. She was not crying over her life.

If anything, she felt a faint irritation—why, for so many years, had she kept such a poor answer to the question, "What did I do?"

Neelima came in again.

"Ma, the carpenter is asking whether this upper plank can be saved."

"It can. It's teak."

"The lower one?"

"That has rotted. Remove it."

"Will the window frame be changed?"

Saroja said at once, "No. The window will not be moved."

Neelima paused at the firmness in her voice. "No one was going to move it."

"Good. It will stay facing east."

“All right.”

Neelima left.

Saroja smiled as she stirred the onions in the pan.

She understood that she did not want to save the window because it was old. She wanted it kept because once it had been her decision, and it still served its purpose.

The wooden cutting board? That could be thrown away.

The distinction had never been this clear to her before.

An old object and one's own life were not the same thing.

By afternoon the house was full of people. Meera arrived with her husband and daughter. Naveen brought sweets from the market. Yogendra Babu bathed, put on a new kurta, and sat on the veranda, where the box containing the watch he had received as a retirement gift had remained unopened for three weeks.

Before the meal, everyone remembered Anu's school assignment.

Anu took her paper and sat down in front of her Nana.

“Nana, five major events.”

Without thinking, Yogendra Babu said, “Appointment, first transfer, promotion, the house being built, retirement.”

Anu wrote them down.

“That quickly?” Meera laughed.

“A government servant's life is like a register,” Yogendra Babu said. “You can find all the dates.”

Anu looked towards Saroja.

“Nani's five are still left.”

For a moment, everyone's eyes turned to Saroja.

Setting down a plate, Saroja said, “The food is getting cold.”

“Tell me one first,” Anu insisted.

Yogendra Babu laughed. “I'll count your Nani's events for you.”

Saroja looked at him.

No anger rose in her. What rose was curiosity—now she wanted to hear what Yogendra Babu would count.

“Marriage,” he said, “Meera was born, Naveen was born, the house was built...”

“Those four are on your list too,” Anu said at once.

Everyone burst out laughing.

Yogendra Babu laughed too. “You caught me.”

Saroja said, “Your Nana is running my life from his own list.”

The sentence was spoken in laughter, but even as she said it, Saroja heard the truth inside it.

Meera asked, “Then you tell us, Ma.”

Saroja put the plate down on the table and sat.

For the first time she began to make a list—not to look up a certificate, but to examine her own memory.

“One,” she said. “When this house was being built, I changed the position of the kitchen window.”

Yogendra Babu laughed immediately. “That is an event too?”

Saroja laughed as well. “It is mine, so I’ll decide whether it is large or small.”

Anu wrote with great care.

“Two?”

“During Meera’s Class Ten examinations, I lived here alone with the children for four months.”

Meera fell silent. “I remember.”

“I didn’t,” Naveen said.

“You were younger.”

“Three?” Anu asked.

Saroja paused.

Her mother-in-law’s night at the hospital? Naveen’s form? Her insistence on buying Meera her first bicycle? Starting a savings group with five women from the neighbourhood? Travelling back and forth between her parental home and her marital home during her mother’s last month? Opening the first bank account in her own name?

They all came to her.

Suddenly the number five seemed too small.

Saroja laughed. “I’ll tell you the other three this evening. Eat now.”

Anu was dissatisfied, but the sight of the plate persuaded her.

In the middle of the meal Yogendra Babu suddenly said, “I remember the window.”

Serving dal, Saroja said, “So do I.”

“I had thought the mason shifted it on his own.”

Saroja looked at him.

A small event from thirty years ago had survived in two people’s memories in two different forms.

“No,” she said. “I changed it.”

Yogendra Babu nodded. “Then you changed it well. The morning light comes in beautifully.”

That was all.

No apology. No grand acknowledgement. Nor was one needed.

Saroja moved the ladle of dal towards the plate.

By evening the house began to empty again. Meera went home. Anu forgot her paper, then ran back in through the door to fetch it. Naveen threw the empty sweets box into the rubbish.

Before leaving, the carpenter had piled the old things to one side: broken planks, a rotted drawer, rusted iron nails, and Saroja's cutting board.

The board was leaning against the wall.

Saroja saw it while putting the kitchen in order.

For a moment she wanted to keep it.

At once she asked herself—why?

The answer came: because the lines are there.

Then came another question—would keeping the lines bring the days back?

No.

She lifted the board. It was still heavy. There was an old stain of damp on the underside. The wood in the middle had grown thin. Neelima was right—it now rocked under the knife.

Saroja set it down again.

"This goes," she said, pushing it towards the separate pile for the carpenter.

After dinner, Anu came back with her paper. Her house was two lanes away; she could not sleep without finishing her school assignment.

"The remaining three."

This time Saroja was ready.

"Three—I opened my first bank account in my own name. I don't remember the date."

"Is the date necessary?"

"No. Did your teacher ask for it?"

"No."

"Then no."

"Four?"

"I started a savings group with the women in the neighbourhood. The first meeting was held in this kitchen."

Anu stared. "That group still exists, doesn't it?"

"It does. Now it runs even without me."

"Five?"

Saroja remained silent for a long time.

This time, many memories were not jostling one another for the fifth place. She was choosing.

"Staying here during Meera's examinations is already number two," Anu reminded her.

"Yes."

Saroja said, "Five—today I understood for the first time that all these things are events in my life."

Anu stopped her pen. "Should I write that?"

"Why not?"

"Madam will say—what kind of event is that?"

"Then tell her—Nani said so."

Anu laughed and wrote it down.

Yogendra Babu was listening to the news in the adjoining room. Whether he heard the sentence or not, Saroja did not try to find out.

After Anu left, Saroja went back into the kitchen and began looking over the preparations for the next day.

On the table lay the small piece of the sprouting onion from the morning that had been left uncut. The green tip had wilted slightly.

Saroja picked it up.

For a moment she thought of planting it in the soil.

Then she laughed. There was no need to turn every green thing into a symbol.

She cut off the sprout and put it in the rubbish bin, then placed the remaining onion in a container.

Neelima had bought a new cutting board—light, smooth, made of bamboo. Not a single mark had yet appeared on its surface.

Saroja unwrapped it, washed it under the tap, wiped it with a cloth, and set it in the old place beneath the window.

At night the east-facing window was only a black rectangle. In the morning, sunlight would come through it again.

Saroja took out two lemons for the next day. She placed one on the new board and brought the knife down.

The first cut was very light.

A fine line remained on the smooth bamboo.

Saroja did not touch it with her finger.

She began cutting the other half.

STORY 5

The Bus Window

That evening, at first, Madhav Jha could see only the road outside in the bus window.

The crowds of Laheriasarai were falling away behind him. Shop lights, bicycle bells, the yellow roofs of tempos, bulbs hanging above fruit vendors' carts—everything slipped past beyond the glass. The lights inside the bus had not yet been switched on, so the pane was still simply a clear window.

As soon as they crossed the railway gate, the darkness thickened a little. The driver switched on the two lights overhead.

Then the window changed.

The road remained where it was, but a face settled over it.

At first Madhav thought someone in the seat behind him had leaned forward and was looking into the glass.

He turned slightly. Two college students behind him were watching their phones with earphones in. An elderly man sat with his eyes closed.

Madhav looked back at the window.

The face was still there.

His first feeling was not fear. If it had been fear, his heart would have quickened, his body would have drawn back. This was only an awkward pause—as when, in a crowd, one sees someone familiar from a distance but cannot remember the name.

The face was familiar.

Very familiar.

And yet Madhav could not immediately accept it as his own.

The bus lurched. The reflection trembled. A red light from outside slid across his left cheek, then disappeared.

Madhav narrowed his eyes a little.

The hair at the front of his head was thinner than before. The right eyebrow sat slightly higher than the left. Deep shadows lay on either side of the nose. The skin beneath the chin had loosened. Fine lines gathered at the corners of the eyes.

He knew all this.

Every morning while shaving, he saw these things in the mirror.

But now the problem was not the lines or the hair.

The problem was that there was no familiar expression in the face.

It was neither smiling nor worried; it carried neither the gravity of the office nor the ease of home. It was simply the face of a tired man sitting in a bus, not prepared to answer anyone.

Madhav did not know what to do with this face.

At four that afternoon, a photograph had been taken at the office for his new identity card.

The three-year-old identity cards were being replaced. A white backdrop had been hung in the office conference room, with a small light in front and a chair in the middle. A young man was photographing all the employees on a mobile phone.

When Madhav's turn came, the young man said, "Sit a little straighter in the chair."

Madhav sat up straight.

"Chin a little lower."

He lowered his chin.

"Eyes here."

He looked at the small black dot above the phone.

"No smile."

The smile that had appeared on Madhav's face without thought vanished at once.

The first photograph was taken.

The young man looked at the screen and said, "Relax a little."

Madhav laughed inwardly. Sit straight, chin down, eyes here, no smile—and in the end, relax.

For the second photograph, he deliberately let the muscles of his face go slack.

The young man looked again.

"This one looks a little tired. Once more."

For the third attempt, Madhav assumed the expression that came automatically to his face whenever he entered the room of a senior officer—not too much of a smile, not sadness, not a question.

The young man immediately said, "Yes, this is right."

Madhav had not paid attention to the word "right" then.

Now, in the bus window, the word returned.

The right face.

Right for whom?

The bus was passing through a small market. In the hard light from a sweet shop, the reflection almost vanished. Madhav felt something like relief. Real people outside became clear again—a child holding his father's finger, a cyclist carrying a sack, a woman steadying a bag of vegetables.

Once the market fell behind and the darkness deepened again, the face returned to the glass.

This time Madhav was ready.

He made his mouth smile slightly.

At once familiarity returned.

This was the face he wore when posing for a photograph at a neighbour's wedding.

He removed the smile and drew his brows together a little.

This was the face he made at the office when the figures on two account sheets refused to match.

Corners of the mouth lowered, eyes softened.

This was the face that came of its own accord when he visited the home of someone who was ill.

Then he let all of it go again.

The stranger returned.

Madhav took his wallet from his pocket.

There was less money in the wallet than paper: a bank slip, a prescription, two or three old receipts, his current office identity card, and four small old photographs in a transparent sleeve.

He took the photographs out of the sleeve.

The oldest was from his undergraduate admission form.

Madhav had been twenty-two. His hair was thick, his cheeks lean, his moustache not yet fully grown. Yet the expression on his face was surprisingly solemn.

That day the photographer had said, "Don't smile. A smile doesn't look good on a certificate photograph."

Madhav still remembered the sentence.

The second photograph was from his first job application.

That time the photographer had run a comb through his hair and said, "Show your ears."

Both ears were plainly visible in the photograph.

The third photograph was from an older office identity card.

At the time, his daughter Ritu had been in Class Eight. Before he went to have the photograph taken, she had said, "Babu, don't look so serious. You look like a criminal."

Madhav had smiled. The photographer had immediately said, "That's enough. No teeth."

The fourth was from his current identity card, three years old.

Madhav held each photograph up in turn beside the face in the bus window.

The face had changed; that was natural.

But for the first time he realised that behind every one of those photographs some command or other was hidden.

Don't smile.

Show your ears.

No teeth.

Keep your chin straight.

Eyes here.

Relax.

Had he been recognising the instructions more readily than his own face?

At the front of the bus, near the driver, was a small rectangular mirror. It was not meant for the passengers but for the driver. In it, the faces inside the bus appeared small and reversed by distance.

Madhav tried to find his own face there.

Among so many people it was difficult to pick himself out.

Then, suddenly, he laughed at himself.

Because he could not recognise his face, he had gone looking for it in another mirror.

In the seat ahead, a child of six or seven slept in his mother's lap. His mouth was half open, one cheek pressed flat, a thin thread of saliva at the corner of his lips. Now and then his mother wiped it away with the end of her sari. The child did not wake.

Madhav thought: this child's face would never appear like this on his identity card.

And yet his mother probably knew him best in precisely this form.

The thought was so simple that Madhav did not immediately want to accept it.

He began looking out of the window.

His phone vibrated.

It was a message from Ritu.

"Babu, did you get the new photograph taken?"

Madhav smiled.

Two days earlier, Ritu had told him she was making a little family booklet for her five-year-old daughter. She wanted a recent photograph of every family member. Madhav had sent her the photograph from his old identity card.

Ritu had immediately sent it back. "Not this one. Send a photograph in which you look like you."

Madhav had replied jokingly, "Who else do I look like but myself?"

Ritu had answered, "Not in an identity-card photograph."

That day the exchange had ended in laughter.

Now, before the bus window, Ritu's sentence returned.

A photograph in which you look like you.

Madhav opened the front camera on his phone.

His face appeared clearly on the screen—far more clearly than in the window.

Without thinking, he straightened his head. Lifted his chin a little. Opened his eyes wider. Evened the two corners of his mouth.

At once a familiar man appeared on the screen.

Without pressing the button, Madhav switched off the camera.

The bus jolted through a pothole.

The seat beside him had been empty until then. At the next stop a thin young man got on and sat beside Madhav. A cloth bag hung from his shoulder; in one hand he carried a tin of blue paint. He looked as though he were returning from painting work.

As soon as he sat down, he glanced once at the window, then rested his head against the seat.

The words escaped Madhav before he had meant to say them: “Once it gets dark, this glass turns into a mirror, doesn’t it?”

At first the young man did not understand.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Madhav said.

After a couple of seconds the young man looked at the glass. “In the dark, you can see yourself.”

That was all.

He closed his eyes again.

Madhav found his own question ridiculous.

What he wanted to know was this: when other people saw their reflections, did they at once say, “That is me”? Or did a moment’s distance ever come between seeing and knowing?

But could such a question even be asked?

And if it were asked, would the answer be true? The very question would make a person conscious of his face.

Madhav looked at the window again.

This time he deliberately did nothing.

No smile. No tightening of the brows. No adjustment of the chin.

The face became uncertain again.

Electric wires outside ran across his forehead. Green letters from a shop fell across his cheek for a moment, then the red tail-light of a bus rested beside his eye. The reflection was never still. Perhaps this too was one reason for the lack of recognition—at home, in a mirror, the face stood alone; in the bus window it mingled with the road.

But Madhav knew it was not only a question of light.

He was never like this when he stood before the mirror at home.

In the morning, while shaving, the purpose was clear—where a patch of beard remained, where soap remained. While brushing, he looked at his teeth. Before leaving home, he fixed his hair. There was always some task.

The mirror was less an object for seeing his face than a tool for correcting it.

In the bus window there was nothing to correct.

Perhaps that too was why the face seemed unfamiliar.

Even the word “unfamiliar” did not seem quite right to Madhav.

An unfamiliar person is someone one has never seen before.

He had seen this face thousands of times.

Then what was this?

It was like a room in a familiar house that had remained locked for years, and when it was opened one day, every object inside was one’s own, yet their arrangement was unknown.

The bus slowed beneath a railway bridge. A train passed overhead with a roar. The window trembled. Madhav’s reflection seemed to break into many fine fragments, though the glass itself was unbroken.

He closed his eyes.

The moment he did, he remembered his father.

While shaving, his father used to hang a small round mirror from a nail by the window. The silvering had peeled away around its edges. As a child Madhav would stand behind his father and see only half his own face in it—sometimes one eye, sometimes the nose, sometimes the mouth. To see the whole face he had to tilt his head to one side.

One day his father had asked, “What are you looking at?”

Madhav had said, “Myself.”

“Half of yourself?”

“Half of me is still me.”

His father had laughed.

At the memory, Madhav opened his eyes.

He thought: as a child he had so easily accepted half a face as his own. Now the whole face was before him, and yet why was it difficult?

The young man beside him rose to get off. The paint tin knocked against Madhav’s knee.

“Sorry,” the young man said.

“It’s all right.”

The seat was empty again.

The conductor came from the rear and said, “Madhav Babu, you did take a ticket, didn’t you?”

Madhav started.

“Yes, I did.”

The conductor laughed. “You’re very quiet today.”

Madhav showed him the ticket.

The conductor moved on without even looking at it. He recognised Madhav every day.

That too seemed strange. The bus conductor did not even need to see his face—where he sat, the bag he carried, the stop where he got off, the way he asked for a ticket: all of it together was Madhav.

Then how much of Madhav was the face?

The moment the question arose, he felt irritated with himself.

After spending the whole day staring at columns of figures, to sit in a bus and philosophise about one’s own face—this was not his nature.

He closed the wallet and put it back in his pocket.

At that exact moment, the lights inside the bus went out for an instant.

The glass became a window again.

Madhav’s face disappeared.

Outside there was only the darkness of the fields, a bulb glowing at a distant house, and the beam of a motorcycle.

Madhav suddenly felt a faint sense of loss.

The face that had made him uncomfortable a moment earlier did not feel good to lose.

The lights came on again.

The face returned.

This time Madhav did not correct it.

He simply kept looking.

After a while he noticed that the face which seemed still was not truly still. The motion of the bus changed the eyelids; with each breath the nostrils widened slightly; at some thought the corner of the mouth moved; the light outside kept changing its colour.

None of this existed in a photograph.

On those little pieces of paper, the face had been stopped at a single moment of obeying instructions.

Here the face was obeying no instruction at all.

Madhav’s stop was drawing near.

From a distance the conductor called, “Next turn!”

Madhav lifted his bag.

As he stood, the whole shape of the reflection changed. The seated face lengthened, the shoulders rose, the roof of the bus moved into place behind his head.

For an instant it looked strange again.

Madhav did not smile.

He simply watched until the bus came to a stop.
When he reached home, Anita opened the door.
“Late today?”
“The bus got held up at the turn.”
Anita took his bag. “Why does your face look so fallen? Did something happen at the office?”
Madhav paused while taking off his shoes.
“My face looks fallen?”
Anita looked at him carefully once. “Not now. It did at the door.”
“It changed in two minutes?”
“What is wrong with you?”
Madhav laughed.
“Nothing.”
“Then wash your hands and face. I’m putting out the tea.”
There was a rectangular mirror in the washroom. Madhav turned on the tap but did not look at it.
Then his eyes rose of their own accord.
A clear face. Steady light. A familiar room.
Madhav immediately smoothed down the hair on the left side of his forehead with his hand.
Then he realised—he was correcting his face again.
His hand stopped in the air.
He left his hair as it was.
Jaw loose. Eyes ordinary.
Within two moments, the stranger from the bus had returned to the mirror.
This time Madhav was not startled.
The face was his. It was simply a face with no task to perform.
“Your tea will get cold!” Anita called.
“Coming.”
Madhav left the mirror and went out.
While they drank tea, Anita asked, “Did they take the photograph for the new identity card?”
“Yes.”
“Show me.”
“I don’t have it yet. They’ll make the card at the office.”
“Ritu was asking for a photograph too.”
Madhav remained silent.
Setting down her cup, Anita asked, “What are you thinking about?”
Madhav tried to ask a very simple question, but it did not come out simple.

“When does my face look most like mine to you?”

Anita laughed first. “What sort of question is that?”

“Just asking.”

She studied Madhav for a few moments.

“When you listen to someone and don’t interrupt halfway through.”

Madhav had not expected that. “I asked about my face.”

“That is when your face shows.”

“A smile? The eyes? Something?”

Anita looked again. “When you listen carefully, your right eyebrow lifts a little. But why do you want to know this?”

Madhav touched his right eyebrow.

“And when you say, ‘I’m not tired,’ your left eye closes halfway,” Anita added.

“Really?”

“Yes. Now tell me—what happened?”

Madhav could have told her about the bus window. But he felt that the moment he put it into words, the whole thing would become small or ridiculous.

He said, “Nothing. Today, while they were taking the photograph, I had to arrange my face so many times.”

Anita said easily, “Everyone arranges their face for a photograph.”

The matter ended there.

Madhav liked that answer.

That night Ritu sent another message: “Babu, don’t forget.”

Madhav opened his phone. Instead of opening the camera, he typed a reply: “I’ll send it tomorrow.”

The next morning, while shaving, he looked at the mirror very little. The shave turned out just as neat.

At the office, a preview of the new identity card arrived on his phone. It carried the third photograph from the previous day—the same “right” face.

A colleague said, “Madhav Babu, the photograph has come out well this time.”

Madhav looked at it.

The photograph was ordinary.

The man in it looked orderly, dependable, fit for the office.

Madhav said, “Yes, it’s good.”

He did not ask them to change the photograph.

That evening, on the way home, the bus was more crowded. There was no window seat. Madhav remained standing in the aisle.

He felt a little disappointed, and then laughed at his own disappointment. Until yesterday that pane had been a source of discomfort; today he wanted precisely that seat.

Two stops later, the window seat became free. Madhav sat down.

The sun had not fully set. For now, the glass showed more of the outside and less of the inside. His face was only a faint shadow.

The bus moved on.

Slowly the darkness deepened. The interior lights came on.

The face became clear again.

Madhav's first impulse was to straighten his chin a little.

He did not.

A lock of hair had fallen over his forehead. He did not brush it aside.

The man in the glass was still not entirely familiar.

But this time Madhav did not immediately declare him a stranger.

He kept looking.

Light from a shop passed over the glass. Half the face disappeared.

Then darkness. The face returned.

The corner of an eye shifted slightly, as though he were thinking something. At the edge of the mouth, without instruction, a faint smile appeared and went away.

Madhav did not try to hold it.

His phone vibrated again. It was a message from Ritu.

He took out the phone, but instead of opening the camera he opened Anita's name.

He wrote, "When I get home, take a photograph of me. Don't tell me beforehand."

The reply came at once: "Then you'll know that I'm taking it."

Madhav burst out laughing.

The man in the glass laughed too.

The laughter was familiar, but it had not been rehearsed.

Madhav put the phone back in his pocket.

The bus reached a brilliantly lit crossroads. The face slowly withdrew from the glass, and the road took its place.

This time Madhav did not try to stop it.

STORY 6

When It Was Time to Fetch Water

Manjari's phone showed 7:18 when she placed her yellow bucket in the queue at the tap.

Her bucket was ninth in line.

Ninth usually meant about fifteen minutes, but today the mouth of the tap was still dry, and all that could be heard was the faint rasp of air moving somewhere inside the pipe.

Manjari could wait for ten minutes.

At 7:28 she had to be back home. Father left for the shop at eight, her younger brother Anshu caught the school bus at five past eight, and Mother's medicine had to be given at twenty past eight.

And amid all this, she also had to send a reply by ten.

That reply had been lying half-written in her phone since the previous night.

"For personal reasons, I shall not be able to attend the training on the scheduled date..."

That was all she had written.

What remained was the final sentence: "Therefore, my place may be offered to a candidate on the waiting list."

Manjari had written and deleted that last sentence three times.

She had not deleted the message itself.

Only the final sentence refused to take shape.

She had gone to Darbhanga twice for that training—first for the written test, then for the interview.

It was a three-month programme at the district record repository, where she would learn to preserve old papers, registers, maps, and documents. There was no promise of a permanent job afterward, but there would be a certificate and experience.

Manjari liked the smell of old paper.

No one at home particularly understood that.

Father would say, "What is there in old paper? Look for a new job."

Mother would say, "If your heart is in it, learn."

Anshu would say, "Didi, so your job will be to dust old files?"

Manjari would laugh.

But when the letter of selection arrived, for the first time she did not laugh.

The training was to begin on Monday. She had to report at nine in the morning. By bus, Darbhanga was an hour and a half from home. In the evening, the return journey could sometimes take three hours.

And in that very week Mother sprained her right foot.

Not on the stairs.

At the tap.

Her foot had twisted while she was lifting a full bucket.

The doctor said—no heavy strain for ten or fifteen days.

So for the past ten days, Manjari had been fetching the water.

Mother had always fetched it before.

Manjari knew that, but she had not known that fetching water was not one task; it was a knot made of many tiny pieces of time.

What time the tap came alive in the morning, when the first burst of air escaped the pipe, which household's bucket reached the line first, whose vessel stood behind whose—each had its own arithmetic.

When Manjari received the selection letter, none of this queue for water had figured in the calculation she made.

She had written down only the bus timings.

6:45—leave home.

8:15—Darbhanga.

9:00—training.

5:00 in the evening—leave.

7:30—home.

On paper it was possible.

At home it was not.

It was 7:20.

The tap was still silent.

Manjari looked toward the front of the line.

In first place stood a blue container. Its owner was nowhere to be seen.

Second was an old brass water pot. No one stood beside that either.

Third was Rahima Chachi's red bucket. Rahima Chachi had said two minutes earlier, "The milk is on the stove. I'll check it and come back. Move the bucket forward for me."

Sushila Kaki, seated behind that bucket, said nothing; she simply nudged it slowly forward with her foot.

Manjari watched.

More than half the queue was made up of vessels; there were fewer people.

Someone had a stove to attend to at home, someone a child's tiffin, someone an elderly mother-in-law's medicine. People left their vessels in line and ran home in between.

The vessels remained standing in the queue.

Their places remained reserved.

Manjari had seen this arrangement before.

But today her attention stayed fixed on it.

"Whose blue container is that?" she asked Sushila Kaki.

"Kamala's. She has gone to put her grandson on the bus."

"And that pot?"

"Shobha's. Her rice is on the stove."

"Will they all come back?"

Sushila Kaki laughed. "If they don't, who will fill the water?"

Manjari laughed too.

But inside her, the question sounded differently.

If they don't come back, who will fill the water?

Mother had said almost the same thing the previous night.

"If you go away, who will fetch the water in the morning?"

Mother had not said it in the tone of someone stopping her.

She had merely asked for the arithmetic.

Manjari had given no answer.

Later that night, she had composed the half-written message declining the training.

It had seemed to her that there was only one answer to the question—"I won't go."

It was 7:22.

Suddenly the air inside the pipe stirred.

A "phuss" escaped from the mouth of the tap.

Everyone glanced at their own vessels.

Kamala came running back. Shobha had not yet returned. From a distance Rahima Chachi called out, "I'm coming!"

The queue suddenly came alive.

Sushila Kaki placed the first container beneath the tap.

Air came out first.

Then two or three heavy drops.

Then a thin, yellowish stream.

Kamala said, "Let the first water run. It will have been sitting in the pipe all night."

Sushila Kaki kept the container aside and let the water flow onto the ground.

Impatience rose in Manjari.

Water came with such difficulty, and these people were letting the first flow run away.

But no one filled it.

Within moments the stream turned muddy.

Then it grew a little stronger.

Then its colour lightened.

Kamala put the tip of a finger into the stream, smelled it, and said, "Now."

Only then did the first container begin to fill.

Without thinking, Manjari took out her phone.

7:23.

She opened the half-written message.

"For personal reasons..."

She read it.

Last night the sentence had seemed clear to her.

Today it seemed like that first flow from the pipe—what comes out the moment the pipe is opened need not be the water one finally keeps.

She did not delete the message at once.

She slipped the phone back into her pocket.

The first container filled.

Kamala hoisted it onto her head and walked away without looking back.

Shobha, the owner of the second pot, had still not returned.

Sushila Kaki placed the pot under the tap.

"She isn't here," Manjari said.

"So?"

"The water will overflow."

"I'll stop it."

When the pot was full, Sushila Kaki covered its mouth with her palm, moved it away from the tap, and set it to one side.

"When she comes back, she'll take it."

Manjari fell silent again.

Other people were filling water for those who were absent from the queue.

No meeting had been held to create this arrangement. No file had been opened. No signatures had been taken.

Everyone simply understood: if someone needed ten minutes elsewhere, that person's place did not disappear.

Manjari thought about her own home.

Could some rule like this be made there too?

At first the question seemed strange.

Then she began counting the tasks one by one.

Water.

Mother's morning medicine.

Anshu's tiffin.

Father's tea.

Rice for lunch.

The evening vegetables.

Small things from the market.

Until yesterday Manjari had put all these things inside one large word — "home."

"Home" was such a large word that beside it the training seemed small.

But when she broke home down into separate tasks, each one revealed its own time, its own hands, its own possible solution.

Father could fetch the water—if he opened the shop half an hour later.

Anshu could prepare his tiffin the night before—if all he had to do in the morning was warm it.

Mother's medicine could be given at seven, not at twenty past eight.

Until Mother's foot recovered, Reena from next door could come and put the rice on at noon—last month, in return for learning sewing from Mother, she had offered to help with something.

Manjari could cook the evening vegetables after she returned.

Some of these things would be inconvenient.

Not impossible.

"What are you thinking about?" Pinki asked from behind.

Manjari turned. Pinki had arrived in the queue carrying two small containers.

"Nothing."

"Where's your bucket?"

"There."

"Ninth?"

"Fifth now."

Pinki set her containers at the end of the line.

"I have to go turn off the gas at home. Keep an eye on my containers."

"All right."

Pinki ran off.

Manjari kept looking at her containers.

One was green, the other white. Both had a fine rim of soot around their mouths.

That someone's absence could be protected so simply—today this struck her as extraordinary.

7:25.

The third bucket was filling.

Manjari took out her phone again.

The cursor blinked beneath the message declining the training.

She selected the entire message.

Her finger paused over "Delete."

Then moved away.

She opened a new message instead.

"Namaskar. I have received the selection letter. I will attend on the scheduled date. During the first week, for family reasons, I will need to catch the evening bus; I will observe the training hours in full."

She read it.

This time too, she did not send it immediately.

First she looked at the water.

The stream was clear now.

But the water being clear did not make the message true.

The truth was that she wanted to go.

She had not admitted that the previous night.

She had thought: if she admitted that she wanted to go, she would also have to admit the guilt of leaving the work of the house behind.

So it had been easier to bury her desire inside the phrase "personal reasons."

The fourth bucket filled.

Now her yellow bucket was next.

She went up to the tap.

Sushila Kaki slid her bucket underneath.

"How is your mother's foot?"

"The pain is less now."

"Did the doctor say she can walk?"

"Not yet."

"You're going for the training from Monday, aren't you?"

Manjari started.

"Who told you?"

"Your mother."

"Mother?"

"Yesterday she was saying, 'Manjari will be away for three months. I'm thinking how I'll manage the water.'"

Inside Manjari, the sentence from the previous night rose again—"If you go away, who will fetch the water in the morning?"

It had been a question.

Manjari had turned it into an order.

"Your mother also said that if you don't go, she won't feel good about it," Sushila Kaki added casually.

Manjari said nothing.

The bucket was filling.

At first the stream struck the bottom with a hollow sound. As the water rose, the sound changed—deeper, fuller.

Suddenly Manjari understood that in making half a decision the previous night, she had heard only half of her mother's sentence.

Only the part that matched her fear.

"It's full," Sushila Kaki said.

Manjari turned off the tap.

7:28.

Exactly ten minutes.

Before lifting the bucket, she took out her phone.

She read the new message again.

She changed one sentence.

"I will attend on the scheduled date."

That was enough.

She deleted the rest of the explanation.

There was no need to send anyone an entire essay proving that her desire was justified.

She sent the message.

A small mark appeared on the phone screen.

The message had gone.

No instant sense of triumph rose inside her.

Her first thought was: now she would actually have to make the arrangements.

The bucket was very heavy.

She lifted it with both hands.

"Wait," Sushila Kaki said. "I'll take half the weight."

"No, I can carry it."

"Don't be heroic. Your mother has sprained her foot; now will you sprain your back?"

They both laughed.

Sushila Kaki took one handle of the bucket. Manjari took the other.

Together they carried it past two houses.

At Manjari's gate, Sushila Kaki let go.

"Send the empty container back in the evening. Tomorrow I'll teach your father how the queue works."

"Father?"

"Why not? Will the tap refuse water because a man's hand is holding the bucket?"

Manjari laughed.

Inside the house, Father was folding his newspaper.

“Why so late?”

“The water came late.”

“I told you to put two containers in the line last night itself.”

Manjari set down the bucket and went straight to the kitchen.

Mother was sitting on a low cot with her foot stretched out.

“You brought it?”

“Yes.”

“It didn’t hurt?”

“No.”

Mother looked at her face.

“What happened?”

“I’m going on Monday.”

Mother was silent for two moments.

“You sent the reply?”

“Yes.”

Mother looked at the bandage around her foot.

“Then the morning water?”

This time Manjari heard the question as a question.

“Father will fetch it.”

From outside, the rustle of the newspaper stopped.

“Me?” Father’s voice came from outside.

Manjari came and stood in the kitchen doorway.

“Yes. For the first week. Until Mother’s foot is better.”

Father pushed his glasses up onto his forehead.

“I don’t understand these queues and all.”

“You put the bucket down. When your turn comes, you fill it.”

“People will move it ahead and behind.”

“Sushila Kaki is there.”

At the sound of her name, Father fell silent. Few people in the neighbourhood had the courage to argue with Sushila Kaki about the queue.

Anshu came out from inside.

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Prepare your tiffin the night before.”

“Didi!”

“Just put the roti and vegetables in the box. Warm them in the morning.”

“I’ll miss my bus.”

“Wake up ten minutes earlier.”

Anshu pulled a face.

Mother kept looking at him.

“Practice from tomorrow,” Mother said.

Anshu immediately looked toward Father.

Father opened his newspaper again.

"I'll fetch the water, he'll do the tiffin," he said. "What else?"

In Manjari's mind, the huge word "home" she had made the previous day began opening again into small, separate tasks.

"I'll give Mother her medicine before I leave. I'll ask Reena if she can come and put the rice on for three or four days at noon. I'll be here in the evening."

Mother said softly, "Pay Reena."

"Yes."

"It is not good to make a habit of taking help without payment."

Manjari nodded.

From behind the newspaper Father said, "If I open the shop half an hour late, customers will go somewhere else."

Manjari remained silent.

This was a real difficulty.

She did not need an immediate answer to every question.

Mother said, "For the first fifteen days, one person can do two days—you two days, he two days, Anshu two days. On Sundays the tap comes late."

Anshu was about to protest, but one look at Mother's eyes silenced him.

Father lowered the newspaper.

"Anshu will fill buckets?"

"Why not?" Mother asked.

Father looked at Anshu.

Anshu looked at his own hands, as though for the first time checking whether these hands could lift water.

"I'll fill them halfway," he said.

"Who said you had to lift a completely full bucket?" Manjari said. "Make two trips."

Mother burst out laughing.

The air in the kitchen grew lighter.

Manjari understood that making arrangements was a second task that came after making a decision. A decision did not create the arrangements. It merely chose the direction in which arrangements could be made.

She looked at her phone.

There was still no reply from the record repository.

For a moment her chest grew heavy again.

What if they said her reply had not come in time?

What if her place had already been given to someone else?

What if nothing came of the training afterward?

What if, after three months, all the work of the house fell back upon her again?

A decision did not erase fear.
No one had told her that before, but today she understood it clearly.
She put the lid over the bucket full of water.
Then her phone vibrated.
The message read: "Attendance confirmation received. Please report by 8:45 a.m. on Monday."
That was all.
No congratulations. No assurance.
Manjari liked that.
She placed the phone in front of Mother.
Mother read it.
"Then check the bus timing again," she said.
"I have."
"There will be morning fog on the road."
"Where is the fog now?"
"You'll be there for three months, won't you? There will be by then."
Manjari laughed.
Mother had already carried the future three months ahead.
The previous night, Manjari's future had extended only as far as ten o'clock—whether or not she would send the reply.
Today it had suddenly reached all the way to the fog of December.
That afternoon Manjari went to Reena.
Reena was sewing a child's frock on the machine.
"Will you come and put the rice on at noon for three or four days?" Manjari asked.
"Will you pay me?" Reena asked.
"Yes."
"Then I'll do it."
They both laughed.
"Your mother has had plenty of work from me for free," Reena joked.
"That's why I'll pay."
"How much?"
The bargaining began.
Manjari found relief in the bargaining. The relationship would rest not on a favour, but on clearly defined work.
When Father came home that evening, he had a new, thin rope in his hand.
"The old bucket handle is weak," he said. "If it breaks tomorrow morning, the blame will fall on me."
He began replacing the bucket's handle.
Anshu moved the alarm on his phone five minutes earlier.

“Ten minutes earlier,” Manjari said.

“Let me start with five.”

Mother sat on the cot, watching everything.

That night Manjari opened her selection letter again.

She read her own name on the page.

Manjari Jha.

Three-month training programme.

Monday.

Until then she had seen only one problem on that page—her absence from home.

Today she saw something else: the page had a place written on it for her.

That place would remain hers only if she reached it on time.

No yellow bucket could be placed in a queue to hold that place for her.

She would have to go herself.

The next morning, at 7:17, Father opened the gate and stepped outside.

In one hand he carried the yellow bucket, in the other a small blue container.

“Why two?” Manjari asked.

“Anshu said he’ll fill only half, didn’t he? The small one is for him.”

From behind, Anshu called out, “I said I wouldn’t fill a full one!”

Father said, “First learn the queue.”

Manjari came out too.

“I’m going.”

“Where?” Father asked.

“The bus stand. I need to ask the exact time of Monday’s first bus.”

“Now?”

“Yes.”

Father placed the yellow bucket in the queue at the tap.

For a moment he shifted it left and right to find the exact position, as though straightening a bicycle wheel at his shop.

Sushila Kaki was watching from a distance.

“Not there,” she called. “Behind the red bucket!”

Without arguing, Father picked up the bucket and placed it behind the red one.

Smiling, Manjari started toward the road.

After ten steps she turned and looked back.

The yellow bucket was in the queue.

Father was not standing beside it—Sushila Kaki had taken him away to show him the pipe valve.

But the bucket’s place was safe.

Manjari turned back toward the road.

For the first time she understood that sometimes, to preserve one's place, it is not necessary to remain standing there.

But it is necessary to know which place one must return to.

STORY 7

The Blank Notebook

Govindkant Jha had never been afraid of a blank notebook.

For thirty-eight years he had been looking at blank notebooks.

One had no name on the first page, another no subject, another the wrong date.

He would make a small mark in the margin with his red pen and say, "You can tell how the work will go from the very first page."

Twelve years after his retirement, on that morning, a brand-new notebook of his own lay before him.

A blue cover, pale blue ruling inside, and a red margin on the left.

The shopkeeper had asked, "Master Sahib, is it for a child?"

He had replied, "No, for me."

The shopkeeper had not laughed.

He had merely dusted the notebook and slipped it into a paper bag.

Now the notebook lay open on the dining table.

Govindkant sat with his spectacles resting a little low on his nose.

A blue pen in his right hand.

The school's letter to his left.

Printed on it were the words: Centenary Year of the School's Foundation.

Former teachers had been asked to contribute a two-page reminiscence.

A suggested subject had been given: "The First Day of My Life as a Teacher."

Below it was the headmaster's signature.

After the date, in brackets, were the words: "Please send within seven days."

Govindkant had bought the notebook three days into those seven.

On the first day, he wrote his name on the cover.

On the second, he wrote the date at the top of the first page.

On the third, he drew a straight line parallel to the red margin.

Today was the fourth day.

The page was still blank.

He placed the point of the pen on the paper.

"The first day of my life as a teacher..."

That was all he said inwardly.

His hand did not move.
He lifted the pen.
Outside the window, two mynas were quarrelling in the guava tree.
Sudha's voice came from the kitchen: "The tea will get cold."
"I'm drinking it now."
"You said 'now' yesterday too."
Govindkant picked up the cup of tea.
The notebook remained open before him.
Sudha came and stood behind his chair.
"Not even one letter?"
"I'm thinking how to begin."
"Write about the first day."
"It is the first day itself that is not clear."
Sudha looked at his face.
"You taught for so many years and forgot the first day?"
Govindkant took off his spectacles and set them on the table.
"I have not forgotten the day. The question is which day was the first day."
Sudha did not understand.
She picked up the empty cup and went away.
Govindkant lifted the pen again.
This time he wrote, "Since childhood I had dreamed of becoming a teacher."
The moment the sentence was complete, his brow tightened.
He put down the blue pen and took out the red one.
Beside the sentence he wrote: "False."
The red word startled even him.
After many years, he was marking a sentence of his own.
He drew a short line beneath the red word.
Then he wrote a second sentence: "Circumstances made me a teacher."
The red pen rose.
"Incomplete."
A third sentence: "The school changed my life."
The red pen: "Easy to say; evidence?"
Govindkant pushed his chair back.
The first page was no longer blank.
Yet to him it seemed emptier than before.
Three blue sentences, three red judgments.
As though a student had copied out every question in an answer book and answered none of them.
He closed the notebook.

Until noon he busied himself with small household tasks.

He arranged the medicine box.

Folded the newspaper and put it away.

Hammered a loose nail into the veranda.

But the blank page kept moving about with him.

At lunch Sudha asked, "Will you go to the school?"

"Why?"

"To check the date. Who knows whether your appointment letter will turn up in the old trunk."

Govindkant stopped with a morsel in his hand.

"It will be in the school register."

"Then go and see."

"Is a reminiscence written by consulting a register?"

Sudha slid the bowl of dal toward him.

"If memory cannot be trusted, a register is not such a bad thing."

Govindkant did not answer.

After lunch he brought out his old cloth bag.

Inside it, the shawl given to him on the day of his retirement was still folded away.

Beneath the shawl he found an old diary.

The year on the first page was 1981.

His appointment had come two years before 1981.

Even so, he opened the diary.

Most of its pages were filled with students' names, examination dates, parent contacts, and household shopping accounts.

On one page he had written: "Mon—Class Seven—map. Wed—example of Mithila painting. Fri—essay again."

Govindkant smiled.

He remembered that lesson on maps.

But not his first day.

On a page near the back of the diary was Sudha's handwriting: "Bring oil in the evening."

He looked at that page for a long time.

How many days of a life remain preserved in such small instructions.

And how many great days pass without leaving behind a single word.

At three o'clock he set out for the school.

The road had changed.

There was now a chemist's shop at the old unpaved turning.

The peepal tree in front of the school was gone.

In its place stood an iron gate, with a cloth banner for the centenary year tied above it.

The watchman seated at the gate stood up at once on seeing him.

“Master Sahib! Pranam.”

Govindkant raised a hand in blessing.

The gesture still came from within him without thought.

The headmaster, Niranjana Chaudhary, had not been his student; he was much younger.

Even so, he called him “Sir.”

“We are waiting for your piece,” Niranjana said.

Govindkant tried to smile.

“Is the piece waiting, or am I?”

Niranjana did not understand the question.

He sent for tea and asked an assistant to open the cupboard containing the old records.

Registers were stacked inside the cupboard.

The edges of some bindings bore the marks of rats’ teeth.

Some were stained by damp.

The assistant placed three thick registers on the table.

“1979?”

“Yes.”

The pages were turned.

Govindkant’s name was found.

“Govindkant Jha—Assistant Teacher—assumed charge: 3 July 1979.”

Niranjana said with satisfaction, “See, the first day has been found.”

Govindkant kept looking at the date.

“No.”

“What?”

“On the third of July I came to the school only to sign the papers.”

“Then the fourth of July?”

Govindkant narrowed his eyes.

“Fourth of July... it was raining.”

A scene rose from somewhere within him.

A wet courtyard.

Slippers outside the classroom.

Rainwater dripping onto a wooden desk.

A child standing by the window.

But the scene was incomplete.

“It may have been the fourth of July,” he said, and at once felt dissatisfied with the sentence himself.

Niranjana turned more pages of the register.

“Attendance?”

In those days teachers’ attendance was kept in a separate register.

That register could not be found.

The assistant searched another cupboard.

Old files were opened.

Nothing.

Govindkant felt a strange relief.

As though, in the absence of proof, the question had returned to his own hands.

Niranjan said, "Write the third of July. It is the official record."

Govindkant closed the register.

"Does an official record tell you the first day of a teacher, or the first day of a job?"

Niranjan smiled.

"You can put that question in the piece."

Govindkant remained silent.

On his way out of the school he went toward his old classroom.

The room where he had once taught was now the computer room.

Through the glass in the door he could see machines arranged on small tables.

A student was typing his name on a screen.

When the name was entered incorrectly, a red line appeared beneath it.

Govindkant stopped without meaning to.

The red line.

He remembered the words in his notebook: "False." "Incomplete." "Evidence?"

He crossed the veranda slowly.

An electric bell had replaced the old bell.

But in one corner of the wall an old wooden board still remained.

No one's name could be read in the faded scratches upon it.

Govindkant did not touch it.

Outside the gate was a bicycle-repair shop.

The shopkeeper saw him and said, "Master Sahib, do you recognise me?"

Govindkant stopped short.

The face seemed familiar, but not the name.

"I recognise the face."

The shopkeeper laughed.

"So the name is gone—I understood that."

"Tell me."

"Devanand. I spent two years in Class Eight."

Something opened inside Govindkant.

"Devanand Mandal?"

"Yes, that same one—the one whose notebook was almost always blank."

They both laughed.

Pumping air into a bicycle tyre, Devanand said, "Do you still listen to every little thing so carefully?"

"It is a habit."

"A good habit."

Govindkant asked, "Do you remember why your notebook used to be blank?"

Devanand stopped pumping.

"I used to work."

"Where?"

"Here, with my father. At night I would be exhausted."

Govindkant did not remember this.

He remembered only the blank notebook.

He remembered the red zero.

"Did I ever ask?"

Devanand thought for a few moments.

"Once."

Govindkant's throat went dry.

"Then?"

"I told you I did not get the time."

"What did I say?"

Devanand pressed the tyre again to test it.

"You said, 'Bring three lines written. Not a whole page.'"

Govindkant held his breath.

"That was all?"

"That was all. For me, that much was a great deal."

A faint satisfaction appeared involuntarily on Govindkant's face.

Devanand noticed it.

"But I did not finish Class Nine," he said casually.

Govindkant's satisfaction stopped where it was.

"You left school?"

"My father fell ill. I had to look after the shop."

"I do not remember that."

"You came to our house twice."

Govindkant stared at Devanand's face.

"Did I try to stop you from leaving?"

"You did."

"Then?"

"The arithmetic at home was different, Master Sahib."

There was no complaint in Devanand's voice.

That made the words sink deeper into Govindkant.

Had he wished, he could have turned this meeting into proof that he had been a good teacher—the advice to write three lines, the journey to a student's house to look for him.

But Devanand stood before him—a school dropout, pumping air into bicycle tyres, managing his life well enough.

No story was giving clear testimony in Govindkant's favour.

Devanand began pumping again.

Govindkant heard no grand expression of gratitude.

No declaration that he had changed a life.

Only three lines.

Govindkant did not remember the incident.

Devanand did.

At that moment Govindkant understood that if he himself remembered every meaning of his life as a teacher, the life would become very small.

Some meanings lived in other people's memories.

Some in papers.

Some nowhere at all.

It was evening by the time he returned home.

Sudha was shelling peas on the veranda.

"Did you find the date?"

"Third of July."

"Then write it."

"That was the first day of the job."

"Of being a teacher?"

Govindkant looked at Sudha.

"You understood?"

"I understood from the beginning."

"Then why did you not say so?"

Sudha dropped an empty pea pod into the bowl.

"When you understand your own question yourself, the answer stays."

Govindkant wanted to take a red pen to that sentence.

But no comment formed in his mind.

After dinner he sat at the table again.

He opened the notebook.

The three blue sentences and three red judgments were still on the first page.

He did not tear the page out.

He capped the red pen and put it away in the drawer.

He took the blue pen in his hand.

He found the first blank line.

For a few moments he sat in silence.

Then he wrote: "On 3 July 1979 I joined this school as an employee."

He paused.

On the next line he wrote: "There is no date in the register for when I became a teacher."

His hand stopped again.

This time he did not look toward the red pen.

On the third line he wrote: "In my first year I knew many answers, but asked few questions."

After that he felt like writing Devanand's name.

Then he stopped himself.

This was not Devanand's story.

Nor was it an occasion for self-praise.

He wrote: "Many years later I understood that it is easy to give a zero when you see a blank notebook; to ask why it is blank is harder."

Govindkant read the sentence.

It seemed too clean to him as well.

Life had not been so clean.

With the blue pen he underlined the word "understood."

Then he added after it: "And I did not understand this all at once."

He leaned back in the chair.

His face was visible in the window glass.

White hair, thin cheeks, two shining frames of spectacles.

He tried to see himself not as Master Sahib, but simply as Govindkant.

It was difficult.

Over so many years, the title had endured more firmly than the name.

He began writing again.

The reason for taking the first appointment—household expenses.

He had accepted the job for three months.

Then he stayed until the next school term.

Then his father's illness.

Then his younger brother was studying.

Then marriage.

Then children.

Then the school's new building.

Then examinations.

Then the flood.

Then a student's admission.

Then another year.

Govindkant stopped in the middle of writing.

He could now see another form of the question.

If becoming a teacher had not been a decision made on the first day, did that mean all the days that followed had been mere compulsion?

He counted the years.

There was no single great moment at which he had declared, "Now I am a teacher."

But on thousands of mornings he had gone to school.

Many times while ill.

Many times in anger.

Many times when he did not feel like going.

Many times with enthusiasm.

On many days he taught well.

On many days badly.

He understood the words of many children.

And failed to understand many others.

He thought: some decisions in life do not happen on the day one signs a paper.

On the page he wrote: "Some decisions are not made on one day; they are made again and again."

For this sentence he felt no need of the red pen.

Sudha came and set down a glass of water.

"How much have you written?"

"They asked for two pages. It has become five."

"Then cut it."

Govindkant laughed.

"For the first time in my life, I do not feel like cutting."

Sudha laughed too.

"Master Sahib is improving."

Govindkant stopped his pen.

"Call me Govindkant."

Sudha looked at him.

"At this hour of the night?"

"Practise."

Sudha said softly, "Govindkant, go to sleep now."

Hearing his name felt strange.

As though the door of a very old room had opened.

He did not close the notebook.

He turned to the next page.

There was no separate box at the top for name, subject, or date.

There were only lines.

On the first line he wrote: "From today I will not give marks to my own answers."

Reading it, he found the sentence a little theatrical.

The red pen was in the drawer.

He did not take it out.

With the blue pen alone, he drew a line through the sentence and crossed it out.

Below it he wrote: "I will read it again tomorrow."

That was all.

In the morning Sudha found the notebook lying open on the table.

The first page was no longer blank.

But neither was it neat.

Blue, red, crossed out, added, halted—everything together.

Govindkant was sitting outside beneath the guava tree.

There was no newspaper in his hand.

Sudha took the notebook outside to him.

"Will you send this for the centenary volume?"

Govindkant took the pages.

He looked at them for a while.

"Not in this form."

"Then a clean copy?"

He looked at the red words on the first page—False. Incomplete. Evidence?

"No. In a clean copy all this will disappear."

"Then?"

Govindkant opened the notebook again.

He took out a small slip of paper and placed it on the first page.

The school's address was written on it.

"I'll give them this very notebook."

Sudha looked at him in surprise.

"The whole thing?"

"Yes. The headmaster asked for two pages. Let him print two pages. Whether he reads the rest or not is up to him."

"But the first page has been cut and corrected so much."

Govindkant touched the red margin with a finger.

"You can tell how the work will go from the very first page."

Sudha smiled.

Govindkant smiled too.

He closed the notebook, but this time his hand rested on its cover for a few moments.

His name was on the cover.

No class beneath it.

No subject.

Only the name.

For the first time, that blank space did not seem incomplete to him.

STORY 8

The Broken Comb

When Shailaja saw the comb, the first thing she noticed was not its colour but the empty space in it.

It was a black plastic comb, glossy as glass.

Three teeth were missing from the middle.

Two teeth were broken halfway.

There was a white scratch along one edge.

The moment she took it in her hand, Shailaja's finger settled of its own accord on that empty space.

As though her hand had always known that the comb's true identity lay in the broken part.

The comb had been lying at the bottom of an old tin box.

Her mother had sent the box three days earlier.

A slip of paper lay on top: "Keep whatever is useful. Get rid of the rest."

Her mother's handwriting was no longer as rounded as it used to be.

The letters had grown smaller, but the kh in "rakhi" still had the same long tail beneath it.

Shailaja had put off opening the box for three days.

The house was to be repainted.

The workman had said that the eastern room would have to be cleared by Monday.

So the cupboard, the old trunk and the paper bags had all come down onto the floor.

Shailaja was dividing things into three groups—keep, give away, discard.

Her mother's box had created a fourth group.

The moment she looked at anything inside it, the act of deciding came to a halt.

A yellowed measuring tape.

Two small spindles.

A wooden reel of blue thread.

Three needles wrapped in cloth.

An old thimble.

And then this broken comb.

A scene opened inside Shailaja so swiftly that she had no time to think.

She is eight or nine years old.
 After her bath she is sitting on a low stool in the courtyard.
 Her mother is sitting behind her.
 There is the smell of mustard oil in her hair.
 The comb is coming down from the centre of her head.
 At one place a tooth catches.
 Shailaja says, "Ah," and bends forward.
 Her mother pulls her head back toward herself.
 "Sit straight."
 Then the hair is parted in two.
 In that scene Shailaja could see the comb clearly—black, with broken teeth in the middle.
 She sat down on the floor in front of the box.
 She brought the comb close to her nose.
 There was no smell of oil.
 There was the faint smell of old cloth, dust and metal.
 She laughed at herself.
 Why would thirty- or thirty-five-year-old plastic still smell of oil?
 Yet the scene had been so clear that she could almost feel the greasiness of the comb.
 Before undoing the last knot in her hair, her mother used to tap the comb twice against her palm.
 She remembered that too.
 She tapped the comb twice against her palm.
 The sound was very faint.
 The blue reel inside the box shifted.
 Shailaja's phone rang on the table.
 It was Nilima.
 "Did the box arrive?"
 "Yes."
 "Have you opened it?"
 "Just now."
 "Ma keeps asking me whether you're going to put everything back in the cupboard again or actually sort it out."
 "I am sorting it out."
 "For three days?"
 Shailaja kept looking at the comb.
 "Do you remember a black comb?"
 "Which one?"
 "Ma's. Three teeth were broken in the middle."
 Nilima was silent for a moment.

“Black?”

“Yes. Ma used to comb my hair with that one, didn’t she?”

Nilima burst out laughing.

“Your hair? With that broken black comb?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Ma used to comb your hair with a red comb. The one with thick teeth. It had a flower on the back.”

Shailaja’s finger tightened over the broken teeth of the comb.

“The red comb came later.”

“No. I got hit with that same red comb too whenever my hair pulled.”

“Hit with a comb?”

“By hit I mean she’d tap us on the head with it. You make everything sound serious.”

Shailaja said nothing.

Nilima added, “The broken black comb used to stay in the sewing box.”

“Why would a comb be in the sewing box?”

“Ask Ma that.”

“You don’t know?”

“I remember she used it for something with thread. Tassels or edging. I can’t say exactly.”

After the call ended, Shailaja tried once more to see that same childhood scene.

There was the courtyard.

There was the low stool.

There was mustard oil.

Her back was between her mother’s knees.

But now the colour of the comb would not hold.

When she made it black, it turned red.

When she made it red, a flower appeared on its back.

She closed her eyes.

The scene changed again.

Her mother is sitting not in the courtyard but on the veranda.

There is cloth in her lap.

The black comb is moving along the edge of the cloth.

This scene was less distinct than the first, but it contained a different sound—the soft rasp of plastic teeth against thread.

Shailaja opened her eyes.

For the first time, she was angry with her own memory.

Not because it could be wrong.

Because it could be wrong with such confidence.

She reached to put the comb back in the box, then stopped.

A very fine blue thread was caught behind the comb.
It was so old that its colour had turned almost grey.
She tried to pull it out with her fingernail.
The thread was wedged at the root of one broken tooth.
Then Nilima's words came back to her—tassels or edging.
An old handwoven coverlet lay in the room that was to be painted.
Her mother had given Shailaja that coverlet a few years after her marriage.
The tassels along its edge were now tangled.
Shailaja brought the coverlet out.
She spread it on the floor.
She drew the comb slowly along its edge.
It did not move properly.
The teeth caught in the thread.
She laughed.
“Did she really work with this?”
On the second attempt she held the comb not straight but at an angle.
This time the threads separated.
The space left by the three missing teeth formed a broad gap.
Several fine threads came together into that gap.
Shailaja could catch them with her fingers and set them apart.
She straightened five or seven tassels.
Then she stopped.
This much proves nothing.
She said it silently to herself.
The sentence immediately reminded her of her father, who used to say at once whenever anyone told him something, “What you see and what you understand are two different things.”
Shailaja folded up the coverlet.
She felt like calling her mother.
Then she looked at the clock.
It was eleven.
At that hour her mother was usually sitting in the courtyard sun, sorting greens.
She took time to answer the phone.
Shailaja did not call.
She opened the second section of the cupboard.
She began sorting again.
But now every object looked like a question.
An old key—what lock had it opened?
A small brass box—had it held kohl or needles?
A blue ribbon—had it belonged to Shailaja or to Nilima?

She realised that an object does not itself give a memory.
 It merely opens a door.
 And the room behind that door is furnished by the mind according to its own convenience.
 The thought unsettled her.
 For there were many things about her mother that she believed she remembered "exactly."
 Her mother always watered the tulsi first thing in the morning.
 Her mother changed the water three times while washing rice.
 When angry, her mother pronounced a person's full name.
 When she laughed, her right eye narrowed first.
 How much of this had Shailaja actually seen?
 How much had been made afterward?
 By noon the room was half empty.
 The painter's boy came and measured the place where the paint tins would be kept.
 Shailaja made tea.
 She left the comb on the kitchen table.
 As she drank her tea, her eyes kept returning to it.
 The comb seemed to be pretending to be an ordinary object.
 Three teeth were missing.
 Everything else was there.
 That was all.
 In the afternoon her mother called on her own.
 "Have you finished sorting?"
 "Half of it."
 "I told you, didn't I? If something is no use, get rid of it."
 "Ma, this black comb?"
 There was silence at the other end for a few moments.
 "Which black comb?"
 "The one in the sewing box. The one with broken teeth in the middle."
 "Oh!"
 Recognition came into her mother's voice at once.
 "Is that still there?"
 Shailaja felt unexpectedly pleased.
 "Yes. You remember it?"
 "Why wouldn't I?"
 "Did you use it to comb my hair?"
 Her mother laughed so loudly that the sound on the phone crackled.
 "Your hair? With that comb?"
 It was not like Nilima's laughter.

There was more astonishment in this one.

“Where did you invent such a thing?”

Shailaja fell silent.

“I remember it clearly.”

“So what you remembered clearly became blurred the moment you asked me?”

Her mother laughed again.

Shailaja’s irritation returned.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Not at you. At the comb. If I’d used that comb in your hair, it would have broken half of it off.”

“Then what did you use it for with the sewing?”

“Not sewing. Edging.”

“What edging?”

“In those days we used to leave loose threads along the edges of cotton wraps and make tassels. I used the comb to straighten the threads.”

“With a broken comb?”

“It wasn’t broken at first.”

Shailaja sat upright in her chair.

“Then?”

“One tooth broke. I was going to throw it away. Then I saw that the broken space made it easier to separate a small bunch of thick threads. Later I broke two more teeth myself.”

Shailaja picked up the comb.

“Yourself?”

“Yes. Look, the three teeth missing in the middle did not all break in one accident. The first broke on its own. I broke two.”

Shailaja placed a finger in the empty space.

Suddenly one part of her childhood scene changed again.

Her mother is tapping the comb twice against her palm.

Not to shake loose knots of hair.

To dislodge thread caught in the comb.

“Did you use to tap the comb against your palm?”

“Perhaps. Thread used to get caught in it.”

A fine shiver ran through Shailaja.

The memory had not been entirely wrong.

Its pieces had been joined in the wrong place.

The courtyard sunlight, her mother’s hand, the tapping of the comb—all of them might have been true.

Just not in a single scene.

“Which comb did you use for my hair?”

"The red one. You hated that red comb."

"Why?"

"Your hair was thick. You didn't like having oil put in it. The comb would get stuck. You would run away."

Shailaja smiled.

This time the scene opened by itself.

She is running toward the courtyard door.

Her mother is standing behind her with the red comb in her hand.

There really is a flower on the back of the comb.

"And the black comb?"

"That stayed in the sewing box. Sometimes you would pick it up and draw lines in the dirt with it."

"Me?"

"Yes. Once you broke two more of its teeth."

"What?"

"You said, 'Now it's even.'"

Her mother laughed again.

Shailaja's hand went still.

"Did you break two teeth, or did I?"

"One I did, one you did. It's hard to keep count now."

After that sentence, both were quiet for a few moments.

Shailaja kept looking at the empty space in the comb.

What she had until now taken as her mother's mark had, in part, been made by her own hand.

The object had belonged to her mother.

The breakage had not belonged only to her mother.

"Ma, shall I send this comb back to you?"

"Why?"

"It's yours."

"I gave you the box. Keep whatever is useful."

"Is it still useful?"

"Try it on the edging of that coverlet."

Shailaja laughed.

"I already have."

"Did it work?"

"More or less."

"Then keep it. Otherwise get rid of it."

There was no worship of memory in her mother's voice.

That made Shailaja feel unexpectedly light.

She had imagined her mother would say, keep it safely, it's an old thing.

But for her mother, an object's importance was not separate from its use.

After ending the call, Shailaja did not spend long thinking about the difference between the black comb and the red one.

She got up.

She spread the coverlet out again.

She brought the tangled threads along the edge before her.

She drew the comb through them at an angle.

Eight or ten threads gathered together in the broken gap.

She caught them with her fingers and twisted them.

The tassel did not come out even.

Nor did the second.

The third was better than the first two.

Shailaja remembered her mother's hands—not quick, but patient.

This time no complete scene appeared before her.

Only the movement of two fingers.

She could not decide whether this was a memory she had truly seen or an image formed after hearing her mother's words.

Earlier that uncertainty would have troubled her.

Now it did not.

She went on straightening the threads.

By evening, the edging along one side of the coverlet had opened out.

Some tassels survived; some she tied again.

The black comb on the table became filled with threads.

Shailaja tapped it twice against her palm.

The threads fell away.

At the sound, she remembered her mother again.

This time not hair.

Not the veranda.

Not the courtyard.

No fixed scene at all.

Only the sense of a hand that knew how to give an object a second use after its first use had ended.

And beside that hand, the hand of a little girl who too had once broken one of its teeth.

By night the room being repainted was almost empty.

Shailaja looked again at the three piles.

Keep.

Give away.

Discard.

Her mother's tin still stood apart.

She opened the tin.

She picked up the blue reel.

She set the tape aside.

She discarded the rusted needles.

She kept the thimble.

After taking the black comb in her hand, she thought for a few moments.

Then she did not put it in the “keep” pile.

She placed it with the coverlet.

The workman came the next morning to clear the room.

Shailaja was folding the coverlet.

The three newly tied tassels along the edge looked slightly different from the others.

She thought of undoing them.

Then she did not.

The comb lay on the coverlet.

The empty gap left by three teeth was plainly visible.

Shailaja placed a finger in that gap, but this time she did not try to summon any single scene.

She simply picked up the comb and drew it once more along the edge of the coverlet.

The threads separated.

The teeth that remained did their work.

So did the empty space where the missing ones had been.

Hands Choosing Vegetables

Ramlochan Jha placed his hand on the heap of eggplants, then drew it back.

The eggplant was round.

Its skin was smooth.

Its stem was green.

It was difficult to find a fault in that heap.

Even so, his fingers kept moving from one eggplant to another.

“Babuji, they are all good.”

Bindeshwar, the vegetable seller, said it.

Ramlochan did not reply.

He picked up a third eggplant.

He turned it over to look at the underside.

There was a fine white line.

He put it back.

Bindeshwar laughed.

“Will you cut off that line and eat it, or hang it in a frame?”

Ramlochan looked at him over the top of his spectacles.

“The blemish may spread.”

“The eggplant will not grow old before it reaches your house.”

A faint smile touched Ramlochan’s lips, but his hand was still among the pile.

It was Saturday morning.

Water had been sprinkled over the old market in Laheriasarai.

Earth, coriander, green chillies and wet sacking mingled into a familiar smell.

For the last twenty-seven years, Ramlochan had bought vegetables at about this time.

Earlier, before leaving for work.

Now, after retirement, without any hurry.

Yet his method had not changed.

Potatoes of wildly different sizes did not go together.

Tomatoes must not be too soft.

The skin of pointed gourds must not be yellow.

Ridge gourds must be straight.

The leaves around a cauliflower must be fresh.
Mud might cling to the roots of coriander, but its leaves must not be wilted.

At home his wife, Malati, would say—

“Are you buying vegetables or choosing a bride?”

Ramlochan would reply—

“If I am paying money, I will bring home good produce.”

That sentence would end the argument.

Today too his shopping bag stood beside the counter.

Malati had made the list the night before.

Potatoes—one kilogram.

Eggplants—half a kilogram.

Pointed gourds—half a kilogram.

Tomatoes—four hundred grams.

Coriander—a small handful.

At the bottom, in smaller letters, she had written—

“No pumpkin. Half of the last one turned out bad.”

Ramlochan had read the list twice.

On reaching the market, he began with the potatoes.

Choosing potatoes required no thought.

Firm.

No sprouts.

No cuts.

Not too large.

His hand knew the rules.

It was as though those rules had settled into his palm.

The rules for eggplants were a little more difficult.

Meanwhile Bindeshwar called to his son, Raju.

“Put that crooked bottle gourd aside.”

Raju pulled a long bottle gourd from behind the heap.

It curved in the middle like a bow.

There was a fine scratch along one side.

Ramlochan’s eyes stopped there.

“Is it bad?”

he asked.

Bindeshwar took the bottle gourd in his hand.

He pressed beside the scratch with his thumbnail.

“Why would it be bad? It’s tender.”

“Then why put it aside?”

“This one will go home.”

“You won’t sell it?”

“Who will take it?”
 Ramlochan looked again at the eggplants.
 “If it is good, someone will take it.”
 Bindeshwar laughed.
 “Being good and being chosen are not the same thing, Babuji.”
 The sentence was spoken in an ordinary tone.
 There was no lesson in it.
 Bindeshwar immediately turned to another customer.
 But Ramlochan’s hand stopped on an eggplant.
 Being good and being chosen.
 Two different things.
 Why had such a simple distinction never seemed obvious to him?
 He put one gleaming eggplant into his bag.
 He picked up another.
 Then he looked again at the crooked bottle gourd.
 It was now lying beside Raju.
 Raju had set it on a sack and was sorting coriander.
 Ramlochan opened his list.
 No pumpkin.
 Bottle gourd was not on the list at all.
 He folded the list and put it in his pocket.
 Half a kilogram of eggplants was weighed out.
 The pointed gourds were sold at another stall.
 As he moved that way, Bindeshwar’s sentence rose again in his mind.
 Being good and being chosen.
 He remembered his father.
 The memory had nothing at all to do with vegetables.
 Yet it came.
 The day his matriculation results were announced.
 Ramlochan was sixteen.
 He liked drawing.
 The steps beside the pond behind the school.
 A horse at the fair.
 Bamboo bending in the rain.
 Again and again he drew lines in the margins of his notebooks.
 On the evening the results came, his father had said—
 “You are good at arithmetic. You will study commerce.”
 Ramlochan had asked—
 “Art?”
 His father had replied—
 “Will drawing pictures run a household?”

There had been no discussion after that.

For years Ramlochan had narrated the episode as though it had been his own decision.

“I chose commerce.”

How many times?

In job interviews.

At his son’s school.

Among friends.

Even at his retirement function.

“I was always interested in accounts.”

Today, standing before a heap of pointed gourds, Ramlochan saw a blank space inside that sentence for the first time.

Interest?

Or the road that had been available?

He picked up a pointed gourd.

He pressed it from both ends.

It was firm.

He put it into the bag.

The next pointed gourd had a yellow patch.

He left it.

The third was crooked.

He left that too.

His hand continued its work according to rule.

His mind went backward.

A job after college.

There had been an opportunity with a private company in Patna.

An acquaintance of his maternal uncle had sent word.

The salary was higher.

The work uncertain.

His father had said—

“Sit for the government examination.”

Ramlochan had done so.

He was selected.

He kept saying—

“I chose stability.”

Was that true?

Or had his father chosen stability, and had he accepted it?

The answer was not simple.

He had not disliked government service.

The salary came on time.

A house was built.

The children were educated.
 His mother received treatment.
 Many good things had come by that road.
 So the question was not whether the road had been wrong.
 The question was whose road it had been.
 Ramlochan's hand stopped with a pointed gourd half lifted.
 The seller asked —
 "How much?"
 "Half a kilogram."
 "Choose them."
 "Yes."
 He began choosing again.
 Voices were rising all around the market.
 "Ten rupees a quarter kilo!"
 "Fresh green peas!"
 "Coriander! Take coriander!"
 A child was holding his mother's bag.
 He pulled the most crooked okra from a heap and laughed.
 His mother took it from his hand and put it back.
 "Not this one. Choose a good one."
 Ramlochan's gaze settled on the child's hand.
 The small fingers went back into the pile.
 This time he picked up a straight okra.
 The mother nodded.
 The child put the straight okra into the bag.
 Ramlochan did not discover any profound secret.
 Only a small, familiar act.
 First learn the rule.
 Then the hand itself becomes the rule.
 He looked at his own hands.
 Trimmed nails.
 Fine lines of age over the knuckles.
 The right index finger slightly bent.
 With these hands he had signed so many files.
 On so many applications he had written, 'Approved.'
 On so many others, 'Not in accordance with rules.'
 People had thought of him as an officer who made decisions.
 So had he.
 But in his private life?
 Marriage.
 His maternal uncle had brought Malati's photograph.

The family had agreed.
Ramlochan had asked—
“Is the girl educated?”
The answer had come—
“Up to Class Twelve.”
He had said—
“All right.”
Later he had kept calling that “all right” his own choice.
Malati had not been a bad wife.
On the contrary, she had been the steadiest companionship of his life.
Then the same question again.
Does a good outcome prove that there was a choice?
Or only that there was an outcome?
Ramlochan suddenly laughed.
The pointed-gourd seller looked at him.
“What happened?”
“Nothing.”
“Found a bad one?”
“No.”
He paid.
The tomato stall was ahead.
Here he usually did not choose them himself.
The shopkeeper, Sushila, knew him.
“Babu, four hundred grams?”
“Yes.”
“Firm ones?”
Ramlochan asked, almost without meaning to—
“Do I always take only the firm ones?”
Sushila laughed.
“You send them back the moment you see they are soft.”
“For how many years?”
“Do I have time to keep accounts of that?”
“An estimate?”
“Since your moustache was black.”
Sushila picked up four tomatoes.
Two red.
One half red.
One small.
Ramlochan pointed to the small tomato.
“Why this one?”
“To make four hundred grams.”

“I used to leave those.”
 “That is why I put one in today.”
 “Why?”
 “Because it isn’t bad. It is only small.”
 Ramlochan took the tomato in his hand.
 Small.
 Round.
 A leaf-mark at the top.
 The old impulse to hand it back arose.
 His hand even lifted slightly.
 Then stopped.
 “Let it stay.”
 Sushila said nothing.
 The tomato went into the paper bag.
 Ramlochan moved on.
 His pace had slowed.
 The crowd streamed past him.
 A young man walked by speaking into his phone—
 “I have decided.”
 The four words reached his ears and Ramlochan went backward again.
 His son, Amresh.
 Class Twelve.
 He had said—
 “I want to study history.”
 Ramlochan had replied—
 “What will you do after studying history?”
 Amresh had fallen silent.
 Ramlochan had begun listing alternatives.
 Economics.
 Commerce.
 Bank examinations.
 “The final decision is yours,” he had said.
 But afterward he had given so many arguments that there was no space
 left for a ‘final decision.’
 Amresh studied commerce.
 He took a job in a bank.
 Now he lived in Pune.
 Ramlochan would tell everyone—
 “My son chose banking on his own.”
 Today the sentence sounded hollow inside.
 He remembered Amresh’s face.

Seventeen years old.
The face from that time.
His eyes bright when he said history.
Then slowly becoming expressionless.
Ramlochan pulled the strap of his bag higher onto his shoulder.
The first impulse in his mind was—
Call him.
Say—
“You wanted to study history, didn’t you?”
Then that impulse too seemed hasty.
A thirty-year-old question could not be answered by today’s remorse.
Was Amresh unhappy in the bank, or content?
Ramlochan did not really know.
Had he ever asked?
“How is work going?”
He had asked that.
“Do you like the work?”
That was harder to say.
He stopped at the coriander stall.
A little girl was tying bunches of coriander with the roots still on.
She asked—
“How much?”
Ramlochan said—
“A small handful.”
The girl closed her fist around a bunch.
Ramlochan’s gaze fell on that fist.
A small hand.
About the size of a decision.
Then he remembered his granddaughter, Ira.
Two days earlier she had said on the phone screen—
“Dadu, I can’t decide whether to study design or biology.”
Ramlochan had immediately said—
“There are more opportunities in biology.”
Ira had said—
“But—”
The phone audio had broken off halfway.
The conversation had ended there.
At the time Ramlochan had thought—children need direction.
Today, for the first time, he understood that direction and choice were
not the same thing.
The coriander girl put the handful on the scale.

“Too much?”

Ramlochan looked at the scale.

“Let it be.”

The girl wrapped the coriander in paper.

Ramlochan paid.

The list was complete.

Normally he would have gone straight home from there.

But today his feet took him back toward Bindeshwar’s stall.

The crooked bottle gourd was still lying on the sack.

Raju had placed two small pumpkins beside it.

Ramlochan stopped.

Bindeshwar was settling an account with a customer.

“What have you forgotten now, Babuji?”

“Nothing.”

“Then?”

Ramlochan looked at the bottle gourd.

“How much for this?”

Bindeshwar looked up.

“This one?”

“Yes.”

“This is the one I kept for home.”

“Sell it.”

“You will take it?”

Reasons immediately began forming inside Ramlochan.

It is tender.

It will be cheap.

It will make a vegetable dish.

Malati likes bottle gourd.

But bottle gourd was not on the list.

And whether Malati particularly liked bottle gourd—he was not even sure.

Again the reasons were being arranged for someone else’s convenience.

He remained silent.

Bindeshwar asked—

“Why do you want it?”

Ramlochan stopped at that simple question.

“Why?”

“Yes. It wasn’t on your list, was it?”

Bindeshwar had seen the paper in his hand.

Ramlochan looked at the curve of the bottle gourd.

The scratch across its middle.

The green stem at the top.
He did not find it especially beautiful.
There was no proof it would be especially tasty either.
He had simply stopped when he saw it.
That was all.
“I felt like taking it.”
He said it softly.
Bindeshwar looked at him for a few moments.
Then he laughed.
“That is reason enough.”
Raju weighed the bottle gourd.
Bindeshwar charged the ordinary price.
No discount.
No reward.
The bottle gourd would not fit inside the bag.
Half of it stuck out.
Ramlochan thought his bag looked ridiculous.
He set off.
On the road, two people noticed the gourd’s curve.
Neither cared.
Only one child said—
“Look, a bow!”
Ramlochan laughed.
When he reached home, Malati was sitting in the veranda shelling peas.
“So late?”
“There was a crowd.”
Ramlochan set down the bag.
Malati began taking things out one by one.
Potatoes.
Eggplants.
Pointed gourds.
Tomatoes.
Coriander.
Then the crooked bottle gourd.
Malati’s hand stopped.
“Was this on the list?”
“No.”
“Did Bindeshwar palm it off on you?”
The old answers tried to come out of Ramlochan’s mouth—
It was good.
It was cheap.

It was tender.
But he stopped them.
“I bought it.”
“I can see that. Why?”
At that question, the morning market opened again inside him.
The heap of eggplants.
The crooked bottle gourd.
Bindeshwar’s sentence.
The child’s straight okra.
The small tomato.
Amresh wanting to study history.
Ira’s unfinished ‘but.’
Ramlochan held the bottle gourd by its stem and placed it on the table.
“I felt like it.”
Malati kept looking at him.
“That’s all?”
“That’s all.”
Malati laughed.
“A new illness at fifty-seven?”
Ramlochan laughed too.
“Possibly.”
“How will I cut it? It bends in the middle.”
“Cut it in two at the bend.”
“Does that make a straight bottle gourd bad?”
“No.”
“Then?”
Ramlochan began searching for an answer.
Then stopped searching.
“A straight one is good too. So is this one.”
Malati shook her head.
“It seems a great deal of thinking went into today’s vegetables.”
“Too much.”
Malati picked up the bottle gourd and went toward the kitchen.
Ramlochan sat in the veranda.
He took out his phone.
Amresh’s name was on the screen.
His finger rested on the call icon.
He did not call at once.
First he thought—what will I say?
“Did I stop you from studying history?”
That sounded like an attempt to lighten his own guilt.

“Do you like your job?”
 That sounded like a question asked thirty years too late.
 In the end he wrote only a message—
 “If you have time this evening, call me. I want to ask you something.”
 He sent it.
 Then he opened Ira’s name.
 For a long time he did not write anything.
 Then he typed—
 “What is it in design and in biology that draws you toward each of them?
 We can look at the list of opportunities afterward. Write this to me first.”
 He read the message.
 He wanted to improve it.
 Should he remove “opportunities”?
 Was “draws you” right?
 Was the question too large?
 For the first time, he did not try to make the message perfect.
 He sent it.
 From the kitchen came the sound of a knife.
 Thock.
 Thock.
 Then a pause.
 Malati called—
 “Ramlochan!”
 “Yes?”
 “This bottle gourd is perfectly good inside.”
 From the veranda Ramlochan answered—
 “It turned out good. That’s fine.”
 Malati called again—
 “And if it hadn’t?”
 Ramlochan fell silent.
 The Ramlochan of that morning would have answered at once—
 Then it was a mistake.
 Money wasted.
 Be more careful next time.
 Now he went into the kitchen.
 Malati had cut the bottle gourd in two.
 The crooked place had been cut exactly through the middle.
 Inside, the flesh was white and tender.
 The seeds were small.
 Malati held one half toward him.
 “Look.”

Ramlochan looked.

Then said—

“If it had been bad, it would simply have been bad.”

“And the choice?”

“It would still have been mine.”

Malati stopped the knife and looked at him.

After a few moments she smiled.

“Who was selling philosophy in the market?”

“The bottle-gourd seller.”

“How much did he charge?”

“Full price.”

“Then the philosophy came free.”

They both laughed.

When the laughter ended, Ramlochan remained seated on the kitchen stool.

Malati went on cutting the bottle gourd.

The slices were not coming out round.

Sometimes a half-moon.

Sometimes a triangle.

Sometimes thick.

Malati said—

“Look at this. Not one slice is like the next.”

Ramlochan reached out and picked up a piece.

“Put it down, don’t eat it raw.”

He put it back.

The phone rang.

Amresh.

Ramlochan answered the phone.

“Yes, son.”

“I saw your message. Is everything all right?”

“Yes.”

“What did you want to ask?”

Ramlochan looked toward the veranda.

The small tomato was still in the bag.

“Do you like your work at the bank?”

He asked it directly.

There was silence at the other end.

Another sentence immediately rose inside Ramlochan—

“If you don’t like it, leave it.”

He did not say it.

Amresh said slowly—

"Some days I do. Some days I don't. Why?"

"That's all I wanted to know."

"Today?"

"Yes, today."

Amresh laughed.

"Have you started conducting surveys after retirement?"

Ramlochan laughed too.

"Possibly."

Then he said—

"One more thing. You wanted to study history, didn't you?"

There was silence again at the other end.

This time it lasted longer.

Ramlochan waited.

Amresh said—

"I did."

"And now?"

"I still read it. On Sundays."

Ramlochan was startled.

"What?"

"Whatever I find. Books. Lectures. Articles on old coins."

Ramlochan's eyes moved to the small tomato lying beside the bag.

"You never told me."

"You never asked."

The sentence was not spoken harshly.

That made it sound even clearer.

Ramlochan did not reply.

Amresh said on his own—

"Babu, I am not unhappy in my bank job."

"I didn't ask that."

"I know."

"I used to think..."

Ramlochan stopped.

To say 'I took away your choice' seemed too simple.

Life had not been that simple.

Amresh too had been seventeen then.

There had been family circumstances.

There had been money.

There had been fear.

And there had also been history.

He said—

“I used to think the decision was yours. Now I understand that I talked a great deal.”

Amresh did not laugh.

After a few moments he said—

“Yes. A great deal.”

Ramlochan laughed too.

“All right.”

“You called just to say that?”

“No. To listen.”

Silence again at the other end.

Then Amresh began telling him an ordinary story from the bank.

A customer’s signature had not matched.

An old account.

Two applications.

Ramlochan kept listening.

Earlier he would have suggested a solution.

Today he did not.

After he ended the call, the bottle gourd began sizzling in seasoning in the kitchen.

Its fragrance reached the veranda.

Ira’s reply arrived.

A long message.

In design, she liked form, lettering and the use of objects.

In biology, living systems.

She had written—

“Dadu, the problem is that I like both.”

Ramlochan smiled as he read it.

Earlier his mind would immediately have begun comparing—

Jobs.

Fees.

Cities.

Competition.

Those questions had not disappeared today either.

But he did not turn them immediately into an answer.

He wrote—

“If you like both, then the next question may be—which kind of difficulty are you willing to live with?”

He paused before sending the message.

This too was direction.

Advice.

His own influence.

Does choice ever happen without influence?
That was difficult to say.
He added one line to the message—
“My question is only a question too; you must make the answer.”
Then he sent it.
In the evening Malati served the bottle-gourd curry.
Ramlochan took the first bite.
The taste was ordinary.
Not especially sweet.
Nothing remarkable.
A little too much cumin.
He laughed.
Malati asked—
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“Did the bottle gourd turn out magnificent?”
“Ordinary.”
“Then disappointed?”
Ramlochan broke a piece on his plate with his spoon.
“No.”
“After so much thought, only ordinary?”
“That is all right.”
Malati kept looking at him.
Ramlochan resumed eating.
At night, while emptying the shopping bag, they found the small tomato.
Malati picked it up.
“Did you choose this?”
Ramlochan remembered Sushila.
“No.”
“Then?”
“She put it in. I didn’t take it out.”
Malati laughed.
“Where is the choice in that?”
Ramlochan took the tomato.
He rolled it in his palm.
“Sometimes not removing something is a choice too.”
“And sometimes it is laziness.”
“That too.”
Malati put the tomato back in the bag.
“It will go into chutney tomorrow.”
Ramlochan came and sat in the veranda.

The market list lay on the table.
Malati's handwriting at the top.
Below it, small ticks in his pencil.
A mark beside every item.

Potatoes.

Eggplants.

Pointed gourds.

Tomatoes.

Coriander.

At the bottom, "No pumpkin."

Ramlochan felt like writing in the empty margin of the list—

Bottle gourd.

Then he did not.

The list had completed its work for the day.

He turned it over.

On the blank side he wrote two words—

"My wish."

As soon as he wrote them, the phrase seemed ridiculous.

He picked up the pencil to strike it out.

Then set the pencil down.

He folded the paper.

He did not throw it away.

Nor did he put it in his pocket.

He left it on the table.

The next morning Malati picked up the paper and moved toward the wastebasket.

She saw the two words written on the back.

"What is this?"

Ramlochan had opened the newspaper.

"Nothing."

"My wish?"

Ramlochan looked over the top of the newspaper.

Malati was laughing.

"Shall I put that on the list next time too?"

Ramlochan said—

"No."

"Why?"

He folded the newspaper and set it aside.

"If it is written on the list, it will become another item on the list."

Malati was silent for two moments.

Then she did not throw the paper into the wastebasket.

She put it back on the table.
In the afternoon Ramlochan began putting away the market bag.
A small piece of the crooked bottle gourd's stem lay at the bottom.
He picked it up.
As before, his hand immediately moved to throw away what it had
recognized as useless.
Then he stopped.
There was no reason to keep the stem.
He looked at it.
And this time he threw it away for only one reason: its work was finished.
His hand reached the wastebasket.
The piece fell in.
Ramlochan's hand returned empty.
He was surprised—
Sometimes even an empty hand can feel like one's own.

Winter Sunlight

On winter mornings, sunlight entered the house late.

Janaki Devi knew this not by looking at the clock, but by looking at the floor.

Through the lattice of the south-facing window, a long bright strip fell inside.

At first the strip remained close to the wall.

Then it slowly slid toward the middle of the floor.

By noon it would touch the leg of the old low stool.

Janaki Devi would say, "The day has risen now."

The people of the house would laugh.

"There is a clock, Amma."

Janaki Devi would laugh too.

There was a clock.

A round clock hung on the wall, and its hands were always five minutes fast.

No one any longer asked why it was five minutes fast.

Years ago, Janaki Devi herself had set it five minutes ahead.

"It will save us from being late."

In those days there were four people in the house and four different times to keep.

Her husband's office time.

Her son's school time.

Her daughter's college time.

Her own kitchen time.

Keeping the clock five minutes fast was a way of gathering them all together.

Now everyone in the house had a clock on their phone.

No one looked at the wall clock.

Even so, it continued to run five minutes fast.

That day was Sunday.

Her granddaughter Kavya came into Janaki Devi's room carrying a box of chalk.

"Dadi, will you do something for me?"

Janaki Devi pushed her spectacles up her nose.

“At the very mention of work, one should first ask the wages.”

Kavya burst out laughing.

“The wages are two tilkuts.”

“Then tell me the work first.”

Kavya sat down on the floor.

With a piece of chalk, she drew a small line at one edge of the strip of sunlight falling through the window.

Beside the line she wrote—10:30.

“What is this?”

“School work.”

“Making the floor dirty has become school work now?”

“It is chalk. It will wipe off.”

Janaki Devi looked at the strip of sunlight.

“You want to see how far the sun moves?”

“Not the sun, Dadi.”

“You mean the earth rotates?”

Kavya brightened.

“You know everything.”

“My education did not stop in Class Five.”

“Then you can save my experiment.”

“Save it?”

Kavya looked at the clock.

“From ten-thirty until twelve, I have to mark this edge every fifteen minutes.”

“You do it.”

“I have to go upstairs and make the display chart for the project.”

“So the project will stay downstairs while its display chart gets made upstairs?”

“Dadi.”

“All right.”

Kavya handed her the chalk.

“10:45, 11:00, 11:15, 11:30, 11:45, 12:00.”

“So many times?”

“That is all.”

Janaki Devi took the chalk.

Kavya added, “Watch the edge exactly.”

“I have seen sunlight before.”

“But this time it has to be measured.”

Janaki Devi did not like that sentence.

One could look at sunlight.

One could sit and warm oneself in sunlight.

That sunlight could also be measured did not seem wrong to her; it merely seemed a little uncivilized.

Kavya went upstairs.

Janaki Devi placed the chalk on the low stool.

The 10:30 line had already moved inside the strip of sunlight.

She thought—this far in fifteen minutes?

She looked at the wall clock.

10:38.

“This clock is five minutes fast.”

She said it to herself.

So the real time was 10:33.

A faint discomfort stirred in her.

Kavya had written 10:30.

Which line was correct?

The chalk line?

The clock’s?

The phone’s?

The sun’s?

She got up and went into the sitting room.

Her daughter-in-law Manisha was shelling peas.

“What time is it on your phone?”

Manisha checked the phone.

“Ten thirty-three.”

“The clock is five minutes fast.”

“It has been for years.”

Janaki Devi returned to her room.

The strip of sunlight had shifted again.

It occurred to her that even while she went to fetch the answer to that small question, the sunlight had gone on doing its work.

At 10:45 she drew the second chalk line.

The line was farther from the first than she had expected.

“Can fifteen minutes be this long?”

The words slipped out of her mouth.

Then she laughed at her own sentence.

Fifteen minutes were not long.

Only their distance on the floor looked long.

She sat down on the low stool.

From the sitting room came the sound of peas dropping into a bowl.

Upstairs came the scrape of Kavya’s chair.

In the lane a vegetable seller called, “Cauliflower!”

Every sound inhabited its own time.
Janaki Devi placed the back of her hand in the sunlight.
The warmth did not come at once.
It came after a few moments.
She remembered—when her little boy was recovering from fever, she would place his hand in the sunlight just like this.
As soon as the memory came, she drew her hand back.
A child's fever had no place in Kavya's experiment.
She looked at the clock.

10:49.

Four minutes.
Four minutes are very short.
In four minutes milk can boil over on a stove.
In four minutes a bus can be missed.
In four minutes someone can say, "I'm coming," and step out of the house.

And four minutes spent sitting on a low stool can also become very large.
Janaki Devi got up and opened the cupboard.
From the upper shelf she took out some old woollen socks.
One pair had belonged to her husband.
The moment she saw them, she felt the urge to look at the clock again.
She shut the cupboard.
The socks remained inside.

10:56.

Four minutes still remained.
She went to the window.
On the neighbour's roof, a woman was spreading out a quilt.
The quilt's red border gleamed in the sunlight.
Janaki Devi wondered—did that woman need to know what time it was?
Perhaps she did not.
She would turn the quilt when one side grew warm.
She would know time not by a clock, but by the warmth of cloth.
At 11:00 Janaki Devi drew the third line.
This time she tried to write the numerals as neatly as Kavya would.
The first 1 came out crooked.
She rubbed it away and wrote it again.
In that much time the edge of the sunlight had moved forward once more.

Janaki Devi held the chalk suspended in the air.
"Then where is the exact place?"
Where the edge had been when she began to write?

Or where it was now?

First she made a small dot.

Then she wrote 11:00.

This method satisfied her.

The dot—the moment.

The number—the name.

She thought: by the time a moment is given a name, it has already moved on.

Was every date like this, then?

She remembered the date of her marriage.

She remembered her son's birth date.

She also remembered the day her husband died.

But who had written down all the time contained inside those dates?

Manisha came to the doorway of the room.

"Amma, shall I donate one of the old quilts?"

Janaki Devi turned.

"Which one?"

"The one with the green border."

"Not that one."

"Then the blue one?"

"Not that either."

Manisha smiled.

"Then which one are we donating?"

Before replying, Janaki Devi looked at the lines of sunlight.

"Keep them for now."

Manisha went away.

Janaki Devi felt a little ashamed of her own answer.

"Keep them for now."

For many days she had been saying those words about many things.

Old quilts.

An old brass plate from the family.

A broken low stool.

Her husband's socks.

Papers whose writing had now faded.

"Keep it for now" was as though there were a room inside time where objects could remain safe forever.

Meanwhile, the strip of sunlight had crossed all three chalk lines.

11:07.

Eight minutes.

Eight minutes suddenly felt heavy to Janaki Devi.

She went into the sitting room to shell peas.

Manisha pushed the bowl toward her.
 The two of them shelled peas without speaking.
 A pea-pod opened.
 The peas fell into a palm.
 The empty pod went into one basket.
 The full peas into another bowl.
 Manisha asked, "Why do you have to keep looking at the clock so much?"
 "Kavya's work."
 "She left you here as a watchman?"
 "My wages are two tilkuts."
 Manisha laughed.
 So did Janaki Devi.
 After a while, something suddenly occurred to her.
 "What time is it?"
 Manisha checked her phone.
 "Eleven seventeen."
 Janaki Devi dropped the peas and stood up.
 "Oh!"
 She hurried back to the room.
 11:15 had passed.
 The edge of the sunlight had already moved on.
 The chalk was in her hand.
 She stopped.
 "Should I write 11:15 here?"
 She asked herself.
 Where the sunlight stood now was the place for 11:17.
 Where was 11:15?
 Two minutes behind.
 The place where the earth had been turning two minutes ago no longer existed there.
 This small mistake troubled Janaki Devi far more than she had expected.
 While running a household, a mistake of two minutes had never troubled her this much.
 Nothing happens if food is served two minutes late.
 If a child reaches school two minutes late, he can run inside.
 If medicine is given two minutes late, the clock does not stop.
 But the thought of drawing the wrong line on Kavya's floor was unbearable to her.
 She put down the chalk.
 She left 11:15 blank.
 The blank place lay between two lines.

There was sunlight in that blank place.

Only the number was missing.

Janaki Devi sat on the low stool and kept looking at it.

From upstairs Kavya called, "Dadi, is everything all right?"

Janaki Devi called back loudly, "I missed one."

"What?"

"Fifteen minutes."

"What?"

"Nothing. Do your work."

Kavya fell silent.

Janaki Devi thought—if she estimated the place and drew the line in chalk, Kavya would never know.

The place in between could be worked out from the distance between the first three lines.

She picked up the chalk.

She measured the first distance.

She judged the second by eye.

Her hand moved forward to make a dot in the middle of the empty space.

Just then a thin cloud drifted past the window.

The strip of sunlight faded.

Within a breath it vanished.

On the floor there remained only three chalk lines and one empty interval.

Janaki Devi stopped her hand.

The room did not suddenly grow cold.

But her faith in the warmth diminished.

She looked out of the window.

A thin cloud lay across the sky.

The sun could still be seen, but milky and pale.

Janaki Devi looked at the wall clock.

11:23.

"What will I do about 11:30 now?"

She placed the chalk on the low stool.

At first she grew restless.

Kavya's work would remain incomplete.

Then she became annoyed—did Kavya have to do this experiment today of all days?

Then it seemed ridiculous to be angry at a cloud.

She rose, thinking she would shut the window.

Then she noticed—there was no sunlight, but time was still passing.

The second hand of the clock kept moving.

Upstairs, Kavya's chair scraped again.
A bicycle bell rang in the lane.
Manisha opened the tap to wash the peas.
There was no strip of sunlight inside the room.
Even so, it became 11:24.
Janaki Devi sat down on the low stool.
It seemed to her as though a teacher had wiped the board clean, but the lesson had not ended.
She closed her eyes.
Time passes in darkness too.
Of course she had always known this.
And yet knowing something and suddenly understanding it are not the same.
She tried to remember a long stretch of her own life.
Her son had gone away for work.
During the first year after marriage, her daughter had not been able to visit often.
Her husband had retired.
She remembered all these events.
But the years in between?
In which year had she had the veranda wall painted?
In which winter had she first sat in the sun with a blanket wrapped up to her knees?
In which month had Manisha taken the kitchen keys into her own hands?
There were no dates.
Yet that time had not vanished.
Just as 11:24 had not vanished merely because there was no line for it on the floor.
Janaki Devi opened her eyes.
Her own thought seemed too large to her.
To make it smaller at once, she called to Manisha, "Will you make tea?"
Manisha replied, "Now?"
Janaki Devi looked at the clock.
11:28.
"Yes, now."
"Before lunch?"
"Since when did tea become the enemy of lunch?"
Manisha laughed.
The tea came.
At 11:30 the cloud was still there.

Janaki Devi did not draw a line.
 She did not even try to write 11:30 on the floor.
 Steam kept rising from the cup.
 For a few moments it was visible.
 Then it disappeared.
 “Does this measure time too?” she wondered.
 She smiled.
 At 11:36 the sun became clear again.
 The strip of sunlight suddenly reappeared on the floor.
 Not where it had been before.
 It had gone far ahead.
 Something seemed to drop inside Janaki Devi.
 The interval during which the sunlight had disappeared had become a
 leap on the floor.
 She rose and went to the edge of the strip.
 The chalk line for 11:00 lay far behind.
 No 11:15.
 No 11:30.
 In front of her, only the present edge.
 She could have written 11:36 if she wished.
 11:36 was not on the experiment’s list.
 She did not write it.
 She simply sat there with the chalk in her hand.
 Until 11:45 the sunlight moved slowly once more.
 During those nine minutes she felt no impatience.
 She kept watching.
 The edge crossed a fine crack in the floor.
 Then it touched the shadow of the old low stool.
 Then it slipped past one of the stool’s legs.
 At 11:45 she drew the line.
 Beside it she wrote the time.
 This time her hand did not tremble.
 Between the two lines lay a long blank stretch.
 That blank stretch held the time of the cloud.
 On Kavya’s display chart it would look ugly.
 Janaki Devi had begun to like its ugliness.
 Kavya came downstairs.
 She had a ruler and a sheet of paper in her hand.
 “Dadi, let me see.”
 She sat down on the floor.
 10:30.

10:45.

11:00.

Then blankness.

Then 11:45.

Kavya raised her eyebrows.

"11:15 and 11:30?"

Janaki Devi said, "The first one I missed."

"And the second?"

"The cloud."

Kavya looked toward the sunlight.

"But it is there now."

"It wasn't then."

Kavya set down the ruler.

"I'll draw the missing lines in between from the distances."

Janaki Devi said at once, "No."

Kavya looked at her.

Janaki Devi softened her voice.

"If it is an experiment, write what was actually observed."

"But the graph will be incomplete."

"Why incomplete? There was a cloud. That is also a result."

Kavya thought for a moment.

"Teacher will say the observation was interrupted."

"Then write that the observation was interrupted."

"You have become a scientist."

"No. I simply do not want to hide my mistake."

Kavya looked at the floor again.

"You missed 11:15?"

"Yes."

"By how many minutes?"

"Two."

Kavya burst out laughing.

"So much worry over two minutes?"

Janaki Devi kept looking at her.

"Two minutes became large when I wanted them back."

Kavya stopped laughing.

It seemed she did not fully understand the sentence, but she did not make another joke.

"12:00 is still left," she said.

"I'll do that one."

Kavya did not go upstairs.

She sat beside her grandmother.

The two of them watched the strip of sunlight.
 After a little while Kavya grew restless.
 "It moves so slowly."
 Janaki Devi said, "It is slow because you are watching it."
 "And if I don't watch?"
 "Then you will discover that it has moved."
 Kavya thought.
 "Is that a riddle?"
 "No."
 "Then what?"
 Janaki Devi did not answer.
 Kavya began measuring the distances between the old lines with the ruler.
 "Dadi, from 10:30 to 10:45 it is seven centimetres."
 "Hmm."
 "From 10:45 to 11:00 it is eight."
 "Hmm."
 "Why aren't they the same?"
 "The window, the angle, the earth—ask your science."
 "You don't know?"
 "I don't know everything."
 Kavya looked up.
 "But you say you know everything."
 "I said my education did not stop in Class Five."
 "Isn't that the same as knowing everything?"
 "No."
 Kavya laughed again.
 So did Janaki Devi.
 Just before 12:00 Manisha came and stood in the doorway.
 "Why are both of you staring at the floor?"
 Kavya said, "We are catching time."
 Manisha said, "Did you catch it?"
 Janaki Devi replied, "It escaped from two places."
 Shaking her head, Manisha walked away.
 At 12:00 Kavya herself drew the line.
 She placed the chalk exactly at the edge of the sunlight.
 Janaki Devi saw that even while the line was being drawn, the edge was moving forward.
 Kavya wrote—12:00.
 "That's all."
 She stood up.
 "Shall I wipe it now?"

Janaki Devi said at once, "No."

Kavya paused.

"Why?"

Janaki Devi searched for the answer herself.

"Let it stay for now."

"Ma will scold me."

"I'll tell her."

Kavya gathered the chalk and went upstairs.

The room grew quiet again.

The strip of sunlight had already crossed the 12:00 line.

The experiment was over.

The sunlight had no work left to do.

Janaki Devi remained seated on the low stool.

She had imagined that the moment the experiment ended, the sunlight would somehow matter less.

But the sunlight went on moving without her permission.

12:07.

12:12.

12:19.

No one was drawing lines now.

Still the edge kept moving.

Janaki Devi found a strange relief in this.

For the day to be seen, it did not have to be recorded.

If she wished, she could simply sit.

She got up and went to the bundle of quilts.

The quilt with the green border lay on top.

The blue one beneath it.

She pulled out the green-bordered quilt.

The border was worn.

The cloth in the middle was still strong.

Her son had slept under this quilt when he was small—the memory came at once.

Then she stopped herself.

Was that reason alone enough to keep the quilt?

She spread it out.

There was an old patch in one corner.

She had sewn the patch herself.

She could not say when.

Had her son been small then, or already a teenager?

Had her husband still been working, or had he retired?

Nothing was clear.

The quilt nevertheless existed.

A blurred memory did not make the object false.

She called Manisha.

“Donate the green one.”

Manisha came to the doorway.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Not ‘keep it for now’?”

Janaki Devi laughed.

“Not for now.”

Manisha picked up the quilt.

“And the blue one?”

“Keep that one for now.”

“All right.”

Manisha went away.

Janaki Devi thought—giving away one quilt did not make a life lighter.

Even so, for the first time a small door seemed to open inside the words
“for now.”

The strip of sunlight had by then reached the leg of the low stool.

Every day at this hour Janaki Devi shifted the stool a little so that her feet
would stay warm.

Today she did not move it.

She watched the bright edge touch the front of her slipper.

Then her toes.

Then climb over the top of her foot.

Warmth came.

She did not look at the clock.

After a while the sunlight crossed her feet and moved on.

There was no reason to stop it.

Manisha called her to lunch.

Janaki Devi stood up.

At the doorway she turned and looked at the floor once more.

The chalk lines were still there.

So were the two blank places.

Suddenly she understood—the blank places were not truly empty.

There had been a cloud there.

There had been a mistake there.

There had been tea there.

There had been peas there.

There had been her sitting there.

Only the line had not been there. That was all.

After lunch Kavya came carrying her display chart.

"Dadi, what should I write as the title?"

"What does your subject say?"

"The position of sunlight with time."

"Then write that."

Kavya wrinkled her nose.

"Too dull."

"Science is not dull."

"A title can be dull."

Janaki Devi said, "Write 'Winter Sunlight.'"

Kavya smiled.

"That is a science title?"

"If your teacher asks, tell her your grandmother gave it to you."

Kavya wrote—"Winter Sunlight."

Then she paused.

"What do I write for the two blank times?"

Janaki Devi said, "For one, write—observation missed."

"And the other?"

"Cloud."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

Kavya wrote it down.

She made two points.

At one—11:15, observation missed.

At the other—11:30, cloud.

Janaki Devi watched from a distance.

On the paper, the blank places had now acquired names.

She felt a faint dissatisfaction.

What had been blank on the floor was filled on the paper.

Kavya seemed to notice the dissatisfaction.

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Should I change the title?"

"No."

Kavya took the display chart and went away.

Toward evening, Manisha came to wipe the floor.

"Shall I wipe off the lines?"

Janaki Devi looked toward the window.

There was no sunlight.

Only the shadow of the lattice.

She said, "Yes."

Manisha passed the wet cloth across the floor.
 10:30 disappeared.
 10:45 disappeared.
 11:00 disappeared.
 There was nothing to wipe across the empty interval.
 11:45 disappeared.
 12:00 disappeared.
 Within moments the floor was even again.
 Janaki Devi had expected to feel sad.
 She did not.
 She looked at the wall clock.
 Five minutes fast.
 Suddenly she remembered—it had been years since she had set that clock
 five minutes ahead.
 “Manisha.”
 “Yes?”
 “Take down this clock.”
 Manisha looked surprised.
 “Is it broken?”
 “No.”
 “Then?”
 “It is five minutes fast.”
 “But you set it that way.”
 “Yes.”
 “Shall I correct it?”
 Janaki Devi looked at the clock for a few moments.
 “No. Let it stay for now.”
 Smiling, Manisha said, “For now again?”
 Janaki Devi laughed too.
 “Yes. Everything does not have to end on the same day.”
 That night Kavya brought the display chart to her grandmother’s room
 once more.
 “Look.”
 The lines on the display chart had been drawn straight with a ruler.
 Between them, two points were marked in another colour.
 Janaki Devi read—
 “11:15—observation missed.”
 “11:30—cloud.”
 Below them Kavya had written one sentence—
 “The passage of time continued even while the sunlight was not visible.”
 Janaki Devi read the sentence twice.

“Did your teacher write this?”

“I did.”

“Because I told you?”

“No.”

“You wrote it well.”

Kavya did not fold the display chart.

She carried it carefully out of the room.

Janaki Devi turned off the light.

Outside the window was a winter night.

There was no strip on the floor.

In the dark, the wall clock only ticked.

Janaki Devi kept listening to it.

The clock running five minutes fast.

The phone showing the correct time.

The sunlight that would return in the morning.

And between them, the night, for which there was no chalk line.

She pulled the blanket up around herself.

For the first time, night did not feel like empty waiting.

It was night.

That was all.

The Milk Boiled Over

In the mornings, Pramila Devi could hear the milk.

Even when her eyes were occupied with something else, her ears stayed turned toward the stove.

First came a faint rustling from the bottom of the pot.

Then the thin skin on the surface of the milk trembled lightly.

After that, the sound changed altogether.

Once that small change came, even half a minute's delay was enough for the milk to reach the rim.

Pramila Devi never needed to look at the clock.

The family teased her about this skill.

Shashidhar Babu would say, "There are three clocks in this house, but Pramila is the milk clock."

Aniruddh would laugh and say, "Mother's milk never boils over."

Sometimes Meera would say, "Ma, why don't you set an alarm on the phone?"

Pramila Devi would refuse at once.

"You don't watch milk with an alarm."

There was a quiet pride in that answer.

Meera would smile and return to her work.

Pramila Devi took that smile for agreement.

There were many things in the house that were settled without anyone asking her.

She knew whether the rice tin was running empty.

She remembered whose medicine was about to run out.

She knew where Shashidhar Babu most often left his spectacles.

She knew where the spare copy of Aniruddh's office identity card was kept.

She even knew which drawer held the small scissors from Meera's sewing box.

Knowing so many things had slowly become part of who she was.

Whenever anyone failed to find something, the same cry went up—"Ma!"

Pramila Devi answered.

Often she was already on her feet before the call had fully come.

She liked being able to make things easy for everyone.

It exhausted her too.
 Both things were true at once.
 On that winter morning, everything in the house was ordinary.
 A thin veil of fog hung beyond the window.
 Dew rested on the tulsi plant in the courtyard.
 The milkman had come half an hour late.
 Even so, Pramila Devi did not allow the day's sequence to fall apart.
 She strained the milk.
 She set some aside for tea.
 She put the rest on the stove in a large pot.
 She turned the flame to medium.
 Then she stood beside the stove and began picking over coriander leaves.
 Meera came in.
 She had washed clothes in her hands.
 "Ma, there's no room on the line upstairs."
 Pramila Devi left the coriander and looked toward the window.
 "Take down the clothes from the back line."
 "They're still damp."
 "Then put these on the line inside the veranda."
 Meera nodded.
 She went back.
 The first faint sound rose from the pot of milk.
 Pramila Devi listened.
 Just then Shashidhar Babu called from the sitting room, "Pramila!"
 She did not answer.
 Shashidhar Babu called again, "Where am I supposed to write the date on this form?"
 Pramila Devi closed her eyes and stood still for a moment.
 Only yesterday she had told Shashidhar Babu to have Aniruddh fill out the bank form.
 Shashidhar Babu had said, "It's only this much. I can do it."
 And now Pramila Devi was required even for that "only this much."
 "Top right corner," she called from the kitchen.
 "Where?"
 Pramila Devi set the coriander stems on the table.
 The sound of the milk was still quiet.
 She went to the sitting room.
 The form was in Shashidhar Babu's hands.
 The blank space for the date was plainly visible.
 Pramila Devi put a finger on it.
 "Here."

“This one?”

“Yes.”

She turned back.

As she reached the kitchen doorway, Aniruddh came out of his room.

“Ma, have you seen my black belt?”

Before answering, Pramila Devi looked at his waist.

He was wearing a khaki belt.

“I need the black one.”

“Why?”

“I’m wearing blue trousers today.”

“Look in the upper cupboard.”

“It isn’t there.”

Pramila Devi remembered.

Three days earlier, she had brought the belt back from the cobbler after it was repaired.

She had put it in a cloth bag.

“There’s a bag on top of the trunk in the veranda.”

“Which bag?”

Pramila Devi said nothing.

She went into the kitchen.

The surface of the milk was swelling.

She immediately lowered the flame.

The foam sank back.

Pramila Devi drew a long breath.

“That’s enough,” she said to herself.

It seemed to her that even her ears were tired today.

She picked up the coriander again.

She separated two leaves.

Just then the doorbell rang.

Meera was upstairs hanging out the clothes.

Aniruddh was looking for the belt.

Shashidhar Babu was bent over the form.

The bell rang a second time.

Pramila Devi put the coriander on the table.

She went toward the door.

A delivery man was standing outside.

“Shashidhar Jha?”

“He is inside.”

“I need his signature.”

Pramila Devi turned and called, “Shashidhar!”

There was no answer.

The delivery man looked at his watch.

“Maaji, quickly, please.”

At that moment Pramila Devi did not like the word “Maaji.”

She could not say why.

She went inside.

Shashidhar Babu was on the phone asking someone about bank interest rates.

Pramila Devi gestured with her hand.

He said, “One minute.”

One minute.

Pramila Devi returned to the door.

The delivery man kept looking at something on his phone.

The sound of the milk was now coming clearly from the kitchen.

First the faint rustle.

Then a sound like heavy breathing.

Pramila Devi heard it.

Her body recognized the sound.

But she remained standing at the door.

Shashidhar Babu came out.

“Where do I sign?”

The delivery man held out the paper.

Pramila Devi moved away.

There were only five or seven steps between there and the kitchen.

But the milk was not going to wait five or seven steps.

By the time Pramila Devi crossed the doorway, the white foam had already risen above the mouth of the pot.

She stood still for a moment.

The foam crossed the rim.

A thick stream of milk fell onto the stove.

It made a hissing sound.

The smell changed at once.

Hot milk spread across the iron surface.

A few drops fell to the floor below.

Pramila Devi reached out and turned off the flame.

That was all.

The house did not shake.

Nothing happened to anyone.

The milk had boiled over.

Meera came down the stairs.

“Oh, the milk!”

Aniruddh arrived with the belt in his hand.

Shashidhar Babu came inside after setting down the parcel envelope.
All three saw the same scene.
Pramila Devi stood in front of the stove.
Even after turning off the flame, her hand was still gripping the stove knob.

Shashidhar Babu spoke first. "It happened with you?"

The sentence was short.

There was no rebuke in his voice.

Only surprise.

That surprise lodged somewhere deep inside Pramila Devi.

"Why shouldn't it happen with me?"

Shashidhar Babu fell silent.

Pramila Devi let go of the knob.

Meera began looking for a cloth to wipe up the spill.

"Leave it," Pramila Devi said.

Meera stopped.

"First the stove—" Aniruddh began.

"It's off."

"Then shall I wipe the milk?"

"Leave it."

Pramila Devi was startled by the sound of her own voice.

She was not speaking loudly.

But there was such hardness in it that everyone stopped.

The stream of milk on the stove was slowly thinning.

A drop hung from the edge.

Then it fell.

Pramila Devi kept watching that drop.

"Mother's milk never boils over," she said softly.

Aniruddh's expression changed.

He understood that his mother was repeating his old remark.

"I only said it as a joke—"

"I know."

Pramila Devi cut him off.

"As a joke."

She pulled a stool beside the stove and sat down.

No one in the house was accustomed to seeing this.

Pramila Devi never sat down in the middle of kitchen work.

To her, sitting meant that the work was finished.

The work was still spread out before her.

Yet she remained seated.

Shashidhar Babu said, "Let it be, it's only—"

“Only?”

Pramila Devi looked at him.

Shashidhar Babu did not finish the sentence.

Whether he remembered yesterday’s “only” about the form, Pramila Devi could not tell.

She remembered it herself.

“Where do I fill in the form?”

“Where is the belt?”

“Where do I hang the clothes?”

“Who will attend to the delivery man?”

Pramila Devi did not count the sentences one by one.

She wanted to count them.

Then the very desire to count made her angrier.

Why should she have to provide all the evidence?

Why should even anger have to become an account book?

She stayed silent.

Meera said softly, “Ma, I’ll clean it.”

“Leave it.”

“The milk will dry onto it.”

“Let it dry.”

As she said this, something trembled inside Pramila Devi.

For the first time in her life, she deliberately wanted to let spilled milk dry on the stove.

There was a childish stubbornness in the wish.

She did not like that stubbornness in herself.

Even so, she did not get up.

Aniruddh slowly left the kitchen.

Shashidhar Babu remained standing there with the parcel envelope in his hand.

Meera stayed.

After a few moments, she too sat down on the floor, leaning against the other side of the stool.

Pramila Devi looked at her.

“The clothes?”

“I hung them.”

“All of them?”

“Yes.”

Both were silent.

The smell of milk now carried a burnt sweetness.

Meera said quietly, “I’ve told you many times that I can watch the milk in the morning.”

The anger rose again inside Pramila Devi.

"So now it's my fault?"

"No."

Meera answered at once.

"I'm not talking about fault."

Pramila Devi tried to read Meera's face.

There was neither sarcasm nor triumph there.

Meera kept rubbing a hand over her knee.

"I'm only saying that you never let me do it."

Pramila Devi opened her mouth to answer.

No sentence came.

Many mornings returned to her memory.

In the first month after Meera's marriage, she had wanted to do a great deal of the kitchen work.

Pramila Devi would say, "Rest first."

Then, "You have your office."

Then, "The milk catches when you handle it."

Then, "I'm used to doing it."

Now the word "used to" sounded different.

Standing in the doorway, Shashidhar Babu said, "I should have learned a few things too."

Pramila Devi shot him a sharp look.

"Learn now?"

"If you teach me."

At that answer, the direction of Pramila Devi's anger shifted for a moment.

"So I have to teach you as well?"

Shashidhar Babu looked taken aback.

Meera pressed her lips together.

Pramila Devi felt laughter trying to rise.

It did not come.

No tears came to her eyes either.

There was only tiredness.

She stood up.

She took an old cloth.

Meera stood too.

"I'll do it."

"Take two cloths."

This time Pramila Devi did not refuse.

Together they began wiping the stove.

In places the milk had dried into a thin skin.

Elsewhere it had become sticky white patches.
Meera wet the cloth.
Pramila Devi brought a scraper.
“Gently here,” she said.
“The coating will come off.”
Meera lightened her hand.
There was no reconciliation in the middle of the work.
No apology was asked for.
No grand promise was made.
Only the stove became clean again.
But a thin black ring remained on the bottom of the milk pot.
Pramila Devi tried to scrub it away.
The mark did not come off completely.
“Let it stay,” Meera said.
Instinctively Pramila Devi wanted to say, “No, it won’t look good.”
The sentence formed halfway.
She stopped.
“Let it stay.”
By afternoon, the house looked ordinary again.
Aniruddh had gone to the office.
Meera had returned to her work.
Shashidhar Babu put the bank form into an envelope.
Pramila Devi cooked lunch.
She put the dal on the stove.
She took the rice off the flame.
She checked the salt in the vegetable dish.
All the work got done.
But something unfinished kept moving inside her.
Her anger had not risen once like milk and then settled back down.
It had divided itself into separate questions.
Was it really true that she had to do everything whenever others asked?
No.
She took up many tasks before anyone asked.
Why?
Because she could not bear disorder.
Because she noticed flaws in work done by others.
Because it saved time.
Because she liked being the one everyone came looking for.
The last reason made her uncomfortable.
After lunch she sat in the veranda.
Winter sunlight lay in one corner.

Unlike Janaki Devi the day before, she had no desire to measure time.
She simply stretched out her hand and placed it in the sunlight.
In the courtyard, Meera was speaking to someone on the phone.
Shashidhar Babu was folding the newspaper.

Pramila Devi remembered that five years earlier, Meera had once scorched the milk.

That day Pramila Devi had said three times, "If you had left it to me, it wouldn't have burnt."

Meera had said nothing.

It was a small memory.

But now it pricked like a thorn.

Pramila Devi heard the voice inside herself offering a defence.

"I said it so she would learn."

Then another voice came.

"Did you?"

She could not escape the question.

In the evening Shashidhar Babu asked for tea.

"Will there be tea?"

Pramila Devi was folding clothes in the veranda.

By old habit, her body began to rise.

She stopped her feet.

"Make it."

Shashidhar Babu lifted his head from the newspaper.

"Me?"

"Yes."

Two moments of silence.

A small spark of anger flared again inside Pramila Devi—see, this man doesn't even know how to make tea.

Then she remembered that in the early years of their marriage, Shashidhar Babu used to make tea.

At the time Pramila Devi had told him, "Leave it. You put in too much tea leaf."

Gradually Shashidhar Babu had stopped making tea.

That memory did not support her side.

Pramila Devi did not like it.

Even so, it was true.

"Two cups of water," she said.

"Then?"

"One cup of milk."

"Sugar?"

"As you like."

“Tea leaves?”

“As you like.”

Shashidhar Babu burst out laughing.

“Then the tea will go wrong according to my own calculations.”

For the first time, a faint smile came to Pramila Devi’s lips.

“Let it.”

The tea really did taste different.

There was too much tea leaf.

Pramila Devi drank it.

She did not praise it.

She did not complain either.

After dinner that night, Meera was putting the kitchen in order.

Pramila Devi came in.

The stove was clean.

The milk pot with the black ring was standing upside down.

“Ma,” Meera said, “shall I put the milk on tomorrow?”

Pramila Devi’s first response was already prepared inside her—“You have a meeting in the morning.”

The sentence reached her lips.

Then stopped.

“What time is the meeting?”

“Nine-thirty.”

“The milk comes at seven.”

“Then I’ll do it.”

Pramila Devi nodded.

That night she lay awake for a long time.

Shashidhar Babu was asleep.

His breathing was regular.

Pramila Devi kept wondering what anger’s true face had been.

Was it the delivery man’s hurry?

Was it Shashidhar Babu’s “It happened with you?”

Was it Aniruddh’s belt?

Was it Meera?

Was it Pramila herself?

There was no single answer.

Anger often appears to rest on one person.

But its roots draw water from many places.

At that thought Pramila Devi laughed at herself.

Thinking about milk and ending up with roots drinking water!

She turned over.

In the morning, the milkman came on time again.

Pramila Devi opened the door as usual.
She took the packet.
She strained the milk.
Meera was still upstairs.
Her old bodily habit, without asking permission, prepared to put the milk
pot on the stove.
Pramila Devi stopped her hand.
She set the pot on the table.
She did not light the stove.
Meera came down five minutes later.
“Has the milk come?”
“It’s on the table.”
Meera picked up the pot.
She lit the stove.
She set the flame to medium.
Pramila Devi stood by the doorway.
“Not so high,” she wanted to say.
The flame really was a little high.
She stayed silent.
Meera turned the knob herself.
“This much?”
Pramila Devi said only, “Yes.”
Then she started to go outside.
From behind, Meera asked, “Where are you going?”
Pramila Devi stopped.
Until yesterday, that question would have meant: where are you going,
leaving the milk?
Today it was an ordinary question.
“To the courtyard.”
She went outside.
The winter morning sunlight had not yet fully descended.
Dew lay on the tulsi leaves.
Pramila Devi sat on the first step.
From the kitchen came the first faint sound of the milk.
Her ears became alert at once.
Her body wanted to rise.
She did not get up.
The second sound came.
Then came the clink of Meera’s movements.
The sound of the knob being turned.
The sound grew softer.

The milk did not boil over.
Along with relief, a small disappointment arose inside Pramila Devi.
She laughed at herself when she noticed it.
Had she wanted Meera to fail?
Perhaps.
It was difficult to admit.
She rested her hands on her knees.
A little later Meera called, "Ma, shall I take some out for tea?"
Pramila Devi said, "Take as much as you need."
"The cream?"
"As you like."
"Will you have tea?"
"Yes."
Pramila Devi stood up.
She came into the kitchen.
The milk was quiet in the pot.
A fine white ring had formed around the edge.
The black mark from yesterday was still on the bottom of the pot.
Meera had used the same pot.
Pramila Devi did not run a finger over the stain.
She picked up her cup.
She poured in tea.
From the sitting room Shashidhar Babu asked, "Not too little sugar, is it?"
Pramila Devi opened her mouth to answer.
Then she looked at Meera.
"Ask her," she said.
Meera burst out laughing.
Shashidhar Babu laughed too.
Pramila Devi did not laugh.
She blew on her tea and began to drink.
There really was a little less sugar in it.
She still said nothing.
Sunlight was entering through the window in a thin line.
The stove was off.
The milk had not boiled over.
Yesterday it had.
The house had gone on through both days.
Pramila Devi set the cup on the table.
Her hands were empty.
No one had yet called out asking where something was.
In that small empty interval, she placed her hands in her lap.

And for the first time, she did not feel the need to give them work at once.

Before Opening the Envelope

The moment Sudha Jha saw the envelope, she knew it held the very answer she had been waiting for for three months.

The envelope was ordinary.

Off-white paper, dulled to a greyish cast.

The college's blue seal in the upper left corner.

Beneath it, in small letters: Records Section.

At the sight of it, her right hand stopped.

The postman was only just walking out through the gate.

"Signed?" he asked, turning back.

Sudha looked at the signature she had written beside her name.

"Yes."

The postman left.

As she closed the gate, she felt that the envelope resting in her palm was somehow heavier than paper ought to be.

She went inside.

She set the envelope on the table in the sitting room.

Then immediately picked it up again.

Left on the table, it seemed as though she had spread her answer open in the middle of the house.

She put the envelope on the kitchen cupboard instead.

There stood the sugar tin, the tea leaves, and two empty bottles.

Among them, the envelope looked like something someone had put there by mistake.

Sudha put water on the stove.

Tea could be made.

Making tea required no thought.

The water heated.

The leaves went in.

The milk went in.

Sugar according to taste.

That sequence reassured her.

There was no such sequence for opening an envelope.

She could slit the edge with a knife.

She could peel the gum apart with her fingers.

There were scissors in the drawer too.

The problem was not how to open it.

The real obstacle was that once it was opened, something would become definite.

Three months earlier, that prospect had not seemed so frightening.

Then, while writing to the Records Section, she had been almost excited.

"If a copy of the admission form for the 1988-89 session is available, kindly send it."

She had written in her neatest hand.

"Especially the section concerning choice of subjects."

At the bottom she had signed her old name—Sudha Mishra.

Not the name she had used after marriage.

Writing the old name had given her a strange pleasure.

As though she were opening a narrow path back toward her eighteen-year-old self.

That day her granddaughter Ira had asked, "Nani, why did you give up music?"

Without thinking, Sudha had answered, "I didn't give it up. Babuji said music would not run a household."

She had been saying that sentence for years.

She had said it so often that its beginning and end had hardened into place.

Babuji said it.

Music would not run a household.

I studied commerce.

Later I got a job in a bank.

That was all.

A great turn in a life could fit into two sentences.

Ira had not fallen silent that day.

"Why didn't you say no to Babuji?"

Sudha had laughed.

"Daughters did not argue so much in those days."

Then Ira had asked, "Did your form say music?"

At that question, Sudha's laughter had stopped.

"It must have."

"Must have?"

"I remember."

"Then look. The old papers must be somewhere."

The old papers were not in the house.

That was when Sudha had written to the college.

She wanted to prove that her memory was right.
At least, that was what she had believed then.
Before the tea could boil over, she lowered the flame.
The envelope was still on the cupboard.
Its blue seal faced the wall, not her.
Sudha poured tea into a cup.
One cup.
Her husband Arvind had gone to the market.
He would be back by noon.
For now, the house held only Sudha and the envelope.
She carried the cup into the sitting room.
After two sips, she got up again.
She returned to the kitchen and picked up the envelope once more.
She ran her thumb along its back.
The strip of gum was smooth.
One corner had come slightly loose.
A simple pull from there would open it.
Sudha placed a finger on that corner.
She did not pull.
She brought the envelope close to her nose.
There was no smell of old paper.
Only the dry scent of newly posted paper.
She laughed.
What she had been treating as a truth thirty-five years old was sealed
inside freshly printed paper.
Sudha set the envelope beside the cup.
As she drank her tea, she turned the question around for the first time.
What if the form did say music?
Then Babuji would stand guilty.
At the thought, something inside her suddenly hardened.
She did not like the word "guilty."
Babuji had been dead for twelve years.
In his final months, he had been confined to bed.
Sudha had managed his medicines, his doctors, and the calculations for
his bank pension.
Once Babuji had said, "You're good with accounts, Sudha."
Sudha had joked, "You're the one who made me so."
Whether Babuji had laughed, she could no longer remember clearly.
Perhaps he had.
Perhaps he had only closed his eyes.
Memory was already beginning to loosen.

Sudha set the cup on the table.
What if the form said commerce?
That was the second question.
It was harder than the first.
What if her own signature stood beside the subject choice?
What if music was not mentioned anywhere?
What if Babuji had really only asked, "Commerce will make it easier to
get a job, won't it?"
And Sudha herself had turned that question into an order?
A cold emptiness descended into her stomach.
She picked up the envelope again.
She ought to open it now.
The longer she delayed, the more foolish the delay became.
She took out the scissors.
She opened the two blades.
She placed them against the top of the envelope.
At that exact moment, the phone rang.
Sudha felt almost relieved.
It was her younger sister, Anjana.
"What are you doing?"
"Nothing."
The answer came too quickly.
Anjana said, "Why does your voice sound like that?"
"Like what?"
"Like you're hiding something."
Sudha sat down on the chair.
The scissors lay on the table.
The envelope rested in her lap.
"The reply from the college has come."
"Which reply?"
"The old admission record."
Anjana was silent for two moments.
Then she laughed.
"You really sent for it?"
"Yes."
"They kept papers that old?"
"They said they would look if anything was available."
Anjana went quiet again.
Sudha said, "I haven't opened it."
"Why?"
The word was so small that it made Sudha angry.

"I just haven't."

"Then open it."

"You remember, don't you? Babuji told me to give up music."

She heard Anjana breathe at the other end of the line.

"Did he?"

Sudha sat up straight.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't remember exactly."

"You were there."

"Was I present for every conversation?"

"You were at home when I took admission."

"I was at home. Whether I was there when that conversation happened is another matter."

Sudha pressed the edge of the envelope with her nail.

"Do you remember anything?"

Anjana said slowly, "I remember this much: you had brought forms from two places. One for music, and the other wasn't exactly commerce—perhaps arts and commerce. Babuji talked about expenses."

"He didn't say, 'Music will not run a household?'"

"I have heard that sentence more often from you."

Sudha did not reply.

Anjana added at once, "That doesn't mean he never said it. I just don't remember."

"You don't remember anything."

"That is possible too."

Sudha ended the call.

She did not immediately feel ashamed of her anger.

At first, she simply felt angry.

Why had Anjana not remembered?

Some things change one member of a family's life, while another member does not remember them at all.

It felt unjust.

Then Sudha thought: perhaps, for Anjana, that event had never happened at all.

Perhaps the event had taken shape later inside Sudha.

She picked up the scissors and put them back in the drawer.

Her desire to open the envelope had not diminished.

Her fear had grown.

Holding the envelope, she went to her room.

Two old music notebooks were kept in the lower compartment of the old trunk.

One was labelled Introduction to Ragas.
 The other bore only her name.
 Sudha took them both out.
 She brushed off the dust.
 Inside the first notebook was Guruji's handwriting.
 "Yaman—ascending scale, descending scale."
 Below it, Sudha's own hand.
 For a moment she wanted to find Babuji's signature somewhere in it.
 Why?
 She herself did not know.
 As though finding one mark made by her father would allow her to hand
 the burden of the decision over to him.
 The last written page of the notebook bore the date—17 June 1988.
 Four pages after that were blank.
 That was all.
 Sudha kept looking at the date.
 College admissions had taken place in July.
 Had she stopped her music lessons before taking admission, or afterward?
 She had always believed—afterward.
 The notebook suggested—perhaps before.
 But four blank pages were not proof.
 Guruji might have been ill for a few days.
 She might have changed notebooks.
 The date might simply not have been written.
 Memory immediately found its routes of defence.
 Sudha saw it happening.
 She did not like what she saw.
 She closed the notebook.
 She laid the envelope on top of it.
 Now there were two objects before her—one that said nothing, and one
 that might say something.
 Arvind returned around noon.
 He put his shopping bag on the table.
 "Peas have become expensive."
 Sudha said, "Hmm."
 Arvind looked at her face.
 "What happened?"
 "Nothing."
 "That is not a 'nothing happened' face."
 Sudha showed him the envelope.
 Arvind read the seal.

"It came?"

"Yes."

"Did you open it?"

"No."

Arvind said casually, "Then open it."

Sudha felt the same anger she had felt with Anjana.

Why did everyone speak of opening the envelope as though they were talking about opening a gate?

She said, "Do you know what is inside?"

Taking peas out of the bag, Arvind said, "No."

"Then why is 'open it' so easy to say?"

Arvind stopped his hand.

"Because not opening it will not change what is inside."

Sudha replied at once, "I'm not afraid of what is inside."

After saying it, she realised it was true.

At least half true.

Arvind sat down on a chair.

"Then?"

Sudha took the envelope in her hand.

The answer did not come immediately.

After a while she said, "Once I open it, one of the stories I tell about myself may change."

Arvind looked at her questioningly.

Sudha repeated the sentence about Babuji.

Music will not run a household.

Arvind had heard the sentence before.

He said softly, "Yes, you say that."

"What if it didn't happen that way?"

Arvind split open a pea pod.

There were five peas inside.

"Then it didn't happen that way."

Sudha stared at him.

"You think this is a small thing?"

"No."

"Then?"

"I'm thinking."

Sudha was silent.

Arvind said, "If you have been angry with Babuji for years, and then discover that the decision was yours, that would be difficult."

Sudha looked away.

"And if the decision was Babuji's?"

“Then?”

“Then at least my memory was not wrong.”

The moment the sentence came out, Sudha startled herself.

“At least.”

What exactly was she trying to save—her music, her memory, or her anger?

Arvind went on shelling peas.

He did not offer advice.

That was one of his qualities Sudha had learned to recognise only after many years.

Sometimes he simply did not advise.

Sudha carried the envelope back to her room.

Afternoon sunlight was entering through the window.

The envelope looked white.

She thought: if there is a copy of the form inside, what will I look at first?

My signature?

The choice of subjects?

The date?

My father’s signature?

Perhaps her father’s signature would not be on the form at all.

An eighteen-year-old student would have signed for herself.

Sudha could not remember what her own signature had looked like at eighteen.

Suddenly this seemed enormously important.

The girl whose decision Sudha had described to everyone for years—Sudha could not even remember that girl’s handwriting.

She remembered the face.

Not two plaits—by then she wore one plait.

A blue salwar.

The veranda of Guruji’s house.

The black-and-white keys of the harmonium.

Babuji’s bicycle.

But the moment of decision?

Where had it happened?

In the sitting room?

In the courtyard?

In the admission queue at the college?

Whose hand had held the pen?

Sudha closed her eyes.

A scene appeared.

Babuji was folding the newspaper.

He was saying, "Music and singing are fine as a hobby."

Sudha stopped the scene.

Was that truly a memory, or an image made from a story repeated for years?

She closed her eyes again.

Another scene appeared.

Her mother was polishing a brass plate.

She was saying, "Your Babuji says choose a subject that will lead to a job."

Why had she never remembered this scene before?

Perhaps it had never happened at all.

Sudha opened her eyes.

The envelope was still closed.

For a while now, its being closed felt useful.

As long as it remained closed, both possibilities stayed alive.

Babuji could still be guilty.

Sudha could still have chosen for herself.

The two possibilities did not cancel each other; they simply stood outside the sealed paper.

For the first time Sudha understood that for three months she had not been waiting for an answer; she had been waiting for uncertainty to end.

And now that the end stood before her, she was postponing it.

At four in the afternoon Ira returned from school.

She went straight to the kitchen.

"Anything to eat?"

Sudha gave her flattened rice with curd.

As Ira sat at the table, she noticed the envelope.

"What's this?"

For a moment Sudha wanted to say—nothing.

Then she said, "It came from the college."

Ira's eyes brightened.

"That form?"

"I don't know."

"You haven't opened it?"

"No."

Ira laughed.

"Nani!"

Sudha wanted to laugh too, but no laughter came.

Ira reached out her hand.

"Shall I open it?"

Sudha pulled the envelope toward herself at once.

The movement was so quick that both of them fell silent.

Ira drew her hand back.

"All right."

Sudha said, "I have to open this myself."

"Then open it."

"Not yet."

Ira went on mixing the flattened rice into the curd.

After a while she asked, "Are you afraid?"

Sudha was ready to say "no."

Then she stopped.

"Yes."

Ira looked up.

"Of what?"

Sudha looked at the envelope.

"That something I have believed about myself for years may be wrong."

Ira thought for a moment.

"If it is wrong?"

Sudha did not answer.

Ira asked again, "You can start music again, can't you?"

"This is not about music."

"Then what?"

Sudha understood that whatever answer she gave now could become the next version of the story.

She grew careful.

"It is about whom I gave responsibility for one of my decisions."

Ira stopped her spoon.

"To Babuji?"

"Perhaps."

"And if Babuji really did stop you?"

"Then to him."

"In either case, you should open the envelope."

Sudha smiled.

"At your age, everything looks straight."

Ira immediately said, "At your age, does everything become crooked?"

This time Sudha truly laughed.

The laugh was brief, but it lasted a little while.

Ira finished eating and went to her room.

The envelope remained on the table.

Sudha did not move it.

At five o'clock, the sunlight moved off the table.

The envelope looked greyish again.

Sudha weighed it in her hand once more.

There could not be more than two or three sheets inside.
She did not hold it up to the light.
That felt like stealing.
If she was going to open it, she would open it.
If not, then not.
There was no middle way.
The thought startled her again.
Perhaps years ago she had thought in exactly the same way—music or commerce.

As though there were nothing in between.
As though studying commerce meant music had to end.
As though choosing music meant household responsibility had to end.
Perhaps the decision had never been that absolute.
Perhaps she herself had made it absolute later, so that regret would remain clean.

Clean regret is easier than muddied responsibility.
The sentence formed inside her, but she did not say it aloud.
At half past five Arvind asked for tea.
Sudha made tea.
The envelope was on the table.
This time Arvind did not even look at it.
That gave Sudha a strange relief.
She wanted no one's gaze to compel her to open it.
As she drank her tea, she placed the envelope in front of herself.
From her room, Ira could be heard humming something as she studied.
Sudha did not recognise the tune.
Suddenly she remembered the smell of Guruji's harmonium—wood, old cloth, and incense.

Was that smell truly a memory, or was it being made now?
By now she trusted her memory less.
And strangely, that mistrust was reducing her fear.
If memory was not complete evidence, why should a document be a complete judge?

The form could only show what had been written in one box on one day.
Where could that one box contain all the fear, advice, desire, hesitation, convenience, and stubbornness of that day?

Sudha caught the loosened corner of the envelope again.
This time her hand did not tremble.
She pulled gently.
The strip of gum came apart.
The paper made a small sound.

That was all.
The house did not change.
Nor did the evening.
Nor did her age.
The envelope was open.
Sudha did not immediately take out the papers inside.
She kept looking at its open mouth.
What she had kept sealed all day was now only an ordinary hollow made of paper.
Arvind said nothing.
Sudha drew out two sheets.
The first was a letter from the Records Section.
She read it.
“The individual admission forms for the 1988–89 session were damaged by damp and are not available in full.”
Sudha stopped.
She read on.
“On the basis of the available admission register, it can be certified that Ms Sudha Mishra was admitted to the Faculty of Commerce.”
The second sheet was a certified copy of the register.
Name.
Father’s name.
Date of birth.
Commerce.
That was all.
No subject-choice form.
No signature.
The word music nowhere.
No sentence spoken by Babuji.
After three months of waiting and a full day of fear, the letter said only what Sudha had already known.
She had studied commerce.
For the first time, Sudha did not laugh.
Nor did she cry.
First, an intense relief rose inside her.
So intense that the moment she noticed it, she felt ashamed.
She had wanted the form not to be found.
She had wanted the decision to remain uncertain.
That desire was itself an answer.
Arvind asked, “Did you find it?”
Sudha handed him the letter.

He read it.
“It wasn’t found.”
Sudha said, “Yes.”
Arvind gave the letter back.
“Are you disappointed?”
Sudha thought for a while.
“Relieved.”
The word was difficult to say.
Arvind only said, “Hmm.”
Sudha looked again at the certified copy.
Her name was there on the line.
Sudha Mishra.
Commerce.
That much was fact.
Everything else was story.
But calling it a “story” did not make it a lie.
Stories take shape in the empty spaces where documents do not reach.
The problem comes only when a story begins calling itself proof.
After dinner, Ira asked again, “What was in it?”
Sudha showed her the letter.
Ira read it quickly.
“So you still don’t know?”
“No.”
“Whether Babuji stopped you or not?”
Sudha opened her mouth.
The old sentence was ready.
Babuji said music would not run a household.
For years the sentence had come out without resistance.
This time it did not.
Sudha said, “I don’t remember exactly.”
Ira looked a little disappointed.
Young minds like clear answers.
Sudha added, “I remember that there was a great deal of talk about jobs at home. Babuji worried about it. I was afraid too. But whose words became whose decision—I can no longer say.”
Ira reached out to fold the letter.
Sudha said, “No, not like that.”
She folded the letter herself.
She took out the old Introduction to Ragas notebook.
For a moment she wanted to place the letter inside it.
Then she did not.

The record office letter would stay with the records.
The music notebook would stay with the music.
She put the letter back into the envelope, but did not seal it.
The envelope was open now.
What it contained was no longer a mystery.
The mystery remained outside it—Sudha's own eighteen-year-old mind.
That night, when she went to bed, Babuji's sentence returned to her.
"Music will not run a household."
This time the voice was not clear.
Sometimes it sounded like Babuji's.
Sometimes like her mother's.
Sometimes like Sudha's own.
She did not try to give the voice a face.
The next morning Ira was humming before leaving for school.
Sudha was straining tea in the kitchen.
One of Ira's notes went off-key.
Out of old habit, Sudha opened her mouth to give her the correct note.
Then she stopped.
Ira found the note again herself.
Sudha poured the tea into the cup.
The open envelope lay on the table in the sitting room.
Its mouth was still open.
Sudha did not close it.

White Hair in the Mirror

Madhavi Jha noticed her first white hair on a day when she was not looking at her face at all, but straightening the parting in her hair.

It was half past seven in the morning.

Tea was brewing in the kitchen.

On the veranda, the washed clothes were half dry, half still heavy with water.

From the room upstairs came the sound of Kavya dropping a book, while from inside Arun had called, "Where did you put my black pen?"

Madhavi stood before the mirror for two minutes.

Those two minutes could, perhaps, be called her own.

She drew the comb through her parting.

She wet the small flyaway hairs near her ears and pressed them down.

Then she saw a thin line of white gleam.

At first she thought it was a thread of sunlight falling through the window.

She turned her head a little to the right.

The line did not move.

She turned to the left.

The line was still there.

With her fingers she separated the other strands.

One hair.

White from root to tip.

A little stiffer, a little different.

"Oh," escaped Madhavi's lips on its own.

There was less fear than surprise in that "oh."

She was forty-six years old.

Whether the white hair had come late or on time was a question without much meaning.

Even so, for a moment she thought of pulling it out.

A small pair of tweezers lay beside the mirror.

She reached out her hand.

Just then a voice came from the courtyard: "Chhotki! Is the tea ready?"

It was Urmila, her elder sister-in-law.

Madhavi's hand reached the tweezers and stopped.

"It's nearly ready," she answered.

Then she looked at her face in the mirror again.

The white hair was still there.

"Chhotki."

The word had not come from inside the mirror, but from the courtyard.

Yet for the first time it struck Madhavi as strange that a forty-six-year-old woman, on whose head the first white hair had now appeared, was still "Chhotki" in this house.

She did not pick up the tweezers.

She went towards the kitchen.

Urmila was waiting for her tea.

"Chhotki, less sugar in mine," she said.

"Yes."

From inside, Arun asked again, "Listen, did you find the black pen?"

Madhavi said, "In the right-hand drawer of the table."

From upstairs Kavya called, "Ma, has my white dupatta been ironed?"

"It's on the chair."

Three voices.

Three forms of address.

Chhotki.

Listen.

Ma.

No one's mouth had formed the word "Madhavi."

It was not that the people in the house had forgotten her name.

Everyone knew it.

Whenever it had to be written on paper, it was written correctly.

On the bank account.

On the insurance papers.

In the school's register of parents.

On the application for the new electricity connection.

Madhavi Jha.

Not Madhavi Arun Jha.

Only Madhavi Jha.

On paper, the name was whole.

In speech, only now and then.

While straining the tea, she tried to remember when Arun had last called her "Madhavi."

In the first year of their marriage?

Before Kavya was born?

While introducing her to someone?

“This is my wife, Madhavi.”
She remembered that sentence.
But inside the house?
Madhavi could not remember.
She held the cup out to Urmila.
Urmila took a sip and said, “It’s just right.”
Madhavi smiled.
That small approval made her feel a little lighter.
Why, she could not tell.
In the work of the morning, she forgot the white hair.
Kavya left for college.
Arun for the office.
Urmila went to her room.
Madhavi folded the clothes, sifted flour, and answered two phone calls.
The first call was from her mother’s house.
Her sister-in-law asked, “Chhoti, are you coming on Saturday?”
Madhavi answered, “I’ll see.”
The second call was from a neighbour.
“Kavya’s mother, will I get that book I asked for yesterday?”
“Yes, I’ll send it.”
After putting down the phone, Madhavi sat for a few moments with it still in her hand.
Chhoti.
Kavya’s mother.
In her mind she said her own name: Madhavi.
The word was familiar.
Yet it felt like the opening line of an old song whose tune one remembers but has lost the practice of bringing into voice.
That afternoon she had to go to the market.
A small rubber washer for the household tap, a blue file for Kavya, and a little box for Urmila’s medicines—three things.
She changed into another cotton sari.
She stood before the mirror again.
The white hair was still there.
The sun was now at a different angle, so its shine was less visible.
Madhavi could press it down with a finger and hide it among the black strands.
She tried.
Two moments later the white hair sprang out again.
She laughed.
“You’re in an awful hurry,” she said softly.

Whether she said it to the hair or to herself, she did not decide.

At the hardware shop in the market, the shopkeeper saw her and said, "Chhotki Bhauji, what do you need?"

He was an old customer of the family.

Madhavi asked for a rubber washer.

"The size Arun Babu uses?"

"No, I unscrewed the tap and brought the old one. See."

She took the worn washer out of her bag.

The shopkeeper measured it and handed her a new one.

Madhavi paid him.

Next was the stationery shop.

The shopkeeper's young son was sitting at the counter.

He did not know Madhavi.

"Whose name is the account under?" the boy asked.

Madhavi did not understand.

"What?"

"We need a name for the old credit ledger. Babuji has told me to write down all the old customers' names again."

Madhavi opened her mouth.

The first answer was almost ready: Arun Jha.

The household credit usually ran under his name.

Then she stopped.

"Madhavi Jha," she said.

The boy wrote in the ledger: Madhavi Jha.

"Phone number?"

Madhavi gave him her number.

"That's all."

That was all.

Nothing rang out like a fanfare.

No announcement was made.

On the other side of the counter, the boy kept slipping the blue file into a paper bag.

Yet something small stirred inside Madhavi.

She thought: Why did I hear my own name so loudly?

The name is mine.

As she was leaving the shop, the boy called from behind, "Madhavi ji, your change!"

Madhavi turned at once.

She held out her hand and took the coins.

"Thank you."

Outside, for no reason, she walked slowly for a little while.

Why should hearing her own name from the mouth of a stranger feel so strange?

She tried to remember the first day of her marriage.

How many people had asked her name when she arrived at her husband's home?

Very few.

"The new bride."

"The younger daughter-in-law."

"Chhotki."

Then Kavya was born, and she became "Kavya's mother."

Time passed, forms of address changed, but where had Madhavi herself been among them?

The thought did not make her sad.

None of those forms of address was loveless.

Many times her heart had filled at the word "Ma."

There was affection in Urmila's "Chhotki."

There was the easy intimacy of married life in Arun's "Listen."

The problem was not in the words.

Perhaps the problem was only that, among all those words, the sound of the original name had become rare.

For a moment Madhavi wondered how often she herself called Arun by name.

Very rarely.

In front of Kavya: "Papa."

In front of Urmila: "He."

On the phone: "Listen."

When introducing him to someone: "Arun ji."

Inside the house, almost never "Arun."

She laughed.

So this was not her story alone.

Together, they had slowly turned one another's names into names of relationships.

The names had not vanished.

They were simply used less often.

On her way home, Madhavi passed a shop with a mirrored glass front.

For a moment she saw her reflection in the pane.

The white hair was not visible.

She did not stop.

When she reached home, Urmila looked at the medicine box and said, "Oh, Chhotki, this is very nice."

"Yes."

“How much did it cost?”

Madhavi told her the price.

Urmila took the box away.

Madhavi put the blue file on Kavya’s table.

She left the rubber washer beside the tap.

Three tasks completed.

After lunch the house grew quiet.

Urmila went to sleep.

Madhavi sat in the drawing room with a book, but her mind would not stay on the page.

“Madhavi Jha.”

The stationery-shop boy’s voice kept returning to her memory.

She closed the book.

Once more, in her mind, she said her name.

Madhavi.

Her mother had given her that name.

Her mother used to say that when Madhavi was born, the madhavi creeper behind the house had been covered in flowers.

Madhavi had loved that story as a child.

Even after her marriage, her mother would sometimes say on the phone, “Madhavi, listen.”

Her mother had been dead for seven years.

It suddenly struck Madhavi that after her mother’s death, there was almost no one left who regularly spoke her name aloud.

She closed her eyes.

Her mother’s voice was no longer very clear in memory.

But the three syllables of the name were clear.

Ma-dha-vi.

She did not become emotional at once.

No tears came to her eyes.

Instead, she felt a faint urge to laugh.

A name is such an ordinary thing.

And yet how long it can take a person to notice when it has stopped being used.

Kavya returned in the evening.

Seeing the file, she said, “Ma, this is exactly the one I needed.”

Madhavi asked, “Do you like my name?”

Kavya stopped in the middle of taking off her shoes.

“What?”

“My name. Madhavi.”

Kavya burst out laughing.

“Why are you asking like this all of a sudden?”

“I just asked.”

Kavya thought for a moment.

“It’s nice. A little old-fashioned, but nice.”

“Old-fashioned?”

“I mean... it’s not a name from my generation.”

“Oh.”

Kavya started upstairs, then turned back and asked, “Ma, did you have a pet name at home?”

Madhavi thought.

“At my mother’s house they called me ‘Madhu.’”

“Wow. Madhu!”

Kavya deliberately drew it out: “Ma-dhu!”

Madhavi laughed.

“Go on, do your work.”

Kavya went upstairs.

Madhavi thought again: after how many years had she heard the name “Madhu”?

There was no way to count.

Arun came home in the evening.

Taking off his shoes, he said, “Listen, will you give me some water?”

Madhavi gave him water.

After one sip Arun asked, “What happened? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Nothing.”

“There is something.”

Madhavi smiled.

“What is my name?”

Arun lowered the glass from his mouth.

“What?”

“My name.”

“What kind of question is that?”

“Answer it.”

Arun laughed.

“Madhavi Jha.”

“When was the last time you called me by my name?”

Arun’s laughter faded a little.

He began to think.

“I... I do call you by name.”

“When?”

“Oh, I do.”

“Remember one time.”

Arun put the glass on the table.

“Is this some kind of test?”

“No.”

“Then?”

Madhavi said, “I found my first white hair.”

Arun’s face took on an expression as though the question had now become even harder to answer.

“Oh. What does that have to do with your name?”

“I don’t know either.”

A brief silence settled between them.

Arun tried to look at Madhavi’s head.

“Where?”

Madhavi made no immediate attempt to hide it.

“Here.”

With a finger she pointed to the right edge of her parting.

Arun came closer.

“Only one?”

“Only one so far.”

“Shall I pull it out?”

Madhavi laughed.

“No.”

Arun laughed again.

“All right. Let it stay.”

He began to turn away.

Madhavi called, “Arun.”

Arun stopped.

For a moment their eyes rested on each other.

First surprise, then laughter appeared on Arun’s face.

“Had you forgotten my name too?”

Madhavi said, “No. I had stopped using it.”

Arun pulled a low stool towards him and sat down.

“True.”

“I usually call you Kavya’s papa.”

“And I call you ‘Listen.’”

“Urmila Didi calls me Chhotki.”

“Kavya calls you Ma.”

Arun said, “So now what?”

Madhavi thought before answering.

She did not want to make a rule out of it.

“Nothing. Just say my name sometimes.”

Putting on a solemn expression, Arun said, "Very well, Madhavi ji."
 Madhavi glared at him.
 "Drop the ji."
 "All right, Madhavi."
 The word sounded slightly unnatural inside the house.
 Like a new object placed in an old room.
 Madhavi laughed.
 Arun laughed too.
 "And you?" he asked.
 Madhavi said, "Arun."
 This time the word sounded less unnatural.
 At dinner Urmila asked, "Chhotki, what will you cook tomorrow?"
 Madhavi answered naturally, "There's ridge gourd."
 She did not say, "Call me Madhavi."
 She had understood that freedom did not mean erasing every old form of address.
 In "Chhotki" there was one of her lives.
 In "Ma," another.
 In "Bhauji," a third.
 She only needed to know that beneath them all, the original name was still alive.
 After dinner Kavya suddenly looked towards her head.
 "Ma!"
 "What?"
 "Your white hair!"
 Madhavi laughed.
 "Yes, I saw it."
 Kavya got up and came closer.
 "There's only one. Shall I pull it out?"
 Madhavi's hand went involuntarily towards her head.
 She remembered the tweezers from the morning.
 "No."
 "Why?"
 "Let it stay."
 "Will you colour it?"
 "Not yet."
 Kavya shrugged and went away.
 The question was over.
 Madhavi liked that no grand declaration had been necessary.
 At night she stood before the mirror again.
 The white hair was clearly visible now.

As before, she could have read it as information about her age.
Forty-six.
Forty-seven a year from now.
Then forty-eight.
The calculation was easy.
But now the hair seemed to her less like a number than like a voice.
Not a voice calling anyone.
A small sign saying: your body is not older than all your relationships, but
it is certainly separate from them.
You are not only Chhotki.
Not only Ma.
Not only someone's wife.
Not only someone's sister.
Madhavi.
She did not turn the thought into a sentence aloud.
To say it would have made it too large.
She simply picked up the comb.
She straightened her parting.
The white hair remained where it was.
She did not try to press it down among the black strands.
The next morning, nothing in life looked visibly different.
Tea was made.
Kavya woke late.
Urmila said, "Chhotki, has the newspaper come?"
Madhavi said, "It's by the gate."
Arun could not find the black pen again.
Madhavi smiled.
"Look in the drawer."
Arun opened the drawer.
The pen was there.
Just then his phone rang.
He looked at the screen.
"Unknown number," he said.
He answered the phone.
"Hello?"
The voice at the other end asked something.
Arun looked towards Madhavi.
For a moment the old form of address rose to his lips—"Listen..."
He stopped.
Then he said, "Madhavi, the phone is for you."
Madhavi turned in from the veranda.

The morning sunlight fell across her head.

The white hair gleamed for a moment.

She reached out to take the phone.

This time, hearing her own name did not make her feel that someone else was being called.

The Empty Bowl

Anshu was nine years old, and he was very fond of his steel bowl with the blue rim.

There were four bowls in the house of almost the same size, but he could recognize his own from a distance.

A thin blue ring ran around its rim, chipped away in three places.

Anshu said those three white patches were his bowl's "teeth."

His mother, Sarita, would laugh.

"Bowls don't have teeth."

"Then what are these?"

"The paint has chipped off."

Anshu could never quite accept that.

He liked giving things names in his own way.

On Friday evening, that bowl held his rice, red-lentil dal, and fried potatoes.

He had come back from playing and was ravenously hungry.

When his mother served him dal the first time, he ate quickly.

The second time, he pushed the bowl forward himself.

"More dal?"

"A little."

"Rice?"

Anshu placed a hand on his stomach and considered.

"One spoonful."

Sarita gave him one spoonful of rice.

Grandmother Janaki Devi said, "He says one spoonful, then he'll finish all the potatoes."

Anshu smiled.

He did, in fact, pick up two more pieces of potato.

His father Naresh sat opposite him.

He had returned after working all day with a mason, but instead of the usual tiredness on his face there was a look of waiting.

Again and again he checked his phone.

Sarita asked, "Did it come?"

Naresh shook his head.

Anshu understood that some message had probably not arrived.
He went back to mixing dal into his rice.
Such exchanges happened many times a day among the grown-ups.

“Did it come?”

“No.”

“What did he say?”

“By Monday.”

“We’ll see.”

To Anshu, these sentences carried no particular meaning.

In his world, many things happened later.

His school shoes would be bought next month.

New coloured pencils on Sunday.

The fair next week.

His father’s wages on Monday.

“Later” seemed to him like a large room in time where all unfinished things lay safely stored.

By the time he finished eating, his stomach was full.

At the bottom of the bowl he saw a thin yellow trail of dal.

A single grain of rice clung to the rim.

He picked it up with his finger and ate it.

Grandmother was finishing her meal slowly.

Naresh got up to wash his hands.

Sarita sat beside the stove eating the last two mouthfuls from her plate.

Anshu turned the bowl upside down and tapped it on the table—tak, tak.

The blue rim rang against the metal table.

“Don’t play the drum,” Sarita said.

Anshu tapped it once more, more softly.

Then he picked up the bowl.

“Shall I wash it?”

“Yes.”

He liked this chore because a small bowl was easy to wash.

At the tap outside the kitchen, he filled the bowl with water.

The pale yellow tint of the dal swirled through the water and disappeared.

He scrubbed the bowl with ash until it shone.

Then he turned it upside down and set it on the ledge by the tap.

He thought he would now go outside and finish the remaining round of marbles with Sumit.

Just then Sarita called, “Anshu, bring that bowl here.”

“I’ve just washed it.”

“It needs to be washed.”

Anshu carried the bowl inside.

Sarita had pulled the rice tin towards her.
The tin was old.
There was a small round dent in the middle of its lid.
Anshu had often tried to sit on that lid, but his mother had stopped him.
Today the lid lay on the floor.
Inside the tin, the rice lay very low.
Sarita took Anshu's bowl.
"What for?"
"To measure."
"What?"
"Rice."
Anshu became curious.
Sarita lowered the bowl into the tin.
The grains rasped against the metal.
She brought the bowl up full.
With her palm she levelled the rice.
Then she emptied it into an old plate.
"One," she said.
Until then, Anshu thought this was a game.
Sarita filled the bowl again.
"Two."
A third time.
"Three."
The fourth time, the bowl would not fill completely.
To gather the rice from the bottom, Sarita tilted the tin slightly.
The grains collected on one side.
The bowl filled a little more than halfway.
Sarita kept looking at it.
Grandmother had come over too.
"How much?"
"Three bowls and a little more than half."
Naresh came in, wiping his hands.
"Is there maize flour?"
"Enough for two meals."
"Flattened rice?"
"Enough for one meal."
"Dal?"
"There's masoor. Not much arhar."
Anshu listened to this inventory.
A moment ago his bowl had simply been his bowl.
Now it was measuring something that belonged to the whole household.

Sarita poured the rice from all three full bowls back into the tin.
 Then the half bowl too.
 One or two grains remained on the plate.
 Anshu began picking them up.
 Sarita did not stop him.
 He dropped the grains back into the tin.
 "Is this all the rice there is?" he asked.
 "Yes."
 "Where is the rest?"
 "This is all."
 Anshu peered into the tin.
 The empty part was much larger than the rice.
 He must have seen it before as well.
 But earlier he had thought of the empty part simply as part of the tin.
 Today, for the first time, it looked like an emptiness.
 Naresh said, "I'll speak to the contractor again tomorrow."
 "He said Monday," Sarita said.
 "Tomorrow is Saturday. It would help if he gave something."
 Grandmother said, "I don't need rice at night. Roti will do."
 "Not like that," Sarita said at once.
 "I'm saying it will do for me."
 "Whatever is cooked will be for everyone."
 Anshu looked at Naresh's face.
 "Will the money come on Monday?"
 Naresh looked at him.
 "That's what we've been told now."
 "Then will we buy rice tomorrow?"
 Before Naresh could answer, Sarita said, "Tomorrow we'll manage with what we have."
 "There's rice at the shop, isn't there?"
 "There is."
 "Then why don't we buy it?"
 To Anshu, the question was perfectly straightforward.
 If the thing was in the shop, why was it not in the house?
 Naresh smiled faintly.
 "You have to pay money to buy it."
 "Don't you have money?"
 This time a small silence settled over the room.
 The smile did not leave Naresh's face, but it grew smaller.
 "Not as much as we need just now."
 Anshu placed a hand on his stomach.

His stomach was full.
He was not hungry.
He could still taste the dal in his mouth.
Even so, for the first time the word “not” touched something beyond his stomach.

He looked at the bowl again.
The empty bowl was in Sarita’s hand.
Only a little while ago it had held rice.
Anshu had taken dal twice.
He had taken one more spoonful of rice.
Now it was empty.
But looking at the empty bowl did not remind him of the meal he had eaten.

It reminded him of the bottom of the tin.
“How much cooked rice does one bowl of raw rice make?” he asked.
Sarita said, “A lot.”
“One bowl this size?”
“Measuring raw rice is a different matter.”
“How many people can eat from it?”
Grandmother laughed.
“Now the calculations begin.”
Sarita thought for a moment.
“It depends on what is cooked, how much water is used, and how much each person eats.”

Such an answer did not satisfy Anshu’s curiosity.
At school, answers did not slide away like this.
Take three mangoes away from ten and seven remained.
Divide twelve sweets among four children and each got three.
One bowl of rice fed how many people?
Why could that not have a single-number answer?
“How many bowls will we cook tomorrow?”
Sarita picked up the lid of the tin.
“We’ll see tomorrow.”
“Why not now?”
“Because tomorrow we won’t eat only rice.”
Grandmother said, “There’ll be maize roti.”
Sarita added, “And a little rice at noon.”
“Milk?”
“No milk until Sunday.”
Anshu stared.
“Tea?”

Naresh laughed.

"I'll survive without tea."

"I drink milk."

Sarita looked at him.

"Tomorrow you can eat roti with jaggery-water."

Anshu opened his mouth.

He wanted to say that he did not like roti with jaggery-water.

He wanted milk.

His mouth remained open.

Then his eyes fell on the bowl.

Sarita was wiping that empty bowl.

Anshu closed his mouth.

He himself was surprised by his silence.

He had not decided to make a sacrifice.

Nor had he said, "I don't want milk."

Only the next part of the question did not come out.

It was a new experience for him.

When he was smaller, hearing "no" would only make him ask again.

Why not?

When?

Where else?

Who has it?

Now, for the first time, it seemed that the answer to the question was already lying before him.

The answer was the empty part of the tin.

The answer was three bowls and a little more than half.

The answer was the distance between Saturday, Sunday, and Monday.

Anshu remembered that day's mathematics lesson at school.

The teacher had written on the blackboard—

" $9 - 4 = 5$ "

Anshu had answered at once.

Five remained.

The teacher had asked, "Is five a little or a lot?"

The class had burst out laughing.

"Compared with what?" the teacher had said.

Then everyone had fallen silent.

At the time, Anshu had thought the question was one of the teacher's games.

Now three and a half bowls stood before him.

Was that little or a lot?

The tin was not empty.

The food in the house had not run out.

Grandmother was not hungry.

Father had eaten too.

Mother had finished her plate.

Anshu's stomach was the fullest of all.

And yet something was scarce.

What was scarce was not inside the stomach; it spread across the days ahead.

Anshu placed a hand on his stomach again.

His stomach was full.

The rice in the tin was low.

Both things could be true at the same time—never before had he understood it quite this way.

It seemed to him that scarcity could begin even before the stomach was empty.

Sarita closed the rice tin.

"Where shall I put this bowl?" Anshu asked.

"Where it always goes."

Anshu carried the bowl towards the utensil shelf.

Three other bowls lay there upside down.

He began to turn his bowl upside down too.

Then he stopped.

It seemed to him that an upturned bowl showed only its shining back.

Not the empty space inside.

He set the bowl upright.

Grandmother saw him from a distance.

"Is there water left in it?"

"No."

"Then why upright?"

Anshu did not answer.

He did not fully understand the reason himself.

That night he sat at his study table.

He opened his mathematics notebook.

There were five subtraction problems in the day's exercise.

He worked out all the answers.

The fourth problem was—

"A shopkeeper had 18 kilograms of rice. He sold 7 kilograms. How much remained?"

Anshu wrote—11 kilograms.

Usually he would have thought the problem ended there.

Today he paused over the 11 for a while.

Eleven kilograms for how many days?
For how many people?
Was there more rice somewhere or not?
Had the shopkeeper received his money or not?
The problem said none of these things.

Then Anshu understood that the “remaining” in mathematics and the “remaining” at home could be the same word and yet not the same experience.

He closed the notebook.

Outside, he could hear Naresh speaking softly on the phone.

“Yes, I understand.”

A short silence.

“No, I’m not complaining.”

Then—

“If you can give even five thousand on Saturday, we’ll manage.”

For the first time, Anshu listened carefully to the phrase “we’ll manage.”

It was said often in the house.

If a strap was fixed to an old slipper, they would manage.

If one fewer bulb was fitted, they would manage.

If there were fewer vegetables, add potatoes and they would manage.

If there was no money until Monday?

They would manage.

Anshu wondered—where, exactly, did this “managing” go on?

Who had to keep pushing it forward?

He wanted to laugh.

But the question felt deep.

Sarita came to check his notebook.

“All done?”

“Yes.”

“Pack your schoolbag.”

Anshu put the notebook into his bag.

Sarita began to turn away.

“Ma.”

“Yes?”

“I don’t want milk tomorrow.”

Sarita stopped.

Anshu added quickly, “I mean... jaggery-water will do.”

Sarita looked at him and remained silent for a moment.

“You like milk.”

“I won’t drink it for one day.”

“It isn’t about one day.”

Anshu did not understand.

Sarita came closer and rested a hand on the back of his chair.

"When something is short in a household, it is not necessary that the child be the first to give up his share."

Anshu was silent.

"We are doing the calculations. We won't give you less food."

"But the rice is low."

"The rice is low. Food is not."

Anshu thought about the difference.

Sarita said again, "It is good to understand scarcity. Being frightened by it is something else."

"I'm not frightened."

"All right."

"It's just... the bowl feels smaller."

A faint smile came to Sarita's face.

"The bowl is the same size."

"But before, it was mine."

"And now?"

Anshu searched for an answer.

"Now it's a measure too."

Sarita laughed.

"Yes, a measure too."

She went away.

For a long time Anshu kept straightening the strap of his schoolbag.

Before going to sleep, he went to the kitchen to drink water.

His bowl stood upright on the utensil shelf.

The yellow bulb left a round pool of light inside it.

The bowl was empty.

Anshu picked it up.

In his palm it felt very light.

He tried to imagine—how heavy would it be filled with raw rice?

Filled with cooked rice?

Filled with dal?

He understood that emptiness was not only a matter of weight.

The same empty bowl, after a meal, had meant an ending.

Beside the tin, used as a measure, it had become a question about the next day.

He put the bowl back on the shelf.

This time he did not turn it upside down.

In the morning, when Sarita lit the stove, Anshu woke earlier than usual.

He came into the kitchen.

“So early?”

“I woke up.”

Sarita was kneading flour.

Anshu looked at the bowl on the shelf.

“Shall we measure the rice?”

“Not now.”

“When?”

“At noon.”

Anshu nodded.

He did not insist on picking up the bowl.

Naresh was getting ready to go out.

“To the contractor?” Anshu asked.

“Yes.”

“Will he give the money?”

Putting on his shoes, Naresh said, “We’ll see.”

Earlier, after hearing “we’ll see,” Anshu would have asked the next question.

Today he did not.

He had learned that some answers become clear like a bowl filled to the brim, some like a half-filled bowl, and some like grains scattered across the bottom of a tin.

Naresh went out.

Grandmother went to water the tulsi plant.

Sarita set the griddle on the stove.

Anshu looked at the empty bowl standing upright on the shelf.

His stomach was empty now.

But today hunger and scarcity no longer seemed to him the same thing.

Hunger was inside him.

Scarcity was the three days spread around that bowl.

Sarita lifted the first roti from the griddle.

“Anshu, bring your plate.”

Anshu went to get his plate.

The bowl stayed where it was.

At noon it would measure the rice again.

The Bird at the Window

Prabha Jha's day ran less by the clock than by sequence.

She rose at five forty-five in the morning, but she knew the hour not from an alarm, but from the growl of the first passenger vehicle in the courtyard lane.

By six, the rice had been washed, the lentils picked over, the stove cleaned, and water set to boil for tea.

At half past six, Shailesh opened the newspaper.

At seven, Naina got ready for school.

By seven twenty, in that small house, three cups of tea, two plates of breakfast, and one lunch box had each set off in its own direction.

Prabha had never written down this list.

Yet her body remembered it.

Which utensil would be lifted first, which clothes would dry where, on which day spices would be ground, on which day the window mesh would be wiped—everything moved in an order like an unwritten rule.

Thursday was the day for cleaning the window mesh.

That kitchen window did not open toward the road, but toward the neighbour's back courtyard.

Between the two houses lay a narrow strip of open ground where rainwater collected in the monsoon and sunlight barely descended in winter.

The window had an old iron frame, three bars on the outside, and a fine mesh within.

One corner of the mesh had come slightly loose during the previous monsoon.

Prabha kept noticing it.

Each time she thought—I'll sew it on Sunday.

Sunday came, another task appeared.

The mesh remained as it was.

That Thursday morning, while leaving, Shailesh said, "Mishraji may come this evening. Keep something savoury with the tea."

Prabha nodded.

As Naina put on her shoes, she said, "Ma, wash my white shirt today. Tomorrow is laboratory day."

“Leave it there.”

Naina left the shirt on the chair.

The door closed.

The house did not suddenly become silent.

The fan kept turning, the tap kept dripping, a chair scraped in the flat upstairs, and the milkman’s bell sounded on the road.

For Prabha, these were all sounds inside silence.

She gathered the plates.

She wiped the stove.

She put the lentils on to cook.

At eight ten, she soaked Naina’s shirt in soapy water.

At eight twenty, she checked the storage tins.

The gram was half full.

There was enough flattened rice.

There was gram flour for making something savoury.

In her mind, she completed the accounting for the evening tea.

At eight forty, she stood before the window mesh.

First she dusted the grime settled on the bars.

Then she ran a dry cloth over the mesh.

The loose corner caught her eye again.

“I’ll sew it today itself,” she said to herself.

The needle and thread were not in the kitchen.

She put the cloth down.

She thought she would cut the vegetables first, then bring the sewing box.

She cut two small pieces of cauliflower.

Just then something fluttered outside the window.

Prabha thought it must be a dry leaf.

Then came a faint “tick”—as though something like a fingernail had struck the iron bar.

She looked up.

A small brown bird was perched on the outer bar of the window.

It was so close that Prabha could see the fine pale ring around its eye.

The bird reached its beak toward the loosened corner of the mesh.

A fine wire protruding like a loose thread from the mesh caught in its beak.

It pulled.

The mesh tightened.

The bird pulled again.

The knife remained still in Prabha’s hand.

A third time the bird fluttered its wings and tugged hard at the wire.

The wire did not come free.

The bird stopped.
Its chest rose and fell very quickly.
Its body was still, its breathing within it so swift.
It was the first time Prabha had seen one so closely.
The bird let go of the mesh.
It turned its neck and looked toward Prabha.
For two moments their eyes met.
Prabha understood that she was not seeing any “sign.”
Nothing auspicious, nothing inauspicious.
Only a living creature that had pulled at one thing three times and had now let it go.
The bird dropped to the outer sill below.
Two dry straws lay there.
It picked up one slender straw in its beak and flew away.
Prabha kept looking at the empty bar for a long time.
Not really “a long time.”
She looked at the clock—nine oh two.
Perhaps not even a minute had passed.
Yet the half-cut piece of cauliflower in her hand felt as though some long pause had entered the middle of her work.
She put the knife down.
The loose wire of the mesh stirred slightly in the air.
“It didn’t come out at all,” Prabha said softly.
Then her own voice struck her as ridiculous.
Whom was she telling?
The bird had already gone.
She began cutting the vegetables again.
But the sequence did not return to where it had been.
After the cauliflower, she was supposed to cut the potatoes.
She picked up a potato, then put it back.
She felt like having tea first.
Tea at nine?
Prabha usually had her second cup of morning tea at ten fifteen.
Inside her there was a fixed hour for that cup.
If she drank tea at nine, what would she do at ten?
The question arose so naturally that Prabha herself was startled.
As though ten o’clock depended for its existence on her cup of tea.
She did not make tea.
She cut the potatoes.
She checked the lentils.
She wrung out the clothes.

She rinsed Naina's white shirt separately.
 Then she went to the room to fetch the sewing box.
 The sewing box was beneath the bed.
 She bent down.
 She pulled out the box.
 When she opened the lid, she saw three buttons lying on top, two partly cut strips of elastic, and an old spool of green thread.
 She needed black thread for the mesh.
 The black spool was underneath.
 She kept moving things aside.
 Then she found a slip of paper.
 Naina had made it when she was in Class Five—a list titled “Mother’s Day.”
 Prabha read it.
 “Mother gets up.”
 “Mother makes tea.”
 “Mother cooks food.”
 “Mother washes clothes.”
 “Mother checks my work.”
 Below it was a smiling face drawn with coloured pencils.
 Prabha had seen this paper long ago.
 She had laughed then.
 Today the list made something different visible to her.
 “Mother” appeared five times in the list.
 Not one sentence contained “Prabha.”
 She put the paper back in the box.
 She took out the black thread.
 She returned to the kitchen.
 She stood before the mesh.
 She threaded the needle.
 She took the loose corner in her hand.
 Before making the first stitch, she remembered the bird pulling three times.
 She did not freeze.
 Only a question came—was it necessary to sew this mesh today?
 The answer should have been simple.
 Yes, mosquitoes would get in.
 Dust would come in.
 The mesh would tear further.
 But the opening was so small that even a fine finger could scarcely pass through it.

It had been like this since the previous monsoon.
Prabha pushed the needle back into the spool.
“In the evening,” she said.
Then she immediately laughed.
Not Sunday now, but evening.
She did not close the box.
She left it in a corner of the kitchen.
It was ten fifteen.
Tea time.
Prabha set water on the stove.
She took out a cup.
The tea was ready.
Usually she picked coriander while drinking tea.
Today the coriander lay before her.
She did not reach for it.
Cup in hand, she stood by the window.
The bird was not there.
A scrap of red paper lay in the narrow strip outside.
A cloth hung halfway down from the neighbour’s terrace.
A few ants were climbing an old wooden post.
Prabha had always thought there was nothing outside the window worth looking at.
Today she understood that “nothing” too is made of many things.
She finished her tea.
She picked the coriander.
The day moved on again.
At eleven, she was supposed to wipe the upper shelf.
She took a cloth.
Three brass vessels sat on the shelf, used only once or twice a month.
Prabha wiped them every Thursday.
She lifted one vessel.
A fine ring of dust lay beneath it.
She wiped the place.
She lifted the second.
Then it occurred to her—Mishraji was coming in the evening to drink tea, not to inspect the brass vessels.
She did not lift the third vessel.
Her hand stopped.
Was this laziness?
Prabha asked herself.
The first phrase came at once—“leaving work undone.”

Then another—"choosing the work."
 The two were not the same thing.
 She left the third vessel where it was.
 She folded the cloth and put it away.
 Eleven oh five.
 Five minutes saved.
 The word "saved" felt slightly strange to her.
 Saved from what had those five minutes been?
 She did not fill them with some other task.
 She sat down on a chair.
 As soon as she sat, her eyes fell on a dry lentil lying on the floor.
 Usually she would have picked it up at once.
 Today she kept looking at it.
 The lentil remained where it was.
 The house did not fall apart.
 At eleven oh seven, she picked up the lentil.
 She did not smile.
 She did not frame any lesson in her mind.
 Only this settled lightly into her body: a lentil could remain on the floor
 for two minutes.
 Lunch was ready on time.
 Shailesh ate at the office.
 Naina was at school.
 Prabha ate alone.
 Earlier she used to turn on the radio, but it had been broken for two
 months.
 She ate without sound.
 She washed her plate.
 At half past twelve, she normally checked the vegetable box for the next
 day.
 Today she forgot.
 She remembered that she had forgotten at one o'clock.
 At one, she was straightening the bed-sheet.
 Her hand suddenly stopped.
 "The box!"
 She got up.
 She went to the kitchen.
 She opened the box.
 Enough potatoes, four tomatoes, not much okra.
 Everything was fine.
 No disaster.

She closed the box.
 Then she thought—what if there had been no okra?
 Then some other vegetable would have been cooked.
 The answer was exceedingly ordinary.
 So ordinary that many of the fears in her day began to seem exaggerated.
 But she did not immediately pass judgment on her life.
 She knew that a house is difficult to run without order.
 Doing things on time creates ease.
 Sequence is not the enemy.
 The question was when sequence had turned from a means into a rule, and
 when the rule had forgotten its reason.
 At half past one she lay down to rest for ten minutes.
 Ten minutes was her rule.
 She woke twelve minutes later.
 On seeing the clock, her first feeling was not guilt but surprise.
 “Twelve minutes?”
 Two extra minutes of sleep had made no particular change in her body.
 She got up.
 Naina’s shirt had dried.
 She took out the iron.
 While ironing the shirt, she noticed a small stain near the shoulder.
 The stain had not come out with soap.
 Earlier, for such a stain, she would have soaked the shirt again.
 Today she thought—the stain would not even show beneath the
 laboratory coat.
 She folded the shirt and put it away.
 Naina returned at three.
 As soon as the door opened she said, “Ma, I’m hungry.”
 Prabha cut some fruit for her.
 While eating, Naina saw the shirt.
 “You washed it?”
 “Yes.”
 Naina noticed the stain on the shoulder.
 “This didn’t come out?”
 Prabha looked at her face for a moment.
 “No.”
 “Then?”
 “Then nothing. It will be under the coat.”
 Naina was quiet for a little while.
 Then she ate another piece of apple.
 Prabha felt like laughing, but she did not.

All this time she had feared Naina's possible objection more than the stain itself.

Naina objected, then ate her apple.

At four, Shailesh called.

"Mishraji isn't coming. His meeting has run long."

Prabha said, "All right."

She ended the call.

She had already taken out the gram flour for the savoury snack.

Normally she would have thought—I've taken it out now, I might as well make it. It will keep till tomorrow.

Today she put the gram flour back in its tin.

Naina was studying.

Evening was settling slowly over the house.

Prabha went to the window.

The loose wire of the mesh was still exposed.

The sewing box lay open in the corner of the kitchen.

She looked at it.

She had said she would sew it in the evening.

Now evening had come.

She picked up the needle.

Then a faint sound came again from the outer bar.

Whether it was the same bird or another, Prabha could not tell.

A small brown body, bright eyes—to her, birds of that kind looked almost alike.

This time its beak was empty.

It sat on the bar.

It did not look toward the loosened corner of the mesh.

It kept watch somewhere above the road.

Inside, Prabha stood holding the needle in her hand.

The bird looked toward her for a moment.

Then it fluttered its wings and flew away.

That was all.

Prabha threaded the needle.

She took the loose corner of the mesh.

She made two stitches.

Before making a third, she stopped.

The corner was already completely closed.

More stitches were needed only to make it look neat.

She cut the thread.

She closed the sewing box.

That night dinner was served at nine oh five.

Usually it was served at nine.

Shailesh said nothing about the five minutes.

Neither did Naina.

After dinner Shailesh asked, "You look tired today?"

Prabha thought.

"No."

"Then why are you so quiet?"

Prabha looked toward the window.

"Nothing. A bird came today."

Shailesh laughed.

"What is new about a bird coming to this house?"

Prabha smiled too.

"Perhaps the bird was not the new thing."

"Then what?"

Prabha did not answer.

Because she herself did not yet have a complete answer.

At night, while washing the dishes, she left one bowl in the washing area.

Her habit was to dry every utensil, put it in its place, and only then leave the kitchen.

The bowl was clean; water was merely dripping from it.

She left it there.

She switched off the light.

She walked to the door.

Then she turned and looked once more.

The window was dark.

There was no bird outside.

The sewn corner of the mesh was still.

A drop of water fell from the bowl in the washing area.

Prabha did not switch the light on again.

The bowl would still be there in the morning.

There would still be time to lift it.

The night had no duty to stand guard over the bowl.

Prabha closed the door.

Next Thursday, the day for wiping the window would come again.

She had not changed that rule.

But inside the rule there was now a small empty space—a space that did not have to be filled.

Something fluttered its wings outside the window.

Prabha did not turn around.

One Wrong Word

Vasudha Jha heard the wrong word leave her elder sister's mouth first; its meaning arrived afterward.

Lunch was over.

Saroj Didi was sitting on the chair by the window.

It had been five days since the cataract operation on her right eye.

The doctor had said—do not let direct sunlight fall on the eye, do not lift anything heavy, and do not stay alone for a few days.

So Saroj had left her own home in Madhubani and come to Vasudha's house in Darbhanga.

Vasudha did not think of this arrangement as an arrangement.

To her, Didi had come; that was all.

When Vasudha had been thirteen, Didi had taken her into her home then too.

There had been no doctor's prescription at that time.

There had been no particular day of which one could say—from this day onward, Saroj Didi became like a mother.

Their father died.

Their mother died two years later.

In the years between, Saroj Didi was twenty, but the household accepted her as the grown-up.

Vasudha was the younger one.

Being younger was a kind of right—the right to cry, sulk, study, and fail to understand a question.

For Saroj, being the elder one was not a right but a task.

Vasudha had thought about this many times.

But until today, her thinking had always ended at the same conclusion—
Didi did a great deal for me.

There had been no thorn in that conclusion.

It was clean.

Like the steel bowl that shines after being scrubbed clean at the end of a meal.

That day too, Vasudha came out of the kitchen after washing two bowls.

Saroj Didi sat in the chair with her eyes half closed.

She had no kajal on her eyes.

The doctor had forbidden it after the operation.

Without kajal, her face looked to Vasudha like a photograph from childhood.

"Is it time for the medicine?" Saroj asked.

Vasudha looked at the clock.

"Ten minutes to go."

"Not now, just now," Saroj said, laughing.

Vasudha laughed too.

"Ten minutes to go."

"Half your Maithili still lives in the office."

"And half your Hindi still lives in the marketplace."

They both laughed.

This kind of teasing between them was old.

Saroj had married into a family in Samastipur.

After living there for years, many Hindi words had entered her everyday speech.

Vasudha, after spending half her life working in a bank, had spent years listening to the language of forms, branches, accounts, and customers.

Each corrected the other's language, but neither felt insulted.

Words were a game between them.

At least that was what Vasudha had believed until then.

Vasudha placed the small medicine bottle on the table.

"Didi, the doctor says you can go home after seven days, but I say stay for two weeks."

Saroj turned her face toward her.

"If I stay, your work will increase."

"What work?"

"Medicine, meals, drops in my eye, getting up at night to check on me—aren't these all work?"

"These are household things."

Saroj was silent for a few moments.

A vegetable seller's call came from the road outside.

A gate closed at someone's house.

The fan turned slowly.

Saroj stroked the arm of the chair with her fingers.

"For a long time, I have been living on your..."

She stopped.

Vasudha looked at her.

"What?"

Saroj began again.

“For a long time, I have been living on your debt.”

The sentence came out naturally.

So naturally that it took Vasudha a moment to understand that it was wrong.

Saroj herself immediately frowned.

“Not debt—support.”

She laughed.

“See what my mouth said! I meant support.”

Vasudha tried to smile too.

“Yes.”

Saroj moved on.

“Support. Now with my eyes, my knees, all this—I have to depend on you.”

But Vasudha remained caught inside the first sentence.

Debt.

The word was small.

Only four letters in Maithili.

Not even very far from support.

Change the first vowel and the meaning changed.

Vasudha thought—it was a slip of the tongue.

That was all.

It would be foolish to search for meaning in it.

The ten minutes until the medicine had by then become seven.

She picked up the bottle.

She put the drops into Saroj’s eye.

Saroj closed her eyelids.

“Don’t open your eye for two minutes,” Vasudha said.

“Did the doctor say that, or you?”

“The doctor.”

“Then I’ll obey.”

Vasudha smiled again.

But the word ‘debt’ did not close its eyes inside her mind.

That night, while cooking dinner, she thought for the first time—when Didi paid my school fees, was that a debt?

The question seemed so indecent that she immediately grew angry with herself.

Didi had paid the fees because there had been no one else in the house.

That was all.

At the time, Saroj had sold two of her glass bangles.

Vasudha had learned this much later, not from her mother but from a neighbour auntie.

Saroj herself had never mentioned it.

Would someone who keeps accounts of debts hide the story of selling her bangles?

Vasudha added salt to the lentils.

The answer seemed clear.

No.

But in the next moment another memory came.

In the month of Vasudha's first salary, Saroj had asked for a sari.

Jokingly she had said, "Now the little one earns; my account will be settled."

Everyone had laughed.

Vasudha too.

Had that been only a joke?

The lentils began to boil over.

Vasudha lowered the flame.

She felt ashamed of her question.

It was not right to change the meaning of thirty-year-old laughter because of one wrong word.

She decided—tonight I will not think about this again.

Ten minutes later she was thinking about it again.

When Saroj's son Raghav had studied engineering in Darbhanga, he had lived in Vasudha's house for two years.

Vasudha had kept him like her own son.

His food, clothes, fee dates, fever—she had attended to everything.

Saroj would often say, "You have taken half my work upon yourself."

At the time Vasudha had felt proud.

Today an invisible account opened behind that sentence.

Two years of meals in exchange for two bangles?

Raghav's room in exchange for school fees?

Drops in Saroj's eye in exchange for the nights Saroj stayed awake during their mother's final illness?

Vasudha stopped while serving the plates.

The arithmetic was repulsive.

And, though repulsive, very simple.

That simplicity frightened her.

"What happened?" her husband Naresh asked.

"Nothing."

"Too much salt?"

"No."

Naresh tasted the lentils.

"They're fine."

Saroj was eating slowly.
 Since the operation, bright light troubled her.
 Vasudha switched off the main light and lit the smaller lamp.
 Saroj said, "You remember everything."
 Vasudha's hand stopped for a moment.
 Everything?
 Even the debt?
 She said nothing.
 After dinner Vasudha opened her household expense book.
 The habit came from her bank job.
 Milk, vegetables, electricity, medicines, domestic help—everything was
 written down.
 After Saroj's operation she had opened a new page.
 At the top she had written—"Didi—medicines/check-ups."
 Below were five entries.
 Medicine 1,280.
 Dark glasses for the eye 350.
 Car 600.
 Two consultation fees.
 Until then those amounts had meant only expenses.
 Today the heading 'Didi' looked like an account.
 Vasudha closed the book.
 That night she did not fall asleep for a long time.
 Naresh asked, "Didi's eye is all right, isn't it?"
 "Yes."
 "Then?"
 "Nothing."
 Naresh turned over.
 Vasudha kept looking at the ceiling in the dark.
 It seemed to her that after a wrong word, silence too becomes a word.
 The next morning, while drinking tea, Saroj said, "There's less sugar
 today."
 Vasudha started.
 "Less?"
 "Yes, but it's fine."
 Saroj's voice was ordinary.
 Vasudha wanted to laugh at herself.
 In a single day she had begun weighing every sentence Didi spoke.
 "Where is the medicine kept?"
 Was that dependence?
 "You've grown tired?"

Was that guilt?

“Did Raghav call?”

Was that accounting?

Once language falls under suspicion, even ordinary questions begin to look like documents.

Vasudha was troubled by this.

She left the kitchen work and went to the veranda.

Saroj was sitting there in the shade, out of the sunlight.

An old woollen shawl lay in her lap.

She was pushing a loose thread at its corner back in with her finger.

Vasudha remembered—Saroj had given her this shawl at her wedding.

She had said then, “It isn’t expensive, but it will keep you warm.”

Vasudha had said, “Why such a large shawl for me?”

Saroj had answered, “In your husband’s home, your own covering should never be too small.”

The sentence had been humorous then.

Today Vasudha wondered—had Didi known the price of the things she gave?

At once she thought—of course she had.

Whoever buys a thing knows its price.

Knowing a price is not the same as keeping an account.

It took Vasudha half a day to arrive at that small distinction.

In the afternoon Raghav called.

Saroj put the phone on speaker so everyone could hear.

“Ma, are you taking your medicines on time?” Raghav asked.

“Your aunt has turned me into a child.”

“Be one. For a few days.”

“Yes, now I am a burden on everyone...”

Saroj stopped.

Vasudha’s ears sharpened slightly.

“Not a burden,” Saroj corrected herself, “I meant dependent.”

Raghav laughed.

“Ma, your tongue slips a lot these days.”

Saroj laughed too.

“Effect of age.”

Vasudha did not laugh.

After the call ended she asked, “Didi, do your words really slip this much?”

Saroj looked over her glasses.

“What?”

"Yesterday you said debt instead of support. Today you almost said burden."

Saroj said casually, "It's a mouth. It makes mistakes."

"Yes."

Vasudha wanted the question to end there.

It did not.

Saroj kept looking at her face.

"You've been stuck on this since yesterday?"

Vasudha was silent.

The smile left Saroj's face.

"Oh, I meant support."

"I know."

"Then?"

Suddenly Vasudha felt thirteen years old again.

At that age too she used to fall silent like this before asking Didi a difficult question.

"Didi, did you ever feel that I owed you a great deal?"

Saroj's fingers became still on the loose thread of the shawl.

She did not answer at once.

At that delay, something sank inside Vasudha.

Saroj asked, "What do you mean by 'owe'?"

"That you did so much for me. Later I kept Raghav with me, I run around for your treatment... as though all of it were an account."

Saroj slowly folded the shawl.

"You made this account?"

The question came back at her.

Vasudha was startled.

"Me?"

"Yes. Yesterday I only said one wrong word. You spent the whole night making a ledger out of it?"

Vasudha grew irritated.

"Don't make fun of me."

"I'm not making fun of you."

Saroj's voice was gentle.

"You remembered the school fees?"

Vasudha did not answer.

"The bangles?"

Vasudha looked at her.

"How did you know?"

"Auntie told you. I knew she had."

At those few words, the old story changed again for Vasudha.

Didi had known that Vasudha knew about the bangles.

Then Didi's silence was not necessarily the silence of sacrifice; it could have been a decision not to repeat the story again and again.

Saroj said, "What I did then was what the house needed then."

Vasudha said, "But you left your studies."

"Yes."

"For me."

Saroj lowered her eyes.

"For you too. For the house too. And because of my own fear too."

"Fear?"

"I myself didn't know what I would do by going to college. After Babuji died, I lost the courage to leave the house."

Vasudha sat stunned.

The story she had carried all her life was—Didi gave up her studies for her younger sister.

Saroj was now saying—the reason had not been one thing.

This answer did not make the sacrifice smaller.

But the clean line blurred.

Vasudha was uncomfortable with such blurring.

In a bank, money is either a deposit or a withdrawal.

At home, the same amount can carry many names.

Saroj said, "You kept Raghav for two years. Was that to repay what you owed me?"

"No."

The answer came at once.

"Then?"

"He was a child. He was studying. It was convenient for him to stay with me."

"That's all."

Saroj pushed the loose thread of the shawl in again.

"For me too, at that time, there was what was convenient, what was responsibility, what was love—it was all mixed together."

Vasudha said nothing.

Saroj added, "Some love is not pure. Work, fear, habit, responsibility—everything stays mixed into it."

The sentence felt heavy to Vasudha.

She wanted Didi to say—'No, there is no debt at all.'

A clean answer.

Saroj did not give that answer.

The afternoon passed.

In the evening Vasudha opened the expense book again.

At the top it said—"Didi—medicines/check-ups."

She picked up her pen.

For a few moments the nib rested on the word 'Didi.'

She did not cross it out.

Below it she wrote a new entry—"Eye drops—480."

Then she closed the book.

She understood that crossing out a heading would not erase the accounting inside it.

Even acting against accounting can become another form of accounting.

Over the next two days Saroj's eye improved.

She began walking from the veranda to the courtyard without support.

Vasudha watched from a distance.

As before, she felt the urge to hurry over and take her hand.

Twice she restrained herself.

The third time Saroj herself said, "Give me your hand."

Vasudha gave it.

That small incident made something new visible to her.

It seemed to Vasudha that when Saroj asked for her hand, the meaning of the hand she held was different from the hand Vasudha had stopped herself from offering the first two times.

She did not feel the need to name that difference.

She simply kept the difference in mind.

After that she continued watching Saroj's steps, but did not immediately extend a hand.

On the seventh day the doctor said, "The wound is healing well. She can go home after two more days."

Saroj was pleased.

Vasudha said, "After two days?"

"Yes."

A small emptiness rose inside her.

She did not again insist that Saroj stay two weeks.

On the morning of her return, Saroj packed her clothes.

She folded the shawl.

She put the medicine bottle in a separate bag.

She put on the dark glasses.

Vasudha was in the kitchen wrapping parathas for the journey.

From inside Saroj called, "Little one, this medicine is three times a day, right?"

"Yes."

"And the one with the red cap at night?"

"Yes."

“Write it down.”

Vasudha wrote it on a piece of paper.

Saroj folded the paper and put it in the bag.

Then she said, “You are so much my...”

Vasudha looked toward her instinctively.

Saroj smiled.

“Don’t worry. This time I’ll think before I choose the word.”

Vasudha laughed too.

Saroj said slowly, “You are my support.”

The word was correct.

The pronunciation was clear.

The meaning too ought to have been clear.

Yet strangely, to Vasudha that sentence felt smaller than yesterday’s ‘debt.’

Perhaps the wrong word had opened more rooms than the right one.

She said, “Didi, a house rests on support. But a house is not only its support.”

Saroj raised an eyebrow.

“Is that bank language or philosophy?”

Vasudha laughed.

“I don’t know.”

“Then leave it.”

They both laughed again.

The car arrived.

Naresh loaded the luggage.

Saroj sat inside.

Vasudha stood at the gate.

The car turned away.

The house suddenly became quiet.

Vasudha went inside.

The chair was empty.

There was half a glass of water on the table.

One of Saroj’s hairs was caught on the back of the chair like a thread from the shawl.

Vasudha removed it.

In the afternoon she opened the expense book.

The page headed ‘Didi—medicines/check-ups’ was before her again.

She could have totalled it.

Adding five amounts was not difficult for a bank employee.

She did not add them.

Nor did she tear out the page.

She closed the book and put it in the cupboard.

Three days later Saroj called.

"Little one, I can see clearly now."

"Very good."

"I'm taking the medicine on time."

"Good."

"And listen."

"Yes?"

"Yesterday Raghav was saying—Ma, when will we repay what we owe Mausi?"

Vasudha's body tightened slightly.

Saroj laughed.

"I scolded him. I told him, from now on think before using that word in this house."

Vasudha was silent.

Saroj's laughter slowly faded.

"You've started thinking again?"

Vasudha looked toward the window.

Clothes were drying outside.

"Yes, but not as before."

"What are you thinking?"

Vasudha searched for an answer.

A week earlier she would have said—nothing.

Today she said, "I think a wrong word sometimes opens the wrong place."

Saroj was silent.

"And the right word?"

Vasudha said, "It may sometimes close the door."

At the other end of the phone Saroj laughed softly.

"You've begun thinking too much."

"You said one wrong word."

"My fault."

"No."

Vasudha said this 'no' slowly.

She understood that to search for fault would be to open the ledger again.

"Didi?"

"Yes?"

"When you paid my school fees, were you afraid then?"

There was silence on the phone for a few moments.

"Very," Saroj said.

"Of what?"

"That the next month I wouldn't know where the money would come from."

For the first time Vasudha imagined that answer.
In memory she kept looking at the bangles.
Earlier, the bangles had been a sign of sacrifice.
Now fear existed inside them too.
Adding fear did not reduce the love.
It made it more human.
Vasudha said, "I understood nothing then."
"You were a child."
"And now?"
Saroj laughed.
"Even now, you understand a great many things only partly."
Vasudha laughed too.
After ending the call she stood by the window.
She remembered yesterday's correct word—support.
Then the wrong word—debt.
The two words no longer cancelled each other out.
There was some open space between them.
In that space were school fees, bangles, Raghav's two years, eye medicine,
fear, convenience, habit, love.
So many things could not fit into a single word.
Vasudha went to the kitchen.
The expense book lay on the table.
She opened it.
It was time to begin the page for a new month.
She wrote the date at the top.
Then the first item—milk.
The second—vegetables.
The third—medicine.
She did not create a separate heading called 'Didi.'
Nor did she alter the old page.
She let both remain truths of their own time.
She capped the pen.
The phone rang again from outside.
Vasudha paused for a moment before getting up.
She did not know whether Didi was on the other end or someone else.
This time she did not guess.
She answered the phone.
"Yes, tell me."

New Slippers

Urmila Jha had no desire to buy new slippers.

The left strap of the old pair could be stitched once more.

At least, that was what she thought.

Before going to the market, she picked up the old slippers and examined them.

The heel of the right slipper was almost level.

The outer edge of the left slipper had become very thin.

The knot of the strap had been stitched twice.

Even the colour of the dust on the soles was different on the two.

Urmila understood all this as wear.

Wear belonged to things, not to people—until now, that was all she had believed.

She put on the old slippers and went to the market.

On the way, the left strap loosened once again.

She stopped and bent down.

With a finger she pushed the knot of the strap inward.

“One last time now,” she said, not to the slipper but to herself.

The shoe-and-slipper shop stood at the turn of the lane.

The shopkeeper, Kamlesh, had known her for many years.

“Stitch them again?” he asked with a laugh.

“If they can be stitched.”

Kamlesh took the slipper in his hand and turned it over and over.

“The strap can be stitched.”

Urmila breathed in relief.

“But the sole?”

“What is wrong with the sole?”

Kamlesh placed both slippers evenly on the table.

“Look.”

Urmila looked.

One stood straight.

The other leaned a little outward.

“They are old.”

“They both became old on the same day.”

Urmila remained silent.
Kamlesh ran a finger along the outer edge of the left slipper.
"It is more worn here."
"The road is uneven."
Kamlesh did not laugh.
He showed her the right slipper.
"Is the road kinder to the right foot?"
Urmila looked at his face.
Kamlesh said at once, "I am not saying anything is wrong."
"Then?"
"Your gait may have changed."
Urmila did not like that sentence.
"Why would my gait change?"
"I am not a doctor."
Kamlesh put the slippers back on the table.
"I only look at soles."
Urmila felt he was stretching the matter unnecessarily.
"Show me a new pair."
Kamlesh brought out three pairs.
The first pair seemed much too bright in colour to Urmila.
The second had thin straps.
The third was plain black.
"This one."
Kamlesh asked her size.
Urmila held out her old slipper.
"Like this."
Kamlesh did not measure her foot.
He looked at the number written inside the old pair and handed her the new one.
Urmila sat on the edge of the bench.
She took off the old slippers.
She put on the new ones.
Her first sensation was not comfort.
It seemed to her that the floor was slightly tilted.
She pressed down with her right foot.
Then the left.
Both soles were even.
"This is not right," Urmila said.
Kamlesh bent down and looked.
"The size is right."
"One foot feels lower."

Kamlesh removed the slippers and matched the two soles together.
“They are equal.”
“It does not feel so to me.”
Kamlesh paused for a moment.
“Put on the old pair.”
Urmila put the old slippers on again.
At once everything felt right.
She rose and took two steps.
The floor was level.
“See?”
Kamlesh said, “I see.”
“Then the new pair is not right.”
Kamlesh placed the old slippers on the table again.
“Your old pair has worn itself to match your gait.”
Urmila grew irritated.
“Slippers wear according to the way one walks. What is new about that?”
“The new pair has not yet worn itself to your gait.”
Kamlesh’s voice was matter-of-fact.
That very matter-of-factness made Urmila more uneasy.
She put the new slippers on again.
“Walk and see,” Kamlesh said.
Urmila took four steps inside the shop.
The first step with the right foot.
The second with the left.
On the third, she became aware that she set her left foot a little outward.
She deliberately tried to place it straight.
At once her right knee tightened.
There was no pain.
Only something like an old caution awakened inside.
Urmila stopped at once.
“What happened?”
“Nothing.”
She walked again.
This time she watched not her feet but her shoulders.
Her left shoulder moved a little forward.
The right a little back.
She had never noticed this before.
A small mirror stood in front of the shop.
It was not there for looking at one’s hair.
It was there so customers could see their whole bodies while trying on shoes.

Urmila walked in front of the mirror.
Her eyes fixed on the straps of the new slippers.
The distance between her two feet was not equal.
“It is because of these slippers,” she said.
Kamlesh only said, “It may be.”
Urmila did not like that answer either.
“Give me the old pair.”
“For stitching?”
“No.”
She thought for a moment.
“Keep them.”
Kamlesh put the old pair into a bag.
Wearing the new slippers, Urmila stepped out of the shop.
For the first ten steps she felt everyone was watching her walk.
No such thing was happening.
Everyone was busy with their own work.
The vegetable seller was watching his scales.
A cyclist passed, ringing his bell.
Two children ran by with schoolbags hanging from their shoulders.
No one had any interest in Urmila’s left foot.
That gave her relief and disappointment at once.
The road home was about half a kos.
Ordinarily, Urmila stopped at two places on her way back from the market.
First at the spice shop.
Then at the milk booth.
That day she bought no spices.
Nor did she buy milk.
She only wanted to walk.
She wanted to listen to her own gait.
The soles of the new slippers made a faint sound on the dry road.
Right—tap.
Left—a slight scrape.
Right—tap.
Left—a slight scrape.
Urmila slowed down.
She listened again.
The right foot lifted cleanly.
Before leaving the ground, the left foot slid a little.
“It was not like this before,” she said in her mind.
Then the question came at once—

Before when?
Twenty years ago?
Ten years ago?
Last month?
She could not answer.
At the gate of the house she stopped.
There was a small raised brick beneath the gate.
She always lifted her right foot first to cross it.
This time she deliberately lifted the left.
Her body faltered for a moment.
The left foot crossed the rise.
Her right knee trembled slightly.
Urmila caught hold of the gate.
“Ma:”
Neha called from inside.
Urmila released her grip.
“Yes.”
Neha came as far as the veranda.
“New slippers?”
“Yes.”
“They’re nice.”
Urmila waited.
Neha said nothing more.
“Did you notice how I walk?”
Neha looked startled.
“What?”
“How do I walk?”
Neha burst out laughing.
“With your feet.”
Urmila did not laugh.
Neha looked at her face.
“What happened?”
“Nothing.”
She went inside.
The passage leading to the kitchen was narrow.
On one side stood the grain bin.
On the other, the basket of utensils.
Urmila passed between them dozens of times a day.
She went through by drawing her right shoulder slightly back.
This time she became distinctly aware of that movement of her body.
She stopped.

Then she tried to pass through normally.
 Her shoulder brushed the basket of utensils.
 A steel bowl clattered.
 "What fell?" Neha asked.
 "Nothing."
 Urmila straightened the basket.
 She looked at the width of the passage.
 "How long has this been here?"
 Neha came over.
 "What?"
 "This basket."
 "For a long time."
 "How long?"
 Neha did not laugh.
 "Ma, I don't know."
 Urmila looked at the grain bin.
 The bin had not always stood in that corner.
 She remembered—the bin had been moved there after the new rack for
 utensils was installed.
 When had that rack come?
 Seven years ago?
 Eight?
 From that day the passage had become narrower.
 From that day she had been drawing her right shoulder back as she passed.
 "Push the basket a little farther in," Urmila said.
 "It is convenient here."
 "Convenient for whom?"
 Neha did not answer.
 Urmila herself lifted the basket and placed it elsewhere inside the kitchen.
 The passage became two fingers wider.
 What could so little change?
 She walked through once again.
 Her shoulders could remain straight.
 But the gait of her feet was the same.
 Right—straight.
 Left—a little outward.
 Urmila was not disappointed.
 What surprised her was that she wanted an immediate correction.
 As though the body had written a wrong answer.
 She sat down in the sitting room.
 She took off the new slippers.

She brought the old pair out of the bag.
She placed both pairs in front of her.
The new pair—the two soles even.
The old pair—one edge thin.
She took the old left slipper in her hand.
She ran a finger over the worn place.
The rubber had become smooth.
Here and there the threads showed through.
The wear had happened day by day.
Not on any one day.
Not because of any one event.
That thought drew her attention to her right knee.
Seventeen years earlier, in the monsoon, she had fallen on the stairs.
She had been carrying a bucket full of water.
Her right knee had remained swollen for two days.
She had not gone to a doctor.
There had been a wedding in the family.
“The pain has gone down,” everyone had said.
The pain truly had gone down.
But had her gait changed then?
Urmila was not certain.
She got up and put on the old slippers.
She walked from the sitting room to the kitchen.
In the old pair she did not feel the sliding of the left foot.
The sole had accepted that sliding.
Like an old seat that learns the pressure of a body.
Urmila put on the new slippers again.
The difference returned at once.
“Ma, if the old ones are more comfortable, wear those,” Neha said.
Urmila looked at her.
There was nothing wrong with the advice.
Urmila herself would have said the same.
Why replace something that is comfortable?
But now the word comfort had changed a little.
“They are comfortable,” she said.
“Then?”
“I’m seeing.”
After lunch Urmila usually lay down for half an hour.
That day she did not.
She sat in the courtyard with the two pairs of slippers.
A small strip of sunlight lay on the wall.

She turned the old slippers upside down.
On the right sole, the wear was in the middle of the heel.
On the left, it ran along the outer edge toward the front.
With her fingernail she tried to connect the two marks.
No straight line emerged.
Neha came with tea.
“Is an examination going on?”
This time Urmila laughed.
“Yes.”
“What have you discovered?”
“I walk crooked.”
“Who told you?”
“The slippers.”
Neha sat down.
“You look normal to me.”
“What is normal?”
Neha thought.
“The way you walk every day.”
The answer struck Urmila deep inside.
Every day’s gait was normal.
Every day’s tilt was normal.
Every day’s path was normal.
“How long have you been watching me?”
“Since I became aware of things.”
“Then how would you know my old gait?”
Neha blew on her tea.
“Do you know your old gait?”
Urmila fell silent.
There was no answer to that question.
In the evening Pradeep Babu returned.
As soon as he came through the gate he noticed the new slippers.
“They’re nice.”
Urmila asked, “How do I walk?”
Pradeep Babu stopped while taking off his bag.
“What sort of question is that?”
“Look.”
Urmila walked from one end of the sitting room to the other.
Pradeep Babu watched carefully.
“Fine.”
“Are both feet equal?”
“I’m not measuring.”

“Just look.”

She walked again.

Pradeep Babu said, “The left foot goes a little outward.”

Urmila stopped at once.

“Since before?”

“What?”

“Was it like this before too?”

Pradeep Babu scratched his head.

“Perhaps.”

“Since when?”

“Who remembers that?”

Urmila did not become angry.

Her own question seemed impossible to her.

Who keeps a date for a change that happens slowly?

Who writes down—today the gait shifted by two degrees?

Who says—today the shoulder went a little farther back?

Who notes—starting today, the right foot goes first on the stairs?

Pradeep Babu went to wash his hands and face.

Urmila remained alone on the veranda.

She looked at the rise beneath the gate.

Then the passage.

Then the high shelf in the kitchen.

The spice boxes on that shelf were in the right-hand corner.

She always raised her right hand to take them down.

The rice drum was on the left.

She lifted the bucket with her right hand.

The stair railing was on the left, yet she climbed with her right foot first.

Were these all causes, or only habits?

Urmila did not know.

She did not want to make a list of causes.

At dinner she remained quiet.

In the middle of the meal Neha asked, “Are the slippers comfortable?”

“They are new.”

“That does not make things clear.”

“For now, that is all I can say.”

Pradeep Babu laughed.

“Wear them for two days. They’ll mould themselves.”

Urmila stopped her spoon.

“To whose shape?”

“What?”

“Will the slippers mould themselves to me, or will I mould myself to the slippers?”

Pradeep Babu laughed again.

“A little of both.”

Urmila liked that ordinary answer.

At night she did not throw away the old slippers.

Nor did she put the new pair into the cupboard.

Both remained beside the door.

The next morning the milkman rang his bell.

Urmila rose sleepily.

Without thinking, her feet went into the old slippers.

She had already taken two steps when she stopped.

She looked down.

The old pair.

She turned back.

She took them off.

She put on the new ones.

It was a very small decision.

So small there was no need to tell anyone about it.

By the time she reached the gate, her left foot had again turned a little outward.

She did not force it straight.

She took the milk.

On the way back, she did not try to lift the left foot first over the raised brick.

Whichever foot her body lifted, she crossed with that one.

It seemed to her that today was not a day for experiments.

The routine continued.

But her attention had changed.

While washing lentils in the kitchen, she noticed that she always held the bowl in her left hand.

She lifted the heavy pot with her right.

While sweeping, her left foot stayed forward.

While folding the bedding, she bent her right knee less.

She did not immediately change any of these things.

She only noticed them.

Three days later, a faint line of dust appeared on the soles of the new slippers.

Before washing them, Urmila turned them over and looked.

A little more dust had gathered along the left edge.

Not wear yet.

Only a sign.
 Urmila felt like laughing.
 "Now you are learning too," she said to the slipper.
 Neha heard her.
 "Who are you talking to?"
 "No one."
 "To the slippers?"
 Urmila laughed.
 "Yes."
 Neha laughed too.
 On the fourth day Urmila went to the market.
 Kamlesh's shop lay on the way.
 She did not go inside.
 Kamlesh was outside measuring a customer's shoe.
 He saw Urmila.
 "Are they all right?"
 Urmila stopped.
 "The slippers?"
 "Yes."
 "They're fine."
 "And the gait?"
 Urmila thought for a moment.
 "That is fine too."
 Kamlesh smiled.
 Urmila added, "Only not the way it used to be."
 She walked on.
 In the market crowd it was difficult to observe her own gait.
 People jostled her.
 She had to avoid rickshaws.
 There were potholes.
 Sometimes she turned right, sometimes left.
 Urmila realised that a straight gait could be seen only on an empty veranda.
 On the roads of life, a gait is always in conversation with the road.
 The thought seemed a little too philosophical to her.
 She dropped it at once and began choosing vegetables.
 On the way back she carried a bag in one hand.
 She always carried the bag in her right hand.
 This time she took it in the left.
 After ten steps it became uncomfortable.
 She changed hands.

Freedom did not mean doing the opposite—she understood this without turning it into a sentence.

On reaching home she placed the bag on the table.

Neha said, “You came back early today.”

“There was less crowd.”

“The slippers?”

“Leave the slippers alone.”

Both of them laughed.

While cleaning in the afternoon, Urmila saw that the basket of utensils had again been placed in the passage.

Neha had probably put it there for convenience.

Urmila lifted the basket.

She did not return it to its old place inside the kitchen.

She measured—with her eyes.

How much space was needed in the middle of the passage?

She pushed the basket a little closer to the wall.

Then she moved the grain bin two fingers farther inward as well.

There was now enough space in the middle for two feet to pass at equal width.

Wearing the new slippers, Urmila walked through once.

The left foot still went a little outward.

But she did not need to twist her shoulder.

She passed through again.

This time her body turned a little less.

She did not go through a third time.

Walking through three times would turn it into an examination again.

She went back to her work.

A week later Pradeep Babu said, “Your gait seems to have changed a little.”

Urmila asked at once, “How?”

“I don’t know.”

“Straighter?”

“No.”

“Then?”

Pradeep Babu thought.

“Slower.”

The answer surprised Urmila.

“Did I use to walk fast?”

“Not fast. You just... used to walk in the middle of doing things.”

“And now?”

“Now, when you walk, you are walking.”

Urmila did not laugh.

The sentence stayed inside her for a while.
Walking in the middle of work.
Walking while walking.
The two were not the same.
She did not ask Pradeep Babu whether that was good or bad.
She no longer needed an immediate verdict on every change.
On the tenth day she picked up the old slippers.
The stitching on the strap had opened.
Kamlesh could have stitched it again if she had wanted.
Urmila did not take them outside to throw them away.
She washed and dried them.
Then she placed them beside the back door of the house.
They would be useful for work involving mud and water.
The new slippers remained beside the main door.
The two pairs now had different uses.
And different meanings as well.
One day, in a hurry to leave for college, Neha put on Urmila's new slippers.
After two steps she stopped.
"Ma, these feel a little crooked."
Urmila looked at her.
"Crooked?"
Neha took off the slippers.
"The left one feels slightly tilted."
Urmila took the slipper in her hand.
She looked at the sole.
A very faint wear had begun along the outer edge of the left one.
She did not suddenly feel sad.
Nor did she feel that every effort had failed.
She only understood—the new slippers too were now learning her gait.
Neha put on her own slippers and went out.
Urmila held the new pair in her hands for a while.
Then she put them on the floor.
She slipped her feet into them.
She walked.
On reaching the passage, she looked at the basket of utensils.
During the night it had again shifted outward.
This time Urmila did not twist her body to get past it.
She bent down.
She lifted the basket and moved it six inches to the left.
The passage opened up.

Urmila stood straight.
Then she placed one foot forward.
This time she did not notice which foot went first.

The Silence of the Afternoon

Saumya was not in the habit of sleeping in the afternoon.

Everyone else in the house was.

At least, that was how it seemed after Sunday lunch.

That day there had been rice, masoor dal, potato curry, and mango chutney.

By the time the meal ended, it was half past one.

As Mother gathered the plates, she said, "Now sleep for a while. Study in the evening."

Grandmother added on her way to her room, "The eyes need rest too."

Uncle folded the newspaper.

Aunt took little Rinku by the arm and led her inside.

Father turned the fan a little faster.

Her younger brother Piyush protested at first, but five minutes later he too was stretched out on his bed.

Saumya watched everyone.

In the house, preparing to sleep was itself almost a collective task.

Pillows were shaken out.

Curtains were drawn halfway.

Phone ringers were switched off.

Glasses of water were placed beside pillows.

And in the end, everyone gathered up their own voices.

Saumya went to her room.

Her bed was right beside Piyush's.

Piyush lay facing the wall.

His feet stuck out from under the sheet.

Saumya opened her book.

The history chapter was about cities, trade, and routes.

She read the first paragraph.

By the time she reached the second, her attention had drifted to the sound of the fan.

The fan revolved evenly.

There was no rise or fall in its sound.

She tried to read again.

Three lines later, she realized that the words were passing before her eyes without sinking inside.

She laid the book on her chest.

Closed her eyes.

Sleep did not come.

Two minutes later she opened them.

Piyush was in front of her.

Now, when he breathed, he made a faint whistling sound.

Saumya smiled.

“Asleep?”

The question came as far as her lips, but she did not say it.

The answer was obvious.

She sat up.

On an ordinary day, that alone might have prompted Mother to ask from outside, “Finished studying?”

Aunt might have said, “If you’re awake, bring these clothes inside.”

Grandmother might have called, “Saumya, where did I put my glasses?”

Without opening his eyes, Piyush might have said, “Turn the fan up a little.”

This time nothing happened.

Saumya sat there for a while.

For the first time she understood that the silence of a house was not merely the absence of sound.

No one needing her was another form of silence.

She put her feet on the floor.

She did not put on her slippers.

The floor was cool.

She went out quietly.

In the passage, the curtain hung half drawn.

Light from outside entered in a thin strip.

Looking at that strip, she remembered no winter sunlight; she saw only motes of dust.

Even with no wind, the dust motes moved ever so slightly.

Saumya reached out and tried to catch one.

Nothing came into her hand.

She drew her hand back.

In the sitting room, Father was half-reclining on the divan.

The newspaper lay across his stomach.

His glasses had slipped a little down his nose.

Saumya stopped at the doorway.

If Father had been awake, his first sentence would have been certain:
“Studying at this hour?”

The answer to that question would have been certain too: “Yes, I’m going now.”

Today there was no question.

So there was no answer either.

It was a small thing, yet Saumya found it strange.

She went toward Uncle’s room.

The door was not fully closed.

Inside, Uncle and Aunt were both asleep.

Rinku lay diagonally between them.

One of her hands rested on Aunt’s cheek.

Saumya did not go inside.

She looked for only a moment and moved on.

The fan in Grandmother’s room was turning slowly.

Grandmother lay on her side.

Her tulsi beads lay beside the pillow.

Saumya felt that if Grandmother woke and saw her standing there, she would ask, “What do you need?”

Saumya asked herself: What do I need?

No answer came.

She went toward the kitchen.

The smell of the meal still lingered.

The utensils had been washed and put away.

A small bowl lay upside down, with a drop of water clinging to its rim.

Ordinarily Saumya would never have noticed such a drop.

Today she kept watching it.

The drop slowly grew heavier.

Then it fell.

A small round mark appeared beneath the bowl.

Saumya felt like laughing.

The sight served no purpose.

It was not even something worth telling anyone.

Yet she watched the whole thing.

In one corner of the kitchen sat the mango chutney.

Saumya loved mango chutney.

Mother usually said, “Don’t eat it again and again; it will burn your stomach.”

For a moment Saumya thought: no one is awake now.

If she wanted, she could take out one spoonful.

Then two.

No one would know.
She placed her hand on the lid of the container.
Her hand stopped at once.
She wondered whether she truly wanted chutney just then, or whether the desire had risen only because Mother forbade it.
The question was ridiculous.
She smiled at herself.
She did not open the lid.
Then it suddenly occurred to her that not opening it was also obedience to Mother's instruction.
So where was her own desire?
She took her hand away.
She came out of the kitchen.
She stood in the middle of the sitting room.
Everyone in the house was asleep.
The door was bolted from inside.
Now and then the bell of a passing bicycle sounded from the road.
From somewhere far off came the creak of a handcart being pushed.
Then everything was quiet again.
Saumya did not feel that the house was empty.
In an empty house, one feels the absence of those who are not there.
Here everyone was present.
Only their gazes, questions, and needs were asleep.
It was a different kind of solitude.
Saumya realized that she had never experienced it before.
At school, it was impossible to be alone.
There were people on the bus.
Even if she went to the roof, someone called from below.
At night everyone slept, but then she too was expected to sleep.
This afternoon was the first time no fixed task had been assigned to her.
She could read if she wished.
She could sleep.
She could draw.
She could listen to music.
She could talk to someone, if she made a call.
There was no compulsion to do anything at all.
Inside that "nothing at all" she found a small fear.
She had imagined that when free time came, she would immediately know what she wanted to do.
Now she did not know.
She returned to her room.

The book was still lying open.
The history chapter did not seem to be waiting for her.
The book was only a book.
She opened the cupboard.
Her drawing notebook was on the upper shelf.
Saumya used to draw a great deal.
For the past two years, she had drawn less and less.
She took out the notebook.
On the first page was an old tree.
On the second, the unfinished face of a woman.
On the third page, there were only two faint lines.
Saumya picked up a pencil.
She wanted to draw something.
The pencil did not touch the page.
She wondered: if I draw, what should I draw?
The window?
The fan?
The sleeping house?
Her own hand?
None of these seemed important enough to be put down on paper.
Saumya set the pencil aside.
She closed the notebook.
She felt a little irritated.
“I wanted so much time,” she said to herself, “and now that I have it, I can’t think of anything.”
She could not tell whether the voice inside that sentence was Mother’s or her own.
She went out again.
The floor in front of the divan in the sitting room was empty.
People crossed that spot all day long.
Sometimes Rinku spread her toys there and Aunt gathered them up.
Sometimes Piyush left his schoolbag there and Father said, “You’re blocking the way.”
It was not considered a place to sit.
Saumya stood there.
Then, for no reason at all, she sat down on the floor.
She stretched her legs out in front of her.
She braced her hands behind her.
She looked up at the ceiling.
From this angle, the fan looked different.
The dust beneath the blades was clearly visible.

Under the divan lay an old blue button.
Saumya realized that the button might have been there for months.
She could pick it up.
She did not.
After a while she lay down fully on the floor.
Her back against the smooth floor.
Both arms beside her body.
Her braid spread to one side.
The first sensation was coolness.
The second was the certainty that if anyone saw her lying like this, they would ask, "What happened?"
At once she prepared an answer in her mind: "My back was hurting."
Then she laughed at her own answer.
Her back was not hurting.
So another answer came: "I was looking for something."
That too was a lie.
A third: "Rinku's button had fallen."
Her gaze returned to the blue button.
That answer could become half true if she picked the button up.
Saumya began to reach for it.
Then she stopped.
It suddenly struck her that no one was even awake, yet she was preparing an explanation for what she was doing.
As if gazes could sleep, but questions could not.
The questions were awake inside her.
Why here?
Why like this?
What are you doing?
What use is it?
For how long?
She closed her eyes.
She decided in her mind: I will not make up any answer.
She was lying on the floor simply because, at that moment, she felt like lying there.
Was "I felt like it" reason enough?
Some old teacher-like voice inside her said: Make the reason clear.
Another voice said: Clear to whom?
Saumya opened her eyes.
The fan was turning.
The blue button was still there.
Father's breathing came faintly from inside the room.

No one sneezed.
No door opened.
Saumya became sharply aware of the weight of her body against the floor.
All these years, even this simple fact had never occurred to her: one did not need a pillow in order to lie down.
The floor was holding her back.
She felt no one helping her.
Nor did she feel heroic.
Only weight and coolness.
She turned her right palm over.
She placed it on the floor.
The floor was smooth.
In one corner there was a hairline crack.
She touched the crack with her fingernail.
Then she put her hand back.
She felt that in silence, things revealed their shapes more distinctly.
In conversation, every object became a function.
A glass—to give water.
A chair—to sit on.
A book—to read.
A broom—to clean.
A door—to open or close.
In silence, for a few moments, they could remain merely things.
Saumya wondered: then what about a person?
When no one called her “sister,” “daughter,” “granddaughter,” “student,” or “hey, listen,” what was she?
The question felt heavy.
She did not want to look for its answer.
She felt that the moment she searched for an answer, she would be sitting another examination.
The right answer.
The wrong answer.
Full marks.
Half marks.
She left the question where it was.
There was a slight relief in leaving it there.
From Piyush’s room came the sound of him turning over.
Saumya stiffened a little.
She thought: now he will wake.
Then he will say, “Didi.”
Piyush did not wake.

The silence spread again.

Saumya realized that she had been waiting for this silence to end.

As though something abnormal were taking place.

She thought: what if no one wakes until evening?

The thought did not frighten her.

But it made her remember the time for hunger, the time for tea, the time for studying.

The house took its cues for time from people's voices.

Grandmother's "Is the tea ready?"

Father's "It's time for the news."

Mother's "Evening has come; bring the clothes in."

Aunt's "Rinku, homework."

Piyush's "I'm going out to play."

Now, without looking at the clock, Saumya could not tell how far the afternoon had advanced.

She deliberately did not look at the clock.

This time she did not want an answer from time either.

She remained lying on the floor.

Sometimes with her eyes closed.

Sometimes open.

She was not asleep.

But neither was she performing the task of staying awake.

She was somewhere in between.

For a moment, children's voices came from the distant road.

Then a motorbike passed.

Then a dog barked somewhere.

Inside the house, the silence no longer felt as heavy as before.

A little space had opened within it.

Saumya remembered an incident from school.

One day in Class Eight, the teacher had arrived late.

For five minutes the whole class had been without a teacher.

All the children had made a racket.

Saumya too.

At the time, she had thought that the moment supervision disappeared, freedom turned into noise.

Today supervision was asleep.

She was quiet.

Yet she felt freer than before.

Why?

Again she left the question unanswered.

After a while her left arm began to go numb.

She rolled onto her side.
Her cheek touched the floor.
The coolness was stronger.
The blue button was now directly in front of her eyes.
It had four small holes.
A tiny shred of thread was caught in one hole.
Saumya wondered whose garment the button had belonged to.
There were possible answers.
Father's kurta.
Uncle's kurta.
Piyush's old pyjamas.
Rinku's clothes.
If she wanted, she could get up and inspect all their clothes.
She was curious.
Then she also understood that not every curiosity needed an answer.
A button could remain a button.
She smiled.
Just then Grandmother coughed.
Once.
Twice.
Saumya immediately planted an elbow to get up.
Her body rose halfway.
Then she stopped.
Grandmother did not cough again.
Saumya slowly lay down once more.
Her own reaction surprised her.
Grandmother coughed—she should get up.
Mother called—she should go.
The door knocked—she should open it.
The phone rang—she should check.
These had become such practiced responses that her body rose before the task had even begun.
Now, for the first time, she asked her body: Is it necessary?
The answer was: not yet.
A few moments later Grandmother really did wake.
First the cot creaked.
Then came the soft scrape of slippers.
Saumya again felt the urge to sit up.
She did not.
Grandmother came out of the room.
She looked toward the sitting room.

On seeing Saumya lying on the floor, she stopped.
“What happened?”
That was the very question Saumya had been waiting for all afternoon.
All the prepared lies came back at once.
My back was hurting.
I was looking for the button.
I was feeling hot.
My head was spinning.
Saumya looked at Grandmother’s face.
Then she said, “Nothing.”
Grandmother came two steps closer.
“Then why are you lying on the floor?”
Saumya opened her mouth.
For a moment she felt she needed a proper reason.
Then she said, “I felt like lying here.”
Grandmother kept looking at her.
Saumya thought the next question would come: Why did you feel like it?
The question did not come.
Grandmother touched the floor with her foot.
“It’s cold. Don’t lie there too long, or your body will stiffen.”
With that, she went toward the kitchen.
Saumya remained lying where she was.
Nothing very great had happened inside her.
She did not feel victorious.
Nor rebellious.
She only understood that the world had not stopped because it heard “I felt like it.”
Grandmother had not become angry.
The rules of the house had not broken.
The roof had not fallen.
The floor had remained merely the floor.
Saumya slowly sat up.
She looked at the blue button again.
This time she picked it up.
She placed it in her palm.
Then she put it on the corner of the divan.
She did not try to discover whose it was.
Grandmother had opened the tap in the kitchen.
The sound of water clearly broke the silence for the first time.
A few moments later came the light clink of utensils.

Saumya understood: that complete solitude of the afternoon was beginning to end.

Mother turned over.

Aunt moved Rinku aside and got up.

Father woke as the newspaper slipped from his stomach.

From the room Piyush shouted, "Didi, water!"

Saumya automatically prepared to get up.

Then she laughed.

"Get up and take it," she called back.

Piyush answered, "Oh, it's so far away!"

"Closer to you than to me."

Muttering, Piyush got up.

Saumya remained seated.

Mother came out and looked at her.

"Didn't sleep?"

"No."

"Did you study?"

Saumya paused for a moment.

Earlier she would have said: yes, a little.

Or: I'm going to study now.

This time she said, "No."

Mother looked at her in surprise.

"Then what were you doing?"

The whole afternoon returned to Saumya at once.

The lid of the chutney container.

Those two faint lines in the drawing notebook.

The coolness of the floor.

The blue button.

Grandmother's question.

The even sound of the fan.

She did not feel any need to decide whether all these things amounted to "something."

"Nothing," she said.

Mother looked at her for a little while.

Then she only said, "All right. Study in the evening."

She went toward the kitchen.

Saumya returned to her room.

The history book was still open to the same page.

Piyush, drinking water, looked at her.

"Nothing the whole afternoon?"

"Yes."

“Weren’t you bored?”
Saumya thought.
“At first.”
“Then?”
“Then I wasn’t.”
Piyush found the answer pointless.
He shrugged and went outside.
Saumya picked up the book.
She read the first paragraph again.
This time the words sank inside.
Cities, trade, routes.
She read three pages.
Then she closed the book.
By evening the house had returned to its familiar voice.
Doors opened and closed.
Teacups clinked.
Uncle commented on the news.
Aunt made Rinku do her homework.
Grandmother went to the tulsi altar.
Father asked Saumya a question.
Piyush called her name twice.
Mother gave her three tasks.
Saumya did them all.
She did not feel that from now on she would stop listening to anyone.
The silence of the afternoon had not made her rebellious.
Only one small thing had changed.
She felt a little less need to answer every question immediately.
After dinner Mother asked, “Tomorrow when you come back from school, you’ll study straightaway, won’t you?”
Saumya opened her mouth.
“Yes” almost came out.
Then she thought.
“I’ll rest for a while first, then I’ll study.”
Mother said, “All right.”
That was all.
No argument.
Saumya remembered the afternoon floor again.
Before going to sleep that night, Piyush asked, “Didi, whose blue button was it?”
Saumya was startled.
“Where did you find it?”

“On the corner of the divan.”

“It was there.”

“Whose?”

Saumya thought for a moment.

Then she said, “I don’t know.”

“Shall we find out?”

Saumya smiled.

“We’ll see tomorrow.”

Piyush turned off the light.

The room went dark.

Now the house was slowly moving again toward the silence of sleep.

But this silence was not like the silence of the afternoon.

In the silence of night, tomorrow’s tasks were already present.

School.

Homework.

Getting up in the morning.

Catching the bus.

That afternoon silence had been different because, for a few moments within it, even the next task had been absent.

Saumya closed her eyes.

She remembered the coolness of the floor again.

“Nothing”—Mother had asked, and that was what she had said.

This time the answer did not feel to her like laziness, guilt, or concealment.

Only a small empty space.

In which she was not an answer to anyone’s question, but simply present herself.

A Splitting Nail

Vibha's right index fingernail did not break all at once that morning.

At first, only a hairline crack appeared.

It was so fine that Vibha barely noticed it.

As she lifted the lid of the grain tin, the corner of the nail caught on the metal rim.

There was a faint sting.

Vibha pulled her hand back.

Nothing was visible from above the nail.

She closed the tin again.

The work in the kitchen went on.

Tea was set to boil.

Rotis were rolled out.

Her daughter Pragya kept looking for her schoolbag.

Her husband Mukund kept looking for his spectacles.

Vibha moved among them all in her familiar way.

No one realised that a fine crack had begun to travel through the nail of her right index finger.

Vibha did not realise it either.

When she wiped the griddle with a cloth, the corner of the nail snagged on a cotton thread.

This time she stopped.

She brought the finger up before her eyes.

A small split showed at the left corner of the nail.

"Hmm."

That was all she said.

Mukund asked, "What happened?"

"Nothing."

Vibha was about to bite the nail off, then stopped.

The split was too low.

If she cut it, she would reach almost to the skin.

She took a small strip of cloth and wrapped it around the tip of the finger.

"For that little thing?" Pragya said with a laugh.

"It catches on threads."

“It’ll be fine in two days.”

Vibha did not reply.

That day she had to complete the monthly attendance register in the school office.

Vibha had been a clerk at that school for twenty years.

Everyone said her handwriting was neat.

The spacing between names was even.

The dates stood in one straight line.

The loops of her numerals were clear.

Even her signature was almost the same size every time.

Vibha did not react much to this praise.

She would say, “If one is going to write, one should write neatly.”

She had said the sentence so often that it no longer seemed like an opinion, but part of her nature.

On reaching school, she opened the register.

She picked up the pen in her right hand.

As her index finger settled against the barrel, the nail pressed inside the bandage.

It stung.

Vibha loosened her grip.

Then she tried to write again.

The ‘r’ in the first name came out a little thicker than usual.

She did not like it.

In the second line, the ‘7’ leaned crookedly.

Vibha put the pen down.

She opened the bandage and looked at the finger.

The crack had opened a little more than before.

“Madam, do you need anything?” Ramesh, the assistant sitting opposite, asked.

“No.”

Vibha tied the bandage again.

She laid her right hand on the desk.

For a few moments the register remained open.

Her left hand was already resting on the left-hand page.

Without thinking, Vibha picked up the pen in her left hand.

All she had to do was put a small tick beside a name.

The pen touched the paper.

A tick appeared.

Vibha stopped.

It was not a beautiful tick.

But it was not unfamiliar either.

It did not look as though the hand had held a pen for the first time.
 Vibha turned the pen and made another tick.
 The second was cleaner than the first.
 With the third, her wrist moved easily.
 Vibha's gaze settled on her left hand.
 "What?" Ramesh asked again.
 "Nothing."
 Vibha took the pen back into her right hand.
 Until noon she worked slowly.
 Where there was more writing to do, she used the right hand.
 Where a page had to be turned, the left.
 Where a stamp had to be lifted, the left.
 When she picked up her cup of tea, the left hand.
 When she turned a key, the left hand.
 Had she always done all this, or only today?
 The question was so small that at first Vibha did not even want to call it a question.
 At lunchtime she opened her tiffin box.
 She lifted the spoon in her right hand.
 Her index finger hurt again.
 She shifted the spoon to her left hand.
 The first mouthful reached her mouth without any difficulty.
 So did the second.
 Vibha held the spoon a little away and looked at it.
 The grip of her left hand was ordinary.
 It did not seem to be learning.
 It felt as though some old task had simply begun again.
 A very old scene came back to her.
 A slate.
 A small wooden stool.
 White chalk.
 A woman's hand holding her wrist and saying—
 "Not this hand. The right one."
 The scene was so brief that it had neither a beginning nor an end.
 Vibha closed her eyes.
 Then opened them.
 The spoon was still in her left hand.
 "Was I left-handed?"
 She whispered the question to herself.
 No one could hear it.
 On the bus home, Vibha rested both hands in her lap.

There was a cloth bandage around her right index finger.
 Her left hand lay open.
 She kept looking at the two as if comparing them for the first time.
 The middle of her right palm was slightly harder from holding a pen.
 There was thickened skin at the base of her left thumb too.
 "Where did this come from?"
 She could not remember.
 When she reached home, she telephoned her mother.
 Her mother lived in Madhubani with Vibha's younger brother.
 Vibha did not usually call in the evening.
 Her mother answered, "Everything all right?"
 "Yes."
 "Then?"
 Vibha was silent for a few moments.
 Then she asked, "Ma, which hand did I write with when I was little?"
 There was silence at the other end.
 Then she heard her mother laugh.
 "Why this question after so many years?"
 "Tell me first."
 "With your left."
 Vibha sat upright in the chair.
 "Really?"
 "Yes. You ate with your left hand too. Made mud houses with the left.
 Held your doll with the left."
 "Then?"
 "At school the teacher said you should be taught to write with the right.
 Everyone said that in those days."
 "You taught me?"
 "Me, your Babuji, the teacher—all of us."
 There was neither guilt nor self-defence in her mother's voice.
 The fact came out like ordinary information.
 "At first you used to get terribly annoyed."
 Vibha remembered nothing.
 "For how long?"
 "Not days. Months. I don't remember exactly, but for a long time."
 Her mother paused over the words.
 "A long time."
 Vibha said nothing even to this uncertain answer.
 "Then you began writing so well with your right hand that everyone forgot."
 "You too?"

“Yes. I hadn’t remembered it for years either.”

After the call ended, Vibha remained sitting in the chair for a long time.

Pragya was studying in her room.

Mukund had not yet returned.

The pressure cooker whistled in the kitchen.

Vibha got up.

She reached out to turn off the stove.

Her left hand went forward.

She stopped.

Her right hand was behind it.

Which hand was natural?

Why had this question never existed in her life until today?

Vibha turned off the stove with her left hand.

Then, deliberately, she touched the lid with her right.

The nail stung.

She drew the hand back again.

Mukund returned in the evening.

At the doorway Pragya told him, “Ma’s nail has broken.”

Taking off his shoes, Mukund asked, “How much?”

“This much,” Pragya said, laughing as she showed her own nail.

From the kitchen Vibha called, “Is it necessary to announce it to everyone?”

Mukund laughed.

“Everyone has been informed.”

Normally Vibha would have laughed too.

This time she did not.

Mukund looked at her face.

“Does it hurt?”

“A little.”

“Shall I put some medicine on it?”

“No.”

At dinner Vibha held the spoon in her left hand.

Mukund noticed after two mouthfuls.

“With the left today?”

Vibha stopped the spoon.

“I was left-handed as a child.”

Mukund’s hand stopped in mid-air.

“You?”

“Yes.”

“I never knew.”

“Neither did I.”

Pragya grew excited.

“So, Ma, are you actually left-handed?”

The word ‘actually’ caught somewhere inside Vibha.

She took a moment before answering.

Pragya asked again, “You are, aren’t you?”

Vibha looked at her right hand.

Every register from twenty years of work had been filled by this hand.

Thousands of signatures.

Pragya’s first school application.

The household accounts.

The names of her mother’s medicines.

Little notes for Mukund.

All with the right hand.

Then she looked at the left.

She had very few memories about that hand.

Only a few movements the body performed without thought.

“I don’t know,” Vibha said.

Pragya looked disappointed.

“Such a simple question!”

Vibha smiled.

“It doesn’t seem simple anymore.”

That night she did not go looking for old papers.

She did not try to inspect anyone’s photographs for which hand she had used.

For a moment she had wanted some proof, but in that desire too she recognised her old way of doing things.

A question arose: find proof.

Find proof: reach a conclusion.

Reach a conclusion: straighten the line.

That night the line did not straighten.

Lying in bed, Vibha wrote her name in her mind.

‘Vibha.’

She could clearly see the letters formed by her right hand.

What the letters of her left hand had been like—she could not remember.

The next morning the crack in the nail had widened a little more.

As she opened the bandage, one edge caught in the cloth.

Vibha felt irritated.

She picked up the nail clippers.

She cut the nail back as far as it was safe to cut.

The index fingernail was now shorter than the others.

Vibha spread her hand and looked at it.

The unevenness was obvious.
But her attention did not remain on the nail for long.
She picked up the tumbler used for brushing her teeth.
Left hand.
She opened the cupboard.
Right hand.
She tied her braid.
Both hands.
She strained the tea.
The left hand held the strainer; the right held the spoon.
“What have I been looking at all these years?” she thought.
There was no answer.
At school that day she conducted a small experiment.
She took out a blank sheet of paper.
She held the pen in her left hand.
She tried to write her name.
As she formed ‘Vi’, the line trembled.
The vowel mark in ‘bha’ went crooked.
The whole name looked like a child’s first attempt at writing.
Vibha kept looking at it.
No miracle occurred.
She did not feel some old beautiful handwriting returning from inside her body.
The left hand had forgotten how to write.
Or perhaps the left hand had never been allowed to learn writing in the first place?
Vibha wrote it a second time.
This time the letters were a little clearer.
She did not write it a third time.
She folded the paper and put it in the drawer.
Ramesh came in.
“Madam, a signature is needed.”
Vibha took the paper.
She picked up the pen in her right hand.
Because the index fingernail was short, her grip shifted slightly.
The signature came out a little broader than usual.
Ramesh took the paper and left.
He did not pause over the signature even once.
Vibha felt a small laugh rise in her.
Until yesterday she had thought of her neat handwriting as almost a natural extension of her personality.

Today it seemed to her that it too was practice.

Twenty years of practice.

Why should that make it less valuable?

But if something made by practice can come to feel like nature, then how does one measure nature?

In the afternoon the headmistress, Shashi Devi, came into the office.

Glancing at one register, she said, "Vibhaji, looking at your handwriting gives me peace of mind. Everything is in order."

Vibha was about to say, as she usually did, "The work itself demands it."

Then she stopped.

"I've had a great deal of practice."

Shashi Devi said matter-of-factly, "Practice is what becomes skill."

She left.

Vibha thought about that ordinary sentence for a long time.

Practice is what becomes skill.

Then why should practice be the opposite of nature?

And why should nature be the opposite of practice?

When Vibha returned home that evening, her mother called again.

"Did yesterday's conversation upset you?"

"No."

"I was thinking—would it have been better if we had let you write with your left hand?"

Vibha searched for an answer.

"I don't know."

"In those days, that was what all of us believed."

"I'm not angry with you."

"Then?"

Vibha looked towards the window.

Outside, a child from the neighbourhood was throwing a ball.

The child threw with the right hand and caught with the left.

"I'm thinking, Ma, about how many things I have accepted about myself without ever thinking about them."

Her mother was silent.

"Everyone does," she said at last.

"Yes."

"What will you do now? Write with your left?"

Vibha laughed.

"No. It's easier to write with the right."

"Then what is the problem?"

Vibha laughed again.

"That is exactly what I'm trying to understand."

After the call, Pragya came with her homework.

“Ma, look at this problem.”

Vibha took the notebook.

Pragya was holding the pen in her right hand.

For the first time Vibha asked her daughter, “Which hand feels natural to you?”

Pragya looked surprised.

“The right.”

“Do you ever do anything with the left?”

“On the playground I pick up the ball with my left.”

“That is a hand too.”

Pragya laughed.

“Ma, are you going to research every hand now?”

“No.”

“Then explain the problem.”

Vibha explained it.

That night, while folding clothes, Vibha noticed that her left hand caught the first corner of a dupatta while the right made the fold.

While rolling rotis, the left hand turned the dough ball and the right moved the rolling pin.

When opening the door, the key was in the right, the latch in the left.

When tying her hair, both were equal.

Life did not belong to one hand alone.

Then why had the sentence “I am right-handed” always seemed so complete?

Because she wrote with her right hand?

Or because society identifies a person’s hand by the hand with which they write?

Vibha smiled at her own question.

She was not writing a treatise on society.

Only one fingernail had split.

Yet the small split in that nail had opened so much space inside her that she was beginning to feel irritated with herself as well.

“How many days are you going to think about this?” Mukund asked.

“As long as I feel like it.”

“And when the nail heals?”

“We’ll see.”

Mukund took her right hand in his.

“Does it still hurt?”

“Very little.”

“Then it’s fine.”

Vibha did not pull her hand away.
Mukund's hand held her right hand.
Vibha's left hand lay open on the table.
Two days later she no longer needed the bandage.
The nail was short, but the crack was no longer spreading.
Vibha began writing again at her usual pace.
Her right hand recovered its old speed.
What surprised her was that the left hand did not disappear again.
The teacup often rose in that hand.
She pushed the heavy door panel with it.
While cutting vegetables, the knife was in her right hand and the bowl in her left.
Nothing had changed.
But Vibha noticed now.
One Sunday, while cleaning an old drawer, she found the sheet on which she had written her name with her left hand.
She opened it.
The first 'Vibha' trembled.
The second was a little clearer.
The third had never been written.
An empty space remained.
Vibha picked up a pen.
She held it in her left hand.
Then stopped.
Did she need to write the third name and complete the experiment?
The old Vibha would have said at once—yes, complete the sequence of three.
Now she laughed.
She folded the paper and put it away again.
The third space remained empty.
A few days later a new student was admitted to the school.
The small child wanted to write his own name on the form.
He held the pen in his left hand.
The child's father casually reached to shift the pen into the right hand.
Vibha's eyes went there.
For a moment she held her breath.
Then the father himself stopped.
"You write with your left hand?"
The child nodded.
"Then write."
That was all that happened.

Vibha said nothing.
There was no need for her to say anything.
Slowly, the child wrote his name.
The letters were crooked.
A vowel mark landed in the wrong place.
Smiling, the father straightened the paper.
“You’ll learn to write it properly.”
Vibha looked at her right index finger.
The broken part of the nail was slowly moving forward.
New nail was growing from behind.
The old crack had almost reached the edge now.
In two or three days it could be clipped away.
There was no mystery in that small growing nail.
The body grew at its own pace.
Practice formed at its own pace.
Some natural ease remained.
Some natural ease changed.
Vibha opened the register.
She held the pen in her right hand.
With her left, she straightened the page.
She wrote the new student’s name.
The letters were as neat as before.
Looking at them, this time she did not think, “This is me.”
Nor did she think, “This is only something learned.”
She understood only this much—it was the work of one of her hands.
The other hand was holding the page.
And on the paper lying between the two hands, it was not her name but a
child’s name that was being written.
Vibha smiled.
The short nail of her right index finger touched the edge of the page.
There was no sting.

The Smell of Cut Fruit

Aniruddh Jha had not learned how to cut a pineapple in his village.

He had learned it in Doha.

It was only much later that he remembered this fact.

That evening, in the small kitchen of the workers' accommodation, a knife was in his hand.

The green leaves crowning the pineapple were still stiff.

Outside, June's heat remained trapped in the walls even after nightfall.

The kitchen exhaust fan rattled on.

A fine layer of dust lay over the floor.

And the shoes of four men lay piled over one another by the door.

Suresh Mahato said, "Cut off the crown first."

Aniruddh laughed.

"I know that much too."

"If you know it, then cut it."

"The peel?"

"Cut that too."

"How thick?"

Suresh almost snatched the knife from his hand.

"Are you cutting fruit or timber?"

Everyone in the kitchen burst out laughing.

Aniruddh was forty-two then.

He lived more than four thousand kilometres from home.

He worked on a warehouse maintenance team.

All day he moved among lists, tools, screws, pipes, dust and heat.

Cutting fruit was not on his list of duties.

When he lived at home, someone else usually cut the fruit.

First his mother.

Later his wife, Nilima.

When their child was small, Nilima cut fruit for him as well.

Aniruddh's share usually arrived as ready-cut pieces on a plate.

During his first months in Doha, he rarely bought fruit at all.

It seemed expensive.

And keeping things in a shared kitchen was difficult besides.

Whose bananas someone had eaten, whose milk had diminished, whose container someone had knocked over and put back—small quarrels kept arising over such things.

One day Suresh brought home a pineapple.

The only reason was that it had been cheap in the market that day.

Suresh was from Siraha.

Ravindra was from Samastipur.

Yusuf was from Kerala.

Aniruddh was from Madhubani district.

The four men slept two to a cot in the same room.

Their languages were different.

Their food was different.

But the language of exhaustion at night was not so very different.

Suresh pared the pineapple.

Thinly.

So thinly that the round eyes of the peel remained in the fruit.

Then he turned the knife on a slant.

One row of eyes came out.

Then another.

Then a third.

A spiral line appeared around the fruit.

Aniruddh watched closely.

“All this work?”

“If you don’t do it, half the fruit gets thrown away.”

Aniruddh took that sentence simply as a rule for cutting fruit.

Years later he understood that it might also have been a rule for living in Doha.

Do not be quick to throw away what can still be saved.

The first time the pineapple was cut, a sweet-sour smell filled the kitchen.

There was something green in the smell.

Something sticky-sweet.

Something that seemed to reach all the way behind the nose.

At the time, Aniruddh connected it with no home at all.

Pineapple had scarcely been cut even once a year in the house of his childhood.

There were mangoes.

Jackfruit.

Bananas.

Guavas.

Wood apples.

Jamun.

Pineapple was a market fruit.
Not a household fruit.
So that night the smell of pineapple was merely the smell of pineapple.
The four men sat around the plate.
Suresh counted the pieces.
“Twelve.”
Ravindra said, “Four people—three each.”
Yusuf ate two pieces and left the third.
“Too sweet for me.”
Aniruddh said, “But it’s sour too.”
“Too sweet for me.”
Suresh put the remaining piece in a container for the next day.
That was how pineapple entered their shared kitchen.
Gradually, cutting fruit became Aniruddh’s responsibility.
Because he learned quickly.
And because whatever a person learns, other people are quick to turn into that person’s responsibility.
Aniruddh used to laugh about it.
“I came here fixing pipes and turned into a fruit seller.”
Suresh would say, “Not a fruit seller. A divider of shares.”
“How so?”
“You cut equal pieces.”
It was true.
Aniruddh cut the pieces almost the same size.
Unequal shares displeased him.
Pineapple, melon, watermelon—whatever it was, he cut and arranged it on the plate so that no one would feel his share had come out smaller.
Some months later, Yusuf returned from the night shift and asked, “Any fruit today?”
Aniruddh said, “No.”
Yusuf drank water and went to sleep without showing disappointment.
But the next day Aniruddh bought fruit and brought it back.
Why, he himself did not know.
Perhaps because, for the first time, someone had waited for fruit he had cut.
The years passed.
The room changed.
Roommates changed.
The employer changed.
Even the colour of the city’s roads kept changing.
But the way Aniruddh used the knife scarcely changed.

A thin peel.
 A spiral cut.
 The hard core removed.
 Equal pieces.
 First the plate in the middle.
 Then each person his share.
 Sometimes at midnight.
 Sometimes at five in the morning.
 Sometimes on a holiday afternoon.
 Meanwhile, the word home was used often in his life.
 His mother would say on the phone, "When are you coming home?"
 Nilima would say, "The damp on the roof at home has spread again."
 His son Ishan would say, "Babu, if you were here, we could all go out
 somewhere."
 At the warehouse the manager would ask, "When are you taking home
 leave?"
 His companions would say, "Going home in December?"
 The meaning of the word home changed with the context.
 For his mother, home was the old house in the village.
 For Nilima, it was the rented flat in Darbhanga.
 For Ishan, it was the small room on the second floor of that flat.
 For Aniruddh?
 He did not think about the question.
 The answer seemed simple enough—the village.
 Where he had been born.
 Where there was a neem tree in the courtyard.
 Where his father's old trunk still stood.
 Where the family deity was.
 Where the papers for the land were kept.
 That was home.
 Everywhere else was merely a place to stay.
 He carried that sentence within him without ever writing it down.
 One year, during the rains, he got leave and went to the village.
 Nilima and Ishan had arrived earlier from Darbhanga.
 His mother had stopped plastering the courtyard with mud, but she still
 swept it herself.
 Everyone was delighted when Aniruddh arrived.
 For the first two days he was fed like a guest.
 From the third day onward, he was treated as a man of the house and
 given work.
 Look at the drain on the roof.

Tighten the door latch.
Go to the bank.
Pay the electricity bill.
Look over Ishan's school papers.
Aniruddh grew tired, but there was a sense of belonging in that tiredness.
One evening he saw a pineapple in the market.
Whole, not cut.
He bought it without thinking.
His mother asked as soon as she saw it, "Why this?"
"It's fruit."
"I can see that much myself."
Nilima burst out laughing.
Ishan grew excited.
"Will Babu cut it?"
Aniruddh asked for a knife.
The pineapple was set on a low wooden seat in the courtyard.
He cut off the crown.
He pared the peel thinly.
He cut out the rows of eyes on a slant.
His hands moved in their own rhythm.
His mother kept watching.
"Where did you learn to do it that way?"
"In Doha."
"This fruit was never cut like that in our house."
Aniruddh's hand stopped for a moment.
Only for a moment.
Then it moved again.
The knife turned through the fruit.
A sweet-sour smell rose.
And the smell did not bring back his childhood in the village.
Not the neem tree.
Not his mother's kitchen.
Not the earth after rain.
Not his father's voice.
It brought back the small kitchen in Doha.
The rattle of the exhaust fan.
Four pairs of shoes.
Suresh saying, "Don't cut it so thick."
Yusuf leaving his third piece.
Ravindra's night shift.
The small steel plate.

And a kind of exhaustion after which cutting fruit had become a form of rest.

Aniruddh was startled.

The smell was in the village.

The memory belonged to Doha.

The fact felt almost improper to him.

As though a foreign place had entered the old courtyard.

He worked the knife more briskly.

Nilima asked, "What happened?"

"Nothing."

The pieces were cut.

His mother took one.

"It's sour."

Ishan said, "I like it."

Nilima said, "So do I."

Aniruddh picked up a piece for himself.

The taste was all right.

The smell was more familiar.

That night he sat on the veranda for a long time.

His mother had gone inside to sleep.

Nilima was in the room with Ishan.

A small discomfort kept circling in Aniruddh's mind.

If home was only the village, why had a smell rising in home's courtyard reminded him of a foreign country?

The question was simple.

There was no answer.

The next day he asked his mother, "Did I eat pineapple when I was a child?"

His mother laughed.

"Since when have you become so concerned about pineapple?"

"I just asked."

"No. Very rarely. I remember your maternal uncle brought one once."

"Who cut it?"

His mother thought for a while.

"Perhaps your father. Or me. Who knows now?"

Aniruddh did not get the answer he had expected.

In truth, there had been no expected answer.

He only wanted to make sure his memory was not mistaken.

Pineapple belonged to Doha.

Not to the village.

That much was confirmed.

But the discomfort did not go away.
 In the final week of his leave, Aniruddh went to the flat in Darbhanga.
 Nilima lived there because of Ishan's school.
 The small kitchen window of the flat opened toward the road.
 Outside the window was a web of wires.
 Below, passenger vehicles stopped and moved on.
 Aniruddh usually called that place "Nilima's flat."
 Sometimes, "the place in Darbhanga."
 Very rarely, "home."
 That night, as Nilima cooked rotis, she said, "Does this leave feel as though it's ending too quickly?"
 Aniruddh said, "Yes."
 "Had enough of the village?"
 "Can one ever have enough of home?"
 Nilima turned the roti.
 "Of your home?"
 The question was ordinary.
 Aniruddh got caught inside it.
 "What do you mean?"
 "Nothing. When you're in the village, you're in a hurry to return to Darbhanga. When you're in Darbhanga, you remember work in the village. When you reach Doha, we keep asking—when are you coming home?"
 Nilima laughed.
 "Your home travels around a great deal."
 Aniruddh laughed too.
 But the sentence stayed inside him.
 The next day Ishan said, "Babu, cut a pineapple, please."
 There was no pineapple in the house.
 Nilima said, "Go buy one."
 Aniruddh went to the market.
 He bought the fruit.
 He cut it in the flat's kitchen.
 The smell rose.
 This time he remembered the room in Doha.
 And the village courtyard as well.
 Because now the village courtyard too had acquired an incident attached to that smell.
 He understood that smell does not carry memory only back to old places.
 A smell also becomes attached to new places.
 The thought was very ordinary.
 But it was new to Aniruddh.

As he cut the fruit, he made four small piles.
One for Ishan.
One for Nilima.
One for himself.
His hand made the fourth pile out of habit.
Aniruddh stopped.
There were three people in the kitchen.
Nilima asked, "Who is this fourth one for?"
Aniruddh looked at the plate.
Then he laughed.
"Habit."
"Whose share were you making?"
"Everyone's."
When Ishan reached for the fourth pile, Aniruddh did not stop him.
Ishan left his own pile and took a piece from the fourth.
Something inside Aniruddh grew lighter.
A share that had not been named for anyone could be shared.
The leave ended.
Aniruddh returned to Doha.
Suresh no longer lived in that room.
He had returned to Nepal and then gone on to another country.
Yusuf lived in different accommodation.
Ravindra had returned to India and started a small business.
There were new roommates—Faizal, Manoj and Dilbahadur.
The kitchen had changed.
The exhaust fan was new.
The old steel plate was gone.
Aniruddh did not buy fruit during his first week back.
There was too much work.
One night Manoj brought a pineapple from the market.
"Jha ji, will you cut it?"
Aniruddh's hand rose of its own accord.
"Give it here."
The knife moved.
The smell rose.
This time the smell did not take him to any one place.
The low seat in the village courtyard.
The narrow kitchen in Darbhanga.
The old room in Doha.
The new room in Doha.

Everything was present in a single instant, without any one place displacing another.

This time Aniruddh felt no discomfort.

He made the pieces equal.

Manoj asked, "How do you manage to cut them so evenly?"

Aniruddh said, "Many years of practice."

"Learned it at home?"

Aniruddh fell silent at the question.

Then he said, "In homes."

Manoj did not understand.

"What?"

"Nothing."

The fruit was shared.

Before going to sleep that night, Aniruddh called Nilima.

Ishan was studying.

Nilima asked, "Have you eaten?"

"Yes."

"What did you eat?"

Aniruddh gave her the list.

Dal.

Rice.

Vegetables.

Then he said, "Pineapple too."

Nilima laughed.

"Now this has become your fruit."

"Mine?"

"Wherever you go, you keep cutting it."

Aniruddh was silent on the phone.

Nilima moved on to another subject.

The school fees.

His mother's medicine in the village.

The drainage problem.

Aniruddh listened.

After the call ended, he stared for a long time at the dark screen of the phone.

For so many years he had tied the meaning of home to place.

Land.

Walls.

Courtyard.

Address.

Papers.

Birth.

None of those things was false.

But they were incomplete.

That night, for the first time, he understood that some homes are made of memory.

Some are made of responsibility.

Some are made of waiting.

Some are made of small habits repeated so long that a person does not realize he is making a place his own.

Cutting fruit was one such habit.

But Aniruddh did not turn the thought into a theory.

He was tired.

He wanted to sleep.

The following week, Faizal was preparing to return to his country.

The room was full of piles of belongings.

Shoes apart.

Clothes apart.

Gifts apart.

There was no plan for fruit.

That night Faizal said, "Tomorrow is my last night. Shall we make something?"

Dilbahadur said meat.

Manoj said kheer.

Aniruddh said, "I'll cut the fruit."

Faizal laughed.

"That's already decided."

The next night they brought pineapple, melon and oranges.

Aniruddh kept cutting.

The smell of pineapple rose again.

Faizal kept talking about his home.

His mother.

His wife.

Two children.

A half-built room.

A debt.

A small field.

Manoj began talking about his home.

Dilbahadur did too.

After a while, everyone's "home" had become a different map.

Aniruddh listened.

It no longer seemed to him that one home was real and the others less real.

Someone owned his house on paper but lived there only twenty days a year.

Someone's home was rented, but his children had been born there.

Someone's home was still being built.

Someone's home had been sold, but in conversation it still existed in the present tense.

The fruit was cut.

The plate was set in the middle.

Aniruddh had made the pieces equal.

Faizal left his third piece of pineapple.

"Too sweet."

Aniruddh burst out laughing.

He remembered Yusuf.

Yusuf too used to leave his third piece.

For the same reason.

The memory came with the smell.

But this time the memory did not pull him backward.

It was simply like an empty place on the plate.

Where someone had once sat.

And someone else sat now.

Two months later his mother fell ill.

Aniruddh could not return immediately.

Nilima went to the village.

Medicine, tests, doctors, expenses—everything was discussed over the phone.

The old guilt rose inside Aniruddh.

Far from home.

The weight of that sentence grew heavier again.

One night he asked himself—if there are many homes, does that lessen the guilt of living far away?

The answer came at once—no.

Changing the meaning of home does not reduce responsibility.

Sometimes it increases it.

He sent money for his mother's medicine.

He submitted an application for leave.

He kept asking Nilima for updates again and again.

And amid all this, at night, he kept cutting fruit for the people in his room.

One day Manoj said, "You're worried. Leave it, I'll cut it."

Aniruddh handed him the knife.
 Earlier he would have said—no, I'll do it.
 This time he handed it over.
 Manoj cut the pineapple peel far too thickly.
 The words escaped Aniruddh's mouth on their own: "Not that thick."
 Both of them laughed.
 Aniruddh did not take the knife back.
 He kept watching the thick peel.
 Some fruit came away with it.
 The world did not end.
 There was less fruit.
 The shares were smaller.
 Even so, everyone ate.
 His mother's health improved gradually.
 His leave was approved.
 Aniruddh reached the village again.
 This time he had brought no pineapple with him.
 On the first day he simply sat in his mother's room.
 She was weak, but she talked a great deal.
 "Why do you have to live so far away?"
 Aniruddh knew the answer.
 Earnings.
 Debt.
 Ishan's education.
 Repairs to the house.
 His mother's medicine.
 But he did not give her the list.
 He only said, "It's the work."
 His mother fell silent.
 After a while she said, "You've come home. That much is enough."
 Aniruddh looked at his mother's face.
 "Ma, which one is home?"
 His mother frowned.
 "What sort of question is that?"
 "Just asking."
 His mother gestured toward the courtyard.
 "This."
 Then, after a few moments, he asked, "Not Darbhanga?"
 His mother said, "That too."
 "Doha?"
 His mother laughed.

“Is your bed there? Your utensils? Do people look for you there?”

“Yes.”

“Then you decide.”

His mother turned over.

For her, the philosophical importance of Aniruddh’s question had ended.

That afternoon Nilima brought fruit.

Mangoes.

Bananas.

A small pineapple.

“Ishan said Babu would cut it.”

Aniruddh picked up the fruit.

He took a knife and sat in the courtyard.

His mother watched from the window of her room.

Ishan sat in front of him.

Nilima beside him.

Aniruddh cut off the crown.

The peel came away thinly.

The rows of eyes came out on a slant.

The sweet-sour smell filled the air.

This time no single place came to his mind.

The memories came, certainly.

But not in sequence.

Not old first, new later.

All at once.

Suresh.

Yusuf.

Manoj.

The low seat in the village courtyard.

The window in Darbhanga.

The exhaust fan in Doha.

His mother’s room.

Ishan’s eager eyes.

Aniruddh cut the pieces.

He made three piles.

Then his hand moved to make a fourth.

He did not stop.

He made the fourth pile too.

Ishan asked, “Who is this for?”

Aniruddh said, “Whoever comes.”

No visitor was expected.

The fourth share on the plate waited, empty of any name.

A little later, a small child from the neighborhood came into the courtyard.

Ishan pointed toward the fourth pile.

“Eat.”

The child picked up a piece.

Aniruddh watched him.

The smell of pineapple was still in the air.

This time, within that smell, the word “home” did not take on any one face for him.

There was only a plate.

There were a few people.

And there was one share that had not been named in advance for anyone.

Beneath the Fan

After four days of fever, lying in bed, the ceiling had begun to seem to Jaynarayan Mishra the most familiar part of the house.

The wall clock was to his right.

The window to his left.

But his eyes stayed fixed above for most of the time.

An old fan turned on the ceiling.

Three blades.

Grey in colour.

A faded blue stain near the end of one blade.

The stain was so small that on healthy days he would never have noticed it.

Now that stain was the most regular visitor in his day.

The blue stain came.

Went.

Came again.

Went again.

Jaynarayan counted silently—one, two, three.

Then one again.

Then two.

Then three.

After a while he would lose the count.

He would begin again.

“One.”

“Two.”

“Three.”

Sharda came in through the doorway.

She had a glass of water in her hand.

“Counting again?”

Jaynarayan kept his eyes raised.

“No.”

Sharda smiled.

“I can tell just from the sound.”

“I count aloud?”

“Your lips keep moving.”

Jaynarayan stilled his lips.

The fan went on turning.

The blue stain came round again.

Sharda placed the glass on the table.

“Drink some water.”

Jaynarayan tried to sit up.

Sharda raised the pillow a little.

He drank two sips of water and lay back down.

“What day is it today?”

“Thursday.”

“Yesterday?”

“Wednesday.”

“And the day before?”

“Tuesday.”

Jaynarayan closed his eyes.

He could feel no difference among the three days.

In the morning his temperature had been taken.

He had been given something to eat.

He had been given medicine.

He slept.

He woke.

He was given water to drink.

Someone phoned.

Someone asked how he was.

Evening came.

Night came.

Then morning again.

For three days the sequence had been such that the days seemed not to change at all; only the blue stain on the fan kept returning to the same place again and again.

“Why Thursday?” slipped from his mouth.

Sharda did not understand.

“What?”

“Why Thursday after Wednesday? To me it feels like the same day.”

Sharda drew the window curtain aside a little.

The afternoon light fell in a square on the floor.

“The day has changed.”

“Proof?”

“Yesterday the sunlight was here.”

She pointed to the floor near one leg of the bed.

“Today it is over there.”
Jaynarayan tried to turn his neck.
His temple felt heavy.
He looked back at the fan.
“But this is the same.”
“The fan?”
“Yes.”
Sharda said, “Its very job is to turn.”
Jaynarayan did not answer.
The blue stain came again.
It struck him that turning was not merely a task; it was also a kind of
proof.
What keeps moving comes back to the same place.
Then to the same place again.
And again.
In illness, time did not seem like a line to him.
It seemed like a circle.
He tried to remember his healthy days.
Getting up in the morning.
Bathing.
Tea.
The newspaper.
Walking to the shop.
Lunch.
A little rest.
The evening market.
Dinner.
Sleep.
That too was a circle.
The only difference was that on healthy days he moved along the circle.
Now the circle turned above him.
Sharda began wiping the window frame.
“Shall I change your clothes?”
“Later.”
“By the time you keep saying later, you’ll be soaked in sweat again.”
“Everything here happens again.”
Sharda stopped.
“What?”
“Water. Medicine. Clothes. Food. The fan. Everything again.”
Sharda looked at him.
“So?”

“Nothing moves forward.”

Instead of answering, Sharda removed the pillowcase.

It took her two minutes to put on a fresh one.

There was a pale yellow stain on one corner of the old case.

The new case was clean.

“This did not happen again,” Sharda said.

“What?”

“The pillowcase.”

Jaynarayan tried to smile.

“It will be changed again tomorrow.”

“But tomorrow’s pillowcase will not be this one.”

Sharda carried the old case outside.

Jaynarayan kept looking at the fan.

The blue stain came round.

He thought—the stain itself is exactly the same.

The stain does not change.

There was a fine layer of dust on the rest of the blade.

From below he could not tell whether dust had collected around the edge of the blue stain as well.

He narrowed his eyes and looked.

Each time the stain seemed exactly the same.

He wished he could stop the fan and look at it closely.

But if the fan stopped, he would feel hot.

He let the wish go.

In the afternoon his son Nachiketa phoned.

Sharda held the phone to his ear.

“Babu, how are you?”

“Fine.”

“Has the fever come down?”

“If you say so.”

“Shall I come this evening?”

“Why leave your work?”

“Work can wait.”

“There is nothing new here.”

For a little while there was no sound from the other end of the phone.

“I don’t want to see something new. I want to see you.”

Jaynarayan’s gaze remained on the fan.

The blue stain was circling.

“I’m right here.”

Nachiketa said softly, “That isn’t what I mean.”

Jaynarayan did not understand what exactly he meant.

Sharda took the phone.
She went outside and spoke for a while.
Jaynarayan counted one revolution.
Then a second.
Then a third.

It dawned on him not suddenly but gradually that what he felt inside before those three turns during the phone call was not the same as what he felt after three more turns.

Before, Nachiketa's coming had seemed unnecessary.

Now there was a little expectation.

The fan kept turning at the same speed.

Then where had expectation entered the circle from?

He liked that question.

More than the answer.

Nachiketa had not come by evening.

Rain began.

Water started striking the windowpane.

Outside, the peepal leaves flipped and flashed.

The fan's air and the outside wind collided with one another.

The curtain sometimes billowed inward, sometimes outward.

Jaynarayan watched that back-and-forth movement.

The curtain too seemed to be circling.

But each time its fold was different.

Sometimes one corner lifted high.

Sometimes the middle of the cloth swelled.

Sometimes only the edge trembled.

He looked back at the fan.

The blue stain came.

This time the shape of the curtain behind it had changed.

The blue stain came again.

This time a thick stream of water was sliding down the pane.

It came again.

The light outside had dimmed a little.

"The same place," Jaynarayan said to himself.

Then he corrected his sentence.

"The same place—but not the same time."

The sentence seemed a little too neat to him.

He let it go.

Nachiketa came at night.

After changing his wet kurta, he sat beside his father.

He had two small guavas in his hand.

“Found them in the market.”

“Did the doctor say fruit is allowed?” Sharda asked.

“Not now,” Nachiketa said. “I’ll keep these for tomorrow.”

Jaynarayan looked at the guavas.

For tomorrow.

The words were small.

But for the first time that day, tomorrow seemed to him like a separate thing.

The guavas were placed on the table.

Not now.

Tomorrow.

The fan kept turning.

The blue stain came.

Went.

The guavas remained where they were.

That night Jaynarayan did not sleep for a long time.

Nachiketa had gone home.

Sharda sat leaning against the small cot beside him, dozing.

The room light was off.

A thin line of light from the veranda entered beneath the door.

The fan blades were not clear in the darkness.

The blue stain had disappeared.

Even so, from the sound of the fan he could tell it was turning.

Air fell across his head.

An even rhythm.

He thought—when the stain cannot be seen, where does the circle go?

The turning still continues.

To see a circle, one needs a mark.

Without the mark, only the air remains.

He tried to turn onto his side.

His right shoulder hurt.

Sharda woke.

“What do you need?”

“Nothing.”

“To turn over?”

“Yes.”

Sharda shifted the pillow a little.

Jaynarayan lay on his left side.

Now the fan was no longer directly above his eyes.

He could see the wall.

A thin strip of light beneath the door.

Two round shadows of the guavas on the table.
 Sleep came to him.
 When he opened his eyes in the morning, the fan was still.
 At first he was startled.
 Then he understood that the power had gone out.
 The room was hot.
 All three blades of the fan were motionless.
 The blue stain was clearly visible.
 The stain was not at the very tip of the blade but a little inward from it.
 Its shape was not round.
 Narrow on one side, broad on the other.
 Jaynarayan wondered why, while it was turning overhead, the stain had seemed so uniform.
 A still object was more complicated.
 A moving object was simple.
 Sharda came with a hand fan.
 "Where has the electricity gone?"
 "The whole lane is without it."
 "For how long?"
 "Who knows."
 Sharda began fanning him by hand.
 The air was uneven.
 Strong once.
 Weak the next time.
 In between, her hand grew tired.
 Then she changed the rhythm.
 Jaynarayan kept looking at the motionless ceiling fan.
 The blue stain no longer turned away and returned.
 It was stuck in one place.
 Yet time had not stopped.
 Outside, the milkman passed.
 The voices of children going to school came from the lane.
 Utensils clinked in the neighbouring house.
 The square of window-light shifted across the floor.
 Sharda's hand tired.
 She took the hand fan in her left hand.
 Sweat appeared on Jaynarayan's forehead.
 The smell of the guavas on the table grew a little stronger.
 The minute hand of the clock moved forward.
 The still fan remained silent amid all of it.
 A small laugh came to Jaynarayan.

"What happened?" Sharda asked.

"Nothing."

"This is the first time in four days you have laughed on your own."

"You count that too?"

"I count many things."

Jaynarayan looked at her.

"What things?"

Sharda said while moving the hand fan, "Medicine times. How much water you drink. When the temperature was taken. How many times you woke at night. How often your clothes were changed. Who phoned. How much you ate."

She paused.

"And?"

"And when you say, 'I'm fine,' while your face says you aren't."

Jaynarayan smiled.

"You are in a circle too."

Sharda stopped her hand.

"Me?"

"The same tasks again and again."

Sharda thought for a few moments.

Then said, "Perhaps."

"Then does time feel the same to you?"

"No."

"Why?"

Sharda did not answer at once.

The hand fan began moving again.

"Yesterday you ate two bowls of porridge."

"And today?"

"Today you were full after half a bowl."

"That is not good."

"But yesterday, when you sat up, you had to hold my hand. Today you sat up without holding it."

Jaynarayan was silent.

"Last night you asked for water five times. Tonight, twice."

Sharda said.

"The tasks repeat, but the account is not the same."

Jaynarayan looked at the ceiling.

The motionless fan.

The blue stain.

"Do you write all this down?"

"No."

“Then how do you remember?”
“Because I am the one doing the work.”
The answer did not seem pleasing to him; it seemed true.
After a while the electricity returned.
The fan started with a jerk.
Slowly at first.
Then a little faster.
The blue stain came round once.
A long time later, a second time.
Then the interval shortened.
Then the speed became even.
Jaynarayan began to count once.
“One...”
He stopped.
The blue stain came again.
He did not say the number.
Sharda came after washing the guavas.
“Shall we eat yesterday’s fruit today?”
Jaynarayan said, “Today.”
Sharda cut off a small piece for him.
Jaynarayan chewed slowly.
The taste was mildly sour.
After that Sharda opened the window.
There was wind outside.
Mingling with the fan’s air, it made the curtain tremble slightly.
The blue stain kept circling.
In the afternoon his temperature was taken.
Sharda looked at the number.
She said nothing.
Jaynarayan asked, “Compared with yesterday?”
“A little lower.”
“How much?”
Sharda told him the number.
Jaynarayan looked at the clock.
Then at the fan.
“What was I doing at this time yesterday?”
“Sleeping.”
“And today?”
“Asking questions.”
Jaynarayan laughed.
The laugh was small.

But it caused a slight pull in his chest.
He fell quiet.
Later in the afternoon Nachiketa came again.
This time empty-handed.
“The guavas?”
“We ate them.”
“Good.”
He sat at the foot of the bed.
“Babu, do you feel like going outside?”
Jaynarayan considered his answer.
For the previous four days, the question of outside had seemed meaningless to him.
Now he wanted to see the peepal leaves beyond the window.
“Up to the veranda.”
Nachiketa and Sharda looked at one another.
“Now?”
“Yes.”
Together they slowly helped him up.
His legs trembled a little as soon as his feet touched the floor.
Jaynarayan gripped the edge of the bed.
He looked up at the fan.
The blue stain was turning.
Rising from beneath it and going outside felt to him as though a line were emerging from the middle of a circle.
The metaphor seemed too contrived to him.
He threw it away in his mind.
Nachiketa held his arm and led him to the veranda.
The air on the veranda was different.
Not direct.
Sometimes on the cheek.
Sometimes on the neck.
Sometimes nowhere at all.
A bicycle passed on the road in front.
A dog changed its patch of shade.
On the clothesline hung Sharda’s washed pillowcase.
Jaynarayan recognised it.
It was the same old case with the yellow stain, washed and now hanging in the sun.
The stain had faded.
It had not vanished completely.
He thought—the blue stain too would fade one day.

Whether the fan would still be turning then, who could know.
There was no fear in the thought.
Only an ordinary uncertainty.
A few minutes later he returned to the bed.
He was tired.
Sharda straightened the sheet.
“That is enough.”
“Yes.”
“Again tomorrow.”
This time Jaynarayan smiled at the word “again.”
Again did not have to mean the same thing.
Again could also mean another time.
Evening fell.
The light on the wall slowly climbed upward.
The shadow of the fan blades on the ceiling was sometimes sharp,
sometimes blurred.
Jaynarayan was not waiting for the blue stain.
Even so, it came.
His eyes caught it.
It went.
Came again.
This time the light in the room behind the blue stain was a little more
yellow.
It came again.
Sharda sat on the small cot untangling thread.
It came again.
A child laughed somewhere outside.
It came again.
A minute advanced on the clock.
It came again.
Sharda loosened the knot in the thread.
It came again.
Jaynarayan’s eyelids grew heavy.
He wanted to count.
One.
Two.
Three.
In the old sequence.
But after the third, the next number did not come automatically.
His attention moved to Sharda’s hands.
The small knot in the thread had opened.

Sharda was winding it up.
The fan kept turning above.
The blue stain came again.
This time Jaynarayan did not say the number.

The Half-Written Name

Renuka Mishra stepped inside the municipal library while waiting for the rain to stop.

It was hard to count how many times in the past seven years she had passed in front of that library.

On her way to the vegetable market.

On her way to the bank.

On her way to the post office.

While going to catch a bus.

While returning with someone.

She had always seen the name painted on the blue board above the door, but she had never had a reason to go inside.

That day, the reason was rain.

The Bhadon rain broke so suddenly that the dust on the road turned to mud within two minutes.

Renuka gathered her sari a little and climbed onto the library veranda.

Inside, a fan was turning slowly.

Five men sat at four tables reading newspapers.

In one corner, two students sat with books open before them.

Old magazines stood in glass-fronted cupboards along the wall.

Instead of remaining on the veranda, Renuka went inside.

The young man seated behind the service desk pushed his glasses up his nose.

“Please sit. The rain is heavy.”

Renuka smiled.

There were three empty chairs in front of the service desk.

She sat down on one of them.

For some time, only the sound of the rain could be heard.

Water struck the tin awning as though a thousand tiny grains were falling all at once.

Renuka's eyes went to the magazines lying in front of her.

She picked one up.

As soon as she turned the first page, an old familiar smell rose from it—a mingling of paper, dampness, and dust.

She used to go to the library at school.
At college too.
And after that?
After that, there had been books at home.
The child's textbooks.
Thin recipe booklets.
A novel borrowed from someone now and then.
Sometimes a story collection from Aditi's syllabus.
The thought of sitting in a library and choosing a book for herself came to her after a very long time.
The rain showed no sign of easing.
Renuka placed the magazine back on the service desk.
"Can books be taken home from here?"
The young man said, "Yes, if you have a membership."
"How much does it cost?"
He told her the amount.
It was not a sum that required thought.
"Make me a member."
The young man pulled a yellow application form from beneath the service desk.
"Fill this in. The two photographs can be given later as well. We need a copy of an identity document. You can submit the application now."
Renuka took a pen out of her bag.
The first line of the application form read—
Name:
Without thinking, she began to write.
A
Di
The pen stopped after she had written "Adi."
Renuka kept looking at the paper.
Three letters.
Adi.
"Ti" wanted to come next.
Her hand was ready.
But the name was not hers.
Aditi was her daughter.
Renuka lifted the pen.
The young man at the service desk was entering someone else's book in the register.
He did not notice.
Renuka kept her eyes fixed on the three letters.

Her first impulse was to laugh.

What had happened?

She laughed inwardly.

She had read "Name" and begun writing her daughter's name.

Aditi was in Pune now.

She had started her job three months earlier.

Her own rented room, her own bank, her own identity card, her own office.

And Renuka, in a library in Darbhanga, had begun writing Aditi's name on an application for her own membership.

She drew a straight line through "Adi."

The line came out slightly crooked.

Beneath it, she wrote clearly—

Renuka Mishra.

Even after the name was complete, her hand remained there for a moment.

The next line—Age.

She wrote it.

Address.

She wrote it.

Phone.

She wrote it.

Occupation.

At this line she paused again.

She did sewing and embroidery from home, but should that be called an "occupation"?

Over the past twenty years, blouses, kurtas, curtains, pillowcases, and children's clothes for so many people in the neighbourhood had been made by her hands.

She was paid too.

Sometimes little.

Sometimes reasonably well.

She wrote—

Sewing work.

This time her hand did not pause.

She filled in the application and handed it to the service desk.

The young man glanced over it.

"There is a correction in the name."

"Yes."

"Shall I give you a new application?"

Renuka looked again at the three letters.

Adi.
A crooked line across them.
Renuka Mishra beneath.
“No. It can be read, can’t it?”
The young man looked a little surprised.
“Yes, it can be read.”
“Then it is fine.”
He said nothing.
He placed the application to one side.
The rain had eased a little.
Renuka stood up.
As soon as she stepped outside, she laughed again at her mistake.
Aditi’s name.
Why?
The answer seemed very simple to her.
For years, she had been filling in application forms.
The first school.
“Student’s Name”—Aditi Mishra.
“Date of Birth”—16 July.
“Mother’s Name”—Renuka Mishra.
“Father’s Name”—Manohar Mishra.
Aditi had been five years old then.
She did not yet know how to write properly.
Renuka had filled everything in.
Then the admission form for the second school.
Then the scholarship.
Then the science exhibition.
Then the sports competition.
Then the library membership card.
Then examinations.
Then college.
Then the hostel.
Some applications Aditi filled in herself.
But after filling them in, she would bring them to her mother.
“Just check it once.”
Renuka would check the date.
She would check the name.
She would check the spelling.
She would check the date of birth.
She would see whether the photograph had been pasted in the right place.
She would see where the signature was required.

So often Aditi would say impatiently,
“Ma, it’s fine.”
Renuka would say,
“Checking that something is correct is also part of making sure it is correct.”

Aditi would roll her eyes.
Now she filled out her applications herself.
She did not show them to Renuka.
That was a good thing.
Renuka had always wanted her daughter to manage her own papers herself.

But her hand?
The hand knew only the practice of years.
It saw “Name.”
And Aditi began.
When she reached home, she took off her wet slippers outside.
Manohar was sitting in the drawing room reading the newspaper.
“You got this wet?”
“The rain caught me.”
“Umbrella?”

Renuka opened her bag and looked inside.
The umbrella was there.
She burst out laughing.
“I had an umbrella and still went into the library.”
Manohar lowered the newspaper.
“The library?”
“Yes. I’m becoming a member.”
“Good.”

Renuka paused slightly at the word “Good.”
There was neither enthusiasm nor objection in it.
Only ordinary acceptance.
“I filled in the application.”
“All right.”
She wanted Manohar to ask—What book will you borrow?
He did not ask.
Renuka did not volunteer the answer either.
She went to the kitchen and changed her sari.
She put water on the stove.
While making tea, her eyes fell on an old magnetic strip stuck to the metal cupboard in the kitchen.
Aditi’s Class Twelve timetable had once been fixed there.

Now only the strip remained.

Renuka strained the tea.

One cup for Manohar.

One for herself.

She brought the cups into the drawing room and set them down.

"Did you speak to Aditi today?" Manohar asked.

"Last night."

"Is work going well?"

"Yes."

"Is the room all right?"

"Yes."

"Food?"

"She cooks."

Manohar smiled.

"She couldn't even make tea before."

Renuka ran a finger along the rim of her cup.

"She could. You wouldn't drink it."

"Me?"

"Yes. She made it once. There was too much sugar. You said, 'Her mother makes it better than this.'"

Manohar thought for a moment.

"I don't remember."

"She will."

Having said this, Renuka herself fell silent.

Who remembers what?

Who forgets what?

And what does the hand remember?

In the evening she sat down at the sewing machine.

She had to finish a blouse for a neighbour.

As she folded the cloth, she noticed that she still picked up the measuring tape exactly the way her mother had taught her in the first year of her marriage.

Before cutting thread, she held it lightly between her teeth.

Her mother used to say—when the scissors are in your hand, why hold the thread in your teeth?

But the habit had never gone.

Are habits a form of identity?

If her hand wrote Aditi first, did that mean Renuka had somehow become less herself?

No.

The answer was so obvious that her own question seemed a little theatrical to her.

She started the machine.

Tak-tak-tak.

The seam ran straight.

Without thought, her foot increased and decreased the pressure.

This was the practice of her hands and feet.

Writing Aditi's name was practice too.

And yet something inside her remained caught.

If it was merely habit, why had seeing "Adi" made her so uneasy?

After dinner, Renuka opened the old metal cupboard.

On the upper shelf were three bundles of papers.

One for household papers.

One for bank papers.

One for Aditi's education.

She took out the third bundle.

Manohar asked,

"What are you looking for?"

"Nothing."

She sat on the floor and opened the bundle.

On the first application, Aditi's name was in her handwriting.

Rounded letters.

Aditi Mishra.

Beneath it, "Mother's Name"—Renuka Mishra.

Renuka's own name was in smaller letters, slightly slanted.

She opened the second paper.

Aditi Mishra.

The third.

Aditi Mishra.

On papers from a few years later, the handwriting had changed.

Aditi's own hand.

A little faster.

The lines straighter.

Renuka's signature beneath.

All at once, something became visible to her—

Where there was "Name," for many years the daughter had been written.

Where there was "Parent's Signature," there was Renuka.

Her name had not disappeared.

It had simply lived in a different place.

Not in the first line.

In the lower corner.

In that corner was responsibility.
Renuka sat holding the papers in her hand.
She did not like the idea of tying everything in life into a single sentence.
“I was always in the lower corner.”
That would be untrue.
So many decisions in the household had begun with her in the first line.
Without anyone's permission.
She had made the decision to change Aditi's school.
Manohar had not agreed at the time.
She had also decided to buy the sewing machine.
And during her mother's treatment, she had chosen the hospital.
So the problem was not that she had always been “second.”
The problem was that different tasks taught the hand different sequences.
When one spends years caring for someone, whose face appears first
behind the word “Name” is not the final truth of identity.
Renuka tied the bundle again.
One old paper remained in her hand.
Aditi's Class Eight science exhibition application.
Her daughter's name at the top.
The subject below.
Then “Supervising Teacher.”
At the very bottom, “Parent's Consent.”
There was Renuka's signature.
Seeing the signature reminded her of another habit of her hand.
When signing any paper, she had never once written Aditi's name.
The movement of a signature was different.
Renuka Mishra.
Like a single breath.
She did not even need to write out the whole signature consciously; the
practice of years had turned it into a shape.
Writing a name and signing it were not the same thing.
In one place she was filling in someone else's identity.
In the other she was giving her own consent.
Her hand remembered both.
She placed the old application back in the bundle and closed the
cupboard.
That night Aditi called.
“Ma, what are you doing?”
“I was looking at some papers.”
“Whose?”
“Your old ones.”

“Why again?”
 “Just like that.”
 Aditi laughed.
 “Do you still have the science-exhibition one from Class Eight?”
 “Yes.”
 “Throw it away.”
 “Why?”
 “It is of no use.”
 Renuka smiled faintly.
 “Not every paper is kept because it is useful.”
 “Ma, you’re being very sentimental now.”
 “Say it.”
 “No, say it in Maithili now and it will sound right.”
 Both of them laughed.
 Renuka said,
 “Today I filled in an application for myself.”
 “For what?”
 “The library.”
 “Really?”
 “Yes.”
 “That’s good. What book will you take?”
 Renuka paused at the question.
 Manohar had not asked it.
 Aditi did.
 “I don’t know yet.”
 “Choose whatever you feel like.”
 “Whose wishes have I been choosing by until now?”
 Aditi fell silent.
 “Mine?”
 Renuka laughed.
 “Sometimes.”
 “All right. Now choose for yourself.”
 The sentence made Renuka slightly uncomfortable as soon as she heard it.
 “Now for yourself”—as though everything until now had belonged to
 someone else.
 “Aditi,” she said, “it isn’t quite that simple.”
 “What happened?”
 “Nothing. I’ll choose a book and call you.”
 “All right.”
 The call ended.
 Renuka remained holding the phone for some time.

“Now for yourself.”

Such sentences sound good.

But life is rarely divided into such clean sections.

Had the applications she filled out for her daughter not been part of her own life?

Was the practice of writing Aditi's name again and again not part of the history of her own hand?

If she said, “I had forgotten my own name,” that would be untrue.

She had not forgotten her name.

She had only changed the first answer to the word “Name.”

And now perhaps that answer would change again.

Two days later there was no rain.

Renuka went to the library carrying a copy of her identity document and two photographs.

The same young man was at the service desk.

“Application?”

He searched through a file and took out the yellow sheet.

From a distance, Renuka recognised the three letters she had crossed out.

Adi.

The line.

Renuka Mishra beneath.

The young man pasted the photograph.

He attached the copy.

He wrote something in the register.

Then he turned the application form towards her.

“Sign here.”

Renuka signed without thinking.

The pen did not pause even once.

The young man picked up the application.

Renuka looked at it.

On the first line at the top was a crossed-out, half-written name.

Beneath it was her full name.

At the very bottom was her signature.

All three were made by the same hand.

The application did not look ruined to her.

It was not neat and spotless.

But it was legible.

“Your membership card will be ready next week,” the young man said.

“You may take one book now.”

Renuka went towards the shelves.

For five minutes she read the names.

Some familiar.
Some unfamiliar.
At first she wanted to pick up a book by one of Aditi's favourite authors.
Her hand moved towards one book.
She stopped.
This time, stopping was not a crisis.
She left the book where it was.
She opened another cupboard.
She took out a thin book of stories by an author whose name she did not recognise.
She opened it and read two lines.
She could not yet decide whether she would like it.
That was precisely why she took the book.
At the service desk, the young man wrote the book number in the register.
"Member's name?"
Renuka opened her mouth.
This time it was not the hand's turn, but the voice's.
She did not think.
"Renuka Mishra."
The young man wrote it down.
Renuka put the book in her bag.
Outside, there was sunshine.
As soon as she stepped onto the road, she remembered the yellow application.
Aditi, half-written.
Renuka, complete.
The signature below.
She did not wish to make the application clean again.
The line would remain on the paper.
So would the three letters.
They were not merely evidence of a mistake.
They were the old movement of her hand.
And the full name written beneath them was not a new birth.
It was simply the correct applicant for that day.

Before the Lamp Went Out

The first day, the white line drawn across the middle of the courtyard seemed very thin to Kusum Jha.

The mason had dipped a string in limewash, stretched it taut between two ends, and snapped it against the ground.

For an instant, the string trembled.

Then a straight white mark appeared on the red-brick floor.

“From here?” Kusum had asked.

Rolling up his measuring tape, the mason had said, “This is where it is on the papers.”

This is where it is on the papers.

After those five words, the courtyard had split into two parts.

The portion on the left belonged to Kusum’s husband, Naresh.

The portion on the right belonged to his younger brother, Mahesh.

The house was old.

The walls were thick.

The veranda was long.

The courtyard in the middle was square.

Naresh and Mahesh’s father had inherited this house from his own father.

For years, the shares had been recorded on paper, but there had been no line on the ground.

As long as Babuji was alive, no one had even raised the matter of drawing one.

For two years after his death, too, everything went on as before.

Then the two brothers sat down to calculate the education of their sons and daughters, loans, repairs, taxes, and the future.

The matter had not begun with a quarrel.

It had begun with clarity.

“What belongs to whom should remain clear,” Naresh had said.

Mahesh had agreed.

Kusum, too, had agreed.

Meenakshi—Mahesh’s wife—had been the first to say, “If everything stays clear, there will be no questions among the children later.”

The papers were taken out.

The old measurements were checked again.
For two days, the record-keeper came.
One day, the mason came.
Then came the lime line.
After the line was drawn, Kusum's first surprise was how quickly the places in the house that had seemed to her like one thing could become two.
Before, there had been "the tap."
Now there were "our tap" and "their tap."
Before, there had been "the veranda."
Now there were "this side of the veranda" and "that side of the veranda."
Before, there had been "the clothesline."
Now there were two clotheslines.
Before, the pickle jars were placed wherever the sunlight was best.
Now, before setting down a jar, one looked at the line.
The line was very thin.
But the language of the house kept making it thicker.
In the first week, Kusum left her slippers on the wrong side three times.
"Auntie, these are your slippers!" Mahesh's daughter Tanvi had said, laughing.
Kusum had laughed too.
After that, she began leaving her slippers beside the pillar of her own veranda.
Once, Meenakshi's brass lota wandered over to this side of the line.
Kusum picked it up and placed it back on the other side.
Meenakshi said, "Let it stay there. What harm does it do?"
Kusum had replied, "Now that things have been decided this way, let them remain this way."
There was no anger in that answer.
There was order.
Kusum liked order.
She liked clothes folded neatly.
She liked the grain tins labeled by name.
She liked keys on their own hooks.
Spices in their own containers.
Money in its own purse.
Work at its proper time.
The line did not oppose this temperament; it seemed almost an extension of it.
And yet, in some places, the line snagged against daily life.
The courtyard drain ran diagonally.

Rainwater flowed from the right-hand corner toward the drain by the left gate.

The old tap stood a hand and a half on the other side of the line.

The tulsi altar stood on this side.

But the little brass bowl used for filling water at the altar had for years remained beside the tap.

“Whose is this?” Tanvi once asked jokingly.

Kusum had tapped her lightly on the head.

“Whose can water for tulsi be?”

Tanvi burst out laughing.

“Look at the papers.”

Everyone laughed.

Some things could still make a joke of the papers.

But gradually the jokes became fewer.

There had already been two separate kitchens, because Naresh’s work hours and Mahesh’s shop hours were different.

Now even the movement between the two kitchens diminished.

Before, if Meenakshi ran out of salt, she would take a pinch from Kusum’s jar without asking.

Now she stood at the doorway and asked.

Before, if Kusum saw the lentils boiling on Meenakshi’s stove, she would lower the flame.

Now she stopped her hand.

“That is her work.”

With that sentence, many small hands began to stop.

Whether Kusum liked this or not, she herself could not say clearly.

Often, she felt relief.

Why should every task be hers?

At other times, an emptiness.

If a task was not hers, why should her eyes go there either?

Eight months passed.

The lime line was wiped away many times.

Then drawn again.

In the rains, half of it vanished.

Naresh mixed lime and straightened it himself.

“Once the wall is built, we won’t have to keep drawing the line again and again,” he had said.

The wall had been part of the plan from the beginning.

It was to be built when enough money had been saved.

A wall three hands high.

Low enough for air and light to pass across the courtyard, but high enough to keep the division clear.

Kusum agreed with this too.

“A low wall is fine,” she had said.

Meenakshi said, “Should there be a small gate in the middle?”

Naresh had immediately replied, “Why a gate? Then it will become the same coming and going again.”

Mahesh had remained silent.

Kusum too had said nothing.

Meenakshi changed the subject.

The day for building the wall was fixed—the last Monday of Kartik.

Two evenings before that, the electricity had begun going off repeatedly.

Whenever the power failed in the old house, a brass lamp was brought out.

It was not a ritual lamp.

It was simply the house’s old source of light.

When Kusum’s mother-in-law had first come to this house as a new bride, the lamp had already been there.

A thick, round belly.

A broad rim.

On one side, a spout-like groove for holding the wick.

A cotton wick in mustard oil.

When the electricity went, the lamp was placed beside the pillar between the veranda and the courtyard.

From there, a little light reached both sides.

Once battery lamps arrived, the brass lamp was needed less often.

Even so, during long cuts, Kusum still took it out.

The battery ran the fan.

And a small bulb.

But Naresh would say, “It is good to keep the old lamp. You cannot trust the electricity.”

Kusum kept the lamp clean.

It had no glass, so there was little soot.

She trimmed the wick.

The oil tin was kept separately.

And the little lid used for putting the lamp out had its own place.

She never blew out the flame.

She simply lowered the small round brass lid over it.

Within two breaths, the flame shrank.

Then darkness.

That Saturday evening, the electricity went out at seven.

Within half an hour, the battery began giving its warning beep.

"The battery has grown weak," Naresh said.
 Mahesh lit a small battery lamp on his side.
 Kusum brought out the brass lamp.
 She set it on the little platform beside the old pillar near the line.
 The pillar stood on this side.
 So did the lamp.
 But its light did not obey the line.
 The yellow circle fell over both portions.
 Tanvi brought her book to the light.
 "Auntie, may I study here for five minutes?"
 Kusum said, "Sit."
 Tanvi placed her low stool on her own side of the line and sat down.
 The lamp was in the middle.
 Her brother Neel came too.
 "I have writing to do."
 From the doorway, Meenakshi said, "You have your own light, don't you!"
 Neel replied, "That light hurts my eyes."
 Kusum laughed.
 Naresh arrived with the newspaper.
 "The letters are still clearer in the light of this lamp," he said.
 "Then why are you wearing spectacles?" Kusum asked.
 Naresh laughed.
 Mahesh arrived a little later as well.
 Four people were sitting on both sides of the line.
 The lamp was making a pool of light in the middle.
 For a moment, the scene looked to Kusum as it had in the old days.
 Then her eyes dropped.
 In the yellow light, the lime line looked even whiter.
 As though the lamp were not erasing it but bringing it into sharper relief.
 Tanvi closed her book.
 "Auntie, the wall will start going up on Monday, won't it?"
 "Yes."
 "Then I won't be able to sit here and study?"
 Kusum replied naturally, "You'll sit on your own side."
 Tanvi said nothing.
 Neel said, "Then there will be separate light on each side."
 Mahesh gave him a light tap on the head.
 "You understand too much."
 Kusum did not laugh at that sentence.
 She began watching the lamp's wick.

At nine, the electricity had still not returned.
Dinner was cooked separately in the two kitchens.
Even so, the lamp in the courtyard kept burning.
At ten, Tanvi went back to her side.
Neel had already gone to sleep.
Mahesh went to his room with the shop accounts.
Meenakshi began washing the dishes.
Kusum put her own kitchen in order.
She gave Naresh his medicine.
She checked the doors.
She closed the oil tin.
Now only the lamp remained in the courtyard.
Power-cut darkness altered the old architecture of the house.
The veranda pillars looked thicker.
The doorways deeper.
The corners of the courtyard farther away.
The lime line shone in one place in the yellow light and disappeared into shadow in another.
Kusum pulled over a low stool and sat beside the lamp.
She wanted to think about Monday's wall.
But her thoughts did not move in a straight line.
She remembered that on the first day after the line was drawn, Meenakshi had forgotten her broom on this side.
The broom had lain in Kusum's veranda for three days.
No one noticed.
Then one day Kusum had picked it up and placed it on the other side.
She remembered that last Phagun, Tanvi had fallen ill.
In the middle of the night Meenakshi had knocked at Kusum's door looking for medicine.
The line had been there that night.
But Kusum, running over with the medicine, had not even looked at it.
Then she remembered that two months earlier Meenakshi had placed a pickle jar on this side to turn it into the sun.
That day Kusum had stopped her.
"Look at the line."
Meenakshi had picked up the jar.
Kusum wondered: why was the line invisible on the night of a sick child?
And why was it visible on an afternoon with a pickle jar?
No answer came at once.
The lamp flame leaned slightly.
Kusum looked at the wick.

The oil was low.
She thought, I won't add any more now.
Everyone is going to bed.
I'll put the lamp out.
She stood up.
The brass lid was kept in the niche in the pillar.
She reached for it.
Just then she heard the tap dripping on the other side.
It seemed Meenakshi had not shut it completely.
Drip.
Drip.
Drip.
At first Kusum thought, "It is their tap."
Then she thought, if it drips all night, water will collect and keep the drain wet.
She thought of calling Meenakshi.
"Meenakshi!"
The call had risen only halfway up her throat.
Just then the lamp flame became very small.
Kusum was about to reach for the lid.
The flame turned blue once.
Then thin and yellow.
Then, without wind and without breath, it went out on its own.
Darkness came so quickly that Kusum's raised hand remained suspended in the air.
For an instant she could not even see her own palm.
The smell of hot lamp oil remained.
The drip of the tap sounded clearer.
Kusum stood still.
She knew where the matches were.
On the kitchen wall, above the small box.
The phone was inside too.
She could call Naresh.
But Kusum did nothing.
Drip.
Drip.
Drip.
She began walking toward the tap.
Her first step avoided the edge of the pillar's little platform.
Her second fell on the crack where, years earlier, one brick had sunk slightly.

Her third crossed the narrow run of the drain.
Kusum was not thinking.
Her body was walking.
Her hand stretched forward.
It found the cold iron mouth of the tap.
She turned it shut.
The dripping stopped.
In the darkness, the silence suddenly became enormous.
Kusum's hand was still on the tap.
Then she realized—she was standing on the other side of the line.
Even after that thought came, the line itself was invisible on the ground.
Kusum did not try to find it with her foot.
She simply stood there.
She realized that on the way to the tap, her body had not hesitated even once.

The line existed in memory.
But not in the map of her feet.
Her feet were still walking through the courtyard they had known before the lime line.

One pillar.

One sunken brick.

One drain.

One tap.

One path.

The papers said there were two shares.

The body was still reading a single courtyard.

Something became clear to Kusum not all at once, but very slowly.

She was not against the wall.

She liked the shares to be clear.

She understood that for the future of Naresh's and Mahesh's children, the papers needed to be unambiguous.

But for the last eight months she had also been doing something else—trying to carry the paper's line fully into her memory, her hands, her voice, and her gaze.

Even where the papers said nothing.

The tap was "theirs."

The jar was "theirs."

The flame under the lentils was "theirs."

The child's book was "theirs."

The sunlight on the veranda was "ours."

The pillar's shadow was "ours."

She understood that creating order and cutting through history were not the same act.

She had mistaken them for one.

The darkness had made that distinction clearer than light.

Kusum removed her hand from the tap.

At that moment, the door to Meenakshi's kitchen opened.

"Who is it?"

Meenakshi's voice was heavy with sleep.

Kusum said, "It's me. The tap was dripping."

"You're over there?"

Kusum paused for two moments before answering.

"Yes."

Meenakshi switched on the small light of her phone.

A faint white glow spread across the courtyard.

The lime line became visible again.

Kusum really was standing on the other side.

Her right foot was nearly two hands inside the line.

Meenakshi looked at her.

Kusum looked at the line.

Neither of them said "the wrong side."

Meenakshi only asked, "Did the lamp go out?"

"The oil ran out."

"Shall I give you a light?"

Kusum said, "No. I know the way."

With that she turned.

The phone light remained in Meenakshi's hand.

Kusum deliberately did not look toward it.

She returned in the same three steps.

The drain.

The sunken brick.

The pillar.

This time the line was visible, but Kusum did not pause her foot while crossing it.

Back on her side, she touched the brass body of the lamp.

It was still warm.

The lid was no longer needed.

She left it where it was.

From inside, Naresh asked, "Did you put the lamp out?"

Kusum said, "It went out by itself."

"You should have checked the oil."

Ordinarily Kusum would have replied, "I'll fill it tomorrow."

But she only said, "Yes."

That night, as he was falling asleep, Naresh said, "The mason will come at seven on Monday."

"Yes."

"We'll have to mark the line clearly again. Half of it has faded."

Kusum lay looking at the ceiling in the dark.

"Won't he understand the line from the papers?"

"He will, but having the mark on the ground will make it easier."

Kusum said nothing.

Soon Naresh fell asleep.

Kusum had no grand decision in mind.

She was not thinking of stopping the wall.

Nor of erasing the line.

Nor of once again borrowing salt from Meenakshi as in the old days.

She understood only that in eight months she had given a thin line far too many additional meanings.

A boundary of ownership.

A boundary of work.

A boundary of memory.

A boundary of sympathy.

A boundary of sight.

She had laid them all on the same line.

In the darkness, her body had refused to carry that burden.

The next morning, Kusum cleaned the lamp.

She trimmed the charred end of the wick.

She filled it with oil.

She wiped its brass belly with a cloth.

Then she put the lamp back in its old niche.

In the morning light, the lime line looked pale.

While drinking tea, Naresh said, "We'll have to bring lime today."

Kusum said, "Bring it."

At that moment Meenakshi was filling a bucket at the tap.

When the bucket was full, she shut the tap completely.

Without thinking, Kusum looked toward the tap.

Meenakshi looked toward her too.

Whether either of them smiled was difficult to say.

Their eyes simply met.

On Monday, the mason arrived.

Sand.

Mortar.

Bricks.

Measuring tape.

Naresh and Mahesh both stood in the courtyard.

The mason looked at the old line.

"The wall goes on this?"

Naresh said, "Yes."

The mason took out his string.

Kusum stood at the doorway of her kitchen.

Meenakshi stood on her side.

The string was pulled taut.

Straight from the tap to the gate.

Then the mason stopped.

"There's one thing," he said.

"What?" Mahesh asked.

"This drain runs diagonally through here. If the wall is closed all the way down, it will be hard to clean. We'll have to leave an opening at the bottom."

Naresh said, "Put in a small pipe."

The mason looked at the ground.

"Rubbish will get stuck in a pipe. Better to leave it wide enough for a hand to go through."

Mahesh said, "Then leave it."

Naresh thought for a moment.

"How much?"

The mason showed the measure with his hand.

"This much. We'll leave out two bricks."

Kusum came out of the kitchen.

"Leave a little more," she said.

Everyone looked at her.

Kusum pointed toward the drain.

"So a broom can go through by hand. The drain fills up often."

Naresh said, "Four bricks?"

"Three are enough."

The mason nodded.

"All right."

That was all.

No one called it a symbol.

No one said the house had become one again.

By afternoon, half the wall had risen.

Three hands high.

Near the drain, an opening three bricks wide.

A person could not pass through that opening.

A hand could.

A broom could.
 Water could.
 After the mason left in the evening, Kusum stood beside the wall.
 The courtyard now truly looked like two parts.
 The line had become a wall.
 Whether she felt sorrow, she could not tell at once.
 But one thing was clear—the words on the papers had now acquired a
 body of brick.
 Tanvi peered over from the other side.
 “Auntie!”
 The three-hand-high wall came just below her chin.
 “What?”
 “Can I sit here and study?”
 Kusum looked at the top of the wall.
 “You can put your book on it.”
 Tanvi tried setting the book there.
 It was thick enough.
 “It has made a good table.”
 Kusum laughed.
 That night the electricity went out again.
 Kusum brought out the brass lamp.
 The old pillar’s platform now lay on this side of the wall.
 She placed the lamp there as before.
 The flame caught.
 The yellow light climbed to the top of the wall.
 On the other side, the edge of Tanvi’s book gleamed.
 The sound of Meenakshi’s dishes came across.
 Naresh was searching for the newspaper.
 Mahesh was speaking to a customer on the phone.
 The house went on doing its separate work in its two halves.
 Kusum checked the oil in the lamp.
 This time there was enough.
 At ten, the house grew quiet.
 Kusum lifted the lid to put the lamp out.
 Before lowering it over the flame, her eyes went to the three-brick
 opening at the bottom of the wall.
 Through it, a thin piece of darkness from the other side was visible on this
 side.
 A little water shone in the drain.
 Kusum slowly lowered the lid over the lamp.
 The flame grew small.

The wall's shadow deepened.
The yellow light contracted.
Then the lamp went out.
This time the darkness was not unexpected.
Kusum stood still.
She could not see the tap.
Nor the drain.
The line had now become a wall.
But she knew where everything was.
She turned toward her own side.
Her feet found the right path.
Behind her, through the three-brick opening, came the faintest sound of
water.
Kusum did not feel any need to stop it.

Red Dust

The afternoon air was dry.

Nayan was flying a kite on the roof.

The kite was blue.

A narrow yellow strip ran through the middle of the blue paper.

While making it, Nayan had torn the paper twice.

So the third time his mother had held the paper while Nayan applied the glue.

The kite's bamboo bow was slightly crooked.

Nayan said that was why it caught the wind.

His mother said that was why it kept veering to the right.

Both were partly right.

That day the kite really did veer to the right.

Toward the empty field in front of the roof.

The field had not been empty for three days.

People had been coming and going there since morning.

The surveyor had come.

Two bamboo stakes had been driven into the ground.

A long measuring cord had been stretched across the field.

Nayan watched everything from above.

The wind carrying his kite had no concern with that cord.

Once the kite passed over it.

Then dipped low.

Then rose again.

Below, Nayan's father, Nandkishore, shouted—

“Mind the cord!”

At first Nayan thought he meant the kite string.

But his father was looking at the surveyor.

“The line will not pass through here.”

On the other side stood Ramanand Kaka.

He was not really Nayan's uncle.

By village reckoning, he was a kaka.

By the reckoning of the land, there was now nothing certain between him and Nayan's father.

Ramanand said—
“The old boundary ridge was right here.”
Nandkishore said—
“The old ridge was over there.”
The surveyor had his measurement register open.
He read out a few numbers.
The wind does not understand numbers.
The kite veered right again.
Nayan let out a little more string from the reel.
The blue paper flashed.
Then, below, one of the stakes was uprooted.
Nayan did not see who pulled it out.
His eyes were on the kite.
One voice rose.
Then five voices behind it.
The measuring cord went slack.
One man picked it up and began stretching it again.
Another pushed his hand away.
Someone's foot came down on the dry boundary ridge.
The soil was cracked.
Red dust rose.
First ankle-high.
Then knee-high.
Then so high that the feet of the people in the field vanished.
Nayan's kite was coming down.
He pulled the reel toward himself.
The string drew taut.
For a few moments the kite climbed again.
Then the wind changed direction.
The blue paper disappeared behind a curtain of red dust.
Nayan could see only the string.
A thin string.
Glinting in the sunlight.
Then that too disappeared from sight.
The reel suddenly grew light.
Nayan's hand jerked backward on its own.
The string had snapped.
Below, the quarrel had now shed clear words and become only sound.
“Mine—”
“Yours—”
“Measurement—”

“Papers—”

“Boundary—”

The dust swallowed the rest of the words.

His mother came up to the roof.

“Come downstairs.”

Nayan showed her the reel.

The broken end of the string trembled on it.

“The kite fell.”

“Come down first.”

“It went into the field.”

His mother caught him by the arm.

“No one is going to look for a kite in that field now.”

Nayan went downstairs.

Water was drawn from the earthen pot in the courtyard.

His father came home a little later.

The edge of his dhoti was red.

There was soil on his elbow.

His mother asked—

“Are you hurt?”

“No.”

Nayan looked at his father's elbow.

The skin there was scraped.

There was no blood.

Only dust stuck to it.

His father washed his hands.

Red water ran into the drain.

There was no boundary of the field in that water.

His father went inside.

People came into the courtyard.

Then others came.

No one asked Nayan about the kite.

Everyone talked about the field.

“Who pulled out the stake?”

“What did the surveyor say?”

“How many cubits does the paper show?”

“Where did the old mango tree stand?”

Nayan remembered where the old mango tree had stood.

Two years earlier his red kite had got caught in that tree.

The tree was gone now.

Its trunk had been cut down.

Whether the roots still lay beneath the soil, Nayan did not know.

The afternoon began to decline.
The number of people in the courtyard dwindled.
His mother went into the kitchen.
His father was in the front room looking at papers with two men.
Nayan picked up the reel.
Four finger-widths of the broken string protruded from it.
He did not tie a knot in it.
Holding the reel, he slipped out through the back gate.
At the turn in the lane, dust still hung in the air.
The sun looked not yellow but pale red.
On the path leading to the field there were so many footprints that it was impossible to find the old ones.
Nayan walked slowly.
His mother had told him that the kite was not to be searched for in the field now.
She had not said how long “now” lasted.
By his own reckoning, Nayan decided that now was over.
At the edge of the field, the first bamboo stake lay tilted.
The second was missing.
The measuring cord lay on the ground.
It was white.
But half of it had turned red.
Nayan stopped beside the white cord.
From a distance he thought it was his kite string.
He bent down.
The moment he saw its thickness, he knew—it was not his.
It was the surveyor’s cord.
Nayan did not touch it.
Dust rose again.
This time not from a quarrel.
The wind brushed its hand over the dry surface of the field.
A thin red layer lifted and reached as high as Nayan’s shins.
He half closed his eyes.
When he opened them, the edges of everything before him were blurred.
The boundary ridge.
Thorns.
Uprooted grass.
The strap of a torn slipper.
A scrap of yellow cloth.
Nayan ran and picked up the yellow scrap.
It was not the strip from his kite.

It was the edge of someone's gamchha.
He let it fall.
A little farther away, a thin shard of glass glinted in the soil.
Nayan did not touch that either.
He was looking for the kite.
In the dust, things changed their names quickly.
Paper looked like cloth.
String looked like a dry grass root.
A shadow looked like a pit.
Nayan did not trust his eyes completely.
He moved forward watching where he placed his feet.
Where the old boundary ridge had stood, the earth had been dug up.
There were marks where two stakes were to be driven for the new line.
Red dust had collected inside one of the marks.
Nayan tucked the reel under his arm.
He searched the ground for something.
A thin fibre of string.
His kite string was not glass-coated.
His mother had bought ordinary cotton string.
"It won't cut your hands," she had said.
Nayan's string felt soft to the touch.
He picked up the first fibre.
It turned out to be dry grass.
A second.
A spiderweb.
The third time his fingers truly found the string.
He pulled.
The string emerged from beneath the soil.
Nayan's chest lightened.
He began pulling the string slowly.
One handspan.
Two handspans.
Three handspans.
Then the string caught.
Nayan followed it.
He crossed the surveyor's white measuring cord.
The measuring cord lay on the ground.
There was no one there to forbid him.
His kite string passed beneath it.
Without lifting the white cord, Nayan worked his thin string out from under it.

One cord was measuring land.
The other had gone after something that had fallen from the sky.
For a moment both lay between his fingers.
Nayan released the thick cord.
He kept hold of his own thin string.
Ahead was a thorn bush.
Beyond it lay the part of the field that Ramanand called "mine."
Nayan thought of that.
Then he pulled the string.
It was caught in the bush.
He bent down and looked inside.
There was no blue paper.
Only a very small piece of the yellow strip was caught on a thorn.
Nayan took it out.
It was from his kite.
Along one glued edge, the little crease made by his mother's finger pressure was still there.
Nayan closed the scrap in his fist.
The string ran beyond the bush.
He moved on again.
This time the earth beneath his feet was a little softer.
Someone had recently cut through the boundary ridge there.
Nayan slipped.
His hand struck the ground.
His palm turned red.
The reel rolled into the dirt.
He got up and brushed it off.
The red dust on the reel did not come away.
It had worked into the fine grain of the wood.
Nayan caught the string again.
Ahead lay an uprooted bamboo stake.
The string had looped once around its pointed end.
Nayan stopped.
He did not know whether the stake belonged to the surveyor or to the old boundary ridge.
The string did not know either.
It was simply caught.
Nayan began undoing the knot.
The knot was tight.
Soil packed beneath his nails.
He used his teeth.

The knot loosened.
The string came free.
Then a voice came from far away—
“Nayan!”
It was his father’s voice.
Nayan did not answer.
He looked along the string.
It was now leading toward the third edge of the field.
There stood the dry stubble of an old pigeon-pea crop.
The dust thickened again.
His father’s voice came closer.
“Nayan!”
“I’m here!”
“What are you doing?”
“Looking for my kite.”
His father emerged from the dust.
His face looked tired.
The first thing he looked at was Nayan’s hand.
“Cut?”
“No.”
“Come home.”
“I found the string.”
Nayan showed it to him.
His father looked for a moment in the direction it ran.
“Don’t go that way.”
“The kite is over there.”
“The land on that side—”
His father left the sentence unfinished.
Nayan looked at his face.
His father tried again—
“There was a fight there. There are thorns and stones lying around.
Come.”
That was a second sentence.
Nayan obeyed the second sentence.
But he did not let go of the string.
He began winding the thin string back onto the reel.
As he retraced his steps, the string came free from different parts of the
field.
From thorns.
From the boundary ridge.
From beneath the measuring cord.

From the uprooted stake.
His father stood silently watching.
The reel filled.
Then the far end of the string moved.
Near the pigeon-pea stubble, something blue glinted in the soil.
Nayan started to run.
His father caught him by the shoulder.
“Slowly.”
Together they went over.
The kite was no longer whole.
More than half of the blue paper had torn away.
The yellow strip was stuck to the soil.
One thin bamboo spar lay apart from the rest.
The bow had broken in the middle.
Nayan knelt down.
First he picked up the bamboo spar.
Then the blue paper.
There were two blurred footprints on the paper.
Whose feet had made them was impossible to tell.
Nayan blew the dust off with his mouth.
The blue colour appeared again.
But not completely.
The fine fibres of the paper remained red.
From behind him his father asked—
“Where did you find it?”
Nayan turned and looked at him.
It was an ordinary question.
But that day the word “where” was no longer ordinary.
Ramanand called this part of the field his own.
His father said something else.
The surveyor’s measuring cord had drawn a third line.
The kite string had wandered across all of them and reached this place.
Nayan picked up the blue paper.
“At the end of the string.”
His father said nothing.
He looked once at the soil.
Then at Nayan’s reel.
“Come.”
The two walked home.
Behind them the wind rose.
Red dust spread across the field again.

It covered the whiteness of the measuring cord.
The uprooted boundary ridge too.
The footprints too.
But the string wound around Nayan's reel was in his hand.
When they reached home, his mother looked at the kite.
"It won't fly now."
Nayan spread the blue paper on the table.
"It can be made smaller."
His mother examined the broken bow.
"You'll need new bamboo."
"This one spar is still good."
Nayan picked up the kite's straight bamboo spar.
It was stained with red dust.
His mother started to bring a cloth.
Nayan said—
"Leave it."
His mother stopped.
"The dust?"
"Yes."
He turned the bamboo spar in his hand.
Red dust came off on his fingers.
Nothing in that dust showed whose share of the field it belonged to.
Nayan opened the reel.
He laid the two broken ends of the string before him.
For the new kite, the string would have to be knotted together.
He tied the knot.
The knot was very small.
But plainly visible.
From the direction of the field, a sound rose again outside.
This time it was not people.
It was the wind.
Nayan held the bamboo spar to his ear.
There was no sound in it.
He set it down on the table.
Tomorrow the kite would be made again.
Over whose field it would fly was not something he needed to think about yet.

A Three-Minute Procession

At seventeen minutes past three in the afternoon, the mouth of the lane filled with noise for the first time.

Before that, the lane had been going about its ordinary day.

The tak-tak of a sewing machine.

The clang of brass being hammered.

The faint hiss of oil in a wok.

And, every now and then, the thud of the hand-pump handle dropping.

On paper, the lane was called Shivmath Lane.

People called it Carpenter's Lane.

That was because Ramsevak the carpenter had his shop at the entrance, and fine wood dust floated in the air there all day.

At that moment Ramsevak was running a plane over a doorframe.

His granddaughter Jhilmil was gathering the shavings on the ground into a little heap.

"Not there," Ramsevak said. "If the wind rises, it will get into your eyes."

Jhilmil pushed the heap into a corner by the wall.

At the other end of the lane, Sakina Chachi was arranging guavas on her cart.

Ten ripe fruits in a separate pile.

The half-ripe ones apart.

The bruised fruit at the very bottom.

She used to say that a buyer's eyes tasted the colour first; the tongue came later.

At that moment Naseem was coming in with two milk cans tied behind his bicycle.

The lane was so narrow that if two bicycles met head-on, one had to flatten itself against the wall.

Naseem had given up ringing his bell and was advancing with cries of "Move aside, move aside."

Jhilmil laughed when she saw him.

"Has your bell died?"

"The bell may survive; I won't," Naseem replied.

Just then the first beat of a drum came from the main road.

One heavy stroke.
Then two quick ones.
Ramsevak stopped his plane.
Sakina Chachi raised her head.
Naseem stopped his bicycle and listened.
First, a small scrap of red-and-yellow paper blew into the mouth of the lane.

Behind it, two boys appeared running.
“A procession is coming,” one of them said.
The other ran off toward the main road without stopping.
Ramsevak pulled the doorframe inside the shop.
“Jhilmil, come in here.”
Jhilmil left the heap of wood shavings and went inside the shop.
Sakina Chachi gripped the bamboo handle of her cart.
She wanted to pull the cart back, but an empty tin from the sweet shop lay behind it.

Naseem remained trapped in the middle of the lane.

“Should I get out?”

“Not now,” Ramsevak said.

The main road suddenly became sound.

The slogans were no longer words.

They came like a wave.

Struck the walls and poured into the lane.

The first rank passed the entrance.

The flags were above.

Below, only feet could be seen.

Slippers.

Shoes.

Bare heels.

Dust.

At the mouth of the lane, a policeman stood with his arms spread, trying to stop people from spilling inside.

But the pressure from behind moved the bodies in front farther than they meant to go.

A young man was flung out of the line and into the lane.

He did not fall.

He caught the wall and steadied himself.

He had a bundle of leaflets in his hand.

Half the bundle fell to the ground.

Another shove came from behind.

Two women, a boy and an old man were pushed into the lane.

The policeman kept shouting at the entrance.
 His voice drowned in the procession.
 Sakina Chachi tried to turn her cart.
 At that instant a man's foot caught against one of its wheels.
 He saved himself.
 The cart did not.
 The right wheel climbed onto the platform of the hand pump.
 The left wheel sank into a pothole.
 The guavas rolled away all at once.
 Green, yellow, blemished.
 Running in circles through the lane.
 Jhilmil watched from inside the shop.
 Naseem seized the bicycle handlebar to steady it.
 The rear milk can struck the wall.
 Its lid came off.
 A white stream of milk ran over the brick pavement.
 No one noticed it.
 The drum sounded again.
 At that stroke, a guava struck the pump platform and split open.
 Its pink flesh showed.
 Three eighteen.
 There were more people in the lane now.
 Many times more on the main road.
 A little boy slipped out of the crowd and crawled under Sakina Chachi's
 cart.
 He had both hands clamped over his ears.
 "Come out," Sakina Chachi said.
 The boy shook his head.
 "Who are you with?"
 The boy did not answer.
 A black streak of dust crossed his cheek.
 The next section of the procession kept passing the mouth of the lane.
 Some people were singing.
 Some were simply walking.
 Some took each step looking only at the shoulder in front of them.
 Then a long bamboo pole brushed the electric wire strung above the lane.
 The wire did not break.
 But the old bulb beside it swung loose.
 Jhilmil looked up with her mouth open.
 Ramsevak pulled her back.
 "Inside."

A leaflet flew into the shop.
 Jhilmil stopped it with her foot.
 It had large letters on it, but mud from a shoe had smeared the middle.
 She could not read it.
 Without picking it up, Ramsevak said, "Leave it for now."
 Three nineteen.
 The last flag of the procession passed the mouth of the lane.
 The drumbeats turned right and began to recede.
 The slogans withdrew first from the walls.
 Then from the air.
 Then from the ears.
 Dust remained on the main road.
 In the lane there were five extra people, twelve fewer guavas, half a can less
 milk, and one child still under a cart.
 The three minutes were over.
 No clock announced it.
 Ramsevak was the first to come outside.
 He did not go toward the mouth of the lane.
 First he looked at the swinging bulb.
 Then at the hand-pump platform.
 The cart wheel was still jammed there at an angle.
 "Lift it," he said to Naseem.
 Each of them took one corner of the cart.
 Sakina Chachi pulled the handle.
 The wheel came free of the pothole.
 With it, one brick of the platform came loose.
 A thin stream of water sprang out from beneath the brick.
 "Oh, God," Sakina Chachi said.
 Naseem bent to look.
 "The joint of the pump has shifted."
 The water first mixed with the milk.
 The white colour thinned across the ground.
 Then dust mixed into it.
 The colour turned muddy.
 Sakina Chachi began gathering the guavas.
 Three had been crushed.
 Two were stuck in the drain.
 One had fallen into Ramsevak's wood shavings.
 Jhilmil came out of the shop.
 She picked up a guava from the drain.
 "Not that one," Sakina Chachi said. "Leave it."

Jhilmil put the guava down again beside the drain.
Then the boy under the cart stirred.
“Arre,” Sakina Chachi said, bending down, “are you still in there?”
The boy slowly crawled out.
He looked seven or eight years old.
One button was missing from his kurta.
There was no slipper on his left foot.
“What’s your name?” Ramsevak asked.
The boy was silent.
“Where is your home?”
Silence.
As Naseem straightened the milk can, he said, “He’s frightened.”
Sakina Chachi tried to wipe the boy’s face with her scarf.
He drew back.
“All right, I won’t touch you,” she said.
People now began emerging at the mouth of the lane.
Some talking about what they had seen of the procession.
Some about being shoved.
Some repeating a slogan.
Ramsevak heard them, but his eyes remained on the stream of water.
“First we have to stop the water.”
He brought two thin wooden wedges from his shop.
Naseem brought an old piece of cloth.
Together they began stuffing them into the crack in the platform.
The water slowed, but did not stop.
The boy stood by the wall watching everything.
Jhilmil looked at his bare foot.
“Your slipper?”
The boy looked toward the main road.
“Out there?”
The boy nodded.
Jhilmil went as far as the mouth of the lane.
Ramsevak called out, “Don’t go far.”
On the main road lay paper, dust, a broken flower garland and one black slipper.
The slipper was in the middle of the road.
Two rickshaws passed beside it.
Jhilmil was about to step down.
Ramsevak called again, “Wait.”
Naseem left his bicycle and went onto the road.
He picked up the slipper and brought it back.

He put it on the boy's left foot.
 It was not his.
 The heel stuck out by two fingers' breadth.
 The boy spoke for the first time.
 "Mine was blue."
 Sakina Chachi did not laugh.
 "This must belong to someone else."
 Naseem stood holding the slipper.
 "Keep it?"
 Ramsevak said, "Stand it by the entrance. Whoever owns it may see it."
 Naseem propped the slipper against the wall.
 The water grew stronger again.
 The wooden wedge had shifted.
 Ramsevak did not curse.
 He pushed the wedge back into place.
 Sakina Chachi took an empty basket from her cart and set it in front of
 the stream.
 "At least it won't fill the drain."
 The basket could not hold water.
 Everyone laughed.
 Sakina Chachi laughed too.
 "My brains work only as far as guavas," she said.
 A small smile appeared on the boy's face.
 "Name?" Jhilmil asked again.
 "Chhotu."
 "Home?"
 "Behind the big mosque."
 Sakina Chachi said, "That's half a mile from here."
 "Who did you come to the procession with?"
 Chhotu lowered his eyes.
 "Abba sells roasted gram by the road. I was near his cart."
 "You weren't in the procession?"
 "No."
 "Then?"
 "People ran. I ran too."
 That was all he said.
 For him, the story of those three minutes was only that much.
 For Ramsevak, it was the broken pump joint.
 For Naseem, half a can of milk.
 For Sakina Chachi, the crushed guavas.
 For Jhilmil, the leaflet smeared with mud.

The procession had already gone far down the main road.

But the lane had begun its own accounting.

Naseem measured the milk.

"Four litres gone."

He scratched his head.

"Who do I tell?"

Sakina Chachi cut open one of the crushed guavas and looked inside.

"If we argue about it, the milk will only turn sourer."

Naseem did not laugh.

He had taken the milk on credit.

He had to settle the account that evening.

Ramsevak knew this.

He went into his shop and brought out some money from an old brass box.

Naseem drew his hand back.

"No."

"Take it as a loan."

"The milk was mine."

"The pump joint broke in front of my shop."

"Did you bring out the procession?"

Ramsevak smiled for the first time.

"No."

"Then keep your money."

They left the matter there.

Jhilmil looked at Sakina Chachi, asking with her eyes for a guava for Chhotu.

Sakina Chachi picked one from the half-ripe pile, not the ripe one.

Then she thought for a moment and exchanged it for a ripe guava.

"Eat."

Chhotu took the guava but did not bite into it.

"For Abba."

Sakina Chachi gave him another.

"This one's yours."

This time he bit into it.

A woman came running to the mouth of the lane.

She was carrying a child's blue slipper.

"Whose is this?"

Chhotu dropped the guava and stepped forward.

"Mine!"

The slipper really was his.

The woman said, "It was lying by the side of the road. I picked it up thinking it was my child's. He has both of his on."

She handed the slipper to Chhotu.

Naseem showed her the black slipper standing by the wall.

"Is this yours?"

The woman looked at the slipper and laughed.

"My foot isn't that big."

She went away.

The black slipper remained where it was.

Chhotu put on his blue slipper.

Then he remembered his worry about Abba again.

"I should go."

"Not alone," Sakina Chachi said.

"I'll take him," Naseem said.

His bicycle was still fit to ride.

There was less milk, but the wheels were sound.

Chhotu sat on the rear carrier.

The cans swung on either side.

Jhilmil waved.

Naseem rode out of the lane.

Normal traffic was now returning to the main road.

Two handcarts, three bicycles, one bullock cart.

The dust still had not settled.

Ramsevak remained bent over the pump joint.

Sakina Chachi began arranging the fruit again.

The crushed fruit apart.

The dusty fruit apart.

The surviving ripe guavas on top.

Jhilmil picked up the leaflet that had blown into the shop.

The mud had begun to dry.

Half the large lettering could now be read.

She went to Ramsevak.

"Baba, what does this say?"

Ramsevak wiped his hands and looked at the paper.

Some of the words had been erased.

What remained did not make a complete sentence.

"What will you do with half a message?"

"Half a message is still a message."

Ramsevak handed the paper back to her.

"You read it."

Jhilmil began joining the letters together.

Then an old voice came from farther inside the lane—

“Why has the water stopped?”

Ramsevak answered, “It hasn’t stopped; the pipe has burst.”

“When?”

Ramsevak looked at his watch.

Three twenty-seven.

He thought for a few moments.

“Ten minutes ago.”

Jhilmil immediately said, “In three minutes.”

“What?”

“The procession passed in three minutes. We’ve spent the other seven trying to fix things.”

Ramsevak looked at her.

Then at the pump joint.

“Fixed? Where is it fixed yet?”

By evening the joint had been replaced.

The municipal plumber arrived at five.

He removed the old iron ring and fitted a new rubber one.

The work took twelve minutes.

The labour charge was quoted for fifteen.

Sakina Chachi took seven crushed guavas home.

They would become chutney that night.

After taking Chhotu to his Abba, Naseem went to settle the milk account.

The four-litre shortage was entered in his ledger.

The stain of milk, water and dust in front of Ramsevak’s shop remained until evening.

Jhilmil wanted to throw water over it.

Ramsevak stopped her.

“Not now. Let it dry.”

“The stain will remain.”

“We’ll scrub it tomorrow.”

The black slipper stood at the mouth of the lane until evening.

People came and went.

Twice a dog sniffed it.

One child tried it on, looked at his foot, and left it again.

As darkness fell, Ramsevak picked it up and placed it beside the doorframe.

“Why?” Jhilmil asked.

“Someone may come looking for it tomorrow.”

“And if no one comes?”

“Then until the day after.”

“And then?”

Ramsevak did not answer.

Night settled over the main road.

No one in the lane knew how far the procession had gone.

One leaflet lay pressed between the pages of Jhilmil's notebook.

The black slipper rested by the doorframe.

A guava seed was caught in the heap of wood shavings.

The pump joint was new, but the old bricks around it were still wet.

The three minutes had passed on the city's clock.

In the lane, those three minutes were still lodged in separate things.

The Torn Drum

At Sonbarsa village's annual spring festival, the drum sounded first; the song rose afterward.

No one knew exactly why the order was so.

The elders said that when the steps of the pond were built, the hand that first cut the earth and the hand that first struck the drum had eaten at the same feast that evening.

The young men took the tale for an amusement of old people.

Yet on the morning of the festival, before the sun rose, every ear waited for the drum's first beat.

This year the drum hung in the veranda of Ganeshi Paswan's house.

Ganeshi was past seventy, but when he tightened a hide his fingers were still as nimble as a young man's.

His son Mohan had been working with a band in Darbhanga for three years.

He had returned to the village two days earlier for the festival.

The drum lay overturned in the middle of the veranda.

The hide on one side was dark brown, on the other a pale yellow.

Five old smears of vermilion marked the wooden shell between them.

Pulling at the rope, Mohan said, "Babu, we should replace the drum this time."

Ganeshi ran his fingers over the hide.

"Why?"

"Look, it has dried along the edge. The sound has grown heavy too."

"Is a heavy sound a bad sound?"

"Not bad, but there will be loudspeakers on the stage."

Ganeshi looked at him.

"Will the microphone ask the drum its age?"

Mohan did not laugh.

"I'm saying, what if it tears?"

"If it tears, it tears. It will give its voice first."

Just then two bicycle bells sounded from the square.

On the first bicycle was Ramakant Jha, a member of the panchayat.

On the second was Chandan, son of Bisesar Yadav.

Both had come to the veranda over the same matter, though not in the same language.

Ramakant said that this year the procession should set out first from the North Hamlet.

Chandan said that the South Hamlet had played first the previous year, so this time it was their turn.

Ganeshi let go of the rope.

“Why are you asking me where the drum will be played?”

Ramakant said, “The drum is at your house.”

“The drum belongs to the village.”

Chandan immediately said, “Then the village will decide.”

Ganeshi smiled.

“Who is the village?”

The veranda fell silent for a moment.

Ramakant hitched his gamchha higher on his shoulder.

“It will be settled at the meeting.”

“Settle it. The drum will stay here until the player comes.”

Chandan looked toward Mohan.

“The player is right here.”

Mohan kept tightening the rope.

“I’ll play the instrument. I won’t lead the procession.”

Chandan seemed about to say something, but Ramakant turned his bicycle around.

“We’ll see in the evening.”

By noon the color of the festival had spread through the village.

Yellow pennants were tied along the pond steps.

The children’s drawings were hung in the school courtyard.

In front of the shops were arranged jaggery, sugar drops, flattened rice, toys, and colored whistles.

An old potter who had come to sell clay horses kept shaking the dust from his sheet.

Three loudspeakers were tied behind the stage.

The largest loudspeaker pointed exactly toward the direction from which the drum procession was to arrive.

A meeting was held after noon.

The meeting was on the school veranda, but more people stood in the courtyard than under the veranda.

The program sheet said—procession at four, group song at five, play at seven.

It did not say where the procession would begin.

Because that one line had not been written, all the other lines became useless.

The North Hamlet said—the main temple is on our side, so the beginning should be there.

The South Hamlet said—the old drum has always gone to the ghat by our road, so the tradition should not be changed.

The Middle Hamlet said—because of this quarrel, start directly from the pond.

Then the question arose—who would carry the drum to the pond?

One voice grew louder.

Someone remembered an old dispute at a wedding.

Someone the panchayat election five years earlier.

Someone a field boundary.

Someone the seating line at a wedding procession.

Slowly, the matter of the festival became a bundle of all those matters that had no direct connection with the festival.

Mohan stood by a veranda pillar and listened.

Ganeshi had not come.

His name, however, was called three times.

Mohan was asked, “What does your father say?”

Mohan replied, “He looks at the drumskin, not at hamlets.”

Some people laughed.

Some took the laughter as a taunt.

The matter worsened again.

At last the mukhiya announced that the drum would be played from the school gate to the pond, and the procession from every hamlet would join there together.

The decision was simple on paper.

Not on the village road.

Fifteen minutes before four, Ganeshi and Mohan reached the school with the drum.

The drum was on Mohan’s shoulder.

Ganeshi carried two beaters.

One thick, one thin.

Two groups were already standing near the school gate.

The North Hamlet with its young men wearing green gamchhas.

The South Hamlet with yellow strips edged in red.

None of those colors had any old meaning.

Two days earlier, whatever cloth had been cheapest in the market had become their markers.

But once a color was tied on the head of a group, meaning arose by itself.

Mohan lowered the drum just inside the gate.

Ganeshi placed his palm on the hide and listened.

"Loosen it."

"Now?" Mohan asked.

"It has tightened in the sun."

Mohan began loosening the knot.

Just then Chandan arrived.

"It's time. Let our people play first."

From behind, Ramakant said, "The decision has been made. Everyone will go together."

"Everyone will go together, but who will give the first beat?"

It was a small question, but people immediately formed a circle around it.

Ganeshi took the rope from Mohan's hand.

"The drum will give the first beat."

Chandan said, "Will the drum play itself?"

"When people talk too much in front of a drum, the drum keeps quiet."

This time no one laughed.

The announcer's voice burst from the loudspeaker—"All guests, please take your respective places."

No one's place was fixed.

The bamboo barrier at the gate was opened halfway.

People began pushing in from two directions.

One young man caught the left strap of the drum and said, "Turn it this way."

Another pulled the right strap. "This line will go first."

Mohan pushed into the middle.

"Let go. The hide is tightening."

No one listened to him.

Two or four hands fell on the rope.

For a moment the drum tilted in the air.

Ganeshi slammed the thick beater on the ground.

"Let go!"

His voice was so hard that the two young men in front removed their hands.

But the pressure from behind did not stop.

Mohan pulled the drum against his chest.

The rope tightened again.

Along the rim of the hide, a thin line that had already dried suddenly turned white.

A sound came—not a beat, not a blast.

Only a coarse "crack," like cloth tearing.

Every hand stopped.

The hide on the right side of the drum had split for nearly two spans from the edge.

Through the torn opening, the dark wood inside was visible.

Mohan's mouth stayed open.

Ganeshi put the beater down.

He cursed no one.

He named no one.

He merely ran a finger along the torn edge of the hide.

The announcer's voice was still coming from the loudspeaker—"The procession will begin shortly."

At the head of the procession, the drum was silent.

The first accusation came from Chandan's side.

"It was pulled from that side."

Ramakant immediately said, "Everyone saw it. Your people grabbed it first."

Within ten seconds the torn hide became evidence.

Within twenty seconds, a side.

Within half a minute, guilt.

Someone said the split had already been there.

Someone said a deliberately weak hide had been left on the drum.

Someone said the proposal to replace the drum this year had been suppressed.

Mohan listened.

He knew that in the morning he himself had said to Babu, "What if it tears?"

But saying that now would clarify nothing.

It would only give birth to another suspicion.

Ganeshi lifted the drum.

"Take it home."

Chandan blocked the way.

"What about the procession now?"

Ganeshi looked at him.

"Do you want a procession or a sound?"

"Both."

"With this drum, neither now."

Ramakant looked toward the mukhiya.

The mukhiya signaled to the people on the stage to wait five minutes.

Saying five minutes was easy.

In a festival crowd, if five minutes remain empty, rumor fills them.

Someone said a fight had broken out.

Someone said the drum had been smashed.
Someone said Ganeshi had refused to play.
The woman selling sweets by the pond heard that two hamlets had clashed.

She made her child sit behind the stall.
The old toy seller moved his clay horses farther inside.
Three policemen set out from the square toward the school.
The sky was clear, but suspicion settled over the festival like a cloud.
Ganeshi carried the drum beneath the neem tree behind the school.
Mohan went with him.
Twelve-year-old Binod came running behind them.
Binod was not Ganeshi's grandson.
He was the grandson of Ramudit, a craftsman from the North Hamlet, and he often came to Ganeshi's house to watch drums being made.

He looked at the torn hide.
"Baba, can it be joined?"
Ganeshi said, "The hide can be stitched together. The sound will not be as it was."

"Today?"
"There isn't time today."
Mohan was silent.
Ganeshi asked him, "Where are the other instruments?"
"The brass band will arrive at five."
"The kettledrum?"
"There is a small kettledrum at the temple."
"Cymbals?"
"Plenty."
"Then why has the procession stopped?"
Mohan looked at his father's face.
"Everyone wants the drum."
"Everyone does not want the drum. Everyone wants the first beat to be theirs."

Binod plucked a neem leaf and began crushing it in his hand.
Raised voices rose again from the school gate.
Ganeshi shook his head.
"Go tell the mukhiya—take out the procession without the drum."
Mohan remained standing.
"And you?"
"I'll remove the hide."
"Now?"
"Looking at a broken thing does not mend it."

Mohan walked toward the gate.
 Binod stayed behind.
 Ganeshi began undoing the knots.
 Slowly the torn hide loosened from the mouth of the wooden shell.
 In the shade of the neem, the drum without its hide looked like a house
 with one wall removed.
 There were old scratches inside on the sal wood.
 At one place, 1987 had been written in charcoal.
 At another, only the letter "M."
 Binod asked, "Who wrote this?"
 "Who knows."
 "Not you?"
 "The drum was made before I was born."
 "Then is it the village's drum?"
 "It stays in my house, so people call it my drum."
 Binod was holding the torn hide.
 The tear had begun exactly where the pressure of the strap fell hardest.
 He measured it with his finger.
 "Did it tear because it was pulled from both sides?"
 Ganeshi did not answer.
 "Baba?"
 "The hide has already said it."
 "What?"
 "That it could not bear so much pulling."
 At the school gate, Mohan delivered Ganeshi's message to the mukhiya.
 At first the mukhiya was not ready to agree.
 "A procession without a drum? What will people say?"
 Mohan said, "People are already saying plenty."
 Chandan cut in, "Bring the temple kettledrum."
 Ramakant said, "The kettledrum is in that hamlet. Then it becomes the
 same issue again."
 Mohan's patience was wearing out.
 "Then clap your hands."
 "What?"
 "Everyone has their own hands. No hamlet's name is written on a clap."
 Some people laughed again at that.
 But this time the laughter was light.
 Chandan said, "Are you joking?"
 Mohan replied, "No. Take out the procession. The band will arrive at
 five."
 The mukhiya looked at his watch.

Four twenty-four.
The festival was running twenty-three minutes late.
The children on the stage were waiting.
The women arranging lamps by the pond kept asking where the crowd was.

At last the gate opened.
The procession set out without the drum.
For the first twenty steps there was such silence that everyone could hear the sound of their own slippers.

Then the small schoolchildren began clapping.

There was no rhythm.

No even tempo.

One child clapped fast, another late, a third stopped midway.

But the walking continued.

Behind them, someone found a pair of cymbals.

Someone else a brass plate.

An old woman began striking the knob of her walking stick on the ground in rhythm.

The sound was not beautiful.

Nor was it orderly.

But the procession moved.

Chandan and Ramakant walked on opposite edges.

Neither spoke to the other.

When the procession reached the pond, the announcer on the stage called the incident a "technical difficulty."

Hearing the phrase, Mohan smiled from a distance.

The drumskin had torn, but over the loudspeaker its name became "technical difficulty."

At five in the evening the brass band arrived.

The festival filled with noise again.

Prizes were given for the children's drawings.

The group song took place.

The play too began only half an hour behind schedule.

Many visitors from outside never knew how many things had already torn inside the village that afternoon.

But the villagers' eyes kept returning to Ganeshi's empty place.

Ganeshi did not return to the festival.

When Mohan reached home at night, a lantern was burning in the veranda.

The wooden body of the drum lay on the ground.

The torn hide had been dampened with water and pressed between cloths.

Ganeshi was spinning thread.
 Mohan sat down.
 "Will we buy a new hide?"
 "We will."
 "Will we throw the old one away?"
 Ganeshi did not lift his head.
 "What is the hurry to throw it away?"
 Mohan was silent.
 After a while he said, "What happened today..."
 Ganeshi broke the thread and joined it again.
 "What happened?"
 "The drum tore in front of everyone."
 "The drum has torn at home before too."
 "But not like this."
 "How, then?"
 Mohan searched for an answer.
 "It was pulled from both sides."
 For the first time Ganeshi looked at him.
 "Then remember that."
 "Whom should I tell?"
 "No one. Yourself."
 At nine that night Chandan came.
 He had brought a coil of new rope.
 "Kaka, keep this."
 Ganeshi asked, "Why?"
 "The old rope tightened too much."
 Mohan looked at him.
 Chandan averted his eyes.
 "It was our people's fault..."
 Ganeshi stopped him.
 "Leave the rope."
 Chandan left it and went away.
 Half an hour later Ramakant came.
 He carried not goatskin but thick thread bought from the market.
 "It may be useful for the stitching."
 Ganeshi took the thread in his hand.
 "It will be useful."
 Ramakant stood there for a while.
 "Today... the children clapped well."
 "Yes."
 "Will the drum be repaired?"

Ganeshi looked at the torn hide.

"This hide will never be fit to play again."

Ramakant's face fell.

"Then?"

"A new hide will be fitted."

"The old one?"

"We'll keep it."

Ramakant left.

Mohan laughed softly.

"They both came at different times."

Ganeshi said, "If they had come together, the argument would have begun again."

The next morning Binod came again.

He kept bringing the two edges of the torn hide together and looking at them.

"Stitch it, Baba."

"It won't play."

"Not for playing."

"Then?"

Binod had his answer ready.

"We'll hang it in the school. People will see it."

Ganeshi placed a hand on his head.

"People will see it, but what will they understand?"

"That the drum had torn."

"Only that?"

Binod slipped a finger into the torn part and touched the wood inside.

"That it had been pulled too much."

Ganeshi took out thread and needle.

The torn hide began to be stitched.

The seam would not run straight.

The two edges of the damp hide sometimes met, sometimes one rode over the other.

Ganeshi did not force them into perfect alignment.

"The scar will stay crooked," Binod said.

"Let it."

By noon the torn hide had once again been bound into a round shape, but not on the drum.

Ganeshi made a frame for it from two thin strips of bamboo.

The white stitching in the middle was clearly visible.

In the evening Mohan took it to the school.

At first the headmaster hesitated.

“Why should we hang this torn hide?”

Mohan said, “Beside the children’s drawings.”

“What name should we write?”

Mohan said nothing.

Binod, who had gone with him, spoke up. “Don’t write a name.”

The headmaster laughed.

“An exhibit without a name?”

“Everyone knows the drum.”

In the end the hide was hung on the school veranda.

There was no label beneath it.

No culprit’s name.

No hamlet.

Only the seam through the middle.

For the next few days children looked at it and asked questions.

Some were told—it tore at the festival.

Some—the rope had tightened.

Some—too many hands had grabbed it at once.

Some—the hide was old.

No single answer remained fixed.

A month later the drum, fitted with a new hide, sounded again.

The first beat was given not by Ganeshi but by Mohan.

The place was the school courtyard.

There was no procession.

It was the children’s sports day.

The beat was deep and clear.

The old hide hanging on the veranda moved gently in the breeze.

The sound of the new drum reached as far as its seam.

The seam gave no answer.

But whenever a beat fell very hard, the white thread tightened for a moment.

In that tension, what returned was not the whole uproar of the day the drum tore, only one rough sound.

A sound that was not a beat.

After which, for the first time, the village had understood that before a drumskin tears, it often remains silently stretched for a long while.

The Night Truck

By the time evening settled, the rain had thickened again.

Water lay on both sides of the main road; only a raised strip in the middle, black as a ribbon, remained above it.

Along that strip the relief truck moved slowly forward.

Two yellow lamps blinked at the front of the truck; behind them, under a tarpaulin, were sacks, medicines, candles, salt, and dry flattened rice.

Seven people sat on top of the sacks.

They were all looking at the same flood, but the flood inside each of them was different.

The driver, Saroj, held the steering wheel in a rigid grip.

He was not watching the road so much as the earth beneath it.

Earlier in the day, a young man from the panchayat had said that one edge of the road near the Barhampur bend had been eaten away.

No one knew exactly how deep the washout was.

Saroj feared that if the truck's front wheel caught the soft edge even once, the whole weight of the vehicle might tilt toward the water.

He had not told the people sitting behind him this.

At the front of the group in the back sat Dhanouti Kaki.

A small cloth bundle rested in her lap.

The bundle held no clothes: only three papers, an old brass key, and a skein of red thread.

Her fear was for her house.

The house stood half-submerged, but inside the courtyard her old she-goat had been left tied to a bamboo peg.

There had been no time to untie the goat.

The boat for the camp had already pushed off, and all she had managed to take was the key.

After distributing relief, the truck would drop her at the bend from which her hamlet lay half a kos away.

Everyone had told her, "Do not go home now."

Dhanouti Kaki had given no answer.

Only the goat's thin bleating remained lodged in her ears.

Beside her sat seventeen-year-old Ranjana.

Ranjana held a tin box in her hands.

There were no books inside it, only four surviving pages from water-soaked notebooks.

The roof of the school had blown away.

No one knew when her examination would now be held.

But Ranjana was not afraid about the examination.

She was afraid the ink would spread before the pages could dry.

On those pages were two mathematical formulae written in the hand of her dead father.

Her father had died the previous year.

Ranjana was not saving pages; she was saving his handwriting.

Again and again she touched the lid of the box, then drew her hand away.

If she opened it, splashes of water might get inside.

If she did not, the dampness trapped within would increase.

Her whole night was caught between those two small fears.

Behind Ranjana sat Mahendra.

He was a volunteer with the relief team.

A cloth pouch hung from his neck; inside it was a list of names.

The list recorded three hamlets, fifty-seven families, and the distribution account.

Mahendra was not afraid of the sacks getting wet.

He was afraid the numbers would go wrong.

If one sack went missing, who would answer for it?

If one family was entered twice, who would know?

If one name was left out, people might remain hungry until the next consignment.

He held the list tight against his chest, as though it were not paper but the breath of all those families kept inside the pouch.

Opposite Mahendra sat Navkeen.

He was a labourer who had returned from the city.

Inside his kurta, wrapped in plastic, were five thousand three hundred rupees.

They were his savings from three months.

He had told no one at the camp.

He feared suspicion more than theft.

If anyone's money disappeared, the first glance would fall on Navkeen, the man returned from elsewhere—this was the assumption lodged inside him.

So he did not keep touching his money.

If he reached for it, people would notice.

If he did not, he could not trust that it was still there.

He sat upright, as though guarding the pocket beneath his clothes were his only duty.

In the right-hand corner of the truck sat Phoolo Devi.

Four-year-old Sonu slept in her lap.

Sonu's forehead was hot.

At the medicine-distribution point in the camp she had been given two packets of medicine.

She had been told, "If his fever rises at night, give him one packet with water."

Phoolo Devi's fear was where she would find water.

There was water on every side, but none to drink.

Sonu had drunk half the water in her lota that evening.

Only two mouthfuls remained.

She had wrapped the lota in cloth and placed it between her feet.

To her, those two mouthfuls were worth more than all the sacks, tins, and lists in the truck.

At the very back sat old Budhan Mallah.

Budhan's hands were empty.

His fear too looked empty.

He was a boatman, but in this flood his boat had been swept away.

People asked him about the route, the current, the depth.

He answered every question.

But inside, he was afraid of the question no one asked: what is a boatman without a boat?

The truck kept jolting forward.

Rain rattled against the tarpaulin.

At times the sound of the drops grew so dense that it drowned the growl of the engine.

Beside the road appeared the crown of the first submerged mango tree.

Seeing it, Budhan said, "The current is strong on the left here."

Saroj looked at his face in the mirror.

"But the road is straight."

"On the surface."

At that one phrase, Saroj's hands tightened further.

The truck slowed.

Mahendra looked at his watch.

"We were supposed to reach Barhampur in half an hour."

Saroj replied, "The road on a clock is always dry."

No one laughed.

Ahead, two bamboo poles had been planted on either side of the road.

Someone had put them there during the day as a warning.

One of the poles now leaned halfway into the water.
 Saroj pressed the brake.
 The truck stopped.
 As it halted, everyone sitting in the back lurched forward once.
 Sonu woke and began to cry.
 Phoolo Devi touched his forehead.
 "He's hot," Ranjana said softly.
 Phoolo Devi said nothing.
 Saroj climbed down.
 The water reached his knees.
 He went to the bamboo pole and began feeling for the road's edge with his foot.
 At one spot, as soon as he pressed the ground, his leg sank above the knee.
 He stepped back at once.
 The people in the truck could see only his shoulder.
 Saroj climbed back up.
 "The edge ahead has been washed away."
 "How much?" Mahendra asked.
 "Too much for the truck."
 "Can we turn back?"
 Saroj looked behind them.
 Five kos back, the water had begun rising over the small bridge as well.
 "There's no certainty in turning back either."
 The rain grew harder again.
 From one corner of the tarpaulin, water began falling in a stream.
 Mahendra stood at once and pulled the rope.
 With the tug, the cloth pouch around his neck slipped free.
 It fell onto the floor of the truck.
 Navkeen snatched it up immediately.
 For one moment their eyes met.
 Mahendra took the pouch, but the word of thanks reached his lips and stopped.
 Navkeen saw that halted word.
 He said nothing.
 They began discussing how to lighten the truck.
 Saroj said, "If we unload twenty or twenty-five sacks here, the wheels will carry less weight."
 "Unload them here?" Mahendra burst out. "The water is rising."
 "We'll spread a tarpaulin."
 "It's relief rice."
 "If the truck overturns, where will the rice go then?"

This time Mahendra fell silent.

Everyone's fear was colliding with everyone else's.

Dhanouti Kaki felt that if the delay grew, the goat's rope would pull tight in the rising water.

Ranjana felt there was no air inside the tin box.

As she kept touching Sonu's forehead, Phoolo Devi counted her two mouthfuls of water.

Navkeen felt that as the darkness deepened, people's eyes would linger more on small things.

Mahendra felt that once the sacks came down, his accounting would scatter.

Saroj felt that if they delayed the decision, the road would grow softer still.

Budhan listened only to the sound of the water.

"First straighten the truck," he said.

Saroj looked at him.

"It is straight."

"No. The rear right wheel is on soft ground."

Every eye dropped.

The wheel had indeed sunk half an inch farther than the other.

Saroj did not curse; he simply started the engine at once.

The truck was taken one cubit backward.

For that one cubit, everyone held their breath.

The wheel came back onto firm ground.

Budhan climbed down, took a bamboo pole, and began sounding the water ahead.

"Not here," he said at one point.

"Two cubits to the left."

"There's more water on the left," Saroj said.

"More water, firmer ground."

Saroj looked at Budhan's face for a while after hearing this.

In the boatless boatman's voice lived the old assurance of someone who knew a current.

Twenty sacks were unloaded.

Everyone climbed down and went to work.

Dhanouti Kaki too shifted a small sack of salt.

Ranjana put her tin box beneath the tarpaulin and gripped a sack with both hands.

Navkeen unloaded the heaviest sacks of rice.

Mahendra kept counting—one, two, three...

When Navkeen set down the fourteenth sack, Mahendra counted again.

"Thirteen."

"Fourteen," Navkeen said.

Mahendra frowned.

Without speaking, Navkeen pointed toward the sacks.

Two had been placed one behind the other so that they looked like one.

Mahendra counted again.

"Fourteen."

With that single word, his gaze on Navkeen changed for the first time.

As the nineteenth sack was being unloaded, Phoolo Devi's lota rolled away.

Ranjana lunged and caught it.

The lota was in her hands before the lid could come off.

Phoolo Devi's face had gone completely pale.

"Is the water still there?"

Ranjana righted the lota and listened.

A faint slosh sounded inside.

"It's there."

At that sound Phoolo Devi let out a breath as if someone had risen above the surface of the water.

The twentieth sack came down.

The tarpaulin was tied tightly over them.

Saroj told everyone to climb back onto the truck.

Budhan did not get on.

"I'll walk ahead."

"Why?"

"I'll see where the wheels should go."

Saroj wanted to refuse, but Budhan was already in the water.

Probing the ground with the bamboo pole, he moved ahead.

The truck began crawling behind him.

The first ten cubits passed easily.

On the eleventh, the right wheel slipped.

Several voices rose together from the back.

Saroj turned the steering wheel left, but did not touch the brake.

Budhan raised a hand and shouted, "Keep moving—don't stop!"

The truck tilted slightly.

Dhanouti Kaki seized the rope around the sacks.

Ranjana clutched her tin box to her chest.

Mahendra's pouch pressed against his stomach.

Navkeen grabbed not his own pocket, but Sonu's shoulder.

Phoolo Devi clenched the lota between her teeth and wrapped both arms around Sonu.

Two moments later, the wheel climbed back onto hard ground.
 The truck straightened.
 No cheer rose from anyone.
 Only the growl of the engine sounded normal again.
 Budhan did not turn back to smile.
 He drove the bamboo pole into the water again.
 It took five minutes to cross the washed-out stretch.
 To everyone, those five minutes felt enormous.
 Once across, Saroj stopped the truck.
 Budhan climbed back aboard.
 His dhoti was wet up to his thighs.
 Dhanouti Kaki opened her bundle and tore off a piece of red thread.
 She tied it to the top of Budhan's bamboo pole.
 "Why?" Budhan asked.
 "So the next truck coming this way can see it from a distance."
 The red thread darkened in the rain until it looked nearly black, but it kept fluttering.
 From there to Barhampur hamlet, the road was firm.
 The silence inside the truck slowly loosened.
 Mahendra took out his list and checked the count again.
 This time Navkeen himself helped count the sacks.
 Phoolo Devi found time to give Sonu his medicine.
 Ranjana opened the tin box for a moment to let air in.
 The ink had not spread.
 Dhanouti Kaki kept looking through the darkness toward her hamlet.
 When they reached Barhampur, the first sack of relief supplies was unloaded.
 People came running.
 Some needed flattened rice, some salt, some candles.
 Mahendra read out the names.
 This time his voice was not as hard as before.
 Navkeen kept unloading sacks.
 No one discovered the money hidden inside his kurta.
 Phoolo Devi's lota became empty, but Sonu's fever came down a little.
 Ranjana's tin box closed again, but her fear did not close as tightly.
 When they reached the bend where Dhanouti Kaki was to get down, Saroj said, "Don't go alone now."
 Kaki replied, "Where am I alone?"
 She looked at Budhan.
 Budhan lifted his bamboo pole.
 "I'll see her to the hamlet."

The two walked away along the narrow path through the water.

The truck moved forward again.

Behind them, the twenty sacks they had unloaded still lay under the tarpaulin on this side of the washout.

Saroj was already worrying about collecting them on the next trip.

On his list, Mahendra made a small mark beside those twenty sacks.

"What is that?" Ranjana asked.

"Relief supplies lying on the road for now."

"No name?"

Mahendra thought for a moment.

"I'll write the name later."

The truck's yellow lamps moved forward, drawing two long, trembling lines on the water.

All night the flood looked like one colour.

But the people sitting on the truck now understood that fear did not have a single colour.

For one person, fear was a goat's rope.

For another, wet ink.

For another, a name left out of a list.

For another, wages wrapped inside clothing.

For another, two mouthfuls of water.

For another, an identity without a boat.

And for Saroj, that stretch of road which was a road on the surface, but not underneath.

The truck kept moving.

Behind them at the washout, the red thread could no longer be seen in the darkness.

Even so, the rain-wind kept it fluttering.

It was no flag.

Only a small marker—on a road at night where the fears were different, but every wheel was searching for the same firm ground.

Flowers on Ash

Three days after the fire, in the last week of Phagun, that courtyard in Dharampur looked as though some black hand had erased all its colours in a single night.

The part of the wall that remained was streaked black with smoke. The bamboo screen had crumbled into ash. Half the thatched roof had fallen in, and in the middle of the courtyard the red bricks of the earthen hearth lay half-buried in soot.

The owner of the house, Rambabu Sah, stayed awake night after night. How the fire had started was a question whose answer changed every day. Some said a spark from the hearth, some dry leaves, some a fault in the old wiring.

Rambabu himself could settle on no answer. For him, the question larger than the cause was what remained now.

What remained was the rear wall of one room, an old iron chest, two brass plates, and a red earthen flowerpot belonging to his seven-year-old grandson Neeraj, half its rim broken away.

On the night of the fire Neeraj had been at a neighbour's house with his mother. When he was brought back at dawn, the first thing he looked for was not the house but the flowerpot.

Nothing remained in it. The tulsi leaves had blackened and fallen, and a thin layer of ash lay over the soil.

From that day onward Neeraj would repeatedly come to the middle of the courtyard and sit in silence. The adults would move him away, saying there were nails in the ash, bits of glass, perhaps hot embers still buried underneath.

Neeraj would step away, but after a while he would return and stand in the same place.

On the morning of the fourth day he took the broken flowerpot in his hands and followed his mother.

His mother, Sarita, was wringing wet clothes in a neighbour's courtyard. Neeraj asked, "Can anything grow in this soil again?"

Without turning, Sarita said, "Let the house stand again first."

"Can't there be flowers before the house?"

Sarita stopped her hands. Water kept dripping from the cloth.

“Will you eat flowers?”

Neeraj did not laugh. “No. But can they grow or not?”

Sarita’s eyes went once toward the burnt courtyard. She gave no answer.

That afternoon some relief workers came. They gave the family a plastic sheet, rice, lentils, salt, and two blankets. On the form Rambabu did not put a thumbprint; he signed his name, for he had run a shop for years.

A young man raised a camera and asked the family to stand in front of the burnt house. Rambabu stood stiff for a few moments, then pushed the surviving lid of the chest behind him.

Neeraj did not stand for the photograph. He was searching at one edge of the heap of ash, where his grandmother had once grown marigolds.

His grandmother had died two years earlier. The marigolds she had planted had spread so widely that in Phagun the courtyard used to look yellow. On the night of the fire every plant had turned to ash.

When Neeraj began pushing his hand into the ash, Sarita ran over and caught his wrist.

“How many times have I told you? Don’t put your hand in there.”

Neeraj opened his fist. Inside lay the dry round fragment of a half-burnt seed.

“Has this survived?”

Sarita looked at his palm. “Hard to say.”

Neeraj placed the fragment in the flowerpot.

By evening he had picked out five such seeds. Some were completely black, some half-brown.

When Rambabu saw him, he became irritated. “Stop sifting through the ash. This is no time for games.”

Neeraj asked, “When will the courtyard be cleaned?”

“When we find labourers.”

“Where will the ash be thrown?”

“Behind the pond.”

Neeraj thought about that answer all night.

At dawn he came into the courtyard carrying an old aluminium bowl, half the handle of a broom, and a broken sieve.

He began dividing the ash into three piles—brick and stone, iron and glass, and fine ash.

When Sarita saw him, she first wanted to stop him. Then she put an old pair of thick shoes on his feet and said, “The moment you see glass, stop using your hands.”

Neeraj nodded.

The first person to join him in this work was eight-year-old Rani from next door. Her house had escaped the fire, though the outside of one wall had been blackened by smoke.

Rani asked, "What will you do with the ash?"

"Flowers."

"Flowers in ash?"

"Grandmother used to plant them."

Rani brought a small hand hoe from her house.

By noon the two children had cleared a corner of the burnt courtyard about a cubit long. The old soil underneath was black, but not hard.

At that moment Tejnath, the village gardener, happened to pass by. A basket of vegetable seedlings was strapped to his back.

Seeing the children, he stopped. "What sort of farming is going on here?"

In a serious voice Neeraj said, "Flowers."

Tejnath picked up some ash, smelled it, and rubbed it between his fingers. "Not in ash alone. You'll have to turn the soil underneath. The pieces of burnt plastic and wire must be removed."

Rambabu came over. "Kaka, let the children play. Right now we have to think about rebuilding the house."

Tejnath looked at him. "The house will be built. But the soil too needs to breathe again."

Rambabu said nothing.

Tejnath took two handfuls of composted leaves from his basket and mixed them into the soil the children had cleared. Then he said, "No seeds yet. Let the ash cool first."

Neeraj asked, "How many days?"

"What has burned keeps its heat longer than the heat you can see outside. Give it seven days."

Neeraj began counting the seven days.

Meanwhile, talk of rebuilding the house began. Masons came, bamboo came, bricks came. No insurance representative came, because the house had no insurance. Relatives kept offering advice—make the courtyard smaller and add an extra room, extend the shop in front, don't waste space on flowers and plants.

Rambabu thought this made sense. The fire had eaten up his savings; an extra room could be rented and bring in some income.

On the seventh day he asked the mason to measure the courtyard.

At that very moment Neeraj was loosening the soil in the corner he had cleared.

The mason's measuring line ran straight through his little flower bed.

Neeraj lifted the line and placed it to one side.

The mason laughed. "If you move that line, the wall will come out crooked."

"Flowers will grow here."

From a distance Rambabu called, "Neeraj, move."

Neeraj did not move.

Sarita came over. She understood that if the dispute grew now, the child would cry, and Rambabu might as well. She picked up the line and returned it to the mason, but she did not lift Neeraj into her arms.

"Babuji," she said softly, "leaving one cubit of space won't make the room small."

In an irritated voice Rambabu said, "Everyone wants flowers. Who is looking at the expense?"

Sarita fell silent.

Neeraj only said, "I'm not asking for money."

For a few moments after that sentence, no one spoke.

Rambabu looked at the mason's line, then at the burnt wall, then at the child's hoe. At last he said, "Leave not one cubit, but one and a half. Only make sure the water doesn't run toward the room."

The mason shifted the line.

No smile appeared on Neeraj's face. He simply began digging the soil again.

The next day Tejnath brought four kinds of seed—marigold, sunflower, aparajita, and a small local red flower whose name Neeraj had never heard before.

"Not all of them will sprout," Tejnath said, "and those that do won't all survive equally well."

Neeraj asked, "Then how many should we plant?"

"As many as the soil can carry."

The children made three rows. Rani marked them with pieces of leaves. In a separate corner Neeraj buried the surviving burnt seeds from his grandmother's plants.

He was certain his grandmother's seeds would sprout. Tejnath gave him no assurance.

Nothing happened for the first two days. Nothing happened on the third day either.

On the morning of the fourth day Rani came running—"Green! Green!"

From the black soil mixed with ash, a thin crooked shoot had emerged. Beside it was another, then a third.

Neeraj lay flat on his stomach and looked at them from so close that soil touched his nose.

When Rambabu came outside, he saw the children gathered there.

“What happened?”

Rani pointed.

Rambabu bent down. The shoot was so small that for a moment he could not see it at all.

Once he saw it, he straightened up. “All this noise for that?”

Neeraj said, “It’s the first one.”

Rambabu said nothing, but later that day, when the mason began unloading sand, Rambabu himself said, “Don’t let it fall on the flower bed.”

Slowly the walls of the house rose, and leaves rose in the flower bed. Both kinds of building went on together, but at different speeds.

A brick wall could climb three cubits in a day. A flower plant did not grow even a finger’s breadth in the same time.

Every evening Neeraj measured both.

One day a strong wind blew. The plastic over the new roof flapped wildly, and two shoots in the bed bent over. That night Neeraj planted two thin bamboo sticks and tied thread around them for support.

The next day Rambabu cut an old plank from the shop and made a border around the flower bed. He told no one why.

Sarita saw it and merely smiled once.

On the fifteenth day the first marigold bud appeared.

Neeraj ran to call Rambabu. Rambabu had a bowl of limewash in his hand.

“Has it become a flower?”

“Only a bud so far.”

Rambabu said, “Then call me when it becomes a flower.”

But five minutes later he came into the courtyard on his own and looked at the bud.

The corner where Grandmother’s burnt seeds had been planted was still empty.

Neeraj looked at it every day, gave it little water, and did not disturb the soil.

One night he asked Sarita, “If these don’t sprout, will Grandmother’s flowers be finished?”

Sarita stroked his head. “Flowers and the memory of a person are not the same thing.”

“But these were her seeds.”

“Yes. If the seeds do not sprout, they were still hers. If they do sprout, they are still hers.”

Neeraj remained silent for a long time over that answer.

A month later the new roof of the house was complete. Not all the black marks of the fire had been erased; Rambabu deliberately left one patch of the rear wall without limewash.

When anyone asked, he would say, "There wasn't time earlier."

In truth, the flower bed lay directly in front of that mark.

The first flower to bloom was not a marigold but the unfamiliar red flower whose seeds Tejnath had brought. It was small, with five petals, growing very close to the earth.

Neeraj did not pluck it.

The next day three marigolds bloomed. Rani wanted to pluck one and take it to school, but Neeraj stopped her. Then he himself carefully plucked one flower and gave it to her.

"One can go," he said, "not all of them."

Gradually people began coming to see the new house instead of the burnt one. Those who had earlier asked about the cause of the fire now began asking about the flower bed.

Some people said the ash had become fertilizer. Tejnath corrected them again and again: "Not the ash alone; the ash was removed, the soil was turned, compost was mixed in, and time was given."

Neeraj listened carefully to that correction. He liked the phrase—time was given.

One dawn a tiny green point appeared in the corner where Grandmother's seeds had been buried.

Neeraj called no one.

He sat on the ground and watched it for a long time.

He was not certain whether it had come from one of those burnt seeds or from some other seed already lying in the soil.

Tejnath saw it too and said, "Don't give it a name yet. Let it grow first."

This time Neeraj did not ask for an answer.

Two weeks later leaves had appeared on the plant. It was not a marigold. It may have been some wild seed that had already been in the soil.

Even so, Neeraj did not pull it out.

Rambabu asked, "It doesn't look as though this will even flower. Shall we keep it?"

Neeraj said, "There is room for it for now."

Rambabu nodded.

Before the rains arrived, the courtyard flower bed was full. Red, yellow, blue, green—the black ash survived only in a few places beneath the soil.

The window of the new room opened toward it. When a tenant moved in, the first thing he asked was, "Was there a fire here?"

Rambabu looked toward the blackened rear wall.

“Yes,” he said, “here.”

The tenant looked at the flower bed. “And these flowers?”

Before Rambabu could answer, Neeraj came over watering them.

“After the fire,” Rambabu said.

That was all.

Neeraj kept pouring water slowly from the lota into the soil, so that the ash would not rise into the air again.

The Blacksmith's Hammer

Phagun was drawing to a close, but the seasons made no difference to the forge in the blacksmiths' quarter. Dawn or dusk, Jagdish Lohar's hammer sounded at its appointed hour—thak, thak, thann.

The neighbours set their clocks by that sound. After the first blow the milkman crossed the lane; by the second, the schoolchildren had gone past; and when the iron on the anvil began to throw sparks, the first shop in the market opened.

Jagdish spoke little. People in the village called him hard. He had no son; only one daughter, Madhavi, who had grown up amid the heat of the forge, coal dust, and the roughness of a blacksmith's hands.

Madhavi was five when she first tried to lift the hammer. It did not rise even an inch from the ground. Jagdish did not laugh. He merely said, "Straighten your grip first."

For a long time that sentence of her father's stayed in Madhavi's memory—straighten your grip first.

By twelve she had learned to work the bellows. By fifteen she could look at the colour of hot iron and know when it needed a blow and when it had to go back into the fire. Jagdish said nothing, but whenever her judgment was right, his next stroke fell a little lighter.

That lighter stroke was praise enough for Madhavi.

This time the house was preparing for a wedding. Madhavi was to marry Raghav of Basantpur, three kos away. Raghav was an accounts assistant in a primary school and repaired bicycles in his spare time. At their first meeting he had noticed soot on Madhavi's palm and asked, "Do you work at the forge?"

Madhavi had replied, "It is work of the house."

Raghav had said, "Good if hands know work."

Jagdish had said nothing to that answer, but while leaving he silently tightened the loose pedal on Raghav's bicycle.

Ten days before the wedding, bamboo arrived in the courtyard, then straw, leaf plates, sacks of makhana. The women began rehearsing songs. Curd began setting on the veranda.

Even so, the forge did not close.

“Still working?” Mama asked. “Your daughter is getting married. Let the forge go cold for two days.”

Jagdish laid a hot sickle on the anvil and gave it three blows. “It is an implement for cutting paddy. People are waiting.”

“People can wait.”

Jagdish gave no answer.

Madhavi was listening from inside. She understood the meaning of her father’s silence. If something was not made in time, wedding songs could not make up for the loss.

Seven days before the wedding Jagdish removed the old handle from his hammer. The handle was of sheesham wood, and in its middle there were still two slanting cuts Madhavi had made with a little knife in childhood.

Madhavi asked, “Why are you changing the handle?”

“It has come loose.”

“I’ll tighten it.”

“In a wedding house you have other work.”

“This too is work of my house.”

Jagdish looked at her. Then he placed the old handle in her hand.

Madhavi pared a wooden wedge thin and hammered it in, tightening the iron head again. She lifted the hammer and struck the anvil once. The sound rang clean.

Jagdish said, “Not too hard. Listen to the iron.”

Madhavi smiled. “You should listen to people too.”

Jagdish’s eyes rested on her for a moment. Then he picked up the half-finished hoe.

Five days before the wedding, Raghav’s uncle arrived with two men. The talk began with the number of people to be fed, moved to separate seating for the wedding party, and then reached the question of transport.

“Raghav himself says nothing,” the uncle said, “but a family has its standing to maintain. It would look good if there were a motorcycle at the vidai.”

The air on the veranda went still.

Madhavi was inside. Her mother, Shanti, closed the betel box. Mama cleared his throat.

At that moment Jagdish was straightening a horseshoe beside the forge. The words reached his ears. The hammer rose once, but the blow did not fall.

The uncle said again, “I am not calling it a demand. Only a matter of honour.”

Jagdish set the hammer down and came into the courtyard. There was soot on the sleeve of his kurta.

“Did Raghav say this?”

“No, but the family—”

“Did Raghav say this?”

The uncle fell silent.

Jagdish looked toward Shanti. “Give them tea.”

With that he returned to the forge.

That night Madhavi asked her father nothing. The forge kept sounding until late. In place of the usual three blows, long pauses began to fall between the strokes.

The next day Raghav came himself. He left his bicycle outside the courtyard and went straight to the forge.

“What Kaka said was not from me,” he said.

Jagdish did not stop working the bellows.

“I do not want a motorcycle.”

Jagdish drew the hot iron from the fire. “Whatever you do not want, say it clearly in your own house.”

Raghav lowered his head. “I will.”

“Now hold these tongs.”

Raghav took the tongs. Jagdish began striking the iron. After the first two blows, Raghav’s grip trembled.

“Firm,” Jagdish said.

Madhavi watched from the veranda. She understood that her father’s approval was not a pat on the groom’s shoulder; it was placing hot-iron tongs in his hand.

Two days before the wedding, Jagdish began heating a small strip of iron in one corner of the forge. It did not look like any customer’s tool. He bent the strip, hammered it, then plunged it into water.

Madhavi asked, “What are you making?”

“Something useful.”

“For whom?”

“Let it be made first.”

That night the women sang wedding songs in a sohar-like cadence. Behind the sweet voices, the forge kept going—thak, thak. A few guests complained that the smoke would settle into their clothes.

Shanti said, “Without this smoke, where would this house be?”

On the morning of the wedding, for the first time Jagdish lit the forge late. He bathed and put on a clean dhoti and kurta, but the soot at the edges of his nails would not come off completely.

Madhavi’s friends were admiring the colour of the henna on her hands. Madhavi looked at the tips of her fingers; a fine black line remained even through the henna.

“That won’t come off,” one friend said.

Madhavi replied, "There is no reason it should."

By afternoon the courtyard was full. Music, voices, laughter, the sounds of rows of people being seated. Those who called Jagdish hard were also curious to watch his silence.

"When the daughter leaves, we'll see whether the blacksmith cries or not," one neighbour whispered into another's ear.

Madhavi heard him. She did not feel angry. It only seemed strange that people looked for proof of a father's grief in his eyes, not in his palms.

The wedding party arrived before evening. Raghav walked to the gate; there was no motorcycle. His uncle was there too, but this time his voice was subdued.

The rituals began. The priest continued reciting mantras. Jagdish sat where required, rose where required, offered water, offered grain. He spoke unnecessarily to no one.

At the time of kanyadaan the priest said, "Bring your hand forward."

Jagdish's hand came over Madhavi's. For the first time Madhavi felt that her father's fingers were trembling.

The tremor was very slight—less even than the movement with which he placed hot iron on the anvil.

Madhavi looked up. Jagdish's eyes were dry.

In that moment her father's silence did not feel heavy. It felt familiar.

During the night meal a problem arose. The handle came off the large iron ladle made for serving the rows of guests. The cook panicked.

"Another one?"

"Too short. It won't reach into this cauldron."

People began looking for Jagdish. He was sitting in one corner of the wedding pavilion. The moment he heard, he stood up. He took off his clean kurta and placed an old gamchha over his shoulder.

The forge was lit again.

From the pavilion Madhavi saw smoke rising. Before long the familiar sound of the hammer cut through the wedding music—thak, thak, thann.

The cook carried the ladle away. The meal resumed.

Jagdish did not return to the pavilion without washing his hands. When he did return, there was once again a black stain on the sleeve of his clean kurta.

Madhavi's vidai was set for near dawn. As the night waned, the guests grew tired. The songs thinned. One by one, the lamps in the courtyard went out.

When Madhavi entered her room, she saw the old hammer handle lying on the cot—the same sheesham handle with the two slanting cuts.

Beside it lay a small new hammer. Not the heavy hammer of a blacksmith; one that fit in the palm, meant for driving nails and small repairs. Its handle was new, but the place meant for the grip had been smoothed as though lightly worn.

Madhavi lifted the hammer. The weight was right.

Jagdish stood at the doorway.

"Is this mine?" Madhavi asked.

"Nails keep coming loose in a house."

Madhavi laughed. "Only nails?"

Jagdish gave no answer.

"You made the handle?"

"Measured to your grip."

Saying this, he came inside and picked up the old handle. His thumb passed over its two slanting cuts.

"Will you keep this?" Madhavi asked.

"This is mine."

"And the new one?"

"Yours."

Someone called from outside—the time for the vidai had come.

People gathered in the courtyard. Shanti held her daughter and wept. Madhavi's friends were crying too. Raghav stood a little distance away.

Jagdish remained standing near the gate. Someone said to him, "Give your daughter your blessing."

He placed his hand on Madhavi's head. No words came.

People kept waiting.

Madhavi did not.

She opened her trunk and placed the small hammer on top so it would not be pressed beneath the clothes. Then she closed the trunk.

Before the vehicle moved, she said to her father, "Keep your grip straight."

The corner of Jagdish's mouth moved slightly.

The vehicle went on. The gate, the bamboo, the women singing, the forge blackened with smoke—all fell behind.

Jagdish stood looking down the road for a long time. One by one, the others went back inside.

As dawn brightened, Shanti saw Jagdish sitting beside the forge. The fire was out. The old hammer lay on the anvil, but he was not lifting it.

"Rest," Shanti said.

Jagdish looked at the two slanting cuts on the old handle. "Customers will come late today."

He lit the fire.

The first blow was lighter than usual. So was the second.

On the third, a clear metallic note rang from the anvil.

At that same hour in Basantpur, Madhavi was opening the window of her new home. One nail in the window was indeed loose.

Raghav said, "I'll call the carpenter."

Madhavi opened her trunk.

"Let me look first," she said.

She took the small hammer in her hand, set it against the head of the nail, and before striking, paused for a moment to listen to the iron.

The Lantern Glass

In Basahia market, just as the colour of evening changes, so too does the voice of the shopkeeper. The person who is called a customer by day becomes familiar by dusk—someone is heading home, someone is talking about credit, someone stops for tea.

That evening was not ordinary. The electricity had been gone since late afternoon, and a thin layer of cloud was spread across the sky. Shops on both sides of the main road had lit their own lanterns.

Right beside Suresh Sahu's grocery shop stood Rahim Ansari's tailoring shop. Between them ran only a drain a handspan wide, with two bricks laid across it. For twenty years the two men had stepped on those bricks to pass from one shop to the other.

It was difficult to call Suresh and Rahim friends. Just as difficult to call them quarrelsome. They argued regularly over which way the drain water should slope, whose sacks spread as far as whose threshold, and in whose account the tea had been entered. Yet when a customer asked for needle and thread, Suresh pointed next door; when one of Rahim's customers asked for soap or oil, Rahim indicated Suresh's shop.

Rahim's lantern was old. Its brass colour had worn to a dull grey, black thread was wound around the handle, and there was a fine crack in the lower corner of the glass. Rahim would say, "That is not a crack. It is a line of age."

Suresh would laugh. "One day it will break, and then you will understand age."

That evening Rahim had hung the lantern from a bamboo peg outside the shop. Its light fell on the iron of the sewing machine, making a small bright streak. Inside, his son Sameer was writing something in a school notebook.

Shortly before seven, a motorcycle came racing from the northern end of the main road. Without stopping, the rider shouted, "Shut the shops! Fighting has started up ahead!"

He said it in a single breath and sped away. No one asked where, between whom, or who had seen it.

Within ten breaths the first shutter came down. Then another. The clang of metal ran from one shop to the next.

Messages began arriving on mobile phones. One said there was a crowd near the bridge. Another said people were moving toward the market. A third showed an old photograph, but no one checked the date.

Rahim came outside with the phone to his ear. His face was taut. "Sameer, pack up your notebook. We are going home."

As he closed his cash box, Suresh asked, "What happened?"

"I cannot make sense of anything. They called from home to say the little one's fever has risen. I am going there first."

Rahim covered the sewing machine with cloth. He reached out to put out the lantern, but just then the phone rang again. Still talking, he took Sameer by the hand and crossed the road. The lantern remained burning.

Suresh thought of calling out to him, but the jeweller opposite said, "Bring the shutter down. Do not delay."

Suresh lowered his shutter halfway. Inside, his wife Kamala called on the mobile. "Come home quickly. The children are frightened."

"I am closing the shop and coming," he said.

Meanwhile, a small group of people appeared running from the south. No one had a stick in hand, but at the sight of them running, the people in the market supplied a meaning from their own fears.

Someone shouted, "They are coming!"

Iron shutters crashed down together. In the blink of an eye the lane went dark. Only Rahim's lantern kept burning outside.

Suresh had almost closed his shutter. A gap two palms high remained at the bottom. He bent and looked out. The running people were in fact heading toward the bus stand. From far away came a sound like a police whistle.

Then, in the panic, a bicycle struck the bricks over the drain. The cyclist recovered, but the handlebar brushed the bamboo peg.

The lantern swung. First one way, then the other.

Without thinking, Suresh raised the shutter.

When the lantern slipped free of the peg, he ran and caught it by the handle. The hot body of the lantern touched the side of his palm. He hissed in pain, but did not let go.

Two drops of kerosene fell from the lower part. Had the lantern struck the stone, the glass might have shattered and the oil spread. Inside Rahim's shop, cloth, thread, paper—everything was dry.

Suresh carried the lantern into his own shop and blew out the wick. The glass survived, though the tip of the old crack had lengthened slightly.

"Have you gone mad?" the jeweller opposite called from behind his half-closed shutter. "Is this a time to go outside?"

Blowing on his palm, Suresh said, "There could have been a fire."

“Whose shop?”

Suresh gave no answer.

He placed the lantern on the floor away from the sacks of rice. Then he pulled Rahim’s shutter fully down. There was no padlock. In his haste Rahim had only fastened the hasp. Suresh put his own spare small padlock on it.

Meanwhile another commotion rose. This time, at the bend in the lane, five or seven young men were stopping motorcycles and telling people to go home. Whether their words were meant to reduce fear or increase it, no one was sure.

Suresh closed his own shutter and sat inside. Going out now seemed almost impossible.

The shop was dark. Only the glow of the mobile fell on his palm. The skin had turned red.

Kamala had already called five times. Suresh called her.

“Where are you?” Kamala’s voice was trembling.

“At the shop. I am safe.”

“Come home.”

“Let the road clear a little first.”

“Someone said they set fire to the market.”

Suresh sniffed the air around him. Spices, soap, a faint smell of kerosene. No smoke.

“There is no fire here,” he said.

“Then the messages?”

“There are plenty of messages.”

He put the phone down.

In the dark his foot touched the lantern’s handle. He bent and set it upright. In the light of the mobile, the crack in the glass shone like a white line.

From outside came the sound of something heavy being dragged. Suresh held his breath. Then he understood—two young men were moving a cart lying in the middle of the road so that an ambulance could pass.

After a while a police jeep arrived. A voice came through the loudspeaker: “Do not pay attention to rumours. Everyone remain in your homes. No riot has taken place in the market area.”

For the first time the word “riot” was heard clearly. What until then had been a shapeless fear now received a name from an official voice.

Suresh looked out through the gap in the shutter. The jeep passed. On the road lay a shoe, a vegetable basket, a half-crushed water bottle, and an overturned bicycle.

He unlocked the shutter and stepped outside. Two policemen stood as far as the bend. After taking their permission to go home, he closed his shop.

Rahim's lantern was in his hand.

One policeman asked, "What is that?"

"It belongs to my neighbour."

"Why are you taking it now?"

Suresh paused for a moment. "If I leave it outside, it will break."

The policeman looked at his palm. "Is that from the same lantern too?"

"Yes."

"Get your hand looked at first."

Suresh did not laugh. Carrying the lantern, he started home.

He was stopped three times on the way. Each time he heard a different version. Somewhere they said a crowd had come from across the river. Somewhere they said two shops in the market had been burned. Somewhere they said nothing had happened at all and the rumour had been spread only to facilitate theft.

Suresh argued with no one. In his hand was a lantern whose glass was intact. For him, that fact was enough.

When he reached home, Kamala first took hold of his hand, then noticed the lantern.

"Whose is this?"

"Rahim's."

"In the middle of closing your own shop, you brought this home?"

"It was falling."

Kamala looked at him for a moment. Then she warmed water and washed his palm.

"Where is Rahim?"

"He went home. The little one had a fever."

"Did you call him?"

Suresh fell silent. He had saved the lantern, yet it had not occurred to him to let Rahim know.

He called at once. The signal kept breaking. At last Sameer answered.

"Babu has gone to the hospital," he said. "The little one has a high fever."

"The shop is safe. The lantern is with me."

Sameer was silent for a few moments. "The lantern?"

"Yes. It was about to fall."

"Babu keeps saying the glass should never be replaced."

"The glass survived," Suresh said. "The crack has grown a little."

Sameer let out a faint breath. "Then it is all right."

All night different stories about the market formed and dissolved on mobile phones. One video showed smoke, but it was from another town. In one voice message someone said three people had been injured; by morning it was known that they had been hurt in a road accident.

Suresh placed the phone face down. The lantern stood on the cot. Its wick was out, but the light of the bulb in the house remained caught in the glass.

At dawn he was the first to reach the market.

Some shutters bore marks from police batons—the police had knocked on them while telling people to remain inside. Two carts were overturned. An elderly man had fallen while running. The glass of one grocery shop had broken in the pressure of the crowd.

But nowhere had there been a fire.

The market committee opened a register to record losses. Name, shop, damage.

“Suresh Sahu?” the secretary asked.

“Nothing.”

“Your hand?”

“No damage to the shop.”

“Rahim Ansari?”

“He has not come yet.”

“His shop?”

“Safe.”

The secretary moved on to the next name.

At ten o’clock Rahim arrived. The night’s wakefulness showed beneath his eyes. The little one’s fever had come down.

Without saying anything, Suresh brought out the lantern.

Rahim looked first at the glass, then at Suresh’s bandaged palm.

“It fell?”

“It was about to.”

Rahim turned the lantern and examined the crack. “The line has grown.”

“Put in a new glass. I will pay for it.”

Rahim shook his head. “Not yet.”

“Why?”

“This line is no longer only a line of age.”

Suresh looked at him. Rahim did not smile. He simply placed the lantern inside the shop.

By afternoon the market was almost normal again. People bought and sold as usual, but the stories of the night kept circling in conversation. Some told what they had heard as though they had seen it; others added what they had heard to what they had actually seen.

Twice Suresh thought of saying that nothing had happened. Then he remembered the old man fallen in the road, the overturned cart, the broken glass, and his own burned palm. “Nothing happened” was not the whole truth either.

That evening the electricity went out again.

Rahim filled the lantern with oil, straightened the wick, and lit it. Because of the crack, a fine white line appeared in the glass. One part of the light fell on his sewing machine; the other crossed the drain and fell on Suresh's sacks of rice.

Suresh kept watching.

Rahim said, "If I replace the glass, the light will be clear."

Suresh raised his bandaged hand. "Clear light does not always tell the whole story."

Rahim said nothing.

People began moving through the lane again. Children came laughing home from school. A bicycle climbed onto the same brick over the drain and jolted, but this time the bamboo peg was empty.

The lantern was kept inside the shop.

The light passing through its crack lay like a thin line between the two thresholds.

Under the Bridge

On the morning of the inauguration, coloured flags were being tied along the bridge. Below, in the shadow of the seventh pillar, Vimla was sweeping ash from the hearth.

From above came the tapping of hammers, the clatter of bamboo being shifted, and the announcer's voice, all descending together. Below, the children continued their own work amid those sounds.

Vimla's son Chhotu straightened two bricks and placed a brass bowl on them. Her daughter Kajal put a small stone on the pages of her notebook to keep the wind from turning them.

"You'll study here?" Vimla asked.

"The exam is tomorrow," Kajal said. "However much noise there is above, the lesson will not stop."

Vimla reached out to stroke her head, then lowered her hand. Her palm was full of ash.

Bisesar had not been home since the night before. Home—if it could be called that. Four bamboo poles, a blue tarpaulin, the frame of an old door, and the concrete roof of the bridge: together, that was their house.

Two years earlier, when the old settlement was demolished, the officials had said, "A place for rehabilitation will be found soon."

The word "soon" was now two years old.

Bisesar worked as a labourer on the construction of the bridge. First he carried iron rods, then mixed cement, and finally lifted the moulds for the railings. The bridge for which his old home had disappeared had also taken the sweat of his hands into its body.

Vimla called this neither pride nor irony. To her it was the ordinary arithmetic of life—wherever wages were available, one worked.

At seven o'clock a jeep came and stopped beneath the bridge.

Two men got out. One carried a file; an identity card hung around the other's neck.

"Who lives here?"

Vimla rose from beside the hearth. "We do."

"There is an inauguration today. This place has to be vacated."

Kajal lifted her head from her notebook.

Vimla asked, "For how long?"

"Until the programme is over. There will be cameras, guests. No one should be visible underneath."

Vimla looked at him for a moment. "Where are we supposed to go?"

The man pointed toward the empty sandbank across the road. "Sit there. You can come back in the evening."

"The tarpaulin?"

"You can leave it here, but no people should remain."

Vimla did not laugh. "If the tarpaulin is visible, will the camera not see it?"

The man with the identity card became slightly uncomfortable. "I am only telling you what I was told."

They left.

Chhotu asked softly, "Ma, is the camera afraid of us?"

Kajal immediately said, "Be quiet."

Vimla did not answer. She separated the two pieces of wood still left in the hearth, washed the bowl, opened an old sack, and began packing clothes.

Just then Bisesar arrived. A red gamchha was tied around his head, white cement dust covered his feet, and in his hand was a piece of paper wrapped around half a roti.

"Why are you packing everything?"

Vimla told him.

Bisesar looked up. Yellow and red cloth fluttered along the bridge. A banner bore large letters: "Bridge of New Development."

He said nothing.

"Have you nothing to say?" Vimla asked.

"What would saying it do?"

"You worked on this bridge."

"For wages."

"And the house?"

Bisesar fell silent again.

Kajal closed her notebook. Her father's silence angered her. When their old house had been demolished, Bisesar had stood silently in the line for paperwork then too. When his name appeared as "Bisheshwar" in the compensation papers and as "Bisesar" in the land papers, he had done nothing but scratch his head.

Kajal thought: if Babu spoke loudly just once, something might change.

Bisesar picked up a sack. "Let's go."

"How far?" Chhotu asked.

"As far as the camera cannot reach," Kajal said.

Vimla glared at her, but for an instant the corner of Bisesar's mouth moved.

Together they carried three sacks, a bucket, two plates, Kajal's books and notebooks, Chhotu's tin car, and the essential things from beneath the tarpaulin toward the sandbank. The doorframe, the hearth, and the heavy chest were left beneath the bridge.

There was no shade on the sandbank. The Bhadon sun was not yet at full strength, but the sand had begun to heat.

Bisesar spread an old mat. Vimla sat down. Chhotu began making roads in the sand with his tin car. Kajal opened her notebook.

Above them, preparations for the programme intensified. The same sentence kept coming through the loudspeaker: "The honourable guest will arrive at ten o'clock."

Kajal began reading her lesson—"Because of river erosion..."

She stopped.

Her textbook had a chapter on floods, erosion, rehabilitation, and development. The words were neat and clean. In the picture there was a bridge, a bus passing over it, and a blue river below. There was no tarpaulin, no sack.

Kajal closed the book.

"Why aren't you reading?" Bisesar asked.

"The picture is wrong."

"Can a picture be wrong too?"

"It can."

Bisesar took the book in his hand. He looked at it for a few moments. "It shows the space under the bridge as empty."

Kajal said, "Place."

"What?"

"Not space—place."

Bisesar laughed. "All right. It shows the place under the bridge as empty."

Vimla smiled for the first time.

At half past nine people began gathering on the bridge. Motorcycles, bicycles, groups on foot. Schoolchildren dressed in red and yellow. A beat of the drum travelled as far as the sandbank.

Chhotu stood up. "Can I go and see?"

"No," Vimla said.

"From far away?"

"Stay here."

Chhotu puffed out his cheeks.

Kajal said to him, "Drive your car. You see the bridge every day."

"Today it has flowers on it."

“Has the bridge changed because of flowers?”

Chhotu thought. “The top has changed.”

Hearing this, Bisesar began scratching at the sand.

At ten o’clock the loudspeaker made the formal announcement. The guest had arrived. Cheers rose. A red ribbon was stretched across the top of the bridge.

From the sandbank the four members of the family could see only heads and flags at a distance.

Vimla asked, “They didn’t call you?”

“Who?”

“The labourers.”

Bisesar did not raise his head. “The contractor said two or four people would be there. I was on the night shift. My name is not on the list.”

Kajal said, “Where is your name written on the bridge?”

This time Bisesar looked directly at her.

“Name?”

“Of the people who built it.”

“The engineer’s name will be on the plaque.”

“The labourers?”

Bisesar searched for an answer, then said, “My name is in my hands.”

Kajal was not satisfied. “After you wash your hands?”

Vimla laughed, saying, “Oh God.” Bisesar laughed too.

At that moment loud applause broke out above. The ribbon had been cut.

Suddenly the wind grew strong. The flags fluttered. The voice in the loudspeaker trembled.

The guest began the speech: “This bridge will not merely connect two banks...”

The rest of the sentence broke apart in the wind and the cheering.

Kajal tried to listen carefully. She might have to write an essay on the subject at school.

“...the economic progress of the region... transportation... new opportunities...”

Chhotu raced his tin car across the sand, making the shadow of the bridge into its road.

Kajal wrote in her notebook: “A bridge connects two banks.”

Then she stopped.

Below it she wrote a second line: “Sometimes people are left behind beneath a bridge.”

Bisesar saw the line but said nothing.

Before noon the sky suddenly darkened. Clouds gathered in the distant east.

Vimla said, "It will rain."

The programme was still going on. Food packets were being distributed on the bridge. The crowd spread as far as the railing.

The first drop left a large round mark on the sand.

"Pick up the things," Vimla said.

Bisesar looked up toward their tarpaulin beneath the bridge. It was only two hundred feet away, but a bamboo police barricade stood between them and it.

"Let's go there," Chhotu said.

Bisesar picked up the bucket and reached the barricade. A policeman extended a hand and stopped him.

"The programme is not over."

"It is raining. Our things are there."

"Not yet."

"There are children."

The policeman looked up. The rain was growing heavier. He too needed shelter.

"Wait five minutes."

For the first time Bisesar raised his voice. "In five minutes the books will be soaked."

Kajal heard him from a distance. She was surprised.

The policeman was about to say something when one of the programme organisers came running. "No one is to go underneath. The cameras are still moving around."

Bisesar looked at him. "Does the rain ask the camera before it falls?"

The young man became irritated. "Don't make an issue of it."

Just then lightning flashed. With a strong gust of wind, rain crashed down all at once. The crowd on the bridge scattered. People ran toward the stage, vehicles, and tents.

On the sandbank the mat was soaked in an instant. Vimla put a sack over her head. Kajal pressed her notebook against her stomach. Chhotu began to cry.

Bisesar lifted the barricade and led his family through.

The policeman did not stop them. The organiser said something, but his voice drowned in the rain.

Reaching the seventh pillar, Kajal first opened her notebook. The edges were wet, but the pages inside had survived.

Vimla straightened the bricks of the hearth. Chhotu crawled under the tarpaulin.

Bisesar saw that the doorframe had been pushed to one side. Mud from a large shoe was smeared across the chest. Someone clearing the way for the inauguration decorations must have shoved their things aside.

He lifted the doorframe.

At that moment the first official line of vehicles began crossing the bridge. The growl of tyres travelled down through the concrete body and became a vibration in the pillar.

Chhotu startled. "The bridge is shaking!"

Bisesar placed his hand on the pillar. "This much shaking is all right."

"How do you know?"

"I listened to it while we were building it."

Chhotu too placed his palm on the pillar. His face became serious.

Above, one final wave of applause rose.

The rain lasted fifteen minutes. It eased as quickly as it had arrived.

The programme on the bridge began putting itself together again. Wet chairs were wiped, the loudspeaker sounded once more, and people began looking for food packets.

Below, Vimla searched for dry wood in the hearth.

Kajal saw a small piece of the red ribbon wash down from the edge of the bridge with the rainwater. It caught near her foot.

Chhotu ran and picked it up. "Is this the same ribbon?"

Kajal said, "Probably."

Chhotu tried to tie it around his neck. Vimla stopped him. "It's wet. Throw it away."

Chhotu did not throw it away. He tied it behind his tin car. As the car moved, the red strip dragged over the sand.

Kajal laughed.

Bisesar did not laugh, but his eyes remained fixed on Chhotu's car.

The programme ended in the afternoon. The vehicles left. A few flower petals remained stuck to the bridge, and paper cups stayed caught in the drain.

The man with the identity card came down again.

"You can stay here now," he said.

Vimla kept blowing on the hearth. "We are staying here now."

The man could not tell whether it was an answer or a statement. He left.

By evening the river water had turned deep brown. Traffic on the new bridge became ordinary—motorcycles, tractors, buses, small vehicles. The sound of each vehicle came down below as a different wave.

Chhotu had turned it into a game.

"This is a motorcycle."

Rrrr-rrrr.

"This is a tractor."

Dham-dham-dham.

"This is a bus!"

The whole roof thundered once.

Bisesar kept correcting his guesses.

Kajal sat down to study, but again and again the noise from above broke her concentration. Irritated, she closed the notebook.

"Isn't your exam tomorrow?" Bisesar asked.

"It is."

"Then study."

"There is too much noise."

Bisesar thought for a moment. He opened the chest and took out an old sack. He hung the sack on one side of the doorframe and doubled the tarpaulin on the other. The noise did not stop, but it grew softer.

"Will this do?"

Kajal opened her notebook. "This will do."

Vimla put rice on to cook. Smoke rose beside the pillar and merged into the darkness under the bridge.

After dinner Bisesar took out his file. Inside a plastic bag were papers for compensation, rehabilitation, identity, and wages.

He placed one paper before Kajal.

"Read this for me."

Kajal read, "Applicant's name—Bisheshwar Paswan."

"I am Bisesar."

"That I know."

"Look below."

Kajal continued reading. Old settlement, acquired area, temporary rehabilitation, verification pending.

"You will sit your exam tomorrow. The day after, I will take this file to the office."

Kajal looked at her father. "And stay silent again?"

Before Bisesar could answer, a heavy truck crossed above. The pillar shuddered. Water trembled in the bowl.

He watched until the water grew still.

"No," he said. "This time I will say my name correctly."

Kajal wanted to ask—only the name? What about the house? What about the place? But she stopped herself. For the first time, her father had said "no" on his own.

Night deepened. Half the decorative lights fixed above the bridge were switched off, but two lights in the middle remained lit. Their glow broke along the edge of the pillar and came down below.

Vimla stood the old doorframe upright again. Its wood had survived from their old house. When the house was demolished, Bisesar had refused to throw it away.

“Why here?” Kajal asked.

“The mouth of the tarpaulin hangs crooked,” Vimla said. “With the frame here, the curtain sits properly.”

“A house without a door?”

“Which comes first—the house or the door?” Vimla returned the question.

Kajal did not answer.

Chhotu brought his tin car through the frame. The red inauguration ribbon was still tied behind it, now dry and stiff.

He stopped the car beside the chest. “My bridge has opened.”

“Your bridge?” Kajal teased.

“Babu built it.”

Bisesar heard from a distance. “Many people built it.”

Chhotu thought, then said, “Then it is everyone’s bridge.”

No answer came.

At night the first bus crossed the bridge. Its heavy sound slowly receded into the distance.

Below, Kajal bent over her notebook beside the lamp. She crossed out the first line of her essay and wrote it again—

“A bridge is built to connect two banks.”

Before writing the second line, she looked up. Beyond the doorframe, the pillar, the tarpaulin, the smoke, the tin car with the red ribbon tied to it, and the file beside her father were all held in the same view.

Kajal left the second line blank.

Outside, Bisesar kept his palm against the pillar. Again and again, the vibration of vehicles travelled down through the new bridge.

He knew that vibration.

Now he also had to say his own name clearly.

Paper and Stick

The rains had receded, but the smell of earth still rose from the western hamlet of Sonbarsa village. Along the narrow ridge running through the transplanted paddy, two bamboo poles had been driven into the ground and red cloth tied to them.

Since early morning people had kept gathering around those poles. Some carried old papers, some bamboo sticks, some only questions.

Harinarayan Yadav stood at the corner of his field. His right foot was on the ridge, his left sunk in the wet mud of the paddy. Again and again he said the same thing—"From this marker eastward, six kathas are mine."

In front of him, Rambabu, the surveyor from the circle office, was unrolling the measuring line. With him were two employees, a revenue clerk, and four policemen.

At the very front stood the clerk Manoj, holding the Circle Officer's file. The file had a green cover, and in bold letters on top was written: "Order for Delivery of Possession."

Manoj opened the file and took out a sheet. "The order is that possession of the southern portion of plot number two hundred sixty-nine be delivered to the family of Ramvilas Paswan."

A murmur ran through the whole hamlet.

Ramvilas's widow, Sarita, stood a little distance away with her son Sonu. In her hand was a basgit parcha kept inside a waterproof cover. The corners of the paper were worn, but the red seal was still clear.

Harinarayan looked at her. "I have no enmity with Ramvilas. But how does land my grandfather tilled become someone else's because of one line on a piece of paper?"

Sarita said softly, "I too received this land on paper. For eight years I have been running to the office. Now will you say paper means nothing?"

No answer came at once.

The surveyor stretched the line from the first bamboo marker. It ran straight across the paddy plants.

Harinarayan's younger brother Mahesh stepped forward. He had a stick in his hand, but its end was resting on the ground. "The line will not run from here. It will run from that old ridge."

Without lifting his head, Rambabu said, "We will follow the map."

"A map does not till a ridge," Mahesh replied.

The policemen became a little more alert.

The Circle Officer, Navalkishore, got out of the vehicle and came over. Flecks of dust marked his white kurta. He took the file first, then looked around.

"Has the order been read out?"

Manoj nodded.

"Then begin the measurement."

From the crowd, old Dukhan Mahto called out, "Babu, look at the old map once as well. After the river cut the bank, this ridge shifted twice."

Navalkishore did not know him. "The old map that is in the file has been examined."

Pointing with his walking stick toward the stump of a mango tree in the east, Dukhan said, "That tree was alive in the year I was married. The boundary ran from that tree."

Manoj suppressed a smile. "Government measurement is not done from trees."

Dukhan fell silent, but his stick remained raised toward the stump.

Rambabu carried the other end of the line to the planted bamboo. The measurement placed the land described in Sarita's parcha inside the paddy Harinarayan had planted.

Harinarayan went completely still. His eyes were on the paddy. "This crop is from my seed."

Sarita said, "Harvest the crop. I need a place to build a house, not paddy."

Mahesh broke in, "Today we give the land; tomorrow she will say the crop is hers too."

Sarita turned and looked at him. "I have not asked for anyone's crop. For eight years I have been placing a basin on the roof to keep the rain out."

The crowd began to separate as though into two pieces. On one side was the Yadav hamlet, on the other people who had come from the Dalit settlement. Between them the measuring line was stretched taut.

Navalkishore read the order again. The words were clear—"After demarcation, lawful possession shall be ensured."

He asked Manoj, "When was the earlier demarcation done?"

"Three months ago."

"In whose presence?"

Manoj turned the papers. "The report itself says—in the presence of local witnesses."

"Names?"

Manoj kept turning pages. In the space for names were two illegible signatures.

Dukhan Mahto slowly came closer. "No one called me."

Harinarayan said, "Nor me."

Sarita gripped her parcha tightly. Worry showed on her face. "Then does that make my order false?"

Navalkishore looked at her. "I did not say the order is false. We will see whether the measurement is correct."

Mahesh's stick still rested on the ground, but his fingers had tightened around it. The policeman Ramsevak kept watching his hand.

Rambabu opened a copy of the old map. A thin blue line ran across it—a former channel. In the present field that channel was nowhere visible.

Navalkishore asked, "This blue line?"

"An old watercourse, sir."

Dukhan immediately said, "Not a watercourse. A seasonal stream. It filled with earth twenty-four years ago."

Harinarayan's father, Kailash, who until then had stood behind the crowd, stepped forward for the first time. His hands were empty. "When the channel filled, the panchayat fixed the ridge again. The paper for it was in the old cupboard at the school."

Manoj did not laugh, but disbelief was plain on his face. "Land papers in the school?"

Kailash said, "At that time there was no panchayat building. All the files were kept in the school."

Sarita looked toward Sonu. The child was making a small groove in the wet mud with the tip of his slipper.

Navalkishore signalled for the measurement to stop. A murmur immediately rose through the crowd.

Mahesh said, "This is a game to delay things. Even with an order, they will not give the land."

From Sarita's settlement, Geeta Devi answered, "It has been delayed for eight years. Delay it again?"

Voices rose from both sides.

Ramsevak raised his hand and said, "Keep the sticks down. No one will cross the line."

Mahesh flared up. "I cannot cross a line in my own field?"

Ramsevak replied calmly, "No one will, for now."

At that moment the wind strengthened. One sheet of the order slipped from Manoj's hand and fell among the paddy. Sonu ran toward it. He bent to pick up the page, but his foot caught in the measuring line.

One of the bamboo markers was pulled loose. Instinctively, Mahesh thrust his stick forward and kept Sonu from falling.

For a moment everyone was silent.

Sonu steadied himself by holding the stick. The wet sheet of the order was in his hand.

Mahesh rested the stick on the ground again. "Save the paper."

Sarita reached her son. Mud stained his knee. She said nothing.

Navalkishore looked toward the old school building in the distance. "We need to see the cupboard."

Manoj looked at his watch. "Office hours—"

"Today the office is here," Navalkishore cut him off.

Everyone went together to the school. The headmaster was startled at first, then opened the lock of an old room. Inside were dust, broken chairs, an old election box, and an iron cupboard.

The cupboard lock had rusted. It opened after the key was turned three times.

Among the tied files inside they found the panchayat proceedings register from 2002. The pages had turned yellow.

Kailash's eyes brightened. "It will be in this."

Manoj kept turning the pages. At last they found an entry—a panchayat decision redefining the access path to the fields and the ridge after the seasonal stream had filled in.

Rambabu placed the entry beside the map and read it. Three markers were recorded: the old mango tree, the northern corner of the pond, and the earthen ridge.

Leaning on his stick, Dukhan Mahto said, "Those are the three markers I was talking about."

Navalkishore became serious. "But why was this panchayat decision never entered in the revenue records?"

No one had an answer.

Manoj said softly, "Perhaps the change was never recorded."

Harinarayan's face hardened. "If it was not recorded, is that my fault?"

Sarita immediately said, "And mine?"

This time the question from both sides was the same.

Navalkishore closed the register. "No. If the record is incomplete, the fault is neither yours nor hers."

Mahesh asked sharply, "Then what of the order?"

"The order will stand. But possession will not be delivered by force on the basis of a wrong demarcation. First there will be a fresh measurement."

Geeta Devi was dissatisfied. "Another month or two?"

“No. The measurement will be done today itself, using the three old markers.”

Everyone returned to the field. This time the line was stretched from the mango stump to the northern corner of the pond. The measurement changed.

Under the new line, Sarita’s six kathas did not fall inside Harinarayan’s planted paddy but on the fallow strip to its south—though one corner of the bamboo cowshed Mahesh had built stood on it.

Mahesh stopped short.

Rambabu said, “About three cubits of the cowshed will have to be removed.”

Mahesh ran his hand over the handle of his stick. “I built this cowshed five years ago.”

Harinarayan looked at him. “We built it thinking the land was fallow.”

Sarita said nothing.

Navalkishore asked, “How much time do you need?”

Mahesh did not answer.

Kailash said softly, “It is a bamboo cowshed. Half a day.”

Mahesh looked at his father. “And the paddy?”

“The paddy has been saved,” Kailash said.

For the first time Sarita looked as though she had released a breath.

On the back of the order Navalkishore wrote a new note—“Previous demarcation revised due to an error in the records. Fresh measurement conducted on site. Boundary marked in the presence of the parties.”

Manoj asked, “Possession now?”

Navalkishore looked toward Sarita. “If she is ready.”

Sarita looked at the new bamboo marker driven into the soil. “I am ready. But I will not remain here while the cowshed is taken down.”

For the first time Mahesh looked directly at her.

“Why?”

“You remove your own cowshed. I came to receive my land, not to watch your humiliation.”

Mahesh’s grip on the stick loosened.

The next morning Mahesh and Harinarayan began unfastening the bamboo. Sonu stood at a distance. After a while he ran forward to lift one pole.

Mahesh said, “This is heavy.”

Sonu replied, “I’ll hold one end.”

Together they lifted the two ends of the same bamboo pole.

Sarita took her parcha out of its waterproof cover and looked at it again. The new measurement was now written on the paper.

Harinarayan stood on the paddy ridge. His feet were sunk in the mud as they had been the day before, but this time the measuring line did not cut through the paddy.

Leaning on his stick beside the mango stump, Dukhan Mahto smiled. "The tree died, but the marker survived."

Manoj, who had come again to write the report, said, "Markers survive if someone writes them down."

Dukhan replied, "And what is written survives if someone reads it."

By noon the cowshed had been removed. Small bamboo poles were planted at all four corners of Sarita's land.

Sonu began tying a red cloth to the first corner. Mahesh did not take the cloth from his hand; he only showed him how to tighten the knot.

By evening the policemen had left. The order file had returned to the office. The sticks had been put against the walls of the houses.

In the field there remained only four bamboo poles, one old mango stump, and the green rows of paddy.

On his way home Harinarayan stopped beside Sarita's new marker. The soil there had been pressed down slightly. He levelled it with his foot.

Sarita watched from a distance. She said nothing.

That day the administrative order was completed on paper, but on the land its final line was written not by anyone's pen, but by the footprints of two families.

The Smell of Jackfruit

As evening fell, doors in the western quarter of Sonbarsa market began closing again and again.

Nothing major had happened all day. In the afternoon two young men had quarrelled near the bus stand—someone said over the fare, someone said over a motorcycle being touched, someone said over caste. By evening, the story of the incident had spread farther than the incident itself.

The shopkeepers who kept their shutters open kept looking at one another's faces. No one clearly knew what there was to fear, yet fear was already present.

Mahendra Sah's grocery shop stood at the bend where the quarter began. He left the day's accounts half-finished and began tying the mouths of the sacks. From inside, his wife Sudha asked, "So early?"

Mahendra said, "People are saying the night will not be good."

"Which people?"

Mahendra did not answer.

At that moment, across the road, Nasim Mian could be seen fastening the gate of his courtyard. Behind his house stood an old jackfruit tree. Three days earlier a large ripe jackfruit had fallen. Half had been shared at home; Nasim Mian had been thinking of sending the other half to his sister's house.

The thick smell of jackfruit reached Mahendra's nose—sweet, warm, touched faintly by rot.

The smell reminded him of rainy seasons in childhood. His mother would cut jackfruit and separate the seeds, and Mahendra would wrinkle his nose and run away. Later he would eat those same seeds boiled in salted water.

Sudha said, "Tell Nasim Bhai to move the jackfruit. The smell will grow stronger at night."

Mahendra looked toward the gate. Nasim Mian was looking at him too. Until two days ago the two men had spoken over evening tea; now it felt as though not a few cubits but an entire road lay between their gates.

Mahendra said, "I'll tell him in the morning."

At seven the electricity went out.

As darkness fell, rumours began moving faster. First it was said that one young man had been injured in the bus-stand quarrel. Then it was said he had died. Then someone said outsiders were coming toward the quarter.

No one had seen anything, but someone's uncle, someone's maternal uncle, someone's brother-in-law, an acquaintance, or a 'reliable' policeman was cited as though he had seen everything.

Mahendra kept his son Anuj inside the door. Anuj was twelve, and his curiosity was greater than his fear.

"Babu, is someone coming?"

"No."

"Then why is the door shut?"

"It is night."

Anuj began looking at the road through the slit in the window.

There was no light in Nasim Mian's house either. Only a candle flickered toward the kitchen. In the darkness the smell of jackfruit grew denser.

By eight o'clock four young men were standing in the road holding bamboo sticks. They were boys from the same quarter, yet the hardness on their faces made Mahendra's own familiar boys seem unfamiliar.

One of them, Binod, came to Mahendra's door.

"Kaka, stay inside. The news is not good."

"What sort of news?"

Lowering his voice, Binod said, "People are gathering from that side."

"Which side?"

Binod waved toward one direction, but that direction contained half the market, the hospital, the mosque, the pond, and the railway crossing.

Mahendra asked, "Did you see them?"

Binod remained silent for a few moments. "People told us."

Mahendra closed the door.

Inside, Sudha lit the small lamp in the prayer corner. Anuj sat before it and opened a book, but he was not reading.

At nine a sound rose somewhere in the distance. At first it seemed like a crowd shouting. Then, listening carefully, they realised that dogs were barking together.

After that something fell on a tin roof.

Anuj shuddered.

Mahendra ran toward the door. Sudha caught his arm.

"Don't open it."

Mahendra looked through the slit in the window. There was no one on the road. From Nasim Mian's courtyard came repeated thudding sounds.

Then the sound of a child crying could be heard.

Anuj said, "That is Sameena."

Sameena was Nasim Mian's eight-year-old granddaughter.

Sudha said again, "Do not open the door."

Mahendra listened again for the child. This time, along with the crying, came someone's frightened voice.

"Ammi, a branch of the tree has fallen on the roof!"

Mahendra thought of going outside, but at that moment he heard running footsteps at the other end of the road. Four or five shadows were moving toward the bend.

He went back inside.

The smell of jackfruit was now so strong that Sudha covered her nose with the end of her sari.

Anuj whispered, "Babu, the tree must have broken."

Mahendra understood—the smell was not coming only from ripe fruit. A falling branch must have split two or three jackfruits open.

In the midst of fear, that smell was such an ordinary fact that something inside Mahendra straightened.

He remembered that Nasim Mian had an old pain in his knee. His son worked in Saudi Arabia. At home were Nasim Mian, his wife Halima, their daughter-in-law Rukhsana, and two children.

The shadows on the road came closer.

Binod's voice called out, "Kaka, don't come outside!"

Mahendra looked through the window. Binod had three young men with him. All carried sticks.

"What happened?" Mahendra asked from inside.

"There was some sound from Nasim's house. We are going to see."

There was caution in Binod's voice, but one of the young men with him said, "First find out who all are inside."

A tremor ran through Mahendra's body.

He opened the door and stepped outside.

Behind him Sudha said only once, "Mahendra!"

Mahendra's hands were empty. Binod looked surprised.

"Kaka, stay inside."

Mahendra said, "A jackfruit branch has fallen there."

One of the young men laughed. "You can see jackfruit in this darkness?"

Mahendra replied, "I didn't see it. I can smell it."

No one quite understood.

Mahendra began crossing the road.

Nasim Mian's gate was bolted from inside. Mahendra knocked three times.

"Nasim Bhai!"

At first there was silence inside. Then Halima's voice came, "Who is it?"

“It is Mahendra.”

The wait before the bolt opened felt very long. In truth it was only a few moments.

As soon as the gate opened, the smell of jackfruit seemed to spill out. A thick branch lay slantwise across the courtyard. Two jackfruits had split with it; yellow bulbs were stuck to mud, leaves, and old rainwater.

One corner of the thatch had been crushed. Sameena was crying at the edge of the courtyard. Nasim Mian was trying unsuccessfully to move the branch.

Mahendra stepped inside.

Nasim Mian stopped when he saw him. Relief did not come first to his face; hesitation did.

“You, now?”

Mahendra said only, “This branch will not move with one pair of hands.”

Binod stood outside the gate.

Mahendra called to him, “We need four hands.”

Binod came in. Two young men followed him, but the third remained outside.

Nasim Mian brought an old saw. Its teeth were blunt. Mahendra thought of fetching the axe from his own house.

The young man standing outside said, “Kaka, it is not right to leave your house so often tonight.”

Mahendra replied, “The axe is in my house. The branch is in his. The road will clear only when the two meet.”

Anuj was already standing at the door holding the axe. Sudha was behind him.

“I came to give it,” Anuj said.

Sudha was holding him. She extended the axe toward Mahendra but did not cross the road.

Mahendra returned to Nasim’s courtyard.

The first blow struck the branch. The sound of metal against green wood rang clearly in the darkness.

With that sound, the sticks in the hands of the young men standing on the road lowered slightly.

A window in another house opened. Someone asked, “What happened?”

Binod replied, “A tree branch has fallen.”

Someone inside asked, “And that sound?”

“The axe.”

Two minutes later old Ramcharitra Jha from another house came out carrying a lantern.

“Need light?”

Halima said, "Bring it."

The lantern was set in the courtyard. In its glow the split bulbs of jackfruit gleamed.

Rukhsana brought a sack from inside. She began separating the ripe bulbs because someone might step on them and slip. Sameena stopped crying and began holding the sack.

Binod began cutting the thinner part of the branch. Mahendra stripped leaves from the thicker section. Nasim Mian could not bend his knee, so he kept shifting the pieces that had been cut.

The tension of the night had not ended. At the other end of the road people were still moving about with sticks. Somewhere a rumour would rise again, then subside.

But in that small courtyard everyone's attention was now on a single branch.

Wrinkling his nose, Ramcharitra Jha said, "This jackfruit smell will keep the whole quarter awake."

Halima smiled for the first time. "Tomorrow I'll send half to your house."

Ramcharitra said, "Then I won't complain."

Binod laughed. In his hand was not a stick but a saw.

Half an hour later the way was clear. The bamboo of the crushed roof was still bent, but there was no longer any danger of it falling.

Mahendra asked for water to wash the axe. Halima gave him a lota. Jackfruit latex had dried on the blade like a white film.

Nasim Mian said softly, "Mahendra Babu, is the storeroom behind your shop open?"

Mahendra was startled.

"Why?"

"I saw it while fastening the gate. I thought I would tell you, but..."

He left the sentence unfinished.

Mahendra understood that the distance which had become a road between their gates had existed inside Nasim too.

He said, "Come, let's see."

The two crossed the road.

The rear door of the storeroom was indeed half open. The wind was moving the panel in and out. The sacks were safe.

Mahendra closed the door and fastened the bolt.

Nasim Mian said, "In this darkness, if anyone saw it, they would say there had been a theft."

Mahendra said, "And by tomorrow the thief's name would be decided too."

The two remained silent for a few moments.

From the far end of the road came the light of a police jeep. It approached slowly. Two policemen kept urging people to go inside their homes.

One policeman saw the saw in Binod's hand. "What is that for?"

Binod pointed toward the jackfruit branch.

The policeman wrinkled his nose. "The smell reaches a long way."

Ramcharitra Jha said, "The smell is how we knew the tree had fallen."

The policeman said nothing. He moved on.

The night was not over yet. Mahendra returned home and bolted the door, but this time he left the small upper slit open.

Sudha asked, "Everything all right?"

"The roof was crushed. The people are fine."

Anuj asked, "Are people coming from outside?"

Mahendra said, "No one at the moment."

Anuj asked again, "Then is the fear over?"

Before Mahendra answered, the outside air came in. The smell of jackfruit was weaker now, but still distinct.

"Fear will remain," he said, "but not every sound is a crowd."

Sudha lowered the lamp wick.

After midnight rain began to fall. At first the sound of water on the roof startled everyone again; then, slowly, it became ordinary.

When the market opened in the morning, all of the previous night's rumours had taken different forms. Someone said five hundred people had been coming; someone said the police had stopped them in time; someone said nothing at all had happened.

As Mahendra opened his shop, he looked toward Nasim Mian's courtyard. The cut branch lay to one side. Flies buzzed over the scraps left from the split jackfruits.

Sameena crossed the road carrying a plate.

"Grandmother sent this."

The plate held clean jackfruit bulbs.

Sudha came outside. "Why so much?"

Sameena said, "These were the good ones left from what broke yesterday."

Sudha took the plate. She gave one bulb to Anuj. He brought it to his nose, smelled it, and laughed.

By afternoon the truth about the bus-stand quarrel came out. The injured young man had gone home from the hospital. He had not died. The dispute had begun over fare and jostling; there was no evidence for the caste, religion, or outside crowd that had been added to it through the night.

Binod came to Mahendra's shop in the evening.

"Kaka, yesterday we went outside for nothing."

Mahendra said, "Not for nothing. You helped remove the branch."

Binod fell silent.

Mahendra gave him two packets of salt. "Take these to Nasim Bhai."

Binod took the packets but asked, "Won't you give them yourself?"

Mahendra laughed. "You go. Yesterday you held a saw; today hold salt."

Binod crossed the road.

That evening the electricity went out again.

This time the doors did not close at once.

From Nasim Mian's courtyard came the smell of jackfruit seeds boiling. In her kitchen Sudha tempered spices. The two smells met in the middle of the road.

Anuj sat by the window doing his homework. Once he lifted his nose and said, "Jackfruit again today."

Writing the accounts, Mahendra said, "Yes."

"Like yesterday?"

Mahendra looked outside. Nasim Mian sat on a cot with his gate half open. Ramcharitra Jha was walking slowly along the road. Binod rode past, ringing his bicycle bell.

Mahendra said, "The smell is the same. The night is different."

The Rumour of Five Bullets

The evening market seemed to tire early that day. The damp heat of Bhadon had clung to the body all day, and as the sun went down, the yellow lights of the shops in the old post-office lane came on one by one.

Ramsevak Sahu was putting away the weights of the scale in his spice shop. Across from him, Shafiq the tailor stopped his sewing machine and bit off the thread with his teeth. At the medicine shop, Sushila Devi was reading a prescription for fever medicine.

The first sharp sound came and vanished so quickly that before anyone understood it, all the pigeons in the lane rose at once.

Immediately after it came a second sound.

Some heard a third; some did not.

Holding a scale weight in his hand, Ramsevak looked outside. Shafiq caught the half-lowered shutter of his shop. Sushila dropped the prescription and turned toward the door.

Chhotu came running from the bend in the lane. His breath was breaking.

"Shots were fired!" was all he said.

"How many?" Ramsevak asked.

Without stopping, Chhotu answered, "Five."

He ran on.

Ramsevak had not heard five. He remembered two clear sounds. But the word "five" ran through the lane faster than Chhotu.

Shafiq pulled his shutter all the way down. When the metal sheet struck the ground, there was another loud bang. Karim, his assistant sitting inside, started and said, "Now it has become six."

Shafiq scolded him, "That was my shutter."

Karim did not answer, but in his eyes the number was still six.

At the medicine shop, the mother of a child burning with fever stood before Sushila Devi. She wanted to take the medicine and reach home quickly. As soon as she heard what people were saying outside, her hand began to tremble.

"I heard three," Sushila said.

The child's mother whispered, "Outside they are saying five."

Wrapping the bottle in paper, Sushila said, "What people are saying is not what I saw."

Meanwhile, at the western end of the lane, Kailash the tea seller had set water on his stove. He had not heard the first sound at all. When the second came, he was washing a brass tumbler.

Two customers sitting at Kailash's shop stood up at the same instant. One said, "Four shots." The other said, "Seven."

"Did you count them?" Kailash asked.

"My brother told me on the phone," the first customer replied.

"Where is he?"

"At the bus stand."

The bus stand was half a kos from the old post office.

Kailash lowered the flame under the stove. The tea kept boiling, but the customers left their tumblers half-finished and went away.

Within ten minutes, half the shutters in the market were down. Every loose shutter that fell with a bang was becoming another new shot. When a motorcycle exhaust popped somewhere in the distance, the people sitting in the lane looked at one another.

Harinarayan Mishra stood near the veranda of the old post office. He was a retired postal worker and came walking as far as that veranda every evening. At the time of the sounds, he had been behind the building, where wires near the electrical transformer had flashed.

He saw one sharp flash, then a little later heard two separate sounds.

When he came around to the front, the first question put to him was, "Kaka, five shots were fired, weren't they?"

Harinarayan said, "I did not see any shot being fired."

"The sounds?"

"I heard sounds."

"How many?"

He paused. The eyes of the questioner already wanted an answer before he gave one.

"Two or three. There was also a flash near the transformer."

As the questioner turned away, he whispered into someone else's ear, "Harinarayan Kaka saw three shots and a flash too."

Harinarayan heard him. He wanted to call out, but the scraping rush of running feet from ahead cut off his words.

A bicycle lay fallen in the middle of the lane. Its owner was twelve-year-old Pawan, who had been taking two bottles of milk home. Hearing the commotion, he had abandoned the bicycle and run into a nearby grain shop.

One bottle had broken. Milk was flowing toward the drain.

From inside his shutter, Ramsevak recognised Pawan and called him over.

“Where is your home?”

“East hamlet.”

“Who were you with?”

“No one.”

Pawan’s lips were trembling. He did not know how many shots there had been; he knew only that one bottle of milk had broken and his mother would scold him.

Ramsevak took an empty bottle kept inside the shop and poured the remaining milk into it. Then he knocked on the closed shutter of the neighbouring milk shop. A voice from inside said, “Not today.”

Ramsevak said, “The boy’s bottle has broken.”

After a few moments the shutter rose four fingers high. A hand came out, gave half a bottle of milk, and the shutter dropped again.

For Pawan, at that moment it no longer mattered whether there had been five shots in the market or seven. His two bottles were full again.

At the other end of the lane, Sarju, the ward night-watchman, arrived blowing his whistle. A bamboo stick was in his hand. People surrounded him.

“Where were the shots fired?”

“Who fired them?”

“How many were injured?”

Sarju knew the answer to none of the three questions. The police station had told him only that there was a commotion in the market and that he should see the situation and report back.

But the crowd could not bear an empty answer.

“At least five,” someone said.

“I heard seven,” another voice said.

“No, three,” Sushila Devi said from inside her shop.

“Could have been two as well,” Harinarayan added.

Sarju rested the tip of his stick on the ground. “Whoever saw it, raise your hand.”

No hand went up.

“Who only heard sounds?”

Almost every hand went up.

“Who heard the number from someone else?”

Some hands slowly went down; some remained raised.

This small test did not calm the crowd, but for one moment everyone did look at their own palms.

Two policemen came from the station. They examined the lane, looked for fresh holes in shop walls, searched the ground for cartridge cases, and asked whether anyone had been injured. They found nothing.

Behind the old post office, one fuse in the transformer had burned. There was a small soot mark near it.

How many sounds that had caused was uncertain.

At the same time, a teenager from a nearby wedding house admitted that in the evening he and a friend had lit some sparklers and two loud firecrackers from two leftover strings of fireworks. But whether the timing was exactly the same or a few minutes earlier, the two friends gave different accounts.

The policeman wrote: no direct evidence of gunfire.

By the time that sentence reached the market, it had changed again.

Someone said, "The police picked up five cartridge cases and took them away."

Someone said, "The evidence is being hidden."

Someone said, "Actually, they were firecrackers."

All three statements were made at the same tea shop within five minutes.

Kailash raised the stove flame again. When boiling water hit the tea leaves left from the day, steam rose. He took no side. He simply began washing the empty tumblers again.

By nine at night the market was almost deserted. Pawan had reached home. Instead of scolding him for the broken bottle, his mother touched his forehead to see if he had a fever. He did not. She quietly put the milk away.

Sushila Devi gave out the last medicine and closed her shutter. Harinarayan went once more to the veranda of the old post office and looked at the soot mark. Ramsevak put the scale weights back in their box.

When the market opened at dawn, the numbers from the night were still on the wall. Someone had written "5" in charcoal. Beside it someone had added "7." Below them, in smaller writing, was "3."

Sweeping the shopfront, Kailash looked at the wall and did not laugh. He took a wet cloth and erased seven first, then five, then three.

Harinarayan came for tea. He said, "Couldn't you have left one number?"

Kailash asked, "Which one?"

Harinarayan replied, "The one somebody actually saw."

Kailash ran the cloth over the wall again. All the charcoal numerals blurred into a single black smudge.

Just then Pawan rode past on his bicycle. Two full bottles of milk clinked on the front bar. At the place where he had fallen the day before, he slowed for a moment, then pressed the pedals and rode on.

Ordinary sounds were returning to the lane again—the weights of a scale, a sewing machine, tea glasses, a bicycle bell.

In one person's memory there had been five shots, in another's three, in another's seven.

No number remained on the wall.

The Torn Flag

In the old market of the town, Shanti Devi's tailoring shop stood two steps in from the road. There was no gate, only a half-raised sheet of tin and, inside, a foot-operated sewing machine.

The shop sign had faded so much in rain and wind that of "Shanti Tailoring House," only "Shanti" could still be read clearly.

At dawn she would first sweep, then run her hand twice over the machine's treadle, as though dust had held its breath all night.

There was to be a rally in the market that day. Word had spread that processions of two different parties would pass at different times, so the shopkeepers had pulled inside anything hanging from their awnings.

What worried Shanti Devi most was not the processions, but the clothes promised for Wednesday.

A schoolgirl's blue kurti, a hospital nurse's white wrap, the sweetmaker's torn apron, and Ramlochan's paddy sack—all lay in turn beside the machine.

"Ma, will we close early today?" her daughter Rekha asked.

"Work does not close early," Shanti Devi said as she threaded the needle. "A shop can close."

Rekha was in Class Twelve and, in her spare time, was learning to sew on buttons, turn hems, and cut thread.

At ten o'clock the first procession appeared from the eastern end of the market. The sound of the drum arrived before the flags.

Shanti Devi did not stop the machine. The sleeve of the blue kurti had to be shortened.

The procession passed. The slogans struck the tin roof, entered the shop, then slid away toward the west.

Rekha peered outside. On the road remained two scraps of paper, a broken bamboo pole, and dust.

"Come inside," Shanti Devi said. "Measure the other sleeve of the kurti."

By noon the market had become ordinary again. The vegetable seller brought his wooden platform back outside. The tea seller began washing glasses.

Then three young men came running. In their hands was a long bamboo pole, and from its tip hung a large red-and-green flag, half torn.

The edge of the flag had split almost to the middle. The stitching had come undone at one corner, and the knot at the bamboo pole was loose as well.

"Auntie, stitch it at once," one young man said. "There is another rally in half an hour."

Shanti Devi stopped the machine. Without yet taking the flag in her hands, she asked, "Where is the cloth torn?"

"There was some pulling and tugging at the bend," the second young man said. "Whose fault it was can wait. First fix this."

Shanti Devi opened the flag and spread it on the table. The cloth was thin, but the torn section had already been patched twice before.

"This is not new," she said.

The young man laughed. "The flag is old. The rally is new."

Shanti Devi did not laugh. She brought the torn edges together with her fingers. "If I give it only a straight seam, it will tear here again. It needs a backing strip inside."

"However you do it, just do it quickly."

"Cloth tears quickly when work is done in a hurry."

The young men looked at one another. The youngest asked, "How much will it cost?"

"Let me first see how much work there is."

Shanti Devi began searching for cloth matching the colours of the flag. She found red, she found green, but not the faded yellow in the middle.

Rekha opened a bundle of old cloth. "Ma, this one?"

"Too bright."

"This?"

"Too thick."

In the third bundle they found a strip from an old curtain. The colour was almost right.

Shanti Devi placed the strip behind the flag and cut it with half a finger's extra margin on all sides.

"Will it show from the front?" the young man asked.

"If the work is done properly, very little. The cloth will still know it had been torn."

Rekha smiled. Her mother spoke to cloth like this often, as though cloth understood more than half the truths told by customers.

The machine began to run. The large flag hung down from the table, so Rekha kept it from touching the floor.

Someone shouted a slogan outside. The young men peered out of the half-open shop, but Shanti Devi kept her eyes on the needle.

First she matched the torn edges, then held the backing strip in place, then ran a double seam.

"Shall we give it one more line?" Rekha asked.

"Too much stitching also makes cloth stiff. Only as much as it needs."

Meanwhile an elderly woman arrived carrying a blouse. Seeing the shop crowded, she stopped.

"My sleeve by tomorrow?"

"This evening."

The woman looked at the flag, looked at the young men, then placed her blouse at one corner of the table. "Don't forget my work."

"Do I forget anyone's work?" Shanti Devi asked.

The woman went away laughing.

The tear in the middle of the flag was stitched, but when the corner near the bamboo pole was pulled, it rasped again.

Shanti Devi shook her head. "This has to be opened too."

"Auntie, there is no time."

"Then it will tear again on the road."

The young man looked at his watch. "Do it."

She cut away the old thread at the corner. From inside came a small rusted wire that someone had inserted during an earlier repair to fasten the cloth tightly to the bamboo.

"This wire is cutting the cloth," Shanti Devi said.

Rekha placed the wire on a piece of paper. "Because of this?"

"One reason. The pulling is another."

Shanti Devi made a small strong loop of cloth around the tip of the bamboo. In place of the wire she used thick cotton cord.

When she stopped the machine this time, she spread the whole flag out and examined it. The scar of the tear had not disappeared, but the cloth was one piece again.

The youngest young man said, "It has become like new."

"Not new," Shanti Devi replied. "Fit to be carried again."

"How much?"

She told him the charge. The young man searched his pocket. Two notes and some coins came out.

The second young man whispered, "We'll get it from the party office later."

Shanti Devi did not fold the flag for them. "Whoever has the work done settles the account here."

The three of them together paid the full amount. Shanti Devi counted it, put it in the drawer, and wrote on a small slip: "Torn edge, backing strip, bamboo loop."

“What is this?”

“The account of the work.”

The young men left carrying the flag.

As soon as the flag went outside, two men from the road peered into the shop. One asked, “You stitched their flag?”

Putting the blue kurta back under the machine, Shanti Devi said, “I stitched torn cloth.”

“But you saw the colours, didn’t you?”

“I saw the colours to choose the thread.”

The man stood there for a few moments as though searching her answer for some hidden meaning. Finding none, he left.

Rekha asked softly, “What if the other party’s flag comes?”

“If it is torn, I will stitch it.”

“What will people say?”

“People’s clothes tear too.”

After noon the second procession arrived, this time from the western end of the market.

The beat of the drum was different, the colours different, the slogans different.

Shanti Devi was cutting around an old oil stain on the sweetmaker’s apron and attaching a new pocket.

Among the procession, Rekha spotted the flag they had stitched earlier. When the wind rose, the line of the patch flashed for a moment, then the cloth spread wide again.

“Ma, look,” Rekha said.

“Has the seam opened?”

“No.”

“Then it is all right.”

Ten minutes after the procession had passed, a middle-aged woman entered the shop in a hurry. In her hand was a small flag of another colour, its edge torn.

“Sister, can you stitch this? The children took it for the school cultural programme. It got caught in the crowd and tore.”

Rekha looked at her mother’s face.

Shanti Devi spread out the flag. “Only the edge has come undone here. Five minutes.”

The woman remained seated on the chair. She said, “People in the market will ask whose flag I am carrying around. It is a prop from the school play.”

Changing the thread, Shanti Devi said, “Cloth comes with its own story, but the needle looks first at where it is torn.”

Rekha laughed at this, but the woman’s face relaxed.

As evening fell, the sounds of the processions diminished. The market returned to prices, weights, bus timings, and the worry of reaching home.

Shanti Devi kept finishing one job after another: the elderly woman's blouse, the sweetmaker's apron, the schoolgirl's blue kurti.

Ramlochan arrived carrying his paddy sack. The bottom of the sack was torn.

"Will the machine work on this?" he asked.

"It will, but it needs a thick needle."

Rekha took out the thick needle.

Ramlochan noticed small leftover pieces of red and green thread at the corner of the table. "So politics got stitched today too?"

Turning the sack inside out, Shanti Devi said, "A lot of cloth was torn today."

Ramlochan laughed. "Even your answers are like stitching—you join two edges and keep the middle part inside."

"If too much is left outside, the thread gets tangled."

At closing time, the youngest man from the first procession came back. He had no flag with him.

"Auntie, the stitching held," he said.

"So?"

"We were five rupees short." He placed a coin on the table.

Shanti Devi opened the drawer and took out the slip. She checked the account. "You were not short."

The young man looked surprised. "I thought the three of us paid less in the hurry."

"You paid in full."

"Then keep this."

"No money without work."

She returned the coin to his hand. The young man seemed about to say something, then put it back in his pocket.

He turned toward the entrance, then stopped again. "The patch shows in our photographs."

Shanti Devi asked, "Has the seam opened?"

"No."

"Then the patch is doing its work."

The young man left.

Before closing the shop for the night, Rekha began cleaning the table. Small pieces of thread of many colours lay scattered there.

Red, green, yellow, blue, white, black.

Rekha asked, "What should we do with all these threads?"

"Throw away the ones too short to use. Put the useful ones in the box."

Instead of separating them by colour, Rekha put all the usable threads into the same box.

Shanti Devi lifted the blue kurti. The schoolgirl would come for it in the morning. One sleeve had been shorter before; now both were equal.

She folded the kurti and attached the slip bearing the girl's name.

Outside, two paper flags from the day remained tangled on an electricity pole. Whenever the wind blew, they fluttered in different directions.

Shanti Devi pulled the tin sheet down. The machine fell silent in the dark.

Rekha asked, "What is the first job tomorrow?"

From inside the doorway Shanti Devi called out, "Give that girl her kurti. Then Ramlochan's other sack."

"And flags?"

"If one comes torn again, we'll see then."

The shop closed. Inside remained the wages in the drawer, the box of thread beneath the table, and a half-cut length of white thread still in the machine needle.

Whether the market would remember the colours of the day's flags was uncertain. But at dawn Shanti Devi would thread the needle again—and whichever cloth arrived first, she would stitch its torn place first.

Boot Marks

At the eastern hamlet of Sonapur, the paved road ended and mud began. On the edge of that mud stood Harinath Sah's small bicycle-repair shop—bamboo posts, a tin roof, and two rows of bricks at the front.

It was the last week of Bhadon. Clouds hung low all day, but no rain fell. The earth was soft and took the shape of every foot that stepped on it.

In the evening Harinath was fitting the chain back onto an old bicycle. His twelve-year-old daughter Revati sat beside him doing mathematics exercises for school.

The house stood behind the shop. Between them was a courtyard two cubits wide, where Lalita Devi had planted four marigolds beside the tulsī altar. New leaves were coming in.

A little after sunset, the growl of engines came from the west. Motor vehicles rarely entered the hamlet; as soon as the sound was heard, the dogs began barking all at once.

Three vehicles stopped at the last bend in the road. Five policemen got out of the first. Two carried torches; one held a folded sheet of paper.

Harinath wiped his chain-oiled hands on a cloth and stood up. "Whom are you looking for?"

The policeman in front unfolded the sheet. "Copper wire was stolen from the market warehouse last night. A few names have come up during questioning."

"My name?" Harinath's voice did not rise; it merely became smaller.

A finger moved down the page. "Harinath Sah. You repair bicycles?"

"Yes."

"We will look at wire, tools, scrap—everything."

Harinath glanced once at Lalita. She stood half-hidden by the doorway. Revati did not close her notebook; only her pencil stopped moving.

The policemen entered the shop. The ground had not dried. Heavy boot soles crossed the bricks and carried mud all the way inside.

The first mark appeared just inside the entrance—a broad heel, a slanted cut in the middle, five grooves at the front. Revati's eyes fixed on it.

One policeman overturned the pile of tyres. Another picked up a piece of old wire. "What is this?"

Harinath said, "Brake wire. Every piece you see is entered with its account in this register."

He opened a wooden drawer and took out the ledger containing customers' names. Its pages had yellowed with oil stains.

The policeman turned the pages, but he looked less at the words than at Harinath's hands—soot under the nails, an old cut on the thumb, chain oil across the palm.

"We will see the house."

Lalita opened the door fully. "Look."

The first boot in the courtyard sank into the soft earth near the marigolds. The second step went past the tulsi altar. The third boot came down squarely on a new marigold.

Lalita said nothing. She only bent, lifted the broken stem, then let it fall.

Revati went inside carrying her notebook. It seemed to her that she was seeing everything, yet the clearest things of all were the footprints.

The sack of paddy was opened. A torch was shone beneath the bed. Clothes from the old chest were pulled out. The beam climbed as high as the bamboo rafters.

One policeman picked up Revati's schoolbag and turned it upside down. Two textbooks, a geometry box, a small pencil pouch, and a half-eaten guava fell out.

Revati bent to pick up the guava, and a boot pressed down on the corner of her mathematics notebook.

"Move," she said softly.

Whether the policeman heard her was unclear. He moved toward the next room. A crescent-shaped print of mud remained on the corner of the notebook.

In the last room of the house, Harinath's elderly mother was asleep. She sat up. "Who are all these people?"

"It is a search, Ma," Harinath said.

Looking for her spectacles, the old woman said, "Let them search, but there is medicine in that box. Don't turn it upside down."

The policeman did not overturn the box. He opened it, looked from above, and put it back.

In twenty minutes the whole house had changed. The things were the same, but no longer in their places. The bedsheet was left unfolded, the paddy sack half open, clothes outside the chest, and seven or eight deep boot prints marked the courtyard.

Nothing was recovered.

Folding the sheet of paper, the leading policeman said, "Come to the station tomorrow and give a statement."

Harinath asked, "Why did my name come up?"

"It came up during questioning. You'll understand there."

The vehicles drove away. The dogs' barking receded slowly into the distance, but the mud in the courtyard kept glistening.

Lalita went first to the marigolds. There was no way to straighten the broken stem. She pressed the soil around its root and packed it firm.

Harinath went to the shop. He stood the overturned tyres up again, counted the tools, and put the ledger back in the drawer.

Revati opened her notebook and looked at the page bearing the crescent of mud. The exercise question read: "Find the perimeter of the given figure."

With her pencil, she drew a line around the mud print.

Lalita asked, "What are you doing?"

"I am not going to erase this mark."

"It is mud. It will dirty the notebook."

Revati did not answer.

Harinath did not sleep until late that night. More than the fear of being accused of theft, what hurt him was the thought that everyone in the hamlet who had seen the vehicles would have made up a different story by morning.

At dawn he went to the police station. After sitting on a bench for two hours, an officer asked where he had been the previous night, which customers had come, and where he sold old wire.

Harinath showed the names in the ledger. Three customers' bicycles had been in his shop that night. One had been fitted with a new brake wire.

The officer copied the entries onto a sheet. "Go. If necessary, we will call you again."

"Who gave you my name?"

Without looking up, the officer said, "The investigation is continuing."

When Harinath returned, he found that the hamlet already knew he had been to the police station.

At the tea shop two men stopped talking. A third said, "I had believed from the start that Harinath was not that kind of man."

Harinath did not try to smile. "If you already believed it, why did you need to say it?"

The man fell silent.

In the afternoon the clouds broke open. The first heavy drop struck the tin, then rain began so fiercely that the road and the courtyard became the same colour.

Revati stood in the doorway watching the marks.

First the edge of the heel dissolved. Then the grooves in the middle filled. After a few moments, water gathered in the deepest print, the one beside the broken marigold.

From inside, Lalita called, "You'll get wet."

Revati took one step back, but did not take her eyes away.

Within half an hour the courtyard was level again. Where the boots had been, only a thin sheet of water shone.

Revati opened the notebook page once more. The mud print had dried to a pale brown. The rain could not reach it.

For the next two days fewer customers came to the shop. Those who did asked more about the theft than about their bicycles.

"How much wire was stolen?"

"How many people were caught?"

"How did your name come up?"

Harinath gave the same answer to every question: "The investigation is continuing."

On the third day the stolen copper wire was found at a scrap dealer's shop in the market. Two young men were arrested with the dealer; both were from another block. By evening the news had reached Sonapur.

At the tea shop the same people said, "See? Harinath's name came up for nothing."

Harinath was not there. He was in his shop straightening the bent wheel of a child's bicycle.

In the evening a policeman came again. This time he was alone and on foot. He said, "The matter has been cleared up. Your statement is no longer needed."

Harinath kept turning the wheel. "All right."

The policeman stood there for a while. "That day the house must have been badly disturbed."

Harinath stopped the wheel. "We put everything back in its place."

The policeman's eyes moved toward the courtyard. After the rain, the earth was level again, almost new. Near the marigolds, one broken stem had dried black.

"All the marks have washed away," the policeman said.

Revati had been listening from inside. She came out carrying the notebook.

"This one did not wash away," she said, opening the page.

A pencil line ran around the crescent of dried mud. Beside it she had drawn five small grooves with her own hand, the ones she had seen in the first boot mark by the doorway that night.

The policeman looked at the page. "Why have you kept this?"

Revati thought for a few moments. "What if someone later says nothing happened?"

An answer came to the policeman's face and stopped there. He did not reach out to touch the page.

Harinath said quietly, "What children see, grown people forget quickly."

The policeman lowered his head and left. This time there was no mud on his shoes; after the rain, the road had hardened.

A few weeks passed. The marigolds flowered again, but the plant whose stem had broken did not survive. Lalita planted another one in its place.

The number of customers at the shop returned to what it had been. The people at the tea shop found a new subject to discuss. No further summons came from the police station.

Revati's mathematics notebook kept filling. After the page with the mud print came triangles, fractions, perimeter, area.

One day, while checking the notebook, the teacher noticed the stain. "Why is this page so dirty?"

Revati said, "Sir, this is a measurement."

"Of what?"

Revati wondered whether to answer. Then she said only, "A foot."

The teacher lifted his red pen but made no mark on the stain. He put a tick beside the answer to the exercise.

Before winter began, Lalita levelled the courtyard soil again. New marigolds bloomed in a row.

Harinath extended the two rows of bricks in front of the shop so that less mud would be carried inside during the rains.

As Revati put the old notebook into a trunk, she ran her finger once over the page with the mud mark. The stain had faded, but the pencil line remained clear.

Outside, fresh rain began to fall. In front of the bricks, the prints of two customers' slippers appeared and dissolved at once.

Revati watched from the window, closed the notebook, and sat down with a new exercise book.

In the courtyard, water kept levelling every mark. Inside the house, the measure of the night that had entered without permission remained—on someone's page, in a broken plant, in someone's silence.

The Night Boat

After evening fell, the colour of the water could no longer be made out. After a day of rain, the Kamla River had merged fields, footpaths, and courtyard boundaries into a single muddy sheet. From the high bamboo platform in Mahua Tola, people could see only two or four lamps flickering in the distance, marking where houses stood amid the water.

Jagnath Mallah ran his hand along the belly of his small boat. Made from old bamboo planks, it had already carried people in three trips to the high road that day. A strip of cloth had been stuffed into one split, where water kept seeping in. His son Deepak continued bailing it out with a bowl.

"We are not going again," Jagnath said. "It is getting darker. The current is stronger too."

Deepak nodded in agreement. The exhaustion of the day trembled in his arms. Fifteen or twenty people were on the platform. Some had houses completely submerged, some half; someone had left a cow tied behind, someone sacks of paddy. But by evening everyone had understood that taking a boat out at night was not merely taking out a boat—it was weighing lives.

Just then a voice came from the east—unclear at first, then again.

"Hey, Jagnath!"

Someone raised a lamp below the bamboo platform. The voice came again. "The elder daughter-in-law's labour pains have started!"

Whispers began through the hamlet. The voice was coming from Ramcharan's house. His home stood below the embankment, near the river's old channel. Ramcharan had come to the platform during the day, but his pregnant daughter-in-law Sunita had refused to leave the house. She had said, "The water will go down in two days."

Jagnath closed his eyes and listened for a few moments. The voice broke apart in the wind. Then a woman's groan came through clearly.

Deepak said softly, "Babu, we have to go."

Jagnath did not answer at once. His eyes went to the boat. "No more than four people. And not through the middle of the current—we'll take the side route."

Suresh Mandal, the mukhiya's representative sitting on the platform, stood up. "I'll go. There's an old date palm near Ramcharan's house. We can hold the boat there."

Harinarayan Sahu rose as well. His shop was at the bend in the road, and his wife and two children were stranded on the roof of their house. All day he had kept saying that his family should be brought first on the next trip. Now he came to Jagrnath and said, "I'll go too, but first to my house. It's on the same way. The children are on the roof."

Suresh looked at him. "Sunita's labour pains have started."

Harinarayan's voice hardened. "Are my children not lives? They've been sitting on the roof for three hours."

Silence spread across the platform.

Untying the boat, Jagrnath said, "The boat will decide the route. We'll go where the current allows. But at one time this boat can hold only one crisis."

Deepak picked up the oar. Suresh put in a lantern, a blanket, and a long bamboo pole. Harinarayan took two empty sacks and a rope. The boat pushed off.

For the first fifty cubits the water was calm. The boat slid over submerged paddy fields. Here and there the tops of plants broke through the surface. Jagrnath kept sounding the depth with the end of the oar.

Ahead, the water spun in circles at one spot. By day there had been an unpaved road there. Now the road had been cut away, and the river's main current was forcing itself through the breach.

"Straight ahead will be faster," Harinarayan said. "You can see the roof of my house on the other side."

Jagrnath lowered the lantern light toward the water. Small pieces of debris were racing in one direction. "Straight ahead will get us to the river faster," he said. "We turn right."

Harinarayan said nothing. The boat turned right. On that curve, Ramcharan's house came first.

A little farther on, they found a bamboo thicket half-bent into the water. Its branches blocked the way. Deepak pushed them aside one by one with the pole. One branch brushed the lantern glass. Suresh caught it at once.

"If the light goes out, we'll all be guessing in the dark," he said.

The parapet of Ramcharan's house came into view. He stood on the roof in water up to his knees. His wife was by an inside window. Sunita's groans were now clear.

"It's late," Ramcharan said. "Even lifting her is difficult."

The boat could not reach the doorway; a thick neem branch had fallen in front of it. Jagrnath tried to bring the boat alongside a window. Deepak held onto bamboo to keep the boat steady. Suresh and Ramcharan went inside.

Harinarayan sat in the boat staring toward his own house. Far away, a small light flickered into view now and then, then vanished behind the bamboo.

“My younger boy has a fever,” he said quietly.

Jagnath heard him but did not answer.

After a while Suresh came out and said, “Sunita can’t walk. Even the cot won’t come out.”

Jagnath measured the width of the window. “Leave the cot. Make a sling from the blanket.”

Ropes were tied to the four corners of the blanket. Sunita was slowly brought to the window. Her mother-in-law was gathering a small bottle of oil, a cloth, and an old piece of dhoti kept for the newborn.

“Ma, nothing else,” Sunita groaned. “Just hold me.”

At last Sunita was laid in the boat. Her mother-in-law climbed in too. Ramcharan tried to board, but Jagnath stopped him with a hand. “The boat is full now. You stay here. We’ll come back.”

Ramcharan’s face fell. “My daughter-in-law...”

“Suresh is with her. Deepak is here. I am here. Stay on the roof and keep the lamp high.”

The boat turned.

Harinarayan suddenly said, “My house?”

Jagnath looked at the water rising in the bottom of the boat. Sunita groaned. Her mother-in-law stroked her head.

“The platform first,” Jagnath said.

Harinarayan sprang up. The boat rocked. “No! My house is only two bends away now. Will the children stay on the roof all night?”

Deepak said sharply, “Sit down! The boat will overturn.”

Harinarayan sat, but his breathing was rapid. “To all of you she is one daughter-in-law. To me there are three people on that roof.”

Suresh opened his mouth to say something, then fell silent.

Jagnath kept the boat straight. The water was now striking the left side hard. Turning right toward the platform was safe; Harinarayan’s house lay to the left, but the fierce current at the breach stood between them.

Sunita opened her eyes and looked at Harinarayan. Her voice was barely audible. “Sahuji, you go. They’ll get me to the platform.”

Harinarayan did not understand her. “Where am I supposed to go after leaving the boat?”

“I’m saying... drop me there, then go.”

At that moment Sunita’s mother-in-law caught her hand. “Child, keep quiet.”

Harinarayan's face changed again. He looked at the wet blanket spread near Sunita's feet. Then at the tiny light of his house far away.

"How long to the platform?" he asked.

"Fifteen minutes, if the current doesn't rise," Jagrnath said.

"And then my house?"

"In this boat?" Jagrnath paused for a moment. "If the water rises farther, coming back may be difficult."

After that answer, only the sound of the oars remained in the boat.

Ahead, the crown of a submerged mango tree appeared. Someone had tied a red gamchha to one thick branch—a marker for the safe route made during the day. Jagrnath turned the boat toward it.

Just then a sharp cry came from behind—from the direction of Harinarayan's house.

"Babu!"

Harinarayan sprang up like lightning. "That's my daughter!"

Jagrnath heard it too. No second cry came.

"Turn the boat!" Harinarayan said.

Deepak looked at his father. Suresh looked at Sunita's mother-in-law. No one had an answer on his face.

Jagrnath stopped rowing. The boat began drifting slowly in the current. He knew: the platform was to the right, Harinarayan's house to the left. On one side a woman in labour; on the other a feverish child and a family stranded on a roof. The small boat had no room to take everyone at once. Whatever decision was made, some part of it could later seem wrong.

He asked Harinarayan, "Can you swim?"

"Yes, but not in this current."

"As far as the mango tree?"

Harinarayan looked at the water. The distance was not more than twenty cubits, but no one knew where the ridges of the fields lay below.

Jagrnath opened his spare rope. "I'll hold the boat beside the tree. You climb onto it. I'll get Sunita to the platform and come back at once. From there you can hear your house and keep watching the light. If anything changes, untie the red gamchha and wave it."

Harinarayan stared at him in disbelief. "Alone here?"

"If we turn left, everyone is at risk. If we go all the way to the platform, your mind will not rest. This is the middle course."

Suresh said, "I'll stay on the tree with him."

Jagrnath shook his head. "Then we'll be short two hands for getting Sunita onto the platform."

Harinarayan looked once more toward the distant roof. He looked once at Sunita's face. Then without another word he tied the rope around his waist.

The boat reached the mango tree. Deepak caught a branch. Harinarayan carefully climbed onto it. Jagrnath tied the other end of the rope to the tree so he could find the place in the dark when he returned.

"I'll come back," Jagrnath said.

Harinarayan said only, "Quickly."

The boat moved again.

The platform was no longer far, but Sunita's pain intensified. Her mother-in-law placed Sunita's head in her lap. Suresh kept probing the water with the bamboo pole. Deepak's hands were trembling, but he did not let go of the oar.

As soon as they reached the platform, the women climbed down to meet them. Two men held the boat steady with ropes. Sunita was lifted up in the blanket sling.

Asha Didi, who was there, immediately took her into a corner enclosed with bamboo.

Jagrnath picked up the bowl to bail the water that had collected in the boat.

Deepak said, "Babu, sit for two minutes."

"Harinarayan is on the tree."

Someone on the platform said, "Don't go out again tonight. The water is rising."

Jagrnath did not answer. He remembered his own words—We are not going again. Only half an hour earlier.

He tightened the cloth stuffed into the split in the boat. Suresh began climbing in.

"You stay," Jagrnath said.

"He is sitting on that tree partly because of me too," Suresh replied.

Deepak was already in the boat. The three set out.

On the return journey the wind was against them. The lantern flame kept shrinking. The red gamchha on the mango tree could not be seen.

"It hasn't washed away, has it?" Deepak asked.

Jagrnath's oar stopped for a moment. "The tree won't have washed away."

A little farther on, a dark shape moved on a branch. It was Harinarayan. He was not waving the gamchha.

"Why not?" Suresh asked when the boat came close.

Climbing down, Harinarayan said, "The light at the house is still there. No one called again."

He sat in the boat, but this time he did not immediately insist on going to the house. He only said, "You know how strong the current is at the breach."

Jagrnath answered, "I know."

For a few moments all four remained still beside the tree.

Then the light at Harinarayan's house swung rapidly three times.

"That is a signal," Harinarayan said. "My wife swings the lamp three times like that when she needs help."

Jagrnath turned the boat left.

This time no one argued over the decision. Sunita had reached the platform safely. The boat was lighter. The danger remained, but its meaning had changed.

At the breach Jagrnath used the bamboo pole instead of the oar. Deepak kept the rope ready. Suresh leaned forward watching for submerged shrubs. Twice the current tried to spin the boat. The roof of Harinarayan's house was now close.

On the roof were his wife Kamla, his daughter Rani, and eight-year-old Sonu. Sonu was wrapped in a blanket, burning with fever.

"Why did you wave the lamp three times?" Harinarayan asked as they reached the roof.

Kamla replied, "The rear wall behind the thatch has fallen. Water is coming inside."

Sonu was taken down first. Then Rani. Kamla climbed in last. For five adults, two children, and their belongings, the boat was too small.

Jagrnath said, "Harinarayan, you stay here. I'll take the family to the platform and come back."

This time Harinarayan did not protest. He sat down on the roof. "Leave the rope."

Jagrnath left the rope with him.

As Rani sat in the boat, she asked, "Babu isn't coming?"

Kamla pulled her into her lap. "Babu will come later."

Jagrnath heard her. The word "will" floated across the night water.

The second journey to the platform was harder than the first, but no one raised their voice. Sonu kept whimpering with fever. Deepak dipped his wet gamchha in the water and placed it on the boy's forehead. Kamla kept looking back.

As soon as they reached the platform, people surrounded the child. Someone looked for warm water, someone for dry clothes, someone for medicine.

Jagrnath turned the boat for the third time. Now only he, Deepak, and Suresh were aboard.

"Tonight it isn't a boat moving—it's decisions," Suresh said softly.

Jagrnath stopped him. "Don't say that. A boat has wood, rope, water, and weight. Calling it a decision does not make the current weaker."

Suresh fell silent.

Harinarayan was found on the roof exactly where they had left him. One section of the wall had indeed collapsed. He had brought out a small iron box from inside the house.

“Not that,” Jagrnath said. “No extra weight in the boat.”

Harinarayan placed a hand on the box. “The shop accounts, land papers, the children’s certificates—everything is in this.”

Deepak looked down into the belly of the boat.

For a few moments Harinarayan held the box. Then he opened it, took out the papers on top, put them into an old oilskin pouch, and left the box on the roof.

“If the house remains, I’ll find the box,” he said. “If the house doesn’t remain, what will I do with the box?”

The boat moved toward the platform again.

After midnight the rain eased. On the platform Sunita gave birth to a daughter. In the light of an old lantern, Asha Didi wrapped the baby in cloth. No one felt like celebrating loudly; the exhausted people simply looked at one another. Far away, Ramcharan kept a lamp burning on his roof. There was still no way to send him the news.

Harinarayan sat beside his family. Sonu’s fever had come down a little. Rani had fallen asleep. Kamla was drying her wet hair.

Jagrnath tightened the boat rope around a bamboo post of the platform. Deepak sat beside him.

“Babu,” Deepak asked, “was it right to bring Sunita first, or should we have gone to Sahuji’s house?”

Jagrnath did not answer for a long time.

“People see right and wrong clearly afterward,” he said at last. “In night water, all you can see is who is in the boat at that moment, where the current is strongest, and whether another trip is possible.”

Deepak remained silent.

At dawn the water became steadier. The boat went again to Ramcharan’s roof. He was found alive, exhausted, and silent. When he was told he had a granddaughter, he said nothing at first. Only after sitting in the boat did he ask, “Is Sunita all right?”

“She is all right,” Jagrnath said.

The iron box from Harinarayan’s house was found on the roof two days later. Water had got inside. The ink in the account books had run, but the papers he had removed into the oilskin pouch had survived.

A week later, when the flood receded, the people of Mahua Tola returned to their homes. Some called Jagrnath a hero, some asked why he had not gone to Harinarayan’s house on the first trip, some said the boat should never have been taken out at night at all. Everyone had the light of hindsight.

Jagnath spoke little in those discussions. He turned the boat upside down and let it dry in the sun. He removed the cloth stuffed into the split and fitted a new strip.

Deepak found a small piece of red thread inside the boat. It had probably torn from the edge of the gamchha tied to the mango tree and caught in the boat.

He showed the thread to Jagnath.

Jagnath did not throw it away. He tied it to the front bamboo peg of the boat.

“As a marker?” Deepak asked.

“No,” Jagnath said, “not for memory. So that next time, in the dark, we can find the end of the rope quickly.”

Deepak smiled.

By evening the boat was ready again. The river was returning to its channel. The platform was empty. In the distance a new lamp burned near Ramcharan’s house. Harinarayan was lowering the wet iron box from his roof.

Jagnath left the boat at the bank and walked home. The short journey through the night had ended, but no decision inside him had been carved into stone. There remained only a few faces, the sound of water, the mango tree, the red gamchha, and the weight of a boat—a weight that had kept changing again and again through that night.

A Shard of Glass

Morning sunlight was slowly descending over the awnings on the eastern side of the market. The night's rain had stopped, but water was still rushing swiftly through the drains. In front of the cloth shop, the oil shop, the blacksmith's shed—everywhere people were sweeping, turning over wet sacks, and setting wooden boards out to dry.

At the bend in the square, the front glass of "Mithila Optical" was split through the middle. The lower corner had broken away and fallen outside, while the larger part remained wedged in the wooden frame. Cracks had spread through it like a spider's web. On the table inside, empty spectacle frames, a small screwdriver, scraps of cloth, and the eye-test letter chart trembled in the damp air.

The shop owner, Harinath, had been there since the night before. His eyes were red; he had not slept. At about two in the morning, a small vehicle carrying grain had skidded while taking the bend, its front wheel sinking into the drain. A bamboo pole projecting from the rear had swung around and struck the shop glass. The vehicle had escaped serious damage, the driver had suffered a small injury to his head, but the glass had shattered.

Harinath had spent the hours until morning securing the frame. He had swept together the pieces that had fallen to the ground and wrapped them in thick paper. The part still caught in the frame he was afraid to touch. Its edges were sharp.

His eight-year-old daughter Meera arrived from home carrying his lunchbox. Her mother had told her, "Feed Babu, then go to school."

Meera stopped in front of the shop. She had heard about the night's accident, but this was the first time she had seen the broken glass.

"Why is this still here?" she asked.

Leaning the broom against the wall, Harinath said, "The glazier will come by noon. Don't touch it now."

Meera placed the lunchbox on the table. She stepped inside the doorway, but her eyes remained fixed on the glass. Morning sunlight had now crossed the square and was filtering through the leaves of the peepal tree opposite.

A thin ray fell on the thick edge of the broken pane. Perhaps water was trapped somewhere inside the glass, or a drop from the night's rain was still

caught along the edge. On the wall, beside the eye-test chart, thin lines of red, yellow, green, and blue appeared.

Meera fell silent.

"Babu," she said softly, "look at the wall."

Harinath did not look at first. He was opening the lunchbox.

"What?"

"Colours."

Harinath raised his eyes. A small band of colours lay on the wall. It trembled as the leaves shifted in the sunlight.

"It's the edge of the glass," Harinath said. "The sunlight has broken."

Meera laughed. "Does sunlight break?"

"No," Harinath said. "I said it wrongly. The sunlight is appearing in different colours."

He paused over his own sentence. All night he had been telling everyone, "The glass is broken; everything is ruined." Now, seeing the colours on the wall, he realised that even the language in which one looks at something broken keeps changing. But he did not place that thought upon his daughter.

Meera went near the wall, but kept away from the glass. She put her palm against the band of colour. Red and blue lines fell across her hand.

"It looks like the rainbow we made at school," she said.

Harinath took his first mouthful of rice. "A rainbow is best up in the sky. If you are looking at one through glass, keep your distance."

Meera drew her hand back.

The market was slowly opening. Nandu, the betel-shop owner opposite, came over. He looked at the pane and shook his head.

"A big loss?"

Harinath said, "New glass, labour, straightening the frame—we'll see when it is all added up."

Nandu looked over the cracks. "Last night people were saying a truck had driven straight into the shop."

"Not a truck. A small goods vehicle. It did not enter the shop. A bamboo pole struck the glass."

"Rumour is bigger than the market," Nandu said with a laugh, and went away.

Meera looked again at the colours on the wall. "Do rumours break too?"

This time Harinath smiled. "They spread first. They break later."

At half past eight the school bell sounded in the distance. Meera gathered up the lunchbox. As she left, she said again, "Babu, when the glazier comes, don't throw away this corner that makes the colours."

Harinath did not become irritated. "It's sharp. You are not taking it home."

“I won’t take it home. I only want to see it.”

Meera left.

By ten o’clock three customers had come. An old man wanted the arm of his spectacles straightened, a student had lost a screw from his glasses, and a woman left an old frame to have new lenses fitted. Harinath worked as on an ordinary day, but the broken pane outside kept drawing his eyes.

Before noon, Subhash the glazier arrived. Under his arm were a measuring tape, rope, and thick gloves. The moment he saw the crack, he said, “The whole thing has to come out. The frame has been pushed slightly inward.”

Harinath asked the cost. Subhash wrote a figure on a sheet of paper. Harinath frowned.

“That much?”

“It is thick glass, and this is a shopfront. If you put in a thin pane, it will break again quickly.”

Harinath fell silent. The previous month he had paid his son’s college fees. The roof at home leaked too. The shop’s savings were small.

Subhash said, “For the time being I can nail up wooden boards. You can put in the glass two weeks later.”

Harinath looked out at the road. Dust, water, children, bicycles—the open shop would remain unsafe.

“Put it in today,” he said.

Subhash put on his gloves. First he pasted thick paper along the cracks, then began loosening the nails in the frame.

Harinath moved the things on the table farther back. A sack was spread on the ground.

Subhash said, “Keep the children away.”

“She has gone to school,” Harinath said.

Removing the broken pane from the frame was not easy. One corner was jammed. Subhash slowly lifted the wooden strip. Harinath held the other side. The glass grated once, but the entire section came out in one piece.

Sunlight fell again on its thick edge. This time a thin arc of colour appeared not on the wall but on the ground. Red and green shone in front of Subhash’s shoes.

Subhash looked for a moment. “The old glass was thick,” he said. “That is why the colours show more strongly along the edge.”

Harinath remembered Meera’s words: “Don’t throw away the corner that makes the colours.”

“One minute,” he said.

He brought a piece of chalk from inside and made a small mark on the ground where the colours had fallen.

Subhash laughed. “When the glass goes, the colours will go too.”

"I know," Harinath said.

"Then why mark the place?"

"My daughter will ask when she comes back from school."

Subhash said nothing. He laid the pane on the sack. With a light tap of the hammer he separated the sharp corner. A safe thick piece with a clean edge was placed to one side; the rest of the broken glass went into a box.

Harinath asked, "Can anything be made from this small thick piece?"

"Nothing useful for the shop," Subhash said. "If I grind the edges, you can keep it as a sample. But keep it away from a child's hands."

Harinath said, "Grind it."

Subhash picked up the piece. It was about the size of a palm, not triangular but like a rough quadrilateral. One edge was smooth from the original factory grinding; the others were freshly broken and sharp. Subhash kept wetting a stone and grinding down the sharp sides. Then he wrapped the piece in thick cloth and put it on the table.

"Don't let her touch it yet," he said. "I'll check the edges once more."

The new pane was installed before evening. The frame was straightened. Market dust was kept outside once again. The new glass was clear and uncracked. Harinath felt relieved when he looked at it, yet also sensed an unfamiliar emptiness. The cracks in the old pane had been the mark of the night's accident; the new glass had almost erased the event from the outside.

Subhash took his labour charge and left.

At three o'clock Meera returned from school. Her bag was wet; a light rain had fallen again on the way. She stopped in front of the shop and looked at the new pane.

"Where did the colours go?" was her first question.

Harinath showed her the chalk mark. "They fell here."

"And the glass?"

Harinath took out the piece wrapped in cloth, but did not put it into Meera's hand. He laid it on the table and unwrapped it.

"Here it is. The edges have been ground. Just look."

Meera bent over it. There seemed to be nothing special about the piece. The sun was behind clouds now. The glass looked grey.

"There is no rainbow," she said, disappointed.

Harinath said, "The colours were not locked inside the glass."

"Then where were they?"

"Sunlight, glass, and the angle of looking—when all three came together, they appeared."

Meera thought about this. "Will it happen again tomorrow?"

"It may. In this piece, in the new pane, in a drop of water—anywhere."

Meera did not ask to touch the fragment. She took out her notebook, placed it on the table, and began drawing the shape of the broken pane. Through the middle she drew thin lines in seven colours.

Harinath kept polishing a customer's spectacles.

In the evening the driver whose bamboo pole had broken the glass came to the shop. His name was Shambhu. A bandage was tied around his head. He came inside and stood silently.

"We couldn't talk properly last night," he said. "I will pay half the cost."

Harinath looked at him. He had been very angry during the night. The driver had gone to hospital, so the matter had remained unfinished. People in the market had given different advice—take the full amount, file a police complaint, stop the vehicle.

"Why half?" Harinath asked.

Shambhu said, "The vehicle skidded. The drain cover had shifted. It was my mistake that I did not slow down at the bend. But I cannot pay the whole cost now."

Harinath looked at the new pane.

"Pay whatever you can now. I'll write down the balance," he said.

Shambhu took folded notes from his pocket. Harinath counted them. It was less than he had expected, but he said nothing. He entered the amount in the register.

Meera sat in a corner drawing. Shambhu noticed the colours in her notebook.

"A rainbow?"

Meera said, "It was in the broken glass."

Shambhu lowered his face. "It broke because of me."

Meera immediately said, "The colours were not because of you."

Harinath looked at his daughter. So did Shambhu.

Straightening the yellow line in her notebook, Meera said, "Babu says sunlight, glass, and the angle are all needed."

Shambhu gave a faint laugh. "So my only job was to break the glass?"

An unwilling smile came to Harinath's face. "Don't do that job again."

None of the three laughed, but some of the stiffness inside the shop loosened.

After Shambhu left, Meera asked, "What if he doesn't pay the rest?"

Closing the register, Harinath said, "Then I'll ask again. The account has not been erased."

"And the colours?"

"There is no accounting for colours."

Before closing the shop that night, Harinath did not leave the ground piece of glass on the table. He placed it on a high little shelf on the wall, beyond a child's reach. Behind it he stood a sheet of white paper upright.

The next morning the sunlight was clear. Peepal leaves kept moving. At about ten past eight, one ray reached the shelf. Passing through the thick, smooth edge of the glass, it raised a thin spread of colour on the white paper.

This time Harinath saw it first.

Meera had not yet arrived.

He looked at the clock, then went back to work. The colours remained for a few minutes, shifted, thinned, and disappeared.

When Meera arrived with the lunchbox, Harinath said, "It came again today."

"I didn't see it!" Meera said unhappily.

Harinath had made a small chalk mark beneath the shelf.

"Come a little early tomorrow at ten past eight."

Meera said, "School?"

"You are not missing school. Come five minutes early, then go."

The next day was cloudy; no colours came. On the third day the sun appeared, but the angle of the ray had changed. The colours fell on the wall behind the paper. On the fourth day Meera had a holiday; she sat and waited patiently.

At eight-oh-seven, nothing. At eight-oh-nine, a white gleam. At eight-eleven, a thin red edge. Then yellow, green, blue.

Meera watched without breathing.

Harinath was repairing an old pair of spectacles for a customer. He kept his eyes not on his daughter but on the screwdriver.

"Has it come?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then look."

This time Meera did not put her palm on the wall. She simply watched from a distance. The colours moved slowly. Five minutes later only a white patch remained.

"Babu," she said, "does that mean broken things should not always be thrown away?"

Harinath stopped the screwdriver.

"Not all of them," he said. "Some have to be thrown away. Some can be repaired. Some change their use. Some remain only as memory. First you have to see what is safe and what is useful."

Meera looked at the glass on the shelf.

"Is this useful?"

Harinath thought before answering.

“Not in the way a shop window is,” he said. “But it teaches you about sunlight, reminds me of the expense, and perhaps reminds Shambhu to slow down at the bend. That is not very little work.”

Meera laughed.

Outside, the market had fully awakened. Bicycle bells, vegetable sellers’ calls, the blacksmith’s hammer, the feet of children running toward school—all the sounds were mingling together. Through the new front pane the square was clearly visible. The small piece of old glass lay still on the shelf.

When the sunlight shifted away, its colours disappeared.

Harinath did not cover it again with cloth. The fragment remained where it was—not a prize from an accident, not a miracle. Only a safely ground piece of glass that, at the right moment, revealed the divisions within light.

The Field Turned to Ash

The light of dawn had not yet fully broken, but the southern sky looked not grey but sooty. During the night the smoke had risen very high; now only its smell remained caught close to the earth.

Ramlochan Yadav stood on the ridge of his field. Until yesterday, where the wheat ears had swayed together in one direction with the wind, there now remained black stalks, ash, and twisted metal wire. The night's fire had run from one field to the next. Some said an electric wire had fallen; some said smouldering straw in the fallow land; some said the stub of a bidi. Ramlochan trusted none of the explanations. Before him lay the consequence more plainly than any cause.

He bent and lifted a handful of ash. It was so fine that the moment it settled on his palm, it flew away. The earth beneath was no longer hot, but it was loose and crumbly.

From behind, his son Arun called, "Babu, shall I bring sacks first? Let's gather whatever is left."

Ramlochan did not answer. He walked toward the eastern corner of the field. Two old kans-grass stakes had once stood there. One had burned completely; the other leaned halfway down. Ramlochan brushed away the ash of the burned stake with his hand, scraped at the soil, and found a small hollow.

"Arun," he called, "bring four small bamboo splints."

Arun was startled. "The boundary now?"

"Yes."

"The whole crop has turned to ash. Why the boundary first?"

Ramlochan said only, "When everything becomes one colour, the boundaries have to be marked first."

Arun ran toward the house.

The night's fire had touched the fields of five farmers. Ramlochan's wheat had suffered the most. To the west was Joginder Sahu's field, where half the lentils had survived. To the north lay Rita Devi's small strip, where the mustard had already been harvested and only stubble remained. After the fire, the rise and fall of the ridges had disappeared. In places the ash lay so level that the old lines of the fields could no longer be seen.

Ramlochan walked while repeating in his mind measurements from his father's time—not one hundred and thirty-six paces from the eastern corner to the west, but one hundred and thirty-two as far as the bend of the drain; seven paces south from the old jujube stump on the north. He was not counting steps as he walked; he was recognising places. But the fire had changed the shape of those places.

Arun returned with bamboo splints, a hammer, and a bundle of red thread.

“Why red thread?”

“It will show from a distance against the ash.”

Ramlochan drove the first splint into the hollow where the old stake had stood. He moved north to place the second. Joginder Sahu was already standing there. The sleeve of his kurta had been blackened by smoke.

“Ramlochan,” Joginder said, “the boundary wasn't here. It was two hands that way.”

Ramlochan stopped.

“You remember?”

“Would I not know the ridge of my own field?”

Arun tightened his grip on the hammer. His face grew tense.

Ramlochan sat down on the ground. He began clearing away ash. Joginder bent down too. After a while they found a hard strip of earth beneath the burned grass—the old ridge, whose upper part had dissolved in the fire and the night's water.

Joginder touched its edge with his toe. “It's in the middle.”

Ramlochan said, “Then we'll put the bamboo in the middle.”

Joginder said nothing. He turned back toward his field.

Arun said quietly, “He was asking for two hands.”

Driving the splint down with the hammer, Ramlochan said, “Quarrels rise quickly over ash. Once the ridge is found, the matter is over.”

The sun climbed higher. The dew dried from the ash. Ramlochan's footprints appeared and disappeared across the blackened earth. He kept marking the four corners. Small knots of red thread trembled in the wind.

People from the village began coming to the fields one by one. Some crushed burned ears between their fingers, some estimated losses, some asked when the government people would come.

“We should take photographs first,” said Mahesh, the ward member. “Everything that burned should be visible.”

Ramlochan replied, “We will. But if the boundary is clear, the meaning of the photographs will be clear too.”

Mahesh looked at the red thread. “Your crop has burned, and you are measuring the land.”

Ramlochan did not smile. "The crop belonged to this year. The boundary will remain next year too."

By noon all four corners had been marked. But one problem remained on the western side. The bend of the drain had not been destroyed by the fire but by the wheel of a tractor that had raced in during the night to help extinguish it. The earth had caved in and water had left the drain and spread into the field. The old marker was gone.

Ramlochan had an old tin box brought from home. Inside were papers, old packets of seed, fertiliser slips, loan receipts, and a yellowed map. His father, Bhola Yadav, had made some marks on it in red ink.

Arun spread the map out. "This is hard to read."

"We won't read the map alone," Ramlochan said. "We'll match it with the ground."

Rita Devi came too. The boundary of her field met the same drain. Pulling her sari tightly over her head, she said, "If my husband were alive, he would remember. All I remember is that in the rains the water used to leave first from this corner."

Ramlochan put a finger on the map. "Here is the drain, here the jujube tree, here your ridge."

Rita Devi looked toward a burned stump in the distance. "Could that be the jujube tree?"

Arun ran over. The stump was half burned, but the roots had survived. When he scraped the earth near them, he found a round stone. Old lime still clung to it.

Ramlochan let out a breath. "This is the marker."

Rita Devi said, "Then the drain turned from here."

The three of them marked the western boundary again. Ramlochan did not put bamboo there; he replanted the stone. Red thread was tied to it, though the thread looked small against the stone.

In the afternoon a government field employee arrived. A young man with a camera accompanied him. They photographed the fields, asked names, and wrote down estimates of the burned area.

"How many bighas?"

"Two bighas and eight kathas of wheat," Ramlochan said.

"Complete loss?"

"Almost."

The employee wrote on the form, then looked at the red thread. "Did you put all these markers yourselves?"

"We re-marked the old boundaries."

"Why?"

Ramlochan answered plainly, "When you measure, you should see one boundary. If someone else comes tomorrow, he should see the same boundary. Names should not change on ridges that have turned to ash."

The employee looked at him for a few moments, then wrote a note on the slip: "Boundary markers re-established by local agreement."

Joginder had been listening from a distance. He came forward and said, "Write down my western boundary too. I checked it with Ramlochan."

The employee asked his name.

By evening the crowd in the fields had thinned. People returned to their own homes and losses. Ramlochan, Arun, and Ramlochan's wife Kamla began gathering the half-burned ears that remained in the ash. A few grains inside had survived, but they smelled of smoke. Kamla broke one ear and examined it.

"Will it do for seed?"

Ramlochan shook his head. "I don't know."

Arun said, "Babu, whatever survives could be feed for the chickens."

Kamla looked at him. "And where are the chickens that survived?"

The three were silent for a moment. The night's fire had not reached the house, but the outer thatch of the cowshed had been scorched. Two chickens were missing.

Ramlochan kept putting ears into the sack.

A little distance away, Joginder was turning over a smouldering heap in his field while his son poured water on it. Rita Devi was separating burned stubble. Across the black earth, small tasks belonging to different families continued—no announcements, no meeting.

That night little food was cooked at home. The smell of smoke had settled into clothes, hair, and walls. Kamla had put lentils on the stove, while Ramlochan sat on the outer veranda untangling the leftover bundle of red thread.

Arun asked, "Babu, are you grieving more for the crop or for the erased boundary?"

Ramlochan kept untangling the thread.

"The grief of the crop strikes the stomach," he said. "The grief of an erased boundary strikes the head. The stomach's grief can be understood—how much less grain, how much more debt. The head's grief grows silently. Tomorrow someone will say two hands are mine; the day after someone will say the drain was never here. Five years from now no one may even remember where the ridge lay on the night of the fire."

Arun said, "You don't trust Joginder?"

"I do. That's why I marked it in front of him. Trust needs markers; then quarrels are fewer."

From inside Kamla said, "People also enlarge boundaries while they are making them."

Ramlochan did not laugh, but his voice softened. "That is why it was done in front of everyone."

The next morning it rained—a small, fine rain. The ash turned wet and became a black paste. The red thread tied the night before shone brightly. Some splints leaned, but remained planted.

When Ramlochan reached the field, his first task was not to straighten the splints. He began opening the western drain because water was standing in the field. Arun came with a spade. Without being asked, Joginder joined them with his own spade. Rita Devi sent an old basket from home for carrying away mud.

In three hours the waterway was open. The drain began to flow again. One knot of red thread had blackened with splashed water, but it was still visible from a distance.

After the rain stopped, Ramlochan picked up a burned wheat stalk. Beneath it, in the soil, a small green shoot was visible. It might have been some grass that had survived the fire, or some seed already lying there. He did not touch it.

Arun saw it. "Wheat?"

"I don't know."

"Will it live?"

"We'll see."

Just then the field employee came again. This time he had a measuring pole with him. In front of the three farmers, he measured the boundary. Three of the four markers Ramlochan had placed were correct. The western stone was half a hand to the south.

Arun's face fell. "Did we mark it wrong?"

Ramlochan immediately pulled up the stone. "If it is wrong, we correct it."

Joginder said, "Leave half a hand. What does it matter?"

Planting the stone in the new place, Ramlochan said, "Half a hand is small now. Five years later it can become an entire story."

The employee completed the measurement. Everyone signed. Rita Devi gave her thumbprint, then looked closely at the new boundary line on the paper.

"Is my drain still there?"

"It is," the employee said.

Rita Devi smiled. "Then it is all right."

Later in the day two village boys came to photograph the burned field. One said, "This scene looks very serious."

Ramlochan did not stop them. They photographed the red thread, the black earth, the leaning splints, the burned stalks.

“Kaka, stand here,” one said. “The whole field will come behind you.”

Lifting a sack, Ramlochan said, “I have work to do. Take a picture of the field.”

The boy laughed, but Ramlochan had already gone back to gathering burned ears.

Three days later the colour of the ash began to change. Brown patches of soil showed through the black surface. After five days the red thread faded. On the seventh day, Ramlochan pulled out one splint and planted a small brick in its place.

Arun asked, “Shall we remove the red thread?”

“When the ridge rises again.”

Rebuilding the ridge was not only about remaking the boundary. The ash had to be gathered in one place, burned wire removed, earth put back along the drain, and ash washed in from neighbouring fields separated out. Slowly the line began to appear again on the land.

A few weeks later the first compensation list was posted on the panchayat building. Ramlochan’s name was there, but the area was written as two bighas. Eight kathas had disappeared.

Arun became agitated. “See? We marked the boundary for this very reason, and still the paper is wrong.”

Ramlochan did not tear down the notice. He made a copy, attached the measurement slip, and added a copy of the employee’s note.

“Marking the boundary was not wasted work,” he said. “Now there is a basis for correcting it.”

Two days later the revised list showed two bighas and eight kathas. The compensation was not enough to clear the debt, but it could cover the initial cost of seed and fertiliser.

Counting the money, Kamla said, “The fire ate the field; the paper was eating eight kathas.”

Ramlochan said, “That is why you have to watch both sides—the soil and the paper.”

On the day of the new sowing, the ridges were clear again. Most of the red-thread knots were removed. Ramlochan left one small piece tied to the bamboo at the eastern corner. Arun asked, “Why this?”

Ramlochan said, “Until the next rains.”

“For memory?”

“No. The bamboo is new; this will keep it visible from a distance.”

Arun laughed.

When the plough moved, the ash mixed into the soil. The black layer turned under and moist brown earth came up. Burned stalks broke apart and were buried. The field began to look like a field again, but Ramlochan knew that for one season, each time a spade cut the soil, somewhere or other a thin line of soot would still appear.

By evening the sowing was complete. Joginder sat on his ridge. Looking toward Ramlochan, he said, "The morning after the fire you were rebuilding the boundary. I thought you did not care that the crop was gone."

Shaking out the empty seed sack, Ramlochan said, "I was doing it because I cared."

"I don't understand."

"When many things are destroyed at once, the place of whatever remains has to be fixed first."

Joginder was silent for a few moments. Then he pressed the earth of his ridge down with his foot.

"This ridge was half a hand on my side," he said jokingly.

Ramlochan looked at him.

Both of them burst out laughing.

Before night fell, Ramlochan looked once more at the red thread in the eastern corner. The wind was light. The small end of the thread trembled. Behind it lay the newly ploughed field, level and bare—no wheat, no black sheet of ash, no flame. Only soil, with new seed pressed beneath it.

He turned toward home. The boundary remained where it was.

A Guard Without a Gun

It was the last week of Asadh. After a day of oppressive heat, the night wind had risen from the south. The tin roof of the cooperative seed warehouse creaked at intervals, and dry neem leaves in the courtyard scraped along the wall.

Near the warehouse gate, Jagat Sahu sat on his cane stool. He was past seventy-two, yet night watch remained the main support of his livelihood. In his shirt pocket he kept a brass whistle, a small bunch of keys, and a folded paper slip. No gun. Even the only stick was an old bamboo pole propped in a corner by the gate.

Three months earlier, at a committee meeting, some members had said that the seed season required an armed guard. Inside the warehouse were sacks of certified paddy, maize, and arhar seed; outside, farmers' demand was rising.

The chairman had asked, "Jagat Kaka, do you know how to fire a gun?"

Jagat had replied, "At my age, before lifting a gun I would first have to find my spectacles."

The meeting had laughed. But no gun was arranged. The committee decided that until some temporary arrangement was made, Jagat would remain at night and the warehouse keeper by day.

Jagat took neither pride nor insult from this. His work was to check the lock on the gate, make a round along the rear wall, see whether the roof drains were clear, and blow his whistle once at eight, ten, midnight, and two. Hearing the whistle, the watchman at the milk collection centre opposite knew that Jagat was awake.

That night, after blowing the ten o'clock whistle, Jagat went around the back. The earth beside the western wall of the warehouse was damp. There had been a light shower during the day, so two sets of footprints were clear. One pair belonged to the warehouse keeper's slippers; the other to heavy shoes.

Jagat bent to look. The heavy-shoe prints were fresh. They ran along the outside of the wall and then turned toward the unpaved road.

"Whose?" he said to himself.

At ten-twenty at night, the growl of a motor came from far away. Usually even tractors rarely travelled this road after ten. The sound drew closer and stopped in front of the gate.

It was a small goods vehicle. Sudhir, the warehouse keeper, got down from the front seat. Two young men were with him, both wearing heavy shoes.

Jagat rose from the stool. "At this hour?"

Sudhir took out a paper and said, "Orders from above. Fifty sacks of paddy seed have to be sent to another centre. The vehicle must reach by dawn."

"Why wasn't I told during the day?"

"The order came in the evening."

Sudhir handed the paper to Jagat. Jagat could read, but small print strained his eyes. He switched on the bulb at the gate and put on his spectacles. The paper carried a seal, a signature, and the name of a centre.

"Where is the dispatch register?" Jagat asked.

"Inside."

"And the chairman's telephone confirmation for a night dispatch?"

Sudhir's voice hardened. "Kaka, I am the warehouse keeper. My signature is enough."

Jagat looked at the paper again. The date was today's. But the last two digits of the serial number written at the top looked familiar. In the evening he kept the day's dispatch slips with the keys. The folded slip in his pocket bore the same number—but that slip had been issued four days earlier for twenty sacks of maize seed.

He remained silent.

One of the young men opened the rear panel of the vehicle. Inside was empty space, two thick ropes, and a tarpaulin.

Sudhir said, "Open the lock. We're getting late."

Jagat put a hand into his pocket. The bunch of keys came out, and with it the cord of the whistle hung loose.

"First I'll see the dispatch register," he said.

"You don't trust me?"

"Trust is one thing. The register is another."

Sudhir watched him for a moment, then said, "All right. Open it."

The gate opened. The veranda inside was dark. Sudhir switched on his hand torch. Jagat unlocked the main door, but before stepping inside he blew the whistle once.

Sudhir started. "Why now?"

"My first round after ten is complete."

"Ten has already passed."

"My watch is slow."

That was a lie. Jagat's watch was correct. The sound of the whistle travelled through the quiet night to the milk collection centre, the veranda of the roadside betel shop, and two houses. Across the way, the watchman Ramvriksh turned on his cot and sat up.

Inside the warehouse, sacks of paddy seed stood in three rows. Jagat asked Sudhir for the register. Sudhir opened a cupboard and brought out a thick ledger. Two dispatches made during the day were recorded on today's page; there was no mention of anything at night.

"I'll write it now," Sudhir said.

"The order number?"

Sudhir looked toward the paper. "Whatever is written there."

Jagat opened the slip from his own pocket and compared the two numbers.

"This number was used four days ago," he said.

The two young men looked at each other.

Sudhir laughed, but the laugh was brief. "A clerical mistake. Such things happen in the higher office."

"Then wait until morning. When the office opens, we'll ask."

"The seed leaves now."

His tone had changed. Outside, the wind tapped the tin roof. Jagat closed the register.

One of the young men stepped forward to move a sack. Jagat did not seize his hand. He stood at the doorframe and blew the whistle twice—first short, then long.

It was not his regular signal.

Sudhir whispered, "Kaka, why make a spectacle?"

Jagat did not answer. Outside, Ramvriksh rose from his cot and came to the gate. Mahesh, the owner of the betel shop, who had been sleeping on the veranda, also came out at the sound. Dogs in two houses began barking.

"What happened?" Ramvriksh called from outside.

Jagat said loudly, "There is a night dispatch of seed. Note the time—ten thirty-eight."

Sudhir's face tightened. "No theft is taking place here. Government goods are going to a government centre."

"Then why object to having the time heard?" Jagat said.

Mahesh came and stood by the gate. A half-burned lantern was in his hand. "How many sacks?"

"Fifty," Jagat answered.

"Whose order?"

Sudhir extended the paper toward him, then immediately drew his hand back. "You have no right to see the paper."

Mahesh shrugged. "Fine. I am standing here not to see, but to hear."

The two young men left the sacks and came outside. One quietly said something in Sudhir's ear. Irritated, Sudhir replied, "Keep quiet."

Jagat put the key into the peg-lock on the inside of the gate, but did not close it. He wanted the goods not to leave just then, but he also did not want anyone later to say that the watchman had forcibly stopped official work.

"Write it in the dispatch register," he said. "The time, the number of sacks, the vehicle number, the order number, and your signature in front of me."

Sudhir's eyes narrowed. "You've learned a lot of rules, haven't you?"

Jagat remained calm. "The night is long. There is time to write."

For a few moments only the roof could be heard. Then lightning flashed far away. Rain was coming.

Sudhir opened the register again and began to write. First he wrote "50" for the sacks, then the vehicle number. At the order number he stopped.

"Write it," Jagat said.

Sudhir copied the number from the paper.

Jagat placed his old slip beside the register. The two numbers were identical. Mahesh watched from outside the doorway; Ramvriksh too had come closer.

Sudhir abruptly closed the page. "Order cancelled. We'll see in the morning."

One young man let out a breath of relief. The other began closing the rear panel of the vehicle.

Jagat said, "Don't cut out what you've written. Write 'cancelled' and sign it."

"You'll teach me?"

"No. I won't leave the page blank."

The rain began with the first heavy drops. The sound on the tin roof grew louder. With a red pen, Sudhir drew a line across the entry, wrote "Cancelled," and signed it.

The vehicle drove out. Before climbing in, Sudhir looked at Jagat and said, "This whistle won't save every night."

Jagat did not answer. He closed the gate and locked it. The vehicle turned into the darkness.

Ramvriksh asked, "Kaka, should we tell the police?"

"Not now. In the morning the register will be opened before the chairman and the committee."

Mahesh said, "What if the paper turns out to be genuine?"

"Then I blew the whistle too much, that's all."

"And if it is fake?"

Straightening his stool, Jagat said, "Then the sound came out in time."

It was eleven at night. The rain grew heavier. Ramvriksh returned to his centre; Mahesh to the veranda. Jagat made a round of the western wall. The prints of the heavy shoes were dissolving in the water. In a little while the earth would be level again.

He did not step on the prints. He only looked at them, then moved on.

At midnight he blew his regular whistle—a single long note. This time the sound did not travel very far through the curtain of rain, but from Ramvriksh's centre opposite came a brief answering whistle.

Jagat did not smile. He sat on the veranda and wrung out his wet gamchha.

At five in the morning Sudhir, the warehouse keeper, did not arrive. At seven the chairman, the secretary, and two members came. Jagat placed before them the night register, the old slip, and the cancelled dispatch entry.

The secretary first checked the number, then opened the office file. The number did indeed belong to the maize dispatch from four days earlier. No order had been issued for transferring paddy seed.

The chairman's face hardened. "Whose vehicle was it?"

Jagat showed the number in the register.

"Witnesses?"

"Ramvriksh and Mahesh. Both heard the time."

The chairman looked at Jagat. "Did you stop the vehicle?"

Jagat shook his head. "I made them write the record. The vehicle turned back on its own."

By noon an inquiry had begun. Sudhir's phone was switched off. One of the two young men came to the committee office and said he had been called for paid loading work; he knew nothing about the paper.

Three days later Sudhir was suspended. The matter did not end there; inquiry, statements, files, the vehicle owner's reply—everything continued. Jagat received no citation for bravery. His monthly wage also remained exactly the same.

The committee met again. This time one member said, "Now at least he should be given a gun."

Jagat sat outside on the veranda listening. The chairman called him in. "Kaka, what do you want?"

Jagat thought for a moment. "Have the bulb at the gate repaired. Water collects beside the western wall; have a drain made there. And write a rule requiring two signatures for any night dispatch."

"A gun?"

"Give it to someone who knows how to use one. My whistle is fine."

Laughter rose again, but this time it died quickly.

The following week a new bulb was installed at the gate. A drain was cut beside the western wall. For night dispatches, two authorised signatures and telephone confirmation were made compulsory.

Jagat's brass whistle remained the old one. Its cord had worn through, so his grandson tied on a new cotton cord.

One night the grandson asked, "Baba, aren't you afraid?"

Testing the gate lock with a tug, Jagat said, "Of course there is fear."

"Then why not a gun?"

Jagat turned the whistle in his hand. "A gun makes its sound once. When people hear a whistle, they ask—what happened? On my watch, that question is necessary."

The grandson remained silent for a while, then went home.

At ten at night Jagat walked as far as the western wall. Rainwater was flowing through the drain. The old heavy-shoe prints were gone. On the soil there were only two new blades of grass.

He returned to the gate, looked at his watch, and blew the whistle.

From the milk collection centre in the distance, a small whistle answered.

Jagat sat down on his stool. A great deal of the night still remained.

A Song Amid the Smoke

It was the last evening of Sawan. Clouds had hung overhead all day, but no rain had fallen. At eight that night, smoke began rising from the eastern hamlet. At first people thought someone was burning straw or dry leaves. Five minutes later the smoke had turned black, and an orange glow showed within it.

The old paddy warehouse in the village was on fire. The warehouse belonged to the panchayat, but in this season half of it held sacks of seed belonging to farmers, while the other half was filled with dry straw.

The wind was blowing from the south. The flames were not very visible outside, but smoke was spreading through the lane.

Sabita Devi was taking rice off the stove in her courtyard. As soon as she smelled the smoke, she covered the hearth and went outside. People were running along the road—some carrying buckets, some ropes, some empty-handed.

When Sabita reached the warehouse, she saw that the main gate was half open. A few people inside were dragging sacks out. The smoke was so dense that figures ten cubits away had become blurred.

“Don’t go inside!” the mukhiya was shouting. “The roof has become hot.”

But voices were breaking apart in the smoke and coughing.

Behind the warehouse was a small landing by a pond. People had formed a line and were filling water there. Buckets passed from hand to hand, and empty ones came back. No one seemed able to make out an order. People kept colliding with one another.

Sabita stood in the middle of the line. Her eyes were streaming because of the smoke.

She saw twelve-year-old Guddu run twice in the same direction with an empty bucket. Old Ramvilas was trembling as he lifted a full one. Two women were calling each other’s names, but the replies were disappearing in the smoke.

Sabita first caught Guddu by the shoulder. “You take the empty buckets toward the pond. Pass the full ones forward through this line.”

Guddu nodded, but five cubits later he was lost again in the crowd.

Then Sabita began humming a slow folk tune. It was an old paddy-transplanting melody, the kind women sang in the fields to keep their rows straight. She sang no words, only the rise and fall of the tune.

Ramvilas looked toward her.

On the first rise of the melody, Sabita passed a full bucket forward; on its fall, she sent an empty one back. Then she repeated it.

Three women nearby understood. They picked up the tune too.

There was no complete line of song yet. Only a small wave of shared voices—hands forward on the rise, hands back on the fall.

The line that had been breaking apart ten minutes earlier slowly found a rhythm.

The mukhiya stopped shouting and began signalling with his hands. Two young men arranged a row of filled buckets at the pond landing. Guddu began counting the empty ones.

“Seven!” he said.

“Eight!” came a voice from behind.

The smoke thickened. The song did not grow louder; it only needed to continue.

At the left corner of the warehouse, the tiled roof was sagging downward. Someone could be heard coughing inside.

“Who is inside?” Sabita asked.

No answer came. Only twice came the sound of something metal falling.

A young man named Dinesh tried to go in. The mukhiya stopped him. “No. The roof will fall.”

Sabita stopped singing. For a moment the bucket line also lost its order.

Then a thin voice came from inside—“Here!”

It was Chhotan, Bindeshwar’s grandson. He had gone near the rear window of the warehouse to count sacks and had been trapped inside when the smoke rose.

The window was barred from outside with thick bamboo slats. The fire was stronger near the main gate and the straw in the middle.

Dinesh and Javed ran around the back. Sabita went too.

The window frame was hot. Javed soaked a gamchha and used it to grip the bamboo. Dinesh ran to fetch an axe.

Standing outside the window, Sabita called, “Chhotan, sit low near the ground. Hold a cloth over your nose.”

From inside, between coughs, came a “Yes.”

She began humming the tune again. This time it was not for the bucket line, but so that Chhotan would keep hearing a voice from outside.

She did not add words to the melody. She was afraid that if she began to speak, her own fear would come out.

Dinesh returned with the axe. The first bamboo split after three blows. On the fourth, one panel of the window opened. A black mass of smoke poured out.

Chhotan was crouched near the floor. Javed caught his hand and pulled him outside.

As soon as he came out, Chhotan vomited, then washed his face with pond water.

Sabita stopped singing.

“Why did you stop?” Guddu asked. He had come around to the back as well.

“The work here is done,” Sabita said. “The line is still moving in front.”

Guddu listened carefully. Sure enough, the same tune was still coming from the direction of the main gate.

The women of the village had taken up the melody in their own voices. Some voices were high, some cracked, some little more than humming.

The government fire vehicle arrived three quarters of an hour later. By then one part of the warehouse had burned, but the fire had not reached the houses behind it.

The crew who got down from the vehicle moved people away. A thick hose was run to the pond. A strong stream of water struck inside the warehouse.

The bucket line broke up. The song too slowly faded away.

At eleven that night the middle section of the roof collapsed. At the sound, everyone fell silent for a moment. Sparks rose into the smoke and then disappeared into the darkness.

Chhotan was laid down in the panchayat building. A health worker listened to his breathing and said there was no immediate danger, but he should be watched through the night.

Sabita placed a wet cloth on his forehead.

Chhotan opened his eyes and asked, “Kaki, that song inside—was it coming from outside?”

“Yes.”

“I thought someone was singing inside the warehouse.”

Sabita said nothing.

By dawn the fire was completely out. Many sacks of paddy seed had been soaked; some had burned. Almost all the straw had turned to ash.

At sunrise people gathered in front of the warehouse. The black smoke of the night now rose like a light grey vapour.

Farmers began identifying their sacks. On some, the ink of the names had run; some sacks were half burned. The panchayat clerk opened the records and began matching the numbers.

Guddu was counting the buckets scattered near the pond landing. "Three are missing," he said.

Ramvilas laughed. "You're accounting for three buckets after a night like that?"

Guddu was serious. "If they went to someone's house, they'll bring them back."

Sabita kept looking at the burned wall of the warehouse. Her throat had gone hoarse.

One woman asked her, "What song were you singing yesterday?"

Sabita said, "It wasn't a complete song."

"It was a transplanting tune."

"It was a tune. There were no words."

"Why?"

Sabita thought for a while. "People hear different things in words. Yesterday I only needed one rhythm."

By afternoon a preliminary list of losses had been prepared. Most of the discussion was about the cause of the fire—an electric wire, a bidi, a wire gnawed by rats. No one was certain.

But when people spoke of the night's events, they mentioned the song again and again. Some said Sabita had given everyone courage. Some said the fire had seemed smaller once the singing began.

Sabita felt uneasy hearing this.

"The fire did not become smaller," she said clearly once. "The water from the hose and the buckets made it smaller. The song only gave the hands one rhythm."

Three days later the surviving part of the warehouse was emptied. The broken bamboo bars at the rear window were removed. Chhotan came too.

He stood by the window and looked inside. "It was very dark here."

Sabita said, "It is light now."

"Because it is daytime."

"Yes, because it is daytime."

The panchayat decided that until a new warehouse was built, the seed would be kept in an empty room at the school. Two of the buckets used against the fire were turned upside down on the veranda of the panchayat building.

The handle of one bucket had burned black.

In the evening Sabita went toward the fields. In the distance the paddy transplanting had already finished; the fields were green, but a few women were weeding. One of them raised an old tune.

Sabita stopped and listened. It was the same tune, but here its rhythm was natural—among earth, water, and bodies bent over the field.

This time she added words to the song.
No one spoke of the fire.
Only the line across the field kept moving forward.

One Minute of Electricity

By half past ten at night, the rain was striking the hospital's tin awning so hard that the people sitting inside had to raise their voices simply to hear one another.

It was the district's old hospital. The main building had a long veranda, with the medicine room in the middle, the maternity room on one side, and the general ward on the other. Rainwater had risen as far as the first step of the staircase.

At exactly half past ten, the electricity went out. First the fans stopped, then the tube light went dark, and at last the veranda light flickered once and disappeared into darkness.

Two moments after the darkness fell, different voices rose—"Sister!", "A lamp here!", "Where is Babu's bed?", "Keep the door open!"

Nurse Malti Devi had anticipated the possibility and kept two rechargeable lamps ready. The first lamp came on, but its yellow light reached only the corners of four beds.

"Everyone remain where you are," Malti said. "Those who can walk must not get up without telling us."

At the far end of the veranda, the electrician Raghuvir ran toward the generator room. The slap-slap of his slippers over the water could be heard from far away.

The general ward had twenty-six beds. On the night shift there was one nurse, Malti; one assistant, Lalita; one pharmacy worker, Naveen; and the guard, Bindeshwar. The doctor was in the emergency room.

In the darkness everything seemed to have changed shape. The rails of beds looked like walls, curtains like doors, and the rain outside the windows like people moving about.

On Bed 12 lay the elderly Shivnath Jha. He had difficulty breathing, but that night he was stable. His grandson Ashish was searching the bag under the bed for a medicine prescription.

"Sit down," Malti told him. "The lamp is here."

Ashish sat down, but his eyes kept going toward the door.

On Bed 7, ten-year-old Neha was holding her mother's hand. She had a fever. The moment the power failed she had asked, "Ma, will the night now stay here?"

Her mother had not answered. She had only stroked the child's palm.

Five minutes passed. The generator did not start. The rain grew heavier.

Lalita brought a hand lamp from the medicine room. Its light was clearer, but after five minutes that too began to weaken.

"Raghuvir!" the guard called from the veranda.

From far away came the reply: "There is fuel, but water has got inside! I'm drying the main strip!"

Malti tried to look at the clock. Its hands were not visible. She began estimating time by counting her pulse, then smiled at herself.

"How long has it been?" Neha's mother asked.

"Not very long," Malti said, though she herself was not certain.

In darkness, time expands. Ten minutes can feel like half an hour, and one minute like an entire night.

From outside, the lights of an ambulance swept across the window. For an instant every face became bright, then there was darkness again.

Naveen moved from bed to bed carrying a paper list. "Whose medicine is due at eleven?"

Malti called out the names. In the darkness she repeated them all because reading the list was difficult.

"Listen to the names," she told Lalita. "Even if the lamp goes out, the order must not be lost."

Meanwhile the first cry of a newborn came from the maternity room. Some of the people sitting on the veranda fell silent without meaning to.

No one clapped. Only Neha asked, "Was that baby born in the dark?"

Her mother said softly, "A baby does not ask whether it is darkness or light."

Fifteen minutes later Raghuvir came into the ward in a wet kurta. A small piece of wire was in his hand.

"The water on the main-wire side has been cut off," he said. "The generator can run now, but first it will give a one-minute test. If the sound is right, then we'll put it under full load."

"One minute?" Ashish asked at once.

"Yes. Only for testing."

The news spread through the ward. "There will be electricity for one minute."

Those who had been silent sat up. Those who had been conserving small hand lamps switched them off. Someone looked toward the fan, someone toward the clock, someone toward the door.

Malti's mind was occupied less by excitement than by calculation—what had to be seen in one minute? The medicine chart, the oxygen meter, the wall clock, the bed numbers, the maternity-room signal, the sound of the generator.

"When the electricity comes, no one will get out of bed," she said loudly. "Whatever you need to see, see it from where you are."

Raghuvir went outside again.

A few moments later the generator began to rumble. First one veranda light came on, then two lights in the ward, and then the fans started turning together.

The light seemed so bright that some people closed their eyes.

The wall clock showed 10:57.

Neha immediately looked at her mother's face and laughed. "You are still here."

Ashish read the chart hanging over Bed 12. Shivnath Jha opened his eyes and watched the fan make its first turn.

Naveen marked three names on the medicine chart. Lalita saw that the water bottle at Bed 18 was almost empty; she immediately went to replace it.

Malti read the oxygen-meter figure, checked the temperature chart at Bed 7, and saw the green signal light glowing at the maternity-room door.

The light was reassuring. For one moment the hospital looked like the familiar hospital again—white walls, blue sheets, numbered beds, a clock, fans, charts.

But at that exact moment Malti's eyes went to Bed 5.

Bed 5 was empty.

"Where is the patient from Five?" Her voice changed.

Lalita stopped short. "The toilet?"

"He cannot walk."

In a single instant the reassurance of light turned into fear.

Malti looked under the bed. There were no slippers. The walking stick kept beside it was also gone.

"Name?" Naveen asked, looking at the list.

"Ramcharit Mandal."

The guard Bindeshwar started to run toward the door, but Malti stopped him. "Slowly. Don't create a crowd."

At that same moment the fans began to slow. The lights trembled once.

"Time's up!" Raghuvir called from outside.

The light went out.

The ward sank into darkness again, but the darkness was no longer the same. In everyone's mind the empty rectangular space of Bed 5 remained clearly visible.

“Ramcharit Babu!” Bindeshwar called along the veranda.

No answer.

Malti took the hand lamp and went to the doorway. “Everyone stay in bed. Bindeshwar, you take the veranda. Lalita, not toward the maternity room—check the water room first.”

Ashish said, “Shall I help search?”

“No. Stay with your grandfather.”

The darkness of the hospital had now acquired direction. One empty bed had divided the work among everyone.

Three minutes later Lalita’s voice came from behind the water room —“He is here!”

Ramcharit Mandal was sitting on the floor. He had climbed down from the bed by himself, taken his walking stick, and gone toward the veranda; in the darkness he had slipped where water had spilled and had been unable to get up.

“Any injury?” Malti asked.

“My knee hurts,” he said. “I thought I would drink some water.”

Lalita and Bindeshwar together lifted him. The doctor was called at once. His knee was examined; no serious injury was apparent, but he was carefully settled back on the bed.

“Why did you need to walk in the dark?” Malti’s voice was stern.

Embarrassed, Ramcharit said, “I didn’t want to wake anyone.”

Malti was about to answer, then stopped. “Wake us now. That is what people are here for.”

Outside, the generator started again. This time Raghuvir first put only the essential electrical lines under load for five minutes. The emergency room, the maternity room, and two rows of ward lights came on.

No one made a sound of happiness. Everyone first looked toward Bed 5.

Ramcharit was there.

Neha let go of her mother’s hand and asked for water for the first time. Ashish folded his grandfather’s prescription and put it back in the bag. Naveen wrote down the next round of medicines.

By midnight the main electricity had still not returned. The generator was stopped and checked from time to time, then started again.

Malti made a new rule for counting beds—whether there was electricity or not, names would be called every half hour.

“Wasn’t this rule already there?” Lalita asked.

“Many rules exist on paper,” Malti said. “Today I saw one rule with my own eyes.”

At three in the morning the main electricity returned. This time the light slowly became steady. The fans began to run at an even speed. The wall clock showed 3:04.

Outside, the rain had eased.

Neha was asleep. So was Shivnath Jha. Ramcharit Mandal's walking stick had been tied to the head of the bed so that he could not get down without telling anyone.

Malti went out to the veranda and gave Raghuvir tea. His kurta was still wet.

"Was that one minute all right?" Raghuvir asked.

Malti looked toward the lit veranda. "It was all right. But it wasn't very short either."

Raghuvir laughed. "One minute is one minute."

"For a clock," Malti said.

She went back inside.

All the lights in the ward were on, but her eyes went once more to the small number plate above Bed 5.

In that one minute the hospital had received light.

And in that same one minute, one deficiency in the darkness had become visible.

Not Blood, but Vermilion

It was an evening in Bhadon. Before the market closed, the shops along the temple road were crowded with the last buyers of the day. In front of Malti Devi's cosmetics shop, small paper packets of red vermilion, bangles, and boxes of bindis were neatly displayed.

Malti's fourteen-year-old son Ratan was gathering up the display outside the shop. Across the road, the sweetmaker was putting out his stove, and the vegetable seller was packing the remaining vegetables into sacks.

Just then a bicycle took the bend at speed. Its bell rang, a heifer in front slipped its rope loose and came onto the road, and the cyclist, startled, swerved to the left.

The bicycle struck Malti's small bamboo rack head-on. The rack toppled. Two boxes of bangles sprang open, and seven or eight packets of vermilion tore apart, spreading over the pavement like red dust.

While trying to catch the rack, Ratan slipped and fell. His elbow scraped against a stone, but the wound was not deep. He tried to get up.

At that moment the betel-shop owner opposite shouted, "What is all that red?"

Before anyone could answer, a voice from the row behind cried, "It's blood!"

After that single word, the movement of the crowd changed. Those farther away began pushing forward; those already in front began stepping back. Some eyes were on Ratan, others on the red pavement.

Malti took Ratan's elbow and examined it. Two drops of blood had come from the scrape, but the redness spread across the pavement was hundreds of times greater.

"It's vermilion," Malti said. But her voice was drowned in the noise of the crowd.

Someone asked, "Who hit whom?" Another said, "The cyclist ran away." A third immediately added, "A knife was used."

The cyclist had not run away. He was sitting at the roadside rubbing his knee. His name was Bablu Sah, and the front wheel of his bicycle had bent.

"I'm right here," he said. But before anyone's attention could reach him, the story had moved ahead.

Within two minutes the news had reached the northern gate of the market that a fight had taken place near the cosmetics shop. Within five minutes it had changed—one young man was injured.

The temple bell rang. For a moment the people fell silent again, but even within that silence the guessing continued.

Ratan poured water over his elbow. The water mixed with the red dust and began flowing down the slope of the pavement. From a distance, the scene now looked even more alarming.

This time old Harinath, the bangle maker, came forward. Without saying anything, he bent over the pavement, picked up a grain of the red dust on the tip of his finger, smelled it, and pointed to one of Malti's torn packets.

"This is vermilion," he said clearly. "Blood does not fly about like dry powder."

Some people heard him. But the word "vermilion" did not reach those near the gate; there "blood" was still circulating.

Malti brought a brass plate from inside the shop. She began brushing the vermilion left in the torn packets into it. Ratan started separating the broken bangles.

"Look at his wound first," one woman said.

Malti examined Ratan's elbow again. The scrape was small. Ramesh from the nearby pharmacy arrived carrying clean water and a bandage.

While cleaning the scrape, Ramesh asked, "You're not feeling dizzy, are you?"

"No," Ratan said. "See whether my rack survived."

At that answer, Malti smiled for the first time.

By then Suresh Jha of the market committee had arrived. At the gate he had been told that a serious assault had taken place. He pushed through the crowd, saw Ratan sitting there, saw Bablu beside the bent wheel, and saw red water running over the pavement.

"Who saw the incident?" he asked.

Many hands went up.

"Who saw the bicycle strike the rack?"

Four hands went up.

"Who saw a knife?"

One hand rose halfway and then dropped.

"Who saw a stream of blood?"

This time people began looking at one another's faces.

Malti held out the brass plate. "Look—these are the torn packets. I counted seven. Half of the eighth is still left."

Harinath pointed to the edge of the pavement, where one intact packet lay soaked in water. Malti's shop stamp in blue ink was still visible on the paper.

Suresh Jha sent two boys toward the gate. "Tell them—there was no fight. A bicycle hit the rack. The boy has a small scrape. The red colour is vermilion."

The two boys ran off.

Ten minutes later the news reached the southern lane, but there it took another form—"It wasn't blood; it was vermilion." People began repeating the sentence as though it were a relief.

Some people returned to the shop. The man who had earlier said "knife" quietly began gathering up broken bangles. The one who had said "assault" started trying to straighten Bablu's bicycle.

Bablu apologised to Malti. "The heifer came in front of me. Whatever damage happened to the rack, I'll pay for it."

Malti looked at his bent wheel. "First get that repaired. I'll have the bamboo worker tie the rack back together."

Ratan said, "I'll be short in the account by one packet."

Malti lightly placed a hand on his head. "Today the shortage is not in the account of vermilion. It is in the account of words."

Harinath heard her, but said nothing. He kept cleaning his spectacles.

Evening deepened. The market began to empty. Water was poured over the pavement and the red dust washed away, but a little vermilion remained lodged in a fine crack in the stone.

The next morning, when Ratan opened the shop, the red line was still there in the crack. He bent with the broom, then paused for a moment.

The betel-shop owner opposite asked, "A lot of blood flowed here yesterday, didn't it?"

Ratan looked at him. The man's voice held half a question and half a certainty.

Ratan stopped the broom and showed him the empty packets in the brass plate. "Two drops of blood. Seven packets of vermilion."

The betel-shop owner fell silent.

Ratan poured water over the crack. The red line slowly faded.

That day Malti set the bamboo rack upright again. Instead of keeping the packets of vermilion on the top, she placed them on the lower shelf so that wind or a jolt would not knock them down.

The market began running as before. People bought things, bargained, and laughed.

But when the evening crowd thickened again, Ratan's eyes kept returning to the stretch of pavement where the day before people had seen one red colour and each made a story of his own.

The colour had been one.

There had been many witnesses.

The incident had been one.

The meaning belonged to each person separately.

My Great Business

If you are going to hear the history of my business, first understand one thing—profit is not the greatest thing in business. Profit is what ordinary traders earn; fame is earned by the man who suffers a loss and still leaves people talking about him. By that measure, my business was extremely successful.

This happened at the Wednesday market in Pachrukhi. The market met once a week and, in my eyes, it was not merely a market but an ocean of opportunity. People bought vegetables, sold grain, weighed goats, pressed oil, stitched shoes—but no one seemed to notice one enormous problem.

The problem was that everyone's hands were full. A sack of paddy in one hand, a bag of vegetables in the other, a child tucked under one arm, a gamchha over the shoulder. How was anyone supposed to bargain in such a condition? I understood at once—where there is a problem, there is business.

I came home and told my wife Saroja, "From tomorrow, I am going to change the market."

Saroja was sifting flour. She said, "First change your old debts."

I said, "Debt is the shadow of business capital."

She stopped the sieve and looked at me. "Where is your capital?"

"In the idea."

"Then keep your customers in the idea too."

I accepted this sarcasm as a blessing. Great businesses are often not understood first by the people at home.

The next Wednesday I planted two bamboo poles near the southern gate of the market and stretched an old tarpaulin between them. Under it I placed one long plank, a small hoe, a piece of chalk, and fifty little tokens cut from date-palm leaves. On the plank I wrote in charcoal: "Baggage Deposit. One bundle—one rupee. Safe. Numbered."

My first customer was Ramdin Sahu. He had two sacks of makhana, one bag of aubergines, and a small brass box. He read the board and asked, "What does 'safe' mean?"

I puffed out my chest and said, "As long as I breathe, nothing will happen to your bundle."

Ramdin Sahu said, "I want my sack, not your breath."

Even so, he left one sack with me. I wrote '1' on the sack in chalk and gave him a date-palm token also marked '1'. One rupee came in.

Inside my head I immediately made the calculation—fifty customers meant fifty rupees. Four Wednesdays meant two hundred. Deduct the tarpaulin expense, bamboo was my own, the plank belonged to the neighbour, and a child had brought the chalk from school. The profit was almost pure.

By ten o'clock I had reached number 17. Someone left a sack of potatoes, someone a bundle of clothes, someone even an empty basket. Why an empty basket? The customer said, "After walking around for a while, even this feels heavy." I accepted it in the spirit of service. A trader's job is not to ask questions; it is to collect the fee.

By noon I had accumulated twenty-three rupees. Saroja appeared in the market from a distance. I opened my fist and showed her the coins.

She asked, "Will you be able to count so many things?"

I said, "Look at the system. Everything has a number."

She looked at the tokens, then at the goats tied behind my tarpaulin in the market. "Why are the numbers on date-palm leaves?"

I said, "Paper was expensive."

She said nothing. If a wife leaves a question alone, understand that the question is not yet dead.

At three o'clock the first accident occurred. 'Accident' is not the right word; call it a business test. A black goat loosened its rope and reached the corner of my plank. At that moment I was writing a number in chalk on customer number 24's bundle. I heard a rustling behind me. I turned—and token 19 was in the goat's mouth.

I ran. The goat had already chewed half of token 19. Opening its mouth was not easy. In the end three pieces survived in my hand—one with '1' on it, one with a chalk smudge, and the third completely soaked in saliva.

I thought—no matter. The customer has his token; the bundle on my plank has its number. The system works from both sides. A great business does not depend on one token.

Just then clouds gathered. Within five minutes such rain fell that everyone in the market squeezed under tarpaulins, shop awnings, trees—wherever they found shelter. The prestige of my baggage house suddenly increased, because people wanted to place not only their bundles but also their heads under my tarpaulin.

I kept shouting, "This is a storehouse, not a dharamshala!"

No one listened. In the crowd someone's elbow landed on a sack of potatoes, someone's foot on the empty basket. The chalk got wet. The numbers written on the bundles slowly began to wash away.

I looked at the plank. Number 8 remained only half visible. 12 had become a white smudge. 17 had vanished completely.

At that moment I remembered Saroja's question—"Will you be able to count so many things?"

I immediately applied business intelligence. I began giving each bundle a different identifying feature. "This one with the red string—possibly 6. This one smelling of mustard—11. This one with the torn corner—14."

The rain stopped. The real test began when the customers returned carrying their tokens.

Ramdin Sahu showed token 1. His sack was clearly identified. I handed it over with pride.

Number 2 went too. So did 3. At 4 there was a problem—two bundles were almost the same colour. One contained lentils, the other old clothes. I tried to decide by smelling the bundles. The customer said, "Those are my clothes. There is no need to smell them."

I replied, "Security inspection."

Somehow things continued from 5 through 10. Number 11 brought his token back soaked by the rain, but his sack was found by the smell of mustard. My faith in my system returned.

The problem came with number 19. An old woman arrived holding token 19. She said, "Give me my small bundle."

I looked toward the goat. The goat looked back at me with exceedingly innocent eyes.

"What is inside the bundle?" I asked.

The old woman said, "Why didn't you ask that before?"

"Security inspection."

"Two children's kurtas, one old dhoti, and four papads."

I began feeling the bundles. The moment I heard 'four papads', I pressed one bundle—there came a crisp cracking sound. The old woman cried, "Not that one!"

I removed my hand at once. Later the correct bundle was found. The papads were intact. The old woman did not bless me, but she did not abuse me either. In business, this counts as moderate success.

By evening most of the goods had been returned. In the end three things remained—a brass lota, a green bag, and an earthen pot. Three customers also remained. The problem was that the numbers on all three tokens had washed away in the rain.

I said, "One by one, identify your property."

The first man said, "Mine is round."

I looked at the lota and the earthen pot. "Two things are round."

The second customer, a woman, said, "Mine is green."

The bag was settled at once. My confidence increased.

The third young man said, "Mine is the earthen pot."

Now the mathematics was easy. The lota remained for the first man. I handed all three objects to the proper people. The crowd applauded. That applause was the first public honour of my business career.

I counted the coins—thirty-seven rupees in all. Expenses? The tarpaulin had been bought earlier, the tokens cost almost nothing, the chalk was borrowed. In my mind I entered thirty-seven rupees as pure profit.

Then a boy came running. "Kaka, where is my mother's earthen water pitcher?"

I was startled. "Number?"

"There was a token, but the number washed away in the rain."

I looked all around. There was no pitcher.

The boy said, "I left it at ten o'clock. It had blue flowers painted on it."

I remembered—a blue-flowered pitcher had been under the plank during the noon crowd. Then someone's foot had struck it and it had rolled with a clunk. Whether it broke or someone picked it up, I could not remember exactly.

The boy's mother arrived too. In a calm voice she said, "The pitcher cost eight rupees. It was new."

Now the reputation of a businessman was at stake. I took eight rupees out of the thirty-seven and gave them to her.

Saroja, who had somehow appeared again from I knew not where, quietly asked, "Pure profit?"

I said, "Investment in customer trust."

She did not laugh. This was an even worse sign.

On the way home I discovered that one corner of the tarpaulin had torn. The bamboo owner said, "Your bamboo came from my field. Give me two rupees." The owner of the plank said, "The plank swelled in the rain. Give me three rupees." The child who had brought the chalk said, "The teacher will ask about it. Buy a new piece of chalk."

That night I did the accounts. Thirty-seven income. Eight for the pitcher. Two for bamboo. Three for the plank. Two for chalk. Five for stitching the tarpaulin. Seventeen remained.

Saroja said, "What about the twenty-five rupees you had already spent on the tarpaulin?"

I said, "That was capital expenditure, not a one-day expense."

"So you will continue the business?"

I became serious. "Great experiments are not repeated every day."

The next Wednesday I went to the market, but I did not open the baggage deposit. The tea seller had extended his bench into my place. People saw me and asked, “No numbers today?”

I said, “The first phase is complete. Now the market will learn by itself.”

And to tell the truth, the market did learn. Two weeks later I saw people bringing their bags with red or blue strings tied to them. Some had the first letter of their names on sacks, some had scraps of cloth on their baskets. One shopkeeper had even fixed bamboo pegs and, instead of leaf tokens, stamped numbers onto little tin discs.

I showed Saroja. “See? My innovation has spread.”

She said, “Your business has shut down.”

I said, “The business has shut down; the idea is still running.”

She said, “You earned seventeen and invested twenty-five.”

I said, “History is not written from cash accounts.”

Even now, when I go to the Wednesday market, the old-timers smile as soon as they see me. Ramdin Sahu says, “Here comes the founder of the Bundle Bank.” The goat owner tightens his goat’s rope when he sees me. The old woman whose papads I nearly broke calls from a distance, “Still doing security inspections?”

I listen to all of them with pride.

Why shouldn’t I? The business stall did not survive, but the customers still recognise me. Where in any ledger can you enter the fame earned in exchange for eight rupees of loss, a torn tarpaulin, and a chewed-up token?

I say my business did not fail.

The market simply turned out to be cleverer than I was.

And a great businessman is the man who learns that truth by taking a loss—and still says he made a profit.

The Three-Time Wedding Guest

My name is not Bauku Jha, but ever since this incident happened in the village, some people call me by that name. I do not object. After all, how long can a man who has landed in the wrong wedding party three times defend his real name?

It was the wedding season in Phagun. On the same evening there were three weddings in three villages—Belahi, Amahi, and Sonbarsa. My cousin sister's wedding was in Amahi. As I left home, my mother told me clearly, "Amahi. East of the pond. Red canopy." I tied all three details securely in my mind.

When I reached the bus stand, I saw wedding parties leaving in three directions. Everywhere there were drums, cymbals, flower garlands, and red cloth. It seemed to me that in wedding season the sound of drums was more reliable than signs of direction. That was my first mistake.

I saw a paper marked "Amahi" on a minibus. I ran and climbed in. The people seated inside made room the moment they saw me and said, "Come, come, we're getting late." I was delighted. How warmly one's own people receive one!

Ten minutes later the young man beside me asked, "How are you related to the groom?" I said, "The groom's maternal uncle's paternal aunt's cousin." The young man nodded. It did not occur to me that I myself could not possibly have become my sister's groom's maternal uncle's paternal aunt's cousin. The mathematics of relationships at a wedding differs from ordinary mathematics—I accepted that immediately.

The minibus reached Belahi. There was a pond. The canopy was to the east. It was red too. All three signs matched. I got down without a worry.

During the welcoming ritual, an old man put a flower in my hand. I stood there holding it. The women were singing. The groom dismounted from the horse. I looked at his face and something stirred uneasily inside me. I had once seen a photograph of my sister's groom; this young man was at least five noses away from that photograph.

I thought—photographs deceive. Perhaps cameras make noses look smaller or bigger.

Just then a child asked me, "Kaka, which side are you from?"

With confidence I said, "The bride's."

The child burst out laughing. "Then why did you come in the groom's bus?"

I had no answer to that question.

Somehow I asked a young man, "This is Amahi, isn't it?"

He said, "No, Belahi. The bus used to run to Amahi, so the paper is still stuck on it."

Thus my first wrong wedding party was officially established.

I slipped out at once. But leaving a village wedding quietly is not easy. The man serving betel at the entrance stopped me—"Eat before you go." I said, "There is an urgent matter at home." He thrust two betel leaves, one areca nut, and four sugar drops into my hand. My first profit from the wrong wedding.

There was no transport from Belahi to Amahi. On the road four young men were travelling on a tractor trolley with musical instruments. I asked, "Amahi?" They all said together, "Yes, get on."

This time I was cautious. I asked the groom's name. One young man said, "Rajesh." My sister's groom was also named Rajesh. I felt that God was compensating me for my first mistake.

The tractor moved off. On the way the young men sang and played cymbals. I too began clapping. One of them put a hand on my shoulder and said, "If every wedding party had enthusiastic people like you, it would really come alive!"

I thought to myself—this time I have found the right group.

Half a kos later the tractor turned toward Sonbarsa. I was startled. "Isn't Amahi straight ahead?"

The driver said, "Sonbarsa first, then Amahi. The musicians have contracts for two weddings."

I was just thinking of getting down when the groom's car appeared from the front. The musicians became alert at once. "First take this party in, then Amahi."

Before I could say anything, a pair of cymbals was pushed into my hands. "Play for two minutes. My hands are tired."

Here occurred my second mistake—I played the cymbals.

At the gate in Sonbarsa I arrived in the middle of the musicians. The wedding guests thought I was one of the musicians, and the musicians thought I was one of the guests. I have never again enjoyed such an intermediate social status.

A gentleman placed ten rupees in my hand. "You played well." Alarmed, I said, "I'm not a musician."

He said, "Such modesty is not good."

I tried to return the money, but the drums suddenly thundered. The ten rupees remained in my fist. My second profit from the wrong wedding.

Just then the groom's father saw me and said, "You are Rajesh Babu's college friend?"

I said, "Rajesh?"

"Yes, my son."

I understood—trusting the name Rajesh was no more useful than asking directions.

I returned the cymbals to the musician and ran. Someone called from behind, "At least keep the ten rupees!" I kept them. I considered them wages for all the running around.

By the time I reached the Sonbarsa crossroads, evening had deepened. Red canopies were visible far and wide. The three signs my mother had given me now seemed useless—pond, east, red. In Mithila during wedding season, all three are practically public property.

This time I decided I would not follow anyone's party. I would ask directly for the road to Amahi.

A tea seller gave me exact directions: "Two kilometres along this paved road, left after the peepal tree, then the pond."

I set out on foot. Halfway there, a jeep stopped behind me. Someone inside asked, "Amahi wedding?"

I said, "Yes."

"Get in."

Before sitting inside, I asked five questions—the bride's name? The groom's name? The bride's father? Which hamlet? On which side of the pond? All five answers were correct. I felt proud. Experience makes a man learned.

The jeep reached Amahi. Red canopy. Pond to the east. At the gate stood my own maternal uncle. I breathed with relief.

The moment he saw me, Mama said, "Where on earth did you go? The groom's party arrived half an hour ago."

I said, "I was conducting social research on the way."

Mama did not understand. Good.

I went inside. My mother's first question when she saw me was, "Why so late?"

I took two betel leaves, four sugar drops, and ten rupees from my pocket and placed them on the table. "Travel allowance."

My mother looked at me with an expression containing more questions than patience.

I did not have the courage to tell the whole story. I only said, "I lost the way in two places."

My sister sitting nearby had heard everything. She whispered, "Two?"
I glared at her.

The main wedding rituals began. This time I did not leave my place at all. At mealtime I sat in the row. Vegetables were served on the leaf plate, then dal, then puris. An unfamiliar old man seated beside me asked, "Are you from the groom's side?"

I remained silent for three moments.

All the mistakes of the day spun through my head.

Then, with great care, I said, "I am the bride's cousin. Name—Shivnath Jha. Village—Bardaha. If necessary, rather than Aadhaar, I can call my maternal uncle as proof."

The old man burst out laughing. "Who asked for such a complete introduction?"

I said, "Today I have learned that at a wedding one should never give half an introduction."

Just then a young voice called from behind, "Hey, Belahi Kaka!"

I turned around—the same child from the first wrong wedding party! He had come to this wedding too, with his mother.

The entire row burst into laughter. Proudly, the child told everyone, "Earlier he became one of the bride's people at our wedding."

I protested, "I did not become one. I merely thought I was one."

At that moment, from the other direction, the young musician waved. "Hey, Cymbal Babu!"

There was no longer any point in defending myself.

My sister began counting. "One—Belahi. Two—Sonbarsa. Three—?"

I said, "The third is the correct wedding."

She said, "But you arrived among wedding parties three times, didn't you? The title is settled—The Three-Time Wedding Guest."

I said, "The third time I am not a wedding guest; I belong to the bride's family."

She replied, "Proof?"

From a distance Mama called, "He is my nephew."

My sister folded her hands and said, "All right. Identity confirmed this time."

By the time the wedding ended that night, my story had reached the groom. Before the bride's departure he looked at me and laughed. "Brother, don't sit in my car, or you'll become a wedding guest all over again."

I said, "From now on I'll walk to every wedding for the rest of my life."

A few months later there was another wedding in the village. Along with the invitation, people drew me a map. One person even pasted photographs of the bride and groom onto it.

I did not mind.

Because in that one evening I had learned something—at weddings everyone is dressed up, every party looks cheerful, every canopy is red, and there can be three grooms named Rajesh in the same area.

So the best way to identify a wedding party is not by drums, bus, canopy, or name.

Ask directly: “What is the bride’s name?”

And if no one knows the answer, eat a betel leaf and go home. At least you will not become the wrong wedding guest for a fourth time.

The Philosopher on Credit

At Parsauni Chowk, a wooden board hung in front of Gopal Sah's shop: "NO CREDIT." The board was so old that half the final letter of "NO CREDIT" had worn away, but Gopal Sah's voice was still entirely intact.

Whenever a customer spoke of paying five rupees later, Gopal Sah would clear his throat at once.

"The first rule of business," he would say, "is that the moment goods leave the hand, their price must enter it."

The customer would ask, "Then why is my name written in this ledger?"

Gopal Sah would close the ledger. "That is not business. That is a social circumstance."

No one in the village except Gopal Sah understood the difference.

The truth was that three years earlier, during Sawan, his outstanding credit had grown so large that the wholesaler refused to send a second sack of rice. That night Gopal Sah came home and announced, "The age of credit is over."

His daughter Kusum was then in Class Nine. She asked, "How will it end?"

"By principles."

"How many principles?"

Gopal Sah considered the number. A small number seemed beneath his dignity. He said, "One hundred."

Kusum brought out an old thick exercise book and wrote on the cover: "One Hundred Principles Against Credit."

Gopal Sah himself wrote the first principle: "Cash is the foot of business."

The second: "Credit takes away not the customer's sleep, but the shopkeeper's."

The third: "The person who has no money today should buy the goods tomorrow."

While he was writing the fourth, Kusum asked, "What if the goods are needed today?"

Gopal Sah glared at her. "Questions are not asked while principles are being written."

In one month thirty-seven principles were ready. In two months, fifty-four. By the sixth month, eighty-nine. The remaining principles were

difficult because nearly every possible sentence for stopping credit had already been said.

But credit did not stop.

Budhni Kaki would be the first customer in the morning. She needed half a seer of rice. Her old-age pension would arrive three days later.

Gopal Sah would recite the first principle. Budhni Kaki would listen silently. When the speech ended, she would say, "All right, weigh me half a seer."

Gopal Sah would weigh it. While writing her name in the ledger, he would say, "This is not credit. It is an old-age-payment interval."

At ten o'clock Nandu the mechanic would buy oil and soap. His money depended on his evening wages. Gopal Sah would recite the seventh, twelfth, and sixteenth principles all together.

Nandu would laugh and ask, "After three principles, does the price of the oil go down or up?"

Gopal Sah would give him the oil. "I owe you two rupees from the gate repair last time. This is not credit. It is labour adjustment."

At noon, Chhotu, a schoolboy, would ask for two pencils and an exercise book. His teacher had said the homework must be submitted by the next day. Chhotu was three rupees short.

Gopal Sah would begin the twenty-eighth principle. Chhotu would interrupt, "Kaka, should I listen to the whole thing, or may I take the exercise book?"

"Both."

The speech would be completed, and the exercise book would leave too. In the ledger Gopal Sah would write: "Educational item; payment awaited."

By evening, seven new lines would have been added to the ledger beneath the "NO CREDIT" board.

Kusum would return from school, look at the ledger, and smile.

"Babu, your principles are working."

Gopal Sah would brighten. "See?"

"Yes. Earlier people took credit without a speech. Now they take it after listening to one."

Gopal Sah regarded this remark as disrespect, but could not find an answer.

By Kartik that year, the principles had stalled at ninety-four. Gopal Sah became anxious to complete the number. Whenever the shop was empty, he thought of new sentences.

Ninety-five: "The shopkeeper remembers credit longer than the customer does."

Ninety-six: "If an account has to be written, the price must first be asked."

As soon as he wrote ninety-seven, Kusum interrupted him. "This is a repetition of an earlier one."

Gopal Sah said, "In philosophy, repetition is called depth."

Kusum crossed it out.

Then something happened.

At noon an assistant from the wholesaler Mohanlal arrived with the account. Payment for Gopal Sah's three sacks of rice, two boxes of soap, and sugar had been overdue for five days. The assistant said plainly, "If the account is not settled by tomorrow, no new goods will be sent."

For the first time, Gopal Sah's face showed not principles but arithmetic. He opened the ledger. On seeing the total outstanding amount, he scratched his head.

Kusum was sitting beside him. She turned the pages of the ledger. Budhni Kaki, Nandu the mechanic, Chhotu, Ramvati, Shivdhari, Kalavati, Madan, Tara, Jhagaru—the lines of names went on.

"Babu," Kusum said, "did you stop giving credit, or did you only change its name?"

Gopal Sah replied at once, "Changing the name clarifies the nature of the transaction."

"The nature of the transaction is that the wholesaler must be paid in five days."

Gopal Sah closed the ledger. That evening, in front of the shop, he announced, "From tomorrow, strict rules will apply."

Someone sitting at the chowk asked, "So what we had until now were gentle rules?"

Gopal Sah pretended not to hear.

The next morning he hung a second paper beneath the board, written in red ink: "PLEASE DO NOT ASK FOR CREDIT."

The first customer was Ramvati. She needed salt. Her son would send the money two days later.

Gopal Sah straightened his chest. "Strict rules from now on."

Ramvati read the paper. "All right."

She turned to leave. After she had taken three steps, Gopal Sah called, "Wait. Will you eat rice without salt?"

"Whatever happens."

Gopal Sah weighed out a quarter seer of salt. In the ledger he wrote: "Food balance; not credit."

Kusum sat down holding her head.

The second customer was Jhagaru the barber. He needed soap. Gopal Sah refused in a stern voice. Jhagaru said, "All right. Next week when I shave you, we'll settle the account."

Gopal Sah immediately handed over the soap. "That is service exchange."

The third customer was Tara Devi. She needed matches and mustard oil. There were guests at home. The money would come by evening.

Gopal Sah recited the sixty-fourth principle, then gave her the goods. "A guest situation is not counted as ordinary business."

The fourth customer was an unfamiliar young man. His bicycle chain had broken and only his fare home remained in his pocket. He asked for one bottle of water and two packets of puffed rice, saying he would return along the same road the following week.

Kusum was curious—this time Babu would surely refuse. No acquaintance, no account, no village.

Gopal Sah studied the young man for five minutes. Then he asked, "Name?"

"Ramesh Yadav."

"Village?"

"Sonapur."

"Whom have you come to see?"

The young man gave a name. Gopal Sah wrote it in the ledger and handed over the goods.

Kusum whispered, "Which category is this?"

Gopal Sah said, "Emergency supply arising from travel obstruction."

By noon the paper announcing the strict rule was fluttering in the wind, and five new names had been added to the ledger.

Kusum decided that the principles had to be completed. She picked up her father's old exercise book and said, "Now write the remaining rules today itself."

Gopal Sah was surprised. "This is business time."

"The business is running anyway. Why should the philosophy remain incomplete?"

The people sitting at the chowk became interested. Everyone knew that completing one hundred principles could become a small village celebration.

Gopal Sah wrote ninety-eight: "Before giving credit, ask the date of repayment."

Kusum said, "That one is good."

Ninety-nine: "Tell the customer the same amount that you enter in the ledger."

Kusum nodded again. "That one is good too."

Now only the hundredth rule remained. Gopal Sah put the pen against his teeth and thought. Five minutes. Ten minutes. In between, two customers came; both took goods, and both their names were added to the ledger.

At last Gopal Sah wrote: "If you must give credit, do not hide it; write the account clearly."

Kusum pulled the exercise book toward herself. "That is not an anti-credit principle."

"Why?"

"It accepts credit."

Gopal Sah became solemn. "A philosopher does not run away from truth."

Laughter broke out across the chowk.

That evening Kusum prepared a new ledger. It had four columns—name, item, amount, payment date. At first Gopal Sah objected. He felt this arrangement would reduce his great philosophy to ordinary bookkeeping.

But the moment he remembered Mohanlal's five-day deadline, he agreed.

For the next three days, Gopal Sah began asking everyone who sought credit the same question: "When will you pay?"

The answers varied. "Friday." "After the paddy is sold." "When I receive my wages." "When the old-age pension comes." "My son will send it."

Gopal Sah wrote down the date. Those who could not name a date received fewer goods. But very few people went away empty-handed.

On the fourth day Budhni Kaki came with her old-age pension. She paid for the half seer of rice. Along with it she placed two lemons on the counter.

Gopal Sah said, "The lemons were not in the account."

"Then add them to the philosophy."

Nandu the mechanic deducted the old two rupees for the gate repair and paid the balance. Jhagaru the barber adjusted the cost against a shave. Chhotu came with three rupees and said proudly, "The homework has been submitted."

The entire outstanding amount did not come in within three days, but enough money was collected for Gopal Sah to make the wholesaler's essential payment. New stock arrived.

That day Kusum took down the old "NO CREDIT" board from the shop.

Gopal Sah protested. "That was the symbol of my principles."

Showing him the worn letters on the back, Kusum said, "Keep the symbol, but write the truth too."

A new board was made: "KEEP CREDIT ACCOUNTS CLEAR."

Gopal Sah stared at it for a long time. The sentence seemed insufficiently philosophical to him. But underneath, in small letters, Kusum wrote: "One Hundred Principles Available Inside the Shop."

That line made Gopal Sah happy.

Now, when customers ask for goods, he still gives speeches. He starts with the first principle, quotes the seventh, nineteenth, or fifty-third according to the situation, then writes the amount and date in the ledger.

The people of the village have also learned his ways. Someone will say, “Kaka, give me half a kilo of sugar, and tell me whichever principle applies with it.”

Gopal Sah weighs the sugar. “Principles are not free.”

The customer laughs and asks, “Do I pay for that now, or later?”

Gopal Sah thinks for a moment, then opens the ledger.

“Payment for principles may come later.”

From inside, Kusum calls, “Babu, that is credit again!”

Without being disturbed, Gopal Sah answers, “No. A knowledge-payment interval.”

And at Parsauni Chowk everyone understands that the philosophy of credit is still alive—only its accounts have become clearer than before.

The Panchayat Expert

For three nights in a row, the first heavy spell of the rains fell over Bardaha village. On the fourth morning, the road in front of the school was under knee-deep water. Children crossed carrying their shoes in their hands, cyclists got down and pushed, and the sacks kept in front of the shops had been raised onto bricks.

Water itself was nothing new. What was new was that this time the panchayat had received funds to build a drain. On paper, its length, width, and depth were all specified; what had not been decided in the village was where the drain would begin and end, and how much slope it should have.

To settle the question, a meeting was held beneath the peepal tree. The secretary sat with the file open. The mukhiya said, "First let the masons inspect the route. Then we will decide."

Batesar Jha was already seated there. Batesar Kaka was the kind of man in the village who did not consider it necessary to know a subject before speaking on it. In his view, knowledge was of two kinds—one written in books, and another that could be understood without reading books. He claimed complete authority over the second kind.

The secretary said, "To measure the drain's slope, we'll need a water tube and string."

Batesar Kaka immediately asked, "Measure the slope? The slope is toward the east."

The mason Raghunandan smiled. "Kaka, the sun rises in the east. We're measuring where the water will go downward."

"That much I know too," Batesar said. "Water always goes down. Why measure something so obvious?"

The first laughter rose in the meeting. Batesar Kaka took the laughter as support for his position. "See? Everyone agrees."

Raghunandan lifted the two ends of a transparent tube. Coloured water was inside. He placed one end near the school gate and the other fifty cubits ahead. The water stood at the same level in both ends.

Batesar Kaka peered into the tube and said, "This contraption has stopped the water in one place. When the drain is built, will the water flow, or stand like this?"

“This is only a way of measuring,” Raghunandan explained.

“A method that stops water first, and then needs another method to make it flow. This is science designed to increase expenses.”

Everyone laughed again. The secretary stopped writing. He feared that if every sentence Batesar uttered had to go into the proceedings register, the paper would run out before the drain was built.

Raghunandan drove stakes into the ground at three places and marked them. He said, “From the school to the square, the ground falls gradually. After the square it rises again. So the drain cannot run straight to the pond.”

Batesar Kaka said at once, “Why straight? Make a crooked drain. Does a snake move in a straight line?”

“A snake is not a drain,” someone called from behind.

“Exactly why a snake’s drain never gets clogged,” Batesar replied.

This time the laughter was louder. But laughter did not remove the meeting’s real problem. If the drain turned west from the square, it would touch the corner of Harikishun Sahu’s courtyard. If it turned south, only a cubit and a half would remain between the old peepal tree and the temple platform. The northern route was too high.

Harikishun Sahu stood up. “No drain will be cut beside my wall. The last flood already softened the foundation.”

Two people immediately spoke against him. A third began recalling the old boundary. The secretary held his head.

Batesar Kaka raised a hand for silence. “First listen to everyone. I know the history of the roads in this village.”

Raghunandan whispered into the secretary’s ear, “If the history begins, it will be evening before it ends.”

Batesar began, “Where Harikishun’s wall now stands, there used to be a post for tying cattle. Behind it ran an old earthen drain. When I was a boy, I used to float paper boats in it.”

Harikishun Sahu said, “Will the panchayat build a drain on the basis of paper boats?”

“Not the boat—the direction,” Batesar said. “The boat floated away; the direction remained.”

For the first time Raghunandan looked at him carefully. “Where did the old drain come out?”

“Not behind Sahu’s wall. Three cubits east of the wall, where the dung heap is now. There should be an old earthen pipe underneath.”

“A pipe?”

“Yes. The panchayat installed it ten years before the Durga Puja fair. It worked for two years; in the third, its mouth silted up. Then everyone forgot it.”

Harikishun Sahu immediately objected. "I don't remember any such thing."

Batesar Kaka brightened. "When it was installed, you weren't even married. How would you remember?"

The gathering laughed again, but this time Raghunandan asked for a spade. The dung heap was removed. About a cubit and a half down, a rounded piece of red earthenware appeared. With the second spadeful, the mouth of the old pipe came into view.

For the first time the secretary wrote one of Batesar's statements in the register. Batesar Kaka looked at his pen and said, "Write the whole thing—"The expert's prediction proved true."

"I am writing: 'Old drainage outlet found,'" the secretary said.

"Government language is terribly stingy."

The old pipe was not fully usable. It was broken in several places and clogged with soil in others. But its direction was important. It passed clear of Harikishun Sahu's wall and ran toward the outer edge of the old pond.

Raghunandan measured the level again. The slope in this direction was sufficient. "If we use half of the old route and join the rest with a new drain, we can do the work with less cutting."

Batesar Kaka puffed out his chest. "I told you from the beginning—make a crooked drain."

"You gave the example of a snake," the secretary reminded him.

"A snake is a natural engineer," Batesar said.

Measurements continued until afternoon. In the meantime Batesar Kaka began sentences with "It seems to me" at least twenty-seven times. He offered opinions on the width of the drain, the thickness of the bricks, the quantity of sand, labour costs, the direction of rain, school holidays, and even the psychology of mosquitoes inside drains.

None of his suggestions was accepted immediately. Yet in between them, bits of information kept emerging that were not on the map.

"Don't bring the drain too far out at this bend," he said. "On Friday market days, bullock carts turn here."

Raghunandan altered the measurement. There really would have been too little room for bullock carts.

"The cover here must be strong," Batesar said at another spot. "The children's Saraswati Puja procession passes this way."

"That isn't technical, but it is useful," the secretary admitted.

"Everything I say is useful. Technology arrives later at its own pace."

By evening a preliminary line had been drawn. Raghunandan marked the ground with red chalk. Harikishun Sahu's wall was spared, the peepal tree was

spared, and the water in front of the school gate had found a route toward the old outlet.

The meeting was about to end when Batesar Kaka said, "One important question remains."

Everyone fell silent. The secretary looked exhausted.

"The drain water will reach the pond—but where will the pond water go?"

Raghunandan replied, "The pond has an outer outlet. We'll measure that tomorrow."

Batesar sat down again at once. "Good. Tomorrow I will speak on that subject in detail."

Work began the next day. Batesar Kaka had been present since seven in the morning. In his hand were an old umbrella and a small exercise book.

Raghunandan asked, "Why the notebook?"

"An expert should write observations."

On the first page Batesar had written: "Drain Science—Part One." Under it: "Water flows from higher ground to lower ground."

Raghunandan read it and said, "Preserve this conclusion carefully. It will be useful to future generations."

Batesar could not decide whether it was sarcasm or praise. Even so, he remained pleased.

On the third day of work a problem arose. One section of the old drain ran beneath the school's old kitchen. Digging there was impossible. Raghunandan was considering a new turn. Batesar Kaka had already suggested five solutions—four impossible, and the fifth a repetition of something he had said earlier.

At that moment Malti Devi, the school cook, said, "There used to be an old ash pit behind the kitchen. The soil is soft there."

Raghunandan measured that route. The slope turned out to be right.

Batesar Kaka immediately opened his notebook.

Malti asked, "Will you write down what I said?"

"Certainly," Batesar said. "It is an expert's duty to gather evidence from local sources."

"Am I the local source, or is the ash pit?"

"Both. Evidence is multilayered."

Malti Devi laughed so loudly that two labourers stopped working and looked at her.

Within a week the main part of the drain was built. The next rain came at night. In the morning, water no longer collected in front of the school gate as before. A small stream slipped through the holes in the cover and flowed toward the old pond.

Batesar Kaka stood leaning on his umbrella. Raghunandan asked him, “Kaka, now tell me—is the slope toward the east, or toward the water?”

Batesar Kaka watched the flow in the drain. “I said from the start that water goes by its own intelligence. Our job is merely to keep it free from debate.”

“From debate?”

“Yes. If water had listened to the panchayat meeting, it would still be standing in front of the gate.”

At that, Raghunandan laughed too.

Two days later there was another panchayat meeting—this time the subject was vaccination of goats. The livestock worker was expected. The secretary was arranging the papers when Batesar Kaka arrived before anyone else.

In his hand was the same exercise book. He had crossed out “Drain Science” on the first page and written above it: “General Expertise.”

The secretary saw him from a distance and said, “Kaka, have you ever kept goats?”

“Never.”

“Then remain silent on this subject.”

Batesar Kaka became serious. “That is precisely why my opinion is impartial.”

The secretary closed the register. The livestock worker had not even arrived, but the panchayat expert had already begun his introduction.

My Rich Uncle

In our family, no audit was required to identify a wealthy man. Whoever arrived first at a wedding, ordered a second box of sweets, had two sacks of rice lifted at the market without asking the price, and did not waste time in conversation on figures below a thousand—that man was rich. By this standard, Uncle Nandkishor was the family's undisputed rich man.

He had a grain shop in the Parsauni market. Above the shop hung a tin sign: "Nandkishor Bhandar." The word "Bhandar" was painted in letters so large that from a distance one could not see the empty corners inside.

Uncle always kept two ledgers. One was thick, the other thicker still. If someone bought five kilos of rice, Uncle would open a page and write with such gravity that one might think the fate of the district's entire paddy crop was being decided.

When I was a child, I thought that a thick, filled ledger was proof of wealth. Much later I learned that one way for a ledger to grow thick is for accounts never to be settled.

But that knowledge came to me much later. Until then, in the family, Uncle remained rich.

That year, after two spells of rain in Sawan, the rear roof of Grandmother's old house began leaking in three places. One night a plate had to be placed upside down on the tin of stored paddy to stop the drops. The aunts said that if the roof was not repaired before Dashami, the next rain would turn the inside of the house into a courtyard.

On Sunday all the uncles, aunts, brothers, and sisters gathered in Grandmother's courtyard. Tea, puffed rice, and the estimate of expenses were placed on an old wooden cot in the middle.

Eldest Aunt said, "Bamboo, tin sheets, labour—altogether it will cost about thirty thousand."

Younger Uncle, lowering his head, said he would give five thousand. Aunt offered three thousand. My father said he would bear half the labour cost.

Everyone's eyes turned toward Uncle Nandkishor.

Uncle slowly set down his clay cup of tea. "You are all counting money. I am looking after the arrangements."

The moment he said this, everyone relaxed. In our family, the word ‘arrangements’ meant that whatever amount remained would be paid by Uncle Nandkishor.

Eldest Aunt said happily, “Then Uncle will take care of the balance.”

Uncle smiled. “Not the balance. I will look after the whole job.”

The effect of this sentence was such that even the tea seemed sweeter.

The meeting ended. Uncle said to me, “Come to the market tomorrow. We’ll speak to the tin-sheet man, the bamboo man, the carpenter—all at once. You should learn some business too.”

I was studying in town then. I had little desire to learn business, but a great desire to discover the secret of my rich uncle. So I reached the market early the next morning.

Uncle was opening his shop. First the lock opened, then Ramsevak, the tea seller next door, arrived.

He greeted him and said, “Uncle, thirteen days of old tea are due.”

Uncle looked at me and introduced him. “Ramsevak is an old associate of mine.”

Ramsevak laughed. “Associate is the right word. I provide the assistance; he provides the payment—when he finds the time.”

Uncle opened the ledger. “Not thirteen days. Twelve. I was away one day.”

Ramsevak said, “Your clerk drank tea that day.”

Uncle immediately added a line to the page. “Then thirteen. Justice is essential in accounts.”

I thought—rich people keep even such tiny accounts. It was inspiring.

Then Habib, who stitched sacks, arrived carrying three empty sacks. “Uncle, last month’s stitching?”

Uncle introduced him too. “This is my sack manager.”

Habib said, “My position has gone up. The amount has not.”

Uncle turned a page of the ledger. “You have four hundred and twenty due. I’ll pay you on Wednesday.”

“Which Wednesday?”

“Whichever Wednesday becomes suitable for payment.”

Habib looked at me and said, “Baua, you are educated. Find such a Wednesday for me in the almanac.”

Uncle laughed, and so did I. I still suspected nothing. Perhaps even a rich man’s debts were simply part of business—that was all I understood.

Ten minutes later Bholan, the cart driver, arrived. Seven trips of his freight charges were unpaid. After him came the oil seller—half the payment for two drums of mustard oil. Then a small truck came from the grain market; the driver got down and said at once, “I’ll unload the goods, but first give me the receipt for the previous trip.”

Uncle knew everyone by name, remembered almost every amount, and spoke to each person with such warmth that one might think they had come not to ask for their money but to offer him birthday blessings.

Slowly I began noticing the red marks in the ledger. The pages that in childhood had looked to me like proof of prosperity now looked like a long queue in which people stood waiting for their own money.

I asked, "Uncle, are all these red marks liabilities?"

Uncle tucked the pen behind his ear. "Not liabilities. Ongoing relationships."

"And the blue ones?"

"Those are people who owe me."

There were fewer blue marks.

I asked again, "Then why are there more red ones?"

Uncle looked at me as though I had asked an extremely childish question in arithmetic. "Business needs circulation. If money sits in one place, it catches a fever."

Meanwhile Ghanshyam Sahu, the tin-sheet dealer, arrived. Uncle gave him the roof measurements and asked the price of twenty sheets.

Ghanshyam Sahu quoted the price. Then Uncle said, "Give me fifteen days."

Ghanshyam Sahu shook his head. "First the old eight thousand."

Uncle smiled. "That is a business account. This is family work."

"My shop does not have two separate cashboxes—one for family and one for business."

Uncle leaned toward me and whispered, "These people reconcile accounts too often. That is why their businesses remain small."

Ghanshyam Sahu heard him. "And you do not reconcile accounts. That is why your credit remains large."

For the first time I laughed aloud. Uncle laughed too, though for one moment fewer teeth showed in his smile.

No deal was made for the tin sheets that day. We went to the bamboo seller. There too an old account surfaced. We went to the carpenter—his wages for two doors were still due. The hardware man said Uncle had not yet fully paid for a box of supplies used in last year's roof repairs.

By noon an astonishing truth had become clear to me—the family's rich uncle was in fact the most indebted person in the family.

I asked quietly, "Uncle, how much do you owe in total?"

He did not answer at once. He opened the thick ledger, then the other ledger. He added two or three pages, crossed out one page, and scratched his head.

"Speaking of the total is against business practice."

“Why?”

“The moment you hear the total, the mind panics. Hear the instalment, and the mind remains calm.”

“Even so?”

Very softly, Uncle named a figure.

I asked again, “And how much do people owe you?”

That figure was roughly half the first.

I did not feel like laughing. Uncle read my face. “Don’t become so serious. Everything is running. I have not swallowed anyone’s money. There are delays, but there are accounts.”

That was true. Uncle was not a fugitive debtor. He sat in the market every day; he knew the names of those he owed; if the date he promised was not met, he spoke to them again. His problem was less dishonesty than optimism. To him, every coming week looked larger than the week before it.

I raised Grandmother’s roof again. “Then how will you manage the whole arrangement?”

Uncle became alert at once. “Arrangements are not made with money alone.”

I had heard this sentence before. Now its meaning had changed.

Uncle took me back to Ghanshyam Sahu. This time he said, “Not twenty sheets. Twelve. Only the back room. The rest next year.”

Ghanshyam Sahu said, “Cash?”

Uncle looked at me. “The family contributions have been collected. Half now, half when the goods arrive.”

It was the first time I had seen Uncle on the side of the word ‘cash’.

With the bamboo seller he adjusted the account for four old bamboos against sacks of paddy Uncle had sent him. He told the carpenter he would pay half today toward the old wages for the two doors, while the roof work would be a separate cash job.

I asked, “Where will the money come from?”

“From what all of you said you would contribute. I am only going to make sure it reaches the right place first.”

After noon we reached Grandmother’s house. Everyone had expected Uncle to arrive with twenty sheets of tin, ten bamboos, and an army of five labourers. Behind him came only one bullock cart—twelve tin sheets, six bamboos, nails, rope, and two labourers.

Eldest Aunt asked, “Only this much?”

Uncle sat on the cot and opened the ledger. “Not the whole house. First the part that leaks. Half a roof in cash is better than a whole roof on credit.”

Younger Uncle stared. “You are saying that?”

Uncle became solemn. "Experience is an expensive teacher. I have paid a great deal in fees."

Everyone laughed. Uncle did too.

The work began. Uncle did not lift the tin sheets himself, but he watched the measurements, prices, labour, and reuse of old timber. Strangely, once the facility of borrowing disappeared, his bargaining intelligence became remarkably sharp.

He managed the job with one fewer tin sheet. He had the sound portions of two old bamboos cut and reused. He had the nails separated by size. He told the carpenter, "If the wood has not rotted, don't throw it away merely to look rich."

Eldest Aunt whispered in my ear, "He isn't rich, but he knows business."

By evening the roof over the back room was complete. When the first rain came, not a drop fell inside. Grandmother sat on her cot looking up at the roof.

The following Sunday there was another accounting meeting. This time Uncle brought the thick ledger himself.

First he read out all the expenses—cash payment for tin sheets, bamboo, labour, nails, bullock cart. Then on a separate page he wrote his old liabilities—Ghanshyam Sahu, Habib, Bholan, the tea seller, the carpenter.

Younger Uncle widened his eyes. "Are all these expenses for Grandmother's house?"

"No," Uncle Nandkishor said. "This is my personal splendour."

The courtyard filled with laughter.

Eldest Aunt said, "We all thought you were rich."

Without embarrassment, Uncle replied, "You were not entirely wrong. So many people trust me enough to give me credit. Trust is capital too."

Habib, who happened to have come into the courtyard at that moment for some stitching work, immediately said, "Capital is fine. When do I get my four hundred and twenty?"

Uncle opened the ledger. "Wednesday."

Habib asked, "Which Wednesday?"

Everyone laughed again.

This time Uncle laughed so hard that he had to close the ledger. Then, from the money left over in the roof account—not four hundred and twenty, but two hundred from his own pocket—he paid Habib.

"The rest on Wednesday," he said.

Counting the money, Habib said, "Now my search through the almanac has been cut in half."

After that day the family did not stop calling Uncle rich. If anything, the nickname became firmer. The only difference was that now, whenever

someone said “Rich Uncle,” he himself would pat the ledger and ask, “Shall we count assets, or relationships?”

And before answering, all of us would remember the faces of the tea seller, the sack-stitcher, and the cart driver.

The Missing Goat's Statement

In our village, a missing goat becomes less a problem for the owner than a test of everyone's intelligence. If someone's cow slips its tether, two or four people go looking for it; but the moment a goat disappears, half the village becomes a search party and the other half becomes scholars of causes and explanations.

In the last week of Sawan that year, Budhni Kaki's Dhauri disappeared. Dhauri was not completely white; the front of her left ear was black, and there was a small tuft of grey hair at the tip of her tail. Budhni Kaki said those two marks would make Dhauri recognisable even among a thousand goats.

At dawn Kaki got up, swept the courtyard first, then went to the tethering post. The post was empty. The rope was gone too. There were circular scrape marks in the earth, as though the post had gradually loosened and come out.

Kaki's first call was for Dhauri. Her second was for the neighbour. Her third was so loud that even two dogs in the lane looked at each other.

"Dhauri is gone!" Kaki said.

Within five minutes Lalan Sahu arrived. He never needed to inspect an event; he already knew what had happened before he came.

"This is theft," he said. "She has gone with the rope. A goat cannot untie its own rope and simply walk away, can it?"

Rasida Khala came from behind and immediately disagreed. "A thief would untie the rope. This one has uprooted the post. It must have been a pack of jackals."

Gangaram the blacksmith laughed. "Jackals have started dragging goats away by their ropes now? Next year they'll be reading government files too."

At that remark, instead of the search beginning, the debate began.

Master Harinarayan bent toward the ground. Around the post were two or three faint hoof marks. He adjusted his spectacles and said, "She went east."

"Where are the marks toward the east?" Lalan Sahu asked.

Master pointed at the earth with his stick. "Look at this curved line."

Rasida Khala said, "That is my granddaughter's slipper mark from yesterday."

Master stood up. "I know the difference between a slipper and a hoof."

Just then Ramsevak the barber arrived. His view was that a goat disappearing the night before market day was no ordinary matter. "Traders' people go around the village beforehand," he said gravely.

"Which trader?"

"Traders."

"Whom did you see?"

"Seeing is not necessary. You have to understand trade."

Budhni Kaki sat down holding her head. A small kid of hers was bleating continuously inside beside the bamboo screen. Kaki gave it leaves, but it sniffed them and left them untouched.

For five minutes the bleating lowered everyone's voices. Then a new round of opinions began.

Nago Paswan said Dhauri must have gone toward the northern fields. At night he had heard leaves breaking there.

"At what time?"

"I didn't look at the clock."

"Then when in the night?"

"When I woke up."

On the strength of this evidence, two people set off north.

Mangli Devi believed some child must have untied the goat while playing. At this, all the children in the lane began declaring their innocence at once, each in a different voice.

"I was at home all evening."

"I was at the pond."

"I'm afraid of goats."

"I don't even touch Dhauri."

After these four statements, the adults became even more suspicious of the children.

I too had reached the place by then. I had no theory. Admitting this is not very good for one's reputation in a village, but that was the truth. I saw only that the post had been uprooted, the rope had gone with it, and there were two or three tiny heaps of fine brown powder on the dusty ground outside the courtyard.

I thought it might be husk. But so many people had stepped over it that it was difficult to make out any trail.

Malti was also in the crowd. She was Mangli Devi's eleven-year-old daughter. She had her school jute bag in her hand because she intended to help find Dhauri and then go straight to school.

Malti said quietly to me, "Kaka, the husk is not only here."

"Where else?"

She pointed toward the bend in the lane. "There too. In between."

I walked two paces ahead and looked. Sure enough, there were tiny grains of bran beside the wall in the shade. Nothing showed on the sunlit patches, but where the dew had left the ground damp, the grains had stuck.

I told everyone.

Lalan Sahu immediately said, "The thief must have led the goat away by showing it bran."

Rasida Khala replied, "Do jackals keep bran now too?"

Master said, "The line of husk may have been made by the wind. The hoof direction is the main evidence."

Malti said nothing. She went as far as the bend in the lane and then beckoned to me with her hand.

I followed her. There was more bran at the bend. In the earth there, old bullock-cart wheel marks, bicycle tracks, and footprints overlapped one another. Among them, here and there, a thin mark of a rope dragging along the ground could also be seen.

Now I became interested.

I said, "Let us follow this line first. If we find nothing, we'll search elsewhere."

Five people agreed to come—Malti, Budhni Kaki, Gangaram the blacksmith, Ramsevak the barber, and I. The rest scattered in different directions to prove the importance of their own theories.

The grains of bran led first to the bend by the pond. There the trail broke. Ramsevak said at once, "See? A trader's cart passed from here."

Malti bent under the shade of the pond's masonry wall. "Here it is again."

After that small discovery I understood that the bran had not been blown by the wind; it had been leaking from a torn sack. The grains were not in the middle of the road but mostly near the edge, where a wheel must have jolted along.

Gangaram said, "Who carried bran last night?"

I remembered—Chhotelal Teli had loaded two sacks of bran from the mill onto his handcart in the evening. When the rain began, he had also stopped for ten or fifteen minutes beside the old oil house.

The old oil house was no longer in use. Inside stood an old wooden oil press, two broken low stools, and some empty sacks. One leaf of the door had swollen at the bottom, so it was difficult to close completely.

We reached the place. The door was not locked from outside, but both leaves were wedged against each other.

Ramsevak reached out his hand.

Budhni Kaki said, "Wait."

For the first time since the search had begun, everyone fell silent.

From inside came a very faint "Maa-a."

Kaki rushed to push the door. Gangaram stopped her. "Slowly. The rope may be caught somewhere."

The door leaf was lifted and opened. A thin shaft of sunlight entered. Dhauri stood beside the wooden oil press. Her rope had wound twice around the press's old bamboo handle. At the other end of the rope, Kaki's uprooted bamboo post was still tied.

In front of Dhauri was a small heap of bran spilled from a torn sack. She had eaten half of it; the rest had been trampled underfoot.

Budhni Kaki first untangled the rope, then caught Dhauri by the black ear and gently scolded her. "Because of you the whole village has become learned."

Dhauri did not reply. The moment she came outside, she stretched her mouth toward the grass by the pond.

Meanwhile the search parties that had gone in different directions began returning. The northern party brought a broken slipper. The eastern party had a cracked bicycle bell. The party that had gone toward the market announced that no goat trader had left the village that morning.

When they were told that Dhauri had been found inside the oil house, the first thing to return after their surprise was everyone's defence of his own theory.

Lalan Sahu said, "Didn't I say it was theft? It is still possible that the thief left her here and ran away."

Rasida Khala said, "The jackals must have chased her as far as the oil house. She escaped by getting inside."

Looking at the ground with his stick, Master said, "The eastern hoof marks must have been old. But it was necessary to raise the question of direction."

Ramsevak announced, "I brought up the traders so that the market direction would be checked immediately. It was checked—that itself was useful."

Malti said nothing about any of this. She merely dusted her jute school bag because dust from the oil house had settled on its lower corner.

Chhotelal Teli was called. The moment he saw the torn sack of bran, he slapped his forehead. "Yesterday bran kept spilling from this sack all along the road. When the rain became heavy, I stopped the cart here. I didn't see the goat in the dark. The wind must have jammed the door leaves."

"Your sack lured my goat away," Budhni Kaki said.

Chhotelal laughed. "The sack is guilty; I am only the witness."

The incident could have ended by noon. But in our village, an incident ending and its statement ending are two different things.

Rahman Mian from the market, whose name had twice been mentioned without evidence during the discussion of traders, came to the panchayat outpost that evening and said, "If my name has been taken, then write down that the goat was found in the oil house. Tomorrow someone will say I took her."

Budhni Kaki agreed. "Write it. Today people searched for Dhauri; tomorrow the story may grow larger than my house."

So the panchayat assistant opened the register. I remained seated there because, after hearing the story this far, going home now seemed an injustice to myself.

The assistant wrote the first line: "Budhni Devi's goat was found absent from its tethering post at dawn."

Lalan Sahu immediately interrupted. "Write that theft was suspected."

Rasida Khala said, "And the possibility of jackals."

Master said, "Inspection of hoof marks in the eastern direction."

Ramsevak cleared his throat. "Market-related investigation."

The assistant stopped his pen and looked at me. "Is this the goat's statement, or the experts'?"

Laughter rose at the outpost.

Budhni Kaki said, "If the goat could speak, half the village's work would have been saved."

In the end a short account was written in the register: post uprooted; marks of rope dragging; scattered grains of bran; old oil house; rope caught in the oil press; animal found safe. Beside Rahman Mian's name it was written clearly that there was no evidence against him.

Before writing the last line, the assistant asked, "The goat's statement?"

For the first time Malti spoke loudly. "The statement was on the road. We were slow to read it."

At this, Master took off his spectacles and began cleaning them. Lalan Sahu quietly stared at the page of the register. Rasida Khala smiled.

After thinking for a few moments, the assistant wrote: "No direct statement from the animal available; sequence of events clear from physical signs."

Budhni Kaki could not read. She asked, "It says here that Dhauri has been found, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then that is enough."

On the way back, Malti held Dhauri's rope. Dhauri kept pulling her hand toward the grass growing along the roadside.

From behind, Lalan Sahu called, "I knew from the beginning that the matter concerned the stomach."

Ramsevak asked, “Whose stomach? The goat’s, or your theory’s?”

Everyone laughed again.

The next day the panchayat outpost register acquired the heading: “The Missing Goat’s Statement.” Beneath it were seven lines of facts. After that, there was no theory.

But theories continued in the village. There was only one change: whenever someone spoke with great confidence about something he had not seen, Malti would look at the ground and ask, “Where did the bran fall?”

The Mobile-Phone Guru

Every Wednesday at four in the afternoon, a different kind of school assembled on the panchayat veranda in Baraila village. Most of the students had white hair, thick spectacle frames, and no fewer questions than children.

The teacher of this school was Raghunath Babu. After forty years of delivering letters, he knew almost by heart the route to nearly every house in the village, every family name, and whose son lived where. Now, after retirement, people had given him a new name—the Mobile-Phone Guru.

At first Raghunath Babu protested when he heard the name. He would say, “I am no guru. I only know as much as I have not forgotten since yesterday.” But once the name caught on, he too accepted it with a smile.

A small wooden board always stood before him. On it, in large letters, were written five things: read first, then press; do not trust an unfamiliar message; never tell anyone your passcode; do not keep guessing again and again; and if you do not understand something, ask.

On the first day Rasida Khala brought her phone simply because whenever it rang, she kept confusing which symbol to press. Raghunath Babu made her do it three times. The fourth time he said, “Now I will not tell you.” Rasida Khala did it herself and smiled as if she had passed a difficult examination.

Shivnarayan Kaka had been thinking of giving up the device because the letters looked too small. Raghunath Babu enlarged the text on the screen. Kaka immediately asked, “Was this already inside it?”

“A great many things are already inside,” the guru said. “The difficulty is that the device stays silent, and people do not ask.”

Laughter rose on the veranda.

Kamala Devi liked sending voice messages, but in a single breath she would send one so long that the listener could make tea halfway through it. The guru trained her to speak in short sentences.

Murtuza Mian, while looking for his grandson’s photograph, would keep opening the clock screen instead. Within two weeks he could open and view the photographs by himself. Then he began showing them to everyone. In the third week Raghunath Babu said, “The proof that you have learned is not that you show it to everyone. Show it to the person who wants to see it.”

The hardest subject in the school was the passcode. Many people in the village used their birth year, their house number, or four identical digits. Raghunath Babu gave special lectures on this.

“A passcode is like knowing which peg in the house holds the key,” he would say. “If you tell everyone, what is the point of keeping a key?”

One day Rasida Khala asked him directly, “Guruji, what is your passcode?”

Raghunath Babu folded both hands and said, “If I answer that question, stop calling me guru.”

From that day the students stopped asking one another for passcodes. In fact, if someone began saying one aloud, five people would cry “Quiet!” at once.

On one Wednesday in Bhadon, Raghunath Babu reached the veranda half an hour earlier than usual. His phone had switched off during the night; when he turned it on in the morning, it asked for the passcode.

Raghunath Babu pressed the first digit, the second, the third, the fourth. The screen showed that it was wrong. He frowned. Then he tried another sequence. Wrong again.

A third time his finger went toward the screen, but he stopped midway. He remembered the fourth sentence on his board—do not keep guessing again and again.

He turned the phone face down on the table. For five minutes he kept cleaning the wooden board, although it was already clean.

‘First of all’—Raghunath Babu smiled inwardly at the phrase; it was what he trained his students to do. And indeed, Rasida Khala was the first to arrive.

“Early class today?” she asked him.

“An oral lesson today,” the guru said.

“Where is the device?”

“Resting.”

Rasida Khala looked at the phone lying face down on the table. “Is the device resting, or the guru?”

Raghunath Babu did not answer.

A little later Shivnarayan Kaka, Kamala Devi, Murtuza Mian, and the others arrived. Everyone opened his or her own device. The guru only began reading the five sentences from the wooden board.

Kamala Devi interrupted him. “Won’t you teach by showing us today?”

“Understanding is more important than seeing.”

Murtuza Mian said softly, “That sentence comes out when no example is available.”

Laughter rose again. Raghunath Babu’s ears turned red. At last he turned the phone face up. Four empty spaces were visible on the screen, asking for the passcode.

“I have forgotten it,” he said in a low voice.

For a moment the veranda fell silent. No one laughed.

Rasida Khala looked toward the wooden board. “First rule—do not panic.”

Shivnarayan Kaka said, “Another useful rule—do not keep guessing again and again.”

Kamala Devi said, “And the third—never tell anyone the passcode. So none of us will ask either.”

This time Raghunath Babu himself burst out laughing.

“All right,” he said. “The guru’s examination begins.”

He explained that a few months earlier he had replaced his old, easy number with a new passcode. That day he himself had given the example that recovery information should not be kept with the device.

“Then where did I keep it?” Raghunath Babu scratched his head.

Rasida Khala said at once, “You yourself said, ‘I’ll keep it in the inner pocket of my old postman’s bag.’”

Raghunath Babu looked at her as though a student had defeated the teacher in the answer book.

The old postman’s bag hung on the wall of his house. The house was a five-minute walk from the veranda. Raghunath Babu wanted to go alone, but Kamala Devi said, “Today is the practical lesson. We will keep our distance, but we will not abandon the class.”

The small group went as far as his house. Seeing the crowd on the veranda, Sumitra Devi asked, “Whose device has broken down this time?”

Rasida Khala said, “Guruji’s today.”

Sumitra Devi smiled without surprise. “I have been waiting a long time for this day.”

The old brown postman’s bag hung from a nail in the wall. Raghunath Babu opened its inner pocket. Out came old postage stamps, two torn receipts, a dry neem leaf, and a small sealed envelope. On the envelope, in his own handwriting, were the words: ‘Recovery details; separate from device.’

“I wrote this, but I did not remember that I had written it,” he muttered.

Shivnarayan Kaka said, “That is why it was written down.”

The envelope did not contain the passcode. It contained only the details with which he could prove his identity at the service centre and regain access. Raghunath Babu was pleased to see this. “At least the old me left a complete arrangement for the new me.”

The authorised service centre in the village market was small but familiar. Raghunath Babu went inside alone; the students stood outside near the tea shop. Half an hour later he emerged. The phone was open again in his hand.

Murtuza Mian asked, “What is the new passcode?”

Raghunath Babu replied at once, "Class dismissed."

Everyone burst out laughing.

The next Wednesday there were six sentences on the wooden board, not five. Raghunath Babu had added a new final line: 'If you forget, do not be ashamed; do not keep making wrong guesses.'

He first told them what had happened to him, but not the new passcode. No one asked for it either.

Then he told the students to check their own recovery arrangements—without telling anyone a secret number, without writing down anyone's private information. This time the students did not give one another orders; they asked one another questions.

Rasida Khala opened her device and held it toward the guru. "Look, I have set a new passcode."

Raghunath Babu began to look toward the screen. Rasida Khala immediately pulled the phone back. "Guruji, you yourself told us—not to show it to anyone."

Raghunath Babu raised his hands. "Right. That lesson I remember very well now."

In small chalk letters at the corner of the table, Shivnarayan Kaka wrote: 'Today the guru is also a student.'

Raghunath Babu read it. He picked up a cloth to erase it, then put the cloth down again.

Evening descended. The veranda began to empty. Everyone packed away his or her device. As Rasida Khala was leaving, she turned back and asked, "Guruji, another passcode lesson next Wednesday?"

Raghunath Babu said, "No. Next Wednesday we will learn how to ask a guru a question in such a way that the guru cannot escape."

Laughter rose once more on the veranda. The six rules shone on the wooden board, and in the corner the small chalk sentence had not been erased.

The Wedding Budget

Before the evening meeting began in Navalkishor Jha's courtyard in Sarisab, one thing had already been settled—Kumud's wedding would be simple, the expenses would remain limited, and no money would be thrown away merely to imitate others.

Navalkishor had announced this decision so many times that even the small children in the house began imitating his voice whenever they heard the words "simple wedding." But the distance between a declaration and an account became clear at the very first meeting.

On an old wooden cot in the veranda lay a red-bound expense ledger. Kumud's maternal uncle Govind tucked his pencil behind his ear. Beside him sat Phulo Kaki, neighbour Jagdish Kaka, the village's well-known cook Nathuni Maharaj, and Kumud's mother Shailaja.

Govind opened the ledger and said, "First write the total limit. An account without a limit is like a river without banks."

Navalkishor said, "Not above seventy thousand."

Phulo Kaki immediately asked, "How many from the groom's party?"

"They have said eighty-five. With our own village and household, one hundred and twenty."

Jagdish Kaka added, "Count those who have not been invited too. On a wedding day, people follow the sound of the drums more readily than the invitation card."

Govind wrote: "Total diners: two hundred and fifty; for safety, two hundred and seventy." Navalkishor held his head. In five minutes the meeting had added twenty people.

The first item was the wedding pavilion. Bamboo would come from the neighbour's grove, rope from home, and village children would gather the leaves. The cost was small. For flower decoration Shailaja said, "There are marigolds in the courtyard." A small figure was entered under that item too.

For music, Kumud's younger brother Pawan proposed that the village youth group could play the kettledrum and cymbals. Govind wrote: "Music: honorarium only."

When photography was discussed, Kumud called from inside, "Two hours are enough. Not the whole night." Navalkishor was pleased. So far even half a page of the expense ledger had not been filled.

Then Govind wrote the next heading: "Food."

Nathuni Maharaj had remained silent until then. Spreading his gamchha across his knees, he said, "Before discussing food, first decide what 'simple' means."

Without delay Navalkishor answered, "Rice, dal, one vegetable dish, pickle, curd, and one sweet."

Phulo Kaki made a face as though three fingers out of five had gone missing. "Only one vegetable dish for the groom's party?"

"One is enough."

"Will there be jackfruit?"

"If there is, that itself is the one vegetable dish."

"Jackfruit needs potatoes with it. Do potatoes count separately or not?"

Nathuni Maharaj burst out laughing. "The potatoes will sit inside the vegetable dish, not in a separate row."

Phulo Kaki did not surrender. "Then pointed gourd? The elderly men in the groom's party do not eat jackfruit."

For the first time Govind's pencil crossed into a second line beneath the food heading.

Jagdish Kaka said, "In my view there should be leafy greens. It is a winter wedding; without fresh greens the meal will look dull."

Shailaja said softly, "If we cook greens, we will need another large cauldron."

Nathuni Maharaj began counting: "One cauldron for rice, one for dal, one for jackfruit and potatoes, one for greens. Four fires. Four people to supervise. Oil and spices separately."

Navalkishor said, "Cut the greens."

Jagdish Kaka replied, "I accept that they are cut, but history will record that in our time leafy greens were removed from a wedding feast."

Laughter rose in the veranda. Govind put a question mark beside the greens.

Then they considered curd. They had milk from two cows of their own, but two cows could not supply curd for two hundred and seventy people. The cost of buying milk from neighbours was added. Earthen pots would be needed to set the curd. Phulo Kaki said curd tasted better in earthen pots. Nathuni Maharaj said that for two hundred and seventy people, seventy little pots would become not flavour but transportation. In the end, three large earthen vessels were agreed upon.

The meeting truly grew heated over sweets. Navalkishor had said one sweet. Shailaja wanted kheer. Phulo Kaki would not agree to drop pua. Pawan said his friends were expecting rasgullas.

Navalkishor looked at Pawan. "Are your friends coming to attend a wedding or to inspect the sweets?"

Pawan fell silent, but five minutes later asked, "Then will the bowl of kheer be large?"

In a corner of the ledger Govind wrote: "Special watch on Pawan's friends."

By the time the first meeting ended, out of the total seventy-thousand-rupee ceiling, the estimate for food alone had reached thirty-four thousand. The pavilion, music, photography, honoraria, and transport together did not amount to that much.

Closing the red-bound ledger, Navalkishor said, "In a low-cost wedding, the stomach has turned out to be the most expensive department."

The next day Kumud looked through the expense ledger. Under the food heading there were so many crossed-out, added, and circled words that it seemed to her as though someone had written a story.

She asked her mother, "Do we need this much food?"

Shailaja said, "I would prefer less. But if we remove something, someone's feelings get hurt. Phulo Kaki has her pua, Jagdish Kaka his greens, your brother his rasgullas, and your father his spending limit."

Kumud laughed. "And what do I have?"

"It is your wedding. Your chance to have an opinion on the food list will come later."

Kumud opened a new page in the ledger and wrote: "First use whatever can be made from things available at home or in the village; buy from outside only afterward."

At the second evening meeting she placed that page on the cot. Nathuni Maharaj read it and said, "If the cook had said this first, people would think I was trying to save labour. When the bride says it, it sounds like wisdom."

Two village families offered rice from their own fields. Jagdish Kaka would provide potatoes from his kitchen garden. Phulo Kaki took responsibility for supplying jaggery from her house for the pua, but laid down one condition: "Pua stays on the list."

Navalkishor said, "The jaggery is yours; the decision is mine."

"Then the jaggery is mine too."

Laughter rose again. In the end the pua stayed, but the rasgullas were cut. Pawan protested, then was given the right to taste the first batch of pua. The protest ended.

The question of greens returned at the next meeting. This time Jagdish Kaka arrived carrying a basket of fresh greens. "The thing struck off the list has come back on its own feet."

Nathuni Maharaj looked at the basket and said, "What will this amount do for two hundred and seventy people?"

Jagdish Kaka said, "Flavour."

In the end the greens were assigned not to the main meal but to the first meal for the cooks and household members. Jagdish Kaka looked as pleased as though he had won a policy decision.

The purpose of the third meeting was merely to settle quantities, but deciding quantities turned out to be the hardest task of all. Nathuni Maharaj gave the measure for rice. Govind calculated. Phulo Kaki said, "The groom's party will take second helpings." Pawan added, "My friends will take third helpings."

Navalkishor said, "Shall we keep your friends after the wedding to plough the fields?"

After listening to everyone, Nathuni Maharaj finally said, "Respect people's appetites, but do not invent them. Measure for the number we actually have; keep ten percent extra. Not double."

By this rule the amount of rice fell, the amount of oil fell, and the ingredients for sweets fell. The food estimate came down from thirty-four thousand to twenty-seven thousand. For the first time Navalkishor looked victorious.

Then Phulo Kaki asked, "Won't there be tea at the meeting?"

Everyone looked at one another. At the previous two meetings there had been tea, puffed rice, roasted gram, and jalebis twice, but none of it appeared anywhere in the ledger.

Govind immediately wrote a new heading: "Expenses of Wedding-Planning Meetings."

Navalkishor said, "Remove that heading."

Govind replied, "The heading can be removed. The expense cannot."

On the wedding day, the plan ran almost exactly as it had finally been written in the ledger. Bamboo came from the neighbours, marigolds from the courtyard, rice from village fields, potatoes from Jagdish Kaka's garden. Nathuni Maharaj's cauldrons were hot before evening.

The groom's party did not number eighty-five; one hundred and seven arrived. From a distance Jagdish Kaka looked at Navalkishor as though returning his prediction from the first meeting with interest added.

But because they had kept ten percent extra, some village people ate later, and the cooks divided the serving into rows, there was no shortage. The trays

of pua emptied faster than expected. Pawan went about telling his friends proudly that the rasgullas had been removed deliberately.

Taking three puas at once, Phulo Kaki said, "This is not an expense. It is tradition."

Navalkishor heard her but did not argue on the wedding day. He merely signalled to Govind with his eyes. Govind wrote nothing in the ledger; peace on a wedding day was also a kind of saving.

After the night had deepened, Nathuni Maharaj gave the account of the remaining food. A little rice, dal covering the bottom of one pot, two buckets of jackfruit and potatoes, and only twenty-seven puas. Compared with the estimate, very little had been wasted.

The next morning Govind opened the red-bound ledger again. The final expenses were added. The pavilion cost less than estimated, the music almost nothing, the photography stayed within the agreed limit, and food was still the largest item. Yet the total expenditure remained within seventy thousand.

Navalkishor said with satisfaction, "See? A low-cost wedding is possible."

Govind turned the page. "One account is still left."

"What?"

"Tea, puffed rice, roasted gram, jalebis, samosas on two occasions, and what Phulo Kaki called the special pua-testing for four meetings."

From the other end of the veranda Phulo Kaki said, "How would we have known the quality without testing?"

Govind added the amount. Everyone laughed until they gradually fell silent. Food had been the largest item at the wedding, but the meetings held to reduce the food budget had themselves become small feasts.

Kumud, who came to look at the ledger before leaving for her husband's home, wrote a line in pencil in the corner of the last page: "At the next wedding, do not hold meetings on an empty stomach—eat first."

Navalkishor read it, closed the ledger, and for the first time did not make another declaration about a "simple wedding." He only said, "Keep this ledger safe. Next time, before we begin the accounts, we will eat breakfast at home."

The Great Poet's Neighbour

Batuknath Jha lives immediately to the west of my house. The wall of his house leaves just enough distance between us that when he recites poetry on his veranda, I may not understand the meaning from my courtyard, but I certainly hear the rhyme. People in the village call him "Poet Batuk"; Batuknath himself has added the word "Great" to the name.

I have no objection to this. People may add whatever they like before their names. The only difficulty is that his sole method of proving his greatness is to recite poetry to his neighbour, and unfortunately I am his nearest neighbour.

At first I was polite. In the evenings he would come and say, "Just listen to two lines." I would shift the wooden stool for him. Two lines became four, four became twelve, and by the time twelve became "the last poem in this section," my rice would be cold.

Once my wife Kamla asked, "Shall I heat your rice again?" I said, "No, I'll eat when the poem ends." Laughing, she said, "Then I'll save tomorrow's rice too."

That was how I learned that loving poetry is one thing, and being a poet's neighbour quite another. It was necessary to save my evenings without dishonouring literature.

I devised my first method of escape—whenever I saw the red-bound book in Batuknath's hand, I immediately went toward the cowshed. I believed no one would recite poetry beside a man lifting cow dung. Batuknath proved more determined than I was. Standing at the cowshed gate, he said, "This poem contains soil, smell, and labour—all three. Hearing it here will give it the proper atmosphere."

That day I carried out two baskets of dung and listened to seventeen lines. The only advantage was that the cow occasionally swished its tail between verses, so some words never reached me.

For my second method, I began pretending to be hard of hearing. He said, "I have written a new poem." Cupping a hand to my ear, I asked, "What? You bought a new hoe?"

Batuknath was delighted. "Hoe! Wonderful. A whole poem could be written on that word." He sat down on the veranda at once and began

composing "The Lament of the Hoe." My deafness had not saved me from poetry; it had helped produce a new poem.

The third method was planned with the family's cooperation. I told Kamla—when the poet comes, wait five minutes, then shout from inside, "The milk is boiling over." That would give me an excuse to get up.

The plan might have worked, but on the very first day Kamla forgot that there was no milk in the house that evening. Batuknath looked inside and asked, "Where is the milk?" Kamla thought for a moment and answered, "It finished before it could boil over."

Batuknath looked at me. I looked at him. He said nothing, but titled his next poem "The Milk That Never Boiled Over."

After that I began arranging all my defensive measures in my head. Red book—toward the well. Blue book—to the market. Open sheet of paper—"I have accounts to write." Paper in his pocket—a greeting from a safe distance.

The trouble was that Batuknath's poetic material was everywhere. One day he came without a book. Reassured, I sat on the stool. He slapped his forehead and said, "I forgot the book today." I breathed with relief. Then he added, "But I know it all by heart."

Other people in the village were not unfamiliar with this crisis either. Harimohan the betel seller began pounding areca nuts the moment he saw Batuknath, so half the lines disappeared in the clatter. Mahesh the tailor ran his sewing machine faster. The schoolmaster, the moment he spotted Batuknath coming from a distance, began giving the children extra lessons.

But there was no unity among us. One day Harimohan blamed me. "You are the neighbour. You listen. What am I supposed to tell my customers?" I said, "The poet's throat opens after chewing your betel. You are the root cause."

In the middle of this argument Batuknath himself arrived. "What are you discussing?" he asked. Harimohan immediately said, "Your poetry." I have not considered him a friend since that day.

Batuknath caught hold of me. "I have found you at just the right time. Shall I recite 'The Seven Colours of Evening'?"

I replied at once, "I'll listen, but I have one rule. While listening to poetry, my hands will not remain empty."

He looked surprised. "Meaning?"

"Meaning that I have to repair the bamboo fence behind the house. You recite; I'll listen while tying the bamboo."

I had thought the sight of the repair work would make him turn back. Instead, he gathered up his dhoti and said, "Poetry and labour ought to meet." Five minutes later he was holding the rope, I was setting the bamboo upright, and "The Seven Colours of Evening" had reached an eighth colour.

The poem ended, but half the fence had been repaired too. A new thought came to me—if I could not escape listening, why not get some work done while I listened?

The next time he arrived with a poem, I was shelling peas. I placed a bowl before him. He read the first couplet and shelled three peas. On the second, five. By the third couplet, his hands had found the rhythm. The poem was long, but all the peas were shelled.

When Kamla saw this, her eyes lit up with the particular glow that appears when an expense has been saved. The next day she herself said, “Poet Babu, if you have a new poem, recite it while picking the stones out of these pigeon peas.”

Batuknath looked at the tray of pigeon peas, remained silent for a moment, then said, “If the listener is industrious, it is the poet’s duty to help.”

From that day my method spread through the village. Harimohan began listening while counting betel leaves. Mahesh the tailor sorted buttons. The schoolmaster listened while binding old exercise books. No one escaped Batuknath’s poetry, but at least the time spent listening was no longer wasted.

At first Batuknath was proud of the change. He would say, “See? My poetry is making people industrious.” I would nod in agreement, because the moment I disagreed he would begin another poem as evidence.

After a month the situation became strange. Whenever Batuknath came down the lane carrying a book, people immediately brought out little jobs of their own—shelling peas, untangling jute cord, folding old newspaper sheets. The poet moved from one house to another reciting, and everywhere did some small task alongside it.

One day he said to me, “I suspect people are listening less to the poetry and more to the work.”

I said, “Poetry is heard; work is seen. Together they strengthen memory.”

He stared at me for a long time. I was afraid my answer would give birth to another poem. But he only smiled.

The real test came one evening in Sawan. Batuknath arrived with a new poem—twelve pages long. Clouds hung outside; inside, Kamla was sorting lentils. I had no job large enough to survive twelve pages. In alarm, I looked around the courtyard.

Beside the wall lay a pile of old bricks that had to be moved under the veranda before the rains. I said, “I shall certainly hear the poem. I only need to move these bricks inside.”

Batuknath tucked the book under his arm and lifted the first brick. I took the second. He read one line, we moved two bricks. By the third page the rain

had begun. On the fifth, Kamla opened the door and set down tea. By the eighth, half the brick pile was gone.

On the tenth page Batuknath suddenly stopped reading. I thought he was tired. Looking at the page, he said, "This line is wrong."

I was astonished. For the first time in all those days, he had stopped his own poem midway.

He set down two bricks, took out a pencil, crossed out one line, and wrote another. Then he asked me, "Was the first version better, or this one?"

I had always avoided this question. But that evening I had a brick in my hand, the rain was heavy, and I had crossed ten of the poem's twelve pages. I said, "The second is shorter, so it is better."

He burst out laughing. "Your criticism always saves time."

I laughed too. For the first time that day I understood that Batuknath was not unaware of all my escape tactics. He knew everything—the milk, the cowshed, the deafness, the market, the fence—but seemed content to keep the game going.

Before the twelfth page was finished, all the bricks were under the veranda. Batuknath closed the book and said, "Now you have escaped."

I said, "The poem is over?"

"No. The last two lines tomorrow. You still have to lift the bamboo onto the roof, don't you?"

I began to suspect the plan had slipped out of my hands.

A few days later the village library announced a monsoon literary evening. Everyone feared that if Batuknath gave the main reading, the programme would continue until night. Naresh, the librarian, told me secretly, "You are the neighbour. Do something."

I said, "Where will I find peas on a stage?"

In the end I went to Batuknath. It was difficult to speak directly, but years of neighbourhood give a man some courage. I said, "People do not run from your poetry. They run from its length."

He asked calmly, "How many pages can you listen to?"

"Sitting still? Two."

"While working?"

"Six."

He laughed. "Then shall we give everyone work at the literary evening?"

I said, "No. Keep it to two pages."

On the day of the programme Batuknath went up on the stage. In his hand was the red-bound book, containing at least twenty visible pages. Every listener grew uneasy. Harimohan began searching his pocket for areca nuts; Mahesh assumed the posture of sorting imaginary buttons.

Batuknath opened the book and said, "My neighbour's order—two pages."

Every eye turned toward me. I tried to become smaller in my chair.

He really did read only two pages. The poem was short, about a village evening, the shadow of the bamboo fence, peas, a pile of bricks, and a neighbour's habit of repeatedly getting up to leave. I feared everyone would recognise me; everyone did.

At the last line people laughed, then applauded. Batuknath closed the book and stepped down from the stage. Naresh looked as relieved as though not a programme but a flood embankment had been saved.

On the way back I walked beside Batuknath. He asked, "Were two pages all right?"

I said, "Fine. But what happened to the poem about the fence?"

He narrowed his eyes at me. "I thought you never listened."

I began searching for an answer. The truth was that many lines from the poems I had tried so hard to escape had settled inside me without my consent.

Batuknath said, "Don't worry. The fence poem is seven pages long. I'll recite it tomorrow."

I said immediately, "Tomorrow morning I have to dig potatoes."

He replied happily, "Excellent. The poem is about soil."

That is why I no longer devise new escape plans. Whenever Batuknath arrives with a book, I simply look around the courtyard to see what task has been postponed for too long. I have still not achieved complete escape from poetry, but my fence, bricks, lentils, peas, potatoes, and even the library have all benefited from this neighbourhood.

And Batuknath? He still adds "Great" before his name. I do not object. One advantage of being the neighbour of a great poet is that work in the village never comes to a complete halt.

The Scholar for Hire

In an old lane near the university in Darbhanga stood Gopikant Jha's two-storey house. He himself lived downstairs with his family, while upstairs he had rented three small rooms to students. A tin sign hung on the gate: 'Quiet Residence for Students.' At some point, someone had added 'Very' in red chalk before the word 'Quiet', but Gopikant Babu had never erased it.

Gopikant Babu was a retired clerk. He believed that after thirty years of reading files in an office, no subject in the world could remain entirely unfamiliar to him. If history came up, he cited the archives; if the conversation turned to botany, he pointed to the tulsi plant in his courtyard; if there was a question of economics, he opened the rent ledger.

A new tenant, Nilambar Jha, came to live in the house. He was a final-year postgraduate student, writing a short dissertation on 'The Memory of Domestic Labour in the Wedding Songs of Northern Mithila'. All he wanted was one room, one table, an earthen pot for water, and enough quiet to study at night.

On the first day Gopikant Babu read out the terms of tenancy: rent by the fifth of the month, shoes kept straight on the veranda, no loud music after ten at night, and no plucking mangoes from the tree on the roof without asking.

Nilambar said, 'I don't have a musical instrument.'

Gopikant Babu was pleased. 'Then you seem to be a man of study. What is your subject?'

Nilambar told him the subject.

Gopikant Babu's eyes lit up. 'Wedding songs? That is my special field.'

Nilambar thought that landlords generally regarded their roof, drain, water supply, or electricity as their special field. Wedding songs were a first.

The very next morning Gopikant Babu came upstairs carrying an old exercise book. On its cover was written: 'Miscellaneous Knowledge'. Inside were half a page of rent accounts, half a page of proverbs, names of medicines here and there, two pages of materials for worship, and, at the end, five lines from wedding songs.

'I heard all these from my mother,' he said. 'Use them. Put my name among your sources.'

Nilambar examined the notebook respectfully. Some of the lines were genuinely useful. He said, 'Certainly. I'll put your name in the acknowledgements.'

Gopikant Babu raised an eyebrow. 'Only the acknowledgements?'

Nilambar laughed. He could not tell whether the question was a joke or a proposal.

A week later the first chapter of Nilambar's dissertation lay ready on his table. That evening Gopikant Babu came upstairs on the pretext of collecting the rent. He spent five minutes taking the rent, fifteen minutes reading the chapter, and then drew circles in three places with a red pencil.

'Here you have written "the women of the household". That is too broad. Write "the experienced women of the household".'

Nilambar said, 'But not all the songs are sung only by experienced women.'

'Very well. Then let "the women of the household" remain. I merely offered an alternative.'

The second circle was around a punctuation mark. The third was in an empty part of the page.

Nilambar asked, 'What is wrong here?'

Gopikant Babu said, 'Nothing. The space was empty, so I drew a circle. If there is a red pencil in my hand and I draw no circles, my mind remains dissatisfied.'

Nilambar laughed. From that day Gopikant Babu began his evening 'research darshan'.

He would read a page and say midway, 'This line meant something different at my wedding.' Then he would begin the story of his own wedding. Instead of writing, Nilambar would be left listening.

One night Gopikant Babu said, 'My contribution to your subject has become quite sufficient now. How will the name appear?'

Nilambar asked, 'Which name?'

'On the dissertation. Nilambar Jha—and Gopikant Jha. Smaller type will do.'

The pen in Nilambar's hand stopped. 'This is a university dissertation. The author is the candidate alone.'

Gopikant Babu grew serious. 'Why should there be only one author? The house is mine, the table is mine, the electric wiring is mine, the wedding songs are my mother's, the red pencil is mine. Only the sentences are yours?'

'I pay the rent too.'

'That is financial support in reverse.'

Nilambar remained silent for a few moments before this argument. He understood that the university regulations would contain no answer to a sentence like that.

From the next day Gopikant Babu began to formalise his role. He put a small sign at the corner of the upstairs staircase: 'Research Room'. He had the old chair from the veranda sent into Nilambar's room and said, 'A co-author needs support for his back.'

Nilambar objected. 'Drop the word co-author.'

'Fine. For now, "collaborator". The final decision after the degree is awarded.'

The house's other tenant, Ashok, a mathematics student, took great delight in these discussions. Every day he asked, 'Gopikant Babu, will you become a co-candidate in my examination too?'

Gopikant Babu would say, 'Mathematics is not my field.'

Ashok would immediately reply, 'But only yesterday you were teaching me how to calculate interest.'

'That was life-mathematics.'

Gradually word spread through the lane that Gopikant Babu wanted his name added to his tenant's degree. At the tea stall people began addressing him as 'Professor'. At first he protested; from the third day onward he merely smiled.

Nilambar's difficulty was that not everything Gopikant Babu said was meaningless. One wedding song mentioned 'the seventh post of the veranda'. Nilambar had interpreted it as an architectural symbol. Gopikant Babu said, 'My mother used to say that in old houses sacks of grain were kept beside that post. In the song it may be a memory of the bride taking leave of the grain store.'

To verify this clue, Nilambar spoke to two elderly women. Both remembered the old practice of storing grain in that way. An important paragraph in his chapter was corrected as a result.

After this success, Gopikant Babu's confidence grew by two full armspans. On the first page of his 'Miscellaneous Knowledge' notebook he wrote a new title: 'Assistant Research Ledger'.

Nilambar saw it and clutched his head.

The problem became serious when the submission date drew near. Nilambar had a sample of the university cover page printed. The university's name appeared at the top, the subject in the middle, and below it: 'Submitted by: Nilambar Jha'.

The moment Gopikant Babu saw the page, he asked, 'Where is my name?' 'In the acknowledgements.'

‘Acknowledgements are given even to the man who serves paan at a wedding. Mine is an intellectual contribution.’

‘Then I’ll state it clearly in the acknowledgements—assistance with folk memory and regional interpretation.’

Gopikant Babu was not satisfied. He took out his red pencil and, in faint letters beneath ‘Submitted by’, wrote: ‘Local Co-Thinker: Gopikant Jha’.

Nilambar looked at the page and said, ‘This is the printed copy!’

‘Red is temporary. If the university wants, it can have it printed in black.’

That night Nilambar seriously considered looking for another house. But it was the end of the month, the submission date was five days away, and finding a new room seemed as difficult as writing the dissertation all over again.

Ashok advised, ‘Run away after you get the degree.’

Nilambar said, ‘By then he will come along to the oral examination.’

Ashok laughed. ‘Just answer his questions by saying, “This is not my field; it is life-research.”’

One day before the submission, Gopikant Babu called Nilambar downstairs. On the table lay the rent ledger, the Assistant Research Ledger, and a sheet of white paper.

‘I have been thinking,’ he said. ‘It would not be proper to break the university’s rules. But there ought to be some proof of the contribution.’

Nilambar became wary. ‘What proof?’

‘Write down that my contribution to this dissertation is forty percent.’

‘Forty!’

‘All right, thirty-five. I won’t count the table’s contribution separately.’

Nilambar burst out laughing. Gopikant Babu did not take offence; he began laughing too. After a while the percentage became twenty, then ten, then finally ‘important’. In the end Nilambar wrote one sentence: ‘I received assistance from Shri Gopikant Jha in understanding local memory, the meanings of old songs, and regional practices.’

Gopikant Babu read the sentence three times. ‘Could we add “important” here?’

‘No.’

‘“Special”?’

‘No.’

‘Then “Scholar” before my name?’

‘Certainly not.’

Gopikant Babu folded the paper and placed it in his ledger. ‘Students are ungrateful,’ he said, though there was a smile on his face.

The dissertation was submitted. Two weeks later came the oral examination. Nilambar was about to leave the house early in the morning

when he found Gopikant Babu standing at the gate in a freshly washed dhoti-kurta.

Nilambar was startled. 'Where are you going?'

'To the university. Not as co-author—as listener.'

'The oral examination will be held inside. Listeners are not allowed.'

'Then I'll wait on the veranda. The outcome of knowledge can be heard outside as well.'

Nilambar did not argue. The two left together. On reaching the university, Gopikant Babu sat beneath a banyan tree and Nilambar went inside.

The examiners asked their questions one by one: the division of labour in wedding songs, the metaphor of crossing the river, the household veranda, grain storage. The third examiner asked, 'What is the basis for this interpretation of the "seventh post"?'

Nilambar answered, 'Regional oral memory. I found the clue in an old memory preserved by the mother of the landlord at my residence, and then verified it with two independent elderly women.'

The examiner asked, 'What is the landlord's name?'

'Gopikant Jha.'

'Is he in the acknowledgements?'

'Yes.'

For a moment Nilambar saw, in his mind, the white kurta seated beneath the banyan tree. He had to suppress a laugh.

The oral examination ended. The moment Nilambar came out, Gopikant Babu rose to his feet. 'Was there a question on my subject?'

Nilambar said, 'The seventh post.'

Gopikant Babu's face lit up. 'You see? If not forty percent, then at least a seventh-post percentage.'

A few months later Nilambar's degree certificate arrived. Naturally, it bore only Nilambar's name. When he brought the certificate home, Gopikant Babu put on his spectacles and studied it for a long time.

'My name isn't here,' he said.

Nilambar remained silent.

Gopikant Babu spoke again. 'The university writes very concisely.'

That evening Nilambar gave him a copy of his dissertation. He opened the acknowledgements page, where one sentence had been underlined in pencil: 'I received assistance from Shri Gopikant Jha in understanding local memory, the meanings of old songs, and regional practices.'

Gopikant Babu kept looking at the page. Then he went inside, emptied an old photograph frame, and placed a copy of the acknowledgements page in it.

The next morning a new sign hung beside the gate: 'Quiet Residence for Students. Research Consultation Free. Co-authorship According to University Rules.'

Ashok read it and asked, 'Will the rent come down?'

Gopikant Babu said, 'Knowledge is free. The room is not.'

A few months after receiving his degree, Nilambar left the town. But students continued to come to Gopikant Babu's house. Now, on the first day, along with the terms of rent, he added one more thing: 'Tell me your subject. If it isn't my field, I'll only collect the rent.'

They say no such subject has yet been found.

The Village Meteorologist

In Sonbarsa village, people called Harinarayan Kaka “the meteorologist.” No university had conferred this title on him; years ago, the men sitting in front of the paan shop at the crossroads had bestowed it in jest, and little by little the name had stuck so firmly that his original identity had receded into the background.

Harinarayan Kaka was seventy-two. Sparse white hair covered his head, an old gamchha rested on his shoulder, and he carried a slender bamboo stick. At dawn he looked first not at the sky but at the roof of the cowshed; only after that did he study the ants, the egrets, the leaves, the dust, and the movement of the wind.

He had many theories.

If ants carried grain upward, there would be rain.

If an egret sat in the middle of the pond, there would be sunshine.

If the neem leaves turned over, a storm was coming.

If a cow sat facing east in the evening, it would rain at night.

There was one difficulty with all these theories—the weather usually refused to obey him.

On days when he declared, “There will be a downpour by afternoon,” the women who had put clothes out to dry would not have to clear the washing line even by evening. On days when he said, “Leave your umbrella at home today,” the schoolchildren returned with their books soaked through.

Even so, the first question of the morning was always put to him.

“Kaka, what will happen today?”

He would plant his stick on the ground, narrow his eyes, look toward the sky, and say, “The wind says there will be rain after two.”

The shopkeeper would immediately ask, “Should I bring the sacks inside before two?”

Kaka would reply, “Why are the sacks outside in the first place? Whatever the weather does, sacks of grain ought to stay under the veranda.”

In this way, practical advice emerged even before the forecast had finished.

When a new teacher named Aniruddha came to the village, he found all this peculiar. He taught science and explained wind, temperature, clouds, and

humidity to the children. In his very first week he heard that Harinarayan Kaka had predicted “three watches of rain” the day before, and all three watches had remained bright with sunshine.

Aniruddha laughed.

“Then why do people ask him?”

The pupil Malti said, “We do ask him, Master Sahib.”

“Why?”

Malti thought for a moment. “You will understand later.”

Aniruddha found the answer incomplete. In one corner of the school blackboard he made a new chart—“Harinarayan Kaka’s Weather Talk.”
Date, Kaka’s statement, actual weather.

First day—“Rain in the evening.” Reality—sunshine.

Second day—“Sunshine.” Reality—a light drizzle.

Third day—“Strong wind.” Reality—a still evening.

The children laughed whenever they looked at the chart. When Harinarayan Kaka passed near the school, Aniruddha would call him inside.

“Kaka, we need today’s statement.”

Kaka looked at the blackboard and said, “Have I been given a job?”

“Not a job. An examination.”

“Then who will pay the salary?”

“If you are right, you will get respect.”

Kaka grew solemn. “Respect does not buy rice. Still, write this down—no rain tonight.”

That night it rained for half an hour. The next morning the children wrote “wrong.”

A month passed. Aniruddha added up the figures. Out of thirty statements, five were correct, seven half-correct, and eighteen wrong.

He announced the result of the chart at the crossroads.

Everyone laughed. Harinarayan Kaka laughed too.

“You see,” Aniruddha said, “these figures prove that Kaka’s forecast cannot be relied upon.”

Harinarayan Kaka asked, “Who relies on it?”

Aniruddha stopped short.

The shopkeeper, Bhola Sahu, said, “I ask him.”

“Do you rely on him?”

Bhola Sahu scratched his head. “That is another matter.”

This answer only deepened Aniruddha’s curiosity.

In the last week of Jeth, paddy seed was being dried in the courtyard of the village cooperative. For weddings in three households, sacks of makhana, rice, and spices had also been stacked along one side of the same courtyard.

The sky was clear. The official weather bulletin said the chance of rain during the next twenty-four hours was low.

Even so, Bhola Sahu went to Harinarayan Kaka.

“Kaka, shall we leave the seed outside today?”

Kaka looked toward the west. “No rain tonight.”

Bhola Sahu immediately called two boys. “Where is the tarpaulin?”

Aniruddha was standing there. He burst out laughing. “Kaka says there will be no rain, and you are asking for a tarpaulin?”

Bhola Sahu said, “If the tarpaulin is ready and it does not rain, what do we lose?”

Kaka asked, “And which sacks are for the weddings?”

“These five.”

“Do not leave them directly on the ground. Last time they caught damp from below.”

Two bricks were set beneath a plank, and the wedding sacks were lifted onto it.

Aniruddha noticed that once again a question about weather had turned into a meeting about storage.

There was no rain that evening. This time Kaka’s statement proved correct. Kaka himself came to the crossroads with an announcement: “Draw a red flower on the blackboard.”

Malti said, “One correct answer does not erase eighteen wrong ones.”

Kaka laughed. “You study science; do not forget arithmetic.”

The next week Ashadh began. Near the western hamlet, an old drain was choked with silt. The panchayat had already postponed its cleaning twice. Harinarayan Kaka announced at the crossroads, “No rain for three days. The drain can be cleaned later.”

This time Phulo Devi was the first to speak. “Then let us clean it today.”

Kaka looked startled. “I am telling you there will be no rain for three days.”

Phulo Devi said, “We all understand what your three days mean.”

By afternoon ten people had reached the drain with spades. Aniruddha went too. Kaka stood on the bank with his bamboo stick.

“You will not use a spade yourself?” Aniruddha asked.

“I will supervise.”

“The weather?”

“The work.”

People kept shovelling out the silt. By evening half the drain had been cleared. In the second watch of the night, heavy rain began. Kaka’s promised three days had not survived even half the night.

By morning, however, water had not collected near the western hamlet; it ran away through the cleared drain.

The moment Phulo Devi saw Kaka, she said, "Wrong again."

Kaka asked, "Is the drain all right?"

"It is."

"Then half the respect belongs to me."

"You did not lift a spade."

"I gave advice."

"And even the advice was backwards."

Everyone burst out laughing.

That day Aniruddha added a new column to his chart—"What did the village do after the statement?"

In this column, the story began to change.

"After rain was predicted—the torn thatch on the roof was replaced."

"After sunshine was predicted—the school's damp books were brought inside."

"After a storm was predicted—a heavy mango branch was tied securely."

"After no rain was predicted—the drain was cleaned."

Aniruddha began to understand that the village was not listening to Kaka's weather; using him as a pretext, it was listening to its own need for preparedness.

But before this understanding could become complete, a larger test arrived.

On the first Monday of Sawan, a health camp was to be held beside the panchayat building. Elderly people, children, and women would come from far-flung hamlets. A bamboo canopy was erected in the courtyard. Medicine chests, registers, drinking water, and benches were assembled.

The sky was grey in the morning. The official bulletin said moderate rain was possible after noon.

The panchayat secretary asked Harinarayan Kaka, "What do you say?"

Kaka studied the sky for a long time. He took a neem leaf in his hand and turned it this way and that. He made two rounds toward the pond and came back.

Then, in a decisive voice, he said, "Not a single drop before noon."

Aniruddha made a note of it.

Phulo Devi said, "Then put the medicine chests inside the building."

The secretary said, "But there is a canopy."

"Didn't you hear Kaka?"

Everyone laughed, but the chests went inside. The registration table was shifted nearer the veranda. Two bamboo poles were tightened again. The earthen water pots were moved away from the edge of the canopy.

Harinarayan Kaka put on a show of being offended. "Such an insult to my forecast!"

Aniruddha said, "Kaka, your forecast has tremendous influence."

At half past eleven, rain began. First came large, heavy drops, and then a fierce downpour.

One corner of the canopy sagged, but because the bamboo poles had been tightened, it did not collapse. The medicines remained safe inside the building. The register stayed dry. People pressed together under the veranda.

Kaka himself was stranded without an umbrella.

Phulo Devi gave him half the shelter of her own umbrella and said, "Not a single drop?"

Kaka replied, "These are not drops; this is a full downpour. Technically, my sentence—"

"Quiet."

Laughter erupted under the veranda.

After the camp ended, Aniruddha brought the blackboard chart to the panchayat building. It now had three columns—statement, actual weather, and action taken after the statement.

He read it aloud to everyone.

Harinarayan Kaka had been wrong—that fact had not changed.

But after the questions and answers with Kaka, people usually inspected roofs, lifted sacks, cleared drains, tightened ropes, brought animals inside, and covered seed.

Aniruddha said, "You are less a meteorologist than a bell that rings for preparedness."

Kaka said, "Will the bell get a salary?"

Bhola Sahu said, "Tea on credit at the crossroads."

"I already have credit there."

"Then respect."

"Again that same thing that will not buy rice!"

The blackboard remained in use throughout Sawan. The children no longer wrote only "right" or "wrong"; they recorded which signs had been observed and which preparations had proved useful. Aniruddha also wrote the official weather bulletin alongside Kaka's predictions, so that the difference between conjecture and evidence could be understood.

Harinarayan Kaka did not abandon his theories. On the contrary, he added a new one: "If Malti sneezes three times, the wind will change."

Malti protested, "Dust makes me sneeze."

Kaka said, "And dust too is carried by the wind."

Aniruddha clutched his head.

One evening in Bhadra, the sky was perfectly clear. The radio announced a chance of rain during the night. At the crossroads Bhola Sahu asked, “Kaka, what about tonight?”

Harinarayan Kaka examined the neem leaves, adjusted the gamchha on his shoulder, and declared, “Absolutely no rain.”

For one moment there was silence.

Then the entire crossroads sprang into motion at once.

Bhola Sahu began carrying the rice sacks indoors.

Phulo Devi ran toward home—chillies were drying on her veranda.

Two children went to close the school windows.

The herdsman set off to inspect the bamboo latch on the cowshed.

Laughing, Aniruddha asked, “Kaka, did you see that?”

Harinarayan Kaka looked around. “None of them believes me.”

Aniruddha said, “They do believe you—they simply understand the meaning of what you say in their own way.”

Kaka grew serious. “Then am I science, or am I a sign?”

Malti, who was standing nearby, said, “You are a question, Kaka. We are the ones who have to find the answer.”

Kaka looked at her for a few moments. Then he said, “Write that on the blackboard. But put my name in large letters.”

That night, rain began at nine.

Harinarayan Kaka went inside to look for his umbrella. He could not find it for a long time. At last he remembered—he had left it at the panchayat building on the day of the health camp.

He put the gamchha over his head and set off through the rain. As he crossed the crossroads, Bhola Sahu called out, “Kaka, no rain, eh?”

Without stopping, Harinarayan Kaka replied, “I forecast the weather. I do not forecast where I have left my umbrella.”

The next morning a new line had been written on the blackboard: “Statement: no rain. Reality: rain. Result: the entire village was ready in time.”

Below it, Malti had added in small letters: “A meteorologist is useful for more than the weather.”

Harinarayan Kaka read it and smiled. He picked up the red chalk and drew a line beneath his own name.

Free Advice

At Belahi crossroads, beside Bhola Sahu's tea stall, stood an old wooden bench. Behind it, on a strip of tin, someone had written in charcoal: "Maheshwar Jha: Free Advice. You are responsible for the consequences."

Maheshwar Kaka had added that last line himself. He liked to say, "The remedy is free, but the courage to follow it has to come out of your own pocket."

He held no official position in the village. Once he had run a seed shop. After the shop closed, the wooden bench became his office. From the first tea of the morning until the first darkness of evening, someone or other would invariably arrive there with a question.

Someone's goat had eaten a neighbour's greens; someone's son wanted to skip an examination and go to the fair; someone's roof-water was falling into another person's courtyard; at someone's wedding the number of guests in the groom's party kept increasing day by day. Whatever the subject, Maheshwar Kaka would scratch his chin and ask three questions.

First: "What are the facts?"

Second: "What is the guess?"

Third: "What is the smallest useful thing that can be done right now?"

Bhola Sahu would say, "Kaka, the entire panchayat fits inside those three questions."

Maheshwar Kaka would reply, "Running the panchayat is not my subject. I never get a chance to speak there, so I practise here."

One day Phulo Devi came to him. Her two hens were laying eggs in her neighbour's courtyard. The question was: whose eggs were they?

Maheshwar Kaka asked, "Whose hens?"

"Mine."

"Whose courtyard?"

"Hers."

"Who feeds them?"

Phulo Devi fell silent. From a distance the neighbour called out, "Half the time I do."

Maheshwar Kaka gave no verdict. He said, "For seven days, divide the eggs equally. On the eighth day, give the hens equal feed in both courtyards. Wherever they settle, take that as nature's vote."

Bhola Sahu burst out laughing. "Nature gets a vote too?"

"The oldest member of all."

That was how Kaka's reputation spread. The teenagers called him "Advice Guru," the elders "Maheshwar Babu," and Bhola Sahu simply "Kaka," because adding honorifics to an unpaid tea bill did not reduce the amount owed.

But there was one thing the village did not know: for a month, a problem had been standing in Maheshwar Kaka's own house, and he had not said a word about it to anyone.

In the rear courtyard, a wall ran beside the kitchen as far as the courtyard of their neighbour Kalavati. It was an old brick wall: mud mortar below, lime plaster in patches above, and here and there the cracks of time.

After the last rains, the middle section of the wall had begun to lean slightly outward. To support it, Maheshwar Kaka had propped two bamboo poles against it at an angle.

The previous month, a third bamboo prop had been added.

Saraswati Devi had asked, "Why don't you call a mason?"

Maheshwar Kaka had said, "Let the rains pass. One does not make decisions about a wet wall."

"Did you invent that, or is it written in some book?"

"In experience."

Saraswati Devi looked at the bamboo poles. "Experience has increased for the third time."

Kaka changed the subject.

The real difficulty was that twelve years earlier Maheshwar Kaka himself had proposed the method used to repair this wall. For the rainwater running off the kitchen roof, he had made a narrow earthen channel along the foot of the wall and led it round toward the lane. Everyone had praised his ingenuity then.

Now, if the wall was leaning from that very foundation, the question concerned not only bricks but prestige as well.

At the crossroads Kaka told other people, "Do not fall in love with your old remedies; if one does not work, change it."

At home, he tightened the knots on the bamboo props.

One evening Kalavati called from her courtyard, "Kaka, is the wall leaning more toward my side or yours?"

Kaka looked at the top of the wall. "An optical illusion."

Kalavati said, "Then are the bamboo poles an optical illusion too?"

"A precaution."

“The third bamboo pole?”

“Extra precaution.”

Kalavati laughed, but the next day she moved her two earthen water pots away from the wall.

Two days later Ramkripal came to the crossroads. One post in his cowshed was rotting. He asked, “Should I replace it after the rains?”

Maheshwar Kaka replied at once, “If the weakness is visible to the eye, why wait for the weather? First remove the load, give it temporary support, then look for the cause.”

Bhola Sahu looked at him while pouring tea.

Maheshwar Kaka looked away.

Ramkripal said, “It is difficult to understand the cause.”

“Look at the facts. Is the earth wet? Are there termites? Is there too much weight above? Do not begin with assumptions.”

This time Bhola Sahu cleared his throat.

“Have you got a cough?” Kaka asked.

“No. I was looking at the facts.”

That night it rained hard. Water drummed on the kitchen roof. Around midnight, Saraswati Devi woke to a faint rustling scrape.

In the rear courtyard, the foot of one bamboo pole had sunk into the earth. The wall had not fallen, but the soil at its base had become soft as a marsh.

Maheshwar Kaka came out carrying a lantern. He set the bamboo upright again, placed two bricks beneath it, and moved some old sacks of paddy away from the veranda.

Saraswati Devi said, “Shall I call Bhola Sahu?”

“At night?”

“In the daytime you do not call anyone either.”

Kaka remained silent.

By dawn the rain had stopped. On her way to school through the lane, Ranjana noticed the bamboo poles jutting beyond the wall. The moment she reached the crossroads she told Bhola Sahu, “There are three bamboo poles holding up the wall behind Kaka’s house.”

Bhola Sahu asked, “Three?”

“And one is half sunk into the ground.”

By ten o’clock, the news had reached the bench.

Ramkripal offered the first piece of advice: “Tear down the whole wall and build a new one.”

Phulo Devi gave the second: “Put a broad stone footing underneath.”

Pappu the mason gave the third: “Stop the water first.”

Bhola Sahu supplied the fourth: “Deposit the consultation fee with me.”

Maheshwar Kaka frowned. "Did I ask anyone for advice?"

Bhola Sahu pointed at the strip of tin. "It says 'free' here. It does not specify the customer's name."

Laughter rose at the crossroads.

Maheshwar Kaka got up and walked away. But Ramkripal, Pappu the mason, Bhola Sahu, and Ranjana followed him. Kalavati opened the gate to her courtyard.

"Facts first," Pappu the mason said. "Your rule, Kaka."

Reluctantly, Maheshwar Kaka showed them the foot of the wall.

Pappu took some soil in his hand. The earth near the middle of the wall was much wetter, while the soil in Kalavati's courtyard was almost dry.

Maheshwar Kaka said, "Her courtyard is higher, so the water must be coming toward our side."

Kalavati answered at once, "My water drains into the channel in front. Have you seen it?"

Kaka said nothing.

Ranjana looked toward the edge of the kitchen roof. "Where does the water come down?"

Maheshwar Kaka showed her the old narrow channel. Its mouth was almost completely blocked with earth, leaves, and roots.

Pappu pushed a bamboo rod into it. After half a cubit it stopped. When they dug from the other side, they found the channel packed with fine neem roots.

Bhola Sahu said, "Fact one."

Pappu measured the slope along the channel. In places the earth had subsided; instead of flowing from the roof toward the lane, the water was collecting at the foot of the wall.

Ranjana said, "Fact two."

Kalavati picked up a dry brick from her courtyard and set it near the base of the wall. "And fact three: the water is not coming from my side."

Maheshwar Kaka looked in turn at the wall, the channel, and the three bamboo props.

Bhola Sahu said softly, "What was the guess?"

Kaka replied distractedly, "The neighbour's higher courtyard."

"The smallest useful thing?"

This time Maheshwar Kaka could not help smiling. "First, open the drain."

The whole wall was not demolished that day. For the water from the kitchen roof, a length of split bamboo was temporarily extended to the open drain in the lane. The old blocked earthen channel was dug out and cleaned. The wet soil at the foot of the wall was removed and replaced with dry gravel.

Pappu the mason said, "Let it dry for three days. Then we will reset two courses of brick beneath the leaning section. The upper part of the wall can still be saved."

Maheshwar Kaka asked, "There is no need to tear down the whole thing?"

Ramkripal said at once, "I withdraw my first piece of advice."

Phulo Devi said, "And keep my stone footing on hold for now."

Bhola Sahu announced, "The market for free advice has collapsed."

Three days later, the foot of the wall had dried. Holding the leaning section steady with ropes, Pappu reset two courses of brick beneath it. A small drainage opening was also left so that rainwater would not remain trapped at the base.

Kalavati put her water pots back in their old place. Watching the three bamboo props being removed, Saraswati Devi said, "Has the optical illusion been cured?"

Maheshwar Kaka replied, "The precautions have been reduced."

"And the prestige?"

Kaka ran a hand over the wall. "That has been given fresh mortar."

The next morning, beneath the strip of tin at the crossroads, Maheshwar Kaka himself added a new line: "New rule: hiding your own problem does not change the facts."

Bhola Sahu read it and asked, "And advice for the man who gives advice?"

Maheshwar Kaka handed him the charcoal. "The day you give tea away for free, you may write that line yourself."

Bhola Sahu immediately returned the charcoal. "Reform on such a large scale is not healthy all in one day."

At noon Ramkripal came again. This time his question was not about the cowshed post but the ridge around his field. He began to explain.

Maheshwar Kaka did not interrupt. He listened to the whole thing. Then he repeated his three old questions: "What are the facts? What is the guess? What is the smallest useful thing that can be done right now?"

Before answering, Ramkripal laughed and asked, "Kaka, were these rules tested on the wall?"

Maheshwar Kaka looked toward his house. The upper part of the wall was still old—some bricks crooked, some of the lime flaking away—but the base was dry, and where the three bamboo props had stood there was now an open courtyard.

He said, "Yes. Advice used to be made on the bench. Now, once in a while, it goes home and sits an examination too."

Election Tea

From the second day after the election was announced, the busiest place at Haripur crossroads was no longer the panchayat building but Kailash Sahu's tea stall.

Calling it a stall hardly did it justice. Four bamboo posts, a tin roof, three benches in front, a coal stove inside, two brass kettles, and an old wooden drawer—that was the whole of Kailash's kingdom. Yet during election season those three benches hosted so much discussion that people said, "The polling station will open later; the decisions are made here first."

Kailash would smile at that. He counted cups, not decisions.

Inside the drawer lay his principal election document—a blue-bound credit ledger. On its first page he had written: "Drink tea, have your name entered, and do not forget the date."

Before the election, most entries in the ledger were individual names: a schoolteacher for three cups, a cart driver for five, a farmer for seven. The moment the election was announced, party groups began appearing beside the names.

On the first evening, ten supporters of Rameshwar Jha arrived. "Kailash, ten teas. Quickly."

Kailash set out ten cups. Before he could ask for payment, the leader of the group said, "We'll settle after the election. We're your own people."

Kailash opened the ledger. "And what name shall I write for my own people?"

"Rameshwar Babu's group."

He wrote: "Rameshwar group—ten cups."

The next morning, twelve supporters of Sunaina Devi arrived. They were tired from a meeting that had gone on late into the night. As one of them drank his tea, he asked, "Were those people sitting here yesterday?"

Kailash said, "They were."

"Are you on their side?"

"I'm on the side of their ten cups."

Everyone laughed. Kailash entered twelve cups under the name "Sunaina group."

At noon, Naseem Ansari's people arrived. They had already heard that Kailash had served tea to both the other camps.

Naseem's younger brother Javed asked, "How much respect do our people get?"

Lifting the kettle, Kailash said, "As many cups as you drink, that much respect will be entered in the ledger."

From that day onward, Kailash's reputation rose in a curious fashion. Rameshwar's people said, "Kailash has always been one of ours." Sunaina's people said, "He gives everyone tea, but he smiles more in our direction." Naseem's people said, "Look at the veranda of his shop—when our people sit there, he wipes the bench himself."

The truth was that Kailash wiped the benches after every group, because tea got spilled.

Within a week, three pages of the credit ledger were full. Every evening Kailash added up the totals. By the end of the first week: Rameshwar group—one hundred and thirty-two cups. Sunaina group—one hundred and eighteen. Naseem group—one hundred and twenty-nine. Independent candidate Harinandan's circle of friends—eighty-six.

Kailash showed the account to his wife, Malati.

Malati asked, "And the money?"

Under all four totals, Kailash wrote the same word: "Outstanding."

Malati said, "Is your shop contesting the election, or distributing charity?"

Kailash grew serious. "Business has increased."

"Where is the money?"

"In the ledger."

Malati shut the ledger. "Boil the ledger and make tea with it."

The next day Kailash made a new rule. If a group ordered more than ten cups, the name of one responsible person had to be entered.

When Rameshwar's group arrived, he asked, "Who is responsible today?"

Everyone looked at everyone else. At last Shambhu said, "Write the name Shambhu Yadav."

When Sunaina's group came, Nirmala Devi gave her name. Javed gave his for Naseem's group. Harinandan's friends decided that the responsible person would change every day, so that the whole burden would not fall on any one of them.

Kailash said, "The burden is the cups of tea; changing the name does not change the total."

One day Harinandan himself came by. Drinking his tea, he asked, "Kailash, tell me honestly—where does your heart lie?"

Kailash placed a hand on his chest. "Here."

Harinandan laughed. "I mean your vote."

"That is a matter behind the curtain. The matter outside the curtain is that your group still owes for one hundred and seven cups."

Harinandan's laughter stopped for half a moment, then returned twice as loudly. "You really are an impartial officer."

After that remark, a rumour spread that Kailash was impartial. By evening came another rumour: his impartiality was only for show, and inwardly he supported a certain candidate. By night came a third: Kailash was taking money from every party.

When Malati heard this, she asked, "You're taking money?"

Kailash showed her the ledger. "If I were taking it, why would 'Outstanding' be written here?"

The election fever rose. Meetings filled the crossroads; groups moved from place to place; drums beat; flags and banners went up. Amid it all, Kailash's stall was one place where opponents drank tea from the same kettle, though they insisted on separate cups.

One day two young men from Rameshwar's group began tying up a campaign banner in front of the stall. Kailash stopped them.

"Not here."

"Why not? You're one of us."

"Tomorrow the others will say the same thing. If the tin roof has to carry everyone's banners, where will the rain go?"

One of the young men said, "Then nobody's?"

"Nobody's. The only sign that stays is the price board—tea four rupees, milk tea five."

At noon, Sunaina's people praised the decision. In the evening, Naseem's group said, "You did right." The next morning Rameshwar's group said, "See? It was because we told him that he made everyone remove their banners."

Adding up that day's total in the ledger, Kailash thought that politics and tea had one thing in common: both heated up quickly, but the account became clear only after things had cooled down.

Two days later Malati opened the sack of sugar and looked inside. Less than half remained. The tea leaves, too, had come down to the last tin.

"No more credit now," she said.

Kailash did not object. He hung a new sign in front of the shop: "Credit for election groups today only until evening."

Rameshwar's group gave the first response. "You don't trust us?"

"Complete trust. Half the sugar."

Nirmala Devi of Sunaina's group paid five hundred rupees. "Put this toward today's and some of the old amount."

Naseem's Javed cleared two days' account. Four of Harinandan's friends pooled their money and paid half the outstanding amount.

Kailash's new rule had an unexpected effect. Now, before ordering tea, each group would first ask among itself, "Who has money today?" For five minutes the discussion would leave politics and turn to purses, pockets, and accounts.

One evening two rival groups arrived at the same time. There were three benches and twenty people. Voices began to rise over who would sit first.

Kailash put the kettle on the stove and said, "Whichever group has the larger old debt will stand."

Everyone fell silent.

Nirmala Devi laughed. "Then half our group will sit and half will stand."

Javed said, "Our account came down yesterday."

Kailash opened the ledger. "Shall we verify it?"

The argument dissolved into laughter. In the end, the benches were given to the older people, and everyone else drank tea standing.

On the eve of polling, the crossroads was relatively quiet. Campaigning had stopped. For the first time, Kailash totalled the entire ledger. The outstanding amount was greater than he had expected. On four separate sheets he wrote each group's amount, but no election symbol appeared at the top—only the name and the number of cups.

Malati said, "Tomorrow everyone will be busy voting. The results are the day after. When will you ask for the money?"

Kailash thought for a moment. "After the results everyone will be in a different mood. The winners will forget in their happiness. The losers will forget in their sorrow."

"Then?"

"The credit count before the vote count."

On polling morning Kailash opened the stall at the usual hour. People came and drank tea, but there was less political argument that day. Someone asked him, "Have you voted?"

Kailash said, "I have."

"For whom?"

Kailash lifted the ledger and put it away in the drawer. "This ledger is public. My vote is not."

After that answer, no one asked again.

By evening the voting was over. All four groups began returning to the stall. This time Kailash entered no credit. With every cup he set down a small earthen bowl, and coins and notes dropped into it as the tea was served.

Shambhu from Rameshwar's group asked, "Why so strict today?"

"The votes have been cast. Don't ask for votes on tea now."

From morning on result day, the crossroads was crowded. Alongside the kettles, Kailash had placed the four sheets of paper. When the first result came in, one group shouted with joy. The second fell silent. The third said they would see next time. The fourth began adding up its number of votes.

Kailash placed the ledger in front of everyone.

"I have a count of my own."

Shambhu asked, "What?"

Kailash read from the first sheet: "Rameshwar group—two hundred and thirty-six rupees outstanding."

Nirmala Devi laughed. "Forget victory and defeat. Listen to this result first."

Kailash read the second: "Sunaina group—one hundred and forty-two." The third: "Naseem group—one hundred and fifty-eight." The fourth: "Harinandan friends' circle—one hundred and twenty-one."

Such laughter rose at the crossroads that for a while it drowned out the victory slogans.

Rameshwar himself stepped forward. "Kailash, you were my supporter. Any discount?"

Kailash said, "If support earns a discount, the ballot box may give it. My ledger does not."

Sunaina Devi took the money from her bag. "Strike out my name."

Naseem Ansari said, "Half of mine now, half this evening."

Laughing, Harinandan said, "I lost the election, but I placed fourth in debt—that is an achievement."

Kailash replied at once, "There will be no certificate for this achievement."

By noon most of the outstanding money had been collected. A little remained, but the names of the responsible people were clear. Malati bought a new sack of sugar. Kailash replenished the tea leaves.

By evening the crossroads had grown quiet. The campaign banners were coming down. For the first time, only five regular customers sat on the benches.

An elderly schoolteacher asked, "Kailash, during the election you called people from every side 'our people.' Whose side were you really on?"

Kailash lifted the lid of the kettle. Steam rose.

"The side of the people who drink tea."

The teacher laughed. "And their ideas?"

"Everyone keeps his own ideas. The cups are mine."

From inside, Malati called out, "And the credit?"

Kailash added at once, "I am against credit."

Everyone burst out laughing.

A week later, beneath the old price board in front of the stall, Kailash wrote a new line: "Whether the meeting is political or family—above ten cups, name the responsible person first."

Shambhu read it and said, "Will this rule last until the next election?"

Closing the ledger, Kailash said, "An election may come after five years; credit arrives by evening. I understand nearby accounts better than distant politics."

From that day onward, no one in Haripur could say for certain whom Kailash had voted for. But everyone knew one thing for certain: while drinking his tea, it was important to give one's name correctly.

Uncle with the Microphone

The day Bhelahi Primary School completed fifty years, the village prepared as though it were not merely the school but the whole village celebrating its birthday.

Between the two mango trees in the courtyard, a bamboo platform was built. A sheet was stretched over it to make a small stage. Mats were spread in front for the children, chairs were set behind them for the elderly, and a table for tea and puffed rice stood to one side.

The headmistress, Nirmala Devi, was most anxious about the sound system. The previous year it had failed halfway through the programme, and the names of the prize-winners could not be heard. This time she had brought a battery-powered set from town.

The set came with a wire, two loudspeaker horns, and a handheld microphone. The iron stand meant to hold the microphone, however, was bent in the middle.

“Someone will have to hold this,” said the young man who had brought the equipment.

Just then, near the school gate, Bhuwaneshwar Kaka was looking for a pump to put air into his bicycle tyre. His house stood two doors away from the school. He was sixty-two; sometimes he farmed, sometimes he repaired bicycles; and by temperament, wherever four people gathered, he became the fifth and stood among them.

Nirmala Devi said, “Kaka, could you hold this for five minutes?”

Bhuwaneshwar Kaka took the microphone in his hand. The young man connected the wire and said, “Test it—one, two.”

Kaka brought it to his mouth and said, “One, two.”

His voice travelled from the loudspeakers across the school courtyard all the way to the steps of the pond.

Bhuwaneshwar Kaka started at the sound of his own voice. Then he smiled.

“Three, four,” he added.

The young man laughed. “That is enough.”

But from that moment onward, the word enough became a very small word for Kaka.

The first item was the children's prayer. Nirmala Devi came onto the stage and held out her hand to take the microphone for the introduction. Kaka could have handed it over, but first he said, "And now we shall hear the sweet collective voices of the children of our school, expressing education, discipline, punctuality, and—"

Nirmala Devi said softly, "Kaka, just say the name."

Kaka said at once, "Yes, in brief—the prayer."

The children sitting on the mats burst out laughing.

After the prayer, a student was to recite a poem. Kaka asked her name.

"Mamata."

"Father's name?"

"Why?"

"The introduction ought to be complete."

From a distance, Nirmala Devi waved her hand. "Only the name."

Kaka announced, "Now Mamata will recite a poem."

Mamata climbed onto the stage. Kaka stood in front of her holding the microphone. When the poem ended, he brought it back to his mouth. "Very beautiful. Especially the third line—"

Mamata whispered, "Kaka, I recited five lines."

"Then all five were beautiful."

Laughter rose again.

By ten o'clock, the village had given him a new name—"Microphone Kaka."

People who had once called him Bhuwaneshwar now shouted to him from a distance, "Microphone Kaka, say my name once too."

Kaka did not merely say people's names. He made announcements.

"A pair of slippers with red borders has been found to the left of the stage."

"Rambabu's calf has gone into the field behind the school; the owner is requested to take note."

"The tea is hot at present; after five minutes, do not blame the tea seller."

With every announcement, his voice grew more solemn.

Harimohan, a former student of the school, had come with his two children. He approached Kaka and said, "I have come from the city. Introduce me."

Kaka asked, "What do you do?"

"I work in an insurance office."

Kaka raised the microphone to his mouth. "Harimohan Babu, a former student of Bhelahi School, has graciously come from a distant city. He now safeguards people's future in the field of insurance."

Harimohan's wife said quietly, "The tap at home has been leaking for three months. Let him safeguard the present first."

The microphone was so close that this sentence too went out through the loudspeakers and spread across the whole courtyard.

Everyone laughed. Harimohan was embarrassed at first, then laughed himself.

Kaka said, "That domestic notice was not part of the programme."

Nirmala Devi sat down holding her head.

By midday, the sound system's battery indicator had fallen below half. The young man who had brought the equipment grew worried.

"Madam, at this rate the battery will not last until evening."

Nirmala Devi immediately went to Kaka. "From now on, keep the announcements short. Very short."

Kaka asked, "How short?"

"Twelve words."

Kaka became serious. "A dignified introduction is difficult in twelve words."

"Then eight."

Kaka understood that the bargaining was moving in the wrong direction. He agreed to twelve.

Nirmala Devi now placed a sheet of paper in front of him. Across the top she had written: "One announcement = maximum 12 words."

Kaka made his first attempt: "Now former student Rekha Devi will share her experiences with everyone."

Nirmala Devi counted the words. "Ten. Fine."

Kaka was pleased.

Then came the second announcement: "Someone has lost a blue bag."

Kaka began, "A beautiful blue cloth bag, possibly containing useful belongings—"

Nirmala Devi put a finger on the paper.

Kaka stopped. "Blue bag found. Owner, come to the stage."

Eight words.

Gradually, Kaka began practising how to fit an entire world inside twelve words.

But the problem was not words. It was opportunity.

Once people understood that Kaka was making announcements, everyone began bringing him some small task of their own.

"Kaka, say that Ramdulari's son must not go near the pond."

"Kaka, if anyone has taken my tin box, tell them to return it."

"Kaka, announce that the meal queue will form from the left."

"Kaka, say that the teachers should not eat first."

At this last request, all the teachers protested.

Kaka immediately announced, "The meal queue will follow the same rule for everyone."

Nirmala Devi asked, "Is that within twelve words?"

"Nine."

Kaka had begun speaking with a word-count in his head.

The main programme was after lunch—a meeting with former pupils, prizes for three children, and finally a children's play. The children had been rehearsing the play for two months.

The battery indicator was now close to the red mark.

The young man warned again, "If there is too much talking, there will be no sound left for the play."

For the first time, Kaka looked at the microphone as though it were not an instrument for speaking but oil that had to be spent drop by measured drop.

He asked Nirmala Devi, "How much is left?"

"Hard to tell. But not much."

Kaka lowered the microphone.

He introduced the next student without the sound system. Those seated in front heard him; those at the back craned their necks.

Kaka switched the system on again. "Prize: Rekha Kumari, Class Five."

That was all.

Rekha came onto the stage. There was applause.

The second: "Prize: Mohan Paswan, Class Four."

The third: "Prize: Shabnam Khatoon, Class Five."

Kaka had reduced even his twelve-word rule to three or four words.

There was less joking now, but the work moved faster.

Then a new problem arose. An old woman came along the road behind the school. She carried an old cloth bag and was looking for someone.

Kaka saw her. "Whom are you looking for?"

"My grandson Sonu. I told him to come to me after the prizes. I have brought his medicine."

No one knew where Sonu was. Children were moving about behind the stage, near the mango tree, around the meal queue, and among the costumes for the play.

Kaka lifted the microphone, but the battery's red light was blinking.

Nirmala Devi said, "Make one announcement."

This time Kaka did not arrange his words for effect.

"Sonu, your grandmother is by the stage with your medicine."

Nine words.

The announcement carried across the whole field. Two minutes later, Sonu came running.

His grandmother caught him by the ear and made him sit beside her.

Kaka lowered the microphone. He understood that the pleasure of a public voice did not lie in everyone hearing him; its real purpose was that the right thing should reach the person who needed to hear it, at the right time.

Toward evening, the children's play began. The first scene went smoothly. Halfway through the second, the sound system gave a long "hummm" and fell silent. The battery was dead.

The children froze. From the back, someone in the audience shouted, "We can't hear!"

Nirmala Devi panicked. The young man checked the wires, then the battery. "Nothing can be done immediately."

Everyone looked at Microphone Kaka.

Kaka stood holding the dead microphone. For a moment, the old expression of a public speaker returned to his face. Then he put the microphone down on the table.

"Move the chairs ten handspans forward," he said in his ordinary voice.

A few young men moved the chairs forward. Those standing at the back came closer to the platform. The children sat in a circle on the mats.

Kaka went over to the children in the play. "Don't shout. Speak clearly. Don't talk over one another."

The play began again.

The surprising thing was that after ten minutes everyone had fallen quiet. The voices were softer, but there was no crackle from a loudspeaker. The children spoke every word distinctly. People leaned forward to listen.

In the middle of the play, one child forgot a line. Had the sound system been working, the silence might have seemed enormous. Without it, the child whispered to the one behind, asked for the line, and the story moved on. The audience smiled.

When the play ended, the applause sounded louder than the loudspeakers ever had.

Bhuwaneshwar Kaka applauded too.

Harimohan teased him, "Kaka, a closing speech now?"

Kaka picked up the microphone, then remembered it was dead.

In his ordinary voice he said, "Closing in three words: get home safely."

Harimohan counted. "Exactly three."

Everyone laughed again.

The next day, when Bhuwaneshwar Kaka reached the tea stall, people gathered around him.

"Microphone Kaka, give us a speech."

Kaka took his tea. "Who will charge the battery?"

"There is no battery here."

"Then there is no speech either."

A few days later there was a meeting at the panchayat building about drainage. The secretary said to Kaka, "You know how to make announcements. Handle the sound system."

Kaka first asked for a sheet of paper. At the top he wrote: "Whose message? How many words? Who needs to hear it?"

The secretary laughed. "So many rules?"

Kaka said, "Earlier I thought I was holding a sound system in my hand. Now I understand that this machine takes hold of people's ears. One should not seize ears for no reason."

At the meeting, Kaka announced only the names and the subjects. Four times he had an opportunity to add an opinion of his own, but all four times he made a dot on the paper and kept quiet.

After the meeting, the secretary asked, "Kaka, how did you manage to remain so quiet?"

Kaka showed him the four dots. "Those were speeches. They were spared."

The name, however, did not change in the village.

Bhuaneshwar Kaka went back to being the ordinary Kaka who pumped air into bicycles, inspected the ridges of fields, and drank tea. But whenever there was a public event, people said, "Call Microphone Kaka."

And when Kaka arrived, his first question was, "Where is the sound system?"

His second: "How much battery is left?"

His third: "Does this really need to be said?"

The moment the organisers heard that third question, they usually began shortening their papers for the first time.

A Kilo of Prestige

Madhav Sah's lentil-and-spice shop in Bhathahi market was neither the largest, nor the brightest, nor did it have the lowest prices.

Yet on the Wednesday market day, anyone who came to buy lentils, chickpeas, peas, or cumin would invariably stop once by his bamboo platform.

The reason was his balance.

The balance was old, but when empty its pointer stood exactly in the middle. Madhav Sah wiped every weight with a cloth and kept it in a box. The one-kilo yellow-metal weight was wrapped separately in cloth.

In the market, people called it "Madhav's kilo."

Whenever there was a dispute over someone's balance, the shopkeeper would say, "Come, let us check it against Madhav's kilo."

People bargained over Madhav Sah's prices, but rarely over his weights.

He liked that.

He often said, "Argue about the price, not the weight."

One Wednesday morning, his granddaughter Gauri opened the box and asked, "Grandfather, why does this one-kilo weight shine so much?"

"Because everyone's eyes are on this one."

"There are other weights too."

"There are. People will accept two five-hundred-gram weights as one kilo, but the moment there is a dispute, everyone looks for this single one."

Before Gauri could pick up the weight, her grandfather stopped her.

"Your hands are wet. Wipe them first."

Gauri laughed. "Is this a weight or a deity?"

"A weight. But in a market, whatever people place their trust in has to be cared for like a deity."

The first customer that day was Budhni Devi.

"How much for the lentils?"

"Eighty-six."

"Eighty-two."

"Eighty-five."

"Eighty-three."

"Eighty-four."

“Weigh them.”

Madhav Sah smiled. “The four-rupee war is over?”

Budhni Devi said, “Not a war. A market.”

Madhav Sah placed the one-kilo weight on one pan and lentils on the other.

The pointer balanced.

Budhni Devi took her bag, then said, “Four minutes over the price, four seconds over the weight.”

“That is prestige.”

Nathuni Sah, selling vegetables beside them, overheard.

“Not prestige—the magic of the yellow weight.”

Madhav Sah said, “If it were magic, the price would fall by itself too.”

The market burst into laughter.

By noon, the one-kilo weight had been borrowed three times.

First Nathuni Sah took it to check the balance he used for potatoes.

Then the oil seller, Maqsood, took it to compare against his own weight.

The third time, Devkinandan, who sold flattened rice, said, “A customer says my kilo is light. Lend me your weight for five minutes.”

Madhav Sah lent it every time, but told Gauri, “Write down who takes it.”

Gauri wrote three names in the ledger.

Nathuni—returned.

Maqsood—returned.

Devkinandan—returned.

“See?” Madhav Sah said. “The account is clear.”

As they packed up the shop that evening, Gauri asked, “Grandfather, if everyone trusts your weights, why do you not simply write down your prices?”

“Prices change every day.”

“The weights?”

“Weights should not change.”

The following Wednesday, that very principle was turned upside down.

Madhav Sah opened the box.

The half-kilo weight was there.

The two-hundred-gram weight was there.

The hundred, fifty, twenty, and ten were all there.

The one-kilo weight was missing.

First he turned the box over.

Then he looked behind the sacks.

Then under the platform.

Gauri said, “Against every name from last time, it says returned.”

Madhav Sah looked at the ledger.

“Then where did the weight go?”

From a distance Nathuni Sah called out, "Lost your prestige?"

"Lost the weight."

"I returned it."

"I know."

Maqsood came over too.

Devkinandan left his shop and hurried across.

Within five minutes, the news had spread through the whole market—
Madhav's kilo was missing.

Someone said, "Children were playing here yesterday."

Someone else said, "Perhaps a cat knocked it away."

Gauri asked, "Where would a cat go carrying a one-kilo weight?"

They fell silent.

An elderly man said, "Check with the blacksmith. It is metal."

Madhav Sah grew annoyed. "Do not assume theft and start naming
people."

Meanwhile, the first customer arrived.

"One kilo of chickpeas."

Madhav Sah took out two five-hundred-gram weights.

The customer asked, "Not with that old kilo?"

"It is not here today."

"Then use the two halves."

Madhav Sah weighed the chickpeas.

The customer took the bag, then asked again, "A full kilo?"

Gauri said, "Five hundred plus five hundred."

"The arithmetic is right, child, but that old weight inspired a different
kind of trust."

Madhav Sah's brow tightened.

"Why should two certified half-kilo weights inspire less trust?"

The customer laughed. "Habit."

A second customer arrived.

He too asked for a kilo of lentils.

The moment he saw the two half-kilo weights, the bargaining began.

"Take two rupees off."

"Why?"

"The one-kilo weight is not here."

"What has the weight to do with the price?"

"If it has nothing to do with it, why does your face look so serious?"

Madhav Sah was still thinking of an answer when the customer walked
toward the neighbouring shop.

Nathuni Sah roared with laughter.

"See, Madhav! The weight is missing, and now the price is light too."

Madhav Sah said, "Shall I weigh your potatoes or your jokes?"

"Both are heavy."

By noon, the situation had become peculiar.

People who had earlier bargained with Madhav Sah only over price now began adding the question of weight as well.

"On two kilos, add a handful extra."

"Two half-kilo weights can introduce an error."

"Show me the pointer once more."

Each time Madhav Sah tried to remain calm, but his ears grew redder and redder.

Gauri said softly, "Grandfather, it really does seem as if it is not the weight but the prestige that has gone missing."

"Prestige does not live in a box."

"But people are looking for it in the box."

Madhav Sah said nothing to that.

In the afternoon, Chandreshwar, secretary of the market committee, arrived.

He was carrying a paper envelope.

"Madhavji, do not worry."

Madhav Sah immediately asked, "Do you have the weight?"

Chandreshwar stopped short.

"Yes."

The entire market turned toward him at once.

Madhav Sah's voice dropped.

"You took it without telling me?"

Chandreshwar said, "Yesterday evening, while you were packing up, I said we needed one reliable one-kilo weight from the market for the weights-and-measures inspection camp. You were talking to Nathuni. You said, 'Take it.'"

Madhav Sah put a hand to his head.

Nathuni Sah said at once, "I heard that. But I thought you were telling him to take an old sack."

Gauri opened the ledger. "This time no name was written down."

Madhav Sah looked at the envelope in Chandreshwar's hand.

"So it was inspected?"

"Yes."

"Is it correct?"

A smile appeared on Chandreshwar's face that immediately made Madhav Sah suspicious.

"What?"

"The weight is one kilo."

Madhav Sah breathed a sigh of relief.
 Chandreshwar added, "One kilo and twelve grams."
 For a moment the market was silent.
 Then Nathuni Sah laughed so hard that his basket of potatoes shook.
 "Madhav! Your prestige is twelve grams heavy!"
 Madhav Sah did not snatch the envelope, but he took it quickly.
 The inspection figure was written on the paper—1012 grams.
 He picked up the weight.
 On its underside, a small patch of old yellow metal could be seen.
 Chandreshwar said, "It looks as though years ago, when the bottom wore away, someone repaired it by adding metal."
 Madhav Sah turned the weight over and over in his hands.
 Then he remembered.
 Nearly twenty years earlier, one corner of the weight had broken. His father had had a market craftsman fill it in.
 No one had checked its weight again after that.
 Gauri asked, "So whenever we sold one kilo, we were actually giving twelve grams extra?"
 Chandreshwar said, "Approximately."
 Nathuni Sah began calculating.
 "On a hundred kilos, that is one kilo two hundred grams!"
 Madhav Sah stopped him. "Count your potatoes."
 Maqsood laughed. "Now I understand why people never bargained over your weight."
 "Why?"
 "The pointer balanced, but the prestige went into the bag on top."
 Everyone laughed again.
 Madhav Sah did not find it funny.
 He felt that twenty years of honesty had suddenly been turned into a twelve-gram joke.
 He asked Chandreshwar, "Where can I get a new weight?"
 "Certified weights are being sold at the inspection camp."
 Leaving Gauri in charge of the shop, Madhav Sah went there at once.
 An hour later he returned carrying a new one-kilo weight. It was made of dark metal, less shiny, with a clear official stamp.
 He did not put the old yellow weight back inside the box.
 He set it on the shelf behind the platform.
 Gauri wrote on a piece of paper: "Old weight—not for trade."
 Nathuni Sah added, "For prestige only."
 Madhav Sah glared at him.
 The next customer was Budhni Devi.

"How much for the lentils?"

"Eighty-six."

"Eighty-two."

"Eighty-five."

"Eighty-three."

"Eighty-four."

"Weigh them."

Madhav Sah put the new one-kilo weight on the balance.

Budhni Devi saw the old yellow weight on the shelf.

"Weigh with that one."

"That one is twelve grams heavy."

"Then use that one."

"In trade, only the certified weight will be used."

Budhni Devi made a face. "Earlier, for eighty-four, I got one kilo and twelve grams. Now for eighty-four, I get one kilo. Then take two rupees off."

Madhav Sah was speechless.

From behind, Nathuni Sah said, "That is what is called metrology."

Laughter rose around the entire platform.

Madhav Sah said, "The price is for the lentils, not for an old mistake."

Budhni Devi replied, "And my bargaining is over the lentils too."

In the end, the deal stayed at eighty-four; the price did not fall.

But as Budhni Devi took her bag, she said, "The weight has become correct, and the bargaining has become difficult."

From that day, a new game began in the market.

Some people asked Madhav Sah, "How much will you sell the old kilo for?"

He would say, "It is not for sale."

Some said, "Put it in a museum."

Gauri asked, "May I take it to school for Mathematics Day?"

At first Madhav Sah was going to refuse, then said, "Take it, but write clearly that it is not a trading weight."

At school, Gauri made a small display with the two weights.

One new and certified—1000 grams.

One old—1012 grams.

Above them she wrote: "How much is the thing called one kilo?"

The mathematics teacher asked the children to guess.

One said, "The old one is better. It gives you more goods."

Another said, "But the shopkeeper loses."

Another said, "Without inspection, trust is incomplete."

When Gauri came home, she repeated all the answers to her grandfather.

Madhav Sah asked only, "Did you write my name?"

“No.”

“Good.”

“But everyone understood.”

Madhav Sah nodded. “In this village, leaving out a name does not hide the name.”

Two weeks later, the market returned to normal.

People went back to bargaining over prices.

Madhav Sah once again said, “Argue about the price, not the weight.”

The only difference was that now, if someone questioned the weight, he did not become annoyed.

He would lift the new weight and say, “Look, the stamp is here.”

Sometimes he would even compare it against two five-hundred-gram weights.

And sometimes Gauri would take down the old yellow weight from the shelf and show it to the children. “This is the famous twelve grams.”

One day Nathuni Sah said, “Madhav, your prestige used to be yellow. Now it has turned black.”

Madhav Sah replied, “The colour changed, not the price.”

“The bargaining?”

“That will continue as long as you are around.”

One evening, as the market was packing up, a new customer arrived. He was from another village and knew nothing of the old story.

“Give me one kilo of chickpeas.”

Madhav Sah quoted the price.

The man immediately offered two rupees less.

The two haggled briefly.

The price was settled.

Madhav Sah placed the new dark weight on the balance.

The newcomer’s eyes went to the yellow weight on the shelf.

“Why have you displayed that weight so carefully?”

Nathuni Sah had opened his mouth to answer, but Madhav Sah spoke first. “That is a kilo of prestige.”

The newcomer looked startled.

“One kilo?”

Gauri suppressed a laugh.

Madhav Sah said, “Its name is one kilo; its weight is one kilo and twelve grams. For years people accepted it without question.”

“And now?”

Madhav Sah pointed toward the new weight. “Now the weight is one kilo.”

The newcomer asked, “And the prestige?”

Madhav Sah handed him the bag of chickpeas.

“That is bargained over every day.”

Nathuni Sah said, “And the price?”

Madhav Sah laughed. “The chickpeas have a separate price.”

The newcomer took the bag, walked two steps, then turned back and asked, “If you had weighed it with the old weight, I would have got twelve grams extra?”

“Yes.”

“Then next time I shall bargain for two rupees less.”

As Madhav Sah packed up the platform, he said, “See, Gauri? The moment prestige lost twelve grams, bargaining gained two rupees.”

Gauri opened the ledger and wrote: “A Kilo of Prestige: weight decreased, talk increased.”

Madhav Sah looked at the ledger and, this time, did not cross out the heading.

Not a Leader Who Forgets Names, but a Teacher

After rainwater seeped into the old records room at Belahi Middle School, eighteen files had become soaked.

The papers were dried, but the ink had run in several student registers from 1990 to 1994.

In some places half a letter of a name remained, in others a father's name, and elsewhere only a roll number.

Headmaster Arun Kumar had said, "Reconstruct verified copies as far as possible. Do not fill in names by guesswork."

The task was assigned to Neelam, a newly appointed teacher.

Neelam gathered the old examination forms, fee receipts, library lending register, and prize lists in one place.

Even then, many entries would not match.

At that point someone suggested, "Call Shivnarayan Jha. He taught here in those years."

Shivnarayan Jha was eighty-five years old.

He had taught at the school for thirty-two years.

When he arrived, he carried an old cloth bag, a walking stick, and a pen tucked behind his ear.

Neelam placed the first register before him.

"Guruji, Class Seven, 1991. The name here has been half washed away."

Shivnarayan Jha narrowed his eyes at the page.

"This... Ramesh?"

The assistant sitting by the door laughed. "Ramesh runs a seed shop now. This was Mahesh."

"Mahesh?"

"Yes."

Shivnarayan Jha shook his head.

"All right. But was he the one who once hung the geography map upside down?"

The assistant laughed again. "That was Ramesh."

Neelam stopped her pen.

“Then, Guruji, we cannot rely on you for the names.”

Shivnarayan Jha said without a trace of offence, “That is precisely what I came to tell you.”

Just then Ramesh himself came to the school to deliver a sack of seed.

Hearing the conversation, he joked, “Guruji has become a leader now—he has forgotten everyone’s name.”

Shivnarayan Jha answered at once, “Not a leader, a teacher. Let the register be trusted for names; I shall give you clues.”

Neelam’s interest was stirred.

“What kind of clues?”

“The kind that help you find the paper.”

On the first blurred line, only ‘...resh Ku...’ remained.

At the end of the father’s name, ‘...dev’ could still be seen.

Neelam said, “Could it be Suresh Kumar?”

Shivnarayan Jha said, “There were two Sureshes in this class. One had tied a bamboo pen-holder to the window frame. The other carried two spare nibs on examination days.”

Neelam asked, “How will that help us find the name?”

“The father of the boy who made the pen-holder worked with bamboo. His occupation should be written on the fee receipt.”

They searched the old fee receipts.

On one receipt was written: ‘Father: Ramdev Paswan; occupation: bamboo work.’

The roll number matched the number on the washed-out line in the old register.

Neelam recorded the first match.

“Memory cue—bamboo pen-holder. Documentary match—fee receipt.”

Shivnarayan Jha said, “Work this way. What I tell you is not proof; it is a path.”

Ramesh put down the sack and sat there himself.

“Let us see how many names our Guruji gets wrong.”

On the second line the name was clear—‘Meera Devi.’

The father’s name had been washed away.

Shivnarayan Jha said, “This is the same Meera who used to bring her exercise book wrapped in a reed mat on rainy days.”

Neelam looked through an old prize list.

‘Cleanest Notebook Prize—Meera Devi, father Harinandan Mandal.’

She completed the name.

Ramesh said, “That could still be a coincidence.”

Neelam agreed. “We need another document.”

In the library register, Meera Devi's name appeared with the same father's name.

Neelam did not put a tick; she wrote, "Two sources matched."

Shivnarayan Jha laughed.

"I would not be able to get away with copying in this teacher's class either."

The third line was difficult.

The beginning of the name looked like 'Di', the end like 'sh'.

Shivnarayan Jha said at once, "Ganesh."

Ramesh said, "Guruji, it must be Dinesh."

Shivnarayan Jha looked up at the ceiling.

"The boy who never plucked mangoes, but counted the fallen ones and divided them equally?"

"Dinesh," Ramesh said. "He runs a fruit shop now."

Neelam said, "What Rameshji says is not proof either."

They opened the old examination forms.

The roll number matched—Dinesh Sah.

Neelam laughed. "Guruji, you missed the name again, but the mango clue was right."

Shivnarayan Jha twirled the pen between his fingers. "That is why I am not filling in the names."

By noon, seven lines had been restored.

The same rule was followed in every case.

First, Shivnarayan Jha gave only a memory cue.

Then Neelam searched for at least two documentary sources.

Without two sources, the name was left blank.

Ramesh, after mocking the rule for a while, began searching old files himself.

On one line only 'Ku...' remained.

Shivnarayan Jha described the student almost as if painting a picture. "Quick with answers in mathematics, but never wrote out the steps in between."

Ramesh said at once, "Kusum!"

Neelam asked, "The document?"

The prize list contained the name Kusum Jha, but no roll number.

The library register contained three Kusums.

Neelam left the line blank.

Ramesh grew impatient. "Everyone remembers that it was Kusum."

"Remembering and verifying are two different things," Neelam said.

Shivnarayan Jha said softly, "She is right."

Toward evening Kusum herself arrived at the school.

Having heard about the old records, she had brought her Class Eight certificate from home.

The roll number matched.

Only then did Neelam fill in the name.

Kusum laughed and asked, "Guruji, did you remember my name?"

Shivnarayan Jha told the truth. "No. But you never wrote the working in between."

Kusum said, "Now I keep accounts. If I leave out even one line, the owner asks about it."

Ramesh said, "Guruji's teaching took effect rather late."

The work began again the next day.

This time Shivnarayan Jha was wrong even about one of his clues.

He said, "This student did not do his homework for three days because the calf at home was ill."

Headmaster Arun Kumar smiled.

"Guruji, that was me."

Shivnarayan Jha said, "Yes, Arun."

But when the old daily register was opened, it turned out that it was Arun's younger brother Anil who had been absent for three days because of the calf.

Shivnarayan Jha fell silent.

For the first time, Ramesh made no joke.

Neelam wrote against the line: "Memory cue unverified; not used."

Shivnarayan Jha himself said, "Draw a red line through it."

Neelam drew the red line.

"Guruji, did that hurt?"

"Why should it? Memory is not a register. If an error is not caught, tomorrow it becomes a lie."

From that day, a third rule was added: "A teacher's memory may also be struck out."

Ramesh wrote the three rules on the board.

"One—no name by guesswork."

"Two—memory is only a clue for the search."

"Three—no line is complete without two independent documentary matches."

Shivnarayan Jha read them and said, "Add a fourth."

"What?"

"Even if Guruji says it, check it."

Everyone burst out laughing.

On the third day of the work, they found a curious line.

The name had vanished completely, but one remark remained: ‘School play: Gatekeeper.’

Shivnarayan Jha looked straight at Ramesh.

“This is you.”

Ramesh was startled. “You forgot the name, but remembered the gatekeeper?”

“The king had four pages of dialogue. You chose the gatekeeper’s role with two lines.”

“And?”

“You forgot one of the two lines.”

Ramesh folded his hands. “It would be better if no documentary proof of that survived.”

Neelam searched for the old expense sheet for the play.

It contained the names of the performers.

‘Gatekeeper—Ramesh Yadav.’

The second source was the annual report, which also listed the cast of the play.

The name matched.

Neelam filled in the line.

Ramesh said, “Now I understand. Guruji does not recognise me by my name, but by my laziness.”

Shivnarayan Jha corrected him. “Not laziness—a talent for the shortest route.”

By the fourth day, eighteen of the twenty-two blurred lines had been verified.

Four lines remained blank.

The headmaster asked, “Guruji, does anything come back to you?”

Shivnarayan Jha studied all four lines.

“There are a few hazy memories, but I cannot see a path to any document.”

“Then?”

“Leave them blank.”

The headmaster said, “The copy will remain incomplete.”

Neelam replied, “An incomplete true copy is better than a completed lie.”

Shivnarayan Jha smiled.

Under the fourth rule on the board, Ramesh wrote a fifth: “A blank space is also information.”

When the work was finished, Neelam added a note at the end of the new copy.

“In reconstructing illegible entries, oral memory was used only as a search cue; final names are based on independent archival corroboration.”

Ramesh read it and said, "Will Guruji understand that sentence?"

Shivnarayan Jha replied, "I do not need to understand it. The person who opens the register next time should."

Neelam also made a separate little notebook.

On the cover she wrote: "Memory Cues: Not Evidence."

In that notebook they recorded such clues as the bamboo pen-holder, two spare nibs, the reed mat, fallen mangoes, omitted workings, and the gatekeeper's two lines.

In red ink they also recorded the mistake involving Anil and Arun.

Shivnarayan Jha looked at that red line.

"Why keep this?"

Neelam said, "So that the next person understands that your memory was useful, not infallible."

"You did well."

Ramesh asked, "Guruji, do you remember Neelamji's name now?"

Shivnarayan Jha looked at Neelam.

He remained silent for a few moments.

"The name... Neelam."

Neelam clapped.

Shivnarayan Jha immediately added, "But I may forget the name again."

"Then how will you remember me?"

"The two-witness teacher."

Everyone roared with laughter.

Ramesh said, "The title still has to be the same—Not a Leader Who Forgets Names, but a Teacher."

Shivnarayan Jha asked, "Why 'leader' again?"

Ramesh said, "The joke from the first day."

Shivnarayan Jha scratched his head.

"I have forgotten that joke."

Neelam opened the little notebook and showed him the first page.

It read: "First day: Guruji got five names wrong; he himself said—let the register be trusted for names, I shall give the clues."

Shivnarayan Jha read it and laughed.

"See? That is the virtue of the written word—it remembers better than I do."

As he was leaving, Ramesh called from behind, "Guruji, who am I?"

Without turning around, Shivnarayan Jha replied, "The gatekeeper. You forgot one of your two lines."

Ramesh said, "My name?"

Shivnarayan Jha stopped.

"That is why we made the register."

The Donation Expert

The roof of Belahi village's old reading room had been leaking for three years.

In the first year, a single drop fell from one corner.

In the second year, buckets had to be placed in five different spots.

By the third year, even after shifting the books, there were not enough buckets.

A village meeting was called.

The mukhiya said, "This time there is no remedy except replacing the tin sheets."

Master Shashikant opened the ledger.

"Let us form a committee to collect donations."

The moment they heard this, everyone seated on the veranda lowered their eyes.

Anyone who dared look up feared that his name would be written down.

Master asked, "Who will be the head?"

No one answered.

From the back, Ramauti Kaki said, "Make Gangaram Sah the head."

Every neck turned towards Gangaram at once.

Gangaram Sah was sitting at the corner of the wooden cot, cutting betel nut.

He started.

"Me?"

The veranda erupted in laughter.

Everyone knew why.

In the village, Gangaram Sah was famous—or rather notorious—for never contributing to any collection.

The school was whitewashed—zero.

Steps were built at the ghat—zero.

New cymbals were bought for the kirtan—zero.

A collection was raised to buy a community canopy for weddings—zero there too.

But when it came to getting money out of other people, no one was his equal.

Gangaram shut his betel-nut box.

"I am telling you beforehand—I shall not donate."

The mukhiya said, "That is precisely why we are making you the head."

Another burst of laughter.

Gangaram's face tightened.

"What sort of arithmetic is that?"

Ramauti Kaki said, "A man who guards his own pocket so well will guard the community's pocket well too."

Gangaram thought for a few moments.

"Very well. But there will be three rules."

Everyone fell silent.

"First—whoever makes a pledge will have it entered in the ledger."

"Second—cash, bamboo, tin sheets, nails and labour will all be accounted for separately."

"Third—my name will be at the very top."

Master smiled.

"How much shall I write?"

Gangaram said, "Zero."

This time the laughter rose so loudly that the broken tin sheets on the reading room trembled.

The next morning, Gangaram set out carrying a new ledger divided into four columns.

Name.

Pledged.

Received.

Outstanding.

On the first line was written: "Gangaram Sah—o."

Master's grandson Neeraj went with him.

Neeraj had been given the job of writing down the figures.

The first house belonged to Anant Chaudhary.

Eight sacks of paddy were stacked in Anant's courtyard.

Gangaram said, "The reading room roof is being replaced."

Anant said, "A very good undertaking."

"So, how much?"

"Look, expenses are very heavy this month."

Gangaram opened the ledger.

"If not money, then materials."

"Materials?"

"You have twelve bamboos lying in your storehouse. Will you give two?"

Anant was startled.

"How did you know there were twelve?"

"Yesterday I saw your bullock cart going out. Counting bamboo is the work of the eyes, not the pocket."

Anant laughed.

"Write three, not two."

Neeraj wrote three.

Gangaram immediately said, "Leave the Received column blank. It gets a tick only when the bamboo reaches the reading room."

Anant said, "You do not trust even me?"

"I have not put a tick even against my own zero."

The second house belonged to Chedi the blacksmith.

Chedi said, "I have no money."

Gangaram said, "I never asked for money."

"Then?"

"Nails."

"How many?"

"As many as the roofing mason writes down."

Chedi shook his head.

"This sounds less like a donation and more like a contract."

"If it were a contract, I would have received my wages first."

Neeraj burst out laughing.

The third house belonged to Sita Devi.

Sita was a widow.

She came out with twenty rupees and said, "This is all I have."

Gangaram did not take the money.

"You sweep the reading-room veranda every day. Keep these twenty rupees."

Sita became angry.

"Have you come to ask for donations or to stop them?"

Gangaram was taken aback.

Sita placed the money on the ledger.

"What I wish to give is not for you to decide."

Gangaram silently wrote down twenty.

As soon as they stepped outside, Neeraj asked, "Did the rules change?"

Gangaram said, "The rules need a fifth column—for people one must not argue with."

By noon, the ledger had filled up with more materials than money.

Three bamboos.

Two days of carpentry.

One cartload of sand.

A pledge of nails.

Four labourers to remove the old tin sheets.

Fourteen hundred rupees.

One sack of cement—whose purpose no one later understood.

Gangaram put a question mark beside that entry.

In the evening, the committee met.

The mukhiya asked, “What is the total?”

Gangaram said, “That is the wrong question.”

“Why?”

“What number do you get by adding three bamboos to fourteen hundred rupees?”

Master laughed.

“Then how much is still needed?”

“First we need the mason’s list.”

The mason came the next day.

He counted the tin sheets.

He measured the bamboo.

He listed the nails.

He counted the days of labour.

Gangaram pasted the list into the ledger.

Then the real game began.

Those who had tin sheets were asked for tin.

Those who had bullock carts were asked for transport.

Those who had money were asked for money.

Those who had nothing were asked for one three-hour shift of labour.

But Gangaram’s own entry still remained—zero.

On the third day, Chhotelal Sah said, “You give your share first. Then I shall give mine.”

Gangaram opened the ledger and showed him the first line.

“My share is public knowledge.”

“Zero?”

“Yes.”

“Aren’t you ashamed?”

“There is no separate column for shame.”

The people standing nearby laughed.

Chhotelal laughed too.

“All right, write five hundred.”

Gangaram said, “Five hundred goes under Pledged. It goes under Received only when the money reaches my hand.”

Chhotelal took out five hundred rupees and handed it over.

“Now?”

“Now both columns are filled.”

In four days, the ledger had grown thick.

But along with donations, complaints accumulated too.
Someone said, "Gangaram asked more from me than from others."
Someone said, "He valued my bamboo too low."
Someone said, "I sent two labourers, but the ledger shows only one day."
On Sunday, Gangaram opened the ledger on the reading-room veranda for anyone who wished to complain.

"Anyone with an objection may mark it in red pencil."

Ten marks appeared.

Seven were beside entries where people had forgotten their own pledges.

Two were genuinely Gangaram's mistakes.

One mark had been placed by Neeraj beside Gangaram's own zero.

Gangaram asked, "Why this?"

Neeraj said, "This is the biggest objection of all."

The veranda once again filled with laughter.

The work began.

The old tin sheets were removed.

Two of the bamboos proved usable; the third was hollow inside.

Gangaram wrote two beside the three in the ledger and struck out one.

Anant Chaudhary said, "I shall send a fourth bamboo."

"I shall write it down when it arrives."

"Your trust still has not increased?"

"My trust has increased. The rules of the ledger have not changed."

Clouds gathered in the afternoon.

The mason said, "If the tin is not laid by this evening, the books inside will get wet again."

They calculated what remained.

Eight tin sheets were short.

They were also short of twelve hundred rupees.

Everyone's eyes turned to Gangaram again.

Chhotelal Sah said, "This time, turn that zero into something."

Gangaram put a hand on his pocket.

"The zero will remain zero."

"Then what about the roof?"

Gangaram closed the ledger.

"The job of the head of a donation drive is not to give the money himself, but to raise what is still needed."

He took Neeraj with him and set off for the market.

At the warehouse of Ganesh, the tin-sheet dealer, he asked the price of eight sheets.

He heard the price and shook his head.

"Don't you have a couple of sheets that are not quite good?"

Ganesh was surprised.

“Which ones?”

“The ones with dented corners. They cannot go in the middle of the roof, but they will do along the edge.”

Ganesh said, “Those are not fit for sale.”

“I am not asking for a donation. Sell them to me for less.”

They bargained for half an hour.

In the end, he got six sheets at full price and two dented ones at half price.

Even then, they were three hundred rupees short.

Gangaram said, “Could your cart take them there?”

Ganesh laughed.

“Is this a donation drive or a business deal?”

“When you cannot get a donation from someone, save the freight instead.”

Ganesh agreed to provide the cart.

When they reached the village, Neeraj opened the ledger.

“Ganesh Sah—donation?”

Gangaram said, “Zero.”

“Cart?”

“Transport—free of charge. Write it separately.”

Neeraj looked at Gangaram.

“And all your running around?”

“That is no one’s donation.”

“Then what is it?”

“My misfortune.”

By evening, the roof was in place.

When the first drops of rain fell, they pattered on the new tin.

No bucket had to be placed inside.

The books remained dry.

On Sunday, the accounts were read aloud.

Total cash.

Total materials.

Total labour-days.

Total transport.

Cancelled pledges.

Price reductions.

Balance—zero.

Master Shashikant said, “One thing has been left out.”

“What?”

“Gangaram Sah’s contribution.”

Everyone applauded.

Gangaram raised his hand and stopped them.

“Read the ledger.”

Neeraj read the first line: “Gangaram Sah—o.”

More laughter.

The mukhiya said, “Remove that zero.”

Gangaram said, “Why?”

“You have been running about for so many days.”

“I did, because all of you made me the head. A donation is a different matter.”

Ramauti Kaki said, “Then let that zero remain.”

Gangaram closed the ledger.

“Let it remain. When people see it, they will understand that one need not first be a great philanthropist in order to raise donations.”

Neeraj said softly, “But does one have to be a miser?”

Everyone roared with laughter.

Gangaram laughed too.

Two weeks later, a crack appeared in the masonry platform around the village’s old well.

Another meeting was called.

Master brought a new ledger.

Gangaram was sitting on a cot at some distance.

He said at once, “This time, leave my name out.”

Neeraj opened the ledger.

On the first line he wrote: “Gangaram Sah—o.”

Gangaram clutched his head.

The veranda erupted in laughter once again.

The Free Photograph

Belahi Panchayat had announced that a 'Family Gathering' would be held on Sunday in the grounds of the old middle school. The programme would include folk songs, games for children, health check-ups, an exhibition of old photographs, and one free family photograph for every family.

Of all the words in that announcement, the one I heard most clearly was —'free.'

Nirmala said, "Your ears are less alert to talk of social service than to anything free."

I protested, "I am going to take part in a community programme. The photograph is only a small part of it."

My daughter Gauri promptly asked, "Then why did you take out your new kurta?"

My son Naval added, "And why have you been trimming your beard since yesterday?"

In a family, children usually assume responsibility for telling the truth; the adults are left with the task of explaining it.

We had no proper photograph of the whole family together. In our old wedding photograph, Nirmala and I were there, but Gauri and Naval had not yet entered the world. The children had separate school photographs. Once, all four of us had been photographed together, but Naval's eyes were closed that day and half my head lay outside the frame. Nirmala had put that photograph at the back of the cupboard.

For that reason, on Sunday we were ready much earlier than usual.

Nirmala wore a pale yellow sari. Gauri undid her braid twice and tied it again. Naval put on his new shoes and got dust on them within five minutes. I checked the buttons of my kurta three times.

"All this only for social service?" Nirmala asked.

"There is no crime in looking neat while doing social service," I said.

When we reached the school grounds, there were still twenty minutes to nine. I thought that by arriving early we would get the first place in the photograph queue.

The organizers were still stretching ropes across the ground. On one side old photographs were being hung up; on the other, medicine boxes were

being arranged on the health-check table. In the middle, a green cloth had been hung to make a photography stage. Above it, paper letters read: 'My Family, My Village.'

The photographer had arrived, but his assistant had gone to fetch fuel for the generator. The young man who was supposed to distribute the numbered slips was nowhere to be seen.

The moment the programme coordinator, Shambhunath, saw me, he said, "Gajendra Babu, sit at this table for five minutes. As people arrive, write down each family's name and give them a numbered slip. Just five minutes."

I wanted to say that I myself had come so early precisely in order to stand first in the queue. But Nirmala looked at me with an expression in which the entire account of the word 'social service' was written out.

I sat down on the chair.

On the table lay a register, two pencils, slips cut and numbered from 1 to 100, and a small red cord. The rule was simple—write down the family's name, give one slip to the family, and enter the same number in the register. The slip had to be held while the photograph was taken; later, the printed photograph would be matched by that number.

I entered my own family's name first.

Number 1.

I was pleased. Social service and practical intelligence could proceed side by side—I had become living proof of the fact.

Then the first unfamiliar family arrived.

"Name?" I asked.

"Ramnath Jha."

I wrote it down. At that very moment a voice came from behind: "I am Ramnath Jha too."

A second family stepped forward.

I realized that making a register was a more difficult science than the human imagination allowed for.

Gauri immediately said, "Baba, write the hamlet too."

Thus 'Ramnath Jha, East Hamlet' and 'Ramnath Jha, Beyond the Pond' became two distinct entries.

Naval was put in charge of handing out the slips. He gave each family its slip with such gravity that one might have thought he was distributing land deeds issued by the panchayat.

Nirmala opened the next page of the register and began writing the names clearly. Looking at the two names I had written, she said, "With handwriting like yours, the photographer will have to match people by destiny, not by their faces."

"That was only preliminary handwriting," I replied.

Five minutes passed.
Shambhunath did not return.
Ten minutes passed.
The queue reached all the way to the school veranda.
At number 17, an elderly woman came and stood before us alone.
I asked, "Family name?"
She said, "Write my own name—Janaki Devi."
I paused for a moment. At the top of the register was written 'Family.'
Janaki Devi understood my hesitation.
"Is one person not a family?" she asked.
Without even looking at me, Nirmala wrote: 'Janaki Devi, Back Hamlet.'
I handed her number 17.
Janaki Devi folded the slip and tied it into the knot of her sari's end.
At number 23 came a joint family of thirteen people. The head of the family wanted four separate photographs—one with one son, one with the other son, one with the grandchildren, and one with everyone together.
I read the rule aloud—one family, one free photograph.
He said, "We are four families."
From behind him, his wife said, "When household expenses are being paid, we are only one family."
Laughter rose from the queue. The head of the family himself gave a sheepish smile.
Gauri said, "Have one taken with everyone together. If thirteen people fit into a single frame, that will be the photograph's real miracle."
The photographer, hearing this from a distance, said, "And a test of my equipment as well."
Meanwhile, one corner of the green backdrop came loose. The wind had strengthened. Naval ran and caught the rope. I began to rise from the table, but Nirmala said, "Don't get up; the names will get mixed up."
Naval held the cloth for five minutes. Then the assistant returned with the fuel and tied the rope again.
The generator started. The photographer's flash fired.
Number 1 was announced.
That was our family.
I prepared to get up.
Just then, three families reached the table at once for their slips, and a child dropped his slip in the mud.
Nirmala said, "Set this right first. Our photograph can be taken at number two."
I agreed. After all, a difference of one number could not alter our faces.
Number 1 was skipped and number 2 was called.

Then numbers 3, 4, and 5.

I kept writing names.

By ten o'clock the grounds were full. The health check-up had begun, rehearsals for the folk songs had started, and the children were busy with the running competition. At my table, not only slips but questions too began to pile up.

"My sister's family couldn't come. Can you keep a slip aside for them?"

"My son-in-law will be here in half an hour. Can the photography be stopped until then?"

"If a child is crying, does a crying photograph count?"

"Should I wear my spectacles for the photograph or take them off?"

I answered three of the questions and sent the fourth to the photographer. Thus I learned the first rule of becoming an expert—when you do not know something, put the answer on someone else's head.

By noon we had reached number 64.

Then clouds gathered overhead.

Shambhunath came running and said, "It's going to rain. Take the register and the slips inside."

The photography stage was shifted to the school veranda. The green cloth was taken down and hung on an inside wall. Table, chairs, register, slips—everything went indoors.

In the rush, the photographer's assistant put eight envelopes containing the printed photographs from numbers 41 to 48 in the wrong order.

Gauri looked at the numbers written on the backs of the envelopes and arranged them again one by one.

"Your social service has now become a family business," Nirmala said to me.

I replied, "Family participation is essential in organization."

"And the photograph?"

"There is time."

The rain began. Water drummed so loudly on the school's tin roof that the voices calling out names were drowned. The photographer said the little printing machine would not work properly in the damp. He would keep taking photographs, but the printed copies could not be handed out until evening.

Shambhunath looked at the register in my hands.

I did not like that look.

"Do one thing," he said. "The photographs will be printed in town tomorrow. The numbered register is with you. You take care of the distribution."

"Me?"

“You have come to know all the families.”

This was entirely untrue. I knew the names, not the families. But when someone has spent the whole day sitting at a table, society gradually begins to assume that he understands everything.

Nirmala said, “Take it. After doing so much, there is no point leaving the work half-finished now.”

I picked up the register.

By evening, 82 families had been photographed. After the last family left, the grounds began to empty.

All at once, a question rose in my mind.

“What about our number 1?”

Gauri looked at the register.

Our family’s name was written beside number 1. The box marked ‘Photograph Taken’ was empty.

The four of us looked at one another.

The family that had spent the whole day arranging the world by the order of photographs had forgotten to have its own photograph taken.

Naval said, “Baba, the social service was a success.”

Nirmala burst out laughing.

I went over to the photographer. He was packing away his equipment.

“There is one problem,” I said.

He asked, “Did some family get left out?”

“Ours.”

He looked first at me, then at Nirmala, Gauri, and Naval.

“But all of you were more visible than anyone else the whole day.”

“Being visible and being in a photograph are two different things.”

He began looking through the images stored in the camera. After a few moments, he smiled.

“There is one.”

He showed us on the small display screen.

It was an image taken just before the rain began. The green cloth was flying loose on one side. Naval was holding the rope, Gauri was gathering the slips, Nirmala had one hand on the register to keep the papers from blowing away, and I stood gripping a corner of the table. All four of us were in the same frame, but not one of us was looking at the camera.

I said, “That is hardly a family photograph!”

Nirmala said, “Are all four of us there?”

“Yes.”

“Are we together?”

“Yes.”

“Then the rest is a problem of your prestige.”

The photographer kept that image as number 1.

At noon the next day, a large box containing 82 envelopes arrived at our house.

It was then that the true value of a free photograph became clear.

Distributing the envelopes was harder than taking the photographs.

The family at number 6 said that in their photograph everyone's eyes looked fine, but their younger son had stuck out his tongue; they wanted another copy.

I showed them the rule—one family, one copy.

Janaki Devi at number 17 opened her envelope and remained silent for a long time. Then she said, "Is this me?"

Nirmala said, "Yes."

"Do I look good alone?"

Gauri said, "Very."

Janaki Devi did not tuck the photograph into her sari; she carried it away openly in her hand.

When the photograph of the thirteen-member family at number 23 was handed over, everyone first counted to make sure all thirteen were visible. They were. The head of the family said, "One copy will not be enough."

His wife said again, "One family when expenses have to be paid, thirteen when the photograph has to be shared?"

I wrote 'Received' in the register.

By evening, 71 envelopes had been distributed. Five families were in the fields, three had gone to town, two envelopes had reached the wrong hamlet and come back, and Naval had put one envelope under his pillow and forgotten it there.

Within three days, every photograph had reached its own home.

The last envelope was ours.

Nirmala put the photograph in a frame.

I said, "My new kurta is hardly visible at all."

Gauri said, "Neither are Naval's new shoes."

Naval said, "Ma's sari is half hidden behind the register."

Straightening the frame on the wall, Nirmala said, "That is why it is good. We went there to show our clothes, and the work ended up showing instead."

Let me make one thing clear here: I did not go to the programme merely for the free photograph.

I went there for social service.

Yes, it is another matter that my name stood at number 1 in the register of social service, while we remembered to have our photograph taken only in the evening.

Not on Time, but on His Word

There is no single time in our village of Belahi. It is best to explain this to outsiders beforehand; otherwise they may insult someone by saying he has arrived late, and then imagine the fault was his.

The wall clock in Mangal Sah's shop runs ahead of all the others. Mangal Sah says, "In business, time ought to stay ahead." Ask him how far ahead his clock is, and he looks at it and says, "Far enough to keep me out of loss."

The clock at the middle school is seven minutes fast. The headmaster has deliberately kept it that way, because if a pupil is seven minutes late, the school clock still gets him there on time.

The clock at the panchayat house is five minutes slow. The mukhiya's reasoning is that panchayat decisions should never be rushed; the clock, too, ought to move after due thought.

The pocket watch Harinarayan Kaka carries belonged to his father. He says, "I shall live in the time in which Babuji left me."

I have complete faith in my own watch. I do not consider it proper for another man's clock to interfere in my private time.

With all these arrangements, the village carried on for years. Weddings took place, funerary rites were performed, the weekly market met, examinations were held. People kept arriving late and producing their own watches as evidence.

The trouble came that year in Ashadh, when the time for transplanting the rice seedlings in Phulo Devi's field was slipping away.

Phulo Devi's husband had died of illness away from home two years earlier. The household consisted of her, her mother-in-law, and her twelve-year-old son. Their one and a half bighas of land were their chief support. The seedlings were ready, but continuous rain had kept postponing the transplanting.

One day the sky cleared. The women of the village said, "Tomorrow we shall finish the transplanting." The men agreed as well.

It was decided on the veranda of the panchayat house that every household would send at least one person to give two hours of labour. The work would begin at seven in the morning.

I asked, "Seven o'clock by whose clock?"

Everyone looked at me as though I were being needlessly clever.

The mukhiya said, "Seven o'clock means seven o'clock."

I fell silent. In our village, many disputes begin with precisely such an answer.

The next morning I reached the field. My watch showed two minutes past seven.

The field was empty.

Phulo Devi was sitting on the ridge, loosening the bundles of seedlings. She said, "You are the first to arrive."

I said, "I am two minutes late."

She said nothing.

A little later Sushila Devi, the headmaster's wife, arrived. Her watch showed five minutes past seven.

Behind her came Shambhu, Mangal Sah's son. He said, "Babu told me to be here exactly at seven. Look—by my watch it is six fifty-six."

I looked at his watch. It was four minutes behind the clock in Mangal Sah's shop. There were two times in the same household.

Eight or ten people gathered. The transplanting began.

Feet sank into the mud, seedlings passed from hand to hand, and the rows slowly advanced. For the first time, some of the anxiety left Phulo Devi's face.

Then Harinarayan Kaka appeared on the ridge. Taking out his pocket watch, he said, "I have arrived at exactly seven."

My watch showed seven thirty-seven.

Mangal Sah himself arrived at seven forty-five—according to my watch. By the reckoning of his wall clock, he was on time.

By eight o'clock there were thirty people in the field.

There was no trouble until nine, because everyone's hands were busy. The trouble began when those who had arrived first decided that their two hours were complete and started to leave.

Pulling his feet out of the mud, Shambhu said, "My two hours are done."

Harinarayan Kaka looked at his pocket watch. "You have worked only an hour and a half."

Shambhu said, "By my watch, it has been two hours."

Kaka said, "Your watch runs fast."

Shambhu replied, "Your watch got left behind with Babuji."

The moment I heard that sentence, I knew the rice transplanting was about to turn into a clock-repair workshop.

Sushila Devi said, "Whoever came first may leave first. End of the matter."

Mangal Sah said, "Came first by which clock?"

The seedlings slipped from someone's hand and fell into the mud.

Within five minutes the transplanting stopped. Such an argument broke out over the accounting of two hours' labour that Phulo Devi quietly bent down and began planting a row by herself.

Trying to act as a mediator, I said, "Let everyone write down the starting and finishing time by his own watch."

The headmaster's wife asked, "Who is going to keep a sheet of paper in this mud?"

Mangal Sah said, "I shall keep it, but the times must be written by my clock."

That proposal died on the spot.

Then Phulo Devi's mother-in-law, whom everyone called Dadi, spoke from the ridge. "Are you people planting clocks or rice?"

No one answered.

Dadi said again, "Was the agreement for two hours, or for finishing the field?"

The mukhiya, who had arrived late and had only just begun working, said, "The decision was for two hours."

Dadi said, "Then if the field remains unfinished, will you eat those two hours?"

Everyone laughed, but Phulo Devi did not.

Jyoti, who was in Class Eight, was also transplanting with her mother. She washed the mud from her hands, climbed onto the ridge, and looked across the field.

She said, "Instead of dividing the hours, divide the field."

Mangal Sah asked, "How do we divide a field?"

Jyoti said, "Count the rows from one ridge to the other. Give rows to each household. Whoever finishes his rows has finished his share of the work."

I liked the idea, but I did not support it immediately. In a village, if you endorse an idea too quickly, people assume you had agreed upon it beforehand.

The headmaster's wife counted the width of the field. Phulo Devi told us how many bundles of seedlings there were.

It was settled: four rows to each household. Two rows for a household whose member was elderly or weak. Six rows if a household had sent two young adults.

Harinarayan Kaka objected. "That is not equality."

Dadi said, "Is equality to be counted by feet, or by work?"

Kaka looked at his pocket watch again, but the answer to that question was not in it.

A rope was fetched. It was stretched from one end of the field to the other, and a small knot was tied at every four rows.

Mangal Sah inspected his share. "There is more mud in my part."

Shambhu said, "Babu, you have received mud in proportion to your prestige."

Everyone laughed. Mangal Sah did too.

The transplanting began again.

Now, if anyone looked at a watch, it was only for his own satisfaction. The right to leave came when one's allotted rows were finished.

Harinarayan Kaka planted slowly. He had two rows. Shambhu had six.

After finishing his first three rows, Shambhu looked towards Kaka. Kaka was still halfway through his first.

Without saying anything, Shambhu took over Kaka's second row.

Kaka said, "I do not want your pity."

Shambhu said, "This is not pity. It is saving my sixth row from the mud."

Kaka laughed. "Your watch may run fast, but now and then your mind keeps proper time."

By noon, more than half the field was filled with green rows.

When Mangal Sah finished his four rows, more than two hours had passed by his own watch. He said nothing. He merely climbed onto the ridge and began washing his feet.

I asked, "What time is it?"

He said, "The work is finished."

I thought that answer deserved a place in history.

From time to time Phulo Devi opened another bundle of seedlings. Her twelve-year-old son carried them to the planters. Earlier, while the argument was going on, his face had fallen. Now he counted the knots and called out, "These rows belong to that household; those rows to the other one."

After noon, some people left the field to eat. Some went home after completing their share. Two households' portions remained unfinished; their people had gone to town on business.

The mukhiya said, "Leave those two households' rows. Let them come in the evening and do them."

Dadi said, "Will the seedlings wait until evening?"

Then every family saved a handful of seedlings from its completed share and began planting those eight rows. There was no new decision. No one made a proposal. Hands simply reached out of their own accord.

Before the sun went down, the entire field had been transplanted.

Phulo Devi stood on the ridge and looked at the field for a long time. She tried to say something, but her voice caught.

Dadi said to her, "One does not offer thanks at transplanting time. Next year, take up a row in someone else's field."

Phulo Devi nodded.

As we were leaving, the subject of clocks came up again. That was natural; in Belahi, no day is complete without a discussion of clocks.

Harinarayan Kaka said, "My watch says four twenty-two."

Mangal Sah said, "Mine says four thirty-seven."

The headmaster's wife said, "If the school clock were here, it would say four thirty-two."

I looked at my own watch, but this time I did not announce the time.

Shambhu asked, "What does yours say?"

I said, "My four rows are done."

The next day, the rope was being dried on the veranda of the panchayat house. Jyoti was undoing the knots.

The mukhiya said, "Write this method down as a rule: in community work, divide the work itself instead of the hours."

The headmaster said, "Not every kind of work can be divided into rows."

Jyoti said, "Then divide what can be divided. And where it cannot be divided, make the terms clear beforehand."

Mangal Sah said, "Do not write down any proposal to change the clocks."

Harinarayan Kaka said at once, "Passed unanimously."

On this one decision, there was no disagreement in the village.

A few days later, fresh green shoots rose in Phulo Devi's field. Four rows, six rows, two rows—there was no longer any sign of which part had been planted by whom. The entire field was one colour.

Standing on the ridge, Dadi said, "See? The rice does not care whose clock was right."

Mangal Sah said, "Rice knows nothing of business."

I said, "Does it understand time?"

After thinking for a moment, he replied, "It understands the season."

I liked that answer, though I did not tell him so.

The clocks in Belahi still tell different times. The school clock is fast, the panchayat clock is slow, the clock in Mangal Sah's shop hurries everyone along, and Harinarayan Kaka's pocket watch still moves in his father's time.

An outsider asks, "What is the correct time here?"

I say, "Look at your own watch."

He asks again, "Then how do all of you manage to work together?"

The answer to that question is simple now.

I say, "Not on time, but on our word."

Where Am I to Blame?

My name is Bhola Jha. In the village, people call me Bhola Babu, but do not draw the wrong conclusion from the name. Bhola is the name I was born with, not a description of my nature.

I understand accounts, I know people, and most important of all—I have complete faith in my own memory.

It was because of that confidence that, last Ashadh, responsibility for the village tree-distribution committee came to me. Whether the committee entrusted it to me or I took it upon myself is a small matter we shall come to later.

Sixty-eight saplings had arrived from the block nursery—mango, guava, lemon, neem, and drumstick. The agricultural extension worker, Jyoti Devi, had also supplied a small slip with every sapling explaining what kind of soil, sunlight, and water suited it best.

The moment I looked at the slips, I understood that the work was not difficult. After all, why should one need to study agricultural science in order to know a mango for a mango?

Jyoti Devi said, “Bhola Babu, write the full names. Put the house numbers too. The saplings are small; you cannot always identify them easily by their leaves.”

I said, “Why waste paper? I’ll make short signs.”

“What kind of signs?”

“Aa—for mango, A—for guava, Nee—for lemon, N—for neem, S—for drumstick.”

Jyoti Devi kept looking at me. Then she said, “And if Nee and N blur in the rain?”

I laughed. “Does rain wash away judgment, or only written letters?”

The headmaster praised me greatly for that sentence. Later I realised he had been laughing, not praising me. But at the time, I took it as praise.

The first job was to prepare the list of families. Every household stated its preference. Some wanted mango, some lemon, and some said they would take whatever was left.

Beside Malti Devi’s name I wrote “M,” because she wanted a mango near the manjara in her courtyard.

Jyoti Devi asked, "What variety is this M?"

I said, "Malti."

"Why is a person's name in the sapling list?"

"If there are no people, who will plant the saplings?"

Do you see any fault of mine here? I certainly do not.

The next day all the saplings were arranged in rows on the school veranda. I was tying on my little paper labels with their coded signs. A boy asked, "Bhola Kaka, is this 'A' guava or mango?"

I said, "Aa is for mango. A is for guava."

He said, "What if the extra a gets washed away?"

I put a hand on his head and said, "Pay attention to your studies. I'll worry about the rain."

Just then the wind rose. Two labels blew away. Four became tangled together. I tied them back on. Naturally, one might ask which label belonged to which sapling; but all the saplings were still right there. None of them had gone abroad.

I retied the labels from memory.

From a distance, Jyoti Devi called, "On the right saplings?"

I said, "Trust me."

That sentence acquired much greater importance later.

Ramautar's bullock cart came for the distribution. Mango and guava were placed on one side, neem and lemon on the other. To balance the load, I slipped the drumstick saplings into the middle.

Ramautar asked, "Won't the order get mixed up?"

I said, "Order belongs on paper, not on a cart."

He scratched his head.

By the time we reached the first hamlet, clouds had gathered. It began to rain. The paper labels got wet. In some places the long ee of "Nee" survived; elsewhere it washed away. On some of the "Aa" labels, the second a remained only half-visible.

I remembered what Jyoti Devi had said, but suppose her prediction happened to prove correct. That did not prove my system wrong; it merely proved the rain uncooperative.

At Malti Devi's house I unloaded a sapling. She asked, "Mango, isn't it?"

I looked at the label. It had "M" written on it.

With full confidence I said, "Yours."

"Mango?"

"You are Malti Devi, aren't you?"

She burst out laughing. "I am."

"Then this is your sapling."

Thus the first distribution was a success.

The second house belonged to Parmeshwar Mandal. He wanted lemon. The label still showed an “N.” I handed him the sapling.

He asked, “Is this lemon?”

I said, “When they are small, lemon and neem look like siblings. Once the leaves open out, the truth will reveal itself.”

He said, “Then until the truth reveals itself, where should I dig the pit?”

I said, “Somewhere sunny. Both like sunlight.”

How accurate that answer was from the standpoint of agricultural science is a question for Jyoti Devi. At the time, however, she had gone to another hamlet.

By noon, thirty-eight saplings had been distributed. The cart grew emptier; my confidence grew fuller.

When we reached the third hamlet, the problem was that the list had two men named Ramvilas—Ramvilas Mahato and Ramvilas Paswan. I had not written their fathers’ names, because in a village people know one another.

They both arrived at the same time. One wanted mango, the other neem.

I looked at the list. “Ramvilas—M.”

Both said, “Me.”

I said, “It goes to whoever raises his hand first.”

Ramvilas Mahato immediately raised his hand.

Ramvilas Paswan said, “Is this some kind of examination?”

I said, “Promptness is essential in village work.”

Mahato-ji took the mango. Paswan-ji was given the neem. Later it turned out that the list had been the other way round.

Where was my fault in that? Both households had given their sons the same name. No one had consulted me at the time of their births.

By evening all the saplings had been distributed. Only three remained—a drumstick, a neem, and a guava. Three names remained on the list—mine, the mukhiya’s, and the school kitchen.

I had asked for guava for my house. The mukhiya wanted neem; the school wanted drumstick.

All three labels were soaked. One had something resembling an “A,” another a straight line, and the third nothing at all.

I said, “Now it is easy. Three things, three places.”

Ramautar asked, “Which one goes where?”

I said, “Whichever comes off the cart first is mine.”

He unloaded a sapling that looked like guava. I planted it in my courtyard.

My wife Kamla asked, “Guava, isn’t it?”

I said, “Certainly.”

She said, “Then why do the leaves look like neem?”

I said, "One does not judge a young plant by its appearance. When a child is born, does anyone announce at once that he will study mathematics?"

Kamla fell silent. I took that to mean the argument had been effective.

Three days later the first complaint arrived. Malti Devi said, "Bhola Babu, the leaves of my mango smell like lemon."

I said, "The effect of the soil."

On the fifth day Parmeshwar Mandal came carrying a twig. "My lemon is turning out to be a thornless neem."

I said, "Be patient. Give the sapling time to declare its identity."

On the seventh day Jyoti Devi made a round of the village. She had the original list in her hand—full names, varieties of sapling, advice on soil, everything clearly written.

She first went to Malti Devi's courtyard. One look at the sapling and she said, "This is lemon."

Malti Devi looked at me.

I said, "Lemon is useful too."

She smiled. "Instead of mango pickle, we'll make lemon pickle."

I said, "See? No real loss at all."

Jyoti Devi went to the next house. Parmeshwar Mandal's sapling turned out to be neem. His pit was small, but the spot was good. He said, "Let it stay. It will give shade."

I said, "I told you from the beginning that both like sunlight."

Jyoti Devi stared at me.

The homes of Ramvilas Mahato and Ramvilas Paswan were checked. There was a neem in Mahato-ji's courtyard and a mango at the corner of Paswan-ji's field. Both men burst out laughing.

Mahato-ji said, "So the prize for raising my hand first turned out to be neem."

Paswan-ji said, "And the benefit of being late was mango."

I said, "Life restores its own balance."

Jyoti Devi said, "Not life. A wrong list."

I registered my disagreement.

The mukhiya's house had got the drumstick. The school kitchen had the guava. My courtyard had the neem.

Kamla kept looking at me. She said nothing. This kind of silence is a very powerful language in a married woman.

I said, "Neem is good for health."

She said, "So is guava."

I said, "Neem lives long."

She said, "Guava bears fruit."

I said, "Shade too is a kind of fruit."

She went inside.

At this point people say my plan failed. That conclusion is not supported by the facts. Of the sixty-eight saplings, fifty-seven reached suitable places. Nine had their varieties exchanged, and two had to be moved to different spots.

Work out the percentage and the success rate is very high.

Jyoti Devi said, "Forget the percentage. Think of a way to improve the system."

I immediately said, "Tie coloured thread to them. Red for mango, yellow for guava, green for lemon, blue for neem, white for drumstick."

She said, "That is what I told you on the first day—variety label, house number, and the list, all three."

I said, "You said labels. I added coloured thread."

The committee agreed that the next distribution would use three marks—the full name of the variety, the house number, and coloured thread.

To me, this improvement was extremely scientific.

Two weeks later, as the saplings opened out their leaves, their identities became clear. Two that had been planted in unsuitable places were carefully replanted. The people accepted all the rest.

Malti Devi built a small bamboo guard around the lemon plant. She said, "I didn't get a mango, but this is mine now."

Parmeshwar Mandal marked out the place for a future bench beneath the neem.

Ramvilas Mahato went from time to time to look at Paswan-ji's mango. He would say, "The mango I raised my hand for is over here."

Paswan-ji would reply, "You raised the hand; I'm the one watering the mango."

The neem in my courtyard grew fastest of all. Kamla watered it, but never praised it in front of me.

One evening I said, "See? If it had been guava, it would not have grown this straight."

Kamla said, "Where are you to blame?"

Her voice was very sweet. For a moment I suspected she was making fun of me. Then I thought—life becomes difficult when there is distrust at home. I let the suspicion go.

The following year the saplings came again. A committee was formed. I arrived at the meeting fully prepared. In my bag I had red, yellow, green, blue, and white thread.

The mukhiya read out the names: "Distribution in charge: Jyoti Devi. Assistants: two school students. Register in charge: the headmaster."

I asked, "And me?"

The mukhiya said, "You are the adviser."

I sat up straight with pride.

Ramvilas Paswan quietly said to Mahato-ji, "A promotion."

I heard him.

He was right. The post of the person who advises is above the post of the person who does the work.

Before the meeting ended, I offered three suggestions—write the labels in full, add the house number, tie coloured thread.

Jyoti Devi smiled and said, "Where did these three rules come from?"

I said, "Experience."

That was entirely true.

The experience was mine.

And the fault?

Where the fault lay is for you to decide.

The Devout Thief

In the village, people regarded Devkinandan Jha as a devout man. At dawn the sound of a conch would rise from his courtyard; at noon a small lamp burned in a corner of his shop; and in the evening he supervised the washing of the temple steps.

He possessed another quality as well, one to which he himself had given a very handsome name.

He did not call it stealing. His phrase was: "temporary redistribution of goods."

The phrase was born in the first year of the Harinam week. The temple courtyard had run short of bamboo poles for the pavilion. Devkinandan Jha had four bamboos lifted from Nandlal Sah's backyard.

That evening Nandlal Sah asked, "Who took the bamboos?"

Devkinandan Jha said, "They haven't been taken. They've been temporarily redistributed for a community religious purpose."

"Why didn't you ask?"

"If I had asked, you would have given them anyway. It saved time."

Nandlal Sah made no reply. When the week ended, three of the four bamboos came back. The fourth came back as half a bamboo, because it had been cut to make a prop for the stage.

Returning the half bamboo, Devkinandan Jha said, "In the service of religion, its length has diminished, not its value."

From that day Nandlal Sah began calling him "Redistribution Babu."

Devkinandan Jha was not offended by the name. To him it was almost a title.

The following year a large brass lota was needed for the ritual feast. Phoolmati Kaki had a gleaming one at home. Kaki had gone to the market. Devkinandan Jha had the lota fetched.

That evening Kaki saw her lota in the temple, measuring out kheer.

She said, "If you had asked me, I would have given it."

Devkinandan Jha replied cheerfully, "That is exactly what I am saying—you would have given it. So what separate need was there to ask beforehand?"

Kaki looked at him for a long while. Then she said, "My need for my own things comes first."

Devkinandan Jha reflected on this sentence, but concluded that Kaki had grown old and her attachment to possessions had increased.

Gradually the list of redistributions grew longer. Two long benches from the school went to a religious discourse. Ramsevak the mason's hammer went to the repair of the temple gate. Basanti Devi's thick cloth went to cover sacks of prasad on a rainy day. Kishori Chaudhary's bamboo ladder went to fasten the flag rope.

Devkinandan Jha claimed that he remembered every object.

There was also a slim ledger in the drawer of his shop. Across the top, in red pencil, he had written: "Religious Debt."

Open the ledger and the entries ran like this: "One hammer—public good." "Two benches—discourse." "One thick cloth—protection of prasad."

Very often the owner's name was not written at all.

Devkinandan Jha's reasoning was, "If the object has been identified, why write the owner's name?"

One day Ramsevak the mason came to his shop looking for his hammer.

"Where is my hammer?"

Devkinandan Jha opened the ledger.

"It is in the service of the public good."

"Where does the public good live?"

"Near the temple gate."

Ramsevak went there. The hammer was not there. The gate had already been repaired. He was told the hammer had been by a pavilion stake. The stake had already been removed. At last the hammer was found in the rear storeroom of the temple, beneath an old jhaal.

Ramsevak returned and said, "If you had written the owner's name, the hammer would not have travelled through three places."

Devkinandan Jha replied, "A thing in the service of religion must keep moving. If it sits still, it gathers rust."

Ramsevak oiled his hammer and said nothing.

Meanwhile, it was decided that the temple's old veranda should be repaired. Devkinandan Jha was put in charge of the materials.

He began running about day and night. In his view, delay in religious work was itself a kind of loss.

Kishori Chaudhary's ladder arrived again. Two bamboos belonging to Nandlal Sah arrived. Basanti Devi's thick cloth arrived. Ramsevak's hammer also arrived again; this time Ramsevak himself was not present.

Devkinandan Jha said, "He must know by now that the hammer is used for religious work."

On the third night of that week, clouds gathered overhead.

There was already a crack in the rear wall of Phoolmati Kaki's house. With heavy rain threatening, Kaki had told Ramsevak during the day to brace it with bamboo by evening.

Ramsevak arrived with his tools, but the hammer was missing.

He understood at once.

He went towards the temple. Work on the veranda had stopped, but the hammer was not beside the pile of new bricks.

Devkinandan Jha said, "It must have gone into someone's hands. It is here somewhere."

The rain began.

Ramsevak, Kaki's grandson Sudhir, and Nandlal Sah all began looking for the hammer. Half an hour later they found it beneath a bucket. By then a section of the outer plaster on Kaki's wall had fallen away.

The wall did not collapse. No one in the house was hurt. But two sacks of Kaki's paddy were soaked because water had entered through that corner.

Ramsevak braced the wall with bamboo that very night.

Devkinandan Jha stood there drenched by the rain.

He said, "The hammer was found in time. A great disaster was averted."

From inside the house Phoolmati Kaki replied, "If the hammer had been at home in time, the question of disaster would never have arisen."

Devkinandan Jha had no immediate answer to that.

The next day the temple committee met. No one wanted to remove Devkinandan Jha. Without him, the work really was difficult. But everyone wanted an account of their belongings.

Nandlal Sah said, "First count them—whose things are in the service of religion at this moment?"

Devkinandan Jha opened the Religious Debt ledger.

The counting began.

Two benches belonging to the school. One ladder belonging to Kishori Chaudhary. Three bamboos belonging to Nandlal Sah. One thick cloth belonging to Basanti Devi. Ramsevak's hammer. The owners of two spades unclear. The owner of one bucket unknown. Two families claiming the same rope.

The total came to twenty-seven objects.

Devkinandan Jha said, "You see? Not a single object is for private use. Every one of them is in the service of religion."

Ramsevak asked, "Where is the permission?"

Devkinandan Jha turned the pages of the ledger.

"The permission is in the mind. People would not obstruct religious work."

Phoolmati Kaki said, "The mind is yours; the property is mine. The two are not the same."

A few people at the meeting laughed. Devkinandan Jha did not.

Just then, a small incident occurred.

Devkinandan Jha began looking for his new black umbrella. He had bought it in town the previous week and would not let anyone touch it.

Not in the shop. Not in the temple office. Not on the veranda.

Then Sudhir pointed towards the temple roof and said, "Look there."

The black umbrella was open in one corner of the roof. The masons had propped it upside down so that rain would not fall on the fresh lime mortar.

Devkinandan Jha's face changed.

"Who took my umbrella?"

Wiping his hammer, Ramsevak said, "Temporary redistribution of goods."

For a moment the meeting fell silent. Then Nandlal Sah burst out laughing.

Devkinandan Jha kept looking towards the roof. White splashes of lime had marked one edge of the umbrella.

He asked quietly, "If they had asked, I would have given it."

Phoolmati Kaki said, "That is exactly what I used to say."

This time Devkinandan Jha did not blame Kaki's attachment on old age.

The meeting did not end there. That day a new register was drawn up. It had four columns—object, owner, purpose, date of return. In a fifth column they wrote: "Permission."

Devkinandan Jha himself said, "Without permission, an entry shall be considered incomplete."

Nandlal Sah asked, "Permission given in the mind?"

Wiping lime from his black umbrella, Devkinandan Jha said, "No. From the owner's own mouth."

Over the next two days all twenty-seven objects were traced and returned. The two spades turned out to belong to two different households. The bucket belonged to the school kitchen. The dispute between the two families over the rope ended when a red thread was found inside one of its knots, the kind Basanti Devi tied to her belongings.

Devkinandan Jha went about returning everything. If an object had been damaged, he had it repaired. This time, in place of Nandlal Sah's old bamboo that had been reduced to half, he gave him a whole new bamboo.

Surprised, Nandlal Sah asked, "A new rule of redistribution?"

Devkinandan Jha said, "This is accounting."

The temple veranda was finally completed. On the day of its inauguration, Devkinandan Jha was as busy as ever. The only difference was that a pencil was tucked behind his ear and the new register was in his hand.

Ramsevak needed a rope. Devkinandan Jha went to Basanti Devi.

"Will you lend us the rope for one day?"

Basanti Devi said, "I will. Write it in the register."

He wrote: "Rope. Owner: Basanti Devi. Purpose: tying the veranda jhaal. Return date: tomorrow. Permission: given orally."

In the space for a signature, Basanti Devi put her thumb impression.

Devkinandan Jha closed the register.

From a distance Nandlal Sah called out, "Redistribution Babu, the rules have multiplied!"

Devkinandan Jha replied, "The name has changed."

"Changed to what?"

Lifting the rope, he said, "A loan."

Nandlal Sah asked, "Even for religious work?"

Devkinandan Jha paused for a moment.

"Even for religious work."

That evening a sheet of paper bearing the rules of the new register was pasted on the veranda wall. Devkinandan Jha himself had written the first line: "Whether an object is sacred or ordinary, the owner's name comes first."

In smaller letters below, he had added: "So does the date of return."

The Committee for Good Conduct

One day a new notice was pasted on the wall of Barhi Tola's old reading room: "Committee for Good Conduct: Complaints will be heard on Saturdays."

Beneath the notice were five names: Chairman Harimohan Mishra, Secretary Shashibhushan Jha, treasurer Ramvachan Sah, schoolteacher Devavrat Babu, and Kamla Kaki. All five were regarded as respected people in the village. It was not that they had no faults; respect merely meant that people spoke of their faults in lowered voices.

The reason for forming the committee was not very grand. Someone's goat would eat the flowers at the reading room, someone's sand would lie scattered in the lane, public chairs borrowed for a wedding would come back three days late, or a household drain would empty toward a neighbour's courtyard. Small matters led to quarrels every day. The village head said it was difficult to abandon all the panchayat's work to hear such things. So the committee was formed at the reading room.

Shashibhushan Jha devised the system. There would be a blue book of complaint slips. A slip would be torn out, but its small stub would remain attached to the book. The same serial number would be written on both. The complaint would go above, a brief subject below. The complaint slip would be dropped into a wooden box; the stub would remain in the book.

"This way no slip can ever disappear," Shashibhushan Jha said proudly.

Harimohan Mishra added, "And the committee will apply the same rule to everyone."

On the first Saturday eight slips came out of the box: dung in front of someone's doorway, music played late into the night, the rope from the public well taken home. The committee heard them all, summoned both sides, and wrote brief decisions in the register.

For three weeks the system worked so well that people began to enjoy filing complaints. Some weighed their words while filling out a slip; others made a point of remembering the serial number. As Ganesh, the reading-room attendant, tore off a slip, he would say, "Keep the number. Otherwise later you'll say the complaint was never born at all."

On the fourth Saturday, slip number 18 came out of the box. The complaint read: "Twelve chairs from the reading room went to the chairman's house. Four days have passed. Only six have returned."

Harimohan Mishra read the slip and took off his spectacles.

"This is not a complaint; it is an account of a household function," he said. "The chairs will come back."

Devavrat Babu said, "The chairman himself has taken responsibility. What purpose would a public discussion serve?"

Ramvachan Sah agreed. Instead of entering the slip in the main register, Shashibhushan Jha put it into a grey envelope. On the envelope was written: "Personal consultation."

The following week came number 23: "The secretary's son is building a house, and the sand has blocked half the lane."

Shashibhushan Jha cleared his throat. "It is a matter of two days. The work crew will come and remove it."

Taking the slip in his hand, Harimohan Mishra said, "Some inconvenience is inevitable while a house is being built. There is no need for a public ruling on this."

Number 23 also went into the grey envelope.

Number 29 concerned Ramvachan Sah. He had sent five sacks of paddy to the market on the public handcart but had not entered the cart's use in the register.

"The cart was standing empty," Ramvachan Sah said. "If a village thing cannot serve a villager, what use is it?"

Kamla Kaki smiled. "Quite right. It is hardly theft."

Number 29 went into the grey envelope.

Number 34 concerned Kamla Kaki's cow, which had been tied near the post by the public well and had turned the ground all around into mud.

Reading the slip, Kamla Kaki said, "The cow had gone there to drink water. Every living creature needs water."

Devavrat Babu said, "Where is the question of good conduct in this?"

Number 34 also went into the grey envelope.

Number 41 concerned Devavrat Babu. Two students from the school had gone to his house to carry old books to the reading room, but along with the books they had also carried bags of oil and salt. The person who filed the complaint asked whether it was proper to have schoolchildren carry household goods.

Devavrat Babu frowned. "The children helped of their own accord. I gave no order."

Harimohan Mishra said, "The bond between teacher and pupil cannot be measured in the language of complaints."

Number 41 went into the grey envelope.

Meanwhile the committee continued to hear other people's complaints in the usual way. If someone's sand remained in the lane for seven days, a date was fixed for its removal. If someone returned public chairs late, the name went into the register. If someone's cow made mud by the well, an order was given to put up a separate post. If someone sent a teenager on a private errand, that person was warned.

People in the village began to regard the committee as powerful.

Only the blue complaint-slip book in the hands of Ganesh the attendant told a slightly different story. On the attached stubs the serial numbers ran without a break - 1, 2, 3, 4... - but the main decision register had gaps here and there.

Ganesh had no particular concern with this. His job was to tear off the slips, give the secretary the key to the box, and sweep the veranda after the meeting. But at the end of the year, the task of preparing the reading room's statement of expenses and work fell to his nephew Niranjan. Niranjan was a college student and quick with figures.

On the first day Niranjan asked, "How many complaints in all?"

Shashibhushan Jha said, "Count the register."

There were fifty-two decisions in the register. The last serial number in the blue complaint-slip book was eighty-four.

Niranjan counted again. Fifty-two. Then eighty-four.

"Where did thirty-two slips go?" he asked.

Without looking up, Shashibhushan Jha said, "Some cancelled, some duplicates, some private."

"Where are the cancellation marks?"

Shashibhushan Jha looked at him over his spectacles. "You make the accounts. You are not a court."

Niranjan fell silent, but on the account sheet he left one line blank: "Complaints received: 84. Decision register: 52. Other: ____."

The following Saturday was the annual open meeting. Donors to the reading room, old members, the women's group, and students had all come. Harimohan Mishra read a brief account of the committee's successful year. "We heard every dispute peacefully, applied the same rules to all, and remained above personal animosity."

Then Niranjan read out the accounts. At the end he stopped at the blank line.

"Complaints received: eighty-four. Decisions: fifty-two. Other: thirty-two - I found no details."

There was a stir on the veranda.

Harimohan Mishra said, "Some matters may have been settled by consultation within the committee."

From the back, Phoolmati Kaki untied the knot in the end of her sari and took out a small blue stub. "Mine was number 23. About the sand in the lane. Was that settled?"

For a moment Shashibhushan Jha's face went still.

Phoolmati Kaki continued, "The sand stayed there until the third rain. My grandson slipped twice."

Ganesh quietly took the grey envelope from the cupboard and placed it on the table. A layer of dust lay on it.

Niranjan asked, "Is this the 'other'?"

No member answered at once.

Harimohan Mishra opened the envelope. The first slip was number 18 - the chairs. The second, 23 - the sand. The third, 29 - the handcart. Then 34 - the cow. Then 41 - the students. Among them were other slips involving the members' families and people close to them.

For the first time Kamla Kaki did not laugh. Looking at the slips, she said, "We kept dismissing one another's matters as 'small.'"

Ramvachan Sah immediately said, "They were all small matters."

Niranjan opened the main register and turned its pages. "At number 12 there is a decision ordering a separate post for Haricharan's cow. At number 34 Kamla Kaki's cow became 'personal.' At number 9 there is a warning for using the public handcart without making an entry. At number 29 Ramvachan Kaka's cart became 'village business.'"

No one on the veranda burst out laughing, but smiles appeared on many faces.

Holding his own slip, Devavrat Babu said quietly, "The comparison is fair."

Shashibhushan Jha said, "The committee wished to settle matters involving its members among ourselves first. There was no ill intent in it."

Phoolmati Kaki replied, "The intention may have been good. The sand was still in the lane."

This time the sentence drew laughter. Even Shashibhushan Jha smiled.

Harimohan Mishra looked at the slip about the chairs. "My six chairs?"

Ganesh said, "Two are still on your veranda."

"Not four?"

"Two had already been returned. Two still have slips with your granddaughter's name stuck on them."

Harimohan Mishra put his spectacles back on. "Then first write down that the chairs are to be returned."

Niranjan asked, "In the main register?"

For a few moments the chairman kept looking at the grey envelope. "Yes. In the main register."

After that, the thirty-two slips were read one by one. Not every complaint led to a penalty. Some complaints really were duplicates, some incomplete, some no more than personal friction. But now the reason was written in the register. When a slip concerned a committee member, that member did not decide it; the others and two invited villagers heard the matter.

On Ramvachan Sah's handcart slip it was written: "Next time the name will be entered." For Kamla Kaki's cow, a bamboo post would be set up ten cubits from the well. Devavrat Babu said he would no longer have students carry household goods. Shashibhushan Jha himself wrote down a date within three days for the sand to be removed.

In the matter of Harimohan Mishra's chairs, Ganesh was sent at once. Half an hour later he came back carrying two chairs on his head. On the back of one chair a piece of paper really was stuck: "Naina."

Kamla Kaki said, "So even a chair can have a private name?"

This time Harimohan Mishra laughed louder than anyone.

The meeting went on into the night. At the end, a new rule was written in the blue complaint-slip book: "Whoever a slip is against, that name will be entered in the register in the ordinary sequence. A member's slip will come neither first nor last; wherever its number falls, there it will stand."

"The 'personal consultation' envelope?" Ganesh asked.

Shashibhushan Jha folded the envelope and moved toward the wastebasket, then stopped.

"Don't throw it away," Niranjan said. "It is part of the reading room's history."

A new label was pasted on the envelope: "Slips omitted in the first year."

When the box was opened the following Saturday, there was only one slip. Number 85.

Shashibhushan Jha read it aloud: "The secretary's goat ate the reading room's new marigolds."

Every eye on the veranda turned toward him.

Out of habit he began, "The goat is a household matter..."

He stopped in the middle of the sentence. Harimohan Mishra uncapped his pen and pushed the main register toward him.

Shashibhushan Jha read the slip again, nodded, and wrote: "Number 85. Complaint received. The goat is private; the flowers are public."

Kamla Kaki asked, "The decision?"

Shashibhushan Jha said, "First I will pay for the flowers. Then I will shorten the goat's rope."

Niranjan made a small tick in the margin of the register. This time no grey envelope was opened.

Sacred Parking

This year the annual festival at Pipra Shiva Temple had become a subject of discussion in advance because of a new arrangement. Near the mango grove behind the temple, the committee had marked out eighteen car bays with lime. Down the middle it had left a footpath two cubits wide, two spaces on the left for elderly people, and an open strip on the right for bullock carts and handcarts.

Raghunandan Jha took full credit for the arrangement himself. For three days he had been going about with a chalk line, bamboo stakes, and signboards. A new board hung by the temple gate: "Sacred Parking." Beneath it, in smaller letters, was written: "Keep vehicles within the lines. Keep the footpath clear."

Raghunandan Jha was the committee secretary, but he generally introduced himself as "the man who looks after arrangements." He believed that most quarrels in a village arose from the absence of rules, and that if the rules were written clearly enough, people would become better of their own accord.

The main sermon at the festival that year was also on "self-restraint and the rights of others." Raghunandan Jha was delighted by the coincidence. He told all the volunteers, "The sermon is inside; its practice is outside. Even parking a vehicle is a test of character."

Niranjan, who was studying at college, smiled as he went over the lime lines once more. "Uncle, who will award the marks in this examination?"

Raghunandan Jha said, "The lines will."

Until eight in the morning, everything went well. The first four cars stood neatly inside their bays. Two motorcycles were placed separately behind a bamboo barrier. The two spaces reserved for elderly people remained empty. Every now and then Raghunandan Jha wiped the signboard and made its lettering shine.

At half past eight, his elder brother Harihar Jha arrived in a white car. It was not new, but it had been washed and polished until the mango leaves could be seen clearly reflected in it. Harihar Jha noticed a patch of shade near the gate and stopped the car squarely across half the footpath.

Niranjan came running. "Babuji, this path is supposed to be kept clear."

As he got out of the car, Harihar Jha said, "I'll go inside for ten minutes and then move it. The car will heat up in the sun."

Niranjan looked toward Raghunandan Jha.

Raghunandan Jha looked for a moment at the signboard, then at his brother. "All right, but make sure the wheels do not stand too far outside the line."

"And the path?" Niranjan asked.

"Ten minutes," Raghunandan Jha said. "Rules also require the intelligence to understand circumstances."

Ten minutes passed, and the car remained where it was. Harihar Jha had gone inside and become occupied with the temple's guest list. Then Mahendra Sah, a wealthy trader from the market, arrived. He stopped his car between two bays, occupying half of each.

Niranjan pointed out the lines to him. Mahendra Sah said, "I gave fifty thousand rupees for the bell. What if my car gets scratched?"

Raghunandan Jha wanted to make the rule clear here, but Mahendra Sah added first, "It is only a matter of two hours."

Raghunandan Jha said, "Straighten the car a little."

Mahendra Sah moved it half a cubit straighter. Both bays were still half blocked.

By nine o'clock, the number of "circumstances" had multiplied. A motorcycle appeared in one of the spaces reserved for the elderly on the ground that its rider was a guest of the priest. Two bicycles leaned against the edge of the footpath because the bhajan group needed somewhere to put down its dholak. Raghunandan Jha kept explaining one small exception after another.

Meanwhile, Binda Kaki arrived with three earthen water pots, two brass lotas, and a sack of sattu on a handcart. Serving drinking water at the festival had been her work for years. She had to take the handcart to the water stand behind the temple.

Near the gate, Harihar Jha's car blocked half the path. On the other side stood bicycles and a bamboo stake. The handcart could not get through.

Binda Kaki said, "Is this a footpath, or a resting platform for cars?"

Niranjan went inside to look for Harihar Jha. The sermon was about to begin. Harihar Jha was already seated in the front row. When asked to get up, he said, "The conch has sounded now. It would be improper to rise in the middle of the sermon."

Niranjan came back outside and told Raghunandan Jha.

In a low voice Raghunandan Jha said, "Kaki, unload two pots first. Then the cart will squeeze through along the side."

Binda Kaki looked at him. "I should lift three pots myself, when the sign says this footpath is to be kept clear?"

Before Raghunandan Jha could answer, a voice from inside came over the loudspeaker: "Make your own convenience smaller, and another person's path will grow wider."

The three people standing by the gate looked at one another. Nirnanjan could not suppress his smile.

In the end Binda Kaki unloaded the pots. Nirnanjan, two teenage girls, and a boy carried them inside. The handcart was left outside by a mango tree. Binda Kaki sat down at the water stand, sweat on her forehead and silence on her face.

Inside, the sermon went on—patience, humility, the rights of others, control over anger. Outside, the number of vehicles kept growing. Once the marked bays were full, people began finding new places according to their own ingenuity. One motorcycle was parked beside the water pots, another on the strip meant for unloading grain for the prasad, and a third directly outside the gate.

Raghunandan Jha tried to stop everyone, but his sentences now seemed to contain less rule than relationship: "He is Mukhiyaji's guest," "He is the priest's brother-in-law," "He has come from outside," "He is elderly," "He will be leaving soon."

Once Nirnanjan asked, "Uncle, who are the marked bays left for now?"

Raghunandan Jha said, "Don't make jokes. Manage the crowd."

At noon the sermon ended. People came out from inside. For the first five minutes everyone had to find his own shoes; for the next five, his own vehicle. After that, the main assembly began at the gate.

A bicycle was trapped behind Mahendra Sah's car. A handcart now stood in front of Harihar Jha's car, because Binda Kaki had dragged it back to take the empty pots home. The dholak player from the bhajan group was looking for his bicycle. One motorcycle owner was insisting that someone had twisted his rear-view mirror.

"My car will come out first," Mahendra Sah said. "I have other work."

Harihar Jha said, "My car is on the path. If this one comes out first, the way will open for everyone."

Nirnanjan said softly, "The way has been blocked since then."

Raghunandan Jha glared at him. "This is no time for argument. Put things in order."

"From what moment does the order begin?" Binda Kaki asked. "From when the path was blocked, or from when the sermon ended?"

A few people laughed. Raghunandan Jha did not.

He said loudly, "Everyone be patient. That is what we have just heard inside."

Mahendra Sah answered at once, "I have been patient. My car has been standing here for two hours."

The laughter grew louder at that. Mahendra Sah himself did not understand at first why everyone was laughing; then he too smiled.

Meanwhile, two young men from the temple kitchen wanted to carry a large cauldron of hot dal toward the community dining area. The strip on the right, which had been kept clear for exactly this purpose, was filled by one motorcycle and two bicycles. The young men lifted the cauldron and began trying to thread their way between the vehicles.

Binda Kaki stood up at once. "Not with a pot of hot dal between the vehicles. Open the way first."

Her voice was not very loud, but this time no one objected. Niranjana went looking for the owner of the motorcycle. The owner was sitting in the dining line. Waving from a distance, he called, "Just move it a little, will you?"

Niranjana asked for the key. The owner said, "The key is in my pocket."

Raghunandan Jha went to the line himself. He had to go inside and make people rise in the middle of their meal. Within five minutes, three vehicles had been moved. The cauldron passed through safely.

On his way back, Raghunandan Jha's eyes fell on the ground. The white lime of the footpath disappeared beneath Harihar Jha's car, but two thin muddy wheel tracks curved around it in a semicircle. They were the marks left by Binda Kaki's handcart when, unable to find a clear path, she had turned the cart around and left it outside.

Raghunandan Jha stood looking at those marks for a few moments. Just then the preacher, Shambhunath Babu, came out from inside. People moved toward him, wanting to praise the sermon, but seeing the crowd at the gate he merely asked, "Which vehicle is to be moved first here?"

No one asked him to repeat his sermon. Shambhunath Babu pointed toward Harihar Jha's car. "The one blocking the path goes first."

A little uncomfortable, Harihar Jha said, "The secretary gave me permission."

Every eye turned toward Raghunandan Jha.

At first Raghunandan Jha wanted to say, "For ten minutes." The words came to his lips, but he looked again at the semicircular tracks on the ground.

He said, "Yes, I gave permission. I was wrong to give it."

Niranjana was holding a small tin of lime. He said nothing.

Harihar Jha took out the key. "Then I'll move it."

The moment the car moved, the footpath opened. Binda Kaki pushed the empty handcart straight inside. It went through without turning, without unloading a single pot. Raghunandan Jha kept looking at the width of the path, as though measuring it for the first time.

After the midday meal, the committee sat again for five minutes. Mahendra Sah said that some respect ought to be shown for his donation of fifty thousand rupees for the bell.

Niranjan asked, "A separate parking space?"

Mahendra Sah said, "All I am saying is that the donor should be recognised."

Raghunandan Jha replied, "Your name is on the bell, not on the lines painted on the ground."

Mahendra Sah was silent at first, then said, "All right. But next time no one should lean a bicycle against my car."

"That rule applies to everyone," Raghunandan Jha said.

When the crowd thinned in the evening, Raghunandan Jha took down the signboard. The words "Sacred Parking" now seemed a little too grand to him. On the back of the board he painted new lettering: "Vehicle Parking. Keep the Footpath Clear."

Niranjan asked, "Why did you remove the word 'sacred'?"

Washing his brush, Raghunandan Jha said, "A vehicle is not sacred. It is enough for the path to remain clear."

The next day the new signboard hung by the gate. When Harihar Jha arrived, he left the shade of the mango tree and parked in the third bay. Mahendra Sah's car was not between two bays but inside a single one. The priest's guest kept his motorcycle away from the spaces reserved for the elderly.

Raghunandan Jha parked his own motorcycle farthest back of all. Niranjan smiled.

"What?" Raghunandan Jha asked.

"Nothing. I'm watching the arrangements."

Raghunandan Jha straightened the signboard. "An arrangement works only when the man who looks after it stays inside the lines first."

Niranjan said nothing. He simply joined a broken lime line on the footpath once more. This time, there was no wheel standing on it.

The Donation Photograph

When a new hand pump was installed in the southern hamlet of Belahi, the first discussion was not about the water but about the photograph. Mahendra Sah, who ran a cloth and hardware shop, had paid for the work in memory of his father, and for three days he had been saying that everything ought to look good on inauguration day.

The hand pump had been installed beside the village's old dirt road, a little way from the peepal tree. Until then, people from that hamlet had fetched water from an old well beside the pond half a kos away. The new hand pump was already working, but the earth around it was still raw and unpaved.

Mahendra Sah's chief concern was not the raw earth but the name plaque. On a metal plate gleaming like brass were the words: 'In memory of the late Badrinarayan Sah, by his son Mahendra Sah.' The plaque had been fixed to the lower part of the platform, directly in front of the hand pump.

Mahendra Sah had already told the photographer, Prabhakar, 'The plaque must be clearly visible, my face must be above it, and the water must come out in a stream. I want all three in the same photograph.'

Prabhakar asked, 'Which way will the water flow?'

Mahendra Sah replied, 'Down.'

Buchchi Devi, who was sitting nearby, heard him. She was past seventy, yet she still carried her own water pot. She said, 'The plaque is down there. Will the water flow over it or through it?'

Mahendra Sah laughed. 'Auntie, today is the inauguration. The drain will be built tomorrow.'

Buchchi Devi placed her palm over the mouth of her empty pot and said, 'If the water starts flowing today, why should the drain wait until tomorrow?'

Mahendra Sah answered the question by explaining the order of the inauguration. First, five families would stand by the hand pump with empty pots. Then he would cut the red ribbon. After that Buchchi Devi would fill the first pot. Third would come the group photograph. Only then could everyone else fill water.

Lalita Devi from the hamlet committee asked him, 'What if someone needs water before that?'

'It is a matter of ten minutes,' Mahendra Sah said. 'A deed of donation ought to leave behind a memory.'

Lalita Devi folded the list and put it away. She had no objection to ten minutes, but she was looking at the way water would collect beside the platform. Bhola, the mason who had tested the hand pump, had said twice the day before, 'Make an outlet, otherwise there will be mud here.'

The cost of drainage had not been included in the original work. Mahendra Sah had said that the hand pump should first be put into use; the rest could be seen to later.

By ten o'clock a cloth banner had been stretched between two branches of the peepal tree. It read: 'The Gift of Water: Service Above All.' Prabhakar set his camera on a tripod. Mahendra Sah wore a white kurta and polished shoes.

Buchchi Devi arrived in an ordinary blue sari. Her water pot was not new. Brass still shone at two spots around its rim; the rest had gone grey. Mahendra Sah said softly to Lalita Devi, 'Wipe Auntie's pot a little. It looks very old in the photograph.'

Buchchi Devi heard him. 'The pot has grown old carrying water. There is no need to make it look new today.'

Prabhakar lowered the eye of the camera, as though hiding a smile.

The inauguration began. Mahendra Sah cut the red ribbon. Two children clapped. Prabhakar took the first photograph. Then Mahendra Sah gripped the handle of the hand pump and worked it up and down three times.

The first stream was thin; then the water came out strongly. Buchchi Devi held her pot forward. Water fell into it, but what spilled outside followed the slope of the platform and began to run straight towards the name plaque.

Mahendra Sah said at once, 'Move the pot a little to the right!'

Buchchi Devi moved it to the right. The water flowed right as well, but curved around the edge of the platform and once again began collecting below the name plaque.

Prabhakar stepped back and changed his angle. 'The glint of water on the plaque is coming out nicely.'

'I don't want a glint. I want the letters clear,' Mahendra Sah said.

Buchchi Devi's pot filled. Behind her, four women stood with their own vessels. Taking the inauguration to be over, they stepped forward to fill water. Mahendra Sah raised a hand and said, 'One minute. The group photograph is still left.'

'My pot is full,' Buchchi Devi said. 'Now I am going home.'

'Just stand here. You are the first beneficiary.'

Buchchi Devi replied, 'Is the benefit in the pot or in the photograph?'

A light laugh rose from the people standing behind them. Mahendra Sah took it as a joke and smiled. 'In both.'

While everyone was being arranged in a line, water kept dripping from the hand pump. The earth in front of the platform began to turn dark. Two children tried to catch the water in an empty tin, but half went into the tin and half beneath their feet.

Prabhakar said, 'Move back a little. You're covering the plaque.'

Mahendra Sah took two steps back. His right shoe sank halfway into the soft earth. He pulled his foot out at once. A thick layer of mud clung to the side of the shoe.

'Wait,' he said. 'Clean this first.'

Lalita Devi brought an old sack. Mahendra Sah began rubbing his shoe clean. Meanwhile two women, who had left lentils cooking on their hearths at home, filled their water and went back.

'Why didn't you stop them?' Mahendra Sah asked.

Lalita Devi said, 'The water has started. The inauguration is over.'

'The photograph?'

'That is your business. The water is theirs.'

Mahendra Sah said nothing. Prabhakar began gathering everyone again. This time only three families remained instead of five. Buchchi Devi too set down her pot and came back, because she had developed an interest in watching the spectacle.

Prabhakar gave the signal. Mahendra Sah arranged a smile and took hold of the pump handle. At that very moment a boy named Chhotu came running along the platform with a lota full of water. His foot slipped in the mud.

Buchchi Devi caught him by the arm. Chhotu did not fall, but the water from the lota splashed over the lower part of Mahendra Sah's kurta. Prabhakar's finger was on the shutter at that very instant.

'Don't keep that one,' Mahendra Sah said immediately.

Prabhakar looked at the picture. 'Auntie is holding the child, you're holding the handle, and water is flying through the air. The photograph has life.'

'Look at the kurta.'

'The kurta has life too.'

This time the laughter was louder. Mahendra Sah did not laugh. His eyes went to Chhotu's feet. Mud had climbed to his ankles. Buchchi Devi lifted him onto the platform and washed his feet. The wash water ran back into the same mud.

Bhola, the mason, who had been watching everything from a distance, came forward. 'Babu, shall I build the drain now?'

Mahendra Sah said, 'Let the photograph be finished today. Build it tomorrow.'

Bhola pointed to the lower part of the platform. 'By tomorrow this earth will have softened even more. And the mouth of the drain will have to come out from here itself.'

'What do you mean, from here itself?'

Bhola placed his palm on the name plaque. 'This plaque will have to come off. The drain has to run exactly through this spot. The platform already slopes this way.'

For a moment the smile on Mahendra Sah's face stopped. 'The plaque was fixed only yesterday.'

'If the drain had been made first, the plaque would have gone on the right,' Bhola said. 'Now the water isn't going to ask where the name is written.'

Buchchi Devi said, 'Water isn't literate.'

Prabhakar did not take a photograph of that sentence. He lowered the camera.

Mahendra Sah looked at the flecks of mud on the lettering of the name plaque. For a moment he wanted to say that the drain should be made to curve around it. Bhola laid a cord on the ground and showed him. If the drain were curved, the water would have to climb two cubits uphill before coming down again.

'Water won't climb uphill,' Bhola said.

'I understand,' Mahendra Sah replied.

A little later the four screws around the brass-like plaque were opened. Mahendra Sah himself stood holding the plaque in his hands. Behind it, the new cement showed white. Prabhakar asked, 'A photograph now?'

'Not now,' Mahendra Sah said. 'The drain first.'

Bhola gave two boys the job of choosing bricks. Lalita Devi brought old broken roof tiles and pieces of brick. Buchchi Devi sent a spade from her house. Mahendra Sah sent someone to his shop for two sacks of sand and one sack of cement.

By midday a drain four cubits long had been made in front of the platform. At its end a small soak pit was dug and filled with pieces of brick, sand, and gravel. The name plaque was fixed higher up beside the right-hand post of the hand pump, where the stream of water could not touch it.

Mahendra Sah's white kurta was no longer white. There was a grey mark of cement on its sleeve and flecks of earth near the knee. Prabhakar asked twice whether he wanted to go home, change his clothes, and come back.

'People are filling water now,' Mahendra Sah said. 'Am I to stop everyone again?'

Prabhakar said, 'There is no need to stop them for a photograph.'

This time he stood a little way from the hand pump. Buchchi Devi was filling a second pot. Chhotu was watching the water disappear at the end of the drain. Lalita Devi was explaining the turn to the next household. Mahendra Sah stood to one side, not directly beneath the name plaque.

Prabhakar took three photographs. In one, the water ran along the drain in a thin, shining stream. In another, Buchchi Devi was working the handle. In the third, Mahendra Sah was folding an empty cement sack in his hands.

'In which one is my face clear?' Mahendra Sah asked.

Prabhakar showed him the third photograph. 'A little in this one.'

'The name plaque?'

'Half of it.'

Mahendra Sah looked at the first photograph. His face was at the edge, and the name plaque looked small, but the drain was clearly visible and two water pots stood beside the platform without sinking into mud.

'I am at the side in this photograph,' he said.

Lifting the water pot onto her head, Buchchi Devi said, 'The water is in the middle. That's right.'

Prabhakar smiled. This time Mahendra Sah laughed in reply.

Two days later two photographs hung on the wall of the shop. The first was small: Mahendra Sah cutting the red ribbon. The second was large: the hand pump, the drain, the water pots, the people, and Mahendra Sah at one side in his earth-stained kurta.

A customer looking at the large photograph asked, 'Which one is the donation photograph?'

Mahendra Sah first looked towards the photograph with the red ribbon. Then he looked towards the large one.

'The one from the day the work was completed,' he said.

The customer searched for the name plaque. 'The name looks very small.'

Opening his account book, Mahendra Sah said, 'Water doesn't read.'

The Great Renunciate

In Belwa village of Madhubani district, the room of the "Shared Seed Bank" stood behind the panchayat building. The room was small, but Jagdish Chaudhary kept its key tied into a knot of his sacred thread. He used to say, "The key to the seed is the key to the village's next harvest."

He had repeated this sentence so many times that even a new volunteer at the seed bank knew what would come next: "And what have I not given up for this seed bank!"

Then the list would begin. The first year he had skipped the agricultural fair. The second year he had reached a feast at his brother's in-laws' home half an hour late. Once he had lent his bullock cart to carry seed without charging any hire. Twice his midday meal had gone cold. And one rainy night, when the roof was leaking, instead of sleeping at home he had spent the night shifting sacks in the seed bank.

In Jagdish Chaudhary's telling, every incident was a "sacrifice." Even in jest he would say, "If an account were kept of my sacrifices, it would need a separate book."

He did, in fact, have a book. It was an old red-bound ledger, and on its first page, in thick letters, was written: "Shared Seed Bank: Expenditure and Service." Rupees went in the expenditure column, hours in the service column. But when recording service, Jagdish Chaudhary never wrote merely "three hours." He wrote: "Three hours, leaving my own work."

Manjari Devi, who kept the seed bank's accounts, understood what this language meant. From time to time she would say, "Uncle, just write the hours. Whether you left your own work or not, let the historian decide."

Jagdish Chaudhary would laugh. "A historian needs the whole story, daughter."

That year the seed bank's chief concern was an indigenous rice variety called Kanakjir. At the mere sound of its name, the village elders remembered the fragrance of rice from long ago, but it was difficult to grow. Seed was scarce, the yield moderate, and the newer market varieties matured quickly.

Five years earlier, Jagdish Chaudhary had begun multiplying Kanakjir again from two handfuls of seed kept in his father's bamboo chest. The first

year he planted one kaththa, the second three kaththas, then half a bigha. He had also given some seed to the village's shared bank.

This time, eighteen kilos of selected Kanakjir lay separately in his private storeroom. The grains were uniform in size, properly dried in the sun, and sealed with neem leaves in a large earthen jar. A red cloth was tied over the mouth of the jar.

For two months Jagdish Chaudhary had been thinking of sending a sample to the district agricultural fair for the "Best Preserved Indigenous Rice" category. The agricultural extension worker had said that if, in the next season, he planted a full half-bigha of pure Kanakjir, his name could be submitted for seed-purity testing.

Jagdish Chaudhary placed this not on his list of sacrifices but on his list of achievements. "This is my father's seed," he would say. "I will give it a name again."

In the first week of Ashadh, three days of proper rain fell. Preparations for transplanting began. Different rice seeds were issued from the shared bank. Manjari Devi wrote down the names in the register, weighed the seed, and marked each sack.

On the fourth night, torrential rain swept in from the north. It did not last very long, but a small channel of the Kamla River rose suddenly. Water entered the courtyards of several houses in the lower hamlet. The worst losses were in the rooms where farmers had kept rice seed soaking for transplanting.

When the water receded, it became clear that the seed of nine families had been ruined. Some sacks had been soaked through; in other homes the swollen seed had been swept away with the mud. If transplanting was delayed, the fields would remain empty; if fresh seed was to be gathered, it was needed within two or three days.

At dawn the room of the shared seed bank was opened. Manjari Devi counted what remained: there was not enough ordinary rice seed. The stock left in the bank would not even cover half the fields of seven families.

Jagdish Chaudhary said at once, "Order it from the market."

Manjari Devi asked, "From where?"

"It will be available in Jhanyharpur."

Arun, the agricultural extension worker, who was there at the time, shook his head. "Seed for transplanting is scarce in the market now. Hybrid seed may be available, but for the present stage of these fields and this water, it may already be late."

Jagdish Chaudhary said, "Then Sakri?"

"Even bringing it from Sakri will take two days. Then it has to be soaked, sprouted, and only after that transplanted. Time is slipping away from the people with the low-lying fields."

In the empty margin of the register, Manjari Devi added up the figures. "We need seventeen kilos in all. With a little less, each family could at least transplant half its field."

For a few moments the room was silent. Outside, wet sacks were being spread in the sun. Arun's eyes were on the register, not on Jagdish Chaudhary. But Jagdish Chaudhary understood what the next thought would be.

He said it himself. "Do not look towards my Kanakjir. That is not property of the shared seed bank."

Manjari Devi said evenly, "No one said it was shared property."

"Then?"

"I am adding up the figures."

Jagdish Chaudhary picked up the red ledger. "For all these years I have given private seed to the shared bank. Eight kilos last time. Five kilos before that. These eighteen kilos are my foundation seed for next year."

Arun said, "That is true. It is your private seed."

Jagdish Chaudhary found the agreement slightly uncomfortable. Had there been opposition, he would have laid out his reasons one by one. Once everyone agreed with him, those reasons remained in his hands like papers for which there was no use.

Rampyari Devi came from the lower hamlet. A wet gamchha lay over her head. Standing at the door of the seed bank, she asked, "Has any solution been found?"

Manjari Devi said, "We are still counting."

Rampyari Devi bowed to Jagdish Chaudhary. "Whatever you all decide, we will do. It is hard to leave the field empty."

Jagdish Chaudhary asked, "How much seed did you lose?"

"Three kilos. My daughter went to lift the sack higher in the night, but by then the water was up to her knees."

"Ordinary rice seed will be brought," Jagdish Chaudhary said.

Rampyari Devi nodded. "Whatever can be found. I have no craving for the name. Let the field survive." She turned and left.

"No craving for the name" was an ordinary sentence. Yet in Jagdish Chaudhary's mind appeared the jar tied with red cloth. That jar had a name, a history, and the possibility of the agricultural fair.

By noon, two cyclists had returned after visiting three nearby villages. One farmer had five kilos of seed, another two, but everyone had kept it for his own transplanting. One farmer agreed to spare a single kilo.

At the evening meeting, all nine families came. No one came to make a demand; each came only to state the extent of the loss. The rule of the shared seed bank was that in a disaster, whatever was available would be divided equally.

As he opened the meeting, Jagdish Chaudhary told one of his old stories. "This seed bank was made for days like this. When I first gave the room, the family asked where we would keep our grain. But I said: the village's work comes first."

Manjari Devi sat with the ledger open. Her eyes rose for a moment, then lowered again.

Jagdish Chaudhary continued, "I have never been attached to my private comfort."

The elderly Naresh Mahato, sitting in the meeting, asked, "Then what is the remedy now?"

Jagdish Chaudhary's sentence stopped there.

Arun said quietly, "There is one remedy, but the decision belongs to Chaudharyji. He has eighteen kilos of Kanakjir safely stored. It is private seed. The shared bank has no claim on it."

Everyone fell silent. For the first time Jagdish Chaudhary understood that silence too could become a question when no one actually asked one.

He said, "Kanakjir will not suit every field. It needs care."

Arun replied, "The soil in the lower hamlet suits it. If it is transplanted now, a crop is possible."

"And will the seed remain pure?"

"We will mark the borders of the separate fields. At harvest time, any family that wishes can return seed to the bank."

Naresh Mahato said, "Our people will plant whatever they receive. There is no pressure on Chaudharyji's seed."

Jagdish Chaudhary said at once, "Why speak of pressure?"

"There is no pressure," Naresh Mahato said. "That is why I said so."

Once again, agreement proved uncomfortable.

The meeting ended. No one asked for the Kanakjir. It was decided that people would be sent to the surrounding markets again the next morning.

After dinner that night, Jagdish Chaudhary opened his private storeroom. The jar tied with red cloth stood in a corner. He did not need to lift it; he merely placed his hand on the lid.

His wife Vimla came up behind him. "What are you looking at?"

"The seed."

"That much is obvious."

Jagdish Chaudhary said, "Everyone thinks I should distribute it."

Vimla asked, "Did everyone say so?"

"No one said it directly."

"Then how did you learn that everyone thinks so?"

Jagdish Chaudhary remained silent.

Vimla looked at the red knot on the jar. "You have been multiplying this seed for five years. Your heart is in it. If you do not give it, no one will call you a thief."

"This is not about being a thief."

"Then what is it about?"

Jagdish Chaudhary did not answer. He remembered his red ledger: three hours leaving my own work, one day leaving the fair, two sacks carried without hire. Every line now seemed very small beside the eighteen kilos in the jar.

Vimla said, "A sacrifice is written down when giving something up is difficult. What was lying useless and you gave away may count as service; whether it was a sacrifice, I do not know."

Jagdish Chaudhary said, a little annoyed, "Have you started keeping accounts too?"

Vimla laughed. "You taught me how."

The jar remained where it was that night.

At dawn, preparations began again to send out the bicycles. Manjari Devi had opened the register. Arun was repairing an old balance scale. Jagdish Chaudhary arrived as on any ordinary day, except that the key was no longer tied to his sacred thread.

Manjari Devi did not notice.

A little later, Vimla Devi came from behind. On her head was a bamboo basket, and in the basket was the jar tied with red cloth.

Jagdish Chaudhary stepped forward at once and lowered the jar. "Careful. The seal at the mouth has not been broken."

Manjari Devi understood. "All of it?"

Jagdish Chaudhary looked at the jar. "Weigh it first."

The seed was poured onto the scale. It came to a little more than eighteen kilos. Arun said, "If seventeen kilos are distributed, a little can still be saved. Keep enough for one kaththa."

The suggestion fell on Jagdish Chaudhary's ears like relief. One kaththa could preserve the variety; next year he could multiply it again. He wanted to say at once, "All right."

Just then Gudia, Rampyari Devi's daughter, arrived carrying two empty bags. She said, "Mother says that whatever falls short, we will leave half our field empty. We will not reduce anyone else's share."

Jagdish Chaudhary kept looking at the pan of the scale. Then he said, "Distribute the seed that remains as well. I will plant another rice variety in my field this year."

Arun asked, "The agricultural fair?"

Jagdish Chaudhary's hand rested for a moment on the red cloth. "The fair will be held next year too."

No one applauded. Manjari Devi simply began writing the weight beside each of the nine names in the register. Strangely, Jagdish Chaudhary liked that. The sentences he had prepared--his father's seed, five years of labour, the fair--did not need to be spoken.

The seed was distributed. It was agreed that after the harvest, any family whose crop did well would return some seed to the shared bank according to its means. No fixed burden was placed on anyone.

Jagdish Chaudhary looked into the empty jar. Only dried neem leaves remained inside. He folded the red cloth and put it into his pocket.

Manjari Devi pushed the red ledger towards him. "Write down today's service."

Jagdish Chaudhary picked up the pen. At the top of the page stood an old entry: "Rainy night: four hours, leaving my sleep." Below it was an empty space.

He wrote: "Kanakjir seed: 18 kilos 350 grams, distributed among nine families."

Manjari Devi asked, "You won't write 'leaving my own work'?"

Jagdish Chaudhary looked at her. Manjari Devi's face was serious, but laughter was held back in her eyes.

"No," he said. "The weight is enough."

Three weeks later, the fields of the lower hamlet were green. Kanakjir plants were a slightly different shade from ordinary rice, so the separate strips could be distinguished even from a distance. Jagdish Chaudhary had planted another market variety in his own field. For the first two days he looked towards that field with a sense of loss; from the third day onward, the pace of work occupied his attention.

At the end of Sawan, the agricultural extension worker came again. He asked, "No sample for the fair?"

Jagdish Chaudhary pointed towards the lower hamlet. "The sample is in nine fields now. If it is to be tested, go there."

At harvest time, the nine families returned Kanakjir seed in separate small bags. Some brought half a kilo, some one kilo; Rampyari Devi brought two kilos. The shared bank's jar filled again, but this time it did not go back to Jagdish Chaudhary's private storeroom.

Manjari Devi opened a new page and wrote: "Kanakjir: shared foundation seed."

Jagdish Chaudhary looked at the page. He ran a finger over the old red cover of the ledger, where the words "Expenditure and Service" were written.

Naresh Mahato asked with a laugh, "Chaudharyji, how much does the account of sacrifice come to this time?"

Jagdish Chaudhary almost gave his old answer--"My account is separate." But he stopped himself.

He opened the red ledger and showed the page. "Eighteen kilos three hundred and fifty grams. The rest is in the register."

Manjari Devi laughed and asked, "But that is the account of the seed."

Tying a new cloth over the mouth of the jar, Jagdish Chaudhary said, "Yes. For now, let that be enough."

Manjari Devi closed the register. Outside, rice from the nine fields was going to nine different homes, while in the shared jar the seed for the next season was gathering in one place.

The Truthful Merchant

In the old market of Madhubani town, Banshidhar Sah's shop was called "Mithila Cloth Emporium." Above the name, another line was painted in blue letters: "Whatever a thing is, that is what we shall call it."

Banshidhar Sah was prouder of that line than of the name of his shop. He used to say, "Prices may be higher or lower, but there should never be two versions of the truth."

The shop sold cloth, shawls, small panels of Mithila painting, bags, and coloured fabric for worship. Some articles were entirely handmade, some had been coloured by hand over printed outlines, and some were wholly machine-printed.

In Banshidhar Sah's own reckoning, he understood these distinctions, so they presented him with no difficulty. The difficulty began where the customer did not understand them.

At such moments Banshidhar Sah used a particular art of his own: he never said anything untrue, but neither did he answer a question that had not been asked.

For example, someone might ask, "Is this Mithila art?"

He would reply at once, "Certainly. Fish, lotus, sun, vines - all are motifs of Mithila."

If someone asked, "Is it handwork?"

He would say, "It has been coloured by hand."

Both statements were true, and Banshidhar Sah did not consider the empty space between those two statements to be a lie.

The shop's paper bags also bore a small stamp: "A Deal in Truth." Kamlesh, who had worked in the shop for five years, once asked with a laugh, "Master, does the stamp of truth go on the paper or on the goods?"

Banshidhar Sah said, "On both. But on the paper it can be seen."

In the first week of Bhadon, a new bundle arrived from Patna. The shawls were white, green, ochre, and pale yellow. Along the borders were paired fish, in the middle lotuses, and on the ends designs of the sun and moon. From a distance they looked very much like handwork.

Inside the bundle was a small slip from the supplier: "Printed outline; hand-coloured finish." Kamlesh read the slip and looked at Banshidhar Sah.

"Which section shall I put these in?"

Banshidhar Sah had made three sections. The first: "Entirely Handmade"; the second: "Hand-Finished"; the third: "Machine Print."

He had the new shawls placed in the second section.

Kamlesh opened one of the shawls and examined it. "The outlines are from a machine, the colour by hand?"

"Yes."

"Then should we write that on the label too?"

Banshidhar Sah said, "It says 'Hand-Finished.' Where is the lie?"

Kamlesh said nothing. He tied the label on.

Two days later, around noon, Pramod Jha came into the shop with his twelve-year-old daughter, Maitreyi. It was the tenth anniversary of his sister's wedding, and he wanted to send her a gift. He needed a shawl that looked beautiful but was not excessively expensive.

The moment Maitreyi entered the shop, she read the board above: "Whatever a thing is, that is what we shall call it."

She said to her father, "Babu, this looks like a shop where one has to sit an examination."

Pramod Jha laughed. "Look at the goods first. You can examine them later."

Banshidhar Sah laughed as well. He liked the child's remark. "I am ready for the examination. Questions are not forbidden in this shop."

Pramod Jha said, "I want Mithila work made by hand. My budget is not very large."

Banshidhar Sah took out two shawls from the first section. When Pramod Jha heard the prices, he fell a little silent.

Then Banshidhar Sah moved towards the second section. "Look at this. It has hand-applied colour, the motifs are beautiful, and the price is only a little more than half as much."

Maitreyi took a green shawl in her hands. The eye of the fish was round, and just to the left of it was a tiny black dot. She opened a second, yellow shawl. There too, beside the fish's eye, the same kind of dot appeared in exactly the same place.

She opened a third shawl. Again, the same dot.

Maitreyi asked, "Uncle, were all three shawls made by the same woman?"

Banshidhar Sah said, "They were worked on from the same design."

"What is her name?"

Banshidhar Sah paused for a moment. "The people who filled in the colours may be different. The supplier did not send their names."

Maitreyi looked again at the fish's eye. "This little dot is at exactly the same distance in all three. Does a hand never tremble?"

Pramod Jha looked at his daughter. "Do you learn all this at the art school?"

"Didi says hand-drawn lines may resemble one another, but they cannot be twins."

Banshidhar Sah tried to laugh. "Children look at things very closely."

Maitreyi turned the shawl over. In a few places the colour had bled through to the reverse, but the black outline was hardly visible there at all.

She asked, "Was the outline drawn by hand?"

The smile remained on Banshidhar Sah's face, but his answer came a little late. "The outline was printed first."

"And the colour?"

"The colour was filled in by hand."

"Then it is not entirely handmade?"

"I never said it was entirely handmade."

Maitreyi looked up at the board, then read the label on the shawl: "Hand-Finished."

"I did not understand what 'Hand-Finished' meant," she said. "Babu did not understand it either. You do. Then what does that line - 'Whatever a thing is, that is what we shall call it' - mean?"

Pramod Jha immediately stopped his daughter. "Speak properly."

"I am asking properly," Maitreyi said. "Uncle said he was ready for the examination."

There were two other people in the shop at that moment. For the first time, Banshidhar Sah felt that the board was not hanging high above him at all, but directly over his head.

He said, "Daughter, in business every detail cannot be written on a small label. Whoever asks, I tell them."

Maitreyi asked, "And whoever does not ask?"

"Whatever they hear from me will be true."

"But if they do not know the important thing, how will they know what question to ask?"

Before answering, Banshidhar Sah cleared his throat. "A buyer should understand a little for himself too."

Handing the shawl to her father, Maitreyi said, "Babu, I like this one. If the outline is printed and the colour filled in by hand, then it should say exactly that. I would still buy it."

Pramod Jha looked at his daughter. "What about the price?"

"The price later. First the name."

Kamlesh, who was folding cloth, lowered his face to hide a smile.

Banshidhar Sah did not like the smile. He untied the label, picked up a pen, crossed out "Hand-Finished," and wrote: "Machine-printed outline; colour filled in by hand."

The line he wrote was slightly wider than the slip of paper, so the final word dropped onto the line below.

Maitreyi read it. "Now I understand."

Pramod Jha asked the price. Banshidhar Sah quoted the same price as before. Pramod Jha bargained a little, got two hundred rupees knocked off, and bought the shawl.

The sale was complete, yet Banshidhar Sah felt nothing that resembled victory. To him it was an ordinary sale, but something remained lodged inside him.

Maitreyi took the paper bag. It bore the stamp: "A Deal in Truth." She ran a finger over the stamp and smiled, but said nothing.

That silence made Banshidhar Sah more uncomfortable than all the questions she had asked before.

After Pramod Jha and Maitreyi had left, Banshidhar Sah said to Kamlesh, "Children ask a great many questions these days."

Kamlesh replied, "There were not many questions. The label was too small."

Banshidhar Sah gave him a hard look. Kamlesh immediately began counting cloth.

A little later, a woman came in. She wanted a gift for her niece. Picking up a red shawl from the second section, she asked, "This is handmade, isn't it?"

Banshidhar Sah's old answer was ready on his tongue: "It has been coloured by hand."

He even began to say it - "It has been coloured by hand..." - but stopped halfway through the sentence.

The woman kept looking at his face.

Banshidhar Sah opened the shawl. "The outer outline is machine-printed. The colour inside has been filled in by hand. If you want something entirely hand-painted, it is in that other section; it will cost more."

The woman looked at two pieces. In the end she chose the one with the printed outline. "My niece will wear it every day. This will do perfectly."

Banshidhar Sah was surprised. Telling the whole truth had not lost him the sale. But then he felt ashamed of the surprise itself - as though he had been weighing the value of truth only on the scale of whether a sale survived it.

When the market grew quiet in the evening, he took down the labels from all three sections and laid them on the table. "Entirely Handmade" was

clear. "Machine Print" was clear too. The middle label, "Hand-Finished," suddenly seemed to him like smoke.

He read the supplier's original slip again: "Printed outline; hand-coloured finish."

Kamlesh asked, "Shall we change them all?"

"All of them."

"There will be a lot of labels to write."

"We will write them."

"It will take until tomorrow."

Banshidhar Sah said, "The old wording will also remain until tomorrow. That is why we shall write them today."

The two of them sat down. On the label for the first section they wrote in black letters: "Entirely hand-painted; artist's name included." Wherever a name was available, it was added to the back of each article.

On the second section: "Outline printed; colour filled in by hand."

On the third: "Entirely machine-printed."

The labels became longer, and the shop's display looked a little less elegant. For the first time, Banshidhar Sah liked that lack of elegance.

Then his eyes went to the board above: "Whatever a thing is, that is what we shall call it."

He pulled over a chair, climbed onto it, and took the board down. Kamlesh was startled. "Is this going too?"

"It is not going."

Banshidhar Sah fixed an empty strip beneath the board. After thinking for a long while, he wrote: "What you need to know before buying, we will tell you without waiting to be asked."

Kamlesh read it and said, "This line is longer than the first one."

"Truth does not have to fit into a short sentence."

Kamlesh did not laugh at that answer. He hung the board back up.

The first customer the next morning was a young man from Darbhanga. He wanted a Mithila-work shawl for his sister. He was in a hurry and said, "Show me handwork. I have a train to catch."

Banshidhar Sah reached towards a shawl in the second section. His old habit said: show the beautiful article first; if questions come, explain the details afterward.

His hand stopped halfway.

He opened an article from the first section. "This is entirely hand-painted; the artist's name is written on the back. It is expensive."

Then he opened one from the second. "Here the outline is printed and the colour filled in by hand. It costs less."

And then the third. "This is entirely printed. It is cheaper for everyday use."

The young man looked at all three, chose the second, and said, "Yes, this is exactly the kind I wanted."

As Banshidhar Sah made out the bill, he raised his eyes. The letters on the new strip had not yet dried completely; at one spot a tiny gleam of wet ink remained.

On the bill he wrote the description of the article: "Outline printed, colour filled in by hand." Then he wrote the price.

A paper bag lay beside the table. Its old stamp still said: "A Deal in Truth."

Banshidhar Sah picked up the bag, looked at the stamp for a moment, and this time felt no need either to cover it or to explain it.

A Receipt for Merit

Even after retiring from the cooperative store, Ramanand Chaudhary could not give up the habit of keeping accounts. The sacks of rice, tins of oil, and credit ledgers had passed out of his hands, but a red-bound register had now taken their place on his table.

On the cover of the register, in his own handwriting, were the words: "Account of Merit."

The first time his wife Saroj saw it, she burst out laughing. "What new business is this?"

Pushing his spectacles higher on his nose, Ramanand said, "Keeping accounts of money is prudence; keeping accounts of good deeds is memory. People do good and then forget it."

Saroj said, "And what is lost if a good deed is forgotten?"

"Nothing is lost, but the account remains incomplete."

The register had five columns: date, deed, expenditure, witness, and merit-points.

Ramanand had also devised rules for awarding points. Helping an old person cross the road earned two points; taking medicine to a sick neighbour's house, five; lifting chairs at a wedding without being asked, three; and giving food to a poor family, anywhere from ten to fifty points according to the expense.

Saroj had once asked, "Who decided these points?"

"Experience."

"Whose experience?"

Ramanand thought for a moment and said, "Mine."

The family regarded the register as a game, but to Ramanand it was no game. At the end of every month he added up the points. At the end of the year he turned back through the old pages. If a deed had no witness's name beside it, he grew uneasy.

That was why he had small receipts printed. Each slip said, "Assistance received." Below it were spaces for name, date, and a signature or thumb impression.

When Saroj saw the bundle of receipts, she clutched her head. "People will be in distress, and you will take their thumb impressions?"

"Not a thumb impression. Proof."

"Proof for whom?"

"For the future."

"Whose future?"

Ramanand closed the register. "You find a joke in everything."

Behind Ramanand's house ran a narrow lane. Across it stood Basanti Devi's mud-and-brick house. Her husband had died long ago. She lived with her grandson Niranjan, who was in the eighth class.

Basanti Devi's courtyard lay low. Rainwater entered it in the monsoon, but an old drain along the side of the lane used to carry the water away towards the pond.

Two rooms at the front of Ramanand's house were rented out. After retirement he thought that if the veranda were extended a little, a third small shop could be made. A mason was called, and a brick platform was extended for seven cubits.

The old drain ran along the edge of that platform. The mason said, "Babu, the drain will narrow here."

Ramanand replied, "Put a pipe through it. The water will pass."

The pipe was laid, the platform built, and an advance for the third room was received as well. Ramanand entered no merit-points for this successful arrangement, because this was business.

The first two rains of Sawan passed without trouble. On the third night, clouds closed in. Until midnight, rain drummed in one unbroken note on thatch, tin, and leaves.

At dawn, Niranjan came and stood at Ramanand's gate. His feet were caked with mud.

"Grandfather, Grandmother is calling you."

Ramanand took an umbrella and went over. The water in Basanti Devi's courtyard was not knee-deep, but it reached the ankles. Paddy stored along one side of the room was soaked, two bedrolls were wet, and the earthen stove had softened and caved in.

Basanti Devi said nothing. She was lifting the soaked sacks to higher ground.

Ramanand sprang into action at once. He had two plastic sheets brought from his house, sent over a sack of rice, and asked two young men from the neighbourhood to spread the bedding out in the sun.

By noon, the water had receded.

A familiar warmth of satisfaction rose in Ramanand's heart. He returned home and opened the register.

He entered the date. In the deed column he wrote: "Food and sheet assistance to Basanti Devi during the rain emergency." He added up the

expense. In the witness column he wrote Nirnanjan's name. Beside merit-points he first wrote forty, then paused and changed it to fifty.

He filled out one of the receipt slips as well.

Saroj watched him. "Will you take her thumb impression now?"

"The water has gone down. What difficulty is there now?"

"There is this difficulty too--" Saroj stopped, then changed her words. "The difficulty is that her paddy is still wet."

Ramanand put the slip in his pocket.

In the evening he went to Basanti Devi's house. A piece of the plastic sheet had been tied over a leak in the roof. Nirnanjan had spread his wet books separately to dry.

Ramanand took out the slip. "This is only for my accounts. Put your thumb impression here."

Basanti Devi looked at the slip. "Does it say I owe you money?"

"No, no. Assistance. Nothing has to be returned."

"Then why the thumb impression?"

"I keep an account of what I do."

Basanti Devi looked at Nirnanjan. "I cannot read. You read it."

Nirnanjan read the slip. Then he asked, "Grandfather, will you also write where this water came from?"

Ramanand's hand stopped. "From the rain. Where else?"

"The water could not get out through the drain."

"That happens in the rains."

"It never happened like this before."

Ramanand folded the slip and put it back in his pocket. "Would children remember how the rains used to be?"

Nirnanjan said nothing. He led him to the mouth of the lane. In front of the pipe running beneath the new platform, leaves, plastic, and silt were jammed together. The mouth of the pipe sat half a level higher than the drain. Water from the lane had backed up there and turned towards Basanti Devi's courtyard.

Ramanand tried to clear the silt with a stick. A little water flowed out, then stopped again.

"This is the mason's mistake," he said.

Nirnanjan asked, "Whose platform is it?"

Ramanand looked at him. There was no taunt in the boy's voice. He was only asking a question.

The mason was called the next day. After examining the pipe, he said, "I told you then that the drain would become too narrow. The pipe does not have enough fall. It cannot carry a large volume of water all at once."

Ramanand frowned. "Then what is the remedy?"

"Restore the old width. This side of the platform will have to be broken."

"How much of it?"

The mason indicated a line seven cubits long. Half the wall of the new shop stood on that stretch.

Ramanand fell silent.

Gopal Mandal was to rent the new shop. Ramanand had already used Gopal's advance to replace the roof of his house. If the shop were demolished, the question of returning the advance would arise. Then there would be the separate cost of the platform and the wall.

Ramanand asked the mason, "What if we put in a wider pipe?"

"Its mouth needs to be lower. Without removing the bricks, the slope cannot be made."

"Can we turn it the other way?"

"The other way is Sharmaji's courtyard."

For the first time Ramanand understood that water takes no one's side; block one path, and it looks for another.

Even so, he could not bring himself to decide.

That afternoon he opened the register. The fifty merit-points seemed to gleam at him. It occurred to him that the number now looked slightly crooked.

In pencil, he wrote in the margin: "Drain under examination."

Saroj read it. "Who is examining it?"

"The mason."

"The mason has already told you."

"One mason's word is not final."

Saroj said nothing. She slid the bundle of receipts farther under the register.

The next day Ramanand brought a second mason. The second mason said the same thing: restore the old drain.

On the third day, Harinarayan Paswan, an elderly man who had long overseen the village's drainage work, was called. Leaning on his stick, he measured the lane, studied the slope, and traced the old line towards the pond.

"I dug this drain when I was a young man," he said. "The water used to run straight through here. That platform is sitting on its chest."

Ramanand did not like the word "chest." "Is this a government drain or a private one?"

Harinarayan laughed. "Water does not read government papers before it flows."

By evening the matter had spread through the neighbourhood. There was no quarrel, but people kept coming to look at the lane. One poked a stick

into the pipe, another recalled how wide the old drain had been, and another simply stared at the new wall.

Ramanand disliked this silence. An open accusation could be answered; silence was harder to answer.

He went to Basanti Devi again. "If you wish, I will also pay for the paddy that was spoiled."

Basanti Devi said, "We can settle the paddy later. Open the water's path first."

"But I am helping you."

"Thank you for the help. But it will rain again."

The word "thank you" gave Ramanand a little comfort, but the last sentence took that comfort away.

That night he sat for a long time with the register open. He turned back through the old pages.

At one place he had written: "Bamboo for Ramphal Kaka's roof--twenty points." He remembered that the bamboo had fallen while the boundary ridge of his field was being cut, and Ramphal Kaka had simply carried it away.

Elsewhere: "Examination fee for Dulari's son--thirty points." He remembered that Dulari had worked in his house for three months and had still not received half her wages; the examination fee had been paid out of that very money.

A third entry read: "Meal for labourer in the rain--ten points." The labourer had been building Ramanand's own wall.

Sweat appeared on Ramanand's forehead, although the night was cool.

For the first time he began to see his own debts beside the good deeds in the register.

At dawn, Nirnanjan was sweeping water out of the lane. There had been a light rain in the night, and the pipe had clogged again.

Ramanand called to him. "How much of your grandmother's paddy was soaked?"

"About one sack."

"I will pay for it."

Nirnanjan stopped sweeping. "Grandmother said: the drain first."

"If I open the drain, my shop will have to be broken."

The boy remained silent.

Ramanand himself added, "Gopal's advance will have to be returned too."

Nirnanjan was silent again.

"Do you think all this is easy?"

"No."

"Then?"

"I did not say anything."

That answer stung Ramanand more than he had expected. He needed an opponent for his argument; the boy refused to become one.

That afternoon Gopal Mandal was called. Ramanand told him everything. Gopal was disappointed at first, then asked, "So the shop will not be built?"

"Not in this form."

"And the advance I gave you?"

"You will get all of it back. I used the advance to replace the roof, so give me some time, but I will return the money."

Gopal was silent for a long while. "I will find another room. But when you break the wall, give me the bricks. One side at the back of my house is unfinished."

The words slipped out of Ramanand's mouth: "The price of the bricks--"

He stopped.

"Take them," he said.

The mason came. When the first hammer blow landed on the fresh plaster, Ramanand closed his eyes without meaning to. The platform had been built with his money, the plan had been his, and the pride in it had been his too.

A section of the wall came down. The bricks were stacked separately. The pipe was removed. Beneath it, the black earth of the old drain appeared.

Harinarayan Paswan stood there leaning on his stick. He said, "Now the path can be seen."

Ramanand did not answer him.

Within three days, the drain had been restored to its old width. A low barrier was built along the edge of the platform so that no one would fall in. The plan for the new shop was abandoned.

For those three days Ramanand did not open the register.

On the evening of the fourth day, dark clouds gathered again. Ramanand set a chair on the veranda and sat down. Saroj said, "You never used to be this eager to watch the rain."

Ramanand did not reply.

The rain grew heavy. The lane filled, then a stream rushed through the open mouth of the drain towards the pond. Spray reached the edge of Basanti Devi's courtyard, but no water collected there. Niranjan waved from the veranda.

Ramanand raised his hand without thinking.

That night he opened the register. He placed his pen on the line that carried the fifty merit-points. First he struck out "50." Then beside the deed he wrote: "Food and sheets--the beginning of compensation for damage."

Below it he made a new entry: "Old drain reopened; platform removed; Gopal's advance returned."

He left the merit-points column blank.

After a while, Niranjana's name came to mind for the witness column. The pen did not move.

He was about to close the register when Saroj asked, "Did you forget the points?"

Ramanand said, "This was not a matter for points."

"Then what kind of matter was it?"

He opened the register again. At the end of the deed he added two more words: "My debt."

Saroj read them and said nothing.

The bundle of receipts lay in a corner of the table. On the top slip, Basanti Devi's name had been filled in halfway; the space for the thumb impression was blank. Ramanand picked up the slip, looked at it for a while, and did not tear it up.

He placed the blank receipt between the pages of the register at the very place where the merit-points column had been left empty.

The next morning, the night's rain still ran as a thin stream through the drain. The receipt between the pages was dry paper; it bore no one's thumb impression, no one's thanks, and for the first time in Ramanand's accounts, that empty space seemed clearer than anything else.

The Respectable Family

For many years a framed notice had hung in the sitting room of Vinaykant Jha's house. Inside it were seven lines: Speak softly; do not interrupt; remember a guest's name; wait your turn at mealtimes; keep things in their proper place; say thank you; and never insult anyone.

Beneath the frame stood Vinaykant's old chair. Even after retiring from school, whenever he sat in it, the voice of a headmaster came out of him almost by itself.

"Civility is no grand thing," he would say again and again. "It is the sum of small acts of conduct."

His wife, Manorama Devi, had heard this sentence so many times that sometimes, before Vinaykant had finished half of it, she would complete the rest for him.

Their son Anshuman would laugh and say, "Father's eighth rule: read the seven rules every day."

Vinaykant would glare at him, but the smile would escape despite his efforts.

That year Vinaykant and Manorama were about to complete forty years of marriage. The family decided there would be a small gathering at home.

Everyone agreed on the word "small," but the guest list reached thirty-seven names.

Manorama said, "And you call this small?"

Vinaykant replied, "Where our own people are concerned, numbers are not counted."

Anshuman glanced quietly at Richa. Richa suppressed a laugh.

Their granddaughter Ira was given charge of making the name cards. Her handwriting was beautiful, and she liked cutting paper and giving it coloured borders.

Vinaykant gave special instructions. "Do not shorten anyone's name. 'Bablu' and 'Guddu' are household nicknames; the cards must carry full names. A person's name is a matter of respect."

Ira began copying the list into a blue notebook.

"Kaushalya Kaki -- full name?"

"Kaushalya Mishra," Manorama answered at once.

"Anant Mama?"

"Anantkumar Jha," Anshuman said.

"Mithilesh Dada?"

"Mithileshchandra Chaudhary. Do not drop the 'Chandra,'" Vinaykant added.

For two hours they discussed names, relationships, ages, and the order of seating. Of the thirty-seven people, Vinaykant remembered the full names of thirty-five. For the other two he pulled out old invitation cards and checked.

Ira finished the list and turned the page.

"There will be one more card."

Richa asked, "Who is left?"

Ira looked towards the kitchen. "Kaki."

For a few moments silence spread through the room.

Manorama spoke first. "Yes, make one for her too. If she is in the house, her name should be there."

Ira held her pen ready. "Full name?"

Manorama looked at Vinaykant.

Vinaykant looked at Anshuman.

Anshuman looked at Richa.

Richa put a hand to her forehead and tried to think. "I... I call her Kaki."

Ira said, "So do I. What is her name?"

Manorama said with some hesitation, "I think it may be Malti."

Anshuman said, "Malti was the woman who used to come before her."

"Then Shanti?"

"Shanti Mausi comes to sew clothes."

Vinaykant's brows tightened. "Didn't we call her Dulari's mother?"

Richa burst out laughing. "Dulari is her daughter. That still does not give us her name."

Ira left a blank line in the blue notebook.

Vinaykant raised his eyes towards the third rule in the frame: "Remember a guest's name."

"She isn't a guest," Anshuman said.

The sentence sounded wrong even to his own ears as soon as he had said it.

Trying to move the conversation on, Manorama said, "Look in the monthly accounts notebook. Richa writes it."

Richa brought a brown-bound notebook from the cupboard. They turned the pages one by one.

Rice, milk, vegetables, laundry, gas, puja supplies -- everything had a name.

On the line for monthly household work was written: "Kaki -- full month."

The next month: "Kaki -- two days' leave."

The month after that: "Kaki -- advance, five hundred."

In six years of notebooks, her name did not appear even once.

Ira asked, "You all pay her wages, but you don't write down her name?"

Richa closed the notebook. "We will from now on."

Vinaykant said, "First we must learn the name."

The list of thirty-seven names lay on the table. One blank line was more conspicuous than all the rest.

By noon, guessing the name had become a little game in the house. Manorama vaguely remembered something like 'Chandra.' Anshuman thought it might be 'Kamla.' Richa said she had once seen something on a bank slip, but could not remember it.

Ira put a question mark beside every guess.

"Such a respectable family," she said with a smile, "and four opinions about one name."

Vinaykant said, "No mockery. We have understood the mistake. That is enough."

Just then the courtyard gate opened.

Carrying a basket of greens at her hip and an old cloth bag in one hand, the woman entered whom the five members of the household called in five different ways.

Manorama called out, "Kaki, come here."

Ira pressed her lips together.

The woman stood at the threshold of the sitting room. "What happened?"

Vinaykant sat up straight in his chair. The question was so simple that its very formality struck him as strange.

"What is your full name?"

The woman looked first at Ira and then at the name cards spread across the table.

"Today? After all these years?"

Manorama laughed in embarrassment. "We are making name cards."

"Chandrakala Mandal."

Ira wrote at once: Chandrakala Mandal.

Vinaykant repeated it. "Chandrakala Mandal."

Chandrakala said, "I told you on the very first day."

Vinaykant fell silent.

"Then you said, 'Fine, we'll call you Kaki.' I thought the matter of my name had been settled there and then."

Anshuman pretended to cough. Richa began straightening the cards on the table.

Ira asked, "Do you know all our full names?"

Chandrakala set the basket down. "Why wouldn't I?"

One by one she recited them: "Vinaykant Jha, Manorama Devi, Anshuman Jha, Richa Jha, Ira Jha."

Anshuman laughed and asked, "In my 'Anshuman,' is the 'sh' written with sha or ṣa?"

"Sha. I have carried your medicine prescriptions, insurance papers, and post inside so many times."

Vinaykant's eyes went once more to the framed rules.

Chandrakala picked up the basket. "Shall I wash the greens now?"

Manorama said, "Yes, Chandrakala Devi."

Chandrakala stopped at the threshold and laughed. "It is good that you know my name now, but you do not have to say 'Devi' five times in a single breath."

Ira burst into laughter. Even Vinaykant could not suppress a smile.

From that day, a few awkward changes began in the house. Manorama would pause before saying "Kaki" and then say "Chandrakala." Twice Richa slipped and called her "Chandra," then corrected herself.

One day Anshuman called from a distance, "Hey, listen," and Ira shouted from the sitting room, "Eighth rule!"

"Which eighth rule?"

"Now that you know someone's name, call them by it."

Vinaykant took Ira's side. "That is a good rule."

From the veranda Chandrakala called back, "Make fewer rules. Remember more."

Five days before the gathering Chandrakala told Richa, "That day I can stay only until twelve. At one there is a parents' meeting at my grandson's school."

Richa was measuring flour. "Yes, all right."

Chandrakala said again, "The meal is at one, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I'll see to it."

The matter ended there.

On the night before the gathering, the sitting room was full of coloured name cards. Ira was arranging them not alphabetically but in seating order. Chandrakala's card was placed beside Manorama's.

When Manorama saw it, she asked, "Why is this here?"

Ira said, "There are name cards for everyone."

Manorama replied, "But she'll be serving."

Ira said nothing. She did not move the card.

The bustle began early in the morning: rugs in the courtyard, chairs on the veranda, three stoves in the kitchen, and a tray of flowers in the sitting room.

Chandrakala had arrived before time. She rolled balls of dough for the puris, arranged bowls of yoghurt, washed betel leaves, and, at Manorama's request, checked the salt twice.

Vinaykant welcomed each guest by name.

"Come in, Mithileshchandra Babu."

"Kaushalya Didi, your chair is here."

"Anantkumar, after such a long time."

There was satisfaction in his voice at the order he had created.

At half past eleven Ira showed Chandrakala her name card near the kitchen door. "Your seat is ready."

Chandrakala laughed. "If I sit down, who will take out the puris?"

"I will."

"You'll be tired after taking out two puris."

"Try me."

At twelve Chandrakala washed her hands, picked up her cloth bag, and went to Richa. "I'm leaving."

Richa was startled. "Now? Serving is just about to begin."

Chandrakala looked at her. "I told you five days ago."

Richa was holding the serving spoon. The conversation came back to her.

"Yes... you did say so. But I thought perhaps a little later --"

"The school meeting is at one. My grandson said, 'Nani, if you don't come, I'll have to sit there alone.'"

Manorama too came over. "On a day like today, couldn't you stay a little longer..."

Before she could finish, Ira said, "Dadi, you remembered her name but forgot what she told you?"

Manorama glared at Ira but did not answer.

From a distance Vinaykant understood that something was happening and came over. Richa explained quietly.

He asked Chandrakala, "When will you be back?"

"Not today. After the meeting I am going to my daughter's."

"All right."

Manorama looked at him. "Then who will serve?"

Rolling up the sleeves of his kurta, Vinaykant said, "Whoever has a free pair of hands."

Ira immediately picked up two plates. Anshuman was called in. Richa took charge of the kitchen.

Chandrakala had reached the gate when Vinaykant called out, "Chandrakala!"

She turned.

"What is your grandson's name?"

Chandrakala smiled a little. "Nishant."

"I hope the meeting goes well."

"It will."

She left.

Once the meal began, the household's well-mannered order was thoroughly tested during the first half hour. Anshuman spilled dal into one guest's plate. Twice Ira had to run when the puris ran short. With a water lota in one hand and a bowl in the other, Vinaykant went on calling people by name until he forgot his own chair altogether.

Mithileshchandra Chaudhary laughed and asked, "Where has the serving squad gone today?"

The old answer came to Vinaykant's lips: "Our Kaki is on leave..."

He stopped.

"Chandrakala Mandal has gone to her grandson's school," he said. "Today it is our own hands that are being tested."

Mithileshchandra said, "So on your fortieth wedding anniversary you are learning self-reliance as well."

Laughter rose. The conversation moved on.

By late afternoon the meal was over. Ira began gathering the name cards from the table. A drop of yoghurt stained Kaushalya Mishra's card. Anantkumar's was bent. Vinaykant's had a splash of dal on it.

Chandrakala Mandal's card lay clean. No one had sat in her chair.

Ira put the card aside.

When Chandrakala came the next morning, the house was quiet like any ordinary day. Two chairs from the day before were still lying overturned on the veranda.

Manorama asked, "Did Nishant's meeting go well?"

"Yes. The teacher said he is doing well in his studies; his handwriting needs improvement."

Vinaykant came out of the sitting room. He had the brown accounts notebook in his hand.

"Chandrakala, one minute."

He opened the notebook and showed her the new line for the month's household work. The old lines all said "Kaki." The new line was blank.

"Write your name yourself. I don't want to get the spelling wrong again."

Chandrakala took the pen and slowly wrote: "Chandrakala Mandal."

Vinaykant looked at the handwriting. "You write beautifully."

"I studied up to Class Five. I still haven't forgotten how to write my own name."

She handed the pen back.

Ira came running in from inside. In her hand was the clean name card from the day before.

"This is yours."

Chandrakala read the card. "You're giving it to me?"

"Yes."

"I'll show it to Nishant. He'll say, 'Nani's name has been written as beautifully as if it were printed.'"

She carefully slipped the card into her bag.

Ira put the other thirty-seven cards into a small wooden box that would stay in the cupboard until the next family gathering.

The brown accounts notebook remained open on the table. Through six years of entries, the same word appeared again and again: "Kaki." Beneath them, on the line for the new month, a full name appeared for the first time: "Chandrakala Mandal."

Vinaykant wrote the wage amount in the next box. Then for a few moments he kept looking at the empty space, as though even after writing down a name there was still a great deal left to ask.

The Preaching Traveller

At Laheriasarai bus stand, the morning sunlight had not yet fully settled. Steam from tea, bus exhaust, and the voices of travellers mingled with one another.

Shashibhushan Pathak stood a little apart from the crowd. In one hand he carried a cloth bag, under his arm an old umbrella, and in the upper pocket of his kurta a blue pen.

He was going to Madhubani.

As soon as the bus arrived, people surged toward the door all at once.

Shashibhushan raised a hand. "Let those getting off alight first. Those boarding can come after."

Two passengers stopped. Three ignored him and pushed ahead.

Shashibhushan raised his voice a little. "If we keep a queue, we'll save five minutes."

Ramlochan Sah, standing behind him, laughed. "Babuji, the bus will leave, but the queue will survive."

"It would only leave us behind if it ran on time," Shashibhushan replied.

The conductor stood by the door, fanning himself with his ticket book. "Come, come. There's room inside."

Shashibhushan said, "If there's room, people will board on their own. What's the need to shove them?"

The conductor looked him up and down. "You get in first, Babuji. Everyone else will improve behind you."

Inside the bus, Shashibhushan sat in one of the two seats by the window. He placed his bag on the other seat, then immediately picked it up and put it on his lap.

Ramlochan came in and noticed. "So the rule has already been applied to yourself first?"

"A rule begins with oneself," Shashibhushan said.

Ramlochan sat in the adjoining seat. In his hand was a small bundle tied in cloth.

The bus kept filling. An elderly woman set her bamboo basket beside the aisle.

Shashibhushan immediately said, "Mother, if the basket stays here, someone may trip over it."

The old woman said, "If I put it down below, the greens inside will get crushed."

"Then keep it to the side under the seat. The aisle should remain clear."

Ramlochan said softly, "Did you board the bus, or have you come to run it?"

Shashibhushan suppressed a smile. "If people do their own part properly, no one gets the chance to tell them what to do."

The engine roared. The conductor slapped the side by the door to signal the driver.

"Tickets first," Shashibhushan said. "Once the bus starts, people will stand up to take out money, then there'll be pushing and shoving."

The conductor raised his ticket book. "I'll begin with you."

"One for Madhubani."

Shashibhushan had already kept the exact fare separate. The conductor counted the money and tore off a ticket.

Shashibhushan checked the printed number, checked the date, then folded the ticket twice and tucked it into the upper pocket of his kurta behind the blue pen.

"See?" he said to Ramlochan. "Keep the ticket safe until the journey ends. It may seem a small thing, but it prevents disputes."

Ramlochan shoved his ticket into the lower pocket of his kurta. "I don't know so much procedure."

The bus set off.

At the first bend, a young man got up and tried to make his way toward the driver.

Shashibhushan said, "Don't move back and forth while the bus is in motion. What do you need?"

The young man said, "The window glass is stuck. I wanted to tell the conductor."

"Tell him from where you're sitting."

The young man stared at Shashibhushan for a moment, then called out, "Brother, the window won't slide."

From a distance the conductor replied, "I'll look at it at the next stop."

Satisfied, Shashibhushan leaned back against his seat.

A little farther on, loud music rose from the back of the bus. Two young men were listening to songs on a small audio device.

Shashibhushan turned and said, "It isn't reasonable to assume that every passenger likes the same song."

One of the young men lowered the volume a little. "Now?"

"Still too loud."

The volume went down further.

Looking out of the window, Ramlochan said, "By the time we reach Madhubani, you'll have turned the bus into a meditation room."

"What's wrong with peace?"

"Nothing. But this is a bus."

Shashibhushan did not answer.

Before Sakri, a stretch of road was broken up. The bus lurched forward. The old woman's basket slid out from under the seat and into the aisle again.

Shashibhushan bent down and picked it up. "I told you, keep it somewhere it won't slide."

The old woman held out her hands. "Give it to me. I'll keep it on my lap."

"It'll be heavy on your lap. Ramlochanji, move your bundle a little to the side."

Ramlochan lifted his bundle. Shashibhushan wedged the basket into the empty space between two seats and put Ramlochan's bundle up on the mesh luggage rack.

As he did so, his kurta brushed against the edge of the seat. The blue pen slipped slightly outward. He pushed it back into the pocket.

"Now the aisle is clear," he said.

The old woman silently checked her greens.

At Sakri Chowk the bus stopped. Three passengers got off and five boarded.

The moment Shashibhushan saw the crowd at the door, he called out again, "One at a time!"

The conductor laughed. "Babuji, I'll pay half your fare. You're doing half my job."

Laughter spread through the bus.

Shashibhushan said, "Make your jokes, but order is for everyone's convenience."

A newly boarded woman was carrying a bag of medicines. She was looking for an empty place by the window.

Ramlochan stood up. "You sit here."

The woman sat down. Ramlochan stood beside Shashibhushan's seat.

Shashibhushan said, "If you're standing, hold the rail. You could fall on a bend."

Ramlochan took hold of the rail. "The command has been obeyed."

Laughter broke out in the bus again.

A trace of displeasure crossed Shashibhushan's face, but he remained silent.

After Sakri the bus picked up speed. Fields, ponds, and small markets fell behind.

After a while, the conductor began checking everyone's tickets once more. He had received word that a transport inspection team was stationed ahead on the road.

"Keep your tickets in hand," he called out.

Shashibhushan immediately looked at Ramlochan. "Heard that? That's why you keep the ticket safe until the journey ends."

He put his hand into his upper pocket.

The blue pen was there. The ticket was not.

He reached in again, running his fingers into every corner of the pocket.

Nothing.

Ramlochan watched carefully. "What happened?"

"Nothing."

Shashibhushan felt through his lower pocket. A handkerchief came out. A small key came out. No ticket.

He opened his bag. Inside were a tin of betel nut, two papers, a gamchha, and the invitation card he was to deliver in Madhubani.

No ticket.

The conductor reached him. "Show me your ticket."

Shashibhushan said, "One moment."

The conductor paused.

It seemed as though every eye in the bus had lifted toward him at once.

Ramlochan suppressed a cough and turned toward the window.

Shashibhushan emptied and searched the bag again. He looked under the seat.

"Your ticket?" the conductor asked.

"I had kept it."

"Where?"

"In this pocket."

The conductor looked at the blue pen. "The pen is there. The ticket isn't."

From the back, one of the young men said softly, "Lower the volume."

His friend burst out laughing.

Shashibhushan turned to look. The young man immediately sealed his lips.

The conductor said, "I gave you the ticket. I remember. You even checked the date."

Shashibhushan's ears grew hot. "Memory is one thing; proof is another."

"Then look for it."

Meanwhile the bus pulled over at the roadside. An inspector climbed aboard.

The conductor followed behind him with the ticket book in hand.

"Everyone show your ticket."

The inspection proceeded row by row.

Shashibhushan was still running his hand beneath the seat.

The old woman lifted her basket. "Look under here."

There were a few dry leaves, but no ticket.

Ramlochan took his bundle down from the luggage rack. "Could it have fallen here?"

"Why are you taking the bundle down? Let everything stay in its proper place," Shashibhushan said.

Ramlochan looked at him. "I'm looking for your ticket."

Shashibhushan fell silent.

The inspector reached him. "Ticket?"

Shashibhushan sat upright. "It's lost."

The bus went so quiet that the vibration of the engine could be clearly heard.

The inspector looked at the conductor.

The conductor said, "I gave him a ticket. He paid the exact fare. The number... the number will be in the book."

The inspector examined the counterfoil in the ticket book. "All right. Next."

Shashibhushan looked startled. "That's all?"

The inspector turned back. "The conductor confirms it. There's a counterfoil as well."

"But I don't have the ticket with me."

"It's lost. The fare was paid."

"What does the rule say?"

The inspector raised an eyebrow. "Do you want to read the rules, or do you want to reach Madhubani?"

A few passengers laughed.

Shashibhushan did not. "If showing the ticket is compulsory, then I ought to pay the fare again."

The conductor said, "Why? I remember you."

"A system cannot run on memory."

Ramlochan said softly, "And for the sake of the system, the bus is standing here."

Shashibhushan glared at him.

The woman with the medicine bag checked her watch. "I have an appointment for a test in Madhubani."

At that sentence, Shashibhushan's eyes moved to her.

The inspector said, "There is a counterfoil, the conductor recognizes you, and a fellow passenger saw it. In this situation, no second fare is due. Now let the bus move."

Shashibhushan looked uncertain. The strictness he was insisting on was now consuming other people's time.

The conductor signalled the driver. The bus moved again.

The inspector got off at the next stop.

For a few moments, no one said anything to Shashibhushan.

He closed his bag, put the handkerchief back inside, and put the key back. The blue pen went once more into the upper pocket.

Ramlochan lifted his bundle to put it back overhead.

A thin piece of paper was caught in the bundle's cord.

"What's this?" Ramlochan asked as he loosened the cord.

The moment he pulled the paper free, Shashibhushan's eyes fell on it.

The same colour, the same folds, the same printed number.

The ticket.

Ramlochan straightened it. "Madhubani."

From a distance the conductor shouted, "Found Babuji's official gazette?"

Laughter rose again.

Shashibhushan took the ticket. One corner had been bent where the cord had pressed against it.

He remembered: while moving the old woman's basket, he had put Ramlochan's bundle on the rack. That was when his kurta had rubbed against the edge of the seat.

The ticket must have slipped out of his pocket and become caught in the bundle's cord.

Ramlochan said, "Now you have both proof and memory."

Shashibhushan kept looking at the ticket.

The young man at the back switched on the audio device again, but the volume was very low.

Shashibhushan turned. The young man's finger rested on the volume dial, ready to turn it up.

Their eyes met.

The young man asked, "Is this much all right?"

After a moment Shashibhushan said, "As long as it reaches only your ears."

The young man smiled.

Ramlochan said, "So the meditation room is closed now?"

For the first time, Shashibhushan laughed openly. "Let a little air in."

The old woman noticed two green chillies falling from her basket. She began to bend down.

Shashibhushan bent down too, but this time the word "aisle" did not leave his mouth. He picked up the chillies and put them back in the basket.

The old woman said, "Thank you."

"It's nothing."

As they approached Madhubani, the road became crowded again. The conductor told those getting off to be ready in advance.

Shashibhushan placed his bag on his lap. This time he did not put the ticket in his upper pocket; he slipped it inside the bag between the folds of the invitation card.

Ramlochan noticed. "A new rule?"

Shashibhushan said, "No. Only that the old place proved unreliable."

The moment the bus stopped at the bus stand, people outside surged toward the door. The way out was blocked again for those trying to get off.

Shashibhushan's lips parted. The old sentence was ready: "Let those getting off alight first."

He did not say it.

He slung the bag over his shoulder and reached the door. A young man outside, trying to board, was carrying a heavy sack.

Shashibhushan did not shove him back. He simply turned his body sideways and made space for the old woman.

The old woman got off with her basket. The woman with the medicine bag came out as well. Ramlochan followed behind, steadying his bundle.

Then Shashibhushan got off.

The moment his feet touched the ground, the conductor called down from above, "Babuji, you still have the ticket, don't you?"

Shashibhushan patted his bag.

"I do."

The conductor laughed. "Then I can relax now."

Shashibhushan looked up. "You can relax. But if I lose it again, don't stop the bus on my account."

The conductor looked at him for a moment, then burst out laughing.

The bus moved on.

Shashibhushan remained standing by the roadside. Inside his bag, the ticket lay safe between the folds of the invitation card. Its bent corner had not straightened.

He made no further attempt to take it out and smooth it flat.

Pure Food

In Laheriasarai, Darbhanga, the kitchen in Shashidhar Jha's house stood apart from the other rooms. Above the doorway hung a small wooden plaque: "Pure Food, Peaceful Mind."

Shashidhar had made the plaque himself. The letters were painted red, with two green leaves drawn beneath them.

He would say, "The mind becomes what the body eats. If the food is pure, the thoughts will be pure as well."

At first, the people in the house agreed with this sentence. Later, they merely listened to it.

Shashidhar Jha had many rules about food. Which field the rice came from, how old the lentils were, which oil press the oil came from, how many days old the spices were—everything was recorded in a thick ledger.

The first page of the ledger had four columns—item, source, date brought in, last date for use.

A fifth column was added later: "Doubt."

Once he wrote "doubt" against an item, that item was never allowed into the kitchen again.

Malati, his wife, had initially been pleased with this system. It protected them from adulterated market goods, reduced stale food, and cut down on waste.

But gradually the rules moved beyond food and began to reach people.

"Don't touch the pickle jar with this ladle," Shashidhar would say.

"Wash your hands again before rinsing the rice."

"Don't put the leafy greens on that stool; the market bag was kept there yesterday."

Sometimes Malati would laugh and say, "These days your eyes are on the kitchen more than mine are."

Shashidhar would reply, "If one does not keep watch, purity can collapse in a single day."

His younger brother's daughter, Neelima, lived with them. She studied at a college in town and, after returning from class, often helped Malati in the kitchen.

Once, on a blank page at the back of the ledger, Neelima wrote in pencil: "Salt—one pinch; rules—twenty-seven pinches."

Malati saw it and smiled.

When Shashidhar discovered the line, he erased it.

"Food accounts are not a place for jokes," he said.

Neelima did not reply.

Shashidhar did not confine his concern for pure food to his own home. If neighbours asked his opinion about oil, ghee, rice, or spices, he advised them with great enthusiasm.

Quite often, people benefited from his advice.

That only strengthened his belief that his vigilance about food was not merely a habit but a kind of service.

He spoke of this service himself as well.

"People run after taste," he would say. "I look for the truth of the thing."

The coming Sunday, eight or ten old acquaintances were expected at his house for a meal.

Malati began preparing two days in advance.

Shashidhar opened the ledger and made a list—arwa rice, moong dal, pumpkin, pointed gourd, lemons, homemade curd, ghani-pressed oil.

"Sweets?" Malati asked.

"Nothing from outside."

"Then kheer?"

"The milk must be fresh from that morning."

"And if the morning milk arrives late?"

"Let it be late, but not old."

Malati folded the list.

On Saturday evening, a problem arose. The family in the village that supplied the moong dal sent word that, because of the rain, no vehicle had been able to leave. No one could say for certain whether the dal would arrive by Sunday morning.

Malati said, "The dal we have at home is only two weeks old. It is perfectly good."

Shashidhar looked at the ledger.

"Its source is not recorded."

"It came from my mother's home."

"The date?"

"I don't remember the exact day."

Shashidhar shook his head. "Then not for guests."

Neelima had been listening. She said, "Are the guests going to ask for the dal's horoscope?"

Shashidhar looked at her. "You are making light of it. Purity is not a light matter."

Neelima fell silent.

At five on Sunday morning, the rain began again.

The milk arrived on time, but the moong dal did not.

Shashidhar kept pacing up and down the veranda.

At half past six Malati said, "I'll make masoor dal now. Everything is being held up."

"When was the bag of masoor opened?"

"Four days ago."

"Who filled it?"

Malati stared at him.

"I did."

"I asked because there is a different knot at the mouth of the bag."

Malati picked up the bag and looked at it. "I opened it yesterday and tied it again."

"Then why didn't you say so before?"

"Because it is not a crime."

Shashidhar's voice hardened slightly. "In a kitchen, whether a lapse is small or large, a lapse is still a lapse."

Malati's hand went still on the bag.

She remained silent for a few moments, then said, "All right. You decide."

Neelima heard the exchange from inside and came out.

"Kaki, I'll cut the vegetables."

Shashidhar immediately said, "Wash your hands first. You touched the veranda railing."

Neelima went to wash her hands. When she returned, there was nothing on her face—neither a smile nor annoyance.

At twenty past seven, Kishor Sah arrived with the dal. His clothes were soaked by the rain, and the wheels of his bicycle were caked with mud.

"There was a lot of water on the road," he said. "That's why I'm late."

Shashidhar first examined the sack.

"It hasn't got wet, has it?"

"The outer sack is a little wet, but the bag inside is dry."

Shashidhar opened the bag, took out a handful of dal, smelled it, and bit two grains between his teeth.

"It's fine."

Kishor Sah breathed a sigh of relief.

"The money?" he asked softly.

Shashidhar said, "We'll settle the account after the meal."

"I need to pick up medicine from the market on my way back now."

"I'm not leaving the work for the guests midway to settle accounts."

Kishor Sah opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again.

Neelima was standing on the veranda. She went inside, brought her purse, and put the money into Kishor Sah's hand.

"Take this. Kaka will pay me back later."

Shashidhar's brows drew together.

"It is not proper to pay without settling the account."

Neelima said, "You have already inspected the dal. The account is about the price, not its purity."

Kishor Sah took the money and left quickly.

For a few moments Shashidhar kept looking at Neelima.

"Guests are coming today," he said. "This is not a day to prolong an argument."

Neelima replied, "I didn't prolong anything. I simply didn't hold a person back."

At the word "person," Shashidhar seemed about to say something, but Malati began washing the dal and the matter ended there.

By ten o'clock the kitchen was full of aromas. The kheer was simmering, the dal carried a light scent of ginger, and the pointed gourd was cooking over a low flame.

Every time before lifting a lid, Shashidhar would ask, "The ladle is clean, isn't it?"

The first two times Malati answered him. The third time she simply held up the ladle for him to see.

The guests began arriving around eleven.

With pride Shashidhar told everyone, "The source of every item in today's meal is recorded. Nothing has been prepared outside."

An elderly acquaintance laughed and said, "Are we here to eat or sit an examination?"

Everyone laughed. Shashidhar laughed too, but immediately added, "Let the food be examined, not your stomachs."

The meal was served.

Everyone praised the dal.

"The moong is excellent," one guest said.

Shashidhar immediately began explaining its source—which village it came from, which family's field it came from, and how many days earlier the dal had been milled.

Neelima silently went around filling glasses with water.

In the middle of the meal, one guest asked, "Malati Bhauji, how did you manage so much work all by yourself?"

Malati said, "Neelima was here, so it got done."

Shashidhar added, "If the system is clear from the beginning, the work is not difficult."

Malati looked at him for a moment, then moved on to the next row of guests.

The meal ended.

The guests left pleased.

Shashidhar opened the ledger and wrote on Sunday's page: "Moong dal: satisfactory. Milk: fresh. Oil: pure. Vegetables: fine."

Then he remembered that Neelima had paid Kishor Sah.

He called Neelima.

"How much did you give him?"

Neelima told him the amount.

Shashidhar noted it in the margin of the ledger, counted out the money, and handed it to her.

"From now on, don't make a payment without asking me," he said.

Neelima took the money but did not get up.

"Kaka, may I ask you something?"

"Ask."

"Was today's meal pure?"

Shashidhar's voice relaxed. "Certainly."

"The dal?"

"Very good."

"The milk?"

"Fresh."

"The oil?"

"Fine."

For a few moments Neelima kept looking at the ledger.

"Then everything went well today."

Shashidhar thought she was going to say something more, but she stood up.

"That's all?"

Neelima turned back and said, "Yes. There is no column in the ledger for the rest."

She walked away.

Shashidhar reached out to close the ledger, but the page did not fall shut at once like a lid.

He did not like the words "the rest."

He began going over the day again in his mind.

The rain. The dal. Malati's bag. Neelima's washed hands. Kishor Sah's rain-soaked clothes. The medicine.

First he remembered the smell of the dal, and then Kishor Sah's face.

He had not thanked him for bringing the dal on time.

Nor had he asked whom the medicine was for.

He had doubted the knot Malati had tied on the bag of masoor, yet not once had he spoken a word of trust about all the labour she had put in throughout the day.

Amid these thoughts Shashidhar tried to reassure himself: "The system is one thing; behaviour is another."

But as soon as the sentence was complete, it struck him that this was a defence, not an answer.

In the evening Malati was putting the kitchen in order.

Shashidhar went inside.

The stove had gone cold. Two bowls of kheer were left in one corner.

"This kheer?" he asked.

Malati said, "Neelima and I will eat it later."

"Why didn't you eat with the guests?"

Wringing out the cloth in her hands, Malati said, "There was no time."

"I could have told you."

"You didn't."

Shashidhar searched for an answer.

Malati added, "Your attention was on the food."

The sentence was ordinary, but it brought to Shashidhar's mind the ledger lying on the table.

He said, "Eat the kheer now."

Malati did not smile. "The kitchen still has to be washed."

For the first time Shashidhar looked around as though the room were not his own. Since morning, how many hands had worked here, how many times water had been carried, how many times someone had bent to lift a vessel—there was no column for any of it in the ledger.

Silently he went to the tap and filled a bucket.

Malati looked startled. "What are you doing?"

"I'll help with the washing."

"Leave it. I'll do it."

The old sentence rose to Shashidhar's tongue: "The utensils must be washed properly."

The words did not come out.

He only said, "It has already become very late."

For a while the two of them worked in silence.

That night Shashidhar opened the ledger again.

Four remarks were already written on Sunday's page—dal, milk, oil, vegetables.

He looked at the heading of the fifth column: "Doubt."

The word he had written there so long ago seemed, that night, to be looking back at him.

He picked up his pen.

At first he thought of writing: "Behaviour."

Then he stopped.

Adding a new column would not settle the matter.

At the bottom of the page he wrote only one line: "Kishor Sah's payment was delayed when it should have been made; the reason was my stubbornness."

Once written, the line looked ugly. The rest of the writing in the ledger was straight and neat; this line leaned slightly askew.

Shashidhar did not cross it out.

The next morning Kishor Sah was again on his way toward the market. Shashidhar saw him from the doorway and called out.

Kishor stopped his bicycle.

Shashidhar came outside.

"Did you get the medicine yesterday?"

Kishor said, "Yes, I did."

"Who was it for?"

"For my mother. She had a fever."

Shashidhar nodded.

"I held you up yesterday. That was not right."

Kishor Sah looked slightly taken aback. "Let it go, Babu. I got the money."

"Neelima gave you the money. The fault was mine."

Kishor said nothing.

Shashidhar added, "The dal was good. Thank you."

This time Kishor smiled. "Next time, if it doesn't rain, I'll bring it on time."

Shashidhar said, "If it rains, then bring it on the rain's timetable."

Kishor laughed.

Shashidhar laughed too.

Back home, he looked at the wooden plaque hanging above the kitchen door: "Pure Food, Peaceful Mind."

He did not take the plaque down.

He merely wiped away the dust that had gathered beneath it with a cloth.

Inside, Malati was washing rice.

Shashidhar stopped at the doorway and, before stepping in, asked, "Is there anything I can help with?"

Malati looked at him.

"How many rules today?"

Shashidhar smiled faintly.

“Rules for food are necessary; so are rules for how we speak.”

Malati did not reply. She placed an empty bowl in his hand.

“Put the washed rice in this.”

Shashidhar took the bowl.

He did not, as he once would have, begin inspecting its rim.

The Ceremony of Forgiveness

Near Sakri in Madhubani district there was a small dairy cooperative—"Sajha Dhar Dairy Cooperative." By five in the morning, brass and steel milk cans would begin clanking in the courtyard.

Saroja Devi had been supplying milk there for five years. There were three cows in her household, though only two were in milk at any one time.

She kept the milk accounts in a red-bound notebook. How many litres went on which day, how much money it came to, how much remained unpaid—everything was entered with the date.

The cooperative's secretary, Gaurishankar Mishra, took great pride in the fact that his centre "ran by the rules."

He often said, "In the milk trade, trust is the greatest capital."

The courtyard wall, too, bore the words: "Purity and Trust."

One Monday Saroja delivered her milk. Ramesh, an employee, took a sample, fastened a paper label around the vial, and wrote down its serial number.

The crowd was larger than usual that day. Two employees were absent. It had been raining since the night before, and everyone was in a hurry.

That afternoon, a boy from the cooperative reached Saroja's house.

He said, "From today your milk will not be accepted. The test showed too much water."

At first Saroja could not understand what he meant.

"My milk?"

"Yes. The secretary said the supply is to remain stopped until it is tested again."

Saroja looked at the milk can. The morning's milk had already gone; where was the evening's milk to go now?

She asked, "What was the serial number on the sample?"

The boy had brought no paper with him.

"I don't know."

Saroja opened her red notebook. She also copied into it the serial number written on the receipt each morning. That day she had written: 72.

That evening she went to the cooperative.

Gaurishankar Babu was seated at a table inside. Two members and the test papers were before him.

Saroja asked, "Show me my sample."

Gaurishankar said, "Don't worry. It will be tested again."

"Show me the vial."

"The vial has gone to the laboratory."

"The serial number?"

Gaurishankar looked at the paper.

"Twenty-seven."

Saroja held out her receipt.

"It says seventy-two here."

A brief silence fell over the room.

Ramesh was called in. He opened the old register. The entry for the sample, too, showed 72.

Gaurishankar looked again at the test sheet. It showed 27.

"This could be a copying error," he said.

Saroja asked, "Then why was my milk stopped?"

Gaurishankar's voice softened a little.

"As a precaution."

Saroja said, "Who will pay the price of that precaution?"

She had had to sell eight litres of the evening's milk to a sweet-maker at half price. The next morning she distributed five litres among neighbouring households.

The cooperative did not accept her milk through the following day.

Then the test was done. The retained second sample bearing number 72 was found to be normal.

Number 27 belonged to another supplier, but that supplier, too, was not held at fault; it emerged that rinse water may have been left in the bottle used to hold the sample.

A meeting of the cooperative was held.

Gaurishankar Babu proposed, "A public apology should be made to Saroja Devi."

No one opposed the proposal.

One member said, "This is necessary. People should see that the cooperative admits its mistake."

Another said, "The annual meeting is only two days away. We can apologise from the stage there."

Gaurishankar liked the proposal very much.

"Where dignity has been wounded, dignity should be restored."

Saroja was informed.

She said, "I don't need a stage. Correct what is written in the register, and add the payment for those two days."

The members of the cooperative explained that a public apology was a way of restoring her honour.

Saroja said again, "Why tell people who don't know anything about it?"

Gaurishankar laughed.

"The humiliation was public."

Saroja fell silent.

In truth, the accusation had been confined to a notice on the centre's wall for a single day. Thirty or thirty-five milk suppliers had seen it. Most people in the village knew nothing about it.

Because her milk had not gone to the centre for two days, Saroja had changed her routine. In the morning she first measured the milk, delivered some to two households, and set the rest as curd. Amid all this work, the worry kept returning: would the cooperative begin accepting her milk again or not?

On the third day, when the centre's boy told her that supply would resume the next morning, Saroja asked only, "Has the register been corrected?"

The boy said, "Secretaryji says everything will be done at the meeting."

Saroja understood that her milk would be accepted again, but the matter on paper was still unresolved.

Inside the cooperative, preparations for the event proceeded with a different kind of enthusiasm. Someone suggested that two lines be written on the notice board—"Previous notice withdrawn; error in sample serial number." But Gaurishankar said that this would not make the cooperative's responsibility sufficiently clear.

One member asked, "Does Saroja Devi want to come on stage?"

Gaurishankar replied, "Shyness is natural in a matter of honour."

After that sentence, no one felt it necessary to ask her wishes again.

Preparations for the annual meeting began.

A large cloth banner was hung at the gate: "Restoration of Trust and Public Apology Ceremony."

Below it, in smaller letters, was written: "Administrative error concerning suspicion of adulteration in Saroja Devi's milk."

When Saroja arrived on the day of the programme, she stopped at the gate.

She could read her own name from a distance.

Her sister-in-law Shyama was with her. Shyama said softly, "Was it necessary to write all this?"

Saroja did not answer.

Inside, chairs had been arranged. The stage had a green cloth, a loudspeaker, two flower vases, and a frame placed in the middle.

Inside the frame was a certificate.

Saroja went closer. She read: "On the occasion of being proved completely innocent of the charge of adulterating milk..."

She did not read the rest of the line.

Gaurishankar Babu was pleased.

"Look, we are restoring your honour."

Saroja asked, "Must the word 'accusation' remain on this paper?"

"How will the apology be understood without the context?"

The programme began.

First the cooperative's accounts of income and expenditure were read out. Then came an announcement about a veterinary camp. After that the secretary said over the loudspeaker, "And now, a special moral responsibility."

Saroja was seated in the third row.

Gaurishankar stood on the stage.

He explained in detail the date on which suspicion had fallen on Saroja's milk, how the supply had been stopped, how the serial numbers had been reversed in the testing, and how the cooperative regretted the error.

People who had known nothing about the matter before now began looking at Saroja.

Two women seated at the back asked each other, "What had happened?"

The other whispered, "Something about the milk."

Gaurishankar continued, "I wish to make it clear that Saroja Devi is not at fault."

Saroja's hand tightened around her red notebook.

The sentence brought her no relief. It seemed to her that the stage first placed her inside the circle of guilt and then announced that she was being taken out of it.

The master of ceremonies called her name.

Saroja rose.

There were only five or seven steps to the stage, but all those eyes made the distance feel longer.

Gaurishankar tried to place a flower garland on her.

Saroja folded her hands and said, "No garland."

He held out the certificate.

Saroja accepted it, because refusing the paper on the stage would only create another spectacle.

The young photographer said, "Hold the paper a little higher so the words can be seen."

Saroja did not raise it.

The young man said again, "Both of you, a little closer."

Gaurishankar came and stood beside Saroja.

Then someone at the back asked, "Is she the same milk woman?"

Saroja heard the question clearly.

Gaurishankar heard it too, but said into the loudspeaker, "This incident proves that our cooperative is transparent."

There was applause.

Before moving to the next item, the master of ceremonies said once more, "Saroja Devi will now continue supplying milk to the cooperative with full honour."

An elderly man seated at the back, who had known nothing about the incident before, asked his neighbour, "For how many days had her milk been stopped?"

The other man said, "How would I know? I heard about it only today."

Saroja understood that something which could have ended in two days was now being born anew in people's memories.

Saroja came down from the stage.

Shyama came to her side.

"Shall we go home?"

Saroja said, "First, the office."

In the office, Ramesh was putting away the register.

Saroja said, "Open the page from that day."

Ramesh opened the page.

In red ink it said: "Supply stopped—suspected adulteration."

Below it, a short line had been added in blue ink: "No fault found in testing."

Saroja looked at the page for a long time.

"This is not complete."

Ramesh asked, "What should I write?"

Saroja took out her receipt.

"Write: 'Error on the cooperative's side in recording the sample serial number; supplier not at fault.'"

Ramesh looked at Gaurishankar. He had come to the office doorway.

Gaurishankar looked slightly uncomfortable.

"So much detail in the register?"

Saroja said, "There was detail on the stage."

The room fell silent again.

Gaurishankar pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Write it," he told Ramesh.

Ramesh added the line.

Saroja said again, "And the loss from those two days?"

The accounts were checked. The cooperative's rules contained no clear provision for such an error.

Gaurishankar said, "I will put it before the meeting."

Saroja opened her red notebook. She had written down the quantity for those two days and the lower price she had received.

"Put it before the meeting. Keep this copy."

She handed him the paper.

Gaurishankar took it.

His apology on the stage had lasted five minutes. This conversation in the office lasted fifteen.

Outside, the programme had begun again. A speech about animal feed was coming over the loudspeaker.

Saroja began to fold the certificate, then stopped.

Shyama asked, "Will you keep it?"

Saroja said, "Not on the wall at home."

She placed the certificate on the office table.

Gaurishankar said, "This is your certificate of honour."

Saroja looked at him.

"My honour runs on the price of my milk, not on this paper."

She did not raise her voice.

Then she walked out.

At the gate she had to pass once more beneath the same banner. Some new people were now standing there, reading her name.

One young man asked his companion, "What was the matter?"

Before answering, the other young man looked at Saroja. He knew nothing about it, yet he had already begun to guess.

Saroja did not quicken her steps.

On the road Shyama said, "They apologised, but my heart still doesn't feel lighter."

Saroja kept her red notebook tucked under her arm.

"Because the apology was less for me and more for themselves."

Having said only that, she fell silent.

The next morning she arrived at the centre with her milk as before.

Ramesh was getting the scale ready.

Gaurishankar, too, had arrived early.

The banner at the gate had been taken down.

The cloth lay folded in one corner of the office.

The small notice from the previous day was no longer on the wall either.

Ramesh turned the register toward Saroja.

The line added the day before was clearly visible: "Error on the cooperative's side in recording the sample serial number; supplier not at fault."

Below it, the amount of the two-day loss had been entered as a provisional payment due.

Saroja read the page and signed it.

Gaurishankar stood a little distance away.

He said, "About yesterday's programme..."

Saroja did not interrupt him.

Gaurishankar could not finish the sentence.

Saroja placed the milk can on the scale.

Ramesh entered the quantity.

Until the day before, the nearby notice board had been filled with the name of the ceremony. Today it had been turned around and hung with its other side facing out.

On the blank reverse side, today's milk rate had been written in chalk.

Saroja read the rate once.

Today, her name was not on that board.

The Kindhearted Master

An old mango tree stood in front of Vachaspati Jha's house.

From the right side of the tree one could see the veranda, where Vachaspati Babu often sat in the evenings drinking tea.

Whenever someone came to that veranda for the first time, Vachaspati Babu made a point of telling them the history of the house.

Which room had been built how many years ago, at whose wedding the rear veranda had been extended, and after which flood a wall had been raised again—he knew it all by heart.

There was one thing he said with particular pride.

"In my house, even the people who work here are treated like members of the family."

After saying this, his voice would soften a little.

"Look at Sumitra. It has been fifteen years now. I gave her money for medicine when she was ill, a sari for her daughter's wedding, and at my grandson's naming ceremony she stayed beside us without even being asked. There is no distinction here between one's own and an outsider."

At such moments Sumitra was usually at work in the kitchen or the courtyard.

Whether she could hear him or not was something Vachaspati Babu never bothered to find out.

Sumitra was around fifty.

She came before daybreak and, after putting away the evening meal, sometimes stayed there for the night.

Her village had once been two kos from the house.

After river erosion, she had gone to live with her daughter in the neighbourhood behind the market.

Vachaspati Babu told everyone that the doors of his house were open to Sumitra day and night.

There was, however, one thing inside the house that visitors rarely saw.

Under the back staircase, between an old grain drum and two broken wooden cots, stood Sumitra's iron trunk.

Whenever she stayed the night, she spread a mat in that corner.

Vachaspati Babu's wife, Shailaja, did not regard this as an inconvenience.

"The house is full," she would say, "and Sumitra is one of our own. She fits in wherever there is room."

After one monsoon, a large crack appeared in a wall of the old house.

The mason said a fresh coat of plaster would not be enough.

The rear portion would have to be demolished and rebuilt.

Vachaspati Babu grew excited.

For years he had wanted to preserve the old appearance of the house while modernising its interior arrangement.

His niece Neelima took charge of the architectural design.

Neelima had returned after studying in Darbhanga and now worked in Madhubani.

On the first day she arrived with a measuring tape, blank sheets of paper, and a pencil.

Vachaspati Babu took her around and showed her every room.

"This is mine, this is Shailaja's prayer room, this one is for my son and daughter-in-law, and this is my grandson's study. Two rooms upstairs for guests. The veranda should be wide."

Neelima kept moving her pencil across the page.

"The kitchen?"

"Here. It should get plenty of light."

"Storage for rice and lentils?"

"Next to the kitchen."

"And Sumitra Kaki's room?"

Vachaspati Babu fell silent for a moment.

"Hers?"

Neelima looked up.

"She does sometimes stay here at night, doesn't she?"

"She does. But why would she need a separate room? She is family. She sleeps wherever it is convenient."

Neelima's pencil stopped on the paper.

"Then what about the corner she uses now, under the stairs?"

"That will become part of the storeroom."

"And the trunk?"

"That can go into the storeroom too."

At that moment Sumitra was crossing the courtyard, washing brass utensils as she went about her work.

Her step slowed for an instant, then returned to its usual pace.

Neelima asked again, "And if she stays the night?"

Vachaspati Babu laughed.

"Oh, the house will be so large. She can sleep anywhere. Do you count rooms for your own people?"

From a distance Shailaja called out, "There will be a small veranda outside the kitchen, won't there? It will have plenty of air too."

Neelima said nothing.

On the plan she drew a small rectangle and wrote above it: "Utility Room."

That evening Sumitra opened her trunk.

Inside were two saris, an old blanket, a photograph from her daughter's wedding, packets of medicine, and a small brass box.

She folded everything neatly and put it back.

Then she measured the length of the trunk with the span of her hand.

The demolition of the rear portion of the house was fixed for the following week.

The family temporarily rented a house in a nearby lane.

It had three rooms, a small kitchen, and a narrow veranda in front.

Vachaspati Babu said, "It is only for a few months. We will all manage."

The household belongings began to be moved.

Beds, trunks, the bookcase, prayer articles, the grandson's study table—everything was accounted for separately.

Sumitra's trunk remained under the staircase until the very end.

Two labourers asked, "Where is this going?"

Vachaspati Babu said, "Leave it for now. Sumitra will decide where to keep it."

Sumitra was standing a little distance away.

She said, "I'll take it with me."

"Where?" Shailaja asked.

"I've seen a room near my daughter's neighbourhood."

Vachaspati Babu was surprised.

"You mean you'll pay rent? You already stay here."

Sumitra looked at him.

"Where will I sleep at night in the new rented house?"

Vachaspati Babu answered at once, "There is a veranda beside the kitchen."

Sumitra shook her head.

"The utensils will be kept there after the evening meal."

"Then spread a mat inside. Think of it as your own home."

Sumitra said nothing more.

By evening her trunk had been loaded onto a handcart.

For the first time that day, Vachaspati Babu noticed that the trunk was heavier than he had expected.

"What have you packed in there to make it so heavy?"

Sumitra smiled.

"A little of this and that from fifteen years."

Life settled into a routine in the temporary house.

Sumitra still came in the mornings as before, but after clearing away the evening meal she went home.

Earlier, when guests stayed over, she would sometimes keep working until midnight.

Now, as soon as it was half past eight, she washed her hands.

"I'll be going."

For the first two days Shailaja was surprised.

"The milk pot hasn't been washed yet."

"I'll do it in the morning."

"But my grandson's friends are coming tomorrow."

"I'll come early in the morning."

One evening Vachaspati Babu said, "I don't understand this hurry to rent a room. You are one of the family."

Dusting the flour from her hands, Sumitra replied, "A member of the family knows beforehand where she will sleep at night."

She said it very softly.

Vachaspati Babu heard her, but did not reply.

Work on the house continued.

Neelima came from time to time to inspect the plan and the construction.

One day, while measuring the utility room, she asked, "Kaka, shall we put a window here?"

"What use is a window in a storeroom?"

"What if Sumitra Kaki ever stays here?"

Vachaspati Babu looked slightly uncomfortable.

"She has taken a separate room now. Her own choice."

Neelima drew a line with her pencil.

"Then shall I label it simply 'Storeroom'?"

"Yes."

That day Sumitra too came to see the new house.

The mason knew her.

He asked, "Kaki, which one is your room?"

Sumitra looked around.

In front of her, walls coated in white lime were rising.

To the right, the grandson's study had two windows.

Upstairs, a bathing space was being built into the guest room.

Behind the kitchen was a small storeroom with no window.

Sumitra said, "My room isn't here."

The mason could not tell whether she was joking or merely stating a fact.

He went back to his work.

Vachaspati Babu mentioned her answer to Shailaja.

"Sumitra has changed a little lately."

Shailaja said, "A person does not change after getting a room of her own. She simply begins to stand upright."

Vachaspati Babu looked at her.

Shailaja went back to cutting vegetables.

"So now you are on her side too?"

"What side is there to take? I am only saying that a place to spend the night and a lock on one's own belongings are two things quite separate from speeches about being family."

Vachaspati Babu got up and walked toward the veranda.

By the time the construction was finished, four months had passed.

The new house did not look very different from the old one, but inside everything was more open and filled with light.

Relatives gathered on the day of the housewarming ceremony.

Vachaspati Babu took pride in showing everyone the rooms.

"We have preserved the soul of the old house," he kept saying.

Sumitra had been at work since four in the morning.

Prasad, water, leaf plates, the kitchen—everything was under her supervision.

At one point Neelima, while showing the house to a friend, reached the back of the kitchen.

The storeroom door was open.

Inside were sacks of rice, tins of spices, two empty boxes, and the old wooden cot.

Neelima stood on the threshold for a moment.

Sumitra was passing that way carrying leaf plates.

Their eyes met.

Neither of them needed to say anything.

At the midday meal Vachaspati Babu introduced Sumitra to the guests.

"This is our Sumitra. Think of her as a member of the family. She has stood with us through every joy and sorrow in this house."

Everyone smiled.

Sumitra moved on, serving vegetables onto the leaf plates.

An elderly relative said, "Loyal people like her are a matter of good fortune."

Vachaspati Babu was pleased.

By evening the number of guests had thinned.

Shailaja was exhausted.

Neelima had gone home.

Sumitra put the kitchen in order, covered the leftover food, and wiped the water from beside the stove.

Then she picked up her bag.
 In the new sitting room, Vachaspati Babu was sorting out a bunch of keys.
 He said, "Stay here tonight. It is already so late. This is the new house—think of it as your own."
 Sumitra stopped.
 "Where?"
 Vachaspati Babu's hand froze over the keys.
 For a moment his eyes went toward the closed door behind the kitchen.
 The storeroom was full.
 Relatives in the guest rooms were preparing to sleep.
 In the grandson's room, his books, desk, and toys had all been arranged in their places.
 Vachaspati Babu said, "A bed can be laid out in the sitting room."
 Sumitra smiled.
 "No. It isn't too late yet."
 She put a hand into her bag.
 A small brass key came out.
 "This is the key to my room."
 Vachaspati Babu looked at his own bunch of keys.
 It held the keys to the main gate, the kitchen, the storeroom, the upstairs rooms, the cupboards—everything.
 He separated one key from the bunch and held it out to Sumitra.
 "Keep the spare key to the kitchen. After all, you are family."
 Sumitra took the key.
 Two keys lay in her palm—one for her work, the other for her own room.
 She looked at them for a while.
 Then she put the kitchen key into her bag and closed her fist around the key to her own room.
 "I'll be here in the morning," she said.
 She did not look back as she walked to the gate.
 Vachaspati Babu remained standing in the sitting room.
 On the wall in front of him, the plan of the new house had been set in a frame.
 His son's room, his grandson's study, the guest room, the prayer room, the kitchen, the storeroom—everything was clearly labelled.
 On the small rectangle marked as the storeroom, the faint trace of Neelima's first pencil line still seemed visible beneath the whitewash, like a memory.
 Vachaspati Babu stepped closer to look.
 A word that had once been written there had been erased.
 Only the last two letters of the word 'room' remained faintly visible.

The Poster of Truth

From early Monday morning, the tap-tap of hammer and nails could be heard along the veranda of the Kamalpur Block Office.

A new poster was being hung on the wall.

Across the top, in bold letters, it read: 'Public Funds, Public Accounts.'

Below it were five short lines.

State the budget head.

State the rate.

State the quantity.

State the authorization.

Show the full trail of the expenditure.

Shashinath Chaudhary stood in the veranda, looking at the poster from a distance.

He was the coordinator of Anti-Corruption Week.

For this work, he had spent three weeks running from branch to branch of the office.

Meetings, announcements, pledge forms, posters, leaflets—each had its own list in his notebook.

Shashinath was pleased with his preparations.

He had a favourite saying: 'The first rule of clean work is this—do everything in full view of everyone.'

Manjula Karn, the accounts assistant, had heard that sentence many times.

That morning she sat at her desk with the expenditure register open before her.

Shashinath came in.

'Manjulaji, have all the posters arrived?'

'Three hundred.'

'The leaflets?'

'One thousand.'

'Is the payment voucher ready?'

Manjula stopped writing.

'We need to talk about that again.'

Shashinath pulled up a chair and sat down.

‘What is it now?’

Manjula turned a page of the register towards him.

‘The funds under the awareness head have still not arrived.’

‘We knew that from the very first day.’

‘Then under which head are we to book this expenditure?’

Shashinath looked at the line.

‘There is money left under office maintenance.’

Manjula looked at him.

‘That head is meant for things like the roof, drains, doors and electrical connections.’

‘It is only a matter of two weeks. Once the funds arrive, we will regularize it.’

‘Prior approval is required.’

Shashinath laughed.

‘Are we to hold up the entire block’s work over three hundred posters?’

Manjula remained silent.

Shashinath leaned forward and said softly, ‘Not a single paisa is going towards anyone’s private benefit.’

‘I am not talking about benefit.’

‘Then what?’

‘The budget head.’

Shashinath closed the register.

‘A budget head is a box on paper; purpose is the soul of the work.’

Manjula opened the register again.

‘In accounts, no one looks for the soul. They look at the entry.’

Shashinath got up and left.

A second poster was being hung in the veranda.

He liked its white surface and bold lettering.

He had designed the format of the campaign as well.

The district office had sent only the theme.

The wording, the lines, the size, even the thickness of the paper—Shashinath had decided them all.

Nayan Mishra, the printer, had quoted his price on the first day.

The total cost was coming out slightly above the prescribed ceiling.

The moment that ceiling was crossed, three quotations and a separate approval would be required.

Shashinath had said, ‘There is no time.’

Nayan Mishra had asked, ‘Then shall I reduce the quantity?’

‘No. With fewer than three hundred, we will not reach every panchayat.’

‘Then the approval?’

Shashinath had thought for a moment.

Then he had said, 'Treat the posters and the leaflets as separate jobs.'
 Nayan Mishra had said nothing.
 The next day, two invoices arrived.
 One was for the posters.
 The other was for the leaflets.
 Together they came to exactly the same total amount.
 Manjula understood the moment she saw the invoices.
 'Why has this been split?'
 Shashinath had answered, 'The items are different.'
 'The printer is the same, the order is the same, the date is the same.'
 'The jobs are different.'
 That day Manjula had withheld the payment.
 And so, by Monday, Nayan Mishra's money was still stuck.
 Nayan Mishra had arrived early that morning.
 He stood in a corner of the veranda.
 Shashinath saw him and called him over.
 'Do not worry. We will get it released today.'
 Nayan Mishra folded his hands.
 'I bought the paper on credit.'
 'I understand.'
 'And I still have to pay the workers their wages.'
 Shashinath grew a little uncomfortable.
 'It will be done by noon.'
 Manjula could hear the conversation from inside.
 She said nothing.
 At ten o'clock, Anti-Corruption Week was inaugurated.
 Employees of the block, panchayat representatives and members of several local organizations gathered in the meeting hall.
 Standing before the dais, Shashinath said, 'Truth is not merely a speech; it is a process.'
 Manjula's eyes went involuntarily to the expenditure register.
 Shashinath continued, 'Where the accounts are clear, suspicion diminishes.'
 There was applause.
 The poster hanging on the veranda wall trembled slightly in the breeze.
 As soon as the inauguration ended, Kiran Jha arrived from the district accounts branch.
 Her visit had been scheduled in advance.
 She had not come to see Anti-Corruption Week; she had come for the quarterly audit.
 Shashinath was pleased.

'You have come on just the right day. You can see the campaign as well.'
 Kiran read the first poster in the veranda.
 'The language is good.'
 Shashinath smiled.
 'I drafted it.'
 Kiran read the fifth line again: 'Show the full trail of the expenditure.'
 She asked, 'How much did this printing cost?'
 Shashinath gave the amount in an easy tone.
 'Under which head?'
 It was a small question.
 For a moment, Shashinath looked towards Manjula.
 Manjula had already opened the register.
 Kiran sat down.
 She examined the entry.
 Then she asked for the invoices.
 The two invoices were placed before her.
 She checked the date on both.
 'The order letter?'
 Manjula took out the file.
 A single order listed both the posters and the leaflets.
 Kiran looked at the register again.
 'The maintenance head?'
 Shashinath said, 'The awareness funds are delayed. We could not change the campaign date.'
 Kiran asked, 'Approval to change the head?'
 'It would have been adjusted later.'
 'As of now?'
 'As of now, no.'
 Kiran picked up the second invoice.
 'Two invoices?'
 'The items are different.'
 'The order is one.'
 Shashinath fell silent.
 Kiran called Nayan Mishra in.
 'Did you receive separate orders?'
 Nayan Mishra looked towards Shashinath.
 Then he said, 'I received a single list.'
 'Then why two invoices?'
 Nayan Mishra's voice dropped.
 'I was told to make them separately.'

The chairs left from the inauguration were still arranged in straight rows in the meeting hall.

The pledge sheet hung on the wall.

Shashinath seemed to hear his own words again in his ears: 'Truth is not merely a speech; it is a process.'

He spoke at once. 'No one has gained anything privately from this.'

Kiran put down her pen.

'Did I write that there was private gain?'

'No.'

'Then?'

'The point is that the work is in the public interest.'

Kiran said, 'I will not comment on the purpose. I will record the trail of the expenditure.'

For the first time, Manjula looked directly at Shashinath.

Shashinath sat holding the arm of his chair.

The audit continued until noon.

Kiran recorded three points in the file.

The approved budget head was not available.

No prior approval had been obtained before spending from another head.

Expenditure under a single order had been shown through two invoices so as to remain below the prescribed ceiling.

Shashinath objected to the third line.

'Writing "so as to remain below the ceiling" is an inference.'

Kiran said, 'Then have the reason recorded.'

Shashinath pulled the paper towards himself.

He picked up a pen.

For a while, he stared at the blank space.

He could have written: 'The items were different.'

He had already said those words before.

But the order letter lay in front of him.

One list.

One day.

One printer.

He put the pen down.

'I have already stated the reason orally.'

Kiran turned the page back.

'Then the record will contain the facts available on file.'

Nayan Mishra was still waiting for his payment.

Because of the audit, the payment was held up again.

By evening, his impatience had grown.

He came to Manjula and asked, 'What mistake have I made?'

Manjula said, 'Your work is complete.'

'Then my money?'

'It is difficult to release it until the expenditure entry is corrected.'

Nayan Mishra looked at the poster on the wall.

'My job was to print these words. The rules belong to all of you.'

Manjula did not reply.

At the other end of the veranda, Shashinath heard the exchange.

He called Nayan Mishra over.

'How much do you owe on credit?'

Nayan Mishra told him the amount.

Shashinath did not reach for his pocket.

He merely nodded.

Paying from his own pocket would not solve the problem.

The problem lay in the public accounts.

The next morning, Shashinath was the first to reach the office.

The posters had curled slightly in the dampness of the dew.

He went into his room and wrote a one-page note for Manjula.

The first line read: 'Proposal for correction of the previous entry.'

On the second line he wrote the amount booked under the maintenance head.

On the third he wrote: 'Budget head used without prior approval.'

On the fourth, he recorded the matter of the two invoices.

He began to write the word 'inadvertently.'

His hand stopped.

The two invoices had not been made inadvertently.

He struck out the word.

Then he wrote: 'Although the order was one, the expenditure was presented through two invoices.'

Manjula arrived and read the page.

'Will you sign this?'

Shashinath said, 'I will.'

'Then the correction proposal will go to the district office.'

'Let it go.'

'And Nayan Mishra's payment?'

'Record whatever route the rules provide. His money should not remain blocked much longer.'

Manjula placed the paper in the file.

Shashinath signed it.

At noon, another small meeting was held.

It was nothing like the inauguration.

There was no decorated dais.

No pledge was read aloud.

The audit observations were read out to the branch heads.

Shashinath kept his remarks brief.

‘The expenditure entry for the campaign will be corrected.’

No one applauded.

Kiran had said that after the correction, the observation could be treated as closed, provided approval and payment were processed according to the rules.

Nayan Mishra received his payment three days later.

He took the money and went straight to the printing press.

The posters in the veranda remained where they were.

Shashinath did not ask for them to be taken down.

A week later, Manjula pasted a small sheet of paper beneath the first poster.

That sheet was not part of the campaign.

It was a certified copy of the corrective expenditure entry.

It listed the budget head, the amount, the original entry, the date of correction and the authorization number.

Shashinath came into the veranda and stopped.

The fifth line of the large poster above read: ‘Show the full trail of the expenditure.’

Directly beneath it, on the small sheet of paper, was the trail of expenditure for that very poster.

Two panchayat representatives stood reading the small sheet.

One of them asked, ‘Why has this paper been put up?’

Manjula said, ‘It is the account behind what the poster says.’

Shashinath said nothing.

He straightened one corner of the poster.

The wind was lifting one edge of the small sheet.

Shashinath took a pin from his pocket.

He fixed the loose edge with it.

Now the large poster and the small account sheet were both held firm on the same wall.

A Gentleman's Testimony

In the village, Bhaveshwar Mishra's name was invoked with a trust greater than any office could command.

He was a retired headmaster.

For years he had taught children at the school to write, to read, and to understand the meaning of what was said.

Whenever a witness's signature was needed on a document, people first looked toward his house.

Bhaveshwar did not take pride in this trust - at least, that was what he told himself.

He used to say, "Say what you saw. Keep silent about what you did not see."

Even his former pupils remembered that sentence.

In the last week of Sawan, it rained for three nights without a break.

By the fourth night, the water of the Kamala channel had eaten through the fields and reached the village's rear hamlet.

By dawn, water stood in many courtyards.

Some mud walls leaned; some tiled roofs came crashing down.

The school's high veranda became a temporary shelter.

Bhaveshwar had been there since evening.

He had helped spread mats.

All night, the cries of children, wet clothes, lantern smoke, and the slap of water continued together.

The eastern hamlet could not be seen from that veranda.

An old mango grove and two brick houses stood in between.

Bhaveshwar knew this very well.

Two days later, the water began to recede.

A temporary register for damage relief was opened at the panchayat building.

Only eighteen households were to receive repair materials in the first allotment.

The officials' forms had three categories - total damage, severe damage, and ordinary damage.

A claim for total damage required statements from two local witnesses.

One line on the statement was printed with two choices: mark either "I personally witnessed the incident" or "I saw the damage after the incident."

The accountant, Rekha Jha, explained to people that the two lines meant different things.

The first carried greater weight in the immediate priority list.

The second required a site inspection.

On the first day, Bhaveshwar examined five applications.

Where he had personally witnessed the incident, he marked the first line.

Where he had seen only the damage the next morning, he chose the second.

Rekha Jha smiled and said, "Master Sahib, your statements make the work easier."

Bhaveshwar said, "So long as the facts are clear."

That afternoon, Ramsevak Yadav came in.

He had once been Bhaveshwar's pupil.

He now ran a small fertilizer and seed shop.

At every village event he was the one rushing about - putting up platforms, lifting sacks, arranging places for visiting guests to sit.

When there had been a wedding in Bhaveshwar's family, Ramsevak had managed the work for three days.

He opened the file and placed it before Bhaveshwar.

"Guruji, only your signature is left."

Bhaveshwar read the page.

It said that the mud wall of Ramsevak's back room had collapsed on the night of the flood.

Damage category - total.

The first line already bore a faint mark beside it - "I personally witnessed the incident."

Bhaveshwar looked up.

"I was at the school all night."

Ramsevak said at once, "Yes, Guruji, but you saw the house the next day, didn't you?"

"I saw it the next day."

"Then what difference does it make?"

Bhaveshwar placed a finger on the page.

"It says here: I personally witnessed the incident."

Ramsevak laughed.

"The incident happened, the wall fell, and you saw the fallen wall. Where is the lie?"

Bhaveshwar said nothing.

Ramsevak went on, "If the site inspection takes seven or ten days, the first allotment will be gone. My old mother is at home. It is hard to get through the night without that back room."

That was true.

Ramsevak's mother was close to eighty.

Bhaveswar knew her well.

Ramsevak said softly, "If you will not sign, I will find another witness. But in this village, whose word carries more trust than yours?"

A slight uneasiness stirred inside Bhaveswar when he heard this.

The uneasiness came less from Ramsevak's pleading than from the weight of his own name.

He did not want someone's relief to be delayed because of him.

He did not want Ramsevak to think that Guruji would not trust him over such a small matter.

He wanted the paperwork completed then and there.

All three wishes seemed perfectly reasonable at the same time.

Bhaveswar uncapped his pen.

He darkened the faint mark beside the first line.

Below it he wrote, "Signed, accepting the statement as true."

Then he signed his name.

Ramsevak folded his hands.

"When Guruji is here, work never gets stuck."

Bhaveswar said, "Now go and look after your mother."

The file was closed.

Two days passed.

A list was posted on the veranda of the panchayat building.

It contained eighteen names.

Ramsevak's name was thirteenth.

Nasima Khatun's was nineteenth, written in red ink with the note: "Site inspection pending."

Nasima's house was not on the riverward side, but it stood in a low-lying lane.

The water entered there late and drained away late.

One wall of her house had tilted inward.

Bhaveswar had passed through that lane the next morning.

He had seen the leaning wall.

He had not seen the incident happen.

Nasima came to him with her application.

"Master Sahib, you came into my courtyard the next morning."

Bhaveswar said, "Yes, I saw the damage."

"Then please witness this."

Bhaveshwar read the paper.
The first line had been marked.
He stopped his pen.
"Not this line. I did not see the wall fall."
Nasima said, "It has not fallen. It has leaned."
"Then the second line is right - I saw the damage after the incident."
Nasima said at once, "Write what is true."
Bhaveshwar marked the second line.
He signed it.
Nasima folded up the paper.
She made no complaint.
She asked only, "Will this put my name in the first allotment?"
Bhaveshwar said, "That will be decided after the site inspection."
Nasima nodded.
"All right."
She left.
Bhaveshwar remained seated on the veranda for a while.
Ramsevak's paper came back to his mind.
He had not shown the same caution there.
He told himself that Ramsevak's wall truly had collapsed.
Then he told himself that Ramsevak's mother was old.
Then again - everyone in the village knew what had happened.
All three things were true.
But the printed line too had asked for the truth: had you personally seen it?
Bhaveshwar rose and went home.
That evening, Ramsevak's younger brother was carrying bamboo for the repairs.
From a distance, he bowed in greeting.
Bhaveshwar raised a hand.
His mind settled again.
Three days later, a verification meeting was held at the panchayat office.
Two employees had come from the district office.
Rekha Jha took out the applications one by one.
For statements marked as eyewitness accounts, the time and place were being asked.
Bhaveshwar's name appeared on three applications.
He answered easily on the first two.
"Around seven in the evening, near the school's south gate."
"Before eight at night, on the pond embankment."
Then Ramsevak's paper came up.

The district employee asked, "From where did you see the wall collapse?"
For a moment, Bhaveshwar's throat went dry.
He could have said, "I was with the villagers."
He could have said, "I do not remember the exact time."
He could have said, "It was raining heavily."
Any one of those answers might have carried the matter forward.
It seemed to him that the paper itself had already prepared an answer for him.

Just then the school veranda rose before his eyes.
The wet mats.
The lantern smoke.
The crying children.
And the mango grove hiding the eastern hamlet from view.
Bhaveshwar said slowly, "I did not see it fall."
The employee looked up from the page.
"The eyewitness option is marked here."
Bhaveshwar looked at his signature.
The ink was his.
The handwriting was his.
Beneath those letters there was no Ramsevak, no rain, no old mother.
There was only his name.
Rekha Jha remained silent.
Bhaveshwar said, "I made that mark. I marked it incorrectly."
Two or three people sitting on the veranda looked toward him.
The employee asked, "Then what did you see?"
"I saw the collapsed wall the next morning."
"Who told you it had fallen?"
Bhaveshwar looked toward Ramsevak.
Ramsevak was seated at the back.
His eyes were lowered.
Bhaveshwar said, "I heard people in the village talking about it. Ramsevak told me too."

The employee marked the second line.
He struck out the first mark.
Beside it he wrote, "Not an eyewitness; saw damage after the incident."
Ramsevak did not get up at once.
The meeting moved on.
Inside Bhaveshwar, the meeting did not move on.
He kept thinking that Ramsevak had not forced him to lie.
Ramsevak had only asked for a convenience.
Bhaveshwar himself had chosen the rest of the road.

And while walking that road, not once had his own step seemed wrong to him.

Because he had taken no money.

Because he had intended no harm to anyone.

Because he had thought of an old mother's hardship.

Because he trusted his own name.

Those very reasons had kept the lie from looking like a lie in his own mind.

The meeting ended.

Rekha Jha stopped him.

"Master Sahib, there is one thing."

Bhaveswar said, "Tell me."

"Ramsevak's place will now be decided after the site inspection. The first-allotment list will be recalculated."

"And Nasima's?"

"Her house was inspected yesterday. Severe damage has been recorded. The order may change."

Bhaveswar asked, "Did my incorrect statement push her name down the list?"

Rekha Jha did not answer directly.

She said, "Eyewitness testimony carries greater weight in the priority calculation. It can move a name up or down by one place."

Bhaveswar understood.

It was no great conspiracy.

It was one small mark.

One signature.

One line whose meaning he knew.

And one convenience - not having to say no to anyone.

That evening, Bhaveswar went to Ramsevak's house.

A temporary bamboo enclosure stood where the wall had fallen.

Ramsevak was digging earth.

Seeing Bhaveswar, he stopped his spade.

"Guruji, did I say something wrong?"

Bhaveswar said, "You told me what had happened. I was the one who wrote that I had seen it."

Ramsevak fell silent.

"You did say you would find another witness, but the pen was in my hand."

Ramsevak said softly, "I needed the relief quickly."

"I understand that."

"Mother talks about that room at night."

"I understand that too."

Ramsevak raised his head.

"Then?"

Bhaveswar looked toward the fallen wall.

"Then this: I said I had seen what I had not seen, and in my own mind I called it compassion."

Ramsevak said nothing.

Bhaveswar did not preach either.

He said only, "There will be a site inspection. Whatever the damage is, that is what will be recorded."

As Bhaveswar turned to leave, Ramsevak stopped him.

"Guruji."

Bhaveswar looked back.

"Did you testify against me?"

Bhaveswar thought for a moment.

"No. Today, for the first time, I testified against myself."

No smile came to Ramsevak's face.

Nor to Bhaveswar's.

Two days later, the revised list was posted.

Ramsevak's name had not been removed.

After his status changed to "site inspection complete," his case was placed in the severe-damage category.

Nasima's name too entered the first allotment.

Bhaveswar did not stand with the crowd before the list.

He read it from a distance and walked away.

A week later, another application came to his house.

This time it was Harinarayan Mahato.

Water had entered his paddy store.

He held out the paper.

"Master Sahib, you saw it the next morning."

Bhaveswar read the page.

The same two lines stood before him again.

"I personally witnessed the incident."

"I saw the damage after the incident."

Harinarayan said, "It is all true. Write whatever you think is proper."

Bhaveswar marked the second line.

In the blank space below, he added a line in his own hand: "I did not see the water entering; the next morning I saw wet paddy and marks left by the water."

Harinarayan read it and said, "Was it necessary to write that much?"

Bhaveswar capped his pen.

"It was necessary for me."

He signed it.

He returned the paper to Harinarayan.

The cord of Bhaveshwar's spectacles had caught on an old nail in the veranda pillar.

He gently freed the cord.

His name stood on the paper in fresh ink.

This time, not a single word in the line above his name went beyond what he himself had seen.

The Coin in the Donation Box

At the beginning of Jeth, the masonry platform around the old well in the middle of Pipra village cracked on two sides.

The water was still sweet, but the pulley had begun to lean and, year after year in the rains, bricks had fallen from the platform.

The villagers thought that if they kept waiting for government approval, the monsoon would arrive first.

So it was decided at the village meeting that the well would be repaired from their own common fund.

A wooden box was made.

On top was a narrow slot for coins and notes; across the front, in bold letters: "Common Well Repair Fund."

Two locks were fitted to the box.

One key would remain with the treasurer, Kiran Jha; the other with Devkinandan Paswan, who kept the expenditure ledger.

The rule was simple: the box would not be opened midway; when it was opened, it would be in everyone's presence, and the money inside would be entered in the ledger as a single total.

On the first day, the box was placed on the veranda of the meeting place.

Even before the morning meeting began, two women who had come to collect milk dropped in a few coins.

Kishun the herdsman, too, felt in his pocket and put in a coin.

No one's name was written down.

The box had already given three or four little jingles from within.

Then Ratinath Chaudhary arrived.

Ratinath's grain shop in the market was an old establishment, and in the village his voice was better known than the shop itself.

A meeting, a wedding, the cleaning of the pond—whatever the occasion, he was sure to have something to say.

He came up to the box and first looked around at everyone on the veranda.

Then he took a one-rupee coin from the pocket of his kurta.

The coin was wrapped in a small piece of paper.

In his own handwriting the paper said, "First contribution—Ratinath Chaudhary."

He showed the paper to everyone.

"Do not look at the value of the money; look at the sentiment," he said.

Then he folded the paper again and dropped it into the box with the coin inside.

There was a sharp clink from within.

Ratinath smiled.

"Now the fund has been formally inaugurated."

Kiran Jha was writing down the date.

She looked up. "The box was already making sounds before you arrived."

Ratinath laughed. "Those were loose coins. Mine is the first contribution with a name."

A few people on the veranda smiled.

Kiran said, "The box does not preserve an order of names."

"But my paper is in there."

"The paper will tell us the name. The box will not tell us whether it was first or fifth."

Ratinath took the remark as a joke and let it pass.

That evening, whoever mentioned the well at his shop heard Ratinath add one thing without fail.

"The first named donation was mine."

Someone asked, "How much?"

What matters is not the amount, but the beginning.

Old Gangaram, sitting in front of the shop, said, "It must have begun with the first jingle in the box."

Ratinath replied, "Who keeps accounts of nameless things?"

Gangaram fell silent.

The next day, the money in the box grew.

Sufal Paswan, who dug earth for a living, offered three days of labour without wages.

Phulkumari Devi gave an old but sturdy rope.

Nasim Ansari sent two thick bamboo poles for the pulley.

Some people dropped in five or ten rupees.

Some did not even give their names.

Kiran kept entering cash totals, the estimated value of materials, and labour-days in separate columns.

On the third day, Ratinath came to the meeting place again.

He had a small slip of paper in his hand.

"I need a receipt."

Kiran asked, "For which money?"

“For one rupee. It should be receipt number one.”

Kiran closed the ledger.

“Individual receipts are not issued for money put into the donation box. When the box is opened, the total amount will be entered.”

“I wrote my name on it.”

“That paper is inside the box.”

“Then issue me a receipt when it is opened.”

“When it is opened, whatever is found will be counted. We will not issue an individual receipt backdated to an earlier day.”

Ratinath’s brows drew together slightly.

“Then what proof is there that mine was the first donation?”

Devkinandan, who was noting the measurements of the bricks, said, “Did the thought of proof come before the donation, or afterward?”

Ratinath looked at him.

“The arrangement ought to be transparent.”

Devkinandan replied, “That is why the box has two locks.”

The matter ended there.

But it did not end in Ratinath’s mind.

He went home and wrote on a notebook page: “First named donor to the Common Well Repair Fund: Ratinath Chaudhary—one rupee.”

Below it, he wrote the date.

He folded the page and put it in his pocket.

At the next meeting, he took it out.

“Just add this much to the minutes of the committee.”

Kiran read it.

“Only decisions taken at the meeting go into the minutes.”

“This is a fact.”

“The first half of that fact cannot be verified without opening the box.”

“But I am the named donor.”

Kiran said, “I saw you put in a folded paper with your name on it. I also saw that there was money in the box before you came.”

Ratinath folded the page again.

“Then write ‘first named donor.’”

Kiran smiled. “When did the committee decide there was a competition for that?”

Laughter rose again on the veranda.

This time Ratinath did not laugh.

He put the page back in his pocket and left.

Work in the village kept moving ahead.

A day was fixed for dismantling the old well-platform.

The mason gave a list of materials.

They needed to know how much money had been collected.
 So a day was announced for opening the box.
 That day more people than before gathered on the veranda.
 The two keys were put into the locks at the same time.
 The box was opened.
 Kiran gently turned it upside down over the table.
 Notes, coins, and little folded pieces of paper spread across the surface.
 Ratinath pulled a chair forward and sat down.
 His eyes searched for his own folded paper.
 The counting procedure had been agreed in advance.
 Notes separately, coins separately, written slips separately.
 If a folded slip bearing a name was found, it would be assigned a supporting-slip number, but that number would not be treated as the chronological order of donations.
 Ratinath immediately asked, "Why not chronological order?"
 Kiran showed him the inside of the box.
 Coins lay at the bottom, notes in the middle, papers wedged along the sides.
 "The box has been moved, lifted, and set down. Whatever order there was inside has not survived."
 Ratinath said nothing.
 The first written fold was opened—fifty rupees.
 The name was "Manju Devi, Back Hamlet Ward."
 It was assigned supporting-slip number one.
 Ratinath sat a little straighter in his chair.
 "That is not the first donation."
 Kiran said, "It is the first written fold we have found."
 The second fold contained twenty rupees and no name.
 The third held five rupees and two letters, but not a complete name.
 The papers without names were set aside separately.
 The counting continued.
 At the seventh written fold Ratinath's eyes lit up, but it was not his.
 Nor was the twelfth.
 Every now and then Ratinath asked, "Where has my paper gone?"
 Devkinandan kept saying, "If it is in the box, we will find it."
 The sixteenth written fold was opened.
 There was no money inside—only a line that read, "I will dig earth for two days."
 Kiran placed it not with the cash but in the labour column.
 The seventeenth fold was small.
 As soon as the paper was opened, a one-rupee coin rolled across the table.

Ratinath immediately reached out his hand.

"That one is mine."

On the paper was written, "First contribution—Ratinath Chaudhary."

Kiran wrote on the supporting slip: "No. 17; one rupee; name written."

Ratinath said, "Why number seventeen?"

"This is the seventeenth written fold we have opened."

"But the paper itself says 'First.'"

"That is a line written by you."

"You all saw me put it in."

"Yes, we saw you put in a folded paper with your name on it."

"Then write one."

Kiran stopped her pen and looked at Ratinath.

"Shall I change the counting order?"

Ratinath did not answer.

Devkinandan said quietly, "None of us remembers the order of the coins that jingled before yours. The box will not tell us either."

Ratinath looked at the heap on the table.

There were many one-rupee coins in it.

Some were older than his, some newer.

There was now no way to say which coin belonged to whom.

His coin had been distinguishable only because it had come wrapped in his own written paper.

Kiran mixed the coin into the cash pile.

The paper was filed with supporting slip 17.

Ratinath's eyes kept searching for the coin, but after five moments he could no longer tell which one it was.

The counting resumed.

The total came to three thousand eight hundred and forty-two rupees.

In addition, bamboo, rope, bricks, and labour-days were entered in separate columns.

Kiran read out all the entries.

"Donation box—total, three thousand eight hundred and forty-two rupees."

Ratinath waited.

His name was not read out.

He asked, "What about the named slips?"

"They will be kept with the supporting records."

"A public list?"

"There is no list in the rules we agreed."

Ratinath put a hand into his pocket as though to take out the page he had written at home.

His hand went in, then came out empty.
He did not take out the page.
The following week, work on the well began.
The old loose bricks were removed.
The masonry platform was rebuilt.
The pulley was replaced.
Silt was cleared out.
Ratinath came twice to watch the work.
The first time he asked the mason, "How much has the total cost come to?"

The second time he asked nothing.
On the day the well was completed, no stage was erected.
On one side of the platform a small accounting board was put up: "Money received, materials received, labour-days, total expenditure, balance."
Below it was written: "Balance reserved for the next repair."
No one's name appeared.
Ratinath stood in the crowd.
Gangaram saw him and said, "Chaudharyji, you were the first donor, weren't you?"

Once, Ratinath's answer would have been ready on his tongue.
This time he looked at the accounting board.
"I gave one rupee," was all he said.
Gangaram laughed. "A great many people gave that."
Ratinath, too, smiled a little.
"Yes. They did."
The bucket was lowered for the first time.
The pulley turned without a creak.
Water came up.
People began filling their own lotas.
Kiran was gathering the ledger file.
The supporting slips were tied together with string.
Number one lay on top, below it number two, number three, and so on through the rest.

Ratinath's paper, in his own hand, saying "First contribution," lay seventeenth in that bundle.

He caught sight of its edge once.
Then the file was closed.

Beside the well, only the accounting board remained, where his coin had merged with all the other coins into the total sum.

The Decent Driver

Nagendra Jha, driver of the passenger vehicle that ran from Kamalpur Chowk to Haripur market, often spoke of his own courtesy.

He would say, "No foul word ever leaves my tongue."

He said this perhaps two or three times a day.

Sometimes at the tea stall, sometimes while passengers were boarding, sometimes after stopping the vehicle to explain some trouble on the road.

His conductor, Vijay, had heard the sentence so many times that he had stopped replying to it.

Nagendra had a simple definition of his own.

If a harsh remark ended with "ji," then it was not an insult.

"Look," he would explain to Vijay, "I say, 'Ox-ji, keep to the left.' Where is the insult in that?"

Vijay once asked, "The person you called Ox-ji is a human being, isn't he?"

Nagendra merely laughed.

"It is a metaphor. Metaphor is literature."

His vehicle was better known for its horn than for its literature.

At Kamalpur's narrow bend the horn would sound first, and Nagendra's voice would follow.

"King-ji, the road isn't your father's property!"

A little farther on, someone's bicycle would wobble.

"Great Man-ji, keep your eyes in front!"

An ox-cart would be moving a little too slowly.

"Maharaj-ji, are you carrying a wedding procession or a load of goods?"

And after each such remark he would look at Vijay and say, "See? I said it with respect."

Vijay would go on issuing tickets.

He did not argue.

Three passenger vehicles on this route were run by the same cooperative association.

The association had a rule that at the end of every month the drivers would submit a brief account of delays, quarrels, and passenger complaints.

At first the entries were only a few words long—"road blocked," "passenger dispute," "fare matter."

No one could make much sense of them.

Then, in one month, five complaints came in from the same day.

Sarojini Mishra, who looked after the association's accounts, said, "If you are recording an incident, record the words too. Writing only 'quarrel' does not tell us what the quarrel was."

A new rule was made.

If a complaint concerned language, the sentence spoken was to be written in the complaint register as nearly word for word as possible.

Nagendra was pleased when he heard the rule.

"Very good," he said. "Now there will be proof that I never abuse anyone."

Vijay looked at him but said nothing.

The rule was put to the test the very next week.

On Monday, just beyond Haripur, a cyclist carrying a sack of paddy was shifting from one side of the road to the other.

Nagendra sounded the horn.

Startled, the cyclist veered into the middle of the road.

Nagendra stopped the vehicle.

"Scholar-ji, do you have one body or four? Decide first which side you intend to keep it on!"

The cyclist said nothing.

He moved to the left.

The vehicle went on.

On the delay sheet Vijay wrote: "Cyclist carrying sack of paddy; vehicle stopped; driver's words—'Scholar-ji...'"

Nagendra looked at the paper.

"You wrote it correctly?"

"Exactly as you said it."

"Don't leave out the 'ji.'"

"I haven't."

On Tuesday, an elderly pedestrian stepped into the middle of the road while avoiding a pothole left by the rain.

Nagendra sounded the horn from a distance.

The old man did not hear it.

As the vehicle came near, Nagendra leaned toward the window.

"Uncle-ji, have you sent your ears on leave?"

The old man turned and looked back.

Vijay raised a hand and signalled for him to move to the left.

The vehicle passed.

A second sentence was added to the delay sheet.

On Wednesday, near the market, a woman was crossing the road with two baskets.

The cord of one basket came loose.

She stopped in the middle.

Nagendra brought the vehicle to a halt.

“Mother-ji, are you planning to set up the whole market right here?”

The woman gathered up her basket and moved aside.

An elderly woman seated in the back said, “Son, speak more gently.”

Nagendra replied at once, “Mother, I called her Mother-ji.”

The elderly woman turned to look out of the window.

Vijay wrote down the third sentence.

Nothing happened on Thursday.

That evening Nagendra said proudly, “See? When people follow the rules, even my mouth turns to honey.”

On Friday, an ox-cart ahead took a little time to give way.

Nagendra sounded the horn twice.

“Emperor-ji, kindly clear the royal road.”

The cart driver looked back.

Smiling, he moved the cart aside.

Vijay wrote down that sentence too.

This time Nagendra himself said, “That was a joke. Write ‘joke’ in the register.”

Vijay wrote: “Driver’s words: ‘Emperor-ji...’ Driver’s comment: joke.”

On Saturday morning a message came from the association office.

A passenger had submitted a written complaint saying that Nagendra “talks down to everyone.”

Nagendra bristled as he read the paper.

“Me? Talk down to people?”

He pushed up the sleeves of his kurta, then immediately pulled them down again.

“I call everyone ‘ji.’”

Vijay was silent.

“You hear me, don’t you?” Nagendra asked.

“I do.”

“Tell me, have I ever said anything to anyone without a ‘ji?’”

Vijay thought for a moment.

“Very rarely.”

“There you are! I’ll give them a written reply.”

The association’s meeting room was in the old dharamshala in the market.

All three vehicles remained off the road on Sundays, so the meeting was fixed for that day.

In front of Sarojini Mishra lay the complaint register, the delay sheets, and the fare register, all three open.

Nagendra had brought his reply in writing.

The first line read: "I always use respectful language with passengers and with people on the road."

The second: "My sentences contain respectful forms of address."

The third: "Even in difficult moments I do not use foul language."

He handed the paper to Sarojini.

"Here is my reply."

Sarojini read it.

Then she picked up Vijay's sheet for the week.

"Under the new rule, this week's language-related incidents have also been recorded."

Nagendra smiled.

"Read them. Every bit of evidence will go in my favour."

Sarojini read the first sentence.

"Scholar-ji, do you have one body or four? Decide first which side you intend to keep it on!"

Nagendra nodded.

"See—Scholar-ji."

Sarojini read the second.

"Uncle-ji, have you sent your ears on leave?"

Nagendra said, "Uncle-ji—respectful."

The third sentence was read aloud.

"Mother-ji, are you planning to set up the whole market right here?"

Nagendra still wore an expression of confidence.

"Mother-ji."

Then came the fourth sentence.

"Emperor-ji, kindly clear the royal road.' Comment—joke."

The other driver at the meeting, Parmeshwar Yadav, burst out laughing.

Nagendra turned toward him.

"Why are you laughing?"

Parmeshwar pressed his lips together.

Sarojini said, "I am not giving a decision yet. I have one question."

Nagendra sat up straight in his chair.

"Ask."

Of these four sentences, what useful road instruction is actually there?

Nagendra immediately looked toward the first sheet.

"In the first one I told him to choose a side."

“Which side?”

Nagendra paused.

“The left.”

“Does the sentence contain the word ‘left?’”

Nagendra read it again.

It did not.

Sarojini placed a finger on the second sentence.

“Here, what was the old man told to do?”

Nagendra answered, “To move aside.”

“Where are those words?”

Nagendra looked at the sentence again.

It mentioned only the ears being on leave.

The question then moved to the third line.

“What instruction did you give the woman with the baskets so she could cross safely?”

Nagendra’s answer came more slowly.

“She understood.”

Sarojini said, “Yes, she understood that you were annoyed. But the sentence does not say what you wanted her to do.”

Nagendra grew a little uncomfortable.

“There isn’t much time on the road.”

“Then you need fewer words.”

Sarojini placed a blank sheet of paper before Nagendra.

“For each of these four incidents, write only the useful instruction. No comment on the person.”

Nagendra picked up the pen.

For the first he wrote: “Keep to the left; there is a vehicle behind you.”

For the second: “Uncle-ji, move to the left.”

For the third: “Gather your basket and move aside; I have stopped.”

For the fourth: “Move the ox-cart to the left; I will pass.”

He put down the pen.

All four lines were short.

Sarojini placed his earlier written reply beside them.

“Now compare them yourself.”

Nagendra kept looking at the sheet.

“These are only instructions.”

“At that moment on the road, instructions were all that was needed.”

“Where did the humour go?”

Parmeshwar Yadav again made as if to laugh, but the moment Sarojini looked at him he fell silent.

Nagendra said, “People understand my way of speaking.”

For the first time in the meeting, Vijay spoke.

"Some understand it. Some endure it."

The room fell silent.

Nagendra looked at Vijay.

"Why didn't you ever say anything all these days?"

Vijay replied, "You always said that because there was a 'ji,' it couldn't be abuse."

Nagendra's hand rested on the paper with the four new lines he had written.

He asked, "In your view, the 'ji' changes nothing?"

Vijay said, "'Ji' after a name is an honorific. Put it after mockery, and the mockery does not become respect."

Sarojini stopped Vijay.

"Let the register give the decision, not a sermon."

At that, an unwilling smile appeared on Nagendra's face.

"See? Your sermon has been stopped too."

Vijay smiled as well.

The tension eased a little.

The association imposed no penalty.

In reply to the complaint it merely recorded: "The driver has been instructed to keep road-related directions separate from remarks about individuals."

Nagendra read that line three times.

"Does it say I am decent or not?"

Closing the register, Sarojini said, "The register does not measure decency; it only records incidents."

Nagendra did not answer.

On Monday the vehicle went out again.

The first passenger boarded at Kamalpur Chowk.

Vijay issued the ticket.

Nagendra sounded the horn once and pulled away.

Half a kos down the road, a boy carrying a sack on his bicycle was wobbling.

Nagendra opened his mouth.

"Great Ma—"

The words stopped halfway.

Vijay looked at him.

Nagendra gave a short tap on the horn.

"Brother, keep to the left; there is a vehicle behind you."

The boy moved to the left.

The vehicle passed without stopping.

Vijay opened his delay sheet.
 Nagendra asked at once, "What are you writing?"
 "Nothing. There was no delay."
 Nagendra cleared his throat slightly.
 "No need to write down my sentence?"
 "There was no complaint."
 Nagendra kept his eyes on the road.
 A little farther on, two goats were crossing.
 He slowed the vehicle.
 "Goat-ji—" The word came to his tongue.
 Nagendra himself burst out laughing.
 "It isn't even a person."
 Vijay said, "Then save the 'ji.'"
 Nagendra did not sound the horn.
 The goats crossed.
 By the time they were nearing Haripur, they came upon an ox-cart ahead.
 The cart driver took a little time to move aside.
 Nagendra's finger went to the horn.
 He sounded it once.
 "Move to the left; I'll pass."
 The ox-cart moved aside.
 Nagendra drove past.
 A few moments later he asked Vijay, "That wasn't too rude, was it?"
 Vijay said, "It was clear."
 "There was no 'ji.'"
 "It was still clear."
 Nagendra was silent for a few moments.
 Then he said, "So where was I spending all those 'jis' all these years?"
 Vijay replied, "On the words."
 Nagendra laughed.
 "And the meaning?"
 Gathering up the tickets, Vijay said, "The listener had to supply that."
 Haripur market came into view.
 Nagendra slowed the vehicle.
 There was a crowd along the roadside.
 He rested his hand on the horn, but this time he looked at the spot before
 calling out.
 "Keep to the left—the vehicle is coming."
 People moved aside.
 The vehicle reached its place and stopped.
 Vijay closed the delay sheet.

That day the column for language complaints remained blank.

Nagendra glanced once at that blank column.

He said nothing.

He merely used a finger to wipe the dust from the old words written across the front windscreen—"Courteous Service"—until they stood clear again.

The Character Certificate

Two blank certificates lay before Madhav Mandal.

The day after tomorrow was the deadline to apply for the temporary post of accounts assistant at the district grain depot.

All the other papers were ready.

Only two character certificates from persons of standing were required.

Across the top of the form, in bold letters, was written: "The applicant is personally known to me."

The second line below read: "To the best of my knowledge, his conduct is excellent."

The third line: "He is not related to me."

Madhav read all three lines three times.

His mother called from the kitchen, "Go to Bhuvaneshwar Master first."

Madhav said, "How well does he know me?"

His mother replied, "He is the best-known man in the village."

Madhav did not fold the form.

He placed it between clean clothes and put it in his bag.

Bhuvaneshwar Babu was a retired headmaster.

On his veranda, old report cards, certificates of honour, and photographs of students hung in frames.

The moment he saw Madhav, he said, "Well, have you got the appointment?"

Madhav bowed and placed the form before him.

"It is only the application for now."

Bhuvaneshwar Babu put on his spectacles.

"Is that all?"

"I need two certificates."

"Then I shall give you one."

He took out his pen, but instead of reading the form, pushed it toward Madhav.

"Fill in the name and address and all that."

Madhav filled in his name.

He filled in his father's name.

He wrote the village, post office, and police station.

When he came to the line, "The applicant is personally known to me," his pen stopped.

Bhuvaneshwar Babu asked, "Why have you stopped?"

Madhav said, "That is your statement."

"What do you mean?"

"You should write that."

Bhuvaneshwar Babu laughed.

"You insist on rules even in things like this?"

Madhav remained silent.

Bhuvaneshwar Babu pulled the form back toward himself.

"How long have I known you?"

Madhav said, "I cannot say exactly."

"I'll write ten years."

Madhav said softly, "Ten years ago I was studying away from the village."

Bhuvaneshwar Babu frowned.

"Then five years?"

"It has been four years since I returned to the village."

"Shall I write four?"

"Whatever you think is right."

Bhuvaneshwar Babu wrote four.

Then he read the next line.

"Conduct excellent."

Without pausing, he wrote: "Extremely good, courteous, obedient, and wholly trustworthy."

Madhav kept looking at the form.

"What is it?"

"Nothing yet."

"Why are you making that face?"

Madhav said, "Have you observed me that closely?"

Bhuvaneshwar Babu leaned back against his chair.

"Have I ever heard anything against you?"

"Nothing of that sort."

"Then that is why I wrote it."

Madhav asked, "Just because you have heard nothing, how does that make me 'wholly' trustworthy?"

For two moments the veranda fell silent.

Bhuvaneshwar Babu looked over the form again.

"You argue too much."

Madhav said, "It is your certificate."

"Who wants the appointment—you or me?"

"I do."

“Then take the simple road.”

Madhav reached out to pick up the form.

Bhuvaneshwar Babu stopped him.

“Wait. I’ll cross out ‘wholly.’”

He drew a line through the word.

“Shall I leave ‘trustworthy?’”

Madhav smiled.

“That is for you to know.”

For the first time, Bhuvaneshwar Babu gave the task of filling the form some attention.

At the end, he signed it.

He stamped it with his seal.

He said, “The form is spoiled now; one word has been crossed out.”

Madhav said, “The crossed-out word is visible.”

“Shall I write it again on a fresh form?”

“This one is fine.”

Bhuvaneshwar Babu looked at him.

“You will submit a form with a crossed-out line in an appointment application?”

Madhav replied, “A crossed-out statement is better than a hidden one.”

Bhuvaneshwar Babu said nothing.

Madhav put the certificate into his bag and rose to leave.

The second name was Ramakant Sah.

He was secretary of the Public Welfare Committee.

At every village meeting and function, his chair stood at the front.

The committee’s papers were kept in a small room behind Ramakant Sah’s shop.

When Madhav reached there, Ramakant Sah was sitting with the accounts ledger open before him.

“So, you have come?”

“I need a certificate.”

“Give it here.”

Ramakant Sah did not even read the whole form.

He signed at the bottom.

Madhav was astonished.

“The lines above are blank.”

“Fill them in when you get home.”

“How can I fill in your statement?”

Ramakant Sah laughed.

“You are coming from Bhuvaneshwar Master’s house, aren’t you?”

“I have just come from there.”

“He must have had you fill his too.”

“He wrote it himself.”

Ramakant Sah paused a little.

“Then I’ll fill it in later.”

With that, he bent over the ledger.

“First do one small thing.”

Madhav remained seated.

Ramakant Sah opened a page.

It contained the accounts for the repair of the public tap the previous month.

The date on one receipt belonged to the following month.

Ramakant Sah said, “The date should have been written one month earlier.”

Madhav asked, “Why should the date be put back?”

“The grant was only valid through last month.”

“Was the work done the following month?”

“The work had begun then itself.”

“But the receipt is from the following month.”

“Changing the date alone won’t change the work, will it?”

Madhav remained silent.

Ramakant Sah held the pen out to him.

“Your handwriting is neat.”

Madhav did not take the pen.

“This is not my ledger.”

“It belongs to the committee.”

“Then the committee should write in it.”

Ramakant Sah’s voice hardened.

“I am the secretary.”

“Then you should write it.”

“Everyone knows my handwriting.”

Madhav did not close the ledger, but neither did he pick up the pen.

“I can write the date on which it actually happened.”

Ramakant Sah stared at him.

“You have started understanding too many rules.”

Madhav said, “I understand this much: if the date is changed, what the receipt says will change too.”

Ramakant Sah picked up the form.

He looked at his signature on it.

Then he looked at the blank lines above.

“So what am I supposed to write on this?”

Madhav replied, “Whatever you know.”

Ramakant Sah drew two crooked lines through his signature.

“Now I know nothing.”

Madhav’s throat went dry.

The application deadline was close.

Even so, he picked up the form.

“I understand.”

Ramakant Sah said, “Get another one made somewhere else.”

Madhav bowed.

As he was leaving, his eyes fell on the ledger.

Ramakant Sah had set his pen to the date on the receipt.

Madhav stepped outside.

Until evening, the household discussed whom else they might approach as the second person of standing.

His mother listed five names.

Madhav listened to every one of them.

He knew some of them only slightly.

With others, his entire relationship consisted of exchanging greetings.

That night he opened the application papers again.

On the first certificate, the word “wholly” stood visibly crossed out.

On the second form was Ramakant Sah’s crossed-out signature.

Madhav did not throw that form away.

He placed it in a separate compartment of his bag.

Early the next morning, he went to the library.

The village public library was looked after by Satyanarayan Karna, a retired postal employee.

For four years, Madhav had been helping there in the evenings, shelving and taking down books.

There was no salary.

There was no post.

Satyanarayan Karna usually called him “Madhav” when giving him work, not “volunteer.”

Madhav placed the form before him.

Satyanarayan Karna read it.

He said, “Whether I am a person of standing or not, the people who drafted this form may know.”

For the first time, Madhav laughed.

“You know me.”

“That much is true.”

“Then write whatever else you know.”

Satyanarayan Karna picked up his pen.

On the first line he wrote, “Known to me for four years.”

On the second line, the words “conduct excellent” were already printed.
He added nothing after them.

In the blank space below, he wrote: “In the conduct I have personally observed, I have found nothing improper.”

Madhav read it.

“Will you write only this much?”

“This is as much as I have seen.”

“Not ‘extremely’?”

Satyanarayan Karna raised his spectacles and looked at him.

“Do you need ‘extremely’?”

Madhav shook his head.

“There is no need for ‘extremely.’”

“Then I do not need it either.”

Satyanarayan Karna signed at the bottom.

Instead of a seal, he had only a small stamp bearing the library’s name.

Madhav asked, “Will this be accepted?”

Satyanarayan Karna said, “Whether it will be accepted, the office will know. Whether a lie would be accepted, I do not know.”

Madhav put two certificates into his bag.

The first—Bhuvaneshwar Babu’s.

The second—Satyanarayan Karna’s.

The third form, with the crossed-out signature, remained separate.

The next day, the district grain depot office was crowded.

Madhav waited for his turn.

The clerk receiving the papers examined each form one by one.

He paused at Bhuvaneshwar Babu’s certificate.

“Why is something crossed out here?”

Madhav said, “At first, ‘wholly’ had been written.”

“Then why was it crossed out?”

“The person who wrote it changed his mind.”

The clerk looked at Madhav’s face.

“Did you ask him to cross it out?”

“I only asked whether he knew me that well.”

The clerk said nothing.

He looked at the second certificate.

“Why is there an additional remark here?”

“He wrote what he had seen.”

Again, the clerk said nothing.

He counted the rest of the application papers.

Then one form slipped out of Madhav’s bag.

The one bearing Ramakant Sah’s crossed-out signature.

The clerk picked it up.

“What is this?”

Madhav was silent for a moment.

“An incomplete certificate.”

“The signature is crossed out.”

“The signature was there first.”

“Then how did it get crossed out?”

Madhav felt like saying, “He thought poorly of me.”

But he stopped himself.

He said, “I refused to change a date when he asked me to.”

The clerk’s hand paused over the form.

“What date?”

Madhav told him what had happened, in a few words.

The clerk listened carefully.

Then he returned the crossed-out form to Madhav.

“This will not be attached to the application.”

“I understand.”

The clerk set the two valid certificates aside.

His eyes went to the crossed-out word on Bhuvaneshwar Babu’s form.

Then to Satyanarayan Karna’s three-line remark.

Then he looked at Madhav’s name on the application.

He offered no praise.

He gave no advice.

He simply stamped the receipt slip.

Madhav took the slip.

As he stepped outside, he remembered Bhuvaneshwar Babu’s words: “Who wants the appointment—you or me?”

He opened his bag and looked at the crossed-out form.

Ramakant Sah’s signature had been struck through with two lines.

The entire certificate above it was blank.

Only the name-and-address section had been filled in by Madhav.

He looked at the back of the form.

The pressure of Ramakant Sah’s pen had left faint impressions through the paper.

Like the imprint of that sentence from the ledger: “The date one month earlier...”

The words were not fully legible.

Madhav did not fold the paper.

He kept it flat and clean.

When he reached home, his mother asked, “Did two decent men give you certificates?”

Taking off his bag, Madhav said, "I got two certificates."

His mother asked, "What is the difference?"

Madhav did not answer.

He placed the first two papers in the compartment containing the appointment file.

He kept the third, crossed-out form separately.

No one had written on it that Madhav's character was excellent.

And yet, of all three, that paper seemed to him the clearest statement about who he was.

The Fasting Feast

At four in the morning, the first bamboo basket was unloaded in the courtyard of the dharmashala.

The basket held bananas.

Behind it came a sack of makhana.

Then came cucumbers, coconuts, curd, and sugar candy.

Ramkripal Mishra kept count of every item.

He himself was observing a nirjala fast, without even water.

Yet since dawn his mouth had been full of nothing but the names of food.

"Twenty-four dozen bananas?"

"Twenty-four."

"Twelve seers of makhana?"

"Twelve."

"Six pots of curd?"

"Six."

Ramkripal kept ticking the entries in the register.

This time the Govind Dharmashala was holding a collective fast for Nirjala Ekadashi, followed by an evening recitation.

In the old way, people observed the fast in their own homes.

In the evening they came to the dharmashala to listen to the recitation and broke their fast together.

Earlier, the fasting fare had been simple.

Bananas, curd, makhana—that was all.

But in three years the scale of the event had changed.

The eastern hamlet had served five kinds of fasting fare the previous time.

The southern hamlet had served seven kinds the following month.

Ramkripal would say, "What have we to do with competition?"

Then, at once, he would add, "But the arrangements must not be slack."

This time nine kinds had been decided upon.

By Ramkripal's reckoning, this was not a question of taste.

It was a question of discipline.

What would be placed on whose plate first, what would follow, who would sit in which row—everything had been written down.

On the right side of the courtyard, yellow wooden markers were set aside for those observing the nirjala fast.

On the left, white markers were for those who took water during the fast.

In the middle, green markers were for those taking fruit during the fast.

Ramkripal inspected the three piles in turn.

“No colour must get mixed into another.”

The volunteer Navalkishore laughed.

“Are people coming here to fast, or to identify colours?”

Ramkripal looked at him.

Navalkishore fell silent at once.

By seven o’clock, a large board had been hung on the wall of the dharmashala.

On it was written—

“THE FASTING FEAST—NINE KINDS OF FASTING FARE.”

Below, in smaller letters, were the names of the donor families.

Ramkripal measured the height of the board.

“Half a cubit higher.”

Two young men loosened the bamboo again and raised the board.

At half past seven, Sita Devi arrived with her granddaughter Kusum to enter her name in the register.

Sita Devi was seventy-two years old.

She had observed Ekadashi for years.

This time Kusum did not want to leave her alone.

The young man keeping the register asked, “Nirjala?”

Sita Devi said, “No water from dawn till evening. But at a quarter past six I have to take medicine with food.”

The young man paused.

There was no separate field for medicine in the register.

Kusum said, “She only needs one banana or a boiled potato.”

The young man wrote in the margin—“6:15—medicine.”

Then he handed Sita Devi a yellow marker.

Ramkripal saw this from a distance.

“What did you write in the margin?”

The young man told him.

Ramkripal pulled the register towards himself.

“Food will be served to everyone at the same time.”

Kusum said politely, “Her medicine has to be taken at a fixed time.”

Ramkripal said, “All right. I’ll see to it.”

He turned the register back.

The day climbed higher.

There was less talk of fasting and more of arranging the plates.

The team roasting the makhana said the curd station should not be beside them.

The curd servers said dust from the makhana would blow over.

The young man cutting coconuts wanted his place near the entrance, because people would see his platter first.

Ramkripal kept shifting everyone's places.

At eleven, an acquaintance from the eastern hamlet arrived.

He cast his eyes all around.

"You've arranged nine kinds?"

Ramkripal said casually, "It isn't about the number. It's for people's convenience."

The acquaintance said, "Next time we'll have eleven."

Ramkripal smiled.

As soon as the acquaintance left, Ramkripal called Navalkishore over.

"Could we add a small cake made from water-chestnut flour?"

Navalkishore's eyes widened.

"Then it'll become ten kinds."

Ramkripal said, "Not for the number. For people's convenience."

Navalkishore said nothing.

At noon, the volunteers met in the back room of the dharmashala.

Ramkripal spread out the seating plan.

The first row was for the elderly.

The second was for women.

The third was for men.

The fourth row was for the special donor families.

Looking at the plan, Kusum asked, "Where will the people who have medicines at fixed times sit?"

Ramkripal raised his head.

"How many are there?"

"My grandmother is one."

"Then she'll sit in the first row."

"But she needs food at a quarter past six."

Ramkripal looked at the clock.

"The recitation is supposed to end at six. The conch will sound, then the prasad distribution will begin."

Kusum said, "What if the recitation runs long?"

Ramkripal had his answer ready.

"We'll make sure it ends on time."

Kusum fell silent.

At three o'clock, the rehearsal for cutting the fruit began.

The bananas did not need to be cut.

Even so, the decision about which way the bananas should face on the plates was changed twice.

Five minutes went into deciding whether the cucumbers should be cut in rounds or lengthwise.

Ten minutes went into deciding whether the bowl of makhana should sit at the top of the plate or on the right.

Ramkripal's fast continued.

He was hungry, but had no time to mention hunger.

At half past four, the recitation began.

The dharmashala filled up.

People sat quietly.

Ramkripal stood by the doorway, counting the rows.

One hundred and fourteen.

The register contained one hundred and sixteen names.

Two people had not come.

Even that discrepancy bothered him.

At five fifty-five, the final portion of the recitation began.

Ramkripal's eyes went to the clock.

Everything was in order.

At six-oh-five, the principal speaker requested everyone to remain seated for two more minutes.

Those two minutes became eight.

Then an elderly member of one of the donor families arrived.

The volunteers began making room for him in front.

The rows shifted again.

It was six sixteen.

Kusum quietly came over to Ramkripal.

"It's time for Grandmother's medicine."

Ramkripal looked at the clock.

"Just a moment. The conch is about to sound."

"She needs the medicine first."

"If we open the rows now, everyone will get up."

Kusum said, "I'll take just one banana."

Ramkripal's eyes fell on the pile of yellow markers.

"If we give something separately, other people will ask too."

Kusum looked at him for a few moments.

Then she turned away.

At six twenty, the photographer arrived.

The donor families wanted a photograph of all nine platters of fasting fare together.

Ramkripal himself began straightening the platters.

One platter was half an inch too far back.
 He moved it forward.
 The cloth over one of the curd pots was crooked.
 It was straightened.
 The photograph was taken at six twenty-seven.
 The conch sounded at six twenty-nine.
 People rose slowly.
 Ramkripal breathed a sigh of relief.
 The rows had indeed formed beautifully.
 The elderly people with yellow markers sat down first.
 Ramkripal counted the first row.
 One seat was empty.
 Sita Devi's yellow marker lay on it.
 Kusum was nowhere to be seen either.
 Ramkripal asked Navalkishore, "Where did that elderly lady go?"
 Navalkishore said, "She left by the back of the kitchen."
 "Why did she go back?"
 "For her medicine."
 "Was she given a banana?"
 Navalkishore said, "Champa Kaki gave her half from her own share."
 Ramkripal frowned.
 "Why from her own share?"
 "Because there was no permission to open the plates prepared for distribution."
 Ramkripal said nothing.
 Meanwhile, nine little bowls began to be set out in the first row.
 People took the curd first.
 Then the makhana.
 Then the bananas.
 Then the cucumber.
 Then the coconut.
 Then the sugar candy.
 Then the water-chestnut cakes that had been added after noon.
 Some people laughed.
 "All this just to break a fast?"
 Ramkripal heard them, but only smiled.
 At an event, laughter was considered a good sign.
 By the time the serving reached the second row, two or three items were being left untouched on many plates.
 Some did not want curd.
 Some found the sugar candy too sweet.

Some found the water-chestnut cakes hard.
 The volunteers kept collecting the leftover food in separate vessels.
 Again and again, Ramkripal's eyes went to the empty seat.
 Sita Devi's yellow marker was still there.
 By the time the feast ended, it was eight at night.
 The donors were pleased.
 The principal speaker praised the arrangements.
 The acquaintance from the eastern hamlet also said, "I have to admit, the rows were very neat."
 Ramkripal thanked him.
 Navalkishore said softly, "It did become ten kinds after all."
 Ramkripal pretended not to hear him.
 When the people had gone, three large vessels in the courtyard were full of leftover fasting fare.
 Champa Kaki asked, "May we take these leftover potatoes and bananas home?"
 Ramkripal said, "Divide it all among yourselves."
 Picking out potatoes, Champa Kaki said, "It was a good thing I gave that elderly woman half a banana."
 Ramkripal said, "Yes."
 A little later, he sat down to put away the register.
 One hundred and sixteen names.
 One hundred and fourteen present.
 One hundred and thirteen meals served.
 His pen stopped.
 He found Sita Devi's name.
 In small letters in the margin beside it was written—"6:15—medicine."
 For the first time all day, he read that little note in full.
 Beside it was his own red mark.
 The red mark meant—"first row."
 The time of the medicine had disappeared into that red mark.
 Ramkripal did not close the register.
 He left it open for a long time.
 Navalkishore came over and said, "Come on. It's late."
 Ramkripal asked, "Did Champa Kaki eat?"
 "Last of all."
 "What time did Champa Kaki eat?"
 "Around half past eight."
 Ramkripal did not look at the clock.
 The next morning, he went to Sita Devi's house.
 He was not carrying a box of leftover fasting fare.

He carried only the yellow wooden marker that had been left on her seat.
 Sita Devi was sitting on the veranda.
 Kusum was inside.
 Ramkripal handed her the marker.
 "This was left behind."
 Sita Devi laughed.
 "What use is it to me now?"
 Ramkripal had no answer.
 Sita Devi herself said, "I broke my fast, but I left the gathering."
 There was neither anger nor sarcasm in her voice.
 That was why the sentence lingered all the longer.
 Ramkripal asked, "Did you manage to take your medicine on time?"
 "A little late, but I took it."
 From inside, Kusum said, "Champa Kaki's half banana did the job."
 Ramkripal turned the yellow marker over in his palm.
 In small letters on it was written—"Nirjala."
 That was all.
 No age.
 No medicine time.
 No distance from home.
 Nothing about how long someone working in the kitchen might
 themselves have been fasting before getting to eat.
 Ramkripal rose.
 Sita Devi asked, "Did the event go well?"
 Ramkripal said, "The rows were good."
 As he walked away, his own sentence sounded incomplete to him.
 When he reached the dharmashala, the courtyard was empty.
 The large board still hung on the wall—"THE FASTING FEAST—NINE
 KINDS OF FASTING FARE."
 The names were underneath.
 Navalkishore was approaching with a ladder to take the board down.
 Ramkripal said, "Leave it."
 Navalkishore stopped.
 "Until the next event?"
 "No. Turn it over first."
 Together they took down the board and laid it on the ground.
 The back was blank.
 Ramkripal took a piece of charcoal and wrote four lines—
 "How many people?"
 "Whose medicine has to be taken at a fixed time?"
 "Who has far to travel home?"

“Who will eat late because they are serving others?”

Navalkishore read them and said, “Where do we write how many kinds of fasting fare there are?”

Handing him the charcoal, Ramkripal said, “If there’s room left, write it.”

The board remained propped against the wall, turned around.

Its bright lettering on the front faced the wall.

Its blank-backed side, now bearing the new questions, faced the courtyard.

The Prize for Humility

On the third day after the notice for “The Prize for Humility” was posted in the small auditorium behind the municipal library, people’s manner of walking began to change.

The notice read: “An annual Prize for Humility will be awarded to one person as an example of selfless service, renunciation of credit, and modest conduct in society.”

Below it appeared not the word “application,” but “nomination.”

That word itself was the first thing to reassure everyone.

Putting forward one’s own name seemed contrary to humility.

Having someone else put forward one’s name seemed proper.

The next day, teacher Navalkishore Mishra came to the library.

He carried a two-page letter in his hand.

The letter had been written by a former student of his.

Handing the letter to the secretary, Mridula, Navalkishore said, “I have no attachment to any of this.”

Mridula opened the letter.

The first line read: “Guruji has never taken credit for anything in his life.”

The second line was followed by seven examples.

Mridula asked, “Did you ask him to write this letter?”

Navalkishore laughed.

“No. I merely told him that the committee does not make decisions without facts.”

Mridula placed the letter in the nomination register.

By evening, five nominations had arrived.

In every letter, one sentence said nearly the same thing: the nominee had no desire for the prize.

The following day, cloth merchant Devkinandan came in.

He said, “Strike out my name.”

Mridula asked, “On which page is your nomination?”

“The third.”

“Who told you?”

Devkinandan fell silent for a moment.

“If my name had to be struck out, I had to see where it was.”

Mridula opened the register.
 His younger brother had nominated him.
 Devkinandan said, "I will not accept the prize."
 "You have not even been selected yet."
 "Even so, write down that I refused it in advance."
 Mridula stopped her pen.
 "Where am I to write that you refused?"
 Devkinandan placed a finger on the right-hand margin of the register.
 "Here. Then there will be no confusion later."
 Mridula wrote: "The nominee has expressed no wish to accept the prize."
 Devkinandan read it.
 "Add 'in advance.'"
 Mridula added it.
 He left satisfied.
 Within three days, the nominations had risen to nine.
 The committee chair, Surendra Babu, grew concerned.
 "The criteria must be clear."
 Mridula asked, "How do we measure humility?"
 Surendra Babu said, "By conduct."
 "Evidence of conduct?"
 That question gave birth to a new form.
 The form had three boxes.
 "An occasion on which you gave credit for your work to someone else."
 "An occasion on which you remained calm after being insulted."
 "An occasion on which you rendered service without your name being known."
 The nominator was to fill in the form.
 The nominee's signature was not required.
 But once the forms had been distributed, the nominees themselves began improving the wording of the completed forms.
 Navalkishore's student had written: "The school library was built through his efforts."
 With a red pen, Navalkishore struck out "through his efforts" and wrote "through the collective efforts of all the teachers."
 Below that, in brackets, he added: "Correction by nominee."
 Mridula read it and smiled.
 Navalkishore immediately said, "Do not count that smile in my favour."
 Two days later, Ramakant Jha, who ran a social organisation, arrived with three witnesses.
 All three said separately that Ramakant never sat in the front.
 Mridula asked, "At every programme?"

The first witness said, "Usually."

Ramakant cut in, "Not usually—unless it is absolutely necessary."

The second witness looked at him.

Mridula wrote: "Clarification provided by the nominee."

Ramakant said, "Remove 'clarification.' I do not like speaking about myself."

Mridula capped her pen.

Little by little, the nomination register turned into a ledger of humility.

Someone brought proof that his name appeared in small letters on a plaque.

Someone brought a photograph from a programme in which he was seated in the back row.

Someone brought a letter in which he had written, "I did nothing."

The nominee's name was clearly written on every piece of evidence; otherwise, how was the committee to identify it?

A new file appeared on Mridula's desk: "Humility—Evidence."

The file grew thicker.

One day, Kamli Devi, who did the cleaning, picked up the file and asked, "Whose are all these papers?"

Mridula said, "Humble people's."

Kamli shifted the file from one hand to the other, as though weighing it.

"Humility must be a heavy thing."

Mridula burst out laughing.

Just then the chair came in.

"What happened here?"

Mridula repeated the exchange.

The chair did not laugh.

"Kamli Devi's name could be considered too."

Kamli immediately said, "Leave me out of it. I have another house to go to at four."

The chair looked at Mridula.

Mridula understood that this sentence, too, could become evidence.

She wrote nothing down.

On the day of the decision, five members sat around a circular table.

A score sheet had been prepared for each nominee.

Giving up credit—ten.

Gentle speech—ten.

Keeping oneself in the background—ten.

Anonymous service—ten.

The first file was opened.

There were three pieces of evidence for Navalkishore's "anonymous service."

His name appeared on all three.

One member asked, "How was anonymous service verified?"

Surendra Babu said, "The beneficiary told us."

"Then how did it remain anonymous?"

The first ten points became five.

The second file was Devkinandan's.

He had already refused the prize in advance.

One member said, "That is strong evidence of humility."

Mridula showed them the margin of the register.

It was Devkinandan himself who had insisted that the refusal be recorded.

Ten points became six.

Ramakant's file contained fourteen photographs of him sitting at the back.

One member noticed that in all fourteen he was looking towards the camera.

Another member said, "What does that prove?"

The first replied, "Nothing. But by now I am measuring photographs, not humility."

The room fell silent.

Mridula laid her pen on top of the score sheet.

"May I ask a question?"

The chair nodded.

"If proof is required to show that someone deserves the prize, then the nominee must leave traces of his humility."

No one answered.

Mridula continued, "And if he leaves no trace, how are we to know?"

The members looked at one another.

From the veranda outside came the scrape of chairs being moved.

Kamli Devi was arranging chairs for the evening programme.

The chair said, "Then should we discontinue the prize?"

The treasurer was startled.

"The funds have already been approved."

"For the prize."

"Yes."

"Must they necessarily be given to an individual?"

The treasurer looked at the papers.

The sanction letter read: "Annual prize to encourage humble conduct."

It did not name an individual.

The discussion began again.

Someone proposed that the money be spent on a water pot for the library.
Someone suggested reading materials for students.

Someone said the prize should remain, but the recipient's name should not be announced.

Mridula asked of this proposal, "Then who will receive the money?"

Silence again.

At last Surendra Babu said, "This year we will not award points."

"Then what do we do?"

"Put the money into something everyone needs and to which no single person can keep the credit attached."

Behind the auditorium stood the library's old veranda.

Whenever it rained, water came inside.

The children's books had already been soaked twice.

The money would be enough for a drain and a small awning.

The decision was made.

But the problem was not yet over.

How should the notice be worded?

Navalkishore, Devkinandan, Ramakant, and the other nominators would all ask for the result.

Mridula took out a blank sheet of paper.

She wrote: "This year, no ranking of individual humility has been made."

Surendra Babu read it.

"The reason?"

Mridula wrote a second line: "The committee found that the evidence required by the competition was itself changing people's behaviour."

The treasurer said, "That line is too harsh."

Mridula struck it out.

She wrote a new line: "The prize money will be used for work to protect the library veranda."

Everyone agreed.

The notice went up the next day.

By noon, three nominees had come to the library.

Devkinandan said, "I had already said I would not accept the prize."

Navalkishore said, "The committee's decision is proper. My name should appear nowhere."

Ramakant asked, "When the veranda is finished, who will inaugurate it?"

Mridula said, "That has not been decided yet."

The three stood there for a while.

Then each went his own way.

A week later, the mason began work.

The old drain was dug out.

Bricks were unloaded.
The children's books were shifted inside.
The thick nomination file remained on top of the cupboard.
Kamli Devi dusted it every day.
On the day the awning was completed, the chair said, "We could put up a small plaque here."
Mridula asked, "What would it say?"
"Built with the prize money."
"The name of the prize?"
The chair paused.
Kamli, standing at the foot of the ladder, had been listening.
She said, "Rain is coming. Put the books inside first."
Everyone looked up.
Clouds were gathering in the east.
The matter of the plaque was left there.
People began moving the books inside together.
Navalkishore happened to be there; he picked up two bundles.
Devkinandan, returning from the market, saw them and stood holding the door.
Ramakant stopped his vehicle and carried three boxes inside.
No individual name became attached to that work.
No one announced it.
The rain grew heavy.
Water began drumming on the new awning.
Inside, the children's books remained dry.
On top of the cupboard, the "Humility—Evidence" file lay quietly.
Every name was safely preserved inside it.
Outside on the veranda, there was no name at all.

The Last Line

Decorations for the municipal library's twenty-fifth anniversary meeting began in the hall three days in advance.

A cloth banner behind the stage bore the library's old name and the new year.

A book exhibition was being arranged on the right.

On the left stood water-filled earthen pitchers and glasses.

Eight rows of seats had been laid out in the middle.

At the head of every row was a small paper slip.

The first two rows were reserved for founding members, honoured guests, and readers over eighty years of age.

From the third row onward, the general invitees were to sit.

Ramanand Jha read the notice and smiled.

He ran an old shop selling paper and books in the town.

When the library was being established, he had donated five thousand rupees.

Later, on two occasions, he had donated cupboards as well.

Many people in the town knew this.

Ramanand also knew that many people knew it.

This second fact was no less dear to him than the first.

He had received the invitation card five days earlier.

Before his name on the card there was only 'Shri'.

Ever since, the absence of some word such as 'Patron', 'Senior Contributor', or 'Distinguished Member' had continued to bother him.

He said to the secretary, Sudhakar, 'The card has been made very beautifully.'

Sudhakar thanked him.

Ramanand added, 'They have kept the designation beside the name brief. That is good too.'

Sudhakar thanked him again.

Ramanand waited for him to say something more.

Sudhakar did not raise his head from the file.

On the day of the meeting, Ramanand arrived forty-five minutes early.

The hall still smelled of dust and cloth.

Three men laying out the seats were measuring the spacing of the last row.
The moment Ramanand entered, he looked at the first row.
Names were written on the slips there.
Dr Ila Chaudhary.
Jagdish Babu—Founding Member.
Sharda Devi—First Woman Reader.
Prof. Ratneshwar Mishra.
Ramanand's name was in the middle of the third row.
He looked once toward the stage.
Then at his own slip.
Then toward the first row.
Sudhakar was standing beside the steps to the stage.
Ramanand said, 'My knees are not what they used to be.'
Sudhakar immediately replied, 'If you like, we can give you a seat at the end of the row.'

'The end will be fine.'

Sudhakar told a volunteer to place his slip at the end of the third row.
Ramanand was silent for a moment.
'Will the sound reach the back clearly?'

'Yes, it was tested yesterday.'

'My hearing has become a little weak.'

Sudhakar looked at him.
'In that case, I'll keep the end seat in the second row for you.'

A very faint line of satisfaction appeared on Ramanand's face.
The volunteer picked up his slip from the third row and placed it at the end of the second.

Just then Sharda Devi's granddaughter came in.
She said, 'Grandmother does not hear well, and getting up and sitting down is difficult for her.'

Sudhakar showed her the end seat in the first row for Sharda Devi.
Ramanand recognized Sharda Devi's name.
In the library's early years, she had come every evening to read stories aloud to the children.

Ramanand said, 'It is only right that she should sit in front.'

After saying this, his own second row seemed to him a little less far forward.

One of the men laying out the seats was Ramjatan.
For fifteen years he had been arranging seats, tables, and cloth in the hall.
He was not a committee member.
His name was not on the invitation card.

His job was to keep the rows straight, replace wobbly seats, and pack everything away at the end.

Ramjatan had already seen Ramanand's slip moved twice.

He said nothing.

The guests began to arrive.

The third row filled up.

Teachers, traders, and old readers of the town sat in the fourth row.

Teenage readers sat in the fifth.

The last three rows were still half empty.

Ramanand sat down at the end of the second row.

He could see the stage clearly.

He could hear clearly as well.

Even so, his attention kept drifting less toward the stage and more toward the slips in the first row.

One elderly founding member did not come.

A seat in the first row remained empty.

Ramanand looked at the empty seat.

Then he looked at his watch.

There were twenty minutes before the meeting was to begin.

He signalled to Sudhakar.

Sudhakar came over.

Ramanand said softly, 'If that member is not coming, an empty seat will not look good.'

Sudhakar said, 'Let us wait another ten minutes.'

'Of course.'

Ramanand straightened the edge of his gamchha.

Ten minutes later, the seat was still empty.

But in the meantime Sharda Devi, the first woman reader, arrived.

Two people supported her and slowly brought her inside.

The entire hall rose when they saw her.

Ramanand stood as well.

Sharda Devi sat in her seat.

Her granddaughter wanted to remain standing behind her.

Ramanand spoke up, 'Give her a seat nearby too.'

The empty seat in the first row was given to the granddaughter.

There was a smile on Ramanand's face.

But somewhere inside him, a very small calculation changed again.

There was no longer an empty place in the first row.

At that moment a young man came in carrying a camera.

He began checking the light from the right-hand corner of the stage.

Ramanand watched him.

The young man turned the camera toward the second row.
 Ramanand sat a little straighter.
 The young man then moved farther back.
 Ramanand asked Sudhakar, 'Where will the group photograph be taken?'
 'At the end, in front of the stage.'
 'All the members?'
 'First the honoured guests, then the founding members. If there is time, the contributing members too.'
 'All right.'
 Ramanand said 'all right' in a tone that made it clear the question was not yet finished.
 A cable from the sound system ran in front of his seat in the second row.
 A volunteer said, 'Uncle, mind your feet.'
 Ramanand drew his feet back.
 Because of the cable, this corner might prove awkward when photographs were taken.
 He understood that at once.
 He got up.
 At that moment Ramjatan was replacing a wobbly seat in the last row.
 Ramanand called him over.
 'Ramjatan, can you move this seat a little farther forward?'
 Ramjatan looked toward the second row.
 'How far?'
 'Just in front of that pillar.'
 'That would break the row.'
 'What difference can one seat make?'
 Ramjatan put a hand on the back of the seat but did not lift it.
 'Can't you see the stage from here?'
 Ramanand said, 'I can see it.'
 'Can't you hear?'
 'I can hear too.'
 'Then why move forward?'
 Ramanand laughed.
 'Oh, you wouldn't understand.'
 Ramjatan laughed too.
 'I lay out rows, Babu. I understand a little about rows.'
 Before grasping the meaning of the words, Ramanand weighed the tone in which they had been spoken.
 There was no mockery in it.
 Ramjatan said, 'You are not moving forward so that you can see the people on the stage.'

He paused for a moment.
 'You want the people sitting on the stage to see you.'
 No noise rose in the hall.
 No one else paid any attention to the remark.
 But Ramanand felt that after that sentence all the rows of seats looked a little straighter.
 His hand was still on the back of the seat.
 He looked at Ramjatan.
 Ramjatan's attention had already returned to the wobbly leg.
 Bending down, he was slipping a thin piece of wood beneath it.
 Ramanand wanted to say, 'I have done a great deal for this library.'
 The sentence came as far as his lips.
 He did not speak it.
 He wanted to say, 'I have no craving for recognition.'
 That sentence too remained inside him.
 Because neither sentence answered what Ramjatan had said.
 Sudhakar called from a distance, 'We are starting the meeting.'
 Without moving his seat, Ramanand returned to his place in the second row.
 The first speaker began reading the history of the library.
 The years, donations, repairs, number of books, and membership figures were recited.
 Ramanand's name came up once as well.
 By habit, he lifted his head.
 At once he remembered Ramjatan's sentence.
 Instead of looking at the stage, he began looking at the white hair of Sharda Devi seated in front of him.
 Even when her name was mentioned, Sharda Devi did not look back.
 It was as though she were not accustomed to hearing her own name.
 When it was time for the young-reader award, a girl rose from the fifth row.
 She went to the stage and received a book.
 As she returned, she waved directly toward the last row.
 Ramanand looked back.
 Her father was standing there.
 Although seats were available, he stood against the wall because his little son was asleep in his arms.
 It was almost certain that he would not appear in the stage photographs.
 Yet his face showed no sense of having missed out.
 During the interval, Sudhakar came to Ramanand.

‘Ramanand Babu, one of the founding members has gone home. There is a place free in the first row. Come and sit there.’

Ramanand looked toward the first row.

Then toward Ramjatan.

Ramjatan was carrying two extra seats in from outside.

Ramanand said, ‘Leave it. I can see the stage clearly from here.’

Sudhakar paused for a moment.

‘If your hearing—’

‘I can hear clearly too.’

Sudhakar nodded and moved on.

Ramanand gave a slightly awkward laugh at hearing his own answer.

It was the exact reverse of all the excuses he had made earlier.

After the interval came the presentation of honours.

Names were called for the group photographs.

First the honoured guests.

Then the founding members.

Then the committee members.

Time ran short.

No separate photograph was taken of the contributing members.

For a moment, the old bitterness stirred inside Ramanand.

He looked at his watch.

Then he gripped the arm of his seat.

He did not get up.

The meeting ended.

People gathered in front of the stage and began greeting acquaintances.

Ramanand slowly started toward the exit.

By the door, Ramjatan was counting the seats.

Ramanand stopped.

‘How many seats were used today?’

‘One hundred and thirty-two.’

‘And how many people?’

‘I didn’t count them.’

Ramanand laughed.

‘You count rows, not people?’

Ramjatan said, ‘People are hard to count. The same person keeps changing places again and again.’

This time Ramanand laughed openly.

Ramjatan laughed too.

A week later, the small anniversary souvenir reached the shop.

The group photograph was printed on the inside front cover.

At first glance Ramanand looked for his own face.

He was not in the photograph.

His thumb paused at the edge of the page.

The shop assistant asked, 'Babu, your photograph hasn't been printed?'

Ramanand turned the page.

Inside, his name appeared in the list of donors.

In small type, as before.

He did not let his thumb linger on the list.

His eyes went to the photograph of the girl who had received the young-reader award.

Behind her in the photograph, a small portion of the wall by the last row could be seen.

Ramanand remembered her father standing there.

The assistant asked again, 'Next time, you should sit in the first row.'

Ramanand closed the souvenir.

'From the last row, you can see the stage clearly.'

He placed the souvenir on the stack of books.

A customer came in from outside.

Ramanand walked toward him.

The River's Paper

The Kamla River flowed a little east of Garhiya Tola.

Twenty years earlier, it had not been here.

Back then the river ran farther east, and a settlement called Garhiya Tola existed only on people's lips, not on paper.

Ramcharit Sahni had built the first house.

His old home had been washed away in a flood.

He had driven bamboo poles into the sand and raised a hut.

After him came two families.

Then five.

Then the river's old channel kept retreating, and houses kept multiplying along the bank.

Now Garhiya Tola had thirty-seven households.

Some houses were thatched, some made of mud and brick, some half-pucca.

There were two wells.

There was one community hand pump.

In a small courtyard, children studied in the evenings.

Whenever the river rose, sacks of grain were the first things carried up into that courtyard.

To the people, Garhiya Tola was a settlement.

On the revenue map, it was a blue-and-white strip.

Beside that strip were the words: "River zone, zero habitation."

Champa Sahni first saw that sentence at the block office.

She had gone there to have her address certified on her daughter Poonam's scholarship papers.

The clerk opened the map and asked, "What is the plot number of your house?"

Champa said, "My house has no plot number. The tola is written there."

"Where is the tola?"

"On the western riverbank."

The clerk moved a finger over the map.

"There's nothing here."

Champa thought: it was easy to see an empty place on a map.

The map did not know how many hearths burned there each night.

The clerk handed back the scholarship papers.

“Get the address certified by the panchayat.”

Champa gathered up the papers.

As she was leaving, she looked once more at the map.

On that blue strip, her entire settlement did not amount to a single dot.

Two weeks later, four corners were marked with white lime along the riverbank.

The first corner lay in front of Champa’s house.

The second was inside Bhola Mukhiya’s bamboo enclosure.

The third was near the community hand pump.

The fourth touched the edge of the courtyard where the children studied.

A member of the construction team said, “Stone will be stored here.”

“How much stone?” Champa asked.

“It’s embankment work. A lot.”

“In front of the houses?”

“On the map, this is vacant land designated for storing materials.”

Again Champa caught on that one word—vacant.

Ramcharit was no longer alive.

But if the first bamboo stake he had driven into the ground still survived somewhere beneath the soil, the papers would have called that place vacant too.

The next day, the construction team painted red numbers on twelve houses.

They were not house numbers.

They marked the order in which the houses were to be removed.

A 1 appeared on one wall.

A 2 on another.

Champa’s house was marked 7.

Poonam returned from school and saw the 7 on the wall.

“What does this number mean?”

Champa said, “They say there is no house here.”

Poonam did not laugh.

She opened her schoolbag.

She took out her school identity card.

The address read: Garhiya Tola, western riverbank.

“If there is no house, where will this address go?”

Champa had no answer.

That evening, people from the whole tola gathered.

Some said, what harm would it do if stones were stored there; they could put up with it for a few days.

Others said, first the stones, then the machines, and then the houses would go.

An old woman said, "My name is in the ration register. Why is my house not on the papers?"

Bhola said, "Ration papers are not land papers."

"Then I am not asking about the land. I am asking whether I exist," the old woman said.

The meeting fell silent at that.

The next day Champa went to the panchayat office.

There she found an old flood-relief register.

The names of twenty-four families from Garhiya Tola had been entered in it during a flood three years earlier.

At the top of the register were the words: "Riverbank settlement."

Champa asked for a copy.

The clerk said, "This is a relief register, not a land record."

Champa said, "I am not asking you to declare us owners of the land. First write down that people live there."

The clerk kept looking at her.

Then he gave her the copy.

That evening Poonam opened an old tin trunk.

The family's papers were kept inside.

A vaccination slip.

A school certificate.

A ration-distribution receipt.

A list of families taken aboard the flood-rescue boat.

A copy of an application for repairing the hand pump.

And an electricity-bill receipt where, beneath the address, the same words appeared again—Garhiya Tola.

Poonam said, "One office says we exist. Another says we do not."

Champa said, "Keep all the papers together."

For the next three days, the whole tola searched for papers.

Someone had a maternity-assistance slip.

Someone had a notice of an old-age payment.

Someone had a child's school-enrolment paper.

Someone had a receipt from a livestock vaccination camp.

Someone had the serial number under which the family had been entered on the river-crossing rescue-boat list.

Some papers were torn.

On some, the ink had run.

Of some, only half remained.

But every one bore some government stamp or another.

Poonam did not sort the papers by household.

She arranged them by year.

The oldest slip was fourteen years old.

It was in Ramcharit's name.

Place—Garhiya Tola.

Champa stared at that slip for a long time.

When Ramcharit had driven in the first bamboo stake, how could he have known that one day the ink on a slip would have to survive in order to prove that he had existed there?

Poonam made a list of the houses in a thick notebook.

Not House 1, House 2.

By name.

Jamuna Devi.

Bhola Sahni.

Rahim Mian.

Champa Sahni.

Saryu Khatun.

Devnarayan Mallah.

Against each name she wrote which office's document was available.

From which year.

What address it carried.

Of the thirty-seven households, thirty-two had some government paper or another.

Five households had none.

Those five were new.

Champa said, "Do not strike out their names."

Poonam said, "I won't. I'll write beside them—seen on site."

The tola decided that the notebook would make no claim to ownership of the land.

It would record only how many people lived there, how long they had lived there, and which offices had used that address.

Champa said, "Do not add anything that is not true."

Bhola laughed and said, "So now we have become more careful than government papers."

No one laughed.

On the fourth day, the construction team fastened a notice to a stake giving the date when the stones would arrive.

Materials would begin to be stored there in six days.

Champa went to the panchayat secretary.

"Come and inspect the site."

The secretary said, "This is a revenue matter."

The revenue clerk said, "This is a construction-department matter."

The construction official said, "We work according to the map."

Three offices.

Three answers.

The same vacant strip.

Poonam said, "Call all of them on the same day."

"Who will call them?" Champa asked.

"The office whose papers all of them use—the panchayat."

At first the secretary would not agree.

Then Champa placed the copy of the relief register in front of him.

"Is this your office's stamp?"

"Yes, it belongs to our office."

"Where do the people under this stamp live on the map?"

The secretary said nothing.

At last, a date was fixed for a joint site inspection.

On the day of the inspection, there was no procession through the tola.

No slogans were raised.

Poonam drove a small bamboo stake in front of every house and tied a strip of paper to each one.

The strips carried no household names, only the year and office of a government document.

"2014—Vaccination Camp."

"2016—Flood Relief."

"2018—School Enrolment."

"2021—Hand-Pump Repair Application."

"2023—Ration Distribution."

From a distance, the entire settlement looked filled with little paper flags.

The revenue clerk arrived carrying the map.

The construction engineer was with him.

So was the panchayat secretary.

The engineer looked at the first square outlined in white lime.

It was Champa's courtyard.

"On the map, this is open land."

Champa said, "On the ground, this is my courtyard."

"Do you have ownership papers?"

"No."

"Then what you are saying—"

Champa did not interrupt him.

Poonam opened the notebook.

"We have made no claim of ownership. Your plan says zero habitation. Check that claim."

For the first time, the revenue clerk took the notebook.

He turned the pages.

He looked at documents from different government offices carrying the same address.

“None of these documents establishes ownership.”

Poonam said, “Our notebook does not say that either.”

The engineer moved on.

The second white square covered half of the hand pump.

The third lay in the middle of the courtyard where the children studied in the evenings.

The fourth lay across the narrow path leading to the river.

That was the path where the boat came in during floods.

The engineer asked his assistant, “If materials are stored here, will this path be blocked?”

“Yes.”

“An alternative path?”

The assistant looked at the map.

The path was not on the map either.

In Poonam’s notebook, an entire page was devoted to it.

The flood-relief boat list.

Boarding point—Garhiya Tola western path.

The engineer read the list.

Champa said nothing.

She only kept looking toward the river.

The inspection continued past noon.

Thirty-seven households were counted.

Government papers were examined for thirty-two households.

Five newer households were recorded on site.

Two wells.

One hand pump.

One community courtyard.

One boat path.

The revenue clerk added a new page to his file.

At the top he wrote: “Site Verification.”

Below it he wrote: “Map records zero habitation; thirty-seven households found on site.”

He paused.

Then he added: “Ownership status to be examined separately.”

Champa read the page.

This time she did not ask for a single word to be changed.

The engineer shifted the material-storage site a little farther north on the construction map.

There lay an old sandy stretch of the riverbed, with no houses on it.

"Suspend the numbering of houses for removal until the boundary survey is completed," he told his assistant.

The red 7 was still on Champa's wall.

No one erased it that day.

Three days later, it rained.

The red paint ran a little.

One edge of the 7 blurred.

Poonam did not whitewash over it.

She said, "Leave it. This too is evidence, like a paper."

Champa laughed.

"A wall is not a paper."

Poonam said, "And if a paper cannot see the place, what makes it so much better than a wall?"

This time Champa did not try to silence her.

A month later, two surveyors from the revenue department arrived.

They carried a newly printed map.

The blue strip was still empty.

But along its edge, in small letters, were the words: "Habitation—site verification pending."

The first surveyor asked, "Where should we start counting the households?"

Champa looked toward the river.

Then toward the place where the old map had shown nothing.

"Start where the paper is blank."

The surveyor drove in the first stake.

It stood in front of where Ramcharit's old house had been.

The Number on the Brick

On Ramdev's first day at the kiln gate, no one asked his name.

The clerk placed a small round tin token in his hand.

Painted on it in white was the number 31.

"This is your number."

Ramdev turned the token over.

There was nothing on the back.

"Where do I write my name?"

The clerk laughed.

"I'll remember the name. We use numbers for the work."

Ramdev tied the token into the corner of his gamchha.

From that day on, many people at the kiln called him Ramdev, but in the ledger he was 31.

On the rows of unbaked bricks: 31.

On the day's count: 31.

On the margin of the advance account: 31.

On the list of broken bricks: 31.

Ramdev had no objection to being a number.

When the work was counting bricks, numbers were convenient.

Five hundred bricks in one row.

Seven hundred and twenty in the next.

How many had been made by noon, how many by evening—the clerk could tell at once from the figures.

Little by little, Ramdev too grew used to his number.

A voice would come from far away: "Thirty-one!"

He would turn his head.

Sometimes someone joked, "Not Ramdev—Thirty-one Babu."

He would laugh.

The kiln stood on the outskirts of Sonbarsa village.

On winter mornings the smoke hung low.

The long rows of unbaked bricks disappeared into the fog.

Those who kneaded the clay worked in one place.

Those who filled the moulds in another.

Those who carried the unbaked bricks in another.

Those who tended the kiln in another.
 Everyone had a number of his own.
 Nandu worked with Ramdev.
 Nandu was 32.
 Salim was 33.
 Bhuwan was 34.
 When they spoke to one another, they used names.
 When the accounts were opened, the numbers came to the front.
 Until then, Ramdev had never thought to question such a system.
 He had come to work on the twelfth day of Poush.
 That day, he received a three-thousand-rupee advance.
 His name was written on the advance receipt—Ramdev Mandal.
 The date was written too.
 He had put his thumbprint on it.
 His half of the receipt was given to him.
 He put that piece of paper in his old iron trunk.
 The trunk stayed beneath his cot in a thatched hut at the kiln.
 Ramdev kept a separate little notebook for the daily count.
 He could not write full sentences, but he knew his numerals well.
 He wrote the date.
 Beside it, the number of bricks.
 Sometimes his count was twenty or twenty-five off the clerk's.
 Then the two of them counted again.
 Most of the time, the difference disappeared.
 In the last week of Phagun came the kiln's first major settlement of accounts.
 The workers were called one by one.
 A thick ledger lay open before the clerk.
 For each number he read out the bricks made, the advance, small expenses, and deductions.
 The account for 32 was settled.
 Then 33.
 After that the clerk called, "Thirty-one."
 Ramdev came and sat in front of him.
 The clerk pressed his thumb to the page.
 "The total count is correct. Advance: three thousand. Two grain receipts. And damage—one thousand eight hundred bricks."
 Ramdev lifted his head.
 "What damage?"
 "The unbaked bricks that broke in the first firing."
 "Mine?"

"It says ३१ here."
 Ramdev leaned toward the ledger.
 There, in red ink, really was ३१.
 Beside it—१८००.
 "What day was this?"
 The clerk turned the page.
 "The seventh of Poush."
 At first Ramdev said nothing.
 Then he said, "I came on the twelfth of Poush."
 The clerk looked at him.
 "The number was ३१."
 "But I wasn't here."
 "There's no name in the ledger."
 "Then how can the ledger say I'm the one at fault?"
 The people sitting nearby fell silent.
 The clerk looked at the page again.
 To him, ३१ was one continuous line.
 ३१ on the seventh of Poush.
 ३१ on the twelfth of Poush.
 ३१ all the way through Phagun.
 The person had changed in between; the ledger had not.
 Ramdev went back to his hut.
 He opened the iron trunk.
 He took out his half of the advance receipt.
 The paper had gone slightly soft with the damp of sweat.
 The date was clear.
 Poush १२.
 The name was clear too.
 Ramdev Mandal.
 He placed the receipt before the clerk.
 "This is the day you gave me the advance."
 The clerk read the receipt.
 "Yes. This very day."
 "Then who was ३१ on the seventh of Poush?"
 The clerk's thumb stopped on the ledger.
 He turned back through the pages.
 There was no arrival entry for the old ३१.
 There were only counts.
 Nandu said, "There was someone here before Ramdev."
 "His name?"
 Nandu scratched his head.

“Suresh... or Surjan...”

Salim said, “He used to tie a red gamchha around his head.”

Bhuwan added, “They said his home was somewhere toward Supaul.”

The clerk did not become angry.

He simply grew uneasy.

“No one remembers his name properly?”

The three men looked at one another.

All of them had worked beside that man.

Not one of them could recall his full name.

The kiln owner, Madhusudan Babu, arrived just then.

The clerk explained the matter to him.

Madhusudan looked at the receipt.

He checked the date.

“Ramdev wasn’t here on the seventh of Poush.”

He drew a line through the 1800 written in red ink.

“Remove this deduction from Ramdev’s account.”

Ramdev breathed a sigh of relief.

But Madhusudan asked the next question.

“Then where is the old 31’s account?”

The clerk said, “He left midway.”

“How many bricks had he made?”

“It’s on this page.”

“How much was he still owed?”

The clerk fell silent.

“His name?”

The silence grew heavier.

Madhusudan did not close the ledger.

He reopened every old page for number 31.

The figures were very clear.

There was not a single name.

Ramdev thought that without that half-receipt, the burden of those 1,800 bricks would have remained on him.

And if some wages were still due to the old 31, under whose name would they be paid?

Work began again that evening.

Ramdev went on slapping clay into the mould.

His tin 31 was tied into his gamchha.

Until then, the number had seemed like a light little thing.

That day he understood that sometimes a number lasts longer than a person.

The next morning, the clerk brought out the box of workers' tin number tags.

There were spare numbers in the box too.

47.

52.

61.

On some of the old numbers, the paint had worn away.

The clerk said, "The trouble came from reusing the numbers."

Nandu asked, "Then should we stop using numbers?"

The clerk answered at once, "No. Without numbers the counting would be chaos."

Ramdev said, "Keep the numbers."

Everyone looked at him.

"But when a number is given to someone, write the name as well."

The clerk said, "If we write names too, the ledger will get longer."

Ramdev did not laugh.

"By one line."

Madhusudan Babu was standing nearby.

He said, "Let it grow by one line."

A new page was drawn up that day.

There were four columns at the top.

Number.

Full name.

Village.

Date work began.

The clerk said, "We need the end date too."

A fifth column was added.

Ramdev's row was filled in first.

31.

Ramdev Mandal.

Belahi.

Poush 12.

End date—blank.

Ramdev kept looking at the page.

For the first time, he saw his name and 31 on the same line.

Nandu said, "And the old 31?"

The clerk made a separate row above for him.

In the space for the name, he wrote: "Unknown; red gamchha, somewhere toward Supaul."

Madhusudan said, "Don't leave it as 'unknown.' Ask around. Someone may know his name."

Two days later, Bhuwan remembered the name.
 He had once gone to the market with that former worker.
 His name was Surjan Yadav.
 Nandu remembered the name of the village.
 The clerk corrected the ledger.
 A week later, someone from the kiln cycled to that village.
 Surjan was not there.
 He had gone to Punjab.
 But his family was there.
 The account showed that two days' wages were still due to him.
 It was not a very large amount.
 But before, the owner of that money had been only ३१.
 Now its owner had a name.
 The heat of Chaitra grew stronger.
 Work at the kiln quickened.
 New workers arrived.
 One morning, a thin young man came to the gate.
 The clerk opened the box to give him a tin token.
 "Number 47."
 The young man held out his hand.
 Before giving him the token, the clerk opened the ledger.
 "Name?"
 "Ikram Ansari."
 "Village?"
 "Parsa."
 "Starting work today?"
 "Yes, from today."
 The clerk wrote down the date.
 Only then did he place the tin 47 in the young man's hand.
 Ramdev was kneading clay a little distance away.
 He heard the whole exchange.
 He said nothing.
 At noon, the count was taken.
 The clerk called, "Thirty-one—Ramdev Mandal."
 Ramdev stood up.
 Nandu joked, "Now the name comes with it too."
 Ramdev untied the tin token and looked at it.
 ३१ was still the same.
 The paint had chipped a little.
 He tied the token back into his gamchha.
 That evening, only ३१ was chalked on the new row of unbaked bricks.

There, no name was needed.

But in the ledger, beside ३१, the ink read: Ramdev Mandal, Belahi, from Poush १२.

The ink was not yet completely dry.

The Forest Road

West of Belsar village lay a sal grove.

The forest was not very large, but for the people of three hamlets, the path through that green strip was part of daily life.

Belsar lay on one side of the path, the paved road on the other.

Along that road were the milk collection centre, the high school, the post office, and the weekly market.

The path through the sal grove was a little under one and a half kos long.

Going around by the embankment made the distance nearly four kos.

Every morning Saroja Devi came along that path carrying two cans of milk.

Her bicycle was old; its bell rang half the time and merely trembled the other half.

At the first bend, she would meet the children from Mahuatol.

Some were going to school; others were headed for the road to catch a vehicle to the market.

At the second bend, people bound for Ramphal Sah's flour mill in Dumri would join the path.

No motor vehicle had ever travelled along this path.

It was just wide enough for two bicycles to squeeze past each other with difficulty.

One Monday morning in Bhadau, Saroja saw a red cloth tied across the mouth of the path.

Behind the cloth, two bamboo poles had been driven into the ground.

In thick letters made with lime on the earth were the words: ENTRY CLOSED.

Saroja stopped her bicycle.

Forest guard Bateshwar Jha stood there with three labourers.

The labourers had spades in their hands.

To one side lay bundles of young sal saplings.

The rain expected over the next three days was said to be crucial for the forest planting.

That was why the labourers had been ordered to cut the first trench across the path that very day.

Once the trench was dug, it would be impossible to get a bicycle through with milk cans.

Saroja asked, "What has happened here?"

Bateshwar opened the map tucked under his arm.

On the map, the line through the forest had been struck through with a red cross.

"Under the new forest plan, this route is closed."

"Route?" Saroja bent over the map.

"Is my path shown here?"

Bateshwar put his finger on it.

"On this line."

"Then how is it closed?"

"The map says it is closed."

Saroja looked back at the ground.

Just then three children arrived with schoolbags hanging from their shoulders.

They stopped when they saw the red barrier.

Behind them came Gону Rai with milk cans hanging from his bicycle.

After him came two women carrying baskets for the market.

Within ten minutes, a small crowd had gathered at the mouth of the path.

Someone said they should pull out the bamboo poles.

Someone else said they would make another footpath across the forest.

Saroja did not even touch the bamboo.

"If we pull it out in the night, tomorrow the papers will say we forced our way in."

Bateshwar looked at her.

"Then what will you do?"

"First, let us understand what exactly the map is closing."

Bateshwar had a thick file with him.

In that file they found a brief note from an old survey.

An inspection had been carried out three years earlier, in Sawan.

The note read: "Unpaved motor road; culvert damaged; vehicular traffic closed."

Saroja read it once, then again.

"It says vehicles here."

Bateshwar remained silent.

The legend on the new map said only: "Route closed."

The old word "motor" had disappeared.

Bateshwar said, "I cannot ignore what is written in the papers and open the path on my own authority."

Saroja replied, "I am not asking you to do that either."
 She had the blank back of a red milk slip with her.
 She took out a pencil.
 "Let us count how many people use this path in a single day."
 A few people in the crowd laughed.
 Bateshwar did not.
 "What will counting prove?"
 "At the very least, it will show whether the thing being closed is actually in use."
 Bateshwar told the labourers to stop digging.
 "Until noon."
 Saroja did not go to the milk collection centre.
 The centre stopped weighing milk at seven forty-five.
 Saroja knew that if her milk arrived late that day, it would be entered in the evening account.
 Even so, she did not leave the mouth of the path.
 Gonu Rai took her two cans along with his own.
 Saroja sat down at the entrance to the path.
 Bateshwar brought an old board from the forest outpost.
 He drew four columns on it: on foot, bicycle, animal, other.
 The first row recorded seven schoolchildren.
 Then came five people taking milk to the collection centre.
 Then Lakshmikant Mishra, an elderly man on his way to the post office.
 He needed to have his monthly pension form verified.
 When he heard about the route along the embankment, he said, "My knees do not understand a four-kos map."
 Saroja smiled, but drew only a single mark on the board.
 By eight o'clock, forty-eight people had passed.
 Of those forty-eight, twelve were schoolchildren, nine were taking milk, five carried market baskets, and the rest were headed for the road.
 Bateshwar recorded this breakdown in a separate row.
 Saroja said, "Let the count be kept in such a way that tomorrow no one can say it was only a market-day crowd."
 By ten o'clock, the number had reached eighty-six.
 Someone was going to sell greens.
 Someone else to have a ploughshare sharpened.
 Someone empty-handed to catch a vehicle on the road.
 Someone to bring back salt and oil from the market.
 From time to time, Bateshwar kept asking their purpose.
 Saroja said, "Count the path, not the purpose."
 "Why not ask the purpose?"

"The work they have today will keep changing. The path will remain."
At eleven o'clock, the Forest Department's area assistant arrived by jeep.
The jeep did not enter the forest.
It was stopped by the roadside.

The area assistant looked at the map, then the board, then the line of people beyond the bamboo poles.

"Were all these people specially called here today?"

Saroja said, "No. We are counting whoever happens to come."

The area assistant looked at Bateshwar.

Bateshwar nodded.

"I have been here since morning."

By noon, one hundred and thirty-two people had passed.

By then the sun was high.

The people sitting at the path entrance kept changing, but the counting did not stop.

No one who passed was made to stop and listen to a speech; only a tally mark was drawn.

That simplicity caught the area assistant's attention more than anything else.

Not a single motor vehicle was among them.

There were twenty-seven bicycles.

The rest were on foot.

The area assistant placed his pencil on the red cross on the map.

"This survey concerned a route fit for motor traffic."

Saroja asked, "Then is there no separate symbol for a footpath?"

"Not on this map."

"Then how can something that has no symbol here be declared closed?"

The area assistant did not answer at once.

The labourers were sitting on the bundles of saplings.

By two o'clock, the count had reached one hundred and sixty-nine.

Bateshwar himself set off once to measure the alternative route along the embankment.

He went on foot.

By the time he returned, his sandals were packed with slick mud.

"Not quite four kos," he said, "but more than three."

Saroja did not write that on the board.

"Measuring distance is your job."

That evening, a meeting was held at the forest outpost.

Some young men wanted the entire old route opened to motor vehicles as well.

Their argument was that since the department was already giving ground, they might as well take the full benefit.

One young man said that if motor vehicles were allowed, loads from the market could be brought in more easily.

Saroja showed them the day's tally on the board.

The column for motor vehicles stood at zero.

Saroja objected.

"Let us ask for no more than what we actually need."

"If the path is being opened anyway, why not allow motor vehicles too?" one young man asked.

"Because once motor vehicles begin using it, the forest path will become a road."

For the first time, Bateshwar spoke in Saroja's support. "And then the map will start saying something else again."

The area assistant wrote out a proposal: the old strip used for local pedestrian and bicycle traffic would be preserved; narrow posts would be installed at both entrances to stop motor vehicles; and the plantation would be shifted to either side of the path.

That night, no bamboo pole was pulled out.

The next day, the ENTRY CLOSED strip was not removed; it was merely moved aside.

The measuring began.

The path was four cubits wide in some places, five in others.

Where rainwater had cut into it, packed earth was used instead of gravel.

At two points inside the forest, the rows of saplings were shifted half a cubit.

A week later, two sturdy posts were planted at each entrance.

A bicycle could pass between them.

A motor vehicle could not.

A new sign was put up: "LOCAL PEDESTRIAN-BICYCLE PATH. MOTOR VEHICLES PROHIBITED."

Saroja read the sign.

"Is it right now?" Bateshwar asked.

"The sign is right. What about the map?"

Bateshwar laughed.

"That is being corrected too."

A month later, a new map arrived at the forest outpost.

During that month, the planting had also been completed.

The saplings that had first been placed in the middle of the path now stood in rows along both sides.

Bateshwar said that saving the path had not reduced the number of saplings; only the line had changed.

The red cross was gone.

In place of the thick line, a thin dotted line ran through the sal grove.

In the legend beside it were the words: local pedestrian-bicycle path.

Bateshwar showed the map to Saroja.

She did not look at it for long.

It was almost time for the morning milk run.

She lifted her bicycle.

She carefully guided the milk cans through the gap between the two posts.

Behind her, the schoolchildren were coming along.

The young sal saplings stood in straight rows on both sides of the path.

The path between them was as narrow as it had always been.

The only difference was that now, even on the map, it looked like a path rather than a road.

The Labourer's Signature

The desilting of Belahi Pond began in the second week of Phagun.

The pond's water had already fallen very low.

A thick layer of black silt lay exposed along the banks.

The villagers said that if the silt could be removed before the rains arrived, the pond would breathe again.

Twenty-six women and nine men were engaged in the work.

Dhanwanti Paswan was among them.

She was about forty-five years old.

She could not read, but she kept a careful account of each day's work in her memory.

How many baskets of silt had been lifted, which day it had rained, which day a spade had broken—she remembered it all.

In the evening Jagdish, who kept the work records, would open a register.

Against each name were columns for days, measurement, rate, and amount due.

Dhanwanti could not read her own name.

She simply watched Jagdish's finger.

"Here."

At that spot she pressed down her inked thumb.

During the first week, the procedure caused her no difficulty.

The first wage payment came on time.

At the end of the second week, it rained one day.

Silt was dug in the morning, but by noon the pond bed had turned slippery.

Instead of stopping work, the supervisor told the group to fill sacks with the silt already taken out and move them to higher ground along the bank.

Dhanwanti and the other women spent two hours lifting sacks.

After that, a temporary bamboo barrier was put up beside the pond.

Everyone remained at the site until evening that day.

Three days later the same thing happened again.

This time no silt was dug.

The whole day was spent clearing weeds and debris from the mouth of the old drainage channel.

Dhanwanti remembered that day especially because a small blister had formed in the middle of her right palm.

On payment day, Jagdish called out the names one by one.

When Dhanwanti's turn came, she received less money than she had expected.

She counted the notes, then counted them again.

"Why are two days missing?" she blurted out.

Jagdish looked at the register.

"Not two days. One and a half."

"Was I at home for a day and a half?"

"Not at home. The measurement was short."

Dhanwanti did not understand.

"A full day, but less measurement—what kind of account is that?"

Jagdish placed a fingernail on one of the columns in the register.

"Look here. Half measurement on the rainy day. Half on the drainage day too."

Dhanwanti stared at the page.

Black lines, small figures, and the mark of her thumb.

Jagdish's words—"Look here"—lodged inside her.

She could not read what he was asking her to see.

She could only stare at the page.

That night Dhanwanti did not keep thinking about the bundle of notes; she kept thinking about the columns in the register.

The next morning she went to work.

She lifted silt.

At noon, while stopping for water, she paused by Jagdish's table.

"Say those four words again."

"Which four?"

"Name, day, measurement, rate."

Jagdish laughed.

"And amount due."

"Yes, that makes five."

With her finger, Dhanwanti drew five boxes in the earth.

Jagdish wrote the first letter in each box.

Dhanwanti did not learn the letters that day.

She learned the order of the boxes.

Name first.

Day second.

Measurement third.

Rate fourth.

Amount due fifth.

That evening, with a piece of charcoal, she drew five lines on the wall of her house.

Her daughter-in-law Sunita asked, "What's that?"

Dhanwanti said, "The five houses of a wage."

Sunita had studied through the seventh class.

She did not laugh.

She brought a scrap of paper.

"Learn the numbers first. The letters can come later."

That made sense to Dhanwanti.

Numbers were not entirely unfamiliar to her.

She heard prices at the market.

She counted bus fares.

But connecting written numerals with the spoken numbers was new to her.

Sunita wrote the digits from zero to nine.

Beside each digit, Dhanwanti placed that many grains of rice.

Within three days she had begun to recognize single-digit numbers.

On the fifth day she joined two digits and read them together.

"Twelve days."

Sunita said, "Correct."

Dhanwanti smiled.

"Now I'll be able to see on the paper whether I've worked twelve days or not."

Sunita wrote the five words again.

First box—name.

Day.

Measurement.

Rate.

Amount due.

Dhanwanti could not yet read each whole word at a glance.

She began by recognizing their shapes.

"Day" was short.

"Measurement" had a distinctive shape in the middle.

"Amount due" stretched longer at the end.

Ten days later, when Jagdish opened the register, Dhanwanti did not wait for his finger this time.

She found the first box herself.

Sunita had first taught her the opening "Dh" of her own name.

She could not read the whole of "Dhanwanti," but she recognized the "Dh" and the position of her row.

In the days column was "12."

She read it.
 "Twelve days."
 Jagdish's finger stopped.
 Dhanwanti moved to the third column.
 There it said "10½."
 She did not understand the half sign.
 "What is this crooked mark?"
 Jagdish said, "Half."
 Dhanwanti looked at the page again.
 "Twelve days. Measurement ten and a half."
 "Yes, that's right."
 "Then where did the other day and a half go?"
 "I told you—the measurement was short on the rainy day."
 This time Dhanwanti did not let the page go.
 "That day I carried sacks. On the other day I cleaned the drainage channel."
 "That wasn't measured work."
 "Then which box is it in?"
 Jagdish fell silent.
 Dhanwanti looked at the heading row at the top of the register.
 After the five familiar words there was another small box.
 She did not know that word.
 "What does this word say?"
 Jagdish read it slowly: "Other work."
 Dhanwanti repeated the words.
 "Other work."
 The box was blank.
 "Was carrying sacks and cleaning the drainage channel not other work?"
 Jagdish turned the page.
 "The supervisor told you to do it. I didn't enter it on the measurement sheet."
 "Why not?"
 "Because there was no measurement."
 For the first time Dhanwanti understood that wages could be cut not because the work was absent, but because a column for it was.
 She asked to see the rows for the other women.
 At first Jagdish hesitated.
 Then he turned the register around on the table.
 Dhanwanti could not read all the names.
 But she could recognize "12."
 One row, then another, then a third.

Eleven people who had worked twelve days had been entered as ten and a half in the measurement column.

For three men, all twelve had been entered.

Dhanwanti asked, "What did these three do on those days?"

Jagdish said, "They put up the bamboo posts."

"They didn't dig silt either."

"No, they didn't."

"Then where is their other work written?"

Jagdish turned the page back again.

In the "Other work" column of all three rows, "1½" had been entered.

Dhanwanti's face did not harden.

She simply looked at the page for a long time.

"Did our sacks and drainage work happen in the air?"

Jagdish said, "No."

"Then why is there only empty space on the paper?"

That evening the payment was not held back.

Jagdish called the supervisor.

At first the supervisor said that remaking the measurement sheet would take time.

From the fold of her sari, Dhanwanti took out her paper with the five boxes.

In a sixth box Sunita had written a new phrase—"Other work."

Dhanwanti read the words slowly.

The supervisor looked at her.

"Do you know how to read?"

Dhanwanti said, "Not everything. Just enough for my wages."

At that answer Kusuma, Rampari, and Phulkali laughed.

The supervisor checked the register again.

Jagdish confirmed that it was the supervisor himself who had given the verbal instructions for those two days' work.

The "Other work" done by the three men who had put up the bamboo posts had been recorded.

But the column was blank for the eleven women who had carried sacks and cleared the drainage channel.

The supervisor said, "This is an entry error."

Dhanwanti corrected him: "That error costs a day and a half."

The following week a correction sheet was prepared.

A day and a half was added against each of the eleven rows.

This time Dhanwanti checked the figures herself.

Twelve days.

Twelve measured workdays.

Rate.

Amount due.

Everything matched.

Jagdish slid the inkpot toward her.

“Thumbprint?”

Dhanwanti held out her hand, then stopped.

“I’ve learned to write my name.”

Writing her whole name in one continuous flow was still difficult.

Night after night, Sunita had made her practise its five letters.

Dhanwanti took hold of the pen.

The first “Dh” came out a little crooked.

The “n” in the middle was too small.

The final vowel mark climbed too high.

But on the page, instead of the round inked mark of her thumb, stood her written name.

Jagdish said, “Now you have a signature.”

Dhanwanti turned the page back toward herself.

“The signature comes later. First the account.”

She read each box once more.

First box—name.

Day.

Measurement.

Rate.

Other work.

Amount due.

Only after everything matched did she put the pen down on the table.

On the next payment day, Rampari moved forward to press down her thumb.

Dhanwanti did not stop her hand.

She turned the register toward her instead.

“First look at the days column.”

Rampari said, “I don’t know how to read.”

Dhanwanti replied, “I don’t know all of it either.”

She placed a finger on the word “Day.”

“Start here.”

By the third week, the desilting of the pond was almost complete.

The soil along the bank was gradually levelled.

Something new had appeared in the register too.

The “Other work” column was no longer left blank for anyone.

Dhanwanti’s signature was not very beautiful.

Sometimes the “Dh” grew too large; sometimes the final vowel mark slipped down.

But she kept reading the figures written directly above it.

For her, a labourer’s signature was no longer merely a name in ink.

The road to that name now passed through five or six columns.

The Erosion Zone

Behind Kushaha Tola stood a small hillock.

In the rains, scrub grew over its slope; in winter, the red earth gleamed.

On the other side of the hillock, a lease for stone quarrying had been granted five years earlier.

At first, the villagers regarded it as work taking place far away.

Two or three times a day came a dull thud; the ground trembled slightly, and then everyone returned to what they had been doing.

Sugiya Devi's field lay below the hillock.

A little less than one bigha.

Pigeon pea on the upper part, maize in the middle, and a small patch of paddy lower down.

At one corner of the field stood an old culvert belonging to the irrigation department.

The number "4" was painted in white on its side.

Sugiya's father used to say, "As long as that number remains, the corner of the field will never be lost."

Until then, Sugiya had understood those words only in relation to the boundary ridge.

One morning she saw a bamboo pole tied with a red cloth standing among the pigeon pea.

The pole had not been there the day before.

It stood halfway into the field.

Sugiya went up to it and touched the soil.

The bamboo had been newly planted.

Beside it was written: "Safety."

At noon, a guard from the quarry came.

"There will be blasting today," he said. "Don't remain inside this marker."

Sugiya asked, "Is this the lease boundary?"

"No, only a safety line."

"Then why is it in my field?"

"Stones may fly this way."

That day Sugiya left the pigeon pea and went home.

When she returned in the evening, the bamboo pole was still there.

It was there the next day too.

And the third day.

A week later the red cloth had faded, but the bamboo pole had not been removed.

When Sugiya went in to pick pigeon pea, the guard said, "From now on, don't come too far this way."

"There's no blasting today."

"It is better to be careful."

Sugiya said nothing.

She picked the pigeon pea and carried it home.

Fifteen days later, a second bamboo pole was planted.

Twelve or fifteen cubits farther into the field than the first.

This time the cloth was yellow.

Beside it again was written: "Safety."

Sugiya looked at the first red bamboo pole.

It was still there too.

There were now two lines.

The old line and the new one.

The quarry workers said, "A crack has been found farther ahead, so the distance has been increased."

"For how many days?"

"As long as necessary."

From that day, Sugiya began counting the distance from the corner of her field.

She counted her steps from Culvert Number Four to the first red bamboo pole.

One hundred and fourteen steps.

To the yellow bamboo pole, ninety-six.

Back home, she wrote on the last page of an old notebook:

"Red—114. Yellow—96."

Sugiya could read numbers perfectly well.

When it came to land, numbers had never felt burdensome to her.

The following month, the mining company distributed small slips to four houses beside the field.

The slip read: "Temporary safety restriction."

Sugiya's field-plot number was on it as well.

It said not to enter the field for two days.

A small payment was made for those two days.

Sugiya kept the slip.

She did not go to the field that day.

On the third day, she went.

Beyond the yellow bamboo pole, small pieces of stone lay scattered on the ground.

She picked them up and put them outside the boundary ridge.

By Kartik, the pigeon pea had been harvested.

Sugiyā wanted to sow lentils in that same patch.

The guard said, "Don't sow in this strip."

"The slip said two days."

"There is still a risk."

"Then give me another slip."

The guard did not answer.

Sugiyā sowed the lentils.

The whistle sounded twice.

She left the field.

The blasting took place.

In the evening she returned to the field.

This time the lentils came up.

But in the middle of winter, a new blue flag was planted even farther inside than the yellow bamboo pole.

Sugiyā counted her steps again.

From Culvert Number Four to the blue flag: seventy-two steps.

In the notebook she wrote:

"Blue—72."

In three months, the line had moved from 114 steps to 72.

The quarried section was still some distance away.

But the field seemed smaller.

In Phagun, an employee from the circle office came for an inspection.

Standing beside the field, he asked, "Why is there less crop in this strip?"

The mining company's clerk said, "People no longer sow on this part."

Sugiyā heard him.

"I sow here."

The clerk smiled. "A little."

Sugiyā pointed to the rows of lentils.

On this side of the blue flag the lentils were thick.

On the other side they were sparse.

Whenever the whistle sounded, people had to leave that part of the field; they kept their animals away, and irrigation was delayed.

The employee wrote on his paper: "Mining-affected fallow strip."

Sugiyā immediately asked, "How is it fallow?"

"It is not being fully cultivated."

"Cultivation has decreased because your people told us to leave the field."

“Not our people,” the employee said.
 Sugiya took out all three slips.
 The first, the two-day notice.
 The second, a safety notice.
 The third, a one-week restriction.
 “If the restriction exists on your paper, how did the land become fallow by my choice?”
 The employee looked at the papers again.
 “These restrictions are temporary.”
 “Then ‘fallow’ should also be written as temporary.”
 The employee remained silent for a few moments.
 The clerk intervened. “The line is only for safety.”
 Sugiya opened her notebook.
 “Then why did the safety line move from 114 steps to 72 in three months?”
 The clerk laughed. “Steps are not an official measurement.”
 “Fine,” Sugiya said. “Have it measured officially.”
 The inspection ended there that day.
 For two weeks, nothing happened.
 The blue flag remained where it was.
 One morning Sugiya saw a thin line being drawn with white lime beyond the blue flag.
 She asked, “What is this?”
 The young man doing the work said, “So that the excavation zone can be seen clearly.”
 “Will the quarrying come this far?”
 “I was told only to draw the line.”
 Sugiya did not stop the lime from being laid.
 She walked to Culvert Number Four.
 She opened her notebook.
 She counted her steps.
 The lime line was sixty-eight steps from the culvert.
 She wrote: “Lime—68.”
 Then she went to the circle office.
 This time she did not say, “Save my field.”
 She said, “Show me the lease boundary, the safety line, and the excavation line separately.”
 The surveyor sitting in the room looked up.
 “All three?”
 Sugiya placed her notebook before him.
 “Red 114. Yellow 96. Blue 72. Lime 68. Culvert Number Four is still where it was.”

The surveyor asked, "Is the culvert an officially recorded marker?"

"It has a number painted on it."

The old survey map was brought out.

On the map, the mining-lease boundary was marked with a thick black line.

No safety line was marked within it.

It could change, because the manner of quarrying changed.

But it was not a boundary of land ownership.

The surveyor said, "We need a joint measurement on site."

Three days later, the measurement was carried out.

A representative of the mining company came.

The circle surveyor came.

An irrigation-department employee brought the record for Culvert Number Four.

Five farmers from the village also stood there.

Sugiya stood quietly on the boundary ridge.

The measuring chain was stretched out from the culvert.

The first permanent lease marker was half buried in the earth.

When the scrub was cut away, its top became visible.

An old serial number was marked on it.

The black boundary on the map matched that marker.

The red bamboo pole stood outside it.

So did the yellow bamboo pole.

The blue flag and the lime line lay even farther inside the field.

The mining-company representative said, "All these were for safety, not to extend the lease."

The surveyor said, "Then once the safety restriction ends, the markers must be removed."

"Because of the cracks, we need to keep a distance."

"Keep the distance," the surveyor said, "but do not call it the lease boundary or a permanent excavation zone."

For the first time, Sugiya spoke: "And when the field remains empty because of it, don't call it fallow."

The circle-office employee remembered his earlier remark.

He added a new sentence to the file:

"Cultivation partly obstructed by safety restrictions."

That sentence did not immediately make the field any larger.

Nor did it stop the sound of stone blasting.

But all three temporary markers were removed.

On blasting days, a red flag was now put up only alongside a slip stating the time, and was removed in the evening.

At the lease boundary, the two permanent stone markers were raised above the ground again.

Their serial numbers were repainted.

The next season, Sugiya sowed peas where the blue flag had stood.

At the first irrigation, the water crossed the old lime line and flowed beyond it.

The lime mark disappeared even before the rains.

One day her granddaughter asked, "Where is the boundary of this field?"

Sugiya pointed out the distant stone marker.

Then she pointed to Culvert Number Four.

"Remember these two."

"What about the red and yellow flags?"

"Those only tell you what is happening that day," Sugiya said. "They are not the boundary of the land."

Her granddaughter went on ahead, counting the rows of peas.

Sugiya stood on the boundary ridge.

The dull thud from the quarry came again.

The ground trembled slightly.

The pea leaves quivered, then grew still.

Culvert Number Four remained where it was.

Ration Day

In Sonbarsa village, the seventh day of every month was set aside for ration distribution.

From early morning, people began gathering in front of the shop with sacks, bags, and brass or plastic containers.

Sonmati Devi arrived at seven o'clock.

She was seventy-two years old.

Her body was frail, her gait slow, but her memory remained sharp.

She kept her old ration slip folded inside a red cloth.

The corners of the slip had worn thin.

Inside were small marks showing that she had received grain through the previous month.

Sonmati now lived alone in her house.

One son lived in Punjab; the other worked as a labourer near Janakpur.

Both names had been removed from the household list long ago.

She collected her five kilos of rice and her wheat ration herself.

The dealer, Brijmohan, opened the register.

"Tell me your name."

"Sonmati Devi, wife of the late Harinarayan Sah."

Brijmohan ran a finger down the register.

Then he checked another page.

"Your name isn't here this time."

Sonmati thought she had heard him wrong.

"Look again."

Brijmohan looked again.

"I can't find the name."

"It was there last month."

"Last month's register was different."

Sonmati unfolded the red cloth.

"Look at this. You made the mark here yourself."

Brijmohan examined the slip.

"I'm not denying that. But your name isn't on today's list."

The people standing behind her began to shift impatiently.

Someone said, "Give us ours first. This can be sorted out later."

Sonmati moved aside.
 She sat quietly against the shop's mud wall.
 Brijmohan went on reading out the names one by one.
 Sacks kept opening.
 The scale kept tipping.
 Sonmati's bag remained empty.
 At nine, Brijmohan came over to her.
 "Go to the block office. The list came from there."
 "Was my name sent away from here, or from there?"
 Brijmohan paused for a moment.
 "It didn't come from there."
 Sonmati tucked the bag under her arm and set off for the office.
 The block office was about two kos from the village.
 By the time she arrived, it was noon.
 Seven people were waiting outside the food-distribution room.
 When Sonmati's turn came, the clerk entered the number from her old slip.
 He looked at the screen.
 "Your status here shows 'transferred.'"
 Sonmati stared straight at him.
 "Where to?"
 "What did you say?"
 "Where have I been transferred to?"
 The clerk looked at the screen again.
 "The destination field is blank."
 "Then how did I go?"
 Another employee sitting in the room almost laughed, but Sonmati did not.
 The clerk said, "Bring proof of residence. From the panchayat."
 "Isn't my body proof enough?"
 "The rules require paper."
 Sonmati set off again.
 The panchayat office was half a kos back along the same road.
 The assistant there, Chandreshwar, knew her.
 "Auntie, what happened?"
 Sonmati said, "I've left the village, but I don't know where I've gone."
 At first Chandreshwar did not understand.
 Then he looked at the papers.
 "Oh, this has been entered incorrectly."
 "Do I have to correct the incorrect paper myself?"
 Chandreshwar lowered his eyes.

He wrote out a residence certificate: Sonmati Devi, Ward Five, Sonbarsa, continuous resident for the past thirty-eight years.

The mukhiya's seal was affixed.

Sonmati did not fold the paper.

Holding it flat in her hand, she returned to the block office.

This time the first clerk had gone out for lunch.

The other clerk examined the certificate.

"This proves residence. But the number of family members must also be verified."

"There's only one name in the family."

"It still has to be verified."

"Who will do that?"

"The village-level worker."

"Where will I find him?"

"He's out in the field today."

"What time will he return?"

"Hard to say."

Sonmati sat down outside on the veranda.

Her bag held only an empty container.

Whenever the wind stirred, the lid of the container clinked again and again.

At three, the village-level worker arrived.

The moment he saw Sonmati, he said, "You're from Sonbarsa, aren't you?"

"The paper says I belong somewhere else."

The village-level worker looked at her certificate.

"I'll submit a report after checking your house tomorrow."

"Not today?"

"I'm not going out again today."

Sonmati returned home.

Less rice went onto the stove that day.

Her neighbour Chameli offered her half a seer of rice.

Sonmati would not take it.

"There's enough at home for two days."

That night she unfolded the red cloth and kept looking at the old ration slip.

The certificate stating that she had lived there for thirty-eight years was new.

The ration slip, however, was old.

Both papers belonged to the same woman.

One paper said: she is here.

The other list said: she has gone away.
 The village-level worker came the next morning.
 He inspected the courtyard.
 The earthen stove, the tulsi altar, the old bamboo lattice, the faded
 photograph of Harinarayan on the wall.
 "You live here?"
 Sonmati looked at him.
 "Do you have to write that question down?"
 The village-level worker looked embarrassed.
 "It's on the form."
 "Write: she lives here."
 He wrote it.
 Sonmati asked for a photocopy.
 The village-level worker looked startled at first.
 "What for?"
 "Tomorrow someone else may ask where I am."
 At noon, Sonmati reached the block office for the third time.
 This time the first clerk was at his desk.
 He placed the residence certificate and the verification report together.
 Then he opened the old list.
 "I'll register an application."
 "When will my name come back?"
 "In the next revision."
 "And this month's grain?"
 The clerk fell silent.
 "The shop won't give it without your name on the list."
 Sonmati unfolded the red ration slip.
 "Who took last month's grain?"
 "You did."
 "Where is that register?"
 The clerk said, "At the shop."
 "Does that register have my thumbprint?"
 "It should."
 "Then one paper says I left, and another says I collected grain last month."
 This time the clerk had no answer.
 Sonmati asked, "How did 'transferred' get written there?"
 The clerk called for the old survey file.
 A dust-covered sheet arrived.
 Sonmati's name was on one line.
 Below it was the name of her younger son, Mahesh.
 Mahesh had settled elsewhere five years earlier.

On the original survey sheet, 'away' was written against Mahesh's name.
Against Sonmati's, it said 'present.'

But when the fair copy was prepared, the line between the two rows had gone slightly crooked.

The mark for 'away' had become attached to the row above.

The clerk pulled the paper closer.

"There's been an error here."

Sonmati asked, "Mahesh went away, so why did the paper send me?"

No one laughed.

The clerk wrote a correction note.

The old distribution register was called for as well.

On the page from Brijmohan's shop, Sonmati's thumbprint stood beside the previous month's date.

The quantity was written below the date.

Five kilos of rice.

Two kilos of wheat.

The clerk laid three papers together.

The residence certificate.

The village verification report.

The distribution register.

Then the original survey sheet.

"A provisional approval can be issued today," he said.

Sonmati asked, "Am I provisional, or is the approval?"

A faint smile appeared on the clerk's face.

"The approval."

He stamped it.

By the time evening fell, Sonmati had reached the ration shop again.

Brijmohan was closing up.

He looked at the stamp.

"You want it now?"

"Today is ration day, isn't it?"

Brijmohan opened the sacks again.

The scale came back out.

Sonmati held open her bag.

First the rice was weighed.

Then the wheat.

Brijmohan pushed the register toward her for a thumbprint.

Sonmati held back her hand.

"Read it first."

"What did you say?"

"The name."

Brijmohan looked at the register.

“Sonmati Devi.”

“Husband?”

“Late Harinarayan Sah.”

“Village?”

“Sonbarsa.”

“Quantity?”

Brijmohan read out both quantities.

Only then did Sonmati put down her thumbprint.

On the seventh of the next month, she again reached the shop early in the morning.

A new list had been posted.

She could not read her own name.

Brijmohan’s daughter Rashmi was sitting there.

Sonmati said, “See if my name is there.”

Rashmi ran a finger down the list until she found the line.

“The name is there.”

“Anything else written?”

“Status—present.”

For a moment Sonmati kept looking at that word.

Then she placed the old ration slip, the residence certificate, the photocopy of the verification report, and the stamped correction paper together inside the red cloth.

Rashmi asked, “Auntie, why do you still keep so many papers?”

Sonmati said, “When your name lives on paper, you have to preserve the paper’s memory too.”

A sack slipped behind the shop.

Brijmohan straightened the scale.

Sonmati opened her bag.

This time, her row was already there in the register.

The Distance to School

When Class Eight at Kamalpur Middle School ended, Kanchan's results were good.

She stood third in her class.

For further study, she had to go to Belahi High School.

It was ten kilometres and two hundred metres from Kamalpur.

On the very first day, Kanchan's father, Shambhu Mandal, said, 'I won't send you that far on foot every day.'

Kanchan did not argue.

She knew the distance.

Heavy trucks loaded with sand ran along the main paved road.

In the rains, the roadside became slippery.

There was one old bicycle at home, but it was Shambhu's only means of getting to the market and the fields.

Its rear wheel kept coming loose.

One day Kanchan said, 'I'll walk for the first week.'

Parvati, her mother, asked only, 'Ten kilometres there, ten kilometres back—and then again the next day?'

Kanchan did not answer.

On the day of admission, she went to Madhavi Jha, the headmistress of the middle school.

Madhavi looked over her certificate.

'Shall I enrol you at Belahi?'

Kanchan said, 'Please do. I don't yet have a way to get there.'

Madhavi paused at that answer.

From the school cupboard she took out a register.

On it was written: 'Bicycle Assistance for Girls Living Far Away.'

The rule was brief.

A girl entering Class Nine who lived more than five kilometres away was eligible for assistance.

Kanchan's eyes lit up.

Then Madhavi read the next line.

'Distribution after at least twenty days' attendance at school.'

Kanchan fell silent again.

Madhavi did not close the register.
 She read the line once more.
 She needed a bicycle because of the distance.
 To receive the bicycle, she had to reach school for twenty days.
 To reach school for those twenty days, she needed a bicycle.
 Kanchan said softly, 'Then how do I manage the first twenty days?'
 Madhavi had no answer.
 The admission was completed that day, but Kanchan did not go to Belahi the following Monday.
 Nor on Tuesday.
 On Wednesday, Madhavi came to her house.
 Kanchan was on the veranda, writing her name on a notebook she had bought for Class Nine.
 'Why didn't you go?'
 'The road to the twentieth day begins with the first.'
 Madhavi did not smile.
 She said, 'I'm looking for an answer to that very thing.'
 Behind Kamalpur Middle School was a small storeroom.
 It held bamboo poles used for games, old planks, torn maps, and two iron chests.
 In one corner stood a bicycle covered in dust.
 Kanchan had seen it before.
 Two years earlier it had been bought to carry a travelling book-box from village to village.
 When the mobile service stopped, the bicycle was put into storage.
 In the asset register it was listed as: 'Property No. 14—Bicycle—Not in Working Order.'
 Madhavi and the watchman, Nandu, wheeled it outside.
 There was no air in the tyres.
 The chain was rusty.
 The bell was missing.
 The saddle was torn.
 But the frame was straight.
 Nandu said, 'We can get it running again.'
 Bhola Sah, the village repairman, was called.
 He spun the wheel.
 'Two inner tubes, clean the chain, one pedal, a brake cable. That's all.'
 Madhavi asked, 'How much?'
 Bhola gave her the figure.
 There was enough money in the school development fund.
 But there was another obstacle.

School property could not be given to a student.

Madhavi called a short meeting of the School Management Committee. Shambhu attended as well.

Madhavi placed the rules in front of them.

'I'm not asking anyone to change the assistance scheme.'

Committee member Jagdish asked, 'Then what are you asking?'

'Let us create a way across the first twenty days.'

She opened the page of the asset register.

'The bicycle will remain the school's property, not the student's.'

'Who will use it?'

'A girl who lives more than five kilometres away and is waiting for the assistance bicycle.'

Jagdish asked again, 'And after one girl rides it for twenty days?'

'When her assistance bicycle arrives, this one will go to the next new student.'

Nandu laughed. 'Call it the Twenty-Day Bicycle.'

Madhavi said, 'Let the register give it a clear name: Entry Bicycle.'

The meeting agreed on that name.

A separate section was created.

Student's name.

Distance from home.

Date taken.

Date returned.

Condition of bicycle when taken.

Condition of bicycle when returned.

Kanchan's name was entered in the first row.

Distance—10.2 kilometres.

Bhola had the bicycle running in two days.

He did not repaint it.

The old blue paint remained.

A thick cloth cover was fitted over the saddle.

A new bell was attached.

The chain still made a little noise as it turned, though much less than before.

The first time Kanchan brought the bicycle home, Parvati walked around it, looking it over from every side.

'Is it yours now?'

'No. It belongs to the school. I have it for twenty days.'

Shambhu asked, 'And after twenty days?'

'When I get the assistance bicycle, I'll return this one.'

Shambhu looked at the copy of the register entry.

It said: 'Return date—after receipt of new bicycle.'

Shambhu read that line twice.

Kanchan did not set out alone on the first day.

Rekha and Sarita from the neighbourhood already cycled to Belahi on their own bicycles.

The three met under the peepal tree at Kamalpur at five past seven in the morning.

Madhavi had told them, 'For the first week, leave together at the same time.'

Kanchan's bicycle had a new bell, but old brakes.

She went slowly down the first slope.

Rekha in front.

Kanchan in the middle.

Sarita behind.

The ten kilometres did not become any shorter.

When Kanchan returned on the first day, her legs ached.

They ached on the second day too.

By the third day, she had identified two shady places along the road.

By the fifth, she realised that cycling to school took less than half the time it would have taken to walk.

It rained on the seventh day.

The three girls waited for ten minutes beneath a roadside shelter.

They reached school late, but they reached it.

A seventh attendance mark appeared beside Kanchan's name in the register.

On the tenth day, she had the bicycle's brakes tightened at Bhola's shop.

Kanchan herself wrote in the register: 'Brakes tightened.'

Madhavi said, 'Using something that belongs to the school also means recording its condition.'

Kanchan nodded.

On the twelfth day, a teacher at Belahi School filled out the assistance form.

The distance field was already clear.

The attendance field was blank.

'We'll sign it when you complete twenty days.'

Kanchan did not fold the form away.

She left it in the school file.

On the seventeenth day, Sarita's bicycle tyre went flat.

Kanchan stopped the Entry Bicycle.

The two girls walked for a kilometre and a half, pushing their bicycles.

Rekha rode ahead to the repair shop in the next village.

All three reached school late that day.
 Their attendance was marked, with the time entered separately.
 Kanchan understood that the twenty-day count was not about making twenty flawless journeys.
 It was about reaching school.
 On the nineteenth day Shambhu asked, 'Tomorrow makes twenty?'
 'Yes.'
 'So you return the bicycle the day after?'
 Kanchan said, 'After the new bicycle is in my hands.'
 She remembered the line in the register.
 On the twentieth day, Madhavi came to Belahi.
 She checked the attendance register.
 Twenty days.
 The required stamp was placed on the assistance form.
 Kanchan was delighted, but she did not receive the new bicycle that day.
 Distribution was three days later.
 One committee member said, 'The twenty days are complete. Take back the school bicycle now.'
 Madhavi opened the asset register.
 In the return field it said: 'After receipt of new bicycle.'
 She said, 'Let us not create another three-day gap between eligibility and the means to reach school.'
 The Entry Bicycle remained with Kanchan for three more days.
 On the twenty-third day, the assistance bicycles were distributed in the courtyard of Belahi School.
 Kanchan's name was called.
 She took hold of the new bicycle.
 There was no garland of flowers.
 She first rode the new bicycle once around the courtyard.
 Then she rode the old blue Entry Bicycle back to Kamalpur.
 Madhavi was sitting with the register open.
 Kanchan showed her the condition of the bicycle.
 'Both brakes work.'
 'Tyres?'
 'Filled with air.'
 'Bell?'
 Kanchan rang it.
 Tin-tin.
 Madhavi entered the return date.
 Kanchan signed.
 She had thought the bicycle would now go back into the storeroom.

But the storeroom door did not open.

That evening, Poonam came with her mother from neighbouring Barahi village.

Poonam had enrolled in Class Nine.

Her home was seven kilometres and eight hundred metres from Belahi.

Her own twenty-day qualifying period for assistance had not even begun.

Madhavi brought the Entry Bicycle out in front of her.

The second row of the register was opened.

Poonam's name.

Distance—7.8 kilometres.

Date taken.

Kanchan stood a little way off.

Poonam looked at the height of the saddle.

'I need it a little lower.'

Bhola was called again.

The saddle was lowered.

Kanchan rode home on her new bicycle.

When she reached the peepal tree, she looked back once.

Poonam was now walking away, pushing the old blue bicycle beside her.

The following month, when Kanchan came to the middle school, she wanted to see the asset register.

Beside Property No. 14, 'Not in Working Order' had been crossed out.

In its place were new words: 'Entry Bicycle—In Use.'

Below them were two names.

Kanchan.

Poonam.

Beside Kanchan's name, the return date had been filled in.

Poonam's row was still open.

Madhavi asked, 'Did you come to see your name again?'

Kanchan said, 'No. I came to see the next name.'

That day, a twenty-seventh attendance mark was placed beside Kanchan's name in the Belahi School register.

In the distance field, the number was still the same—10.2 kilometres.

The number had not grown smaller.

Only the gap between the first day and the twentieth now had an old blue bicycle moving through it.

A Song While Breaking Stones

Beside the Sonbarsa road there was a stone-breaking site.

There was no hill there, but heaps of large stones brought down from the hills lay there all day.

Twelve women from the village broke those stones into small pieces of gravel.

The hammer never struck just once.

One strike, then another, then a third.

If the rhythm broke, the palm soon tired.

That was why Jamuna Devi would start a song.

The song was not the same every day.

Sometimes the first line was about the water pot.

Sometimes it was about the yellow truck arriving late.

Sometimes it was about a cracked hammer handle.

Sometimes about rain stopping the work for half a day.

The other women repeated the line.

And then the hammers moved again.

Three heaps of stone, two pots of water...

Jamuna would begin.

All of them answered, "Two pots of water, work till evening."

The next day, the line would change.

The yellow truck is stuck, half a wheel in mud...

The answer rose, "The wheel came free, and the work went on."

There was no written book of these songs.

Nor was there any single fixed version.

Jamuna would say, "When the day changes, the song's opening changes too."

One day Anupama, a teacher at the village middle school, came there.

She had been given the task of writing down labour songs for a block-level cultural booklet.

She was delighted when she heard Jamuna and the others singing.

"This is very good," she said. "I will write it down neatly."

Jamuna laughed.

"What will you make neat?"

Anupama did not understand.

"The song."

Jamuna asked again, "Which day's?"

Anupama wrote down that day's song.

Its first line was, "The driver in the red gamchha arrived late."

Anupama stopped as she wrote.

"Shall I leave this line out?"

"Why?" Basanti asked.

"Why should the driver's gamchha be in the song?"

Basanti put down her hammer.

"Why shouldn't it?"

Anupama smiled.

"The booklet will contain folk songs. A few beautiful lines will look better there."

Jamuna said quietly, "The red gamchha is the mark of that day."

Anupama wrote it down, but later, while making a fair copy, she struck out the line.

In its place she wrote, "The hammer rang in the evening's cadence."

The line sounded beautiful.

But the red gamchha of that day disappeared.

Another line said, "Fourteen baskets were measured."

Anupama struck that out too.

She felt that counting would turn the song into a register.

A third line said, "On Tuesday market day, half a pot of water."

"Tuesday market" disappeared from that line.

The song became better suited to the booklet.

Short, graceful, uniform.

Anupama showed the copy to Jamuna.

Jamuna could not read.

She listened.

Then she said, "It is a good song, but it is not ours."

Anupama's hand stopped.

"The meaning is still there."

"The meaning stayed," Jamuna said, "but the day went away."

At the time, Anupama did not fully understand that sentence.

Two months later, the stone-breaking work was nearing its end.

The main gravel supply for the road was complete.

On the day the final accounts were prepared, the women were told that they would be paid for eighteen days of work.

Jamuna immediately said, "We worked twenty-two days."

Kailash, who kept the accounts, opened the register.

"It says eighteen days here."

"Where did the other four days go?" Basanti asked.

Kailash turned the pages.

"Stone-breaking was stopped for four days."

"Not the stone-breaking," Jamuna said. "The arrival of new stone was stopped."

Kailash looked up.

"Same thing."

"No," Sukhni said. "There were old heaps."

During those four days, the women had sorted the old heaps.

The larger pieces had been broken again.

The smaller gravel had been separated out.

Three truckloads had gone out for the road work.

But against those dates the register said, "No new supply."

Kailash had taken that to mean, "Work stopped."

Jamuna said, "On the first day, the yellow truck got stuck."

Kailash laughed.

"A stuck truck is not proof of wages."

Basanti said, "That day we dug the wheel out twice."

Sukhni added, "And the gravel from the third heap was loaded onto the truck."

Kailash kept his thumb pressed on the register.

"Show me the paper."

The women looked at one another.

They had no slip for those four days.

Jamuna slowly struck one palm against the other.

Tap.

Then tap again.

"The yellow truck is stuck, half a wheel in mud..."

Basanti answered, "The wheel came free, and the work went on."

Sukhni raised another line: "On Tuesday market day, half a pot of water..."

They all answered, "The pot was filled, and the work went on."

Kailash grew irritated.

"Accounts are not made from songs."

Jamuna stopped the song.

"The account is not made from the song; it is made from the days. The song is telling you which days."

Just then Anupama was passing on her way to school.

Seeing the crowd, she stopped.

The moment Kailash saw her, he said, "You are a teacher. Explain it to them. The register says eighteen days; they say twenty-two."

Anupama looked at Jamuna.
Jamuna said, "You wrote it down, didn't you?"
Anupama's expression changed.
She remembered the red gamchha.
She remembered the fourteen baskets.
She remembered the Tuesday market.
And she remembered that she had cut all of them out while making the fair copy.

"My first notebook is at home," Anupama said.
"Some of the lines are still there."
Kailash said, "A notebook will not change the accounts."
"No," Anupama replied, "but those lines will help us find the dates."
She did not go to school.
She brought the first notebook from home.
There were no dates in the notebook.
But the lines were there.
The red gamchha.
Fourteen baskets.
Tuesday market.
The yellow truck.
The broken handle.
Half a day's sunshine after the rain.
Anupama asked, "What date did the Tuesday market fall on?"
Basanti could not give the date immediately.
But she said, "That was the day my daughter brought salt from the market."

The market was held once a week.
They worked out the date.
The truck driven by the man in the red gamchha had arrived the day before.

The next day, the broken handle had been replaced.
Little by little, the sequence of the four days took shape.
Kailash was still not satisfied.
"You have a sequence. Where is the proof?"
Anupama asked, "Where is the dispatch register?"
Kailash fell silent.
There was another register at the stone-breaking site.
It recorded the outgoing trucks, the identifying mark of the heap, and the quantity.
That register was kept separately from the payment register.
Kailash brought it out.

Three trucks were entered on the date of the Tuesday market.
 Their colours were not recorded.
 But their vehicle numbers were.
 Ramsevak, the driver of the yellow truck, was called.
 The moment he saw the number, he said, "That's my truck."
 "Did it get stuck that day?" Anupama asked.
 Ramsevak smiled.
 "Half the wheel sank in. These women dug it out."
 He pointed towards Jamuna and the others.
 Kailash looked at the next date.
 Two trucks had gone out.
 On the third date, one truck.
 On the fourth, two again.
 No new stone had arrived.
 But old stone had gone out.
 Without being sorted and broken, it could not have gone out.
 Kailash added the four dates to the payment register.
 He looked at Jamuna.
 "Did the song contain the vehicle numbers too?"
 Jamuna said, "Not the numbers. The colour."
 "Then it was only half the proof."
 "A song is not sung to become complete proof," Jamuna said.
 "A song keeps the day from being forgotten."
 Kailash said nothing.
 He added the wages for the four days.
 Anupama opened her notebook.
 The fair copy and the first copy lay side by side.
 In the fair copy, the song was beautiful.
 In the first copy, the song was scattered.
 One line said there had been too little water.
 One said a truck had got stuck.
 One said a hammer handle had broken.
 One held the market day.
 One held fourteen baskets.
 That night, Anupama opened the booklet copy again.
 She struck out the line, "The hammer rang in the evening's cadence."
 The red gamchha returned.
 So did the fourteen baskets.
 So did the Tuesday market.
 Above the song, she did not write the title, "Folk Song."
 She wrote, "Work Lines - The Twenty-Two-Day Version."

The following week, a man came from the block office to collect folk songs.

He asked, "Which is the original version of this song?"

Anupama read the notebook aloud to Jamuna.

Jamuna stopped her midway.

"Here it wasn't 'two pots'; it was 'half a pot.'"

Anupama corrected it.

Then she read on.

Basanti stopped another line.

"That day it wasn't fourteen baskets. The fourteen baskets were the next day."

Anupama corrected it again.

The lines kept changing on the paper.

The song never settled into a fixed form.

But the twenty-two days remained distinct, one from another.

A few months later, the Sonbarsa road was finished.

The stone-breaking site stood empty.

The sound of the hammers stopped.

Jamuna and the others took up other work.

Anupama's notebook remained in a cupboard at the school.

One day a new teacher opened it and asked, "Why are there so many versions of the same song?"

Anupama replied, "It isn't the same song."

She turned the pages.

In one place it said, "The yellow truck got stuck."

In another, "On Tuesday market day, half a pot of water."

In a third, "The handle broke; another hammer till evening."

Anupama did not close the notebook.

Outside the window, vehicles were moving along the new road.

Beneath that road lay the gravel of those twenty-two days.

And inside the cupboard, the sound of those twenty-two days.

The Right to the Forest

West of Simarbanni village lies a belt of sal and sakhua forest.

Right beside the forest stood Dhanmaya Devi's bamboo grove.

Beyond the bamboo lay two kathas of field, and beyond the field the Kachhua nala, which flowed during the rains.

Dhanmaya used to say that the nala was small, but there was no better landmark in the village for understanding the boundary.

One morning in Jeth, three Forest Department employees arrived carrying tins of red paint.

They moved ahead, painting red bands on tree stumps, stones, and bamboo.

Dhanmaya was sorting paddy in the courtyard.

The red band ran straight through the middle of her bamboo grove.

She rose to her feet.

"Where is this line going?"

The forest guard said, "It is the new demarcation."

"Where did the old boundary go?"

"Wherever it is on the map."

Dhanmaya came out of the grove.

The new red line cut across the Kachhua nala and ran straight north.

A part of her bamboo grove and field fell inside it.

The forest guard handed her a paper.

It said that private use within the boundary was to be removed.

Dhanmaya read the words slowly.

Her eyes stopped at the word "within."

Her granddaughter Kusum was at home then.

Kusum was learning survey work at the block headquarters, but she held no government post.

She read the paper.

"Amma, this is based on the new map."

Dhanmaya said, "Has the new map straightened the old nala?"

Kusum remained silent.

Dhanmaya was seventy years old.

Her husband, Ramapati, had died long ago.

Ramapati had not been a forest watchman.

He had been a farmer.

But after the rains he would often join the community work of clearing the forest firebreak.

Dhanmaya had gone with him two or three times.

In those days the boundary was visible on the ground, not on paper.

From one post to the nala.

A turn following the nala.

Then a stone pillar.

After that, the dense stand of sal.

Dhanmaya said, "The line used to turn with the nala."

Kusum asked, "What marker do you remember?"

"Post number twenty-six."

"And after that?"

"The nala."

"And twenty-seven?"

Dhanmaya thought.

"Post twenty-seven climbed uphill after leaving the nala."

Kusum said, "Remembering something is not evidence."

Dhanmaya looked at her.

"I am not calling it evidence. I am saying the nala is where you should look."

The next day Kusum came with a long measuring cord, a notebook, and chalk.

She said to Dhanmaya, "Show me the old boundary as far as you remember it. Let us walk it."

Dhanmaya took her walking stick.

The two of them reached post number twenty-six.

The post gleamed with fresh red paint.

From there, the department's new line ran straight toward post number twenty-seven.

Dhanmaya did not go straight.

She turned to the right.

Beneath the dry leaves ran a shallow depression.

"The nala was like this," she said.

Kusum bent down.

The soil was harder than elsewhere, but round pebbles lay in that narrow channel.

There had been no rain, so there was no water.

Dhanmaya moved on.

Halfway along stood an old karanj tree.

Dhanmaya stopped by its roots.

"The firebreak used to turn here."

Kusum measured the distance with the cord.

She wrote in her notebook: from twenty-six to the karanj, one hundred and eighteen metres.

From the karanj, following the nala to the next bend, eighty-seven metres.

Dhanmaya said, "Now we should find the stone."

They did not find the stone at once.

For half an hour they brushed leaves aside.

At one spot Kusum's chalk struck something hard.

They cleared away the soil.

The top of a square stone appeared.

It was not a boundary post.

It was only an ordinary old stone.

Dhanmaya laughed.

"Memory too can sometimes be in a hurry."

They moved on.

They eventually found post number twenty-seven, but it stood on higher ground along the forest edge.

The old narrow channel leading to it matched the bend Dhanmaya had described.

Kusum did not close her notebook.

She kept writing down the distances.

That evening she examined a photocopy of the new map.

On the map, a perfectly straight line ran between twenty-six and twenty-seven.

There was no sign of the Kachhua nala.

The next day Kusum went to the forest range office.

She said, "I have not come to get the boundary changed. I want to see the record from which the boundary was drawn."

The clerk first showed her the new map.

Kusum asked, "Is there an earlier description of the boundary?"

The clerk searched for the old file.

Many of its pages had gone grey with age.

One page had a torn corner.

On that page, between post numbers 26 and 27, were the words: "along the seasonal watercourse."

Kusum read the line again.

A distance was recorded there as well.

Not the straight-line distance.

The distance measured along the watercourse.

Kusum compared the figure with the numbers in her notebook.

They were not exactly the same, but the difference was very small.

She asked for a copy.

The clerk said, "Submit an application."

Kusum submitted one.

Three days later she received a certified copy.

Meanwhile, a second mark had been painted on the bamboo inside the red line.

People in the village began saying, "Dhanmaya's bamboo grove has turned out to be forest land."

Someone said, "Is the government supposed to run on old people's memories?"

Dhanmaya did not answer.

Nor did she begin cutting the bamboo.

She simply waited for the paper to come.

Kusum took the certified copy to the forest officer.

"It says here, 'along the seasonal watercourse,'" she said.

The officer opened the new map.

"In the digital version, the two old posts have been joined."

"And the description of what lay between them was left out?"

The officer did not answer at once.

He looked again at the old page.

Then he said, "There will be a field inspection."

On the day of the field inspection, Dhanmaya did not walk at the head of the group.

She stood beside the Kachhua nala.

A Forest Department surveyor, the circle amin, and two local witnesses arrived.

Measurement began from post number twenty-six.

The straight line shown on the new map was marked separately.

The seasonal channel mentioned in the old description was also traced.

They found the round pebbles in the dry nala, the narrow line of erosion, and remnants of the old firebreak.

Kusum did not offer her notebook.

She said, "You measure first."

The official measurement was completed.

The distance along the channel matched the distance in the old record.

The straight line cut off a triangle in between.

That triangle contained part of Dhanmaya's bamboo grove and field.

The amin also opened the old khasra map.

It showed the western edge of the field touching the watercourse.

The forest officer looked at the newly painted red band.

"This line is to be suspended for now," he said.

Dhanmaya said nothing.

Three separate points were entered in the inspection record.

First: the new digital line joins the two posts directly.

Second: the old boundary description states that the boundary follows the seasonal watercourse.

Third: the watercourse was identified on the ground, and its measured distance matches the old description.

Kusum read the record aloud to Dhanmaya.

Dhanmaya asked, "Was what I said written down?"

"As local oral information."

"That is enough."

For a week, the red band remained as it was.

Then the Forest Department team came again.

The old straight marking was painted over with a muddy colour.

A new boundary was drawn, turning with the nala.

Most of Dhanmaya's bamboo grove remained outside the boundary.

But seven bamboo plants stood on the far side of the nala.

The forest guard said, "These seven are inside the forest boundary."

Harikant, Dhanmaya's son, wanted to say that the bamboo belonged to the old homestead.

Dhanmaya stopped him.

"What lies inside, let it remain inside."

The family made no claim to any of the seven bamboo plants.

That made the final line of the inspection record brief.

"The family accepts the revised demarcation."

When the rains came, water flowed again through the Kachhua nala.

A revised copy of the new map arrived at the panchayat building.

Kusum took it to Dhanmaya.

Dhanmaya placed a finger on the thin blue line on the map.

"Is this the Kachhua nala?"

"Yes. This is the nala."

"And the red boundary?"

"Now it turns with the nala."

Dhanmaya did not look at the map for long.

She went outside and looked toward the actual nala.

The water was carrying bamboo leaves as it slowly rounded the bend.

Kusum opened the first page of her old notebook.

Dhanmaya's first sentence was written there: "The nala is where you should look."

Kusum added nothing beneath that line.

Now the nala itself was written into the map.

Compensation for the Bridge

For many years there had been talk in Basahi village of building a bridge over the Kamla River.

In the monsoon, once the boats stopped running, the market, the hospital, the weekly bazaar—everything lay stranded on the far side.

When approval finally came for a permanent bridge, sweets were distributed at the village crossroads.

Jhumri Devi took a peda too.

She said, “It will be good when the bridge is built.”

A few days later, the survey team arrived.

The western approach to the bridge ran straight through the outer row of Basahi.

Eleven houses fell along that line.

Jhumri’s was the seventh.

It was not a very large house.

Two brick rooms, a tiled veranda, a small kitchen, and the shade of a neem tree in front.

The government surveyor measured the walls.

An assistant recorded the structure of the house in a thick register.

“Two brick rooms?” Jhumri asked.

“Yes, it is written down.”

“The veranda?”

“That too.”

“The kitchen?”

“That too is written down.”

Jhumri asked again, “What will come of all this writing?”

The assistant said, “The valuation will be done next.”

Jhumri looked toward the page of the register.

Reading was difficult for her.

But she could see the measurements of her house in numbers.

Two weeks later, a notice arrived.

It stated the date by which the house had to be vacated.

It also carried one line: anyone wishing to reuse materials should obtain permission and remove them before handover.

Jhumri's son Naresh said, "We'll save the timber."

Jhumri said, "Save whatever can be saved."

Leaving the house hurt, but the timber, roof tiles, and latch could all be used in the new house.

The next morning, Naresh went to the bridge-work camp to seek permission.

The assistant checked the house number and pulled out a slip.

He counted the materials.

Two door shutters.

Three window shutters.

Four wooden beams.

Seventy-six roof tiles.

One old latch made by a blacksmith.

The assistant wrote everything down and signed it.

At the bottom was written: "Permission for removal by owner for reuse."

Naresh was given one copy of the slip.

For three days, the work of dismantling the timber continued at the house.

Shambhu the carpenter removed the doors.

The window shutters were taken down.

The roof tiles were lifted off one by one.

The beams were laid in the courtyard.

Jhumri removed the old latch with her own hands.

Its iron links had been worn smooth with use.

She wrapped it in cloth and set it aside.

The walls still stood, but there were no tiles on the roof.

The doorframes stood open and bare.

Half the veranda had been stripped.

Jhumri thought that now only the government demolition remained.

But on the fifth day, another team arrived.

This team had come to carry out the valuation.

There was an engineer, two employees, and the local revenue clerk.

The engineer looked at the house.

"A lot of this has already been dismantled."

Naresh said, "We removed the materials as instructed in the notice."

The engineer wrote something on his paper.

He tapped the wall to inspect it.

He went over to the veranda.

He counted the empty frames.

He saw no roof tiles.

He saw no beams.

He saw no latch.

By evening, the valuation slip was ready.

Naresh asked for a copy.

The house had been classified there as “partially dismantled.”

The value assigned to the veranda roof was zero.

The value assigned to the wood from the doors and windows was zero.

Jhumri asked, “Why zero?”

An employee said, “The materials were not there on the day of inspection.”

Naresh took out the permission slip.

“These materials were removed because your people told us to remove them.”

The employee looked at the slip.

“This slip is from a different branch.”

“Did the house belong to a different branch too?” Jhumri asked.

No one answered at once.

Two days later, a slip arrived stating the preliminary compensation amount.

The other ten families in the village began checking their respective amounts.

One had more land, another a fully brick-built house, another a larger veranda.

Jhumri’s amount was lower than expected.

Her neighbour Ramcharit said, “Take it. Don’t hold up the bridge work.”

Jhumri said, “Am I stopping the bridge?”

“No, but your signature on the paper is still pending.”

Jhumri folded the permission slip and opened it again.

“They ordered us to dismantle the house. Now they say the house was already half dismantled.”

Ramcharit fell silent.

Jhumri’s objection was not about every last rupee of the amount.

One line kept troubling her: “Partially dismantled beforehand by owner.”

She said, “Not beforehand. After the order.”

Naresh went to the block office.

There he was told to submit a written objection.

Naresh wrote down the sequence: first inspection, notice to remove materials, permission slip, then valuation.

All four dates were written separately.

Before giving her thumbprint, Jhumri had the page read aloud to her.

She stopped them midway.

“Write that I am not opposing the bridge.”

Naresh added it.

“And write that the condition of the house had already been seen on the day of the first survey.”

That too was added.

The objection was submitted.

Meanwhile, the bridge piers began rising from the river.

People from the village went every day to watch the work.

Jhumri too went twice.

Looking at the new pier standing in midstream, she said, “Once this is done, we won’t have to depend on boats every monsoon.”

Naresh looked at his mother’s face.

“Then shall we let the paperwork go?”

Jhumri said, “The bridge and the paperwork are two different things.”

Ten days later, a date was fixed for a joint inspection.

This time, the valuation engineer, an employee from the land branch, and the assistant who had issued the material-removal permission came together.

Jhumri stood beside the open doorway of the house.

The engineer called for the old measurement register.

The page from the first inspection was opened.

It recorded two brick rooms, a tiled veranda, and a kitchen.

The date was earlier than the notice permitting removal of materials.

Then the permission slip was examined.

Two door shutters.

Three window shutters.

Four beams.

Seventy-six roof tiles.

One latch.

The engineer asked, “How could all these have appeared on the permission slip if they had not been in the house?”

The assistant said quietly, “They were counted after the first survey.”

“So the materials were there?”

“Yes, the materials were there.”

Jhumri said nothing.

The revenue clerk took out another page.

It carried the line: “Partially dismantled beforehand by owner.”

During the joint inspection, that line was not struck out.

Beside it, a new note was added: “Reusable materials removed in compliance with departmental notice.”

Jhumri asked, “Will both lines remain?”

The engineer said, "The first line will remain, but the correction will be made explicit."

"Then what about the amount?"

"It will be recalculated on the basis of the condition recorded during the first inspection."

Naresh let out a long breath.

Jhumri asked again, "And the other houses?"

The owners of the other village houses were listening too.

The engineer looked toward the assistant.

"From now on, permission to remove materials will be given only after the valuation is complete."

The employee from the land branch added, "A copy of the valuation slip will be given to the owner beforehand."

No one applauded.

People simply began looking at their own slips.

Three days later, Jhumri's revised amount arrived.

It was higher than the first amount.

Naresh said, "Shall we sign now?"

Jhumri had the entire slip read aloud.

On that page, the condition of the house was recorded as "according to the first technical inspection."

She gave her thumbprint.

On the day the house was to be demolished, Jhumri woke very early.

Wind was coming through the empty frames into the courtyard.

Neem leaves had blown all the way inside.

She touched the wall and stepped out.

By noon, the house had become a heap of earth and bricks.

Naresh stood at a distance.

Jhumri did not go searching through the heap for anything.

Whatever could be reused had already been taken out.

Work on a small new house elsewhere in the village began with the first instalment of compensation.

Two of the old beams proved usable.

Many roof tiles had broken, but some went onto the kitchen roof.

One shutter from the old door was too small for the new house.

Shambhu the carpenter cut it down to fit.

Jhumri had the old latch fixed onto it.

A few months later, the bridge opened.

The time needed to reach the market from Basahi was cut in half.

People went onto the bridge just to look at the river.

On inauguration day, Naresh had kept a place for his mother too.

Jhumri went.

She did not walk all the way to the middle of the bridge.

She stood for a few moments at the beginning of the approach.

From there, it was hard to identify the place where the old house had stood.

The new road now ran over it.

Ramcharit said, "Look, the bridge has been built."

Jhumri said, "Yes, it has."

That night, as she closed the door of the new house, Jhumri fastened the latch.

The iron links sounded with their old familiar clink.

Two papers lay together in the trunk.

One was the permission slip for removing materials.

The other was the revised compensation slip.

Both bore the same house number.

Outside, the first night traffic was crossing the new bridge.

Jhumri tugged the latch once to test it.

It held firm.

The Labourer's Photograph

East of Shivpur there was an old drain that carried away the monsoon water.

Year after year, silt had built up, and earth from the banks kept collapsing into it.

Whenever the rains were heavy, water stood knee-deep on the road.

This year the block sanctioned work to deepen the drain and build masonry outlets at two points.

The work was divided into three sections.

The first was near the culvert, the second near the middle hamlet, and the third near the paddy fields.

Budhan Mandal was in the labour team assigned to the third section.

He dug earth, spread stone chips, and compacted the layers with a hand rammer.

There was a separate register at the site for issuing tools.

Every tool had a number painted on it in white.

Budhan was usually given hand rammer 12.

Its bamboo handle had once come loose.

Budhan had bound it with wire and made it firm again.

So he could recognize the rammer even from a distance.

On the morning of the seventeenth day of Sawan, one worker from the team did not turn up.

Five workers were already on the middle section that day.

The mate, Harilal, told Budhan, "Today leave the third section and work in the middle section until noon."

Budhan had the change of section entered in the tool register.

The line in the register read: Rammer 12, Budhan Mandal, Section 2.

That day the engineer's assistant came to inspect the work.

He had a camera in his hand.

He went first towards the culvert.

Then he stopped at the middle section.

The third layer of stone chips was being laid there.

On a small blackboard, the section, date, and name of the layer had been written in chalk.

The assistant said, "Do not stop the work. I need the photographs while the work is in progress."

Budhan and the other labourers went on with their work.

Two or three photographs were taken.

Budhan paid little attention to them.

After noon he returned to the third section.

The day ended.

A few weeks later, the first payment was made.

The labourers stood in a line near the panchayat building, checking the amounts they had received.

Budhan's account was short by one day.

At first he doubted his own memory.

When he returned home, he opened his small notebook.

He did not write a complete account every day.

But he did note the number of whichever tool he had taken.

Against the seventeenth of Sawan he had written: 12, middle.

The next morning he went to Harilal.

Harilal opened the daily attendance register.

On the page for the third section, the space beside Budhan's name was blank.

"You were in the middle section," Budhan said.

Harilal opened the page for the middle section.

The names of five regular labourers were there.

At the bottom margin, in small letters, was written: one additional.

There was no name.

Harilal scratched his head.

"Was that you?"

"You yourself had sent me."

Harilal remembered.

"Yes, but I forgot to write your name."

When the payment register was prepared, the line marked "one additional" had not been counted.

Harilal said he would enter a correction.

But the accounts room replied that no payment could be added for an attendance entry without a name.

"We need proof of the name," the accounts assistant said.

Budhan laughed.

"I am standing right here."

The accounts assistant smiled too.

"Your standing here proves that you are Budhan. We need separate proof that you worked in the middle section that day."

Budhan fell silent.

Harilal said, "Let us look at the tool register."

The entry for the seventeenth of Sawan was clear in the tool register.

Rammer 12 — Budhan Mandal — Section 2.

The accounts assistant read the line.

"This may serve as supporting evidence, but it is not an attendance record for the work."

Budhan asked, "Did the rammer go there for a walk?"

Two or three people in the room burst out laughing.

The accounts assistant did not laugh.

"I understand what you mean. But the rules of paper have to be satisfied with paper."

That week the block's progress report arrived at the panchayat.

The mukhiya had left a copy on a table in the building.

The colour pages contained photographs of the drain before and after the work.

Budhan's son Nandu saw the pages lying on the table and called his father over.

"Babu, that is you."

Budhan bent over the page.

In a photograph of the middle section, he was lifting the hand rammer.

His face could be seen clearly.

Beside him stood the blackboard: Section 2, seventeenth of Sawan, third layer.

Underneath was written: "Compacting gravel by local labour."

There was no name.

Budhan looked at the page for a few moments.

Harilal came over as well.

"This is the photograph from that day," Budhan said.

Harilal picked up the page.

"The date is clear too."

The two of them took the report to the accounts room.

The accounts assistant looked at the photograph.

Then he looked again at the tool register.

"On what basis am I to write that the person in this photograph is Budhan Mandal?"

Harilal said, "I recognize him."

The accounts assistant said, "Your statement will be recorded too. But is there another link?"

Budhan looked at the photograph.

The white number on the rammer was half in shadow.

He carried the page over to the window.

The number 12 could be seen.

The tool register showed that on that day rammer 12 had been issued in Budhan's name for Section 2.

Harilal's daily register recorded "one additional" in that section.

The photograph in the progress report was from the same day, the same section, and the same layer.

Three separate papers had come together.

The accounts assistant wrote a short note on each of the three copies.

"Combined evidence for verification of attendance where the name was omitted."

A written confirmation was taken from Harilal.

Budhan was also asked how much of that day he had worked in the middle section.

He said, "From morning until noon."

The page for the third section already carried an attendance mark for the afternoon.

In this way, the account for the full day was established.

A correction slip was added to the next payment.

Budhan received the wages still due for one day.

The amount was not large.

But after that, the page in the progress report became a subject of discussion at the panchayat.

The mukhiya said, "Photographs are kept as proof of the work. But if the worker in a photograph is not linked by name anywhere, the proof remains only half complete."

When the engineer's assistant came for the next inspection, Harilal told him what had happened.

At first the assistant thought the labourers wanted their names printed beneath the photographs.

Budhan said, "Having my name printed will not get me anything."

"Then what do you want?"

"If a photograph shows the day recorded in a register, there should be a path from the photograph to that register."

The assistant thought for a while.

The progress report was a public document.

It would not be proper to print every labourer's full name and private details in it.

What the accounts room needed was a way to find whose attendance was connected with the work shown in a photograph on a given day.

From the following month, a small rule was introduced.

Under each photograph, instead of a person's name, the photograph number, section, date, and page of the attendance register would be written.

A list kept at the site would link each photograph number to the labour team's register reference.

The tool register too would be kept section-wise for that day.

At first everyone thought it was more paperwork.

For two days Harilal forgot to write the page numbers.

The accounts assistant sent the register back.

"Without the number, the same problem will happen again."

Harilal began keeping a small pencil in his pocket.

The matter of Budhan's payment gradually came to an end.

The drain was deepened.

During the second spell of rain, water no longer stood on the road as it had before.

The earth from the third section was piled along the side and levelled.

One day a new progress report arrived at the panchayat building.

Nandu was turning its pages again.

This time he did not call his father.

Budhan himself stopped by the table.

In one photograph, four labourers were setting stones along the side of the drain.

Underneath was written: "Photograph 27; Section 1; Attendance Register, page 31."

There was no name.

Budhan turned the page.

In the list at the back, the team reference appeared beside Photograph 27.

He did not start searching the list for his own name.

He only saw that there was now a path to the register.

Nandu asked, "Why have they not printed the names this time?"

Budhan said, "Printing the name is not necessary."

He closed the report.

"What matters is that there is a path to the name."

The Red Card

In the western hamlet of Barail, Phulmati Devi had what could be called a home, but on paper it had no place of its own.

She lived with her husband, Harikishun, and their three children in the rear part of the old courtyard belonging to Harikishun's uncle, Bhuvaneshwar.

A thin bamboo partition stood between the two families.

Their hearths were separate.

Their rice stores were separate.

Their earnings were separate.

But the main gate was the same.

And so was the official house number—Barail West, 47.

Bhuvaneshwar's family already had a red food-assistance card.

Phulmati's family had no card at all.

For seven or eight months of the year, Harikishun stayed away from the village, carrying bricks for a living.

Between the rains and winter, he remained in the village and worked as an agricultural labourer.

Phulmati transplanted paddy, weeded fields, and harvested crops for others.

Two years earlier, her youngest son, Deepak, had fallen ill.

The debt from grain bought on credit at that time had taken three months to clear.

Then the anganwadi worker had asked Phulmati, "Why don't you apply for a separate red card for your family?"

Phulmati had said, "Uncle has a card. None of our names are on it."

The worker asked, "Then how do you get your grain?"

"From the market."

"And when there isn't enough?"

Phulmati did not laugh.

"Then we buy on credit."

The following Monday she went to the panchayat office.

She took an application form.

She had the names entered—Phulmati Devi, Harikishun Paswan, Reena, Gudiya, Deepak.

The address was written as—House No. 47.

The employee checked the list.

“There is already a red card against 47.”

Phulmati said, “That belongs to my uncle’s family.”

“Same house number?”

“Yes, the number is the same.”

“Then verification will be required.”

The application was submitted.

Phulmati received an acknowledgement slip.

She wrote the date from the slip on the wall in charcoal.

Fifteen days later, a verification team came.

That day Phulmati had gone to transplant paddy.

Bhuvaneshwar’s wife was in the courtyard.

The team entered through the main gate.

They saw one courtyard.

They saw one hand pump.

They saw one neem tree.

The bamboo partition ran all the way to the rear, but the little doorway in it happened to be open that day.

Bhuvaneshwar’s wife said, “Harikishun’s family lives separately at the back.”

The employee asked, “Separate house number?”

“No, the number is not separate.”

“Separate gate?”

“No, there is only one gate.”

The register was marked: “Status as a separate family unclear.”

Phulmati understood what had happened when she returned that evening.

The next day she reached the panchayat office.

The employee said, “There will be another site inspection.”

“When?”

“You will be informed.”

The notice came three weeks later.

This time Phulmati stayed at home.

She showed them her own hearth.

She showed them her separate earthen pots.

She showed them her separate sacks of rice.

She showed them the trunk where she kept the children’s clothes.

The verification staff saw everything.

Then one of them asked, "Do you have papers showing a division of the land?"

Phulmati said, "The land is in Uncle's name. The family has given us this part to live in."

"Any rent receipt?"

"There is no rent receipt."

"A separate tax receipt?"

"No separate tax receipt either."

The employee wrote again: "Single premises; no proof of separate ownership available."

Phulmati asked, "Do you have to own the house to get a card?"

The employee paused.

"No, but a separate household has to be established."

"You saw the separate hearth."

"I did."

"And our earnings are separate?"

"That will have to be shown on paper."

From that day began Phulmati's month-by-month rounds of the office.

The first month, she took a copy of Harikishun's labour register.

Harikishun's name appeared there as a worker in his own right.

The employee said, "This proves employment, not a separate family."

The second month, she took certificates from the anganwadi register showing Deepak's and Gudiya's names.

Phulmati was listed as their mother.

"This proves the children," came the reply, "not a separate household."

The third month, she brought a school slip.

Harikishun's name appeared as Reena's guardian.

"We accept that you are a family," the employee said, "but another card is already active against House No. 47."

For the first time, Phulmati raised her voice. "If two families enter through one gate, do they become one family in the government's count?"

The employee said nothing.

The people standing behind her in the queue began to edge forward.

"Come next Tuesday," the employee said.

Phulmati went the following Tuesday.

Harikishun had left again for work outside the village.

For now, the household depended mainly on Phulmati's earnings.

A new assistant was seated in the office—Shashikant.

He looked through everything from the first acknowledgement slip to the fourth.

"Why was the application submitted again and again?"

Phulmati said, "Sometimes it was verification, sometimes a separate-family certificate, sometimes house papers."

Shashikant read the earlier remarks.

"Whose name is on the card against 47?"

"Bhuvaneshwar Paswan."

"Who are the members on that card?"

Phulmati listed five names—Bhuvaneshwar, his wife, two sons, one daughter.

"Is anyone from your family on that card?"

"Not one person from my family is on it."

Shashikant said, "Then the first thing to check is how many people's grain is being drawn on the existing card for No. 47."

He called for the distribution register.

Five members were recorded against Bhuvaneshwar's card.

Month after month, the quantity issued was for five people.

Not one of the five members of Phulmati's family appeared there.

Shashikant asked, "If your family is being treated as part of this card's household, where is the ration for these five additional people?"

No one in the room had an answer.

Phulmati said nothing either.

For the first time, the question had arisen from within the paperwork on her side.

Shashikant added a small note to the application file.

"Check the provision for multiple households within one premises."

He sent the note to the senior officer.

Three days later the reply came: once a separate household was verified, a family sub-number could be assigned under the same house number.

Shashikant called Phulmati.

"There will be another verification now."

Phulmati's face fell.

"Again?"

"This time the questions will be different."

A third verification date was fixed.

This time the employee did not count the main gate.

He asked—was food cooked separately?

Were rice and other grain stored separately?

Were earnings and expenses separate?

Who was responsible for bringing up the children?

Bhuvaneshwar was called as well.

He said clearly, "Harikishun's family is not part of my card. They have kept a separate hearth for five years."

Phulmati said, "Not five. Six years."

Bhuvaneshwar laughed.

"All right, six."

For the first time the verification register recorded: "Single premises, separate household."

Beneath it was the proposed designation—47-A.

Phulmati asked, "What is this 'A'?"

The employee said, "The house number will not change. Your family will have a separate designation."

"And Uncle's?"

"47-original."

Phulmati returned home and looked at the date of the first acknowledgement slip on the wall.

Rain splashes had half-erased the figures.

Four months had passed.

The following week she went to the office.

The file had gone upstairs for approval.

She went again the next week.

Her name had been written as "Phoolmati."

She said, "My name is Phulmati."

The employee asked, "What difference does that make?"

Phulmati showed her anganwadi slip.

"For four months I have learnt that one letter can send you around every doorway later. Correct it now."

The name was corrected.

In the third week she was called for a photograph.

Phulmati went with all three children.

Harikishun was away.

The employee said, "Your husband isn't here?"

Phulmati's heart lurched again.

"He is away for work. His name is on the application."

Shashikant checked the earlier verification.

"Phulmati Devi is recorded as head of household. Take the photograph of the members present. The absent member's earlier identity verification is attached."

This time the application was not held up.

On the first Wednesday of the fifth month, Phulmati received word from the panchayat office.

The card had arrived.

It was red.

Phulmati had never seen that colour before.

She read the name.

Phulmati Devi.

Then she read the household designation—47-A.

Then she read the members.

Harikishun.

Reena.

Gudiya.

Deepak.

Every name was there.

Shashikant said, "Sign once here."

Before signing, Phulmati asked, "None of our names has been added to Bhuvaneshwar's card, has it?"

Shashikant opened both records and showed her.

The records confirmed that none of Phulmati's family had been added to Bhuvaneshwar's card.

"And the quantity?"

"Your five members' entitlement will be added separately against your card."

Only then did Phulmati sign.

On the first distribution day, she did not go at dawn.

The old fear of having to run from door to door was gone.

She reached the distribution centre before noon.

Bhuvaneshwar's wife was there with her card.

The two women stood in the same queue.

Bhuvaneshwar's family's ration was weighed first.

Then Phulmati's card was taken.

The dealer looked at the household designation.

"47-A?"

Phulmati said, "Yes."

He opened the register.

There was a new line.

Phulmati Devi—five members.

The grain was weighed.

Phulmati tied the sack.

Bhuvaneshwar's wife said, "Two cards for one house—look at that."

Phulmati smiled.

"For one house number."

She lifted the sack onto her head.

"There were always two homes."

That evening the children gathered around the red card.

Deepak asked, "Why is it red?"

Phulmati said, "The colour belongs to the government."
Reena asked, "What does 47-A mean?"
Phulmati looked towards the main gate of the courtyard.
Bhuvaneshwar's family entered through that gate, and so did hers.
The little doorway in the bamboo partition was closed now.
Smoke rose separately from the two hearths.
Phulmati put the card away in the trunk.
The half-erased date of the first slip was still visible on the wall.
She did not rub it out.
Beneath that date, she wrote only this in charcoal—47-A.

The Sand Ghat

At this bend of the Kamla River lay a village called Sonbarsa, but the villagers simply called the pale strip across the river the Sand Ghat.

In winter the river grew gentle. A long tongue of sand emerged in the middle, while thin streams of water ran along both sides.

Sonbarsa's three old wells lived by the rhythm of this river. As the rains receded, the water level fell, then stayed steady from Kartik through Paush.

The oldest well stood behind the school. Its water was used for the midday meal, people from five nearby houses drew from it, and every morning Haripriya, who sold tea, filled two pitchers there.

Haripriya did not measure the depth of the water, but her hands knew the length of the rope.

'If it reaches this knot, the bucket will come up full,' she would tell her daughter Manju.

There were seven knots in the rope.

The first five were old, the sixth had been tied by Haripriya's husband, and Manju had added the seventh the previous monsoon.

In the first week of Phagun, three heavy trucks arrived at the Sand Ghat.

Two days later, a yellow machine arrived.

A notice was posted on the panchayat building stating that sand would be lifted from a designated strip of the river. The permit was for three months.

The villagers read the notice. Some spoke of a bridge, some of a road, some of work.

For Haripriya, the first change was dust.

Whenever the trucks left the ghat and took the main road, pale dust settled over the benches at her tea stall.

She swept them twice a day.

'It is business,' people said. 'A little dust has to be endured.'

Haripriya kept enduring it.

A week later, the rope at the well dropped as far as the sixth knot.

She filled the bucket and drew it up.

The water was clear.

Two days later, the rope went down to the seventh knot.

Manju laughed. 'We need an eighth knot.'

Haripriya did not laugh.

That evening she went toward the river.

Where a thin stream had once hugged the village side of the Sand Ghat, there was now a broad track for the trucks to descend. Sand had been cut away to lower the track.

Four deep pits gleamed in the middle of the riverbed.

The excavated sand lay heaped to one side.

Haripriya did not know how to read a river, but one thing was immediately plain to her.

The water no longer curved around the old bend.

A thin stream had been drawn from the lower part of the truck track straight toward the pits.

She returned home.

The next morning Vimla Devi, the school cook, said, 'The bucket is touching the bottom of the well.'

That day, water for the children's meal was brought from another hamlet.

A panchayat meeting was held.

Manoj Sah, the sand contractor, said, 'The water in the river has fallen. It would not be right to say our work is the cause.'

The mukhiya also said, 'There was less rain this winter.'

Haripriya listened in silence.

At the end of the meeting she asked, 'How far are you permitted to dig the track for the trucks to descend?'

Manoj Sah showed her the papers.

The paper marked the four corners of the sand-lifting area. There was no separate mention of a track for the trucks.

'How will the trucks get there without a track?' he said.

Haripriya said nothing more.

That night Manju began tying an eighth knot in the rope.

Haripriya stopped her.

'Do not add another knot.'

'Then how will we draw water?'

'First we will see where the water has gone.'

The next day Haripriya called Ramji, the boatman.

Ramji had been rowing boats on the river for forty years.

He looked at the river and then said, 'The mouth of the channel has shifted.'

'Because of the sand lifting?'

Ramji did not say yes at once.

He went to the truck track and planted his staff in the sand. Then he walked toward the bend of the old channel.

'It is not only the pits,' he said. 'This track has been cut lower. Water takes the lower path.'

Haripriya asked, 'How can that be shown on paper?'

Ramji smiled.

'Write the water into a register.'

For the next seven days, a small exercise began.

Three schoolchildren went to the river at six each morning.

Ramji showed them three places.

The first was the old channel on the village side.

The second was the cut made for the trucks to descend.

The third was the mouth of the sand-extraction pit.

The water depth was measured with bamboo rods of the same length.

Manju wrote down the figures.

Haripriya counted the knots on the school well's rope.

Before cooking the meal, Vimla Devi recorded the well's water level.

The pages filled with seven days of entries.

In the old channel, the water fell day by day.

In the cut track, it rose day by day.

At the well, the rope had to go past the eighth knot.

On the eighth night, there was a light rain.

Haripriya thought the water in the well would rise now.

But by morning there was very little difference.

Ramji said, 'The soil does not hold water by itself. Where the river's current exerts pressure matters too.'

Haripriya understood it in her own way: a river does not flow only over the surface; its water also breathes through the earth along its banks.

On the ninth day, the water in another village well turned grey.

Fine sand from the bottom began coming up in the bucket.

This time the panchayat met again.

Haripriya placed the seven days of records on the table.

Manoj Sah did not laugh.

He looked through the pages.

'This is not an official survey,' he said.

'No,' Haripriya replied. 'That is why you should have an official survey done.'

After that one sentence, the meeting fell silent for a while.

The mukhiya sent word to the block office.

Two days later, Junior Engineer Navalkishore arrived.

He examined the permit, the map of the mining area, and the ghat.

First, the distances between the four marked corners were measured.

The main sand-extraction pits were within the permitted area.

Manoj Sah's face relaxed a little.

Then Haripriya showed him the truck track.

Navalkishore measured its bed.

The cut track crossed the boundary of the designated sand strip and ran as far as the bend of the old channel.

'This is not part of the mining area,' he said.

Manoj Sah replied at once, 'It is only an access track.'

Navalkishore said, 'But the riverbed was cut while making it. Its effect is like mining.'

Ramji showed him the bamboo-rod measurements from the three places.

The engineer measured again with his own instrument.

The figures were not identical, but they pointed in the same direction.

The old channel was shallower.

The cut made for the trucks was deeper.

Small cuts linked the pits to one another.

Navalkishore drew a line on the map with a pencil.

'These are no longer three separate pits,' he said. 'They are becoming a new course for the water.'

Manoj Sah fell silent.

Sand extraction was not halted that day.

Haripriya had not demanded that either.

It was decided that the lowered truck track would be filled back in, an unbroken strip of sand would be left at the bend of the old channel, and the cuts connecting the pits would be closed.

No trucks ran for three days.

The workers filled the cut track with sand again.

Manju watched from a distance.

She asked, 'They are filling it again with the same sand they lifted?'

Haripriya said, 'Sometimes filling in the wrong path is work too.'

On the fourth day, water began flowing close to the old bend again.

There was no instant miracle.

At the school well, the rope still went down to the eighth knot.

On the sixth day, the bucket touched water between the seventh and eighth knots.

On the tenth day, it touched at the seventh knot.

Vimla Devi wrote in the register: 'Water clear again.'

Haripriya read that page and did not put it away separately.

She tied it together with the records from the first seven days.

Manoj Sah resumed sand extraction.

This time the truck track ran over the higher sandbar, where the riverbed had not been cut.

Stakes were driven into the ground at the four corners.

Manju saw that one stake bore the words in red: 'Not beyond this point.'

She told Haripriya, 'Now the boundary can be seen.'

Haripriya replied, 'The boundary was there before. It just could not be seen.'

A month passed.

Trucks still came and went at the Sand Ghat.

Dust still rose.

Haripriya still swept the benches twice a day.

But the rope at the school well kept stopping around the seventh knot.

On the day the permit expired, a final survey was conducted at the panchayat.

Navalkishore looked again at the old records.

He said, 'Keep all of these.'

Haripriya asked, 'Will they become official papers?'

'They are not official papers,' he said, 'but at the next survey they will show where the question first arose.'

Haripriya liked that answer.

She went home and looked at the rope.

Manju had not cut off the eighth knot.

'Shall I remove it?' Manju asked.

Haripriya shook her head.

'Let it stay.'

'Why keep the eighth knot then?'

Rolling up the rope, Haripriya said, 'The river may change again. One knot should remain for memory.'

By evening, the Sand Ghat lay white.

There were no trucks.

The old channel flowed beside the village with a faint sound.

Haripriya filled the bucket at the well.

The rope went taut at the seventh knot.

She drew it up.

The water in the bucket was clear.

She looked at the water, then at the eighth knot in the rope.

For her, the two were no longer separate things.

The Temporary Settlement

The official name of the hamlet that had settled east of the Dharharwa embankment had remained the same for thirty years—"Temporary Relief Settlement."

The villagers simply called it Relief Tola.

The relief in that name had ended long ago; the word temporary had survived.

Thirty years earlier, a flood of the Kamla had washed away the old settlement.

At the time, eighteen families had been given bamboo posts and tarpaulins on barren government land away from the embankment.

The first camp slip had said: "Temporary settlement until the river channel stabilizes."

Below it was another line: "The situation will be reviewed after three years."

Three years passed.

There was no review.

The people stayed.

Thatch replaced the tarpaulins.

Tiles replaced the thatch.

Some houses acquired tin roofs.

Eighteen families became forty-six households.

The first children born in the settlement were now sending their own children to school.

Electric poles went up.

Two rooms were built for the anganwadi.

Yet on the panchayat map, the place was still marked in small red letters: "Temporary Relief Settlement."

The weight of those words was felt most heavily when it came to water.

Water from the main village pipeline did not reach Relief Tola.

Twenty years earlier, the panchayat had laid a black flexible pipe.

It ran above the ground, winding along field ridges, through scrub, and past two courtyards.

At its end stood a public tap.

In summer the pipe softened.
 In winter it hardened and cracked.
 If a vehicle ran over it, it was crushed.
 If a goat got its teeth into it, water sprayed from a small puncture.
 Again and again, the people of Relief Tola bandaged the pipe's wounds
 with thin slivers of bamboo, cloth, and wire.
 The panchayat too replaced the pipe several times.
 This time, at the end of Chait, it split in three places at once.
 For five days people carried filled water pots from the main village tap.
 On the sixth day, Malati Devi went to the panchayat office.
 She was the daughter of one of the eighteen families that had come to this
 place thirty years earlier.
 She had been nine then.
 Now her granddaughter was nine.
 "Not another pipe laid on top of the ground this time," she said.
 "Connect us with a permanent underground water line."
 Panchayat assistant Vijay Jha opened the water-scheme file.
 He looked at the survey sheet, then at the map.
 "A proposal can be made," he said, "but there is one obstacle."
 "What obstacle?"
 Vijay placed a finger on the red lettering on the map.
 "Temporary Relief Settlement."
 Malati Devi was silent for a moment.
 "How many years has the black pipe been temporary?" she asked.
 Vijay did not answer.
 "And the settlement?"
 Vijay looked at the map again.
 "I do not look at time. I look at the record."
 That evening Malati Devi opened her old tin trunk.
 Not much from the time of the flood had survived inside it.
 There was a torn photograph.
 There were two coins tied in a red cloth.
 And there was a thin yellow slip with its right-hand corner torn away.
 Her father's name was written on the slip—Bholanath Sah.
 Below it: Family No. 12.
 The line saying "review after three years" was still legible on that slip.
 The next day she took the slip to the panchayat office.
 Vijay turned it over and examined it several times.
 "This is a settlement slip," he said. "It is not a deed of ownership."
 Malati Devi said, "I am not asking for ownership."
 "Then what are you asking for?"

“When was the review that was supposed to take place after three years actually done?”

Vijay sent for the old files.

Nothing was found on the first day.

On the second day, an inspection sheet from 1999 turned up.

At the top it said: “Relief Tola—temporary.”

Review—blank.

A sheet from 2004 was found.

Status—temporary.

The review field was blank again.

A sheet from 2010 was found.

Status—temporary.

Nothing had been entered under review.

A sheet from 2018 was found.

Status—temporary.

The review line was still blank.

Vijay laid the sheets out in order on the table.

Then he opened the water-expenditure register.

2002—“Temporary water pipe in Relief Tola replaced.”

2006—“Temporary water pipe repaired.”

2011—“New flexible pipe.”

2015—“Water pipe replaced.”

2020—“Relief Tola water pipe repaired.”

2024—“Temporary water pipe replaced.”

Malati Devi read every line.

“The settlement remained temporary,” she said, “and so did the pipe. But the spending remained permanent.”

Vijay wanted to laugh, but he did not.

Malati Devi could have demanded at once that the settlement now be recognized as permanent.

She did not.

“Write down my request,” she said. “First conduct the review that was promised on the original slip.”

Vijay wrote the application.

Malati Devi could read.

She stopped him at the first sentence.

Vijay had written: “Permanently settled here for thirty years...”

Malati Devi said, “I will not use the word permanent myself yet.”

“Then what should I write?”

“Continuously settled here for thirty years.”

Vijay changed the sentence.

The application asked for five things.
A copy of the original relief order.
A current survey of the settlement area.
An assessment of the present distance from the river channel.
The reason for continuing the temporary status.
And the basis for withholding a permanent water line.
Thirty-four households signed or gave thumb impressions.
Twelve households had members away earning a living; their names were listed separately.

Ten days later, two people came from the Circle Office.
One was a surveyor; the other was a revenue official.
The junior engineer responsible for the water works and Vijay Jha came with them.

The first question was: "How old is the settlement?"
Everyone began speaking at once.
"Thirty years."
"My son was born here."
"I was married here."
"This tap has been here for twenty years."
The surveyor raised a hand and stopped them.
"We will record memories, but the survey will be separate."
Malati Devi said, "That is right."
This time she did not want memory to be made into proof.
The first survey was made from the map attached to the old relief slip.
Two of the four old corner markers could not be found.
Near the third corner, a rusted iron stake was found among the roots of a peepal tree.

The fourth corner matched the line of the old tap.
The surveyor measured the distances.
Then everyone went as far as the river's present channel.
Between the settlement and the channel there were now two fields, an unpaved path, and a raised sandbar.

The revenue official asked, "Does floodwater reach this far?"
Malati Devi said, "Water does come, but in thirty years the old channel has not returned here."

"Is there a government record of that?"
Vijay produced the flood-inspection sheets for five years.
No earlier sheets were available.
Malati Devi showed them the old construction year of the anganwadi.
"This shows how long the settlement has existed," she said, "not how the river has moved."

The surveyor nodded.

“Record that distinction.”

That day Malati Devi understood that asking for the right document was more important than trying to make the wrong document prove the right thing.

It took three weeks.

A copy of the original 1996 relief order was found in the Circle Office file.

It stated clearly that the settlement was to remain “until the old river channel stabilizes.”

Below that was a field for the date of review.

It was blank.

Old channel maps were requested from the district water records.

The lines from 1996, 2001, 2011, and 2021 were laid side by side.

The old channel had gradually shifted westward, but it had never returned to the site of Relief Tola.

That fact did not determine ownership of the land.

But it did require a review of the temporary condition stated in the original order.

The Water Department’s records told a different story.

Expenditure was recorded for replacing the black pipe six times.

The junior engineer added up the figures.

“By treating this pipe as temporary, we kept buying a new one again and again,” he said.

Malati Devi asked, “And what would it cost to lay one underground once?”

The engineer wrote down the estimate.

It was less than the total cost of the six rounds of repair and replacement.

No one said anything.

The next meeting was held in the panchayat building.

Many people from Relief Tola stood outside.

Inside were five chairs and one long table.

The Circle Officer read the old order.

Then he looked at the four inspection sheets.

“For thirty years, the word ‘temporary’ was repeated,” he said, “but no review of the original condition was recorded.”

He also examined the water-expenditure register.

“The temporary arrangement was replaced six times.”

No one applauded.

People waited to hear the answer.

The Circle Officer said, “This meeting will not decide ownership.”

Malati Devi said, “My application did not ask for ownership either.”

The officer looked at her.

"That will be made clear in the record."

He dictated an order directing that the status of Relief Tola be formally reviewed, with the present settlement, water risk, public facilities, and land records entered separately.

Then another sentence was added: "A safe basic water supply shall not be withheld solely on the basis of the unreviewed 1996 notation 'temporary relief.'"

Vijay Jha read the sentence again.

Malati Devi asked, "Will the underground pipe be laid now?"

"Yes," the junior engineer said. "The scheme will move forward."

"And permanent settlement status?"

Vijay paused before answering.

"That is a separate decision."

Malati Devi said, "Let it remain separate. At least the question has finally been asked."

A month later, the labourers arrived.

A trench was dug from the main pipeline to Relief Tola.

The black flexible pipe was removed.

A thick water pipe was laid underground.

Three public taps were installed.

At the old single-tap spot, children no longer had to quarrel with one another again and again.

When the water was turned on for the first time, Malati Devi filled her water pot.

She did not place her hand over the mouth of the tap.

She looked down at the ground where the pipe had been buried.

Vijay was holding a piece of the old black pipe.

"Shall I throw it away?" he asked.

Malati Devi said, "No. Let it stay."

"Why keep it?"

"Keep it in the anganwadi."

A length of the black pipe, about a cubit long, was washed and hung on the wall.

Below it Vijay wrote a small label: "Old water pipe."

Malati Devi read the label.

"One word is missing," she said.

Vijay picked up his pen.

The label was changed to: "Old temporary water pipe."

Outside, water flowed from all three taps.

On the anganwadi wall, the old pipe hung silently.

Malati Devi lifted her water pot and walked home.

For the first time, she understood that for something temporary to end, it need not always break; sometimes it is enough for it finally to be reviewed.

The Forest School

In the midst of the sal forest stood the settlement of Beljharia.

The paved road lay four kos from the settlement.

Between them were two small streams, an earthen embankment, and a dense thicket of sal.

At the edge of that thicket stood a one-room primary school.

The limewash on the wall had grown old, but the name in blue letters could still be read.

Phulkumari of Class Five was the first to arrive every day.

Behind her came Raghu of Class Three, Chanda of Class Two, and the younger children.

The school key stayed with Sugni Kaki, who cooked the midday meal.

Naresh Babu, the teacher, had the other key.

In the first month Naresh Babu came for eight days.

In the second month, five.

In the first ten days of the third month, two.

When the teacher did not come, Sugni Kaki opened the room.

The children would talk for a while at first.

Then some went home, while others stayed and played in the courtyard.

One day, standing by the gate, Phulkumari said, "What will we do if we go back home?"

Raghu said, "Let's look at the maths we were given yesterday."

"Who will explain it?"

Raghu shrugged.

Phulkumari went into the room.

The addition and subtraction from the previous week were still written on the blackboard.

She opened her book.

"Let's first study what we do understand."

Four children sat down in front.

Phulkumari read the lesson aloud.

Halfway through, she stumbled over a word.

Raghu pronounced it.

"Meaning?" Chanda asked.

No one knew.

Phulkumari wrote the word on the blackboard.

By noon, eleven questions had accumulated on the board.

As she served the meal, Sugni Kaki asked, "Who will wipe all this off?"

Phulkumari said, "The day Guruji comes, we'll ask him."

The next day Guruji did not come.

There was no room left on the board for a new lesson.

Raghu tore a page from an old notebook.

Phulkumari stopped him.

"Why are you tearing your notebook?"

Sugni Kaki brought out some old slips kept near an empty rice sack.

They were the backs of old food-stock account sheets, with one side still blank.

Phulkumari cut those sheets into small pieces.

They also found an old piece of red cloth.

Chanda stitched a small pouch from it.

On the mouth of the pouch Phulkumari wrote: "NOT UNDERSTOOD."

Any question no one could answer was written on a slip and dropped into the pouch.

If they found the answer in a book, the slip came out.

By the end of the first week there were twenty-seven slips in the pouch.

Some questions were about mathematics.

Some were from the language lessons.

Some were questions the children could work out among themselves by reading the books.

"Which is greater, a quarter or a half?"

That question came out on the third day.

"Why is north shown at the top of a map?"

That slip stayed inside.

"When water boils, where does the steam go?"

Raghu and Chanda gave two different answers.

The slip stayed inside.

One day Naresh Babu came.

Phulkumari placed the red pouch before him.

"What is this?"

"Not understood."

Naresh Babu laughed.

"All of it?"

"All of ours."

He opened the slips.

He explained the first five questions.

The bell rang while he was on the sixth.
 Then someone from the office sent for him.
 He said, "The rest tomorrow."
 The next day he did not come.
 The remaining slips stayed in the pouch.
 Then Phulkumari began another task.
 She opened the last blank page of an old, half-filled register.
 Across the top she drew four columns.
 Date.
 Who opened the room.
 What was studied.
 How many questions remained unanswered.
 Raghu added a fifth column: "Did Guruji come or not?"
 Phulkumari looked at him for a moment.
 Then she left the column there.
 "We won't write anything false," she said.
 "If he comes, we'll write 'came.' If he doesn't, we'll write 'did not come.'"
 No complaint against anyone was entered in this register.
 Only the account of the day.
 Monday — Sugni Kaki opened the room.
 Language lesson three.
 Two questions resolved.
 Thirty-one slips left.
 Guruji did not come.
 Tuesday — Raghu led the multiplication tables.
 Four children checked one another.
 Two slips resolved.
 Twenty-nine left.
 Guruji did not come.
 Wednesday — Guruji came.
 He explained the answers to seven slips.
 Twenty-two left.
 And so the register continued to fill.
 For some days the children were very enthusiastic.
 They took turns ringing the bell, reading lessons, and cleaning the blackboard.
 But little by little the difficulties began to show.
 Phulkumari could explain Class Five mathematics to the younger children, but she herself got stuck on her new chapter.
 Raghu could read, but he was not confident enough to correct written answers.

Chanda could memorize words, but fell silent when asked their meanings.

The red pouch grew thicker.

One day the number of slips crossed fifty.

Phulkumari lifted the pouch.

“We can keep the school open,” she said softly, “but we cannot teach every lesson.”

Sugni Kaki heard her from a distance.

She said nothing.

That week there was a meeting of the School Management Committee at the panchayat building.

Naresh Babu came too.

He said the forest path became difficult after the rains.

The bus came only as far as the road; from there he had to walk.

On some days he also had work at the block office.

The committee members listened.

Phulkumari and Raghu were not at the meeting.

The next day they went on filling their register.

At the end of the month, Sudhanshu Jha, the education coordinator from the block, came for an inspection.

Naresh Babu was with him.

Sudhanshu Jha looked around the room.

The blackboard was clean.

The children were seated.

He asked Phulkumari, “What did you study today?”

Phulkumari showed him the page in the book.

“This lesson.”

“Who taught it?”

Phulkumari looked toward Raghu.

Raghu said, “I read the first two paragraphs. She read the third.”

“And Guruji?”

Naresh Babu was standing right there.

Instead of answering, Phulkumari brought out the register.

Sudhanshu Jha turned the pages.

One day, two days, three days.

In some places it said “came,” in others “did not come.”

He asked about the red pouch.

Chanda took the pouch down.

“Are these all complaints?”

“No,” Phulkumari said, “these are questions.”

Sudhanshu Jha opened one slip.

“Rainwater goes into the river, but where does the water in a well come from?”

A second slip.

“Why is one point five called one and a half?”

A third.

“In history, is it more important to remember the date or the event?”

He spread the slips across the table.

“How many are there?”

Raghu said, “Fifty-eight.”

For the first time, Naresh Babu looked carefully at the pouch.

“On the days I come, I can’t get through all the questions at once,” he said.

Sudhanshu Jha pointed to the register.

“Then on the days you do not come, they keep increasing.”

The room was silent for a few moments.

Phulkumari said at once, “We have not taken Guruji’s place.”

“Then what do you do?”

“We do not let the school close.”

Raghu added, “What we do not understand, we save for later.”

Sudhanshu Jha reached the last page of the register.

He counted the days.

The room had been opened on twenty-two days that month.

Naresh Babu had come on seven days.

For fifteen days the children had kept the lessons going on their own.

“On those fifteen days, did the school run or not?” Sudhanshu Jha asked.

Naresh Babu did not answer.

Phulkumari said, “The door was open.”

“And the teaching?”

She looked at the red pouch.

“As much as we could manage.”

After that answer, another meeting was held at the panchayat building.

This time the children’s register lay on the table.

It was decided that the Beljharia school would no longer be left to depend on a single teacher.

A teacher from a nearby school would come here two days a week.

The days when Naresh Babu had non-teaching work at the block office would be recorded in advance.

If he had to be away on such a day, the name of the substitute teacher would be entered in the register.

The key would continue to stay with Sugni Kaki.

The children’s daily register would continue as well.

Someone said that it was not an official register.

Sudhanshu Jha replied, "No, but it shows that opening the room is not the same as completing the teaching."

The new arrangement began the following Monday.

Naresh Babu arrived on time.

He cleaned the blackboard.

Then he took down the red pouch.

"Books later today," he said.

"This first."

He began opening the slips one by one.

The first question was about well water.

On the ground he drew a circle.

He began explaining the layers of sand, soil, and water.

In the middle of it Chanda raised her hand.

Naresh Babu stopped.

"Yes? What do you want to ask?"

Chanda asked her question.

Raghu added another.

Phulkumari wrote the date in the register.

In the column "Who opened the room," she wrote Sugni Kaki's name.

Under "What was studied," she wrote layers of water and soil.

Under "How many questions remained unanswered," she wrote fifty-six instead of fifty-eight.

The last column was: "Did Guruji come or not?"

Phulkumari held her pen still for a moment.

Then she wrote: "Came."

The bell rang.

This time Phulkumari did not sit in the teacher's chair.

She went back to her place and opened her book.

The red pouch still hung on the wall.

She was not waiting for it to become empty.

She only made sure that whatever the children did not understand did not quietly disappear.

The Power of a Signature

The meeting of the ‘Anjor Women’s Savings Group’ in Sonbarsa village was held on the second Tuesday of every month.

There were twelve women.

Some had been able to write their names for years; some, until two years earlier, had still been putting down thumbprints.

Now all of them wrote their names.

They were proud of that.

But one day Chandrakala Devi said, ‘We have learned to write our names. Now let us learn to read what is written above them.’

Everyone laughed.

Phulo Devi asked, ‘Is it necessary to read everything above?’

Chandrakala said, ‘The signature goes below. The responsibility is written above.’

After that sentence, the manner of their meetings changed.

Along with the additions and subtractions in the savings ledger, they began practising how to read a document.

Sometimes it was a bank receipt, sometimes the quantity printed on a sack of seed, sometimes a notice from the panchayat.

They did not understand every word.

Whatever they did not understand, they circled.

At the next meeting, they looked for its meaning.

Meanwhile, four community paddy-drying platforms were built behind the panchayat building.

The idea was that when the rains ended and paddy began coming in from the fields, the village women could spread it there to dry.

Earlier, paddy had been dried wherever space could be found—in courtyards, beside the road, under thatched roofs.

The sight of the new platforms pleased everyone.

All four were paved.

They stood raised above the ground.

A small drain was to run along the edge so that rainwater would not remain standing.

For the first month, two of the platforms worked well.

A thin crack appeared across the middle of the third.

On one side of the fourth, the outlet for the water had never been made at all.

When it rained, water stood in a corner of the platform.

Sweeping the water away, Phulo Devi said, 'Before we can dry anything here, we have to dry the drying platform itself.'

Everyone laughed, but the water remained in that corner for three days.

A month later, word came from the panchayat that the members of the Anjor Women's Savings Group had to sign a form.

Madan Babu brought the form to their meeting.

He had a single sheet in his hand.

Across the top, in bold letters, were the words: 'User Group Satisfaction Certificate.'

Below were twelve lines.

Madan Babu said, 'Each of you write your name here. The work is complete. This is the paper for the final payment.'

Neelam Devi picked up the pen.

Chandrakala drew the page towards herself.

'Read the line at the top first.'

Madan Babu smiled.

'What is there to read? You have seen the work yourselves.'

Chandrakala read the first line slowly.

'We... the users... certify...'

She stopped.

Phulo read the next word: 'work...'

Neelam added, 'complete...'

Then all three were held up by one word.

Madan Babu said, 'Defect-free.'

Chandrakala read the whole line again.

'The work has been found complete and defect-free.'

The room fell silent.

Phulo said, 'Is the crack in the third platform not a defect?'

'That is a small matter,' Madan Babu said.

'And the water on the fourth?'

'That depends on how it is used.'

Chandrakala turned the sheet over.

The back was blank.

She asked, 'Where are the rest of the papers?'

'What rest?'

'The work order. The measurements. What exactly was to be built. How long the responsibility for repairs lasts.'

Madan Babu stared at her.

‘What do you need with all that?’

Neelam said quietly, ‘Our signatures are being asked for at the end of all that.’

This time Madan Babu had no answer.

He said the complete file was at the panchayat office.

Chandrakala pushed the sheet back to him.

‘Then we will sign after we have seen the complete file.’

Madan Babu went away with the blank sheet.

The next day two women went to the panchayat building.

Then four.

In the end, eight women arrived.

The panchayat secretary said, ‘The file is bulky. It will be difficult for everyone to understand it.’

Chandrakala said, ‘We do not need to understand everything. We will understand as much as our signatures are meant to stand behind.’

The file was placed on the table.

It contained seventeen pages.

The first page gave the name of the work.

The second gave the cost.

From the third onward came the measurements and details of the materials.

On a separate sheet, the women wrote five words: ‘work, measurement, period, defect, responsibility.’

They began looking for those five words in the file.

Many lines went over their heads.

Whenever they did not understand a word, they asked the secretary again.

The sixth page contained the measurements of the four platforms.

The eighth described the drainage along their edges.

For the fourth platform, it said clearly that the slope was to run towards the drain at the back.

Phulo said, ‘There is not even an outlet to the drain there.’

The secretary put his finger on the line.

‘This was supposed to have been built.’

On the eleventh page, one line was circled in red ink.

‘Defect-correction period—twelve months.’

Neelam read it three times.

‘Twelve months.’

Chandrakala asked, ‘How many days has it been since the work was declared complete?’

The secretary checked the date.

‘Fifty-six days.’

Phulo did not laugh.

She only said, ‘So in fifty-six days the defect became ours. And who is responsible for the twelve months?’

The secretary sat straighter in his chair.

The file also contained a column for the security deposit.

That amount was not to be released in full before the defect-correction period ended.

The women did not argue about the amount.

Their question was something else.

‘If the correction period is still running, why is there already a sheet saying “defect-free”?’

The secretary said this was the normal procedure.

Chandrakala asked, ‘Does the file say anywhere that this is the normal procedure?’

The secretary fell silent.

Two days later, Nandkishore Sah, the contractor for the work, came to the village himself.

He inspected the platforms.

He bent over the crack in the third.

‘This is only a fine surface line,’ he said.

Phulo replied, ‘That may be so. The file says that if a defect is seen, it should be reported.’

‘Are you an engineer?’

‘I am not an engineer.’

‘Then who will judge how deep the crack is?’

‘The engineer will. I will only write that a crack can be seen.’

Nandkishore Sah went over to the fourth platform.

There was no water standing there then, but a thin green strip of moss was visible.

Chandrakala said, ‘Water collects here. The outlet is shown in the file, but it is not here.’

Nandkishore Sah said, ‘That can be fixed easily.’

‘Then we will write “defect-free” after it is fixed,’ Neelam said.

Nandkishore Sah’s voice hardened.

‘The final payment is being held up.’

Chandrakala replied, ‘My signature is not meant to hold up a payment. But if I sign against what I have just read, the lie will be in my own writing.’

At that, Madan Babu looked at Chandrakala.

Until then he had thought the women’s group signatures were only a formality.

Now the page lay on the table without a single name on it.
The following Monday, the junior engineer came.
He examined the crack.
He took measurements.
He checked the slope of the fourth platform.
He measured the unfinished drainage outlet.
He wrote that the upper layer of the third platform should be filled again and levelled.
The outlet of the fourth should be completed.
The work continued for five days.
The crack in the third platform was cut open and filled.
The drainage outlet behind the fourth was opened.
Not once during those days did the women ask to sign anything.
On the sixth day it rained.
The next morning, Chandrakala deliberately went to inspect the platforms.
There was no water in the corner of the fourth.
With her big toe, Phulo nudged a little water towards the slope.
The water ran into the drain.
The repaired strip on the third platform was still a different colour.
The women did not spread paddy on it.
The engineer had said it should be left unused for three days.
Three days later, the group met again.
This time Madan Babu opened the seventeen-page file at the final form.
The sheet was not separate.
The file lay open above it.
The signature lines were below.
Chandrakala read the first line.
'Joint inspection by the user group...'
Phulo read the next line.
Neelam read the date.
Madan Babu said, 'If you want to add anything, write it here.'
Chandrakala looked at the secretary.
'Was this line here before?'
The secretary said, 'No. It has been added now.'
Phulo smiled.
She could write, but not long sentences.
Chandrakala asked her what they should write.
Phulo spoke slowly.

‘We saw that the crack in the third platform had been repaired. We saw that the drainage outlet of the fourth had been opened. We will begin using them after three days.’

Chandrakala wrote exactly that.

Below it, all twelve women wrote their names.

Nandkishore Sah was there as well.

He looked carefully at the page.

He said nothing.

Madan Babu put the form back into the file.

That day’s meeting did not end with the savings ledger.

Neelam took out an old bank receipt of her own.

She asked, ‘My signature is on this, but I never read the line above it.’

Phulo said, ‘We cannot change an old signature.’

Chandrakala replied, ‘We can change the next one.’

After that, the group made a small rule.

No member would sign a blank sheet.

No one would sign a detached final page if the meaning of what came before it was not visible.

Any line they did not understand would be read aloud and explained.

They would not certify anything they had not seen.

The rule was written on the last page of the ledger.

The twelve names were written beneath it again.

This time no one was in a hurry.

Two months later, a form arrived for renewing the group’s savings account.

Madan Babu was not there.

Nandkishore Sah was not there.

There was no contract involved.

It was only an ordinary bank form.

Neelam picked up the pen.

The signature line was in front of her.

First she turned the top part of the page towards herself.

Then she began to read.

The other eleven women waited in silence.

Half a Day's Wages

Two days before the rains were due to begin, a truckload of new seed sacks was expected at the Belwara Cooperative Paddy Store.

The rear wall of the storehouse was damp with seepage.

So preparations were made to keep the new sacks in the front room.

Six labourers were called in.

Bachchan Mandal was the oldest among them.

With him were Ramlochan, Rahim, Mahesh, Pachiyaa, and Suresh.

Early that morning, storekeeper Dayanand Jha read out the work slip.

The goods truck carried four hundred and eighty sacks.

The day's assignment for the six labourers was to unload every sack and stack them in order inside the room.

That came to an average of eighty sacks per labourer.

The wage had been fixed for a full day.

Dayanand Jha's signature appeared at the bottom of the work slip.

Bachchan was not highly educated, but he understood the count of eighty perfectly well.

While carrying sacks, he kept count not aloud but on the joints of his fingers.

At the storehouse gate, attendance was marked with slips of two colours.

A white slip in the morning.

A yellow slip after noon.

When both slips were present, a full day was recorded.

With only one slip, half a day.

The labourers all knew this rule.

At eight o'clock that morning, black clouds massed across the sky.

Looking up, Dayanand Jha said, "If it rains, the goods truck will get stuck outside."

The unpaved approach road to the storehouse turned to mud as soon as rain fell.

He said, "No sitting down midway today. Get all the sacks inside first."

Rahim asked, "What about food?"

"Once the work is finished, all of you can go home," Dayanand replied.

"And the wages?" Bachchan asked.

Dayanand laughed. "Work complete, day complete."
 Everyone heard him say it.
 So did the accounts clerk at the gate.
 The six men were given their white morning slips.
 Then the unloading began.
 The body of the goods truck was hot.
 For the first twenty sacks, everyone moved slowly.
 After that, they found a rhythm.
 Two men on the truck.
 Two carrying sacks as far as the gate.
 Two stacking them in rows inside the room.
 After every twenty sacks, they changed places.
 Bachchan did not keep his eighty sacks separate.
 The work of all six was becoming one single stack.
 After every forty sacks, the storekeeper drew a stroke in the receipt register.
 There were four strokes.
 Then six.
 Then eight.
 Then ten.
 Before noon, the wind strengthened.
 Dust rose at the gate.
 The truck driver kept looking at his watch.
 He wanted to leave before the rain came.
 Dayanand Jha said, "No break now."
 Pachiyaa wiped her head with her gamchha.
 Suresh stopped for two minutes to drink water.
 Bachchan kept counting the sacks.
 Four hundred.
 Four hundred and twenty.
 Four hundred and forty.
 Four hundred and sixty.
 The final twenty sacks remained on the truck.
 Just then, the first heavy drop fell.
 All six labourers quickened their pace at once.
 Bachchan and Rahim lifted the last sack together.
 As soon as they set it down inside the room, Dayanand Jha called out,
 "Four hundred and eighty."
 The storekeeper drew the final stroke in the receipt register.
 The goods truck was empty.
 The driver signed the slip and turned the truck around.

The clock showed one ten.
 The rain came down hard.
 Dayanand Jha ordered the gate shut.
 The yellow slips were normally distributed at two o'clock.
 That day, the storehouse remained closed through two.
 The accounts clerk had already gone home.
 The labourers sat beneath the awning at the gate, wringing rainwater from their gamchhas.
 Bachchan asked, "The yellow slips?"
 Dayanand Jha said, "Today the work itself is your slip."
 Ramlochan laughed.
 Everyone understood that the matter was settled.
 Wages were to be distributed three days later.
 The six labourers returned to the storehouse.
 The payment register lay open in front of the accounts clerk.
 Against Ramlochan's name: half a day.
 Against Rahim's: half a day.
 Against Mahesh's: half a day.
 Against Pachiyaa's: half a day.
 Against Suresh's: half a day.
 Against Bachchan's: half a day.
 The amount was exactly half a full day's wage.
 Bachchan looked at the paper.
 Then at the accounts clerk.
 "Why is this half?"
 The clerk showed him the bundle of white slips.
 "Morning attendance is here."
 "The yellow one?"
 "It isn't here."
 "The storehouse was closed."
 "The rule requires both slips."
 Dayanand Jha was not there.
 He had gone to the grain committee office.
 Ramlochan said, "Come on. We'll ask tomorrow."
 Bachchan did not take the payment.
 The other five remained standing too.
 The accounts clerk said, "Take it for now. We can discuss it later."
 Bachchan said quietly, "If we had done half the work, we would take half the wage."
 "You people left at one ten."
 "We were sent away."

“You worked only half the time.”

Bachchan was silent for a few moments.

Then he asked, “How many sacks came that day?”

The clerk replied, “Four hundred and eighty.”

“How many went inside?”

“Four hundred and eighty.”

“Did any other labourers come later?”

“Not one.”

Bachchan asked again, “How many sacks were written on the work slip?”

The clerk turned the pages.

He found the work slip.

Four hundred and eighty sacks.

Six labourers.

One day’s work.

The clerk’s finger stopped on the page.

Bachchan said, “If we worked only half a day, then who did the other half of the work?”

The room fell silent.

The accounts clerk searched for an answer.

There was no answer in the register.

The storekeeper brought the receipt register.

That day’s page carried twelve strokes.

Each stroke stood for forty sacks.

At the bottom was written: Total received—four hundred and eighty.

The goods-truck slip also showed four hundred and eighty.

On its final line, the time was written: one ten.

Bachchan put his finger on the time.

“That is not the time we left,” he said. “That is the time the work was completed.”

Just then Dayanand Jha returned from the office.

Seeing the crowd inside, he asked, “What happened?”

The accounts clerk turned the register toward him.

Dayanand Jha looked at the half-day entries.

Then at the work slip.

Then at the receipt register.

His expression did not change, but his voice grew quieter.

“The yellow slips were not distributed,” he said.

Bachchan replied, “The gate had been closed.”

“The rule requires two slips.”

“Then on a rainy day, does the rule say we should leave the work unfinished?”

Dayanand Jha said nothing.

Pachiyaa spoke for the first time. "We skipped our meal to unload those sacks."

Rahim added, "So the truck wouldn't get stuck."

Suresh said, "If we had sat there until two, we would have received the yellow slips."

"But the truck had already been emptied," Mahesh said.

Dayanand Jha called for the gate daybook.

On that day's page, one line read: Storehouse closed at one fifteen because of rain.

His own signature stood beneath that line.

Bachchan kept looking not at the paper, but at Dayanand Jha.

Dayanand Jha sat down on the chair.

For a while, three pages lay spread out before him.

One page recorded the time.

One recorded the work.

One recorded the goods received.

All three belonged to the same day.

Only the payment page called it half a day.

Dayanand Jha told the accounts clerk, "Don't strike out the entry."

The clerk looked surprised.

"Then what should I do?"

"Write the correction beside it."

He dictated: "The second attendance slip was not distributed because the office was closed; the assigned work was completed."

Beside "half day" against each of the six names, "full day" was entered.

Dayanand Jha added the date.

The storekeeper signed as witness.

The remaining half of the wage was added.

Only then did Bachchan take the money.

He counted the notes again.

There was no smile of victory.

Only the count was complete.

As they stepped outside, Ramlochan said, "Four hundred and eighty sacks turned out to be heavy."

Bachchan said, "Not the sacks. The word 'half' was heavy."

The following week, another goods truck arrived.

This time it carried five hundred and forty sacks.

A new team was called in.

The white morning slips were distributed.

Before noon, the sky clouded over again.

Dayanand Jha had a new line added beneath the work slip.

“If the assigned work is completed before the office closes, a full day will be recorded.”

The accounts clerk read the line.

The storekeeper read it.

The labourers heard it.

Bachchan was not part of the team that day.

He was uprooting paddy seedlings in a nearby field.

At noon, he heard the storehouse bell.

He raised his head.

The goods truck was pulling out through the gate.

It had not yet begun to rain.

Inside the storehouse, all five hundred and forty sacks had already been counted.

The accounts clerk opened the bundle of yellow slips ahead of time.

First the sacks were counted.

Then the day.

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