It is March. Onset of a long and hot summer. It is the time when the farms would be at the mercy of the canal laid to the village from the distant reservoir, water supply erratic at best. State government approved the laying of a water pipeline of larger capacity for this village, and the nearby villages too. But it was a long time ago. Only recently has the file been retrieved from some nook or the topmost shelf of the rural development committee office after repeated complaints. There used to be a narrow cart road from between the fields some time ago. Now, the daily wagers have dug it up, put stone and a bit more soil here, and the bulldozer has leveled it off. The only day motor vehicles plied on this road was the day it was inaugurated. Now, it’s pretty much a cart road again, littered with dung here and there, except for the fact that its corners have been dug up again, for that much awaited pipeline. Daily wagers have gathered from this village and nearby villages, under NREGP(National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme).

Among these workers is a boy, who seems to be somewhere around twenty one. Young, industrious, dark, with worn out hands with a few torn blisters too. He and another man take turns in digging the road and shoveling the loose soil into a heap along the brink. He hails from a nearby village family, has two younger brothers and one elder brother. Younger ones go to school, while the elder works somewhere in the city. His father tends to cattle and has gone farming every single day that the boy can remember.

Each day, a few women pass through the site with earthen pots on their heads and another smaller brass pot tucked along their waists. Younger girls need to maintain balance of the pot on their heads with their hands, so they carry only one. Among this little caravan of ladies, is a girl. She might be nearing eighteen. Wheatish complexion, short, has a pony tail and a ‘dupatta’ passing from over her head, along her face where she is holding a part of it in her mouth lest it may become unmanageable, or maybe trying to avoid the sun, and finally making a small coil around her neck before falling over her back.

And as a daily routine, the workers, some of whom might be having wives in this little caravan ask them for water. It is a brief activity that happens every day, and the ladies quench these workers gaily, although their families would have to make do with lesser amount of water. The girl also lends water, mostly to the boy. It is something inherent that this division of labour ends up each one either serving their husbands or in other cases, men from the same village, or in this case, of the same age group. Married ladies observe ‘purda’ even with husbands here, but unmarried girls have a relaxation.

As this chore comes to pass, no words are exchanged among the boy and the girl; nothing transpires mutually, but yes, smiles! Smiles are exchanged, and sometimes muffled giggles too. They are pretty much used to this activity as a habit. The work progresses slowly among chatting villagers and their talks of monsoon, drought, the pipeline, deaf government, deaths, farms, loans and little things. He smiles and laughs at jokes cracked by other fellow workers, and cracks a few jokes himself too. But that isn’t pleasure. That is amusement, a distraction to ward off tiredness. But in these brief moments while drinking water after a long day at work, with her, he smiles, he smiles out of pleasure, genuine. No he doesn’t know that, not yet.

Days pass, weeks fly, it’s about one month, and the digging is almost done, but the pipelines still needs to be laid. It is on the other terminal of the road, stacked, rusting in the open, waiting to be earthed.

It has been three days since she showed up. He has had a break in his habit. Someone from behind a ‘purda’ gives him water. He cannot even ask where that girl might be. He never asked her her name. And he cannot ask the other women what so ever, everyone seems to be an ace at leg pulling. If he does ask about her whereabouts, they might tease him for being so concerned about that girl. No he doesn’t want that. She might have taken sick, or so he thought.

Five days. Now he really misses her. He misses that smiling time. I think, now he realizes that it was different kind of smile. He still laughs at jokes, but he knows better now. What he does not know is what happened to the girl.

She has been married four days now, married off to a different village. Oh she still goes out to fetch water, but from a different reservoir, on a different route. This village has a metalled road, though worn out. Much nearer to the town, it has bus service, two buses a day. The reservoir is also nearer, and less erratic. But now her ‘dupatta’ doesn’t fall around lazily over her back, but helps her cover her full face as a ‘purda’.

He remembers her, but the memory is fading. Soon, the work would end, and he’d be off running other errands. Soon, he’ll forget that he missed smiling out of pleasure. Sooner, he’ll stop thinking about what happened to the girl. But till then, he will keep waiting, everyday, eager in his heart to smile again, like he used to. Though he does not know this either that he is so eager to do it, but he is eager nevertheless.

Sometimes I wonder, we all knew what happened to the girl, me, you and even most of the workers from that village must have known this. But an ordinary marriage is seldom discussed among daily wagers, men, when there are droughts, rains, farms, fields and loans to worry about. I wonder what he might have gone through, even though the emotion was momentary, and too small. Had he been told, wouldn’t he be saved from the little letdowns that he had every day when some woman granted him water from behind a purda. Could he be saved from missing things, until he eventually forgot them? Why didn’t anyone tell him? Why didn’t I tell him.