

ROHINTON MISTRY



A FINE BALANCE

ROSETTABOOKS™

A Fine Balance

BY ROHINTON MISTRY

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About this Title

eForeword

As Christina Nunez wrote in Atlantic, “[Mistry] has long been recognized as one of the best Indian writers; he ought to be considered simply one of the best writers, Indian or otherwise, now alive.” Twice short-listed for England’s prestigious Booker Prize, Rohinton Mistry was broadly introduced to American readers when A Fine Balance was an Oprah Book Club selection in 2001.

Rohinton Mistry has not lived in his native India for many years; but like many expatriate writers, he continues a relationship with his country in his writings and has enriched his readers’ understanding of it. After emigrating to Toronto in 1975, Rohinton Mistry got a job as a bank clerk and ascended to the supervisor of customer service after a few years.

His dissatisfaction in the job led to his taking classes in English, first at York College, and ultimately pursuing a degree part-time at the University of Toronto.

Rohinton Mistry had no ambitions to be a writer until he got to Canada and began taking classes in literature at the University of Toronto. Encouraged by his wife, he set out to win a university literary contest by writing his first short story. He called in sick from work, devoted several days to the story, entered it, and won the contest.

A Fine Balance displays a compassionate realism and narrative sweep that recall the work of Charles Dickens. This magnificent novel captures all the cruelty and corruption, dignity and heroism, of India. The time is 1975. The place is an unnamed city by the sea. The government has just declared a State of Emergency, in whose upheavals four strangers — a spirited widow, a young student uprooted from his idyllic hill station, and two tailors who have fled the caste violence of their native village — will be thrust together, forced to share one cramped apartment and an uncertain future.

As the characters move from distrust to friendship and from friendship to love, A Fine Balance creates an enduring panorama of the human spirit in an inhuman state. RosettaBooks is proud to publish Rohinton Mistry's first three novels – Such a Long Journey (1991), A Fine Balance (1995) and Family Matters (2002). RosettaBooks is the leading publisher

dedicated exclusively to electronic editions of great works of fiction and non-fiction that reflect our world. RosettaBooks is a committed e-publisher, maximizing the resources of the Web in opening a fresh dimension in the reading experience. In this electronic reading environment, each RosettaBook will enhance the experience through The RosettaBooks Connection. This gateway instantly delivers to the reader the opportunity to learn more about the title, the author, the content and the context of each work, using the full resources of the Web.

To experience The RosettaBooks Connection for A Fine Balance:

Prologue: 1975

The morning express bloated with passengers slowed to a crawl, then lurched forward suddenly, as though to resume full speed. The train's brief deception jolted its riders. The bulge of humans hanging out of the doorway distended perilously, like a soap bubble at its limit.

Inside the compartment, Maneck Kohlah held on to the overhead railing, propped up securely within the crush. He felt someone's elbow knock his textbooks from his hand. In the seats nearby, a thin young fellow was catapulted into the arms of the man opposite him. Maneck's textbooks fell upon them.

"Ow!" said the young fellow, as volume one slammed into his back.

Laughing, he and his uncle untangled themselves. Ishvar Darji, who had a disfigured left cheek, helped his nephew out of his lap and back onto the seat. "Everything all right, Om?"

"Apart from the dent in my back, everything is all right," said Omprakash Darji, picking up the two books covered in brown paper. He hefted them in his slender hands and looked around to find who had dropped them.

Maneck acknowledged ownership. The thought of his heavy textbooks thumping that frail spine made him shudder. He remembered the sparrow he had killed with a stone, years ago; afterwards, it had made him sick.

His apology was frantic. "Very sorry, the books slipped and—" "Not to worry," said Ishvar. "Wasn't your fault." To his nephew he added, "Good thing it didn't happen in reverse, hahn? If I fell in your lap, my weight would crack your bones." They laughed again, Maneck too, to supplement his apology.

Ishvar Darji was not a stout man; it was the contrast with Omprakash's skinny limbs that gave rise to their little jokes about his size. The wise-cracks originated sometimes with one and sometimes the other. When they had their evening meal, Ishvar would be sure to spoon out a larger portion onto his nephew's enamel plate; at a roadside dhaba, he would wait till Omprakash went for water, or to the latrine, then swiftly scoop some of his own food onto the other leaf.

If Omprakash protested, Ishvar would say, "What will they

think in our village when we return? That I starved my nephew in the city and ate all the food myself? Eat, eat! Only way to save my honour is by fattening you!"

"Don't worry," Omprakash would tease back. "If your honour weighs even half as much as you, that will be ample."

Omprakash's physique, however, defied his uncle's efforts and stayed matchstick thin. Their fortunes, too, stubbornly retained a lean and hungry aspect, and a triumphal return to the village remained a distant dream.

The southbound express slowed again. With a pneumatic hiss, the bogies clanked to a halt. The train was between stations. Its air brakes continued to exhale wheezily for a few moments before dying out.

Omprakash looked through the window to determine where they had stopped. Rough shacks stood beyond the railroad fence, alongside a ditch running with raw sewage. Children were playing a game with sticks and stones. An excited puppy danced around them, trying to join in. Nearby, a shirtless man was milking a cow. They could have been anywhere.

The acrid smell of a dung-fire drifted towards the train. Just ahead, a crowd had gathered near the level-crossing. A few men jumped off the train and began walking down the tracks.

"Hope we reach in time," said Omprakash. "If someone gets there before us, we're finished for sure."

Maneck Kohliah asked if they had far to go. Ishvar named the station. "Oh, that's the same one I want," said Maneck, fingering his sparse moustache.

Hoping to spot a watch dial, Ishvar looked up into a thicket of wrists growing ceilingward. "Time, please?" he asked someone over his shoulder. The man shot his cuff stylishly and revealed his watch: a quarter to nine.

"Come on, yaar, move!" said Omprakash, slapping the seat between his thighs.

"Not as obedient as the bullocks in our village, is it?" said his uncle, and Maneck laughed. Ishvar added it was true—ever since he was a child, their village had never lost a bullock-cart race when there were competitions on festival days.

“Give the train a dose of opium and it will run like the bullocks,” said Omprakash.

A combseller, twanging the plastic teeth of a large comb, pushed his way through the crowded compartment. People grumbled and snarled at him, resenting the bothersome presence.

“Oil!” said Omprakash to get his attention.

“Plastic hairband, unbreakable, plastic hairclip, flower shape, butterfly shape, colourful comb, unbreakable.” The combseller recited in a half-hearted monotone, uncertain whether this was a real customer or just a joker passing the time. “Big comb and small comb, pink, orange, maroon, green, blue, yellow comb—unbreakable.”

Omprakash gave them a test run through his hair before selecting a red specimen, pocket-sized. He dug into his trousers and extracted a coin. The combseller suffered hostile elbows and shoulders while searching for change. He used his shirtsleeve to wipe hair oil off the rejected combs, then returned them to his satchel, keeping in his hand the big dual-toothed one to resume his soft twanging through the compartment.

“What happened to the yellow comb you had?” asked Ishvar.

“Broke in two.”

“How?”

“It was in my back pocket. I sat on it.”

“That’s the wrong place for a comb. It’s meant for your head, Om, not your bottom.” He always called his nephew Om, using Omprakash only when he was upset with him.

“If it was *your* bottom, the comb would have smashed into a hundred pieces,” returned his nephew, and Ishvar laughed. His disfigured left cheek was no hindrance, standing firm like a mooring around which his smiles could safely ripple.

He chuckled Omprakash under the chin. Most of the time their ages—forty-six and seventeen—were a misleading indicator of their actual relationship. “Smile, Om. Your angry mouth does not suit your hero hairstyle.” He winked at Maneck to include him in the fun. “With a puff like that, lots of girls will be after you. But don’t worry, Om, I’ll select a nice wife for you. A woman big and strong, with flesh enough for two.”

Omprakash grinned and administered a flourish to his hair with the new comb. The train still showed no sign of moving. The men who had wandered outside came back with news that yet another body had been found by the tracks, near the level-crossing. Maneck edged towards the door to listen. A nice, quick way to go, he thought, as long as the train had struck the person squarely.

“Maybe it has to do with the Emergency,” said someone.

“What emergency?”

“Prime Minister made a speech on the radio early this morning. Something about country being threatened from inside.”

“Sounds like one more government tamasha.”

“Why does everybody have to choose the railway tracks only for dying?” grumbled another. “No consideration for people like us. Murder, suicide, Naxalite-terrorist killing, police-custody death—everything ends up delaying the trains. What is wrong with poison or tall buildings or knives?”

The long-anticipated rumble at last rippled through the compartments, and the train shivered down its long steel spine. Relief lit the passengers’ faces. As the compartments trundled past the level-crossing, everyone craned to see the cause of their delay. Three uniformed policemen stood by the hastily covered corpse awaiting its journey to the morgue. Some passengers touched their foreheads or put their hands together and murmured, “Ram, Ram.”

* * * * *

MANECK KOHLAH descended behind the uncle and nephew, and they exited the platform together. “Excuse me,” he said, taking a letter from his pocket. “I am new in the city, can you tell me how to get to this address?”

“You are asking the wrong people,” said Ishvar without reading it. “We are also new here.”

But Omprakash glanced at the letter and said, “Look, it’s the same name!”

Ishvar pulled a square of ragged paper out of his own pocket

and compared it. His nephew was right, there it was: Dina Dalal, followed by the address.

Omprakash regarded Maneck with sudden hostility. "Why are you going to Dina Dalal? Are you a tailor?"

"Me, tailor? No, she is my mother's friend."

Ishvar tapped his nephew's shoulder. "See, simply you were panicking. Come on, let's find the building."

Maneck did not understand what they meant, till Ishvar explained outside the station. "You see, Om and I are tailors. Dina Dalal has work for two tailors. We are going to apply."

"And you thought I was running there to steal your job." Maneck smiled. "Don't worry, I am just a student. Dina Dalal and my mother used to be in school together. She's letting me stay with her for a few months, that's all."

They asked a paanwalla for directions, and walked down the street that was pointed out. Omprakash was still a little suspicious. "If you are staying with her for a few months, where is your trunk, your belongings? Only two books you have?"

"Today I'm just going to meet her. I will shift my things from the college hostel next month."

They passed a beggar slumped upon a small wooden platform fitted with castors, which raised him four inches off the ground. His fingers and thumbs were missing, and his legs were amputated almost to the buttocks. "O babu, ek paisa day-ray!" he sang, shaking a tin can between his bandaged palms. "O babu! Hai babu! Aray babu, ek paisa day-ray!"

"That's one of the worst I've seen since coming to the city," said Ishvar, and the others agreed. Omprakash paused to drop a coin in the tin.

They crossed the road, asking again for directions. "I've been living in this city for two months," said Maneck, "but it's so huge and confusing. I can recognize only some big streets. The little lanes all look the same."

"We have been here six months and still have the same problem. In the beginning we were completely lost. The first time, we couldn't even get on a train—two or three went by before we learned how to push."

Maneck said he hated it here, and could not wait to return to his home in the mountains, next year, when he finished college. "We have also come for a short time only," said Ishvar. "To earn some money, then go back to our village. What is the use of such a big city? Noise and crowds, no place to live, water scarce, garbage everywhere. Terrible."

"Our village is far from here," said Omprakash. "Takes a whole day by train—morning till night—to reach it."

"And reach it, we will," said Ishvar. "Nothing is as fine as one's native place."

"My home is in the north," said Maneck. "Takes a day and night, plus another day, to get there. From the window of our house you can see snow-covered mountain peaks."

"A river runs near our village," said Ishvar. "You can see it shining, and hear it sing. It's a beautiful place."

They walked quietly for a while, occupied with home thoughts. ~~Omprakash then suddenly thought, on such a hot day.~~

The vendor stirred his ladle in the tub, tinkling chunks of ice afloat in a sea of dark red. "Let's have some," said Maneck. "It looks delicious."

"Not for us," said Ishvar quickly. "We had a big breakfast this morning," and Omprakash erased the longing from his face. "Okay," said Maneck doubtfully, ordering one large glass. He studied the tailors who stood with eyes averted, not looking at the tempting tub or his frosted glass. He saw their tired faces, how poor their clothes were, the worn-out chappals.

He drank half and said, "I'm full. You want it?"

They shook their heads.

"It will go to waste."

"Okay, year, in that case," said Omprakash, and took the sherbet. He gulped some, then passed it to his uncle. Ishvar drained the glass and returned it to the vendor. "That was so tasty," he said, beaming with pleasure. "It was very kind of you to share it with us, we really enjoyed it, thank you." His nephew gave him a disapproving look to tone it down.

How much gratitude for a little sherbet, thought Maneck, how starved they seemed for ordinary kindness.



THE VERANDAH DOOR had a brass nameplate: *Mr. & Mrs. Rustom K. Dalal*, the letters enriched by years of verdigris. Dina Dalal answered their ring and accepted the scrap of crumpled paper, recognizing her own handwriting.

“You are tailors?”

“Hahnji,” said Ishvar, nodding vigorously. All three entered the verandah at her invitation and stood awkwardly. The verandah, which used to be an open gallery, had been converted into an extra room when Dina Dalal’s late husband was still a child—his parents had decided it would be a playroom to supplement the tiny flat. The portico was bricked and fitted with an iron-grilled window.

“But I need only two tailors,” said Dina Dalal.

“Excuse me, I’m not a tailor. My name is Maneck Kohlah.” He stepped forward from behind Ishvar and Omprakash.

“Oh, you are Maneck! Welcome! Sorry, I couldn’t recognize you. It’s been years since I last saw your mummy, and you I have never, ever seen.”

She left the tailors on the verandah and took him inside, into the front room. “Can you wait here for a few minutes while I deal with those two?”

“Sure.”

Maneck took in the shabby furnishings around him: the battered sofa, two chairs with fraying seats, a scratched teapoy, a dining table with a cracked and faded rexine tablecloth. She mustn’t live here, he decided, this was probably a family business, a boarding house. The walls were badly in need of paint. He played with the discoloured plaster blotches, the way he did with clouds, imagining animals and landscapes. Dog shaking hands. Hawk diving sharply. Man with walking-stick climbing mountain.

On the verandah, Dina Dalal ran a hand over her black hair, as yet un-invaded by grey, and turned her attention to the tailors.

At forty-two, her forehead was still smooth, and sixteen years spent fending for herself had not hardened the looks which, a long time ago, used to make her brother's friends vie to impress her.

She asked for names and tailoring experience. The tailors claimed to know everything about women's clothes. "We can even take measurements straight from the customer's body and make any fashion you like," said Ishvar confidently, doing all the talking while Omprakash nodded away.

"For this job, there will be no customers to measure," she explained. "The sewing will be straight from paper patterns. Each week you have to make two dozen, three dozen, whatever the company wants, in the same style."

"Child's play," said Ishvar. "But we'll do it."

"What about you?" she addressed Omprakash, whose look was disdainful. "You have not said a word."

"My nephew speaks only when he disagrees," said Ishvar. "His silence is a good sign."

She liked Ishvar's face, the type that put people at ease and encouraged conversation. But there was the other tight-lipped fellow, who frightened away the words. His chin was too small for his features, though when he smiled everything seemed in proportion.

She stated the terms of employment: they would have to bring their own sewing-machines; all sewing would be piecework. "The more dresses you make, the more you earn," she said, and Ishvar agreed that that was fair. Rates would be fixed according to the complexity of each pattern. The hours were from eight a.m. to six p.m.—less than that would not do, though they were welcome to work longer. And there would be no smoking or paan-chewing on the job.

"Paan we don't chew only," said Ishvar. "But sometimes we like to smoke a beedi."

"You will have to smoke it outside." The conditions were acceptable. "What is the address of your shop?" asked Ishvar. "Where do we bring the sewing-machines?"

"Right here. When you come next week, I will show you where to put them, in the back room."

"Okayji, thank you, we will definitely come on Monday." They waved to Maneck as they left. "We will see you again soon, hanh."

"Sure," said Maneck, waving back. Noticing Dina Dalal's silent inquiry, he explained about their meeting on the train.

"You must be careful who you talk to," she said. "Never know what kind of crooks you might run into. This is not your little hamlet in the mountains."

"They seemed very nice."

"Hmm, yes," she said, reserving judgement. Then she apologized again for assuming he was a tailor. "I could not see you properly because you were standing behind them, my eyes are weak." How silly of me, she thought, mistaking this lovely boy for a bowlegged tailor. And so sturdy too. Must be the famous mountain air they talk about, the healthy food and water.

She peered a little closer, tilting her head to one side. "It has been over twenty years, but I can recognize your mummy in your face. You know Aban and I were in school together."

"Yes," he said, uncomfortable under her intense scrutiny. "Mummy told me in her letter. She also wanted to let you know I'll move in from next month, and she'll mail you the rent cheque."

"Yes, yes, that's all right," she said, dismissing his concern about the details and drifting again into the past. "Real little terrors we used to be in our school-days. And a third girl, Zenobia. When we three were together, it was trouble with a capital t, the teachers would say." The memory brought a wistful smile to her face. "Anyway, let me show you my house, and your room."

"You live here as well?"

"Where else?" As she led him through the dingy little flat, she asked what he was taking at college.

"Refrigeration and air-conditioning."

"I hope you will do something about this hot weather then, make my home more comfortable."

He smiled feebly, saddened by the place in which she resided. Not much better than the college hostel, he thought. And yet, he

was looking forward to it. Anything would do, after what had happened there. He shuddered and tried to think of something else.

"This one will be your room."

"It's very nice. Thank you, Mrs. Dalal."

There was a cupboard in one corner with a scratched, misshapen suitcase on top. A small desk stood beside the cupboard. Here, as in the front room, the ceiling was dark and flaking, the walls discoloured, missing chunks of plaster in several places. Other stark patches, recently cemented, stood out like freshly healed wounds. Two single beds lay at right angles along the walls. He wondered if she would sleep in the same room.

"I will move one bed into the other room for myself."

He looked through the door beyond and glimpsed a room tinier and in worse condition, crowded by a cupboard (also with a suitcase on top), a rickety table, two chairs, and three rusting trunks stacked on a trestle.

"I am turning you out of your own room," mumbled Maneck, the surroundings depressing him rapidly.

"Don't be silly." Her tone was brisk. "I wanted a paying guest, and it is my great good luck to get a nice Parsi boy—the son of my schoolfriend."

"It's very kind of you, Mrs. Dalal."

"And that's another thing. You must call me Dina Aunty."

Maneck nodded.

"You can bring your things here any time. If you are not happy with the hostel, this room is ready—we don't have to wait for a special date next month."

"No, it's all right, but thank you, Mrs.—"

"Ahn, careful."

"I mean, Dina Aunty." They smiled.



WHEN MANECK left her flat, she began pacing the room, suddenly restless, as though about to embark on a long voyage. No need

now to visit her brother and beg for next month's rent. She took a deep breath. Once again, her fragile independence was preserved.

Tomorrow she would bring home the first batch of sewing from Au Revoir Exports.

I
City by the Sea

Dina Dalal seldom indulged in looking back at her life with regret or bitterness, or questioning why things had turned out the way they had, cheating her of the bright future everyone had predicted for her when she was in school, when her name was still Dina Shroff. And if she did sink into one of these rare moods, she quickly swam out of it. What was the point of repeating the story over and over and over, she asked herself—it always ended the same way; whichever corridor she took, she wound up in the same room.

Dina's father had been a doctor, a GP with a modest practice who followed the Hippocratic oath somewhat more passionately than others of his profession. During the early years of Dr. Shroff's career, his devotion to his work was diagnosed, by peers, family members, and senior physicians, as typical of youthful zeal and vigour. "How refreshing, this enthusiasm of the young," they smiled, nodding sagely, confident that time would douse the fires of idealism with a healthy dose of cynicism and family responsibilities.

But marriage, and the arrival of a son, followed eleven years later by a daughter, changed nothing for Dr. Shroff. Time only sharpened the imbalance between his fervour to ease suffering and his desire to earn a comfortable income.

"How disappointing," said friends and relatives, shaking their heads. "Such high hopes we had for him. And he keeps slaving like a clerk, like a fanatic, refusing to enjoy life. Poor Mrs. Shroff. Never a vacation, never a party—no fun at all in her existence."

At fifty-one, when most GPS would have begun considering options like working half-time, hiring an inexpensive junior, or even selling the practice in favour of early retirement, Dr. Shroff had neither the bank balance nor the temperament to permit such indulgences. Instead, he volunteered to lead a campaign of medical graduates bound for districts in the interior. There, where typhoid and cholera, unchallenged by science or technology, were still reaping their routine harvest of villagers, Dr. Shroff would try to seize the deadly sickles or, at the very least, to blunt them¹ a different sort of campaign: to dissuade her husband from going into what she felt were the jaws

of certain death. She attempted to coach Dina with words to sway her father. After all, Dina, at twelve, was Daddy's darling. Mrs. Shroff knew that her son, Nusswan, could be of no help in this enterprise. Enlisting him would have ruined any chance of changing her husband's mind.

The turning point in the father-and-son relationship had come seven years ago, on Nusswan's sixteenth birthday. Uncles and aunts had been invited to dinner, and someone said, "Well, Nusswan, you will soon be studying to become a doctor, just like your father."

"I don't want to be a doctor," Nusswan answered. "I'll be going into business—import and export."

Some of the uncles and aunts nodded approvingly. Others recoiled in mock horror, turning to Dr. Shroff. "Is this true? No father-son partnership?"

"Of course it's true," he said. "My children are free to do whatever they please."

But five-year-old Dina had seen the hurt on her father's face before he could hide it. She ran to him and clambered onto his lap. "Daddy, I want to be a doctor, just like you, when I grow up."

Everyone laughed and applauded, and said, Smart little girl, knows how to get what she wants. Later, they whispered that the son was obviously not made of the same solid stuff as the father—no ambition, wouldn't amount to much.

Dina had repeated her wish in the years to come, continuing to regard her father as some kind of god who gave people good health, who struggled against illness, and who, sometimes, succeeded in temporarily thwarting death. And Dr. Shroff was delighted with his bright child. On parents' night at the convent school, the principal and teachers always had the highest praise for her. She would succeed if she wanted to, Dr. Shroff knew it for certain.

Mrs. Shroff also knew, for certain, that her daughter was the one to recruit in the campaign against Dr. Shroff's foolish philanthropic plan of working in remote, Godforsaken villages. But Dina refused to cooperate; she did not approve of devious means to keep her beloved father home.

Then Mrs. Shroff resorted to other methods, using not money or his personal safety or his family to persuade him, for she knew these would fail hopelessly. Instead, she invoked his patients, claiming he was abandoning them, old and frail and helpless. “What will they do if you go so far away? They trust you and rely on you. How can you be so cruel? You have no idea how much you mean to them.”

“No, that is not the point,” said Dr. Shroff. He was familiar with the anfractuous arguments that her love for him could prompt her to wield. Patiently he explained there were GPS galore in the city who could take care of the assorted aches and pains—where he was going, the people had no one. He comforted her that it was only a temporary assignment, hugging and kissing her much more than was usual for him. “I promise to be back soon,” he said. “Before you even grow used to my absence.”

But Dr. Shroff could not keep his promise. Three weeks into the medical campaign he was dead, not from typhoid or cholera, but from a cobra’s bite, far from the lifesaving reach of antivenins. Mrs. Shroff received the news calmly. People said it was because she was a doctor’s wife, more familiar with death than other mortals. They reasoned that Dr. Shroff must have often carried such tidings to her regarding his own patients, thus preparing her for the inevitable.

When she took brisk charge of the funeral arrangements, managing everything with superb efficiency, people wondered if there was not something a little abnormal about her behaviour. Between disbursing funds from her handbag for the various expenses, she accepted condolences, comforted grieving relatives, tended the oil lamp at the head of Dr. Shroff’s bed, washed and ironed her white sari, and made sure there was a supply of incense and sandalwood in the house. She personally instructed the cook about the special vegetarian meal for the next day.

After the full four days of death ceremonies, Dina was still crying. Mrs. Shroff, who was busy tallying the prayer-bungalow charges from the Towers of Silence, said briskly, “Come, my daughter, be sensible now. Daddy would not like this.” So Dina did her best to control herself.

Then Mrs. Shroff continued absentmindedly, writing out the cheque. "You could have stopped him if you wanted. He would have listened to you," she said.

Dina's sobs burst out with renewed intensity. In addition to the grief for her father, her tears now included anger towards her mother, even hatred. It would take her a few months to understand that there was no malice or accusation contained in what had been said, just a sad and simple statement of fact as seen by her mother.

Six months after Dr. Shroff's death, after being the pillar that everyone could lean on, Mrs. Shroff gradually began to crumble. Retreating from daily life, she took very little interest in the running of her household or in her own person.

It made little difference to Nusswan, who was twenty-three and busy planning his own future. But Dina, at twelve, could have done with a parent for a few more years. She missed her father dreadfully. Her mother's withdrawal made it much worse.

* * * * *

NUSSWAN SHROFF had earned his own living as a businessman for two years prior to his father's death. He was still single, living at home, saving his money while searching for a suitable flat and a suitable wife. With his father's passing and his mother's reclusion, he realized that the pursuit of a flat was unnecessary, and a wife, urgent.

He now assumed the role of head of the family, and legal guardian to Dina. All their relatives agreed this was as it should be. They praised his selfless decision, admitting they had been wrong about his capabilities. He also took over the family finances, promising that his mother and sister would want for nothing; he would look after them out of his own salary. But, even as he spoke, he knew there was no need for this. The money from the sale of Dr. Shroff's dispensary was sufficient.

Nusswan's first decision as head of the family was to cut back on the hired help. The cook, who came for half the day and prepared the two main meals, was kept on; Lily, the live-in servant,

was let go. "We cannot continue in the same luxury as before," he declared. "I just can't afford the wages."

Mrs. Shroff expressed some doubt about the change. "Who will do the cleaning? My hands and feet don't work like before."

"Don't worry, Mamma, we will all share it. You can do easy things, like dusting the furniture. We can wash our own cups and saucers, surely. And Dina is a young girl, full of energy. It will be good for her, teach her how to look after a home."

"Yes, maybe you are right," said Mrs. Shroff, vaguely convinced of the need for money-saving measures.

But Dina knew there was more to it. The week before, while passing the kitchen on her way to the wc well past midnight, she had noticed her brother with the ayah: Lily sitting on one end of the kitchen table, her feet resting on the edge; Nusswan, his pyjamas around his ankles, stood between Lily's thighs, clasping her hips to him. Dina watched his bare buttocks with sleepy curiosity, then crept back to bed without using the toilet, her cheeks flushed. But she must have lingered a moment too long, for Nusswan had seen her.

Not a word was spoken about it. Lily departed (with a modest bonus, unbeknownst to Mrs. Shroff), tearfully declaring that she would never find as nice a family to work for ever again. Dina felt sorry for her, and also despised her.

Then the new household arrangement got under way. Everyone made an honest effort. The experiment in self-reliance seemed like fun. "It's a little like going camping," said Mrs. Shroff.

"That's the spirit," said Nusswan.

With the passing of days, Dina's chores began to increase. As a token of his participation, Nusswan continued to wash his cup, saucer, and breakfast plate before going to work. Beyond that, he did nothing.

One morning, after swallowing his last gulp of tea, he said, "I'm very late today, Dina. Please wash my things."

"I'm not your servant! Wash your own dirty plates!" Weeks of pent-up resentment came gushing. "You said we would each do our own work! All your stinking things you leave for me!"

"Listen to the little tigress," said Nusswan, amused.

"You mustn't speak like that to your big brother," chided Mrs. Shroff gently. "Remember, we must share and share alike." "He's cheating! He doesn't do any work! I do everything!" Nusswan hugged his mother: "Bye-bye, Mamma," and gave Dina a friendly pat on the shoulder to make up. She shrank from him. "The tigress is still angry," he said and left for the office. Mrs. Shroff tried to soothe Dina, promising to discuss it later with Nusswan, maybe convince him to hire a part-time ayah, but her resolve melted within hours. Matters continued as before. As weeks went by, instead of restoring fairness in the household, she began turning into one of the chores on her daughter's ever-growing list.

Now Mrs. Shroff had to be told what to do. When food was placed before her, she ate it, though it did her little good, for she kept losing weight. She had to be reminded to bathe and change her clothes. If toothpaste was squeezed out and handed to her on the brush, she brushed her teeth. For Dina, the most unpleasant task was helping her mother wash her hair—it fell out in clumps on the bathroom floor, and more followed when she combed it for her.

Once every month, Mrs. Shroff attended her husband's prayers at the fire-temple. She said it gave her great comfort to hear the elderly Dustoor Framji's soothing tones supplicating for her husband's soul. Dina missed school to accompany her mother, worried about her wandering off somewhere.

Before commencing the ceremony, Dustoor Framji unctuously shook Mrs. Shroff's hand and gave Dina a prolonged hug of the sort he reserved for girls and young women. His reputation for squeezing and fondling had earned him the title of Dustoor Daab-Chaab, along with the hostility of his colleagues, who resented not so much his actions but his lack of subtlety, his refusal to disguise his embraces with fatherly or spiritual concern. They feared that one day he would go too far, drool over his victim or something, and disgrace the fire-temple.

Dina squirmed in his grasp as he patted her head, rubbed her neck, stroked her back and pressed himself against her. He had a very short beard, stubble that resembled flakes of grated coconut,

and it scraped her cheeks and forehead. He released her just when she had summoned enough courage to tear her trapped body from his arms.

After the fire-temple, for the rest of the day at home Dina tried to make her mother talk, asking her advice about housework or recipes, and when that failed, about Daddy, and the days of their newlywed lives. Faced with her mother's dreamy silences, Dina felt helpless. Soon, her concern for her mother was tempered by the instinct of youth which held her back—she would surely receive her portion of grief and sorrow in due course, there was no need to take on the burden prematurely.

And Mrs. Shroff spoke in monosyllables or sighs, staring into Dina's face for answers. As for dusting the furniture, she could never proceed beyond wiping the picture frame containing her husband's graduation photograph. She spent most of her time gazing out the window.

Nusswan preferred to regard his mother's disintegration as a widow's appropriate renunciation, wherein she was sloughing off the dross of life to concentrate on spiritual matters. He focused his attention on the raising of Dina. The thought of the enormous responsibility resting on his shoulders worried him ceaselessly.

He had always perceived his father to be a strict disciplinarian; he had stood in awe of him, had even been a little frightened of him. If he was to fill his father's shoes, he would have to induce the same fear in other, he decided, and prayed regularly for courage and guidance in his task. He confided to the relatives—the uncles and aunts—that Dina's defiance, her stubbornness, was driving him crazy, and only the Almighty's help gave him the strength to go forward in his duty.

His sincerity touched them. They promised to pray for him too. "Don't worry, Nusswan, everything will be all right. We will light a lamp at the fire-temple."

Heartened by their support, Nusswan began taking Dina with him to the fire-temple once a week. There, he thrust a stick of sandalwood in her hand and whispered fiercely in her ear, "Now pray properly—ask Dadaji to make you a good girl, ask Him to make you obedient."

While she bowed before the sanctum, he travelled along the outer wall hung with pictures of various dustoors and high priests. He glided from display to display, stroking the garlands, hugging the frames, kissing the glass, and ending with the very tall picture of Zarathustra to which he glued his lips for a full minute. Then,

from the vessel of ashes placed in the sanctum's doorway, he smeared a pinch on his forehead, another bit across the throat, and undid his top two shirt buttons to rub a fistful over his chest.

Like talcum powder, thought Dina, watching from the corner of her eye, from her bowed position, straining to keep from laughing. She did not raise her head till he had finished his antics. "Did you pray properly?" he demanded when they were outside.

She nodded.

"Good. Now all the bad thoughts will leave your head, you will feel peace and quiet in your heart."

* * * * *

DINA WAS no longer allowed to spend time at her friends' houses during the holidays. "There is no need to," said Nusswan. "You see them every day in school." They could visit her after being granted his permission, but this was not much fun since he always hovered around.

Once, he overheard her in the next room with her friend Zenobia, making fun of his teeth. It only served to confirm his belief that the little devils needed monitoring. Zenobia was saying he looked like a horse.

"Yes, a horse with cheap dentures," added Dina.

"An elephant would be proud of that much ivory," continued Zenobia, raising the stakes.

They were helpless with laughter when he entered the room. He fixed each one with a black stare before turning away with menacing slowness, leaving behind silence and misery. Yes, it worked, he realized with surprise and triumph—fear worked.

Nusswan had always been sensitive about his bad teeth and, in his late teens, had tried to get them straightened. Dina, only six or seven then, had teased him mercilessly. But the orthodontic

treatment was too painful, and he abandoned it, complaining that with a doctor for a father, it was surprising his condition had not been taken care of in childhood. As evidence of partiality, he would point to Dina's perfect mouth.

Distressed by his hurt, their mother had tried to explain. "It's all my fault, son, I didn't know that children's teeth should be massaged daily, gently pressed inward. The old nurse at Dina's birth taught me the trick, but it was too late for you."

Nusswan had never been convinced. And now, after Dina's friend left, she paid the price. He asked her to repeat what was said. She did, boldly.

"You have always had the habit of blurting whatever comes into your loose mouth. But you are no longer a child. Someone has to teach you respect." He sighed, "It is my duty, I suppose," and without warning he began slapping her. He stopped when a cut opened her lower lip.

"You pig!" she wept. "You want to make me look ugly like you!" Whereupon, he got a ruler and whacked her wherever he could, as she ran around trying to escape the blows.

For once, Mrs. Shroff noticed that something was wrong. "Why are you crying, my daughter?"

"That stupid Dracula! He hit me and made me bleed!"

"Tch-tch, my poor child." She hugged Dina and returned to her seat by the window.

Two days after this row, Nusswan tried to make peace by bringing Dina a collection of ribbons. "They will look lovely in your plaits," he said.

She went to her school satchel, got out her arts-and-crafts scissors, and snipped the ribbons into small pieces.

"Look, Mamma!" he said, almost in tears. "Look at your vindictive daughter! My hard-earned money I spend on her, and this is the thanks."

The ruler became Nusswan's instrument of choice in his quest for discipline. His clothes were the most frequent cause of Dina's punishment. After washing, ironing, and folding them, she had to stack four separate piles in his cupboard: white shirts, coloured shirts, white trousers, coloured trousers. Sometimes she would

strategically place a pinstriped shirt with the whites, or liberate a pair of pants with a hound's-tooth check among the white trousers. Despite the beatings, she never tired of provoking him. "The way she behaves, I feel that Sataan himself has taken refuge in her heart," he said wearily to the relatives who asked for updates. "Maybe I should just pack her off to a boarding school."

"No, no, don't take that drastic step," they pleaded. "Boarding school has been the ruination of many Parsi girls. Rest assured, God will repay you for your patience and devotion. And Dina will also thank you when she is old enough to understand it's for her own good." They went away murmuring the man was a saint—every girl should be fortunate enough to have a brother like Nusswan.

His spirit restored by their encouragement, Nusswan persevered. He bought all of Dina's clothes, deciding what was appropriate for a young girl. The purchases were usually ill-fitting, for she was not allowed to be present while he shopped. "I don't want tiresome arguments in the shopkeeper's presence," he said. "You always embarrass me." When she needed new uniforms, he went to school with her on the day the tailors were coming, to supervise the measurements. He quizzed the tailors about rates and fabrics, trying to work out the principal's kickbacks. Dina dreaded this annual event, wondering what new mortification would be visited upon her before her classmates.

All her friends were now wearing their hair short, and she begged to be allowed the same privilege. "If you let me cut my hair, I'll swab the dining room every day instead of alternate days," she tried to bargain. "Or I can polish your shoes every night."

"No," said Nusswan. "Fourteen is too young for fancy hairstyles, plaits are good for you. Besides, I cannot afford to pay for the hairdresser." But he promptly added shoe-polishing to her list of chores.

A week after her final appeal, with the help of Zenobia in the school bathroom, Dina lopped off the plaits. Zenobia's ambition was to be a hairstylist, and she was overwhelmed by the good fortune that delivered her friend's head into her hands. "Let's cut off the whole jing-bang lot," she said. "Let's bob it really short."

"Are you crazy?" said Dina. "Nusswan will jump over the moon." So they settled for a pageboy, and Zenobia trimmed the hair to roughly an inch above the shoulders. It looked a bit ragged, but both girls were delighted with the results.

Dina hesitated about throwing the severed plaits in the dustbin. She put them in her satchel and raced home. Parading proudly about the house, she went repeatedly past the many mirrors to catch glimpses of her head from different angles. Then she visited her mother's room and waited—for her surprise, or delight, or something. But Mrs. Shroff noticed nothing.

"Do you like my new hairstyle, Mummy?" she asked at last.

Mrs. Shroff stared blankly for a moment. "Very pretty, my daughter, very pretty."

Nusswan got home late that evening. He greeted his mother, and said there had been so much work at the office. Then he saw Dina. He took a deep breath and put a hand to his forehead. Exhausted, he wished there was some way to deal with this without another fight. But her insolence, her defiance, could not go unpunished; or how would he look himself in the mirror?

"Please come here, Dina. Explain why you have disobeyed me." She scratched her neck where tiny hair clippings were making her skin itch. "How did I disobey you?"

He slapped her. "Don't question me when I ask you something."

"You said you couldn't afford my haircut. This was free, I did it myself."

He slapped her again. "No back talk, I'm warning you." He got the ruler and struck her with it flat across the palms, then, because he deemed the offence extremely serious, with the edge over her knuckles. "This will teach you to look like a loose woman."

"Have you seen your hair in the mirror? You look like a clown," she said, refusing to be intimidated.

Nusswan's haircut, in his own opinion, was a statement of dignified elegance. He wore a centre parting, imposing order on either side of it with judicious applications of heavy pomade. Dina's taunt unleashed the fury of the disciplinarian. With lashes

of the ruler across her calves and arms, he drove her to the bathroom, where he began tearing off her clothes.

"I don't want another word from you! Not a word! Today you have crossed the limit! Take a bath first, you polluted creature! Wash off those hair clippings before you spread them around the house and bring misfortune upon us!"

"Don't worry, your face will frighten away any misfortune." She was standing naked on the tiles now, but he did not leave. "I need hot water," she said.

He stepped back and flung a mugful of cold water at her from the bucket. Shivering, she stared defiantly at him, her nipples stiffening. He pinched one, hard, and she flinched. "Look at you with your little breasts starting to grow. You think you are a woman already. I should cut them right off, along with your wicked tongue."

He was eyeing her strangely, and she grew afraid. She understood that her sharp answers were enraging him, that it was vaguely linked to the way he was staring at the newfledged bloom of hair where her legs met. It would be safer to seem submissive, to douse his anger. She turned away and started to cry, her hands over her face.

Satisfied, he left. Her school satchel, lying on her bed, drew his attention. He opened it for a random inspection and found the plaits sitting on top. Dangling one between thumb and forefinger, he gritted his teeth before a smile slowly eased his angry features.

When Dina had finished her bath, he fetched a roll of black electrical tape and fastened the plaits to her hair. "You will wear them like this," he said. "Every day, even to school, till your hair has grown back."

She wished she had thrown the wretched things away in the school toilet. It felt like dead rats were hanging from her head.

Next morning, she secretly took the roll of tape to school. The plaits were pulled off before going to class. It was painful, with the black tape clutching hard. When school was over, she fixed them back with Zenobia's help. In this way she evaded Nusswan's punishment on weekdays.

But a few days later riots started in the city, in the wake of

Partition and the British departure, and Dina was stuck at home with Nusswan. There were day-and-night curfews in every neighbourhood. Offices, businesses, colleges, schools, all stayed closed, and there was no respite from the detested plaits. He allowed her to remove them only while bathing, and supervised their reattachment immediately after.

Cooped up inside the flat, Nusswan lamented the country's calamity, grumbling endlessly. "Every day I sit at home, I lose money. These bloody uncultured savages don't deserve independence. If they must hack one another to death, I wish they would go somewhere else and do it quietly. In their villages, maybe. Without disturbing our lovely city by the sea."

When the curfew was lifted, Dina flew off to school, happy as an uncaged bird, eager for her eight hours of Nusswan-less existence. And he, too, was relieved to return to his office. On the first evening of normalcy in the city, he came home in a most cheerful mood. "The curfew is over, and your punishment is over. We can throw away your plaits now," he said, adding generously, "You know, short hair does suit you."

He opened his briefcase and took out a new hairband. "You can wear this now instead of electrical tape," he joked.

"Wear it yourself," she said, refusing to take it.

Three years after his father's death, Nusswan married. A few weeks later, his mother's withdrawal from life was complete. Where before she had responded obediently to instructions—get up, drink your tea, wash your hands, swallow your medicine—now there was only a wall of incomprehension.

The task of caring for her had outgrown Dina's ability. When the smell from Mrs. Shroff's room was past ignoring, Nusswan timidly broached the subject with his wife. He did not dare ask her directly to help, but hoped that her good nature might persuade her to volunteer. "Ruby, dear, Mamma is getting worse. She needs a lot of attention, all the time."

"Put her in a nursing home," said Ruby. "She'll be better off there."

He nodded placatingly, and did something less expensive and more human than shipping his mother to the old-age factory—as some unkind relatives would doubtless have put it—he hired a full-time nurse.

The nurse's assignment was short-lived; Mrs. Shroff died later that year, and people finally understood that a doctor's wife was no more immune to grief than other mortals. She died on the same day of the Shahenshahi calendar as her husband. Their prayers were performed consecutively at the same fire-temple by Dustoor Framji. By this time, Dina had learned how to evade the trap of his overfriendly hugs. When he approached, she held out a polite hand and took a step back, and another, and another. Short of pursuing her around the prayer-hall amid the large thuribles of flaming sandalwood, he could only smile foolishly and give up the chase.

After the first month's prayer ceremonies for Mrs. Shroff were completed, Nusswan decided there was no point in Dina's matriculating. Her last report card was quite wretched. She would have been kept back had it not been for the principal who, loyal to the memory of Dr. Shroff, preferred to see the marks as a temporary aberration.

"Very decent of Miss Lamb to promote you," said Nusswan. "But the fact remains that your results are hopeless. I'm not going to waste money on school fees for another year."

"You make me clean and scrub all the time, I cannot study for even one hour a day! What do you expect?"

"Don't make excuses. A strong young girl, doing a little housework—what's that got to do with studying? Do you know how fortunate you are? There are thousands of poor children in the city, doing boot-polishing at railway stations, or collecting papers, bottles, plastic—plus going to school at night. And you are complaining? What's lacking in you is the desire for education. This is it, enough schooling for you."

Dina was not willing to concede without a struggle. She also hoped that Nusswan's wife would intervene on her behalf. But Ruby preferred to stay out of the quarrel, so next morning when she was sent to market with a shopping list, Dina ran to her grandfather's flat.

Grandfather lived with one of her uncles, in a room that smelled of stale balm. She held her breath and hugged him, then poured out her troubles in a torrent of words. "Please, Grandpa! Please tell him to stop treating me like this!"

Already started on the road to senility, he took a while to realize who Dina was exactly, and longer to understand what she wanted. His dentures were not in, making it difficult to decipher his speech. "Shall I get your teeth, Grandpa?" she offered.

"No, no, no!" He raised his hands and shook them vehemently. "No teeth. All crooked, and paining in the mouth. Bastard stupid dentist, useless fellow. My carpenter could make better teeth."

She repeated everything slowly, and at last he grasped the issue. "Matric? Who, you? Of course you must do your matric. Of course. Of course. You must matriculate. And then college. Yes, of course I will tell that shameless rascal to send you, I will order that Nauzer. No, Nevil—that Nusswan, yes, I will force him."

He dispatched a servant with a message for Nusswan to visit him as soon as possible. Nusswan could not refuse. He cared deeply about the family's opinion of him. After delaying for several days, citing too much work at the office, he went, taking Ruby along to have an ally by his side. She was instructed to ingratiate herself with the old man in any way possible.

Grandfather had misplaced more of his memory since Dina's

visit. He remembered nothing of their conversation. He was wearing his teeth this time but had very little to say. With much prompting and reminiscing he appeared to recognize them. Then, ignoring Ruby altogether, he abruptly decided that Nusswan and Dina were man and wife. He refused to relinquish this belief, however much Dina coaxed and cajoled.

Ruby sat on the sofa holding the old man's hand. She asked if he would like her to massage his feet. Without waiting for an answer she grabbed the left one and began kneading it. The toenails were yellow, long overdue for a clipping.

Enraged, he tore his foot from her grasp. "Kya karta hai? Chalo, jao!"

Too startled at being addressed in Hindi, Ruby sat there gaping. Grandfather turned to Nusswan, "Doesn't she understand? What language does your ayah speak? Tell her to get off my sofa, wait in the kitchen."

Ruby rose in a huff and stood by the door. "Rude old man!" she hissed. "Just because my skin is a little dark!"

Nusswan said a gruff goodbye and followed his wife, stopping to turn and look triumphantly at Dina, who was trying to sort out the confusion. She stayed behind, hoping Grandpa would summon some hidden resource and come to her rescue. An hour later she too gave up, kissed his forehead, and left.

It was the last time she saw him alive. He died in his sleep the following month. At the funeral, Dina wondered how much longer Grandpa's toenails had grown under the white sheet that hid everything from view but his face.

* * * * *

FOR FOUR Years, Nusswan had been faithfully putting money aside for Dina's wedding expenses. A considerable sum had collected, and he planned to get her married in the near future. He was certain he would have no trouble finding a good husband—as he proudly said to himself, Dina had grown into a beautiful young woman, she deserved nothing less than the best. It would be a lavish celebration, befitting the sister of a successful

businessman, and people would talk about it for a long time to come.

When she turned eighteen, he started inviting eligible bachelors to their home. She invariably found them repugnant; they were her brother's friends, and reminded her of Nusswan in all they said and did.

Nusswan was convinced that sooner or later there would be one she liked. He could no longer place restrictions on her comings and goings—she had outgrown those adolescent controls. So long as she did the housework and daily shopping according to Ruby's lists, relative calm prevailed in the house. Nowadays the quarrelling, if there was any, was between Ruby and Dina, as though Nusswan had delegated this function to his wife. At the market Dina sometimes used her initiative and substituted cauliflower for cabbage; or she felt a sudden yearning for chickoos and bought them instead of oranges. Then Ruby promptly accused her of sabotaging the carefully planned meals: "Wicked, malicious woman, ruining my husband's dinner." She delivered the charge and the verdict in a matter-of-fact, mechanical manner, all part of her role as the dutiful wife.

But it was not always squabbles and bickering between them. More and more, the two women worked together amicably. Among the items that Ruby had brought to the house following her marriage was a small sewing-machine with a hand crank. She showed Dina how to use it, teaching her to make simple items like pillowcases, bedsheets, curtains.

When Ruby's first child was born, a son who was named Xerxes, Dina helped to look after him. She sewed baby clothes and knitted little caps and pullovers. For her nephew's first birthday she produced a pair of bootees. On that happy morning they garlanded Xerxes with roses and lilies, and made a large red teelo on his forehead.

"What a sweetie pie he is," said Dina, laughing with delight.

"And those bootees you made—just too cute!" said Ruby, giving her a huge hug.

But it was the rare day that passed entirely without argument. Once the chores were done, Dina preferred to spend as much

time out of the house as possible. Her resources for her outings were limited to what she could squeeze from the shopping money. Her conscience was clear; she regarded it as part-payment for her drudgery, barely a fraction of what was owed. Ruby demanded an account down to the last paisa. "I want to see the bills and receipts. For every single item," she pounded her fist on the kitchen table, rattling the saucepan's lid.

"Since when do fishmongers and vegetable-women on the footpath give receipts?" fired back Dina, throwing at her the bills for shop purchases, along with the change kept ready after juggling undocumented prices. She left the kitchen while her sister-in-law searched the floor to retrieve and count the coins.

* * * * *

THE SAVINGS were sufficient to pay for bus fares. Dina went to parks, wandered in museums and markets, visited cinemas (just from the outside, to look at posters), and ventured timidly into public libraries. The heads bent over books made her feel out of place; everyone in there seemed so learned, and she hadn't even matriculated.

This impression was dispelled when she realized that the reading material in the hands of these grave individuals could range from something unpronounceable like *Areopagitica* by John Milton to *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. Eventually, the enormous old reading rooms, with their high ceilings, creaky floorboards and dark panelling, became her favourite sanctuary.

The stately ceiling fans that hung from long poles swept the air with a comforting *whoosh*, and the deep leather chairs, musty smells, and rustle of turning pages were soothing. Best of all, people spoke in whispers. The only time Dina heard a shout was when the doorman scolded a beggar trying to sneak inside. Hours passed as she flipped through encyclopaedias, gazed into art books, and curiously opened dusty medical tomes, rounding off the visit by sitting for a few minutes with eyes closed in a dark corner of the old building, where time could stand still if one wanted it to.

The more modern libraries were equipped with music rooms.

They also had fluorescent lights, Formica tables, air-conditioning, and brightly painted walls, and were always crowded. She found them cold and inhospitable, going there only if she wanted to listen to records. She knew very little about music—a few names like Brahms, Mozart, Schumann, and Bach, which her ears had picked up in childhood when her father would turn on the radio or put something on the gramophone, take her in his lap and say, “It makes you forget the troubles of this world, doesn’t it?” and Dina would nod her head seriously.

In the library she selected records at random, trying to memorize the names of the ones she enjoyed so she could play them again another day. It was tricky, because the symphonies and concertos and sonatas were distinguished only by numbers that were preceded by letters like Op. and K. and BWV, and she did not know what any of it meant. If she was lucky she found something with a name that resonated richly in her memory; and when the familiar music filled her head, the past was conquered for a brief while, and she felt herself ache with the ecstasy of completion, as though a missing limb had been recovered.

She both desired and dreaded these intense musical experiences. The perfect felicity of the music room was always replaced by an unfocused anger when she returned to life with Nusswan and Ruby. The bitterest fights took place on days when she had visited the record collection.

Magazines and newspapers were far less complicated. Through reading the dailies, she discovered there were several cultural groups that sponsored concerts and recitals in the city. Many of these performances—usually the ones by local amateurs or obscure foreigners—were free. She started using her bus fares to go to these concerts, and found them a welcome variation on the library. The performers, too, were no doubt grateful for her presence at these meagrely attended evenings.

She lingered at the periphery of the crowd in the foyer, feeling like an imposter. Everyone else seemed to know so much about music, about the evening’s performers, judging from the sophisticated way they held their programmes and pointed to

items inside. She longed for the doors to open, for the dim lights within to disguise her shortcomings.

In the recital hall the music did not have the power to touch her the way it did during her solitary hours in the library. Here, the human comedy shared equal time with the music. And after a few recitals she began to recognize the regulars in the audience.

There was an old man who, at every concert, fell asleep at precisely four minutes into the first piece; latecomers skirted his row out of consideration, to avoid bumping his knees. At seven minutes, his spectacles began sliding down his nose. And at eleven minutes (if the piece was that long and he hadn't yet been wakened by applause), his dentures were protruding. He reminded Dina of Grandpa.

Two sisters, in their fifties, tall and lean with pointed chins, always sat in the first row and often clapped at the wrong moment, unnecessarily disturbing the old man's nap. Dina herself did not understand about sonatas and movements, but realized that a performance was not over just because there was a pause in the music. She took the lead from a goateed individual in round wire-rimmed glasses who wore a beret, looked like an expert, and always knew when to clap.

Then there was an amusing middle-aged fellow who wore the same brown suit at every concert, and was everyone's friend. He dashed around madly in the foyer, greeting people, his head bobbing wildly, assuring them what a splendid evening it was going to be. His ties were the subject of constant speculation. On some evenings they hung long, dominating his front, flapping over his crotch. At other times they barely reached his diaphragm. The knots ranged in size from microscopic to a bulky samosa. And he did not walk from one person to the next so much as prance, keeping his comments brief because, as he liked to explain, there were just a few minutes before the curtain went up, and still so many he had to greet.

Dina noticed in the lobby a young man who, like her, was engaged in observing from the edges the merry mingling of their fellow concertgoers. Since she usually arrived early, anxious to get away from home, she was there to see him sail up to the

entrance on his bicycle, dismount cleanly, and wheel it in through the gates. The gateman allowed him this liberty in exchange for a tip. At the side of the building, he padlocked the bicycle, making sure to remove the briefcase from the rear carrier. He snapped the clips off his trousers and slipped them into the briefcase. Then he retired to his favourite corner of the lobby to study the programme and the public.

Sometimes their eyes met, and there was a recognition of their tacit conspiracy. The funny man in the brown suit left Dina alone but included him in his round of greetings. "Hello, Rustom! How are you?" he bellowed, and thus Dina learned the young man's name.

"Very well, thank you," said Rustom, looking over the shoulder of the brown suit at Dina watching amusedly.

"Tell me, what do you think of the pianist today? Is he capable of the depth required in the slow movement? Do you think that the largo—oh, excuse me, excuse me, I'll be back in a moment, soon as I say hello to Mr. Medhora over there," and he was off. Rustom smiled at Dina and shook his head in mock despair.

The bell rang and the auditorium doors opened. The two tall sisters hastened to the first row with synchronized hopping steps, unfolded the maroon-upholstered seats, and flopped down triumphantly, beaming at each other for once again winning their secret game of musical chairs. Dina took her usual centre aisle seat, roughly midway down the hall.

As the place began to fill, Rustom came up beside her. "Is this one free?"

She nodded.

He sat down. "That Mr. Toddywalla is a real character, isn't he?"

"Oh, is that his name? Yes, he is very funny."

"Even if the recital is so-so, you can always rely on him for entertainment."

The lights dimmed, and the two performers appeared on stage to scattered applause. "By the way, I'm Rustom Dalal," he said, leaning closer and holding out his hand while the flute received the piano's silver A and offered its own golden one in return.

She whispered “Dina Shroff” without taking his hand, for in the dark she did not immediately notice it being held out. When she did, it was too late; he had begun to withdraw it.

During the interval Rustom asked if she would like coffee or a cold drink.

“No, thank you.”

They watched the audience in the aisles, bound for the bathrooms and refreshments. He crossed his legs and said, “You know, I see you regularly at these concerts.”

“Yes, I enjoy them very much.”

“Do you play yourself? The piano, or—?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Oh. You have such lovely fingers, I was sure you played the piano.”

“No, I don’t,” she repeated. Her cheeks felt a little hot, and she looked down at her fingers. “I don’t know anything about music, I just enjoy listening to it.”

“That’s the best way, I think.”

She wasn’t sure what he meant, but nodded. “And what about you? Do you?”

“Like all good Parsi parents, mine made me take violin lessons when I was little,” he laughed.

“You don’t play it anymore?”

“Oh, once in a while. When I feel like torturing myself, I take it out of its case to make it screech and wail.”

She smiled. “At least it must make your parents happy, to hear you play.”

“No, they are dead. I live alone.”

Her smile collapsed as she prepared to say she was sorry, but he quickly added, “Only the neighbours suffer when I play,” and they laughed again.

They always sat together after that, and the following week she accepted a Mangola during the interval. While they were in the lobby, sipping from the chilled bottles, watching moisture beads embellish the glass, Mr. Toddywalla came up to them.

“So, Rustom, what did you think of the first half? In my opinion, a borderline performance. That flautist should do some

breathing exercises before he ever thinks of a recital again.” He lingered long enough to be introduced to Dina, which was why he had come in the first place. Then he was off, gambolling towards his next victims.

After the concert Rustom walked her to the bus stop, wheeling his bicycle. The departing audience had their eyes on them. To break the silence she asked, “Are you ever nervous about cycling in this traffic?”

He shook his head. “I’ve been doing it for years. It’s second nature to me.” He waited for her bus to arrive, then rode behind the red double-decker till their ways parted. He could not see her watching him from the upper deck. She followed his diminishing figure, her eyes sometimes losing him, then finding him under a streetlamp, travelling with him till he became a speck that only her imagination could claim was Rustom. A few weeks the concert regulars came to regard them as a couple. Their every move was viewed with concern and curiosity. Rustom and Dina were amused by the attention but preferred to dismiss it as being in the same category as Mr. Toddywalla’s antics.

Once, on arriving, Rustom looked around to find Dina in the crowd. One of the first-row sisters immediately came up to his elbow and whispered coyly, “She is here, do not fear. She has just gone to the ladies’ room.”

It had been raining heavily, and Dina, soaked, was trying to tidy herself up in the ladies’ but her tiny hanky was not equal to the task. The towel on the rod looked uninviting. She did the best she could, then went out, her hair still dripping.

“What happened?” asked Rustom.

“My umbrella was blown inside out. I couldn’t get it straight quickly enough.”

He offered her his large handkerchief. The significance of this proposal was not lost on the observers around them: would she or wouldn’t she?

“No, thanks,” she said, running her fingers through the wet hair. “It will soon be dry.” The concertgoers held their breath.

“My hanky is clean, don’t worry,” he smiled. “Look, go in and dry yourself, I’ll buy two hot coffees for us.” When she still

hesitated, he threatened to take off his shirt and towel her head with it in the lobby. Laughing, she accepted the handkerchief and returned to the ladies' room. The regulars sighed happily. Inside, Dina rubbed her hair with the handkerchief. It had a nice smell to it, she thought. Not perfume, but a clean human smell. His smell. The same one she perceived sometimes while sitting next to him. She put it against her nose and breathed deeply, then folded it away, embarrassed.

It was still raining lightly when the concert ended. They walked to the bus stop. The drizzle hissed in the trees, as though the leaves were sizzling. Dina shivered.

“Are you cold?”

“Just a little.”

“Hope you’re not getting a fever. All that soaking. Listen, why don’t you put on my raincoat, and I’ll take your umbrella.”

“Don’t be silly, it’s broken. Anyway, how can you ride your cycle with an umbrella?”

“Of course I can. I can ride it standing on my head if necessary.” He insisted, and in the bus shelter they undertook the exchange. He helped her into the Duckback raincoat and his hand grazed her shoulder. His fingers felt warm to her cold skin. The sleeves were a bit long, otherwise it fit quite well. And nicely heated up by his body, she realized, as it slowly got the chill out of her.

They stood close together, watching the fine needles of rain slanting in the light of the streetlamp. Then they held hands for the first time, and it seemed the most natural thing to do. It was hard to let go when the bus came.

From now on, Rustom used his bicycle only to get to and from work. In the evenings he came by bus, so they could travel together and he could see her home.

Dina was happier meeting him without the bicycle. She felt he should give it up altogether, it was too dangerous in the city traffic.

I'm going to get married," announced Dina at the dinner table. "Ah," beamed her brother. "Good, good. Which one is it, Solly or Porus?"—these two being the gents he had most recently introduced.

Dina shook her head.

"Then it must be either Dara or Firdosh," said Ruby, smiling meaningfully. "They are both crazy about you."

"His name is Rustom Dalal."

Nusswan was surprised; the name did not belong among the numerous candidates he had brought before Dina over the past three years. Perhaps it was someone she had met at one of the family gatherings he so detested. "And where did we come across him?"

"We didn't. I did."

Nusswan did not like the answer. He was offended that all his efforts, all his choices, were being spurned by her for a total stranger. "Just like that you want to marry this fellow? What do you know about him and his family? What does he know about you, your family?"

"Everything," said Dina in a tone that made him anxious. "I've been seeing Rustom for a year and a half now."

"I see. A well-kept secret," he said, affecting sarcasm. "And what does he do, this Dalal fellow, your Rustom-in-hiding?"

"He's a pharmaceutical chemist."

"Hah! Pharmaceutical chemist! A bloody compounder! Why don't you use the proper word? That's what he is, mixing prescription powders all day long behind a counter."

He reminded himself there was no sense in losing his temper just yet. "So, when are we going to meet this Father Forty-Lakhs of yours?"

"Why? So you can insult him in person?"

"I have no reason to insult him. But it is my duty to meet him, and then advise you properly. In the end it's up to you."

On the appointed day, Rustom arrived with a box of sweetmeats for Nusswan and Ruby, which he placed in the hands of little Xerxes, who was almost three now. For Dina, he brought a new

umbrella. The significance was not lost on her, and she smiled. He winked at her when the others were not looking.

"It's gorgeous," she said, opening it up. "What a lovely pagoda shape." The fabric was sea green, and the shaft was stainless steel, with a formidable spike at the end.

"That's a dangerous weapon," joked Nusswan. "Be careful who you point it at."

They had tea, with cheese sandwiches and butter biscuits prepared by Ruby and Dina, and the time passed without unpleasantness. But that night, after the visitor left, Nusswan said he could not understand for one moment what was in his sister's head—brains or sawdust.

"Selecting someone without looks, without money, without prospects. Some fiancés give diamond rings. Others a gold watch, or at least a little broach. What does your fellow bring? A bloody umbrella! To think I wasted so much time and energy introducing you to solicitors, chartered accountants, police superintendents, civil engineers. All from respectable families. How will I hold my head up when people hear that my sister married an unambitious medicine-mixing fool? Don't expect me to rejoice or come to the wedding. For me it will be a day of ~~deep dark mourning~~, that in order to hurt him she was ruining her own life. "Mark my words, your spite will come back to haunt you. I am powerless to stop you, you are twenty-one, no longer a little girl I can look after. And if you are determined to throw your life away in the gutter, I can only watch helplessly while you do it."

Dina had expected all this. The words washed over her and gurgled into oblivion, leaving her untouched. The way the rain had rolled off Rustom's lovely raincoat, she remembered, on that beautiful night. But she wondered again, as she had so many times, where her brother had learned to rave so proficiently. Neither their mother nor father had had much ~~talent for it~~. Nusswan grew calmer. If Dina was getting married and leaving for good, better that it should happen amicably, without too much fuss. Secretly he was also pleased that Rustom

Dalal was no great catch. It would have been unbearable if his friends had been rejected in favour of someone superior. He participated in the wedding plans with more enthusiasm and generosity than Dina expected. He wanted to book a hall for the reception and pay for everything out of the money he had been collecting for her. "We'll have the wedding after sunset, and then dinner. We'll show them how it's done—everyone will envy you. A four-piece band, floral decorations, lights. I can afford about three hundred guests. But no liquor—too expensive and too risky. Prohibition police are everywhere, you bribe one and ten more show up for their share."

That night in bed, Ruby, who was pregnant with their second child, expressed dismay at Nusswan's extravagance. "It's up to Rustom Dalal to spend, if they want to get married. Not your responsibility—especially when she wouldn't even let you select the husband. She never appreciates anything you do for her."

Rustom and Dina, however, had simpler preferences. The wedding took place in the morning. At Dina's request, it was a quiet ceremony in the same fire-temple where her parents' prayers were performed on each death anniversary. Dustoor Framji, old and stoop-shouldered, watched from the shadows, upset that he had not been asked to conduct the marriage rites. Time was slowing him down, and the flesh of young women was rarely caught now in his once-dexterous embraces. But the name of Dustoor Daab-Chaab clung to his autumnal years even as all else was withering. "It's disgraceful," he grumbled to a colleague. "Especially after my long association with the Shroff family. For death, they come to me—for saros-nu-paatri, for afargan, baaj, faroksy. But for a happy occasion, for wedding ashirvaad, I am not wanted. It's a matter of shamefulness."

In the evening there was a party at the Shroff residence. Nusswan insisted on at least this much celebration, and arranged for a caterer. There were forty-eight guests, of which six were Rustom's friends, plus his Shirin Aunty and Darab Uncle. The rest were from Nusswan's circle, including extended-family members who could not be left out without risking criticism from

relatives—the insinuating, whispered kind of criticism to which he was so sensitive.

The dining room, drawing room, Nusswan's study, and the four bedrooms were rearranged to allow mingling and movement, with tables set up for food and drink. Little Xerxes and his friends ran from room to room in a frenzy of adventure and discovery, screaming and laughing. They were thrilled by the sudden freedom they enjoyed in a house where their previous visits had felt like time spent in prison, grimly supervised by the very strict daddy of Xerxes. Nusswan himself groaned inwardly each time one of them collided with him, but smiled and patted the child on its way.

During the course of the evening he produced four bottles of Scotch whisky to general applause. "Now we will put some life in the evening, and into this newly married pair!" said the men to one another, with much nodding and laughter, and the whispering of things not meant for women's ears.

"Okay, brother-in-law," said Nusswan, clinking two empty glasses before Rustom. "You're the expert, better start mixing a dose of Johnnie Walker medicine for everyone."

"Sure," said Rustom good-naturedly, and took the glasses.

"Just joking, just joking," said Nusswan, holding on to the bottle. "How can the bridegroom be allowed to work at his own wedding?" It was his only pharmaceutical dig during the evening.

An hour after the Scotch was taken, Ruby went to the kitchen; it was time to serve dinner. The dining table had been moved against the wall and set up for a buffet. The caterer's men staggered in with hot, heavy dishes, calling "Side please! Side please!" to get through. Everyone reverently made way for the food.

The aromas that had been filling the house with appetizing hints all evening, teasing nostrils and taunting palates, suddenly overwhelmed the gathering. A hush fell across the room. Someone chuckled loudly that where Parsis were concerned, food was number one, conversation came second. Whereupon someone else corrected him: no, no, conversation came third, and the second thing couldn't be mentioned with ladies and children

present. Those within earshot rewarded the worn-out joke with hearty laughter.

Ruby clapped her hands: "Okay, everybody! Dinner is served! Please help yourselves and don't be shy, there is lots of food!" She hovered around to play the host in the time-honoured fashion, repeating regretfully before each guest, "Please forgive us, we could manage nothing worthy of you."

"What are you saying, Ruby, it all looks wonderful," they replied. While helping themselves, they took the opportunity to inquire after her pregnancy and when she was expecting. Nusswan examined the plates that passed before him, lightheartedly scolding the guests who took too little. "What's this, Mina, you must be joking. Even my pet sparrow would go hungry with this quantity." He spooned more biryani for Mina. "Wait, Hosa, wait, one more kabab, it's delicious, believe me, one more, come on, be a sport," and deftly plopped two onto the reluctant plate. "Come back for more, promise?"

When everyone had served themselves, Dina noticed Rustom's Shirin Aunty and Darab Uncle on the verandah, a little secluded from the rest, and went to them. "Please eat well. Have you taken enough?"

"More than enough, my child, more than enough. The food is delicious." Shirin Aunty beckoned to bring her closer, and beckoned again, to make her bend till Dina's ear was close to her mouth. "If you ever need anything—remember, anything at all, you can come to me and Darab."

And Darab Uncle nodded; his hearing was very sharp. "Whatever the problem. We are like Rustom's parents. And you are like our daughter."

"Thank you," said Dina, understanding that this was more than a customary welcoming speech from the other side. She sat with them while they ate. Near the dining table Nusswan, miming with plate and fork, signalled to her to get some food for herself. Yes, later, she mimed back, and stayed with Shirin Aunty and Darab Uncle, who watched her with adoring eyes as they ate.

* * * * *

A FEW GUESTS still remained when Nusswan gave the caterer's men the go-ahead for the cleanup. The lingerers got the hint and said their thanks and goodbyes.

On the way out, someone clutched Rustom's lapel and giggled, whispering with whisky breath that the bride and groom were fortunate not to have a mother-in-law on either side. "Not fair, not fair! No one to question you whether the equipment worked on the first night, you lucky rascal! No one to inspect the bedsheet, hahn!" He prodded Rustom in the stomach with one finger. "You're getting off very lightly!"

"Good night, everybody," said Nusswan and Ruby. "Good night, good night. Thank you very much for coming."

When the last guest had departed, Rustom said, "That was a lovely evening. Thank you both for arranging it."

"Yes, it really was, thank you very much," added Dina.

"You're welcome—most welcome," said Nusswan, and Ruby nodded. "It was our duty."

Originally, Dina and Rustom had agreed with Nusswan's suggestion to spend the night there. Then they realized that the rooms would have to be put back in order after the party. So it was more convenient to go straight to Rustom's flat.

"Now don't worry about anything, these fellows will clear up, that's what they are paid for," said Nusswan. "You two carry on." He gave them both a hug. It was the second time that day for Dina. The first time had been in the morning, after the dustoorji had finished reciting the wedding benediction; it had also been the first time in seven years.

A small lump came to her throat. She swallowed as Nusswan quickly passed his fingers over his eyes. "Wish you lots of happiness," he said.

Dina fetched a valise that was packed and ready for the night.

The rest of her things would be delivered later. Nusswan was

going to let her have some furniture from their parents' possessions. He accompanied them down the cobbled walkway

to a taxi and waved goodbye. She noticed with surprise that his voice quavered as he said, “All the best! God bless you!”



THEY WOKE UP late the next morning. Rustom had taken a week's leave from work, though they couldn't afford to go anywhere on a honeymoon.

Dina made tea in the gloomy kitchen while he watched anxiously. The kitchen was the dingiest room in the flat, its ceiling and plaster blackened by smoke. Rustom's mother had cooked over coal fires all her life. Her brief acquaintance with kerosene had not been propitious—there had been a spill, and flames, and burns down her thighs; coal was more obedient, she had concluded.

Rustom had wanted to paint the kitchen before the wedding, along with the other rooms, but the money had refused to stretch that far. He began to apologize for the flat's condition. “You are not used to living like this. Just look at these horrible walls.” “It doesn't matter, it's fine,” she said happily. “We'll get it painted later.”

Perhaps it was due to her presence in the flat, unusual at breakfast time, but he began detecting new deficiencies around him. “After my parents died I got rid of things. Seemed like clutter to me. I was planning to live like a sadhu, you see, with only my violin for company. Instead of a bed of nails, the screeching of catgut to mortify myself.”

“Are the strings really made of cat intestines?”

“Used to be, in the olden days. And in the very olden days, violinists had to go out and hunt down their own strings. There were no music shops then, like L. M. Furtado or Godin & Company. At all the great conservatories of Europe, they taught music as well as animal evisceration.”

“Now don't be silly so early in the morning,” she scolded, but his bizarre humour was what she liked most about him.

“Anyway, I have found my beautiful angel, and the sadhu days are over. The catgut can take a rest.”

"I enjoy your playing. You should practise more."

"Are you joking? I sound worse than the fellow last week at Patkar Hall. And he played as though his f-holes were blocked." "Chhee, how filthy!"

He laughed at the face she made. "I can't help it—that's what they are called. Come, let me show you my f-holes." He took the violin case down from top of the cupboard. "See the shape of the two openings in the soundboard?"

"Oh, it looks just like a running-hand f." She traced the curves with a finger, and touched the strings gently. "Play something while you have it open."

He shut the case and, rising slightly on his toes, slipped it on top of the cupboard. "Play, play, play—that's what my parents used to say." He took her hand and pressed it to his lips. "I wish I had at least kept their double bed." Then he asked shyly, "Were you comfortable last night?"

"Oh yes." She blushed at the fresh memory of the narrow single bed in which they had clung together.

After a breakfast of an omelette and buttered toast, he opened the front door and said there was a surprise for her. "It was too dark to show you last night."

"What is it?"

"You have to step outside."

She saw the new brass nameplate gleaming in sunlight, engraved Mr. & Mrs. Rustom K. Dalal. He basked in the pleasure it gave her. "Day before yesterday is when I screwed it on."

"It looks lovely."

"Changing the nameplate was easy," he chuckled. "It's much more difficult to change the name on the rent receipt."

"What do you mean?"

"The rent is collected in my father's name though he's been dead for nine years. The landlord hopes I will get impatient, offer money to transfer the flat to my name. He keeps hinting."

"Are you going to?" "Of course not. There's nothing he can do, the Rent Act protects us. It doesn't matter in whose name the rent receipt is

issued. And you are entitled to live here too, as my wife. Even if I were to die tomorrow."

"Rustom! Don't say such things!"

He laughed. "When the rent-collector comes with the receipt in my father's name, sometimes I feel like telling him to go up, to heaven, to the renter's new address."

Dina rested her head against his shoulder. "For me, heaven is in this flat."

Rustom drew her close and hugged her. "For me too." Then he gave the nameplate another shine with his sleeve. While they were admiring it, two handcarts rolled up and stopped by their door, laden with things from the Shroff residence.

At first, Rustom had arranged for a small lorry because Dina had requested Nusswan to let her have Daddy's huge wardrobe, the one with the carved rosewood canopy of a sunburst and flowers. She would forgo everything else, she said, for this one item. Nusswan promised to consider it but refused in the end. He said that squeezing the wardrobe through the narrow door of Rustom's flat would damage it, the scratches would be unfair to their father's memory, and, besides, its proportions wouldn't suit the tiny rooms.

So he let her have another cupboard, smaller and plainer, a little desk, and twin beds. There was also a large box of kitchen utensils that Ruby had put together after discreetly inquiring whether Rustom's kitchen was properly equipped. To get them started, she included pots and pans, a stove, some cutlery, a board, and a rolling pin.

The two handcarts were unloaded and the twin beds assembled. One of the carters offered to buy the old single. Rustom let him have it for thirty rupees, and got ten for the mattress from the other man.

As Dina watched them carry it away, he said, "I know what you're thinking. But this flat has no space for an extra bed." She wondered how close they would sleep that night, now that there were twin beds.

But one of the two was as good as unslept in when they woke on their second morning. Reassured, she spent the day getting

her new home organized the way she wanted it. First, she gave notice to Seva Sadan, terminating delivery of Rustom's evening meals. And for lunch, she would pack something for him when he returned to work the following week.

"No more nonsense of eating out or not eating at all," she said, and climbed up on a chair to examine the high shelf in the kitchen. She discovered a series of brass and copper vessels, a kettle, and a set of kitchen knives.

"Those are all gone bad," said Rustom. "I've been meaning to sell them for scrap. Tomorrow, I promise."

"Don't be silly, these are solid old things. They can be repaired and tinned. Nowadays you can't buy such quality."

The next time a tinker yelled outside their window, she called him to fix the leaking vessels and rivet the broken handle of the kettle. She watched to make sure he did the work properly. As he finished each pot, she took it to the bathroom and tested it with water.

The knife-grinder went by with his wheel slung over his shoulder. The tinker stopped hammering while she clapped twice to get his attention.

The dull blades soon began glinting with sharp edges. She relished the energy, the attention, the pounding and banging that went into getting her household shipshape for decades of wedded bliss with Rustom. A lifetime had to be crafted, just like anything else, she thought, it had to be moulded and beaten and burnished in order to get the most out of it.

The knife-grinder averted his face as sparks flew from the spinning grindstone. Like Divali fireworks, she thought, while the tinker's hammer blows rang gaily in her ears.

Dina and Rustom celebrated their first wedding anniversary by going to the cinema and dining out. They saw *Submarine Command*, starring William Holden, who played an American naval commander in Korea. They held hands during the film and, afterwards, ate chicken biryani at the Wayside Inn.

The following year Dina wanted to see something less grim. So they picked Bing Crosby's *High Society*, a brand-new release. She had bought a new frock for the occasion, blue, with a vivacious peplum that came alive with walking.

"I don't know if you should wear that," said Rustom, coming up behind her and stroking her hips.

"Why?" she smiled, wiggling to tease him.

"You'll drive the men wild in the streets. Better carry your pointy pagoda parasol to protect yourself."

"Won't you protect me, and fight them off?"

"Okay. In that case, I'll carry your spear. Better still, I'll bring my violin—the screeching will scare them more."

They enjoyed the film immensely. The blue frock was their private joke all evening as they imagined envious women and lustful men thirsting to get their hands on it. For dinner they went to Mongini's; the desserts there had a wonderful ~~Opulence~~ third anniversary, they decided to invite Nusswan, Ruby, and the children (there were two now) to dinner. Relations between them had been cordial since the wedding. Dina and Rustom were always asked to the children's birthdays, and also on Navroze and Khordad Sal. Dina, sometimes alone, sometimes with Rustom, had taken to dropping in with sweets for her nephews, or just to say hello. The ill feelings had disappeared so completely that it was hard to remember them with any clarity. One was tempted to conclude that it had all been exaggerated by the imagination.

The little anniversary party proceeded most amicably. Dina could not afford a new outfit, and wore last year's blue frock. Ruby admired it, and praised Dina's cooking. She said that the pulao-dal was really tasty. Dina replied graciously that she had learned a lot from her sister-in-law. "But I still have a long way to go before reaching your standards."

For the two boys, who were only six and three, Dina had cooked separately, without spices. But Xerxes and Zarir insisted on having what the adults were eating. Ruby allowed them a taste of it, and they wanted more despite their tongues hanging out.

"Never mind," said Dina, laughing, "the ice cream will put out the fire."

"Can I have it now?" chorused the children.

"Rustom Uncle has yet to go and get it," said Dina. "We don't have an icebox like yours to store it. Here, have this for the time being," and she popped sugar crystals in their mouths from the ceremonial tray of garlands and coconuts.

Later, while she cleared the table with Ruby helping, Rustom decided it was time to go for the Kwality Family Pack. "In case they don't have strawberry, which one—chocolate or vanilla?"

"Chocolate," said Xerxes.

"Lanilla," said Zarir, and everyone laughed.

"Lanilla!" teased Rustom. "You always have to be different, don't you?"

"I wonder from where he got the trait," said Nusswan.

"Certainly not his father," and they all laughed again. He seized the opportunity to add, "But what about you two, Rustom? Time to start a family, I think. Three years is long enough for a holiday."

Rustom only smiled, not wanting to encourage a discussion.

He opened the door to leave, and Nusswan jumped up. "Shall I give you company?"

"Oh no, just relax, you're the guest. Besides, if we walk, it will take too long. Alone, I can go on my cycle, return in ten minutes."

Dina set out clean plates and spoons for the ice cream, and put the kettle on. "The tea should be nice and ready by the time he is back."

Fifteen minutes later, they were still waiting. "Where can he be? The tea is getting so strong. Maybe you two should drink yours now."

"No, we'll wait for Rustom," said Ruby.

"There must be a big rush or something at the ice-cream shop," said Nusswan.

Dina boiled a second kettleful to dilute the infusion. She

returned the pot under the tea-cosy. "Forty-five minutes since he left."

"Maybe it was sold out at the first place," said Nusswan. "Strawberry is very popular, always out of stock. Maybe he went somewhere else, further away."

"He wouldn't, he knows I would worry."

"Maybe he got a puncture," said Ruby.

"Even walking back with a puncture would take only twenty minutes."

She went to the verandah to see if she could spot him pedalling in the distance. It reminded her of the nights when they would part after the concert recitals, and she would be on the upper deck of the bus, trying to keep his disappearing bicycle in sight.

The memory made her smile, but it quickly faded under the present anxiety. "I think I'll go and see what's the matter."

"No, I'll go," offered Nusswan.

"But you don't know where the shop is, or the road Rustom would take. You might miss each other."

In the end they both went. Seeing how tense Dina was, he kept repeating, "Has to be a perfectly simple explanation." She nodded, walking faster. He had to make an effort to keep up.

It was after nine, and the streets were quiet. In the lane at the end of which stood the ice-cream shop, a knot of people had gathered by the footpath. As they got closer, Nusswan and Dina noticed that the police were also present.

"Wonder what's going on," said Nusswan, trying to conceal his alarm.

Dina was the first to spot the bicycle. "It's Rustom's," she said. Her voice had turned into a stranger's, sounding unfamiliar to her own ears.

"Are you sure?" He knew she was. The bicycle was mangled but the saddle was whole. He pushed his way through the crowd towards the policemen. A roaring storm filled her ears, and their words reached her feebly, as though from a great ~~distance~~ lorry driver," said the sub-inspector. "Hit and run. No chance for the poor man, I think. Head completely crushed. But ambulance has taken him to hospital anyway."

A stray dog lapped at the thick pink puddle near the bicycle. Strawberry ice cream was in stock, thought Dina numbly. A policeman kicked the sand-coloured mongrel. It yelped and retreated, then returned for more. When he kicked it again, she screamed.

"Stop that! What harm is it doing to you? Let it eat!"

Startled, the policeman said "Yes madam" and stepped back.

The dog slurped hungrily, whimpering with pleasure while keeping a wary eye on the man's foot.

Nusswan obtained the name of the hospital. The sub-inspector took his address, and asked Dina, who was staring at the twisted bicycle, for hers. The bicycle would be retained as evidence for the time being—in case the lorry driver was found, he explained gently. He offered to give them a lift to the hospital.

"Thank you," said Nusswan. "But they will be wondering at home what happened."

"It's okay, I'll send a constable to say not to worry, there's been an accident and you are at the hospital," said the sub-inspector. "Then you can explain everything later."

* * * * *

THANKS to the sub-inspector's help, procedures were expedited at the hospital, and Nusswan and Dina were able to leave quickly. "Let's take a taxi," said Nusswan.

"No, I want to walk."

By the time they reached home, the tears were silently streaming down her cheeks. Nusswan held her and stroked her head. "My poor sister," he whispered. "My poor little sister. I wish I could bring him back for you. Cry now, it's all right, cry all you need to." He wept a little himself as he told Ruby about the accident, in whispers.

"Oh God!" sobbed Ruby. "What is the meaning of such misfortune! In a few minutes, Dina's whole world destroyed! How can it be? Why does He allow such things?" She composed herself before waking the children, while Dina went to change out of her blue frock.

"Can we eat the strawberry ice cream now?" asked Xerxes and Zarir sleepily.

"Rustom Uncle is not well, we have to go home," said Ruby, deciding it was better to explain gradually.

Dina soon emerged from her room, and Nusswan went to her side. "You must also come home with us, you cannot stay here alone."

"Of course, absolutely," said Ruby, taking her hand and squeezing it.

Nodding, Dina went to the kitchen and began making a package of the leftover pulao-dal. Ruby watched curiously, half-fearfully, before asking, "Can I help?"

Dina shook her head. "No sense wasting this food. On our way home, we can give it to a beggar at the corner."

Later, Nusswan would say to whomever he was recounting the events that he was really impressed with the dignified way his sister had behaved on that cruel night. "No wailing, no beating the chest or tearing the hair like you might expect from a woman who had suffered such a shock, such a loss." But he also remembered their mother's dignity on a similar occasion, and the disintegration that had followed in its wake. He hoped Dina would not follow the same pattern.

Dina packed her valise with a white sari and other things she would need for the next few days. It was the same one she had brought with her three years ago on her wedding night.



AFTER THE FUNERAL and four days of prayers, Dina prepared to return to her flat. "What's the rush?" said Nusswan. "Stay here a little longer."

"Of course," said Ruby. "Here you are with family. What will you do there all alone?"

Dina wavered easily, for she did not feel ready to go back. The most difficult hours were the ones before dawn. She slept with one arm over a pillow. Sometimes she nudged the pillow lightly with her elbow, her signal to Rustom that she wanted his arm

around her. When the human weight did not materialize, she awakened to emptiness, relearning the loss in the darkness before sunrise. Occasionally, she called out his name, and Ruby or Nusswan, if they heard her, came into the room and held her tight, stroking her hair.

"It's not as though you are going to be a burden on us by staying," said Nusswan. "In fact, you will be company for Ruby."

So Dina stayed. Word got about that she was temporarily at her brother's place, and a stream of relatives arrived on condolence visits. After the formal purpose of the call was dealt with, the conversation took on the hue of a genial get-together, and Nusswan and Ruby enjoyed the socializing. "It's the best thing possible for Dina," they agreed.

Rustom's Shirin Aunty and Darab Uncle had attended all four days of prayer at the Towers of Silence, but came again after a week. They sat for a while, had a glass of lemon cordial, and said, "For us, it is like losing a son. But remember, you are still our daughter. If you ever need anything, you can come to us. Remember, anything at all."

Ruby overheard this and prickled. "That's very kind of you. But we are here, Nusswan and I, to look after her."

"Yes, of course, thanks be to God," said the elderly couple, taken aback by the sharpness in her voice. "May He give you both a long, healthy life. Dina is very fortunate to have you two." They left shortly, hoping they had managed to salve ~~Dina's feelings~~, and Dina settled into her old routine, assuming her former place in the household. The servant was let go. Dina did not mind, it gave her something to do with her long, empty days. Xerxes and Zarir, of course, were thrilled to have Dina Aunty living with them. Xerxes was in the second standard and Zarir had just started kindergarten. She volunteered to take them to school; it would be easy, on her way to the bazaar in the mornings.

On Sunday evenings Nusswan organized card games. The three adults played rummy for a couple of hours while the children watched. Sometimes Dina allowed Xerxes and Zarir to hold her cards. At seven, the women started dinner, and Nusswan amused

himself by building a house of cards with the children or glancing over the Sunday newspaper a second time.

Once a week Dina went to her empty flat to dust and clean. There she followed the exact habit of housework that she had developed when Rustom was alive. At the end of the cleaning she made tea. There in the privacy of the dingy kitchen she sat with her cup, remembering, sometimes crying softly, and the tea usually went cold. She often poured it away after drinking half a cup. Following this secret pattern of mourning for some weeks, she began allowing a part of herself to pretend everything was normal, the flat was occupied, the separation temporary. There didn't seem to her any harm in it, and the make-believe was so comforting.

Then one evening, as dusk was falling and the headlights of cars had started to come on, she caught herself gazing out from the verandah to see if Rustom's bicycle was approaching. A shiver ran down her spine. She decided enough was enough. Flirting with madness was one thing; when madness started flirting back, it was time to call the whole thing off.

She renounced the weekly cleaning ritual. If a visit to the flat was necessary, she preferred not to go alone, and took her little nephews with her. Xerxes and Zarir enjoyed exploring the unlivable space. The familiar rooms suddenly seemed remote and mysterious, filled with furniture yet inexplicably empty. The museum-like stillness baffled them. They shouted and ran and skipped through the flat to see if they could banish the void.

One afternoon, when Dina stopped by to pick up a few of her things, she found an envelope from the landlord. The children began organizing a cross-country race, for which Xerxes mapped out the route. "We will start from the verandah, and run all the way to the kitchen, then all the way to the wc, and then all the way back, going through all the rooms. Understood, Zarir?"

"Okay," said Zarir. Dina announced ready, get set, go. She opened the windows in the front room and read the letter. It stated that since the premises were no longer occupied, notice was hereby given for the flat to be emptied of its effects and the keys returned within thirty days.

That night, when she showed the letter to Nusswan, he was livid. "Look at the shameless rascal of a landlord. Not even three months since poor Rustom passed away, and the snake is ready to strike. Nothing doing. You *must* keep the flat."

"Yes, I think I'll go back there from next week," she agreed.
"That's not what I meant. Stay here for a year, two years—as long as you like. But don't give up your right. Mark my words, the time is not far-off when accommodation will be impossible to find in the city. An old flat like yours will be a gold mine."

"It's true," said Ruby. "I heard that Putli Maasi's son had to pay a pugree of twenty thousand rupees just to get his foot in the door. And the rent is five hundred a month. His flat is even smaller than yours."

"Yes," said Dina, "but my rent—"

"Don't worry, I'll pay it," said Nusswan. "And my lawyer will reply to this letter."

He was thinking ahead: sooner or later Dina would remarry. At that juncture, it would be very unfortunate if the lack of a flat were to pose an impediment. He definitely would not want the couple living with him. That would be a blueprint for friction and strife.

On Rustom's first death anniversary, Nusswan took the morning off from work. The previous day, he had written notes to Xerxes' school and Zarir's kindergarten that they would be "absent in order to attend their late uncle's prayers at the fire-temple." Dina was grateful for the entire family's presence.

"Hard to imagine," said Nusswan when they got back home, "a whole year has gone by. How time flies."

A few days later he formally signalled an end to the mourning period by inviting some friends to tea.

Among them were Porus and Solly, two of the many eligible bachelors whom he had strenuously recommended to Dina a few years ago. The two were still single, and still quite eligible, according to Nusswan, if one was willing to forgive minor flaws like incipient potbellies and greying hair.

Priding himself on his subtlety, he said to Dina in private, "You know, either Porus or Solly would jump at the chance to become your husband. Porus's law practice is flourishing beyond belief. And Solly is now a full partner in the accounting firm. They would have no problem that you are a widow."

"How kind of them."

He did not like the sarcasm. It was a reminder of the old Dina—the stubborn, insolent, defiant sister, who he assumed had been transformed into a better person. But he swallowed and continued calmly.

"You know, Dina, I am very impressed with you. No one can accuse you of being frivolous in mourning. You have acted so correctly, so perfectly, this whole year."

"I was not acting. And it was not difficult."

"I know, I know," he said hastily, regretting his choice of words. "What I meant was, I admire your dignity. But the point is, you are still so young. It has been over a year, and you must think of your future."

"Don't worry, I understand your concern."

"Good, that's all I wanted to say. Come on, time for cards. Ruby!" he called to the kitchen. "Time for rummy!" Now there would be progress, Nusswan was certain.

Over the next few weeks he continued to invite the old

assortment of bachelors. "Come, Dina," he would say, "let me introduce you." Then, pretending a memory lapse, he would exclaim, "Wait, wait, what am I saying, where is my head? You already know Temton. So let it be a reintroduction."

All this was enacted in a manner suggesting that a relationship of deep significance was being resumed, a passion rekindled. It irritated Dina intensely, but she tried to keep from frowning while pouring the tea and passing the sandwiches. When the visitors departed, Nusswan resumed with his sledgehammer hints, praising one's looks, commending the merits of another's career, pointing out the inheritance awaiting a third.

After four months of bachelor-entertaining and no sign of cooperation from Dina, Nusswan lost his patience. "I have been tactful, I have been kind, I have been reasonable. But which raja's son are you waiting for? Every chap I introduce, you turn your face away from him and go to the other side of the room. What is it that you want?"

"Nothing."

"How can you want nothing? Your whole life will be nothing. Be sensible."

"I know you are doing it for my own good, but I am just not interested."

The answer reminded Nusswan once again of the old Dina, the ungrateful little sister. He suspected that she looked down upon his friends. And they were such good fellows, all of them. Never mind, he would not let her anger him.

"Fine. As I said, I am a reasonable person. If you don't like these men, no one is forcing you. Find one yourself. Or we can hire a matchmaker. I hear that Mrs. Ginwalla has the best track record for successful kaaj. Let me know what you prefer if want to get married so soon."

"Soon? You call this soon? You are twenty-six years old. What are you hoping for? For Rustom to return miraculously? Be careful, or you'll go crazy like Bapsy Aunty—she at least had an excuse, her husband's body was never found after the dock explosion."

"What a horrible thing to say!" Dina turned away in disgust and left the room.

She had been very young when it happened, but remembered the day clearly, during wartime, when two British ammunition ships had blown up after docking, killing thousands within a large radius of the harbour. Rumours about Nazi spies had begun to spread while the detonations were still in progress. The authorities said that many of those unaccounted for were vaporized during the deadly blasts, but Bapsy Aunty refused to accept this theory. She felt her husband was alive, wandering amnesiac somewhere, and it was only a matter of time before he was located. Alternately, Bapsy Aunty allowed that he might have been hypnotized or fed something by an unscrupulous sadhu and led away into slavery. In either case, she believed her husband would be found. That seventeen years had passed since the calamity did not diminish her faith. She spent her time chatting busily with his photograph, which sat in a heavy silver frame at her bedside, narrating for his benefit each day's news and gossip in detail.

"It's your depressing behaviour which reminds me of Bapsy Aunty," said Nusswan, following Dina into the next room. "What excuse do you have? You were at the funeral, you saw Rustom's body, you heard the prayers. He has been dead and digested for more than a year now." As soon as he said it, he rolled his eyes heavenward to ask forgiveness for this bit of irreverence.
"Do you know how fortunate you are in our community? Among the unenlightened, widows are thrown away like garbage. If you were a Hindu, in the old days you would have had to be a good little sati and leap onto your husband's funeral pyre, be roasted with him."

"I can always go to the Towers of Silence and let the vultures eat me up, if that will make you happy."

"Shameless woman! What a loose mouth! Such blasphemy! All I am saying is, appreciate your position. For you it is possible to live a full life, get married again, have children. Or do you prefer to live forever on my charity?"

Dina did not answer. But the next day, while Nusswan was at work, she began moving her belongings back to Rustom's flat.

Ruby tried to stop her, following her from room to room, pleading with her. "You know how hotheaded your brother is. He does not mean everything he says."

"Neither does he say everything he means," she replied, and continued packing.

In the evening Ruby told Nusswan about it. "Hah!" he scoffed, loud enough for Dina to hear. "Let her go if she wants. I would just love to see how she supports herself."

After dinner, while still at the table, he cleared his throat. "As the head of the family, it's my duty to tell you I don't approve of what you are doing. You are making a big mistake, which you will regret. It's a hard world out there, but I'm not going to beg you to stay. You are welcome here if you will be reasonable."

"Thank you for the speech," said Dina.

"Yes, make fun of me. You have done it all your life, why stop now. Remember, this is your decision, no one is kicking you out. None of our relatives will blame me, I have done all I can to help you. And will continue to do so."

It was not long before the children understood that Dina Aunty was leaving. First they were bewildered, and then angry. Xerxes hid her handbag, screaming, "No, Aunty! You cannot go!" When she threatened to leave without it, Zarir brought it tearfully from the hiding place.

"You can always visit me," she tried to pacify the two, hugging them and drying their eyes. "On Saturday and Sunday. And maybe during the vacation. It will be such fun." They were excited at the prospect but would have much preferred that she stay with them forever.



THE MORNING after she was back in her flat, Dina went to visit Rustom's Darab Uncle and Shirin Aunty. "Darab! Look who's here!" Shirin Aunty shouted excitedly. "Our dear Dina! Come in, my child, come in!"

Darab Uncle emerged, still in his pyjamas, and hugged Dina, saying they had waited a long time for this. "Excuse my

appearance," he said, sitting down opposite her and smiling broadly.

As always, Dina was touched by their happiness at seeing her. She felt their love pour over her like something palpable. It reminded her of the milk bath she was given as a child on her birthday, by her mother, when half a cup of warm milk, with rose petals afloat, came trickling down her face and neck and chest in tiny white runnels over her light-brown skin.

"The hardest part," she said, "is leaving the two little boys. I have become so attached to them."

"Yes, that's how it is with children," said Shirin Aunty. "But you know, Rustom had told us how shabbily your brother treated you in the years before you were married."

"He is not a bad person," Dina objected feebly. "He just has his own ideas about things."

"Yes, of course," said Shirin Aunty, sensing the weight of family loyalty. "Anyway, you can stay with us. We are so happy you came."

"Oh," said Dina, anxious to keep the misunderstanding from going further. "Actually, I have decided to live in Rustom's flat from now on. I came only to ask if you could find me some work."

Her words made Darab Uncle's mouth begin to move. He laboured to swallow the disappointment suddenly filling it, his soft slurping sounds teasing the quiet while Shirin Aunty played desperately with the hem of her dustercoat. "Work," she said, blank, unable to think. "My dear child...yes, work, you must work. What work, Darab? What work for her, do you think?"

Dina waited in guilty silence for his answer. But he was still struggling with his mouthful. "Go change your clothes," Shirin Aunty scolded him. "Almost afternoon, and still loitering in your sleeping suit."

He rose obediently and went inside. Shirin Aunty relinquished her hem, rubbed her hands over her face, and sat up. By the time Darab Uncle returned, having exchanged his blue-striped pyjamas for khaki pants and bush shirt, she had the beginnings of a solution for Dina.

"Tell me, my child, can you sew?"

"Yes, a little. Ruby taught me how to use a sewing-machine."

"Good. Then there will be work for you. I have an extra Singer you can take. It is quite old, but runs well."

For years, Shirin Aunty had supplemented her husband's salary from the State Transport Corporation by sewing for a few families. She made simple things like pyjamas, nightgowns, baby blouses, bedsheets, pillow-cases, tablecloths. "You can be my partner," she said. "There is lots of work, more than I can manage now with my weak old eyes. We will start tomorrow."

Dina picked up her handbag and hugged Shirin Aunty and Darab Uncle. They accompanied her to the front door. Then a commotion in the street drew them to the balcony. A huge protest march was surging down the road.

"It's another silly morcha about language," said Darab Uncle, spotting the banners. "The fools want to divide the state on linguistic lines."

"Everyone wants to change things," said Shirin Aunty. "Why can't people learn to be happy with things as they are? Anyway, let's go back inside. Dina cannot leave now. All the traffic is stopped." She sounded quite pleased about it, and enjoyed Dina's company for two more hours, till the streets had returned to normal.

Over the next few days, Dina was taken around and introduced to the customers. At each stop she waited nervously by Shirin Aunty's side, smiling timidly, trying to grasp the barrage of names and the tailoring instructions. Shirin Aunty kept handing over most of the new jobs to her.

At the end of the week, Dina finally protested: "I cannot accept so much, I cannot deprive you of your income."

"My dear child, you are not depriving me of anything. Darab's pension is enough for us. I was going to give up the sewing anyway, it was becoming too hard for me. Here, don't forget this new pattern."

Along with the assignments, Shirin Aunty passed along background material on the customers, information that would help Dina in her dealings with them. "The Munshi family is the best—always pays promptly. The Parekhs too, except that they

like to haggle. You just be firm, tell them I have set the rates. Who else? Oh yes, Mr. Savukshaw. He has a big problem with the bottle. By the end of the month his poor missis has hardly any money left. Make sure you take advance payment."

With the Surtees, the situation was rather unique. Whenever Mr. and Mrs. Surtee fought, she did not cook any dinner. Instead, she pulled out all his pyjamas from the cupboard and set fire to them, saving the ashes and charred wisps in a dinner plate to set before him when he came home from work.

"The result," said Shirin Aunty, "is more business for you. Every two or three months, after they make up, Mrs. Surtee will give you a large order for pyjamas. But you must pretend it's normal, or she will get rid of you."

Dina's collection of domestic portraits continued to grow as Shirin Aunty rendered descriptions of the Davars and Kotwals, the Mehtas and Pavris, the Vatchas and Seervais, and added them to the portfolio. "You must be getting fed up with all these details," she said. "Just one last thing, and the most important: never measure the misters for their inseam. Ask for a sample to sew from. And if that is not possible, make sure there is someone present when you measure, a wife or mother or sister. Otherwise, before you know it, they move thisway-thatway and thrust something in your hand which you don't want. Believe me, I had a nasty experience when I was young and innocent."

This last bit of advice was uppermost in Dina's mind when she was taken to meet Fredoon, a bachelor who lived alone. Shirin Aunty warned her not to go alone to his flat. "Although he is a perfect gentleman, people's tongues are mischievous. They will talk that some funny business is going on. Your name will be spoilt."

Dina did not care about people's tongues and felt no danger from Fredoon, though she was prepared to bolt if he ever asked her to take his inseam. To reassure Shirin Aunty, she said a friend was always with her. What she did not say was that the friend was

Fredoon. For that was what he soon became. His commissions consisted mainly of little frocks and short pants and pinafores;

to help Dina, he presented clothing on birthdays to the children of friends and relatives instead of envelopes stuffed with rupees.

Their friendship grew. Dina often accompanied him to textile stores to help him select material for the gifts. After the shopping, they would stop for tea and cakes at Bastani's. Sometimes Fredoon

invited her back to his flat for dinner, picking up fried mutton chops or vindaloo on the way. He was always encouraging her to try new frock patterns, assert herself forcefully before her clients, demand higher rates.

Over the next several months, Dina became more confident about her abilities. The sewing was easy, thanks to her sister-in-law's training. And when there was something tricky, she consulted Shirin Aunty. Her visits brought the two old people such pleasure, she went regularly, pretending to be confused by something or other: ruched collars, raglan sleeves, accordion pleats.

The sewing produced snippets of fabric every day, and Shirin Aunty suggested collecting them. "Waste nothing—remember, there is a purpose for everything. These scraps can be very useful." She quickly demonstrated by making a lumpy sanitary pad. "What a good idea," said Dina. Her budget needed all the help it could get. The textile stuffing was not as absorbent as the pads she used to buy, but the homemade ones could be changed more frequently since they cost nothing. As an added precaution, though, she wore a very dark skirt for the duration.

Work made the hours pass quickly in the little flat. While her eyes and fingers were immersed in the sewing, she acquired a heightened awareness of noises from the flats around her. She collected the sounds, sorted them, replayed them, and created a picture of the lives being lived by her neighbours, the way she transformed measurements into clothes.

Rustom's policy regarding neighbours had been to avoid them as much as possible. A little sahibji-salaam was enough, he said, or it led to gossiping and kaana-sori that got out of hand. But the

washing of pots and pans, ringing of doorbells, bargaining with vendors, laundry noises, the flop and slap of clothes thrashed in soapy water, family quarrels, arguments with servants—all this

seemed like gossip too. And she realized that the noises from her own flat would narrate her life for the neighbours' ears, if they bothered to listen. There was no such thing as perfect privacy, life was a perpetual concert-hall recital with a captive audience. Sometimes, the old pastime of attending free concerts tempted her, but she was reluctant to resume it. Anything which seemed like a clutching at bygone days made her wary. The road towards self-reliance could not lie through the past.

By and by, when the tailoring had settled into a comfortable routine for Dina, Shirin Aunty taught her to knit pullovers. "There is not much demand for woollen things," she said, "but some people order them for style, or if they are going to hill-stations for a holiday." As they progressed towards complicated patterns, Shirin Aunty presented her with her entire collection of design books and knitting needles.

Lastly, she instructed Dina in embroidery, with a warning: "Needle-work on table napkins and tea-cloths is very popular, and pays well. But it's a great strain on the eyes. Don't do too much, or it will catch up with you after forty."

And so, three years later, when Shirin Aunty passed away, followed by Darab Uncle a few months later, Dina felt confident of managing on her own. She also felt very alone, as though she had lost a second set of parents.

Contrary to Nusswan's conviction that no one would blame him for Dina's leaving, the relatives quickly grouped into two camps. While a few, professing neutrality, felt comfortable on both sides of the line, at least half were staunchly in support of Dina. To show their approval of her independent spirit, they came out with numerous ideas for money-making ventures.

"Butter biscuits. That's where all the cash is."

"Why don't you start a crèche? Any mother would prefer you to look after her children, instead of an ayah."

"Make a good rose sherbet and you won't have to look back. People will buy it by the gallon."

Dina listened with gratitude to everything, inclining her head interestedly as they formulated their schemes. She became an expert at non-committal nodding. When the tailoring was slow, she filled their orders for cakes, bhakras, vasanu, and coomas.

Then her friend Zenobia had a brainwave about in-home haircuts for children. Zenobia had fulfilled her schoolgirl ambition: she was now chief hairstylist at the Venus Beauty Salon. After the shop closed at night, she instructed Dina on a wig glued to a plaster-of-Paris cranium. The comb kept getting caught in the cheap mop's knotted strands.

"Don't worry," she reassured Dina. "It's much easier with real hair." From the surplus in the shop she put together a kit of scissors, hair clippers, brush, comb, talcum powder and powder puff. Then they made a list of friends and relatives with children who could be used as guinea pigs. Xerxes and Zarir's names were left out; though Nusswan would have welcomed the opportunity to save on haircuts, Dina felt uncomfortable now in his house.

"Just go after the brats, one by one, till you have cropped the whole jing-bang lot," said Zenobia. "It's only a question of practice." She monitored the results, and soon declared Dina trained and ready. Now Dina began going door to door.

After a few days, however, the enterprise folded without a single haircut. Neither she nor Zenobia had remembered that most people regarded hair clippings within their dwellings as extreme bad luck. Dina related the misadventures to her friend, how the thought of hair hitting the floor made the prospective clients hit

the ceiling. "Madam, you have no consideration? What have we done to you that you want to bring misfortune within our four walls?"

Some people did offer her their children's heads. "But only if you do it outside," they said. Dina refused. There were limits to what she would do. She was an in-home children's stylist, not an open-air pavement barber.

Afterwards, she did not hang up her clippers for good. Her friends' children continued to benefit from her skills. Some of the little boys and girls, remembering the practice haircuts, hid when Dina Aunty arrived. As she got better, they were less afraid.

Through all this, there were lean times when it was difficult to meet the rent or pay the electricity bill. Shirin Aunty and Darab Uncle, while they were still alive, had often tided her over with a loan of forty or fifty rupees. Now the only alternative was

Nusswan.

"Of course, it's my duty," he said piously. "Are you sure sixty will be enough?"

"Yes, thank you. I will pay it back next month."

"No rush. So tell me, have you found a sweetheart?"

"No," she replied, wondering if he suspected something about Fredoon. Could someone have seen them together and reported back to Nusswan?

During the two years since Shirin Aunty's death, the bachelor had progressed from friend to lover. Though the idea of marriage was still difficult for Dina to entertain, she enjoyed Fredoon's company because he was perfectly content to spend time in her presence without feeling compelled to make clever conversation or to participate in the usual social activities of couples. The two were equally happy sitting in his flat or walking in a public garden.

But when they ventured into the private garden of intimacy, it was a troubled relationship. There were certain things she could not bring herself to do. The bed—any bed—was out of bounds, sacred and reserved for married couples only. So they used a chair.

Then one day, as she swung a leg over to straddle Fredoon, her action suddenly resurrected the image of Rustom flinging his leg

over his bicycle. Now the chair, like the bed, was no longer possible.

“Oh God!” said Fredoon, groaning softly. He put on his trousers and made tea.

A few days later he persuaded her into the standing position, and Dina had no objections. He began to refine the procedure as much as he could, finding a low platform for her to stand on; their heights became more compatible during their embraces. Next he bought a stool, took some personal measurements, and sawed off precisely two and a quarter inches, adjusting it to the proper size for her to rest one leg. Sometimes she raised the left, sometimes the right. He arranged these accessories against the wall and suspended pillows from the ceiling at appropriate heights for her head and back, and under the hips.

“Is it comfortable?” he asked tenderly, and she nodded.

But the ultimate satisfaction of the bed could only be approximated. What should have been the occasional spice to vary the regular menu had become the main course, leaving the appetite often confused or unfulfilled.

The opposite wall of Fredoon’s room had a small window in it. Outside the window was a streetlamp. Once, between dusk and nightfall, as they were locked in their vertical lovemaking, it started to rain. A moist garden smell came in through the window. Through her half-open eyes Dina saw the drizzle float like mist around the lamplight. Occasionally, a hand or elbow or shoulder strayed beyond the pillows, onto the bare wall, and the cement felt deliciously cool against their heated flesh.

“Mmm,” she said, enjoying with all her senses, and he was pleased. The rain was heavier now. She could see it slanting in needles past the streetlamp.

She watched it for a while, then stiffened. “Please stop,” she whispered, but he continued moving.

“Stop, I said! Please, Fredoon, stop it!”

“Why?” he begged. “Why? Now what’s wrong?”

She shivered. “The rain...”

“The rain? I’ll shut the window if you like.”

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, something made me think of Rustom."

He took her face between his hands, but she pushed them away. She swam out of his embrace and into the memory of that night from long ago: she was wearing Rustom's warm raincoat; her umbrella had broken in the storm. And after the concert, at the bus shelter, they had held hands for the first time ever, their palms moist with the finely falling drizzle.

Remembering the purity of that moment, Dina contrasted it with the present. What Fredoon and she did in this room seemed a sordid, contraption-riddled procedure, filling her with shame and remorse. She shuddered.

Silently, Fredoon handed Dina her brassière and underpants. She shrank towards the pillowed wall while she dressed, turning away from him. He put on his trousers and made tea.

Later, he tried to cheer her up. "In all the bloody Hindi movies, rain brings the hero and heroine closer together," he complained. "But it is, from this moment onwards, the bane of my life." She smiled, and he was encouraged. "Never mind, I'll dismantle this and design a new set for our performance."

And Fredoon kept trying. Despite his creative efforts and secret consultations of sex manuals, however, the past could only be imperfectly distanced. It was a slippery thing, he discovered, slithering into the present at the least excuse, dodging the strongest defences.

But he remained uncomplaining, and Dina liked him for it. She was determined to keep him a secret from Nusswan as long as possible.

"No boyfriend as yet?" said Nusswan, counting out the money from his wallet. "Remember, you are thirty already. It will be too late for children, once you have dried up. I can still find you a decent husband. For what are you slaving and slogging?"

She put the sixty rupees in her purse and let him have his say. It was the interest he extracted on his loan, she thought philosophically—a bit excessive, but the only currency that she could afford and he would accept.

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THE VIOLIN had sat untouched upon the cupboard for five years. During the biannual flat cleaning, when Dina wrapped a white cloth over her head and swept the walls and ceilings with the long-handled broom, she wiped the top of the cupboard without moving the black case.

For six more years, she continued to employ the same strategy against the violin, barely acknowledging its existence. Now it was the twelfth death anniversary. Time to sell the instrument, she decided. Better that someone use it, make music with it, instead of it gathering dust. She got up on a chair and took down the case. The rusted metal snaps squealed as her fingers flipped them open; then she raised the lid, and gasped.

The soundboard had collapsed completely around the f-holes. The four strings flopped limply between the tailpiece and tuning pegs, while the felt-lining of the case was in shreds, chewed to tatters by marauding insects. Bits of burgundy wool clung to her hands. Her stomach felt queasy. With a trembling hand she drew out the bow from its compartment within the lid. The horsehair hung from one end of it like a thin long ponytail; barely a dozen unbroken strands remained in place. She put everything back and decided to take it to L. M. Furtado & Co.

On the way, she had to duck inside a library while demonstrators rampaged briefly through the street, breaking store windows and shouting slogans against the influx of South Indians into the city who were stealing their jobs. Police jeeps arrived as the demonstrators finished their work and departed. Dina waited a few minutes longer before relinquishing the library.

At L. M. Furtado & Co., Mr. Mascarenhas was supervising the cleanup of the large plate-glass window, its shattered pieces glittering among two guitars, a banjo, bongos, and some sheet music for the latest Cliff Richard songs. Mr. Mascarenhas returned behind the counter as Dina entered the shop with the violin. "What a shame," she said, pointing at the window.

"It's just the cost of doing business these days," he said, and

opened the case she put before him. The contents made him pause grimly. "And how did this happen?" He didn't recognize Dina, for it had been a long time since Rustom had introduced her, when they had dropped in once to buy an E string. "Doesn't anyone play it?"

"Not for a few years."

Mr. Mascarenhas scratched his right ear and frowned fiercely around the thick black frames of his spectacles. "When a violin is in storage, the strings should be loosened, the bow should be slack," he said severely. "We human beings loosen our belts when we go home and relax, don't we?"

Dina nodded, feeling ashamed. "Can it be repaired?"

"Anything can be repaired. The question is, how will it sound after it is repaired?"

"How will it sound?"

"Horrible. Like fighting cats. But we can reline the case with new felt. It's a good hard case."

She sold the case to Mr. Mascarenhas for fifty rupees, leaving behind the remains of the violin. He said a beginner might buy the repaired instrument at a discount. "Learners squawk and screech anyway, the tone will make no difference. If it sells, I'll pay you fifty more."

She was comforted by the thought that an enthusiastic youngster might acquire it. Rustom would have liked that—the idea of his violin continuing to torment the human race.

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FROM TIME to time, Dina's guilt about the violin returned to anguish her. How stupid, she thought, to ignore it on top of the cupboard for twelve years, leaving it to destruct. She could at least have given it to Xerxes and Zarir, encouraged them to take lessons. Then, one morning, someone came to the flat and announced that there was a delivery for Mrs. Dalal.

"That's me," she said. The youth, wearing fashionably tight pants and a bright yellow shirt with the top three buttons left undone, returned to the van

to fetch the item. Dina wondered if it might be the violin. Six months had passed since she had taken it to L. M. Furtado & Co. Perhaps Mr. Mascarenhas was sending it back because it was beyond redemption.

The young fellow appeared at the door again, dragging Rustom's mangled bicycle. "From the police station," he said. Before he could get her to sign and acknowledge receipt of the goods, her hand slid along the door jamb, lowering her gracefully to the floor. She fainted.

"Ma-jil!" the delivery boy panicked. "Shall I call ambulance? Are you sick?" He fanned her frantically with the delivery roster, waving it at various angles to her face, hoping that one of these airflows might work, might put the breath back into her nostrils.

She stirred, and he fanned harder. Encouraged by the improvement, he took her wrist as though checking for a pulse.

He didn't know what exactly to do with the wrist, but had seen the gesture being performed several times in a film where the hero was a doctor and his faithful and bosomy nurse was the heroine.

Dina stirred again, and the delivery boy released the wrist, pleased with his very first medical success. "Ma-jil! What happened? Shall I get someone?"

She shook her head. "The heat...it's okay now." The twisted frame and handlebars swam into view again. For a moment she wondered why the police would have painted the bicycle a reddish brown; it used to be black.

Then the haziness passed, and her focus returned to normal. "It's completely rusted," she said.

"Completely," he nodded, then checked the tag inscribed with the file number and date. "No wonder. Twelve years it has sat in the evidence room, where the windows are broken and the ceiling leaks. Twelve monsoon rains will make human bones rust also."

Dina's inner turmoil made her rage at the youth. "Is that any way to treat important evidence? If they caught the criminal, how would they prove it in court—with the evidence damaged?"

"I agree with you. But the whole building leaks. The employees get wet just like the evidence. Important files also, making the ink run. Only the big boss has a dry office."

His explanation gave her little comfort, and he tried again. "You know, ma-ji, once we had a bag of wheat in the storage room. Someone had murdered the owner to steal it. There were bloodstains on the jute sacking. By the time the case came to court, rats had chewed through it and eaten up most of the wheat. Judge dismissed the case for lack of evidence." He laughed carefully as he finished the story, hoping she would see the funny side of it.

"You find that a joking matter?" said Dina angrily. "The criminal walks free. What happens to justice?"

"It's terrible, just terrible," he agreed, giving her the roster to sign, then thanked her and departed.

She examined her copy of the receipt. It stated that the file was closed and the property returned to the next-of-kin.

Dina was not a superstitious person. But the bicycle's reappearance, after the fate of the violin, was more than she could bear. She decided there was a message in it for her. She completed Fredoon's last order, a party frock for a niece, delivered it, shook his hand, and said it wouldn't be possible to see him anymore, for she was giving up the sewing business and getting married.

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FROM THEN on, Dina did not meet Fredoon again. To avoid running into him, she even gave up other clients in that building. There was enough work from her remaining sources to support her.

A full five years passed in this manner. Then, right on schedule, Shirin Aunty's prophecy came to pass. At forty-two, Dina's eyes began to trouble her. In twelve months she had to change her spectacles twice. The lenses had grown quite formidable.

"Stop the eye strain or accept blindness," said the doctor. He was a wiry little man with a funny manner of wiggling his fingers all over the room when checking for peripheral vision. It reminded Dina of children playing at butterflies.

But his suddenly blunt manner made her indignant, and also

a little frightened. She did not know what she would do if sewing became impossible.

Fortune, sticking to its own schedule, brought along a solution. Her friend Zenobia told her about the export manager of a large textile company. "Mrs. Gupta is one of my regular clients. I've done her lots of favours, she can surely find some easy work for you."

One afternoon that week, at the Venus Beauty Salon, amid the disagreeable odours of hydrogen peroxide and other beautifying chemicals, Dina waited to meet Mrs. Gupta, who was nestled under a hairdryer. "Just a few more minutes," whispered Zenobia. "I'm doing such a wonderful bouffant for her, she'll be in a superb mood."

Dina watched from a chair in the reception area as Zenobia performed architecturally, even sculpturally, with the export manager's hair, and created a monument. As construction proceeded, Dina glanced sidelong in a mirror, imagining the lofty edifice upon her own head.

Soon, the scaffolding of clips and curlers was carefully dismantled, and the hairdo was complete. The two women came over to the waiting area. Mrs. Gupta was beaming.

"It looks beautiful," Dina felt compelled to say after introductions were completed.

"Oh, thank you," said the export manager. "But all the credit goes to Zenobia, the talent is hers. I only supply raw material."

They laughed, and Zenobia insisted she had nothing to do with it. "Mrs. Gupta's facial structure—look at those cheekbones, and also her elegant carriage—they are responsible for the total effect."

"Stop, stop! You are making me blush!" squeaked Mrs. Gupta.

Discussing the magic of imported shampoos and hairsprays, Zenobia steered the conversation towards the garment industry, as skilfully as she had twirled the whorls and spirals. Mrs. Gupta was quite happy to talk about her achievements at Au Revoir Exports.

"In just one year I have doubled the turnover," she said. "Highly prestigious labels from all over the world are asking for my creations." Her company—she used the possessive

throughout—had begun supplying women's clothing to boutiques in America and Europe. The sewing was done locally to foreign specifications, and contracted out in small lots.

"It's more economical for me. Better than having one big factory which could be crippled by a strike. Who wants to deal with union goondas if it can be avoided? Especially these days, with so much trouble in the country. And leaders like that Jay Prakash Narayan encouraging civil disobedience. Simply at all creating problems. Thinks he is ~~Mahatma Gandhi~~ the Second," Gupta agreed Dina would be ideal for the work. "Yes, you can easily hire tailors and supervise them. You don't have to strain yourself."

"But I have never handled complicated things or latest fashions," confessed Dina, and Zenobia frowned at her. "Only simple clothes. Children's frocks, school uniforms, pyjamas."

"This is also simple," assured Mrs. Gupta. "All you have to do is follow the paper patterns as you follow your nose."

"Exactly," said Zenobia, annoyed with Dina's hesitation. "And no investment is needed, two tailors can easily fit in your back room."

"What about the landlord?" asked Dina. "He could make big trouble for me if I start a workshop in the flat."

"He doesn't have to know," said Zenobia. "Just keep it quiet, don't tell your neighbours or anyone."

The tailors would have to bring their own sewing-machines, for that was the norm, according to Mrs. Gupta. And piecework was better, it created some incentive, whereas a daily wage would be a recipe for wasting time. "Always remember one thing," she stressed. "You are the boss, you must make the rules. Never lose control. Tailors are very strange people—they work with tiny needles but strut about as if they were carrying big swords." Dina was convinced, and set out to look for two tailors, scouring the warren of laneways in the sordid belly of the city. Day after day, she entered dilapidated buildings and shops, each one standing precariously like a house of battered cards. Tailors she saw in plenty—perched in constricted lofts, crouched inside kholis that looked like subterranean burrows, bent over in smelly

cubicles, or cross-legged on street corners—all engaged in a variety of tasks ranging from mattress covers to wedding outfits.

The ones who were eager to join her did not seem capable of handling the export work. She saw samples of their sewing: crooked collars, uneven hems, mismatched sleeves. And those who were skilled enough wanted the work delivered to them. But this was Mrs. Gupta's one strict condition: the sewing had to be done under the supervision of the contractor. No exceptions, not even for Zenobia's friend, because Au Revoir's patterns were top secret.

The best Dina could do was to write her address on little squares of paper and leave it at shops where the quality was reasonable. "If you know someone who does good work like you and needs a job, send them to me," she said. Many of the owners threw away the paper as soon as she left. Some rolled it into a tight cone to scratch inside their ears before discarding it.

Meanwhile, Zenobia had another suggestion for Dina: to take in a boarder. It would involve no more than providing a few basics like bed, cupboard, bath; and for meals, cooking a bit extra of what she ate.

"You mean, like a paying guest?" said Dina. "Never. Paying guests are trouble with a capital t. I remember that case in Firozsha Baag. What a horrible time the poor people had."

"Don't be so paranoid. We are not going to allow crooks or crackpots into the flat. Think of the rent every month—guaranteed income."

"No baba, I don't want to take the risk. I've heard of lots of old people and single women being harassed."

But as her meagre savings dwindled, she relented. Zenobia assured her they would only accept someone reliable, preferably a temporary visitor to the city, who had a home to return to. "You look for tailors," she said. "I'll find the boarder." continued to distribute her name and address at tailors'

shops, going further afield, taking the train to the northern suburbs, to parts of the city she had never seen in all her forty-two years. Her progress was frequently held up when traffic was blocked by processions and demonstrations against the

government. Sometimes, from the upper deck of the bus, she had a good view of the tumultuous crowds. The banners and slogans accused the Prime Minister of misrule and corruption, calling on her to resign in keeping with the court judgement finding her guilty of election malpractice.

And even if the Prime Minister stepped down—would it do any good? wondered Dina.

One evening, while the slow local waited for a signal change, she gazed beyond the railway fence where a stream of black sewer sludge spilled from an underground drain. Men were hauling on a rope that disappeared into the ground. Their arms were dark to the elbows, the black slime dripping from hands and rope. In the slum behind them, cooking fires smouldered, with smoke smudging the air. The workers were trying to unblock the overflowing drain.

Then a boy emerged out of the earth, clinging to the end of the rope. He was covered in the slippery sewer sludge, and when he stood up, he shone and shimmered in the sun with a terrible beauty. His hair, stiffened by the muck, flared from his head like a crown of black flames. Behind him, the slum smoke curled towards the sky, and the hellishness of the place was complete.

Dina stared, shuddering, transfixed by his appearance, covering her nose against the stench till the train had cleared the area. But the underworld vision haunted her for the rest of the day, and for days to come.

The long, depressing trips, the squalid sights, wore her down. Her spirits were lower than ever. Zenobia could see it in her eyes. “What’s this gloomy face for,” she said, pinching Dina’s cheek lightly.

“I am fed up with this struggle. I can’t do it anymore.”

“You mustn’t give up now. Look, more people have contacted me for paying guests. And one of them is Maneck Kohlah—Aban’s son. Remember her? She was at school with us. She wrote to me that Maneck hates his college hostel, he is desperate to move. I just want to be sure we pick a good character.”

“All these train fares are a waste of money,” said Dina, not

listening. She wanted her friend's approval to abandon the soul-draining journeys.

"But just think—once you find two tailors, how easy your life will be. You want to give up your independence and live with Nusswan or what?"

"Don't even joke about it." The prospect persuaded her to continue to leave her address at more and more shops. She felt like the lost children in that fairy tale whose title had slipped her mind, leaving a trail of bread, hoping to be rescued. But birds had devoured the bread. Would she ever be saved, she wondered, or would her trail of paper be devoured, by the wind, by the black sewer sludge, by the hungry army of paper-collectors roaming the streets with their sacks? Discouraged, she entered a lane where a rivulet of waste water flowed down the middle. Vegetable peelings, cigarette butts, eggshells bobbed along the surface. A little further, the lane narrowed and turned almost entirely into a gutter. Children were floating paper boats in the effluent, chasing them down the lethargic current. Planks had been thrown across to form walkways into shops and houses. When a boat sailed under a plank, emerging safely on the other side, the children clapped with glee.

Dina heard the familiar rattle and hum of a sewing-machine from someone's doorway. This would be the last tailor for today, she decided, gingerly crossing the plank, and then she would go straight home.

Halfway across, her foot went through a rotten spot. A brief cry escaped her; she kept her balance but lost a shoe. The children waded in, yelling, groping beneath the dark surface, competing to retrieve it.

She reached the shop entrance and took back her dripping shoe, giving the excited little boy who found it a twenty-five-paisa coin. The sound of the sewing-machine had ceased; its operator stood in the doorway, summoned by the commotion.

"What are you rascals up to again?" he shouted at the children.

"They were helping me," said Dina. "I was coming to your shop and my shoe fell in."

"Oh," he grunted, a little deflated. "The thing is, they are always

playing bad mischief." Recognizing a potential customer, he changed his tone. "Please come in, please."

Her inquiry about tailors disappointed him. He dismissed it with an indifferent "Okay, I'll try," playing with his tape measure while she wrote down her name and address.

Then he brightened suddenly. "The thing is, you have come to the right place. I have two wonderful tailors for you. I will send them tomorrow."

"Really?" she asked, sceptical about the change of heart.

"Oh yes, two beautiful tailors, or my name is not Nawaz. The thing is, they don't have their own shop, they go out and work. But they are very skilled. You will be so happy with them."

"Okay, I'll see them tomorrow." She departed, nurturing no expectations. There had been several false promises in the past few weeks.

On reaching home, she washed her feet and cleaned her shoes, sickened again at the thought of that lane where the children played with their paper boats. Her hopes would not be raised—neither by the tailor's pledge nor by Zenobia's assurance that a boarder was just round the corner, that their schoolfriend's son, Maneck Kohlah, would drop in any day now to inspect the room.

And so, next morning, when the doorbell rang, Dina welcomed her change of fortune with open arms. The paying guest stood at her door, along with the fruit of yesterday's square of paper: two tailors named Ishvar and Omprakash Darji.

As Zenobia would have put it, the whole jing-bang trio arrived at her flat together.

II
For Dreams to Grow

The offices of Au Revoir Exports looked and smelled like a warehouse, the floors stacked high with bales of textiles swaddled in hessian. The chemical odour of new fabric was sharp in the air. Scraps of clear plastic, paper, twine, and packing material littered the dusty floor. Dina located the manager at a desk hidden behind metal shelving.

"Hello! Zenobia's friend—Mrs. Dalal! How are you?" said Mrs. Gupta.

They shook hands. Dina reported that she had found two skilled tailors and was ready to start.

"Wonderful, absolutely wonderful!" said Mrs. Gupta, but it was evident that her excellent humour did not flow merely from Dina's announcement. The real reason soon bubbled out: she had another appointment at the Venus Beauty Salon this afternoon. Unruly curls which had slipped the leash during the past week would be tamed and brought back into the fold.

This event alone would have been enough to ensure Mrs. Gupta's happiness, but there were more glad tidings; minor irritants in her life were also being eradicated—the Prime Minister's declaration yesterday of the Internal Emergency had incarcerated most of the parliamentary opposition, along with thousands of trade unionists, students, and social workers. "Isn't that good news?" she sparkled with joy.

Dina nodded, doubtful. "I thought the court found her guilty of cheating in the election."

"No, no, no!" said Mrs. Gupta. "That is all rubbish, it will be appealed. Now all those troublemakers who accused her falsely have been put in jail. No more strikes and morchas and silly disturbances."

"Oh good," said Dina nervously. The manager opened her order book and selected a pattern for the first assignment. "Now these thirty-six dresses are a test for you. Test for neatness, accuracy, and consistency. If your two tailors prove themselves, I will keep giving you orders. Much bigger orders," she promised. "As I told you before, I prefer to deal with private contractors. Union loafers want to work less and get more money. That's the curse of this country—laziness.

And some idiot leaders encouraging them, telling police and army to disobey unlawful orders. Now you tell me, how can the law be unlawful? Ridiculous nonsense. Serves them right, being thrown in jail."

"Yes, serves them right," echoed Dina, absorbed in the dress design. She wished the manager would stick to the work and not keep rambling into politics. "Look, Mrs. Gupta, the hem on the sample dress is three inches wide, but according to the paper pattern it's only two inches."

The discrepancy was too trivial for Mrs. Gupta's consideration. She nodded and shrugged, which made the sari slip from her shoulder. A hand darted to halt the slide. "Thank God the Prime Minister has taken firm steps, as she said on the radio. We are lucky to have someone strong at a dangerous time like this."

She waved aside further queries. "I have faith in you, Mrs. Dalal, just follow my sample. But did you see the new posters today? They are put up everywhere."

Dina hadn't; she keenly wanted to measure the fabrics allocated for the thirty-six dresses, in case there was a shortfall. On second thoughts, no, she decided, it would offend the manager.

"'The Need of the Hour Is Discipline'—that's the Prime Minister's message on the poster. And I think she is absolutely right." Mrs. Gupta leaned closer and confided softly, "It wouldn't be a bad idea to stick a few posters on the Au Revoir entrance. Look at those two rascals in the corner. Chatting away instead of stacking my shelves."

Dina clucked sympathetically and shook her head. "Shall I come back in one week?"

"Please do. And best of luck. Remember, be firm with your tailors or they will sit on your head."

Dina started to pick up the bundles of cloth but was stopped. The managerial fingers snapped twice to summon a man to load the material in the lift.

"I'll say hello from you to Zenobia this afternoon. Wish me some luck also," Mrs. Gupta giggled. "My poor hair is going under the knife again."

"Yes, of course, good luck."

Dina brought home the bolts of cloth and made space for the two tailors in the back room. The paying guest wasn't moving in till next month; that would give her time to get used to one thing. She studied the paper patterns and examined the packet of labels: Chantal Boutique, New York. Restless, she decided to start cutting the patterns, have them ready for Monday. She wondered about the Emergency. If there were riots, the tailors might not be able to come. She didn't even know where they lived. It would make a terrible impression in case the delivery date was not met for this trial consignment.

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THE DARJIS arrived promptly on Monday at eight a.m., by taxi, with their sewing-machines. "On hire purchase," said Ishvar, proudly patting the Singers. "In three years, when payments are complete, they will belong to us."

Everything the tailors could spare must have gone towards the first instalment, for she had to pay the taxi driver. "Please deduct from what we earn this week," said Ishvar.

The machines were carried into the back room. They fitted the drive belts, adjusted the various tensions, loaded the bobbins, and ran off seams on waste cloth to test the stitches. Fifteen minutes later they were ready to sew.

And sew they did. Like angels, thought Dina. The treadles of the Singers rocked and the flywheels hummed as the needles danced in neat, narrow rows upon fabric, while the unfurling bolts of cloth were transformed into sleeves, collars, fronts, backs, pleats, and skirts.

I am the supervisor, she had to remind herself constantly, I must not join in the work. She hovered around, inspecting finished pieces, encouraging, advising. She scrutinized the tailors bent over the machines, their brows furrowed. The inch-long nails on their little fingers intrigued her; they used them for folding seams and making creases. Ishvar's disfigured cheek was grotesque, she decided: what might have caused it? He did not look like the type to get into a knife fight. His smile and his funny, undecided moustache tended to soften the damage. She shifted her glance to the silent Omprakash. The skeletal figure, sharp and

angular, seemed a mechanical extension of the sewing-machine. Delicate as cut-glass crystal, she thought with a pang of concern. And his oily hair—she hoped he wouldn't smudge the cloth. Lunchtime came and went, and they continued to work, stopping only to ask for a drink of water. "Thank you," said Ishvar, gulping it down. "Very nice and cool."

"Don't you eat lunch at this time?"

He shook his head fervently as though the suggestion was preposterous. "One meal at night is sufficient. More than that is a waste of time and food." After a pause, he asked, "Dinabai, what is this Emergency we hear about?"

"Government problems—games played by people in power. It doesn't affect ordinary people like us."

"That's what I said," murmured Omprakash. "My uncle was simply worrying."

They returned to their Singers, and Dina felt piecework was a brilliant idea. She rinsed the glass and put it in a separate place. From now on it would be the tailors' glass.

As the afternoon deepened, Ishvar seemed uncomfortable at his machine. She noticed him sitting hunched forward, legs tight together, as though he had stomach cramp. His feet began faltering on the treadle.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing, nothing," he smiled embarrassedly.

His nephew came to the rescue, holding up his little finger.

"He needs to go."

"Why didn't you say it earlier?"

"I was feeling bad to ask," said Ishvar shyly.

She showed him the wc. The door shut, and she heard the stream hit the toilet. It rose and fell haltingly with the reluctance of an overfull bladder.

Omprakash took his turn when Ishvar returned. "The flush is out of order," Dina called after him. "Throw some water from the bucket."

The smell in the wc bothered her. Living alone for so long, I've grown too fastidious, she thought. Different diets, different habits—it was only natural their urine left a strange odour.

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THE PILE of finished dresses grew without Dina's having to do a thing except open the door every morning. Ishvar would have a greeting or a smile for her, but Omprakash's skinny form darted past wordlessly. Perching on his stool like a grouchy little owl, she thought.

The three dozen dresses were completed before the due date. Mrs. Gupta was delighted with the results. She authorized a new assignment, for six dozen garments this time. And safely in Dina's purse was the payment for the first batch. Almost like money for nothing, she felt, experiencing a hint of guilt. How much easier than those tangled days when her fingers and eyes were forever snarled in sewing and embroidery.

The tailors' relief at being approved by the export company was enormous. "If the first lot is accepted, the rest will be no problem," brimmed Ishvar with sudden confidence, as she counted out their payment.

"Yes," cautioned Dina, "but they will always check the quality, so we cannot get careless. And we have to deliver on time."

"Hahnji, don't worry," said Ishvar. "Always top-quality production, on time." And Dina dared to believe that her days of toil and trouble were ending.

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THE TAILORS began taking regular lunch breaks. Dina concluded that the one-meal-a-day formula Ishvar had proclaimed last week was dictated by their pocketbook rather than asceticism or a strict work ethic. But she was pleased because her enterprise was improving their nourishment.

Promptly at one, Omprakash announced, "I'm hungry, let's go." They put aside the dresses, returned their treasured pinking shears to the drawer, and departed.

They ate at the Vishram Vegetarian Hotel on the corner. There were no secrets at the Vishram—everything was out in the open:

the man chopping vegetables, another frying them in the huge black-bottomed pan, a boy washing up. With only one table in the little shop, Ishvar and Omprakash did not wait for a seat but ate standing with the crowd outside. Then they hurried back to work, past the legless beggar who was rolling back and forth on his platform to the squeal of his rusty castors.

Soon, Dina began to notice that the sewing no longer proceeded at the former breakneck speed. Their recesses became more numerous, during which they stood outside the front door and puffed on beedis. Typical, she thought, they get a little money and they start to slack off.

She remembered the advice that Zenobia and Mrs. Gupta had given: to be a firm boss. She pointed out, in what she presumed was a stern voice, that work was falling behind.

"No no, don't worry," said Ishvar. "Everything will finish punctually. But if you like, to save time we can smoke while we sew."

Dina hated the smell; besides, a stray spark could burn a hole in the cloth. "You shouldn't smoke anywhere," she said. "Inside or outside. Cancer will eat your lungs."

"We don't have to worry about cancer," said Omprakash. "This expensive city will first eat us alive, for sure."

"What's that? At last I am hearing words from your mouth?"

Ishvar chuckled. "I told you he speaks only when he disagrees." "But why worry about money," she said. "Work will wash away all of it."

"Not the way you pay us," muttered Omprakash under his breath.

"What's that?"

"Nothing, nothing," said Ishvar hastily. "He was talking to me. He has a headache."

She asked if he would like to take an Aspro for the pain. Omprakash refused, but from then on, his voice was heard increasingly.

"Do you have to go far to get the work?" he asked.

"Not far," said Dina. "Takes about one hour." She was pleased that he was settling in, making an effort to be agreeable.

"If you need help to carry the dresses there, let us know."
How nice of him, she thought.

"And what is the name of the company you go to?"
Glad about his grumpy silences having ended, she almost blurted out the name, then pretended not to have heard. He repeated the question.

"Why bother with the name," she said. "All that I am concerned with is the work."

"Very true," agreed Ishvar. "That's what interests us also." His nephew scowled. After a while he tried again: Was there only one company or several different ones? Was she paid a commission, or a set price for the complete order?

Ishvar was embarrassed. "Less talk, Omprakash, and more sewing."

Now Dina longed for the silent nephew. She saw what he was after, and from that day made sure the material from Au Revoir Exports bore no signs of its origin. Labels and tags were torn off the packages if the telltale name was featured. Invoices were kept locked away in the cupboard. Cracks began appearing in her optimism as it tried to keep up with the tailors. She knew the road had turned bumpy.

* * * * *

THE DARJIS lived far, at the mercy of the railways. Still, Dina worried now if they were late, certain she had been deserted for better-paying jobs. And since she could not afford to let them suspect her fears, she always masked her relief upon their arrival with a show of displeasure.

A day before the due date, they did not come till ten o'clock.
"There was an accident, train was delayed," explained Ishvar.
"Some poor fellow dead on the tracks again."

"It's happening too often," said Omprakash.

The empty-stomach smell floating out their mouths, like a cocoon containing words, was unpleasant. She was not interested in their excuses. The sooner they were at their sewing-machines the better.

But silence on her part could be misconstrued as weakness, so she said, drily, "Under the Emergency, government says railway runs on time. Strange that your train keeps coming late."

"If government kept their promises, the gods would come down to garland them," said Ishvar, laughing with a placating circular nod.

His peace-offering amused her. She smiled, and he was relieved. As far as he was concerned, jeopardizing the steady income would be foolish—Omprakash and he were very fortunate to be working for Dina Dalal.

They pulled out their wooden stools, loaded fresh bobbins, and started to sew while the sky prepared to rain. The gloom of grey clouds infiltrated the back room. Omprakash hinted that the forty-watt bulb was too dim.

"If I exceed the monthly quota, my meter will be disconnected," she said. "Then we will be in total darkness."

Ishvar suggested moving the Singers to the front room, which was much brighter.

"Not possible. The machines will be seen from the street, and the landlord will make trouble. It is against the law to have a factory in the flat, even if it is only two sewing-machines. Already he harasses me for other reasons."

This the tailors understood. They too knew about landlords and harassment. Through the morning they worked steadily, with rumbling bellies, anticipating the midday break. They had eaten nothing since waking.

"Double tea for me today," said Omprakash. "And a butter-bun to dip."

"Pay attention to your machine," said Ishvar. "You will end up with double fingers instead of double tea." They both kept checking the clock. At the hour of deliverance, their feet left the treadles and sought out their sandals.

"Don't go now," said Dina. "This job is urgent, and you were late this morning. The manager will be very angry if the dresses are delayed." She was worried about the due date—what if they came late again tomorrow? Be firm, be strict, she reminded herself.

Ishvar hesitated; his nephew would not take the suggestion

kindly. His inquiring glance confirmed it, colliding with an angry glare.

"Let's go," muttered Omprakash without looking at Dina. "I'm hungry."

"Your nephew is always hungry," she said to Ishvar. "Has he got worms?"

"No no, Om is all right."

Dina was not convinced. The suspicion had crawled into her mind during the first week. Apart from Omprakash's skinniness and his constant complaints about headaches and hunger, she frequently spied his fingers relieving an itch in his fundament; and that, she felt, was evidence as conclusive as any.

"You should take him to doctor for checkup. He is so thin—a walking advertisement for Wimco Matches."

"No no, he is all right. And who has money for doctor?"

"Work hard and there will be plenty. Finish this job quickly," she coaxed. "The sooner I deliver it, the sooner you have your money."

"Five minutes for tea won't make a difference," snapped Omprakash.

"Your five always become thirty-five. Listen, *I* will make tea for you later. Special deluxe tea, not the overbrewed, bitter poison you get at the corner. But first finish the work. That way, everybody will be happy—you, me, the manager."

"Okay," Ishvar gave in, shaking off his sandals and resuming his place. The cast-iron treadle, warmed all morning by his feet, had not had time to cool.

With the two Singers racing again, Omprakash's angry whispers darted their way through the hammering needles to his uncle's ear. "You *always* let her bully us. I don't know what the matter is with you. Let *me* do the talking from now on."

Ishvar nodded mollifyingly. It embarrassed him to argue with Om or scold him within Dina's earshot.

At two o'clock, when the noise of the machines was making her temples throb, Dina decided to deliver what had been completed. She was annoyed with herself. Pleading and bribing

with tea was not a good example of a strict boss. It would take more practice, she concluded, to get used to bullying them. From under the worktable she retrieved the transparent plastic sheet and brown paper in which the bolts of cloth had arrived from Au Revoir. Remembering Shirin Aunty's advice, she wasted nothing. The little snippets of fabric continued to accumulate in great quantities. Enough, she thought, to make sanitary pads for a conventful of nuns. The larger scraps were collecting in a separate pile. She was not yet sure how to use these—for a quilt, perhaps.

She packaged the finished dresses and got her purse ready. To put in an appearance a day ahead of the deadline would impress Mrs. Gupta.

Then, keeping in mind Omprakash's inquisitiveness, she padlocked the door from outside, just in case he decided to follow her.

* * * * *

SORE-BOTTOMED and bleary-eyed, the tailors adjourned to the front room. After the morning-long hardness of wooden stools, the old sofa was sweet luxury despite its broken springs, and the pleasure keener because it was stolen. The stiff posture of their profession melted from their bones as they sank into the cushions. Raising their bare feet to the teapoy, they pulled out a packet of Ganesh Beedis and lit up, sucking greedily at the smoke. A torn-off segment of the beedi wrapper served as ashtray. Omprakash scratched his head and examined the dandruff harvested by his fingertips. With the inch-long nails of his pinkies he cleaned under the others, flicking the oily accretions to the floor. He would not have admitted he was bored—by wasting time he was outsmarting Dina Dalal. If she thought she could drive them like a pair of dumb oxen harnessed to her plough, she was mistaken. He still had his manhood, he thought bitterly, though his uncle sometimes behaved otherwise. Nephew idle away the hour. The rock of hunger lay heavy in both their hollow bellies. He watched amusedly as

Omprakash squirmed and snuggled in the cushions, determined to pilfer maximum pleasure from Dina Dalal's sofa. He meditatively fingered the cheek that kept half his smile imprisoned in frozen flesh.

Laughing, yawning, stretching, they smoked away the time, temporary kings of the broken sofa, masters of the tiny flat, when their illicit leisure was invaded by a battering at the front door. "I know you are in there!" shouted the visitor. "This padlock on the door does not fool me!"

The tailors froze. The pounding continued. "Paying the rent means nothing! We know what goes on behind the padlock! You and your illegal business will be thrown out on the street!"

The tailors understood—it had to do with the landlord. But what was this about a padlock? The banging at the door ceased. "Quick, on the floor!" whispered Ishvar, in case the door-banger decided to look through the window.

Something fell through the mail slot, then there was silence. They waited a few moments before venturing to the door. A large envelope addressed to Mrs. Rustom Dalal lay on the floor. Ishvar turned the latch. The door moved half an inch and hit the outside hasp, confirming the padlock's presence.

"She locked us in," fumed Omprakash. "That woman. What does she think?"

"Must be a reason for it. Don't get upset."

"Let's open her letter."

Ishvar snatched it from his hand and put it aside. They tried to get comfortable again on the cushions, lighting up new beedis, but the intrusion had soured the pleasure. The sofa's sagging comforts hardened into lumps of discontent. Stray threads clinging to their clothes reminded them of the work waiting in the back room. The clock displayed its baleful warning: she would soon be home. Soon, all of this prohibited behaviour would have to cease.

"She cheats us," grumbled Omprakash. "We should sew directly for the export company. Why does she have to be in the middle?"

His lips made small, careful movements that became words, his

smouldering beedi hanging in uneasy equilibrium at one corner of his mouth.

Ishvar smiled indulgently. The insolence of the dangling beedi was aimed, lethal as a toy gun, at Dina Dalal. "Soon as it's time for her to come, your face looks like you ate a sour lime."

He continued, his tone more serious, "She is in the middle because we have no shop. She lets us sew here, she brings the clothes, she gets the orders from the company. And besides, with piecework we have more independence—"

"Leave it, yaar. She treats us like slaves, and you talk of independence. Making money from our sweat without a single stitch from her fingers. Look at her house. With electricity, water, everything. And what do we have? A stinking shack in the slum. We'll never collect enough to go back to our village."

"Giving up already? That's no way to win in life. Fight and struggle, Om, even if life knocks you around." He held his beedi between ring and little finger and made a loose fist, raising it to his lips.

"I'll find out where she goes, you watch," said Omprakash with a defiant toss of his head.

"Your puff moves beautifully when you do that."

"Just wait, I'll get the address of the company."

"How? You think she will tell you?"

Omprakash went to the back room and returned with a pair of large pointed scissors. He clutched it with both hands and thrust theatrically into thin air. "Hold this at her throat and she will tell us whatever we want to know."

His uncle whacked him on the head. "What would your father say if he heard you? Stupid words pour from your mouth like stitches from your machine. And just as carelessly."

Omprakash sheepishly put back the scissors. "One of these days I'm going to cut her out of the middle—I'll follow her to the company."

"I didn't know you could walk through padlocked doors like the Great Goglia Pasha. Or is it Omprakash Pasha?" He paused to draw, then whiffed smoke through his nostrils and smiled at the scowling face. "Listen, my nephew, this is the way the world

works. Some people are in the middle, some are on the border. Patience is needed for dreams to grow and give fruit.”

“Patience is good when you want to grow a beard. For what she pays, we couldn’t afford the ghee and wood for our funeral pyre.” He gave his hair a ferocious scratching. “And why do you always talk to her in that silly tone, as though you were an ignorant fellow from the countryside?”

“Isn’t that what I am?” said Ishvar. “People like to feel superior. If my tone helps Dinabai to feel good, what’s wrong in that?” Savouring the final delights of his shrinking beedi, he repeated, “Patience, Om. Some things cannot be changed, you just have to accept them.”

“You want it both ways? First you said struggle, don’t give up. Now you are saying just accept it. Swaying from side to side, like a pot without an arse.”

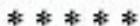
“Your grandmother Roopa used to say that,” laughed Ishvar.

“Make up your mind, yaar, choose one thing.”

“How can I? I’m just a human being,” he replied, laughing again. Halfway, it changed to coughing, shaking him harshly in its racking embrace. He went to the window, moved the curtain aside and spat. Were he close enough to examine it, he would have seen the usual spot of blood.

A taxi approached as he was withdrawing his head from the window. “Quick, she’s back!” he whispered hoarsely.

They began eliminating the traces of their bad behaviour: plumping the cushions, repositioning the teapoy, pocketing the matchsticks and ashes. A spark flew from the beedi in Omprakash’s mouth, as though to mock his earlier fire-breathing rage. He fanned it away from the upholstery. Drawing one last time at the beedis while running to the back room, they extinguished the stubs and chucked them out the rear window.



DINA PAID the taxi and felt inside her handbag for the key ring. The brass padlock, tarnished, hung grim and ponderous. She turned the key with a twinge of guilt, no jailer at heart.

Omprakash stretched out his arms and relieved her of the package. "I heard you arrive."

"There are lots more," she said, indicating the bundles of fabric piled outside the door. He looked them over, trying to spot the company name or address.

When everything had been brought inside, Ishvar gave her the envelope. "Someone came banging on the door, saying the padlock did not fool him. He left this for you."

"Must be the rent-collector." She put the letter aside without opening it. "Did he see you?"

"No, we stayed hidden."

"Good." She went to put away her purse and exchange her shoes for slippers.

"Did you lock us in when you left?" asked Ishvar. "Didn't you know? Yes, I had to." "Why?" pounced Omprakash. "You think we are thieves or something? We are going to take your possessions and run away?" "Don't be silly. What big possessions do I have to worry about? The landlord is the reason. He could barge in while I am gone and throw you out on the street. But if there is a lock, he won't dare. To break a padlock is to break the law."

"Very true," said Ishvar. He was eager to see the design for the new dresses. While his nephew glowered, the tablecloth was whipped off the dining table to make way for the paper patterns.

"How much per dress this time?" interrupted Omprakash, fingering the new poplin.

She ignored him while Ishvar moved the sections around. Like a child with a jigsaw puzzle, he was soon absorbed in its complexities. Omprakash tried again, "Very difficult pattern. Look at all the godets to be inserted for flaring the skirt. We will have to charge more this time, for sure."

"Stop doing your kutt-kutt," she scolded. "Let your elders work. Respect your uncle at least if you cannot respect me."

Ishvar matched the sections against the sample dress, talking to himself. "The sleeve, yes. And the back, with a seam in the middle—yes, it's easy." His nephew frowned at him for that admission.

"Yes, extremely easy," said Dina. "Simpler than the ones you just finished. And the good news is, they are still paying five rupees each."

"Not possible for five rupees," said Omprakash. "You said you would bring expensive dresses. This is not worth our time."

"I have to bring what the company gives. Or they will cancel us from their list."

"We will do it," said Ishvar. "To kick at wages is sinful."

"You do it, then—I cannot do it for five rupees," said Omprakash, but Ishvar nodded reassuringly at Dina.

She went to the kitchen to make the tea she had promised. The dissension in their midst was good; the uncle would curb the nephew's rebellion. She squinted at the cups and saucers, at their rose borders. Pink or red? Pink ones for the tailors, she decided, to be set aside with the segregated water glass. Red for myself. Waiting for the kettle, she checked the chicken wire over the broken windowpanes and found a breach. Those nuisance cats again, she fumed. Sneaking in, prowling for food, or to get out of the rain. And who knew what germs they brought with them from the gutters.

She reinforced the piece, twisting the corners around a nail. The kettle blurted its readiness with a healthy spout of steam. She held back for a vigorous boil, enjoying the thickening haze and the water's steady babble: the illusions of chatter, friendship, bustling life.

Reluctantly she turned down the flame, and the white cloud dissipated in desultory wisps. She filled three cups and carried in the two with pink roses.

"Ah," sighed Ishvar, taking the tea gratefully. Omprakash continued to sew without looking up, still sulking. She put it down beside him.

"I don't want any," he muttered. Dina returned wordlessly to the kitchen for her own cup.

"Delicious," said Ishvar when she was back. He slurped noisily, making sounds to tempt his nephew. "Much better than Vishram Vegetarian Hotel."

"They must be letting it boil all day," said Dina. "That spoils it. Nothing like fresh tea when you are tired."

"Very true." He took another sip and sighed invitingly again. Omprakash reached for his cup. The other two pretended not to notice. He gulped down the tea thirstily without displacing his angry pout.

Two hours of sewing were left in the day, and he filled them with crooked seams and grumbling. Ishvar was grateful to the clock when it indicated six. Keeping the peace between his nephew and Dinabai was becoming difficult.

* * * * *

MORNING WAS striding towards noon as Ibrahim, the rent-collector, plodding slowly down the pavement, prepared to visit Dina Dalal and demand a reply to the letter he had delivered yesterday. Dignified in his maroon fez and black sherwani, he smiled at tenants he met along the way, saying "Salaam" and "How are you?" He was blessed with an automatic smile; it formed whenever he opened his mouth to speak. This felicitous buccal trick was a liability, though, if the occasion of his message warranted something more in the line of a solemn visage—a touch of frowning, perhaps, for overdue rents.

Ibrahim was an elderly man but looked old beyond his years. In his left hand, still sore from pounding the door yesterday, he carried a plastic folder secured by two large rubber bands. It contained rent receipts, bills, orders for repairs, records of disputes and court cases pertaining to the six buildings he looked after. Some of those disputes dated back to when he was a young man of nineteen, just starting in service with the father of the present landlord. Other cases were more ancient, inherited from Ibrahim's predecessor.

So thoroughly was everything documented, Ibrahim sometimes felt he was lugging the very buildings around with him. The folder handed down almost half a century ago by the retiring rent-collector had not been of plastic, but rudely fashioned out of two wooden boards bound by a strip of morocco. It had carried

with it the previous owner's smell. A fraying cotton tape, sewn to the leather, went around to secure the contents. The dark, cracked boards had warped badly; when opened, they creaked and released a sweaty tobacco odour.

Young and ambitious as Ibrahim then was, he was ashamed of being seen with this relic. Though it contained nothing but respectable rent receipts, he knew that people would judge it by its cover, which resembled the filthy binders carried by disreputable marketplace jyotshis and fortune-tellers to shelter their quack charts and fake diagrams. That he might be mistaken for one of those odious mountebanks mortified him. He began to harbour grave doubts about this job which forced him to carry around a questionable folder—he felt shortchanged, as though a bazaar vendor had fiddled the weights and tipped the scales unfairly.

Then, on one lucky day, the morocco spine broke. He displayed the wreck at the landlord's office. The clerk examined it, confirmed its demise from natural causes, and filled out the appropriate requisition form. Ibrahim was given a length of string to make do while the paper-work was processed.

After a fortnight's delay, the new folder arrived. It was built of buckrammed cardboard, very smart and modern-looking, in colour a dignified umber. Ibrahim was delighted. He began to feel optimistic about his prospects in this job.

With the new folder under his arm, he could hold his head high and strut as importantly as a solicitor while making his rounds. It was far more sophisticated than the old one, with generous pouches and compartments. Briefs, complaints, correspondences could now be organized methodically. Which was just as well, because around this time Ibrahim's duties increased, both at work and domestically.

Ibrahim, the son of ageing parents, became a husband, then a father. And the role of rent-collector began to sprout branches too. He was appointed the landlord's spy, blackmailer, deliverer of threats, and all-round harasser of tenants. His job now included the uncovering of hidden dirt in his six buildings, secrets like extramarital affairs, and he was taught by his employer how to

convert adultery into rent increases—the guilty parties would never protest or dare to mention the Rent Act. When the situation demanded, Ibrahim could also play the pleader and cajoler, if the landlord went too far and there was legalistic retaliation. The rent-collector's tears would convince the tenant to back down, to have mercy on the poor beleaguered landlord, a martyr to modern-day housing, who had never meant any harm in the first place.

To sort out the multiple roles in Ibrahim's repertoire, the folder's pouches and compartments were indispensable. At this stage in his career, however, he began to feel the increasing hindrance of his sweet automatic smile. Delivering threats and dire warnings while smiling pleasantly, he discovered, was not a good strategy. If he could have modified it to a menacing smile, that would have been perfect. But the muscles in question were beyond his control. The occasions when he had to express regrets over repairs delayed, or convey condolences for a death in a tenant's family, were equally difficult. Before long, the burdensome dental display earned him an undeserved reputation for being callous, crude, incompetent, retarded, ~~and even demonic~~, the first, and added twenty-four years to his own frame. Twenty-four years of drudgery and deprivation during which his youth disappeared, and the bright ambition of his golden season became tainted by bitterness. Desperate, and scarred by the certain knowledge that he no longer had any prospects, he watched his wife, two sons, and two daughters still believing in him and thereby increasing his anguish. He asked himself what it was he had done to deserve a life so stale, so empty of hope. Or was this the way all humans were meant to feel? Did the Master of the Universe take no interest in levelling the scales—was there no such thing as a fair measure?

There no longer seemed any point in going to the masjid as often as he did. His attendance at Friday prayers became irregular. And he began seeking guidance in ways he had once despised as the preserve of the ignorant.

He found the jyotshis and fortune-tellers in the marketplace

most comforting. They offered solutions to his money problems, and advice on improving his future, which was becoming his past at an alarming velocity. He discovered their confident pronouncements to be a soothing drug.

Nor did he restrict himself to palmists and astrologers. Seeking stronger drugs, he turned to less orthodox messengers: card-picking doves, chart-reading parrots, communicating cows, diagram-divining snakes. Always worried that an acquaintance would spot him during one of his questionable excursions, he decided, with great reluctance, to leave behind his distinctive fez. It was like abandoning a dear friend. The only other time he had forsaken this fixture of daily wear was during Partition, back in 1947, when communal slaughter at the brand-new border had ignited riots everywhere, and sporting a fez in a Hindu neighbourhood was as fatal as possessing a foreskin in a Muslim one. In certain areas it was wisest to go bareheaded, for choosing incorrectly from among fez, white cap, and turban could mean losing one's head.

Fortunately, his sittings at the avian auguries were relatively private. He could crouch unnoticed on a pavement corner with the creature's keeper, ask the question, and the dove or parrot would hop out of its cage to enlighten him.

The cow session, on the other hand, was a major performance that collected large crowds. The cow, caparisoned in colourful brocaded fabrics, a string of tiny silver bells round her neck, was led into the ring of spectators by a man with a drum. Though the fellow's shirt and turban were bright-hued, he seemed quite drab compared to the richly bedizened cow. The two walked the circle: once, twice, thrice—however long it took him to recite the cow's curriculum vitae, with special emphasis on prophecies and forecasts accurately completed to date. His voice was deafeningly raucous, his eyes bloodshot, his gestures manic, and all this frenzy was calculated as a masterly counterpoint to the cow's calm demeanour. After the brief biography was narrated, the drum that had silently hung from his shoulder came to life. It was a drum meant not for beating but for rubbing. He continued to walk the cow in a circle, rubbing the drumskin with a stick,

producing a horrible bleating, a groaning, a wailing. It was a sound to wake the dead and stun the living, it was eldritch, it was a summons to spirits and forces not of this world, a summons to descend, witness, and assist bovine divination.

When the drum ceased, the man shouted the paying customer's question into the cow's ear, loud enough for the entire ring of humans to hear. And she answered with a nod or shake of her intricately made-up head, tinkling the tiny silver bells round her neck. The crowd applauded in wonder and admiration. Then the drum-rubbing resumed while donations were collected.

One day, after Ibrahim's question was bellowed into the soft, brown, unprotected ear, there was no response. The man repeated it, louder. This time the cow reacted. Whether it was the annoying drum that she had put up with for years, or the boorish bellowing in her ear day after day, she gored her keeper with her vermillioned horns.

For a moment, the spectators thought the cow was just responding a bit more energetically than usual to the question. Then she tossed him to the ground, trampling him thoroughly. Now they realized it was not part of the prophecy procedure, especially when the man's blood started to flow.

With cries of mad cow! mad cow! the crowd scattered. But once her tormentor had been dealt with, she stood placidly, blinking her gentle, long-lashed eyes, swishing away the udder-seeking flies with her tail.

The man's bizarre death convinced Ibrahim that this was no longer a reliable method of obtaining divine advice. Some days later a new team of cow and drum-rubber took over the corner, but Ibrahim avoided the performances. There were other, safer systems for procuring preternatural help.

While the mad-cow incident was still fresh in his mind, however, he witnessed another death. This time it was the handler of a sortilegious serpent whose venom ducts had become overdue for milking. Ever after, Ibrahim shivered when picturing the scene: it could have been into him that the cobra sank its fangs, for he had been crouching close to observe its oracular movements.

Shocked by the two fatalities, the rent-collector abandoned all

fortune-telling fauna. As though waking from a nightmare, he redonned his forsaken fez and set out to recover his lost self. How much money had been diverted from his family's needs with his blasphemous addiction, he realized, as he sat beside the sea while the setting sun's ocean light bathed the masjid, floating at the end of the long causeway. He gazed out upon the receding tide that lay bare the secrets beneath the waves, and he shuddered. His own dark secrets swam up again from their murky depths of confusion and despair. He tried to push them back, to hold them under, to drown them. But they kept slipping away like eels, resurfacing to haunt him. There was only one way to vanquish them—he returned penitent to the masjid, ready to accept whatever fate had in store for him.

Among other things, it was the plastic folder. Twenty-four years of buckram had passed, and now it was the age of plastic in the landlord's office. Ibrahim no longer cared. He had learned that dignity could not be acquired from accoutrements and accessories; it came unasked, it grew from one's ability to endure. If the office had handed him a coolie's basket to carry the documents around on his head, he would have complied now ~~without complaint~~. The plastic folder did have an advantage—it kept the monsoon at bay. Now he seldom had to recopy documents on which the ink had decided to frolic with the rain in lunatic swirls. At a time when his hands had started to shake, this was a blessing. Also, one pass with a wet rag, and all sneezes and snuff stains, pea green or brown, were wiped clean, no longer embarrassing him during audiences with the landlord.

And at home, too, there were changes he accepted with submission. After all, what other options were there? His older daughter died of tuberculosis, followed by his wife. Then his sons disappeared into the underworld, returning periodically to abuse him. The remaining daughter, just when he was beginning to think she would redeem everything, left to become a prostitute. His life, he thought, had become the plot of a bad Hindi movie minus the happy ending.

Why, he wondered, did he keep working now, making his rounds of the six buildings and collecting rent? Why did he not

jump off the top of one of them? Why did he not make a bonfire of the receipts and the cash, and throw himself onto it drenched in kerosene? How was it that his heart kept beating instead of bursting, his sanity intact instead of shattering like a dropped mirror? Was it all made of tough synthetic material, like the indestructible plastic folder? And why was time, the great vandal, now being neglectful?

But plastic, too, had its allotted span of days and years. It could rip and tear and crack like buckram, he discovered. Like skin and bone, he realized with relief. It was simply a matter of patience. Thus the present folder was the third of its kind in twenty-one years.

He examined it from time to time, and saw reflected in its tired covers the furrows inflicted in his brow. The plastic divisions inside were starting to tear, and the neat compartments seemed ready to rebel; within his bodily compartments the rebellion had already begun. Which one would win this ridiculous race between plastic and flesh, he wondered, as he arrived at the flat, wiped the snuff off his nostrils and fingers, and rang the doorbell.

Spotting his maroon fez through the peephole, Dina silenced the tailors. "Not a sound while he is here," she whispered.

"How are you?" smiled the rent-collector, baring heavily stained teeth and two gaps: the sweet, innocent smile of an aged angel.

Without acknowledging his greeting, she said, "Yes? The rent is not yet due."

He shifted the folder to the other hand. "No, sister, it isn't. I have come for your reply to the landlord's letter."

"I see. Wait one minute." She shut the door and went to look for the unopened envelope. "Where did I put it?" she whispered to the tailors.

The three searched through the jumble of things on the table.

She found herself watching Omprakash, the way his fingers clutched and his hands moved. His bony angularity no longer disturbed her. She was discovering a rare birdlike beauty in him.

Ishvar came upon the envelope under a stack of cloth. She tore it open and read—quickly, the first time, then slowly, to penetrate the legal jargon. The gist of it soon became clear: the running of

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a business was prohibited on residential premises, she must cease her commercial activities immediately or face eviction.

Cheeks flushing, she raced to the door. "What kind of nonsense is this? Tell your landlord his harassment won't work!"

Ibrahim sighed, lifted his shoulders, and raised his voice. "You have been warned, Mrs. Dala! Breaking the rules will not be tolerated! Next time there will be no nice letter but a notice to vacate! Don't think that—"

She slammed the door. He stopped shouting immediately, relieved to be spared the full speech. Panting, he wiped his brow and left.

Dina read the letter again, dismayed. Barely three weeks with the tailors and trouble already with the landlord. She wondered if she should show it to Nusswan, ask his advice. No, she decided, he would make too much of it. Better to ignore it and continue discreetly.

She had no choice now but to take the tailors further into her confidence, impress on them how essential it was to keep the sewing a secret. She discussed the matter with Ishvar.

They agreed on the fiction to be used if the rent-collector ever confronted the two coming to or going from the flat. They would tell him that they came to do her cooking and cleaning.

* * * * *

OMPRAKASH was insulted. "I am a tailor, not her maaderchod servant who sweeps and mops," he said after they left work that evening.

"Don't be childish, Om. It's just a story to prevent trouble with the landlord."

"Trouble for whom? For her. Why should I worry? We don't even get a fair rate from her. If we are dead tomorrow, she will get two new tailors."

"Will you forever speak without thinking? If she is kicked out of her flat, we have no place to work. What's the matter with you? This is our first decent job since we came to the city."

"And I should rejoice for that? Is this job going to make everything all right for us?"

"But it's only been three weeks. Patience, Om. There is lots of opportunity in the city, you can make your dreams come true."

"I am sick of the city. Nothing but misery ever since we came. I wish I had died in our village. I wish I had also burned to death like the rest of my family."

Ishvar's face clouded, his disfigured cheek quivering with his nephew's pain. He put his arm around his shoulder. "It will get better, Om," he pleaded. "Believe me, it will get better. And we'll soon go back to our village."

III

In a Village by a River

In their village, the tailors used to be cobblers; that is, their family belonged to the Chamaar caste of tanners and leather-workers. But long ago, long before Omprakash was born, when his father, Narayan, and his uncle, Ishvar, were still young boys of ten and twelve, the two were sent by their father to be apprenticed as tailors.

Their father's friends feared for the family. "Dukhi Mochi has gone mad," they lamented. "With wide-open eyes he is bringing destruction upon his household." And consternation was general throughout the village: someone had dared to break the timeless chain of caste, retribution was bound to be swift.

Dukhi Mochi's decision to turn his sons into tailors was indeed courageous, considering that the prime of his own life had been spent in obedient compliance with the traditions of the caste system. Like his forefathers before him, he had accepted from childhood the occupation preordained for his present incarnation.

Dukhi Mochi was five years old when he had begun to learn the Chamaar vocation at his father's side. With a very small Muslim population in the area, there was no slaughterhouse nearby where the Chamaars could obtain hides. They had to wait until a cow or buffalo died a natural death in the village. Then the Chamaars would be summoned to remove the carcass. Sometimes the carcass was given free, sometimes they had to pay, depending on whether or not the animal's upper-caste owner had been able to extract enough free labour from the Chamaars during the year.

The Chamaars skinned the carcass, ate the meat, and tanned the hide, which was turned into sandals, whips, harnesses, and waterskins. Dukhi learned to appreciate how dead animals provided his family's livelihood. And as he mastered the skills, imperceptibly but relentlessly Dukhi's own skin became impregnated with the odour that was part of his father's smell, the leather-worker's stink that would not depart even after he had washed and scrubbed in the all-cleansing river.

Dukhi did not realize his pores had imbibed the fumes till his mother, hugging him one day, wrinkled her nose and said, her

voice a mix of pride and sorrow, “You are becoming an adult, my son, I can sniff the change.”

For a while afterwards, he was constantly lifting his forearm to his nose to see if the odour still lingered. He wondered if flaying would get rid of it. Or did it go deeper than skin? He pricked himself to smell his blood but the test was inconclusive, the little ruby at his fingertip being an insufficient sample. And what about muscle and bone, did the stink lurk in them too? Not that he wanted it gone; he was happy then to smell like his father.

Besides tanning and leather-working, Dukhi learned what it was to be a Chamaar, an untouchable in village society. No special instruction was necessary for this part of his education. Like the filth of dead animals which covered him and his father as they worked, the ethos of the caste system was smeared everywhere. And if that was not enough, the talk of adults, the conversations between his mother and father, filled the gaps in his knowledge of the world.

The village was by a small river, and the Chamaars were permitted to live in a section downstream from the Brahmins and landowners. In the evening, Dukhi’s father sat with the other Chamaar men under a tree in their part of the settlement, smoking, talking about the day that was ending and the new one that would dawn tomorrow. Bird cries fluttered around their chitchat. Beyond the bank, cooking smoke signalled hungry messages while upper-caste waste floated past on the sluggish river.

Dukhi watched from a distance, waiting for his father to come home. As the dusk deepened, the men’s outlines became vague. Soon Dukhi could see only the glowing tips of their beedis, darting around like fire-flies with the movement of their hands. Then the burning tips went dark, one by one, and the men dispersed. Dukhi’s father ate, he repeated for his wife everything he had learned that day. “The Pandit’s cow is not healthy. He is trying to sell it before it dies.”

“Who gets it if it dies? Is it your turn yet?”

“No, it is Bhola’s turn. But where he was working, they accused

him of stealing. Even if the Pandit lets him have the carcass, he will need my help—they chopped off his left-hand fingers today.”

“Bhola is lucky,” said Dukhi’s mother. “Last year Chhagan lost his hand at the wrist. Same reason.”

Dukhi’s father took a drink of water and swirled it around in his mouth before swallowing. He ran the back of his hand across his lips. “Dosu got a whipping for getting too close to the well. He never learns.” Eating in silence for a while, he listened to the frogs bellowing in the humid night, then asked his wife, “You are not having anything?”

“It’s my fasting day.” In her code, it meant there wasn’t enough food.

Dukhi’s father nodded, taking another mouthful. “Have you seen Buddhu’s wife recently?”

She shook her head. “Not since many days.”

“And you won’t for many more. She must be hiding in her hut. She refused to go to the field with the zamindar’s son, so they shaved her head and walked her naked through the square.”

Thus Dukhi listened every evening to his father relate the unembellished facts about events in the village. During his childhood years, he mastered a full catalogue of the real and imaginary crimes a low-caste person could commit, and the corresponding punishments were engraved upon his memory. By the time he entered his teens, he had acquired all the knowledge he would need to perceive that invisible line of caste he could never cross, to survive in the village like his ancestors, with humiliation and forbearance as his constant companions.



SOON AFTER Dukhi Mochi turned eighteen, his parents married him to a Chamaar girl named Roopa, who was fourteen. She gave birth to three daughters during their first six years together. None survived beyond a few months.

Then they had a son, and the families rejoiced greatly. The child was called Ishvar, and Roopa watched over him with the special ardour and devotion she had learned was reserved for male

children. She made sure he always had enough to eat. Going hungry herself was a matter of course—that she often did even to keep Dukhi fed. But for this child she did not hesitate to steal either. And there was not a mother she knew who would not have taken the same risk for her own son.

After her milk went dry, Roopa began nocturnal visits to the cows of various landowners. While Dukhi and the child slept, she crept out of the hut with a small brass haandi, some time between midnight and cock-crow. The pitch-black path she walked without stumbling had been memorized during the day, for a lamp was too dangerous. The darkness brushed her cheeks like a cobweb. Sometimes the cobwebs were real.

She took only a little from each cow; thus, the owner would not sense a decrease in the yield. When Dukhi saw the milk in the morning, he understood. If he awoke in the night as she was leaving, he said nothing, and lay shivering till she returned. He often wondered whether he should offer to go instead.

Soon Ishvar cut his milk teeth, and Roopa began to pay weekly visits to orchards in season and ready for harvest. In the darkness, her fingers felt the fruit for ripeness before plucking it. Again, she restricted herself to a few from each tree, so their absence would not be noticed. Around her, the dark was filled with the sound of her own breathing and little creatures scurrying out of her way to safety.

One night, as she was filling her sack with oranges, a lantern was suddenly raised amid the trees. In a small clearing a man sat on his bamboo-and-string cot, watching her. I'm finished, she thought, dropping her sack and preparing to run.

"Don't be afraid," said the man. He spoke softly, his hand gripping a heavy stick. "I don't care if you take some." She turned around, panting with fear, wondering whether to ~~before~~ pick a few," he repeated, smiling. "I have been hired by the owner to watch the grove. But I don't care. He is a rich bastard."

Roopa retrieved the sack nervously and resumed picking. Her shaking fingers dropped an orange as she tried to slip it past the mouth of the sack. She glanced over her shoulder. His eyes were

greedily following her body; it made her uneasy. "I'm grateful to you," she said.

He nodded. "You are lucky I am here, and not some bad man. Go on, take as many as you like." He hummed something tunelessly. It sounded like a mixture of groans and sighs. He gave up the humming, trying to whistle the tune. The results were equally unmusical. He yawned and fell silent but continued to watch her.

Roopa decided she had enough fruit, it was time to thank him and leave. Reading her movements, he said, "One shout from me and they will come running."

"What?" She saw his smile disappear suddenly.

"I only have to shout, and the owner and his sons would be here at once. They would strip you and whip you for stealing."

She trembled, and the smile returned to his face. "Don't worry, I won't shout." She fastened the mouth of the sack, and he continued, "After whipping you, they would probably show you disrespect, and stain your honour. They would take turns doing shameful things to your lovely soft body."

Roopa joined her hands in thanks and farewell.

"Don't go yet, take as many as you want," he said.

"Thank you, I have enough."

"You are sure? I can easily give you more if you like." He put down his stick and got up from his cot.

"Thank you, this is enough."

"Is it? But wait, you cannot go just like that," he said with a laugh. "You haven't given me anything in return." He walked towards her.

Stepping back, she forced a laugh too. "I don't have anything. That's why I came here in the night, for the sake of my child."

"You have got something." He put out his hand and squeezed her left breast. She struck his hand away. "I only have to shout once," he warned, and slipped his hand inside her blouse. She shuddered at the touch, doing nothing this time.

He led her cringing to the cot and ripped open her top three buttons. She crossed her arms in front. He pulled them down and buried his mouth in her breasts, laughing softly as she tried to

squirm away. "I gave you so many oranges. You won't even let me taste your sweet mangoes?"

"Please let me go."

"Soon as I have fed you my Bhojpuri brinjal. Take off your clothes."

"I beg you, let me go." "I only have to shout once." She wept softly while undressing, and lay down as he instructed. She continued to weep during the time he moved and panted on top of her. She heard the breeze rustle the leaves in trees that stood like worthless sentinels. A dog howled, setting off others in a chorus. Coconut oil in the man's hair left streaks on her face and neck, and smeared her chest. Its odour was strong in her nostrils. Minutes later, he rolled off her body. Roopa grabbed her clothes and the sack of oranges and ran naked through the orange grove. When she was certain he wasn't following, she stopped and put her clothes on.

Dukhi pretended to be asleep as she entered the hut. He heard her muffled sobs several times during the night, and knew, from her smell, what had happened to her while she was gone. He felt the urge to go to her, speak to her, comfort her. But he did not know what words to use, and he also felt afraid of learning too much. He wept silently, venting his shame, anger, humiliation in tears; he wished he would die that night.

In the morning Roopa behaved as if nothing had occurred. So Dukhi said nothing, and they ate the oranges.

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TWO YEARS after Ishvar was born, Roopa and Dukhi had another son. This one was named Narayan. There was a dark-red mark on his chest, and an elderly neighbour who assisted Roopa during the birth said she had seen such a mark before. "It means he has a brave and generous heart. This child will make you very proud."

The news of a second son created envy in upper-caste homes where marriages had also taken place around the time Dukhi and Roopa were wed, but where the women were still childless or

awaiting a male issue. It was hard for them not to be resentful—the birth of daughters often brought them beatings from their husbands and their husbands' families. Sometimes they were ordered to discreetly get rid of the newborn. Then they had no choice but to strangle the infant with her swaddling clothes, poison her, or let her starve to death.

“What is happening to the world?” they complained. “Why two sons in an untouchable’s house, and not even one in ours?” What could a Chamaar pass on to his sons that the gods should reward him thus? Something was wrong, the Law of Manu had been subverted. Someone in the village had definitely committed an act to offend the deities, surely some special ceremonies were needed to appease the gods and fill these empty vessels with male fruit.

But one of the childless wives had a more down-to-earth theory to explain their unborn sons. It could be, she said, that these two boys were not really Dukhi’s. Perhaps the Chamaar had journeyed afar and kidnapped a Brahmin’s newborns—this would explain everything.

When the rumours started to spread, Dukhi feared for his family’s safety. As a precaution, he went out of his way to be obsequious. Every time he saw high-caste persons on the road, he prostrated abjectly, but at a safe distance—so he couldn’t be accused of contaminating them with his shadow. His moustache was shaved off even though its length and shape had conformed to caste rules, its tips humbly drooping downwards unlike proud upper-caste moustaches that flourished skywards. He dressed himself and the children in the filthiest rags he could find among their meagre possessions. To avoid charges of pollution, he told Roopa not to appear anywhere in the vicinity of the village well; her friend Padma fetched their drinking water. Whatever task Dukhi was ordered to do, he did without questioning, without thought of payment, keeping his eyes averted from the high-caste face and fixed safely on the feet. He knew that the least annoyance someone felt towards him could be fanned into flames to devour his family.

Fortunately, the majority of the upper castes were content to

wax philosophic about the problem of fallow wombs and leave it at that. They said it was obvious the world was passing through Kaliyug, through the Age of Darkness, and sonless wives were not the only aberration in the cosmic order. "Witness the recent drought," they said. "A drought that came even though we performed all the correct pujas. And when the rains fell, they fell in savage torrents; remember the floods, the huts that were washed away. And what about the two-headed calf in the neighbouring district?"

No one in the village had seen the two-headed calf, for the distance was great, and it was not possible to make the journey and return by nightfall to the safety of their huts. But they had all heard about the monstrous birth. "Yes, yes," they agreed. "The Pandits are absolutely correct. It is Kaliyug that is the cause of our troubles."

The remedy, the Pandits advised, was to be more vigilant in the observance of the dharmic order. There was a proper place for everyone in the world, and as long as each one minded his place, they would endure and emerge unharmed through the Darkness of Kaliyug. But if there were transgressions—if the order was polluted—then there was no telling what calamities might befall the universe.

After this consensus was reached, the village saw a sharp increase in the number of floggings meted out to members of the untouchable castes, as the Thakurs and Pandits tried to whip the world into shape. The crimes were varied and imaginative: a Bhunghi had dared to let his unclean eyes meet Brahmin eyes; a Chamaar had walked on the wrong side of the temple road and defiled it; another had strayed near a puja that was in progress and allowed his undeserving ears to overhear the sacred shlokhas; a Bhunghi child had not erased her footprints cleanly from the dust in a Thakur's courtyard after finishing her duties there—her plea that her broom was worn thin was unacceptable.

Dukhi contributed some of his skin, too, in wrestling the universe out of the clutches of Darkness. He was summoned to graze a herd of goats. The owner was going to be away from the village during the day. "Watch them carefully," said the man,

"especially that one with the broken horn and long beard. He is a real devil." A glass of goat's milk was promised in return for the work.

Dukhi spent the morning minding the herd, dreaming about the pleasure Ishvar and Narayan would get from the milk. But as the day wore on and the afternoon grew hot, he fell asleep. The scrabbling animals strayed onto a neighbour's property. When the owner returned in the evening, instead of a glass of goat's milk, Dukhi got a thrashing.

It was a small price to pay, he felt, considering what the consequence might have been had it taken the man's fancy. That night, Roopa crept out to steal butter to apply to the welts raised on her husband's back and shoulders.

Butter was something Roopa could steal without a second thought. In fact, she did not even consider it stealing. After all, hadn't Lord Krishna himself made a full-time job of it during his adolescence, aeons ago, in Mathura?

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AT THE APPROPRIATE age, Dukhi began teaching his sons the skills of the trade to which they were born shackled. Ishvar was seven when he was taken to his first dead animal. Narayan wanted to go as well, but Dukhi said it was not time for him, he was still too young. He promised the child that he would be allowed to help with tasks like salting the skin, scraping off hair and bits of rotten flesh with a dull knife, and collecting the fruit of the myrobalan tree to tan the hide. This cheered Narayan up.

Dukhi and Ishvar arrived with a few other Chamaars at Thakur Premji's farm, and were taken to the field where the buffalo lay. An egret was perched on the dark mound, picking insects from the skin. It flew off when the men approached. Clouds of flies buzzed over the animal.

"Is it dead?" asked Dukhi. "Of course it's dead," said the Thakur's man. "You think we can afford to give away live cattle?" Shaking his head and

muttering about the stupidity of these achhoot jatis, he left them to their work.

Dukhi and his friends positioned their cart behind the buffalo; a wooden plank was sloped from the cartbed to the animal. They grabbed its legs and began inching its hulk up the plank, keeping the wood wet so the weight might slide a little more readily.

"Look!" said one of them. "It's alive, it's breathing!"

"Aray Chhotu, not so loud," said Dukhi. "Or they won't let us take it. Anyway, it's almost dead—a few more hours at best." They resumed the task, sweating and grunting, while Chhotu cursed the Thakur softly. "Bastard hypocrite. Making us break our backs. Would be so much easier to kill it, skin the carcass right here, chop it into small hunks."

"That's true," said Dukhi. "But how can Mr. High-Caste Shit permit that? The purity of his land would be spoilt."

"The only thing high caste about him is his little meat-eating lund," said Chhotu. "It feeds on his wife's high-caste choot every night."

The men chuckled, then renewed their efforts. Someone said, "He has been seen in the town once a week. Gobbling chicken, mutton, beef, whatever he likes."

"They are all like that," said Dukhi. "Vegetarian in public, meat-eaters in private. Come on, push!"

Ishvar paid close attention to the men's conversation, joining in the effort with his little hands, as the men encouraged him. "Now we will succeed! Push, Ishvar, push! Harder, harder!"

Amid the joking and cursing and teasing, the buffalo suddenly came alive, raising its head one last time before expiring. The adults shouted in surprise and jumped back to avoid the horns. But the tip caught Ishvar's left cheek, stunning him. He collapsed.

Dukhi grabbed the boy in his arms and began running to his hut. His legs swallowed the distance in urgent gulps. The stunted noonday shadow of their joined figures clung faithfully to his heels. Sweat poured from his brow, sprinkling his son's face. Ishvar stirred then, and his tongue emerged and tasted his father's salt at his lips. Dukhi breathed easier, heartened by the sign of life.

"Hai Bhagwan!" screamed Roopa when she saw her bleeding son. "Aray father-of-Ishvar, what did you do to my child! What-all was the big rush to take him today? Such a little boy! You couldn't wait till he was older?"

"He is seven," Dukhi answered quietly. "My father took me at five."

"That's a reason? And if you were injured and killed at five, you would do the same to your son?"

"If I were killed at five, I wouldn't have a son," said Dukhi, even more quietly. He went out to collect the leaves that would heal the wound, and chopped them very fine, till they were almost a paste. Then he returned to work.

Roopa bathed the gash and wrapped the dark-green ointment over it. Afterwards, when she was calmer, her fury at Dukhi subsided. She tied protective amulets to her children's arms, reasoning that it was the evil eye of the Brahmin women that had hurt Ishvar.

And the childless women were also reassured: the universe was returning to normal; the untouchable boy was no longer fair of face but disfigured, which was as it should be.

Dukhi came home in the evening and lowered himself to the floor in the corner which was his eating place. Ishvar and Narayan snuggled close to him, enjoying the smell of the beedi smoke that clung to his breath, temporarily diluting the stench of hides and tannin and offal. The fragrance of the baking dough made them hungry, as Roopa rolled out fresh chapatis.

The wound festered for a few days before starting to heal, and soon there was no cause for worry. The injury, however, left that part of Ishvar's face forever frozen. His father said, trying to make light of it, "God wants my son to cry only half as much as other mortals."

He preferred to overlook the fact that Ishvar's smile, too, could only be smiled with half his face.



THE YEARthat Ishvar turned ten and Narayan eight, the rainfall

was excellent. Dukhi struggled through the monsoon months, scrounging armfuls of thatch to keep the hut from leaking. The fields recovered from the drought and the cattle grew healthy. Dukhi waited in vain for animals to die and yield their hides.

As the fine weather continued, promising a bountiful crop for the zamindars, for the landless untouchables it was a bleak season. There would be work for them when the harvest was ready, but till then they had to depend on charity or the paltry scraps of toil thrown their way at the discretion of the landlords.

After several idle days, Dukhi was grateful to be sent for by Thakur Premji. He was led to the back of the house, where a sack of dry red chillies was waiting to be ground into powder. "Can you finish that by sunset?" asked Thakur Premji. "Or maybe I should call two men."

Reluctant to share whatever slim reward was to come his way, Dukhi said, "Don't worry, Thakurji, it will all be done before the sun disappears." He filled the massive stone mortar with chillies and selected one of the three long, heavy pestles lying by it. He began pounding vigorously, smiling frequently at the Thakur, who stayed to watch for a while.

Dukhi slowed down after he left. The rapid rhythm could only be maintained when there were three people at the mortar, delivering the pestles in succession. By lunchtime he had finished half the sack, and stopped to eat. Looking around to see if anyone was watching, he reached into the mortar and sprinkled a pinch of chilli powder on his chapati. He was just in time, for the Thakur sent his man out with a can of water.

It was late in the afternoon, when the sack was almost empty, that the accident occurred. Without warning, as the pestle landed and rebounded the way it had been doing all day, the mortar split cleanly in two and collapsed. One side landed on Dukhi's left foot and crushed it.

The Thakur's wife was watching from the kitchen window. "Ojee, my husband! Come quick!" she screamed. "The Chamaar donkey has destroyed our mortar!"

Her screams roused Thakur Premji, drowsing under the awning at the front of the house, cradling a grandchild in his arms. He

passed the sleeping infant to a servant and ran to the back. Dukhi was sprawled on the ground, trying to bandage his bleeding foot with the cloth he normally wrapped around his head like a brief turban.

“What have you done, you witless animal! Is this what I hired you for?”

Dukhi looked up. “Forgive me, Thakurji, I did not do anything to it. There must have been a flaw in the stone.”

“Liar!” He raised his stick threateningly. “First breaking it, then lying to me on top! If you did nothing, how can it break? A big thing of solid stone! Is it made of glass to shatter just like that?”

“I swear on the heads of my children,” begged Dukhi, “I was only pounding chillies, as I have done all day. Look, Thakurji, the sack is almost empty, the work—”

“Get up! Leave my land at once! I never want to see you again!”

“But Thakurji, the work—”

He hit Dukhi across the back with his stick. “Get up, I said! And get out!”

Dukhi rose to his feet, limping backwards, out of reach.

“Thakurji, have pity, there has been no work for days, I don’t—”

The Thakur lashed out wildly. “Listen, you stinking dog! You have destroyed my property, yet I am letting you off! If I wasn’t such a softhearted fool, I would hand you to the police for your crime. Now get out!” He continued to swing the stick.

Dukhi dodged, but could not move quickly enough with his injured foot. Several blows found their mark before he had slipped through the gate. He hobbled home, cursing the Thakur and his progeny.



“LEAVE ME alone,” he hissed in response to Roopa’s fearful inquiries. When she persisted, clinging to his side, begging to be allowed to examine his damaged foot, he struck her. Angry and humiliated, he sat silent in the hut all evening. Ishvar and Narayan were frightened; they had never seen their father like this. Afterwards, he let Roopa clean and bandage the wound, and

ate the food she brought him, but still he refused to talk. "You will feel better if you tell me," she said.

Two days later he told her, his bitterness overflowing like the foul ooze from his foot. He had not minded when he had been beaten that time for the straying goats. It had been his fault, he had fallen asleep. But this time he had done nothing wrong. he had worked hard all day, yet he had been thrashed and cheated of his payment. "On top of that, my foot is crushed," he said. "I could kill that Thakur. Nothing but a lowly thief. And they are all like that. They treat us like animals. Always have, from the days of our forefathers."

"Shh," she said. "It's not good for the boys to hear such things. It was just bad luck, the mortar breaking, that's all."

"I spit in their upper-caste faces. I don't need their miserable jobs from now on."

After his foot had healed, Dukhi turned his back on the village. He left at dawn and arrived in town before noon, getting rides in bullock carts and a lorry. He selected a street corner where there were no other cobblers nearby. With his metal last, awl, hammer, nails, cleats, and leather patches arranged in a semicircle around him, he settled upon the pavement and waited to mend the footwear of town dwellers.

Shoes, moccasins, slippers tramped past in a variety of designs and colours which intrigued and worried him. If one of them chose to stop, would he be capable of doing the repairs? It all seemed more complicated than the simple sandals he was used to.

After a while someone halted before Dukhi, shook the chappal off his right foot, and pointed at its broken cross straps with his big toe. "How much for fixing that?"

Dukhi picked it up and turned it over. "Two annas."

"Two annas? Are you paagal or something? I might as well buy new chappals if I am going to pay a mochi like you two annas."

"Aray sahab, who will give you new chappals for two annas?"

They haggled for a bit, then settled for one anna. Dukhi scraped the soles to expose the groove in which the broken stitches sat. The grime flaked off in large flat crusts. He decided there was no

difference between village grime and town grime, it looked and smelled the same.

He inserted the straps in their slits and secured them with a row of new stitches. Before trying on the chappal, the man tugged at the repair work. He took trial steps, wiggled his toes around, grunted his approval and paid.

Six hours and five customers later, it was time to start back. Dukhi made a few purchases with the money—a little flour, three onions, four potatoes, two hot green chillies—then took the homeward road. Traffic was sparser than in the morning. He walked a long time before getting a ride. It was night when he reached the village. Roopa and the children were waiting anxiously for him.

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AFTER A FEW days at the street corner, Dukhi saw striding towards him on the pavement his friend Ashraf. “I didn’t know you were cobbling in my neighbourhood,” said Ashraf, surprised to see him.

Ashraf was the Muslim tailor in town. He was Dukhi’s age, and it was to him that Dukhi used to go on the rare occasions when he could afford to get something for Roopa or the children—the Hindu tailor did not sew for untouchables.

Learning about Dukhi’s misfortunes in the village, Ashraf asked, “Would you like to try something different? Something which might pay more?”

“Where?”

“Come with me.”

He gathered up his implements and hurried away with Ashraf. They walked to the other side of town, across the railway line, to the lumberyard. There, Dukhi was introduced to Ashraf’s uncle, who managed the place.

From now on, there was always work for him at the yard: loading and unloading lorries, or helping to make deliveries. Dukhi greatly preferred the labour of lifting and carrying, walking upright among men, instead of crouching all day on the pavement,

conducting conversations with strangers' feet. And the fragrance of fresh wood was a welcome respite from the stench of filthy footwear.

One morning, on his way to the lumberyard, Dukhi saw a lot of traffic. The bullock cart he rode in was swallowed by clouds of dust. It had to often pull over to the side, and once, when a large bus passed, ended almost in the ditch.

"What is happening?" he asked the cart-driver. "Where are they all going?" The man shrugged, concentrating on getting his bullock back on the road. His prod failed to get results, and the two men had to jump off and help the animal.

On arriving in town, Dukhi saw the streets festooned with banners and flags. He learned that some leaders of the Indian National Congress were visiting. He wandered over to Ashraf's shop to tell him, and they decided to join the crowds. The leaders started their speeches; they said they had come to spread the Mahatma's message regarding the freedom struggle, the struggle for justice. "We have been slaves in our own country for too long. And the time has come to fight for liberty. In this fight, we do not need guns or swords. We do not need harsh words or hatred. With truth and ahimsa we will convince the British that the moment is right for them to depart."

The crowd applauded; the speaker continued. "You will agree that in order to overthrow the yoke of slavery we have to be strong. No one can argue against that. And only the genuinely strong can employ the power of truth and non-violence. But how can we even start to be strong when there is a disease in our midst? First we must be rid of this disease that plagues the body of our motherland.

"What is this disease? you may ask. This disease, brothers and sisters, is the notion of untouchability, ravaging us for centuries, denying dignity to our fellow human beings. This disease must be purged from our society, from our hearts, and from our minds. No one is untouchable, for we are all children of the same God. Remember what Gandhiji says, that untouchability poisons Hinduism as a drop of arsenic poisons milk."

After this, other speakers addressed the crowd about matters

related to the freedom struggle, about those who were spending time honourably in jail for civil disobedience, for refusing to observe unjust laws. Dukhi and Ashraf stayed till the very end, when the leaders requested the crowd to pledge that they would expunge all caste prejudice from their thoughts, words, and deeds. "We are taking this message across the nation, and asking people everywhere to unite and fight this ungodly system of bigotry and evil."

The crowd took the oath that had been enjoined on them by the Mahatma, echoing the words with enthusiasm. The rally was over.

"I wonder," said Dukhi to Ashraf, "if the zamindars in our villages would ever clap for a speech about getting rid of the caste system."

"They would clap, and go on in the same old way," said Ashraf.

"The devil has stolen their sense of justice, nah—they cannot see or feel. But you should leave your village, bring your family here."

"And where would we stay? There, at least we have a hut. Besides, that's where my ancestors have always lived. How can I leave that earth? It's not good to go far from your native village.

Then you forget who you are."

"That's true," said Ashraf. "But at least send your sons here for a short time. To learn a trade."

"They would not be allowed to practise it in the village."

Ashraf was impatient with his pessimism. "Things will change, nah. You heard those men at the meeting. Send your sons to me, I will teach them tailoring in my shop."

For a moment, Dukhi's eyes lit up, imagining the promise of the future. "No," he said. "Better to stay where we belong."

* * * * *

THE HARVEST was ready, and Dukhi stopped going to the lumberyard. His vow to shun the landlords had weakened, for the distance to town was long when the transport was unreliable. He left for the fields before dawn to bring in the crop, returning

to his family after dusk with an aching back and all the news from surrounding villages that he had missed in the last few months. The news was of the same type that Dukhi had heard evening after evening during his childhood; only the names were different. For walking on the upper-caste side of the street, Sita was stoned, though not to death—the stones had ceased at first blood. Gambhir was less fortunate; he had molten lead poured into his ears because he ventured within hearing range of the temple while prayers were in progress. Dayaram, reneging on an agreement to plough a landlord's field, had been forced to eat the landlord's excrement in the village square. Dhiraj tried to negotiate in advance with Pandit Ghanshyam the wages for chopping wood, instead of settling for the few sticks he could expect at the end of the day; the Pandit got upset, accused Dhiraj of poisoning his cows, and had him hanged.

While Dukhi toiled in the fields and leather-work remained scarce, there was no work for his sons. Roopa tried to keep Ishvar and Narayan busy by sending them to search for firewood. Occasionally, they also found stray, unclaimed cowpats overlooked by the cowherds, though this was rare, for the precious commodity was zealously collected by the cow's owners. Roopa did not use the dung for fuel, preferring to daub it level at the entrance to the hut. After it dried, hard and smooth, she enjoyed for a while a threshold as firm as terracotta, like the courtyards of the cattle-keepers.

Despite their chores, the boys had many empty hours to run around by the river or chase wild rabbits. They knew exactly what their caste permitted or prohibited; instinct, and eavesdropping on the conversation of elders, had demarcated the borders in their consciousness as clearly as stone walls. Still, their mother worried that they would get into trouble. She waited anxiously for the threshing and winnowing to finish, when they would be occupied under her eye, sifting the chaff for stray grain. Sometimes the brothers spent the morning near the village school. They listened to the upper-caste children recite the alphabet, and sing little songs about colours, numbers, the monsoon. The shrill voices flew out the window like flocks of

sparrows. Later, in secret among the trees by the river, the two would try to repeat from memory what the children had sung. If curiosity drew Ishvar and Narayan too close and the teacher spotted them, they were immediately chased away. "Shameless little donkeys! Off with you or I'll break your bones!" But Ishvar and Narayan were quite skilled at spying on the class; they could creep near enough to hear chalks squeaking on slates.

The chalks and slates fascinated them. They yearned to hold the white sticks in their hands, make little white squiggles like the other children, draw pictures of huts, cows, goats, and flowers. It was like magic, to make things appear out of nowhere. One morning, when Ishvar and Narayan were hidden behind the bushes, the students were brought into the front yard to practise a dance for the harvest festival. The sky was cloudless, and snatches of song could be heard from the fields in the distance. The labourers' melodies contained the agony of their aching backs, of their skin sizzling under the sun. Ishvar and Narayan listened for their father's voice, but could not separate the strands in the chorus.

The schoolchildren held hands and formed two concentric rings, barefoot, moving in opposite directions. Every now and then, the rings reversed the pattern of movement. This was cause for much mirth because some children were late in turning, and there were mixups and tangles.

After watching for a while, Ishvar and Narayan suddenly realized that the schoolhouse was empty. They went around the yard on all fours till they were behind the hut, and entered through a window.

In one corner, the children's footwear was arranged in neat rows; in another, beside the blackboard, were their lunchboxes. Food odours mingled with chalk dust. The boys headed for the cupboard where the slates and chalks were kept. Grabbing one each, they sat cross-legged on the floor with the slates in their laps, as they had so often watched the children do. But the two were uncertain about what came next. Narayan waited for his older brother to begin.

Ishvar was a little nervous, his chalk poised above the slate,

fearful of what might happen. Gingerly he made contact, and drew a line, then another, and another. He grinned at Narayan —how easy it was to make his mark!

Now Narayan, his fingers shaking with excitement, chalked a short white line and displayed it proudly. They grew more adventurous, departing from straight lines, covering the slates with loops and curves and scrawls of all shapes and sizes, stopping only to admire, marvelling at the ease with which they could create, then erase with a sweep of the hand and re-create at will. And the chalk dust on their palms and fingers set them to giggling too—it could make thick funny lines on the forehead just like the caste marks of the Brahmins.

They returned to the cupboard to examine the rest of its contents, unrolling alphabet charts and opening picture books. Lost in the forbidden world, they did not notice that the dancing in the yard had ended, nor did they hear the teacher sneak up behind. He grabbed them by their ears and dragged them outside.

“You Chamaar rascals! Very brave you are getting, daring to enter the school!” He twisted their ears till they yelped with pain and started to cry. The schoolchildren fearfully huddled together.

“Is this what your parents teach you? To defile the tools of learning and knowledge? Answer me! Is it?” He released their ears long enough to deliver stinging blows to the head, then seized them again.

Sobbing, Ishvar said, “No, masterji, it isn’t.”

“Then why were you in there?”

“We only wanted to look—”

“Wanted to look! Well, I will show you now! I will show you the back of my hand!” Holding on to Narayan, he slapped Ishvar six times in quick succession across the face, then delivered the same number to his brother’s face. “And what is this on your foreheads, you shameless creatures? Such blasphemy!” He slapped them again, and by now his hand was sore.

“Get the cane from the cupboard,” he ordered a girl. “And you two remove your pants. After I am through, not one of you achhoot boys will ever dream of fooling with things you are not supposed to touch.”

The cane was presented, and the teacher asked four older students to hold the trespassers to the ground, face down, by their hands and ankles. He commenced the punishment, alternating strokes between the two. The watching children flinched each time the cane landed on the bare bottoms. A little boy started to cry.

When the two had received a dozen strokes each, the teacher stopped. "That should teach you," he panted. "Now get out, and don't let your unclean faces be seen here ever again."

Ishvar and Narayan ran off with their pants straggling, stumbling and tripping comically. The other children grabbed the opportunity to laugh; they were grateful for the relief it provided.

...

DÜKHI did not hear till evening about his sons' punishment. He grimly told Roopa to delay baking the chapatis. "Why?" she asked, alarmed. "After a whole day in the fields you are not hungry? Where-all are you going?"

"To Pandit Lalluram. He must do something about this."

"Leave it for now," she pleaded. "Don't disturb such an important man at dinnertime." But Dukhi washed the day's dust off his hands and went.

Pandit Lalluram was not just any Brahmin, he was a Chit-Pavan Brahmin—descended from the purest among the pure, from the keepers of the Sacred Knowledge. He was neither the village headman nor a government official, but his peers said he commanded their unswerving respect for his age, his sense of fairness, and for the Sacred Knowledge locked inside his large, shiny cranium.

Disputes of any sort, over land or water or animals, were presented before him for arbitration. Family quarrels concerning disobedient daughters-in-law, stubborn wives, and philandering husbands also fell within his jurisdiction. Thanks to his impeccable credentials, everyone always went away satisfied: the victim obtained the illusion of justice; the wrongdoer was free to continue in his old ways; and Pandit Lalluram, for his trouble, received gifts of cloth, grain, fruit, and sweets from both sides.

The learned Pandit also enjoyed a reputation for promoting communal harmony. For instance, during the periodic protests against Muslims and cow slaughter, Pandit Lalluram persuaded his co-religionists that it was not right for Hindus to condemn the cow-eaters. He explained that the Muslim, by his religion, was burdened with four wives, poor fellow, and he needed to eat the flesh of animals to heat up his blood and service those four wives—he was carnivorous out of necessity, not out of fondness for cow flesh or to harass Hindus, and, as such, should be pitied and left in peace to satisfy his religious ~~veniements~~ ^{veniements}. Within his spotless record, Pandit Lalluram's champions were many. So honest and fair was he, they said, even an untouchable could receive justice at his hands. That no untouchable could verify this claim in living memory was beside the point. People seemed to remember, vaguely, the time a landlord had beaten a Bhunghi to death for arriving late at the house, well after sunrise, to cart away the household's excrement. Pandit Lalluram had ruled—or it might have been his father, or perhaps his grandfather; in any case, someone had ruled—that the offence was serious, but not serious enough to warrant the killing, and that the landlord, in recompense, must provide food, shelter, and clothing for the dead man's wife and children for the next six years. Or was it for six months, or perhaps six weeks? Relying on this legendary reputation for justice, Dukhi sat at

Pandit Lalluram's feet and told him about the beating of Ishvar and Narayan. The learned man was resting in an armchair, having just finished his dinner, and belched loudly several times during his visitor's narration. Dukhi paused politely at each eructation,

while Pandit Lalluram murmured "Hai Ram" in thanks for an alimentary tract blessed with such energetic powers of digestion.

"How much he slapped my sons—you should see their swollen faces, Panditji," said Dukhi. "And their backsides look like an angry tiger raked them with his claws."

"Poor children," sympathized Pandit Lalluram. He rose and went to a shelf inside. "Here, put this ointment on their backs. It will soothe the burning pain."

Dukhi bowed his head. "Thank you, Panditji, you are truly

kind.” He removed the cloth from his head and wrapped the small flat tin in it. “Panditji, some time ago I was hammered badly by Thakur Premji for no fault of mine. But I did not come to you. I did not want to trouble you.”

Pandit Lalluram raised his eyebrows and rubbed his big toe. Nodding, he kneaded sweat and dirt into black bits that rolled off his fingers.

“That time I suffered silently,” said Dukhi. “But for my children, I have come to you. They should not have to suffer unjust beatings.”

Still silent, Pandit Lalluram sniffed the fingers which had finished massaging his big toe. He pivoted on one buttock and broke wind. Dukhi leaned back to allow it free passage, wondering what penalty might adhere to the offence of interfering with the waft of brahminical flatus.

“They are only children,” he pleaded, “and they were doing no harm.” He waited for a response. “They were doing no harm, Panditji,” he repeated, wanting the learned man to at least agree with him. “That teacher should be punished for what he has done.”

Pandit Lalluram sighed long and hard. He leaned sideways and blew a thick stream of mucus out of his nose on to the dry earth. The impact of its landing raised a tiny puff of dust. He rubbed his nose and sighed again. “Dukhi Mochi, you are a good, hardworking man. I have known you for a long time. You always try to do your duty, don’t you, according to your caste?”

Dukhi nodded.

“Which is wise,” approved Pandit Lalluram, “for it is the path to happiness. Otherwise, there would be chaos in the universe. You understand there are four varnas in society: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. Each of us belongs to one of these four varnas, and they cannot mix. Correct?”

Dukhi nodded again, hiding his impatience. He had not come to hear a lecture on the caste system.

“Now just as you, a leather-worker, have to do your dharmic duty towards your family and society, the teacher must do his. You would not deny that, would you, Dukhi?”

Dukhi shook his head.

“Punishing your sons for their misdeeds was part of the teacher’s duty. He had no choice. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Panditji, punishment is sometimes necessary. But such a terrible beating?”

“It was a terrible offence that they—”

“But they are only children, and curious, like all—”

Pandit Lalluram rolled his eyes at the interruption, pointing heavenward with the index finger of his right hand to silence Dukhi. “How can I make you understand? You do not have the knowledge that would help you to appreciate these matters.” Now the note of patient suffering in his voice was replaced by something harsher. “Your children entered the classroom. They polluted the place. They touched instruments of learning. They defiled slates and chalks, which upper-caste children would touch. You are lucky there wasn’t a holy book like the Bhagavad Gita in that cupboard, no sacred texts. Or the punishment would have been more final.”

Dukhi was calm as he touched Pandit Lalluram’s sandals to take his leave. “I understand completely, Panditji, thank you for explaining to me. I am so lucky—you, a Chit-Pavan Brahmin, wasting precious time on an ignorant Chamaar like me.”

Pandit Lalluram absently lifted his hand in farewell. There was a small doubt in his mind as to whether he had been flattered or insulted. Presently, though, another vigorous belch came rumbling upwards, displacing the doubt and putting both mind and belly at ease.

On the way home, Dukhi came across his friends who were still smoking under the tree by the river. “Oyeh, Dukhi, out so late in that part of the village?”

“Went to see that Chit-Pavan Brahmin,” said Dukhi, and narrated his visit in detail. “Goo-Khavan Brahmin is what he should be called instead.”

They laughed with delight, and Chhotu agreed that Shit-Eating Brahmin was indeed a more suitable name. “But how does he have the appetite, after gobbling a pound of ghee and two pounds of sweets at every meal?”

"He gave me this ointment for the children," said Dukhi. They passed the tin around, examining, sniffing the contents.

"Looks like boot polish to me," said Chhotu. "He must apply it to his head every morning. That's why it shines like the sun." "Aray bhaiya, you are confusing his head with his arse-hole. That's where he applies the polish—that's where the sun shines from, according to his caste brothers. That's why the shit-eaters all try to lick their way into it."

"I have a shlokha of advice for all of them," said Dayaram, and recited in mock Sanskrit, imitating the exalted cadences of a pujari reading scriptures: "Goluma Ekdama Tajidevum! Chuptum Makkama Jhaptum!"

The men roared at the references to buggery and copulation. Dukhi threw the tin in the river. Leaving his friends to speculate about what exactly, if anything, lay below the rolls of fat that constituted Pandit Lalluram's belly, he went home.

He told Roopa he would be leaving early next morning for town. "My mind is made up. I am going to talk to Ashraf the tailor."

She did not ask why. Her mind was busy planning the strategy for another nocturnal assault on someone's butter-churn, this time for her children's backsides.

* * * * *

ASHRAF wanted no payment to apprentice Dukhi's sons. "They will be a help to me," he said. "And how much food can two little boys eat? Whatever we cook, they will share with us. That's all right, nah? No restrictions?"

"No restrictions," said Dukhi.

Two weeks later he returned to the tailor's shop with Ishvar and Narayan. "Ashraf is like my brother," he explained to the children. "So you must always call him Ashraf Chacha."

The tailor beamed with pleasure, honoured by the title of uncle, as Dukhi continued, "You will stay with Ashraf Chacha for some time, and learn with him. Listen carefully to everything he says, and treat him with the same respect you have for me."

The boys had been prepared for the separation in advance by their father. This was only the formal announcement. "Yes, Bapa," they answered.

"Ashraf Chacha is going to turn you into tailors like himself. From now on, you are not cobblers—if someone asks your name, don't say Ishvar Mochi or Narayan Mochi. From now on you are Ishvar Darji and Narayan Darji."

Then Dukhi gave them each a pat on the back, and a slight push, as though to propel them into the other man's keeping. They left their father's side and stepped towards the tailor, who put out his hands to receive them.

Dukhi watched Ashraf's fingers, the warmth with which he gripped the children's shoulders. Ashraf was a good and gentle man, he knew his sons would be well cared for. All the same, an icy ache was spreading around his heart.

During the journey back to the village, he slumped in the bullock cart, feeling exhausted, barely aware of the wheels jouncing over ruts and bumps, jarring his bones. Simultaneously, he felt crazy surges of energy that made him want to hop out of the cart and run. He knew he had done the best thing possible for his sons, and a weight had lifted. Why, then, did he not feel lighter? What was this other ~~thing pressing down on him?~~ he jumped off the bullock cart by the village road. Roopa was sitting idle in the hut, staring out the entrance, when his shadow appeared in the doorway. He told her everything was settled.

She looked at him accusingly. He had made a hole in her life that nothing could fill. Each time she thought of her two sons—distanced by miles to live with a stranger, and a Muslim at that—then her grief leapt up into her throat, and she felt she would choke, she told her husband. He observed bitterly that at least his Muslim friend treated him better than his Hindu brothers.

Muzaffar Tailoring Company was located on a street of small family businesses. There was a hardware store, coal-merchant, banya, and miller, all in a row, the shops identical in shape and size, distinguished solely by the interior noises and smells. Muzaffar Tailoring Company was the only one that displayed a signboard.

Ashraf's shop was cramped, as were the living quarters over it: one room and kitchen. He had married last year, and had a month-old daughter. His wife, Mumtaz, was less pleased than he to have two more mouths staying with them. It was decided that the apprentices would sleep in the shop.

Ishvar and Narayan were overwhelmed by the sudden change in their lives. Buildings, electric lights, water that flowed from taps—everything so different from the village, and so amazing. On the first day they sat in awe on the stone steps outside the shop, watching the street and seeing a universe of frightening chaos. Gradually, they perceived the river of traffic in the street and, within it, the currents of handcarts, bicycles, bullock carts, buses, and the occasional lorry. Now they learned the wild river's character. They were reassured that it was not all madness and noise, there was a pattern in things.

They observed people come to the banya to purchase salt, spices, coconut, pulses, candles, oil. They saw grain being taken to the miller to be made into flour. The miller's arms slowly became white while he worked; sometimes, his face and eyelashes too. The coal-merchant's arms and face turned black as the hours progressed; his delivery boys ran back and forth all day with baskets of coal. Ishvar and Narayan loved to watch their neighbours when they washed at night, emerging brown from behind their daytime colours.

Ashraf left them alone for two days, till their curiosity turned of its own accord towards the tailoring shop. The centre of their desire was, of course, the sewing-machine. To satisfy them, he let each take a turn at working the treadle while he guided a scrap under the needle. The brothers were thrilled that they could make the machine perform. It was as inspiring as making their mark with chalk upon slate.

Now they were ready to settle down to less exciting things, like threading a needle and hand-stitching. Eager to learn, they impressed Ashraf with their quickness. The next time a customer came to Muzaffar Tailoring Company, he decided to let Ishvar write down the measurements.

The man carried striped material for a shirt. Ashraf opened the order book to a new page, noted the customer's name, then unrolled his measuring tape with a flourish, which the boys simply adored. They had already begun to practise it in private, to Ashraf's amusement.

"Collar, fourteen and half inches," he dictated. "Chest, thirty-two." He glanced at Ishvar, who was bent over the book, his tongue sticking out in grave concentration. Turning to the customer, Ashraf continued, "Sleeves. Short or long?"

"Has to be long," said the man. "I am wearing it to a friend's wedding." The formalities completed, the customer left, assured that his shirt would be ready in time for the wedding next week.

"Now let's see the measurements," said Ashraf.

Smiling proudly, Ishvar handed him the book. The page was covered with black scratches and squiggles.

"Ah, yes, I see." Ashraf controlled his dismay, patting the boy's back. "Yes, very good." He quickly jotted down what he could remember of the figures.

After dinner, he began teaching them the alphabet and numbers. Mumtaz was not pleased. "Now you are becoming their schoolmaster as well. What next? Will you find wives for them also, when they are old enough?"

Next day he finished the wedding-guest's shirt. The man came for it at the end of the week and tried it on. Ashraf had got everything right except the length: it hung closer to the knees than was desirable. The man looked in the mirror, dubious, turning left and right.

"Absolutely perfect," admired Ashraf. "This northern Pathani style has become very fashionable these days." The man left, still a bit uncertain, and the three burst out laughing.

A month after the apprentices had started, Ashraf was wakened

in the night by a soft mewling. He sat up to listen, but there was nothing more. He lay down and began to drift.

A few minutes later the sound nudged his sleep again. "What is it?" asked Mumtaz. "Why do you keep waking?"

"A noise. Was the baby crying?"

"No, but she will if you keep jumping up."

Then the soft sobs came again. "It's downstairs." He got out of bed and lit the lamp.

"So why do you have to go? Are you their father?"

Her reproaches followed him as he descended the steps into the shop. He entered and held up the lamp. The light caught Narayan's tear-glistened cheeks. Ashraf knelt on the floor beside him, gently rubbing his back.

"What's wrong, Narayan?" he asked, although he knew the answer, having expected an attack of homesickness sooner or later. "I heard you crying. Is something hurting?"

The boy shook his head. Ashraf put his arm around him. "When your father is not here, I stand in his place. And Mumtaz Chachi is like your mother, nah? You can tell us anything you like."

Narayan burst into sobs at that. Now Ishvar awoke as well and rubbed his eyes, shielding them from the lamp.

"Do you know why your brother is crying?" asked Ashraf.

Ishvar nodded gravely. "He thinks of home every night. I also think of it, but I don't cry." "You are a brave boy." "I don't want to cry either," said Narayan. "But when it gets dark and everybody is sleeping, my father and mother come in my mind." He sniffed and wiped his eyes. "I see our hut, and it makes me very sad, and then it makes me cry."

Ashraf held him on his lap, saying it was all right to think of his parents. "But don't be sad, your Bapa will arrive in a few weeks to take you home for a visit. And when you have learned all the tailoring, you will open your own shop and earn lots of money. How proud your parents will be, nah?"

He told the boys that whenever they felt sad, they could come and tell him about their village, the river, the fields, their friends.

Talking together about it would change the sadness to happiness, he assured them. He lay by their side till they fell asleep, then crept upstairs with the lamp turned low.

Mumtaz was sitting in the dark, waiting for him. "Are they all right?" she asked anxiously.

He nodded, reassured by her concern. "They were just feeling lonely."

"Maybe we should let them sleep upstairs from tomorrow." Her offer touched him, and his eyes swam with love. "They are brave boys. They will learn to sleep alone, it's good for them to become tough," he said.

* * * * *

IT SOON became known in Dukhi's village that his children were learning a trade other than leather-working. In the old days, punishment for stepping outside one's caste would have been death. Dukhi was spared his life, but it became a very hard life. He was allowed no more carcasses, and had to travel long distances to find work. Sometimes he obtained a hide secretly from fellow Chamaars; it would have been difficult for them if they were found out. The items he fashioned from this illicit leather had to be sold in far-off places where they had not heard about him and his sons.

"Such suffering you have brought upon our heads," said Roopa almost daily. "No work, no food, no sons. What crimes have I committed to be punished like this? My life has become a permanent shadow."

But her horizon brightened as the day approached for the children's visit. She dreamed and made plans, her heartache diverted by the desire to have some treat waiting for them. And if the treat was unaffordable, she determined, then it would be obtained moneylessly, in darkness.

For the first time since the children were born, Dukhi acknowledged that he was aware of her night walks. As she rose stealthily after midnight, he said, "Listen, mother-of-Narayan, I don't think you should go."

Roopa jumped. "Oh, how you scared me! I thought you were asleep!"

"Taking such a risk is stupid."

"You never said that before."

"It was different then. It's not like the boys will starve without butter or a peach or a bit of jaggery."

Roopa went anyway, promising herself it was the last time. After all, her children had been away for three months, she had to give them something special.

On the long-awaited day, Dukhi left at dawn and brought his sons back for a week. The two boys sat very close to their father, and couldn't stop touching him throughout the journey, leaning against him on either side, Narayan holding on to his knee, Ishvar clutching his arm. They talked non-stop, then repeated everything for their mother when they got home in the late afternoon.

"Machine is amazing," said Ishvar. "The big wheel is—" "You do your feet likethis-likethis," said Narayan, flapping his hands to mimic the treadle, "and the needle jumps up and down, it's so good—"

"I can do it very fast, but Ashraf Chacha can do it very-very fast."

"I like the small needle also, with my fingers, it goes in and out of the cloth smoothly, it's very pointy, once it poked me in my thumb."

Their mother immediately asked to see the thumb. Assuring herself that there was no permanent damage, she let the story proceed. By dinnertime the boys were exhausted, and started falling asleep over the food. Roopa wiped their hands and mouths, then Dukhi guided them to their mats.

For a long while, they gazed at them sleeping before rolling out their own mats. "They are looking nice and fit," she said. "See their cheeks."

"I hope it's not an unhealthy swelling," said Dukhi. "Like the swollen bellies that babies get in famine time."

"What-all rubbish are you talking? With my mother's instinct

I would know at once if my children were not well." But she understood his doubt was prompted by resentment that their

children should grow healthier in a stranger's house than when they were living at home; she shared his shame. They went to bed feeling a mixture of gladness and sorrow.

The family's excitement continued the next morning. The boys had brought a tape measure, a blank page, and a pencil from Muzaffar Tailoring, and wanted to measure their parents. Ashraf had taught them a diagrammatic code for the constantly used words like neck, waist, chest, and sleeve.

The boys could not reach high enough, so the two clients had to bend down or sit on the floor for some of the measurements: first their mother, and then their father. While they were recording Dukhi's sizes, Roopa called her friends from nearby huts to watch. Now Ishvar grew self-conscious and smiled shyly, but Narayan flourished the tape and made his gestures more expansive, enjoying the attention.

Everyone clapped with delight when they finished. In the evening, Dukhi borrowed the piece of paper to show to his friends under the tree by the river. He carried it about with him for the rest of the week.

Then it was time for the boys to return to Muzaffar Tailoring. The parents' thoughts turned once again with dread towards the absence looming in their lives, in their hut. Ishvar requested his father for the page with the measurements.

"Can't I keep it?" asked Dukhi. The boys considered their father's request, then rummaged for a scrap of paper and copied the figures so he could have the original.

* * * * *

THREE MONTHS again passed before the next visit. This time the boys brought presents for their parents. Ishvar and Narayan planned to fool them that they had gone shopping for the gifts in a big store in town, just like rich townspeople.

"What-all is this?" said Roopa uneasily. "Where did you get the money?"

"We didn't buy them, Ma! We made them ourselves!" said Narayan, forgetting his little joke. Ishvar explained excitedly how

Ashraf Chacha had helped them select and match the remnants left over from the fabric for customers' orders. Their father's vest had been easy; there were plenty of white poplin remnants. The choli for their mother had required a bit more planning. A print of red and yellow flowers made up the front of the blouse. The back was a solid red, and the sleeves were fashioned from a swatch of vermillion.

Roopa burst into tears as soon as she put on the choli. Ishvar and Narayan looked at their father in alarm, who said she was crying because she was happy.

"Yes, I am!" she confirmed his verdict through her sobs. She knelt before them and hugged them in turn, and then hugged them together. She saw Dukhi watching, and led the boys to him. "Embrace your father also," she said, "this is a very special day."

She left the hut in search of her neighbours. "Padma! Savitri! Come and look! Amba and Pyari, you come too! See what-all my sons have brought!"

Dukhi grinned at the boys. "There will be no dinner today. Her new choli will make Ma forget everything, she will spend the whole day showing off." He patted his front and sides. "This fits much better than my old one. Material is also nicer."

"Look, Bapa, there is a pocket as well," said Narayan.

Roopa and Dukhi wore the new garments all week long.

Afterwards, when the boys were back in town, she removed her choli and demanded his vest.

"Why?" he asked.

"To wash."

But she refused to return it when it was dry. "What if you tear it or something?" She folded both articles, wrapped them in sacking, and secured the parcel with string. She hung it from the roof of the hut, safe from floodwater and rodents.

Ishvar and Narayan's years of apprenticeship were measured out in three-month intervals, eased somewhat by the week-long visits to their village. They were now eighteen and sixteen, their training was approaching its end, and they would leave Muzaffar Tailoring Company sometime after the monsoon. Ashraf's family had grown—there were four daughters now: the youngest was three, the oldest, eight. Mumtaz took a keen interest in the apprentices' plans. The sooner they came to fruition, the more room there would be for her own children, she thought, though she had grown to like the two young men, quiet and always helpful.

Narayan's preference was to set up in the village and sew for their own people. Ishvar was inclined to stay on in this town or another, become an assistant in someone's shop. "You cannot earn much in the village," he said. "Everyone is so poor. There is more scope in a big place."

Meanwhile, sporadic riots which had started with the talk of independence were spreading as the country's Partition became a reality. "Maybe it's better to stay where you are for the time being," said Ashraf, while Mumtaz glared at him. "The devil is not doing his evil work in our town. You know all the neighbours, you have lived here for many years. And even if your village is peaceful, it's still the wrong time to start a new business." Narayan sent word to their parents with someone passing through that they would remain with Ashraf Chacha till the bad times were over. Roopa was depressed; separated all these long years, and now her sons were further delayed—when would the gods take pity and end her punishment?

Dukhi, too, was disappointed, but accepted the decision as being for the best. Disturbing things were happening around them. Strangers belonging to a Hindu organization that wore white shirts and khaki pants, and trained their members to march about like soldiers, had been visiting the district. They brought with them stories of Muslims attacking Hindus in many parts of the country. "We must get ready to defend ourselves," they said. "And also to avenge ourselves. If they spill the blood of our Hindu brothers, this country shall run red with rivers of Muslim blood."

In Dukhi's village, the Muslims were too few to pose a threat to anyone, but the landlords saw opportunity in the strangers' warnings. They did their best to galvanize people against the imaginary danger in their midst. "Better to drive out the Mussulman menace before we are burned alive in our huts. For centuries they have invaded us, destroyed our temples, stolen our wealth."

The men in white shirts and khaki pants persevered for a few more days but had no luck with the vast majority. The lower castes were not impressed by the rhetoric. They had always lived peacefully with their Muslim neighbours. Besides, they were too exhausted keeping body and soul together.

So the attempt to dispossess the village Muslims fizzled out. Leaving behind sinister threats about dealing with traitors, including the chief traitor, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the men from the Hindu organization moved on. Places with larger populations and shops and commerce offered them more opportunities for success, and the cloak of urban anonymity to hide behind, where hoax and hearsay could find fertile ground to grow.

Dukhi and his friends discussed the developments in the evening, by the river. They were confused by the varying accounts that reached them of events in faraway towns and villages. "The zamindars have always treated us like animals." "Worse than animals." "But what if it's true? What if the Mussulman horde sweeps

down upon our village, like the khaki pants told us?"

"They have never bothered us before. Why would they do it now? Why should we hurt them because some outsiders come with stories?"

"Yes, it's strange that suddenly we have all become Hindu brothers."

"The Muslims have behaved more like our brothers than the bastard Brahmins and Thakurs."

But the stories kept multiplying: someone had been knifed in the bazaar in town; a sadhu hacked to death at the bus station; a settlement razed to the ground. The tension spread through the

entire district. And it was all believable because it resembled exactly what people had been seeing in newspapers for the past few days: reports about arson and riots in large towns and cities; about mayhem and massacre on all sides; about the vast and terrible exchange of populations that had commenced across the new border.

THE KILLINGS started in the poorer section of town, and began to spread; the next day the bazaar was empty. There were no fruits or vegetables to be bought, the milkmen did not stir, and the only bakery in town, owned by a Muslim, had already been burned to the ground.

“Bread is become rarer than gold,” said Ashraf. “What madness. These people have lived together for generations, laughing and crying together. Now they are butchering one another.” He did no work that day, spending the hours gazing out the door at the deserted street, as though waiting for something dreadful to make its appearance.

“Ashraf Chacha, dinner is ready,” said Narayan, responding to Mumtaz’s signal. Her husband had not eaten all day. She was hoping he would join them now.

“There is something I have to tell you,” he said to Mumtaz.
“And you as well,” he turned to Ishvar and Narayan.

“Come, food is ready, later we can talk,” she said. “It is only dal and chapati today, but you must eat a little at least.” She lowered the pot from the stove.

“I am not hungry. You and the little ones eat,” said Ashraf, shepherding the four children towards the food. They were reluctant, having sensed their parents’ anxiety. “Go, boys, you too.”

“I take the trouble to cook and nawab-sahib won’t even touch his fingers to the dinner,” said Mumtaz.

In his present mood, her commonplace complaint assumed vicious overtones. He shouted at her, something he rarely did. “What do you want me to do if I am not hungry? Tie the plate to my belly? Talk sense once in a while, nah!” The youngest two started to cry. One of their elbows overturned a glass of water.

“You must be satisfied now,” said Mumtaz scornfully as she

mopped up the spill. "Trying to scare me with your big shouting. Only the little ones are frightened of that, let me tell you."

Ashraf took the two weeping children in his arms. "Okay, okay, no crying. See, we will all eat together." He fed them from his plate, putting a morsel in his own mouth when they pointed to it. It soon became a new game, and they cheered up.

Dinner finished quickly, and Mumtaz began taking the pot and ladle outside to the tap for washing. Ashraf stopped her. "I was going to say something before dinner, before your shouting started."

"I am listening now."

"It's about this...about what's happening everywhere."

"What?"

"You want me to describe in front of the children?" he whispered fiercely. "Why are you acting stupid? Sooner or later the trouble will come here. No matter what happens, it will never be the same again between the two communities."

He noticed Ishvar and Narayan listening with dismay, and added in haste, "I don't mean us, boys. We will always be like one family, even if we are apart."

"But Ashraf Chacha, we don't have to be apart," said Narayan. "Ishvar and I are not planning to leave yet."

"Yes, I know. But Mumtaz Chachi and the children and I, we have to leave."

"My poor, paagal nawab-sahib—gone completely crazy," said Mumtaz. "Wants to leave. With four little ones? Where do you want to go?"

"Same place all the others are going. Across the border. What do you want to do? Sit here and wait till the hatred and insanity comes with swords and clubs and kerosene? What I am saying is, tomorrow morning I go to the station and buy our train tickets."

Mumtaz insisted he was reacting like a foolish old man. But he refused to allow her the temporary comfort of turning her back on danger. He was determined to argue all night, he said, rather than pretend that things were normal.

"I will do whatever is necessary to save my family. How can

you be so blind? I will drag you by your hair to the railway station if I have to.” At this threat, the children began crying again. She dried their tears on her dupatta, and dissolved her opposition to the plan. It was not a case of being blind to danger—the danger could be smelt from miles away, her husband was right. Only, removing the blindfold was difficult because of what she might see.

“It won’t be possible to carry much if we are to leave in a hurry,” she said. “Clothes, a stove, some cooking pots. I’ll start packing now.”

“Yes, keep it ready for tomorrow,” said Ashraf. “The rest we will lock in the shop. Inshallah, someday we will be able to come back and claim it.” He gathered the children for bed. “Come, we must sleep early tonight. Tomorrow we have to start a long journey.”

Narayan found it unbearable to listen to or watch their troubled preparations. He doubted if anything he said would make a difference. Pretending he was going down to the shop, he slipped out the back to their neighbour and told him of the planned flight.

“Is he serious?” said the hardware-store owner. “When we talked this morning, he agreed there was nothing to worry about in our neighbourhood.”

“He has changed his mind.”

“Wait, I will come to him right now.”

He collected the coal-merchant, the banya, and the miller, and knocked on Ashraf’s door. “Forgive us for bothering you at this hour. May we come in?”

“Of course. Will you eat something? A drink?”

“Nothing, thank you. We came because we got some news that is causing us great grief.”

“What is it, what?” Ashraf was agitated, wondering if there had been riot casualties in someone’s family. “Can I help?”

“Yes, you can. You can tell us it’s not true.”

“What’s not true?”

“That you want to leave us, leave the place where you were born and your children were born. This is causing our grief.”

"You are such good people." Ashraf's eyes began to moisten. "But I really don't have a choice, nah."

"Sit down with us and think calmly," said the hardware-store owner, putting his arm around Ashraf's shoulder. "The situation is bad, yes, but it would be madness to attempt to leave."

The others nodded in agreement. The coal-merchant put his hand on Ashraf's knee. "Every day trains are crossing that new border, carrying nothing but corpses. My agent arrived yesterday from the north, he has seen it with his own eyes. The trains are stopped at the station and everyone is butchered. On both sides of the border."

"Then what am I to do?"

The desperation in his voice drew the hardware-store owner's hand to his shoulder again. "Stay here. You are with friends. We will let nothing happen to your family. Where is there any trouble in our neighbourhood? We have always lived here peacefully."

"But what will happen when those outside troublemakers come?"

"Yours is the only Muslim shop in the street. You think so many of us together cannot protect one shop?" They hugged him, promising he had nothing to fear. "Any time you want to, day or night, if you feel worried about anything, just come to our house with your wife and children."

After the neighbours left, Narayan had an idea. "You know the sign outside—Muzaffar Tailoring Company. We could put another one in its place."

"Why?" asked Ashraf.

Narayan was hesitant to say. "A new one..."

Then Ashraf saw the point. "Yes, with a new name. A Hindu name. It's a very good idea."

"Let's do it right now," said Ishvar. "I can get a new board from your uncle's lumberyard. Can I take the cycle?"

"Of course. But be careful, don't go through a Muslim area."

An hour later Ishvar returned empty-handed without having reached his destination. "Lots of shops and houses on fire. I kept going—slowly, slowly. Then I saw some people with axes. They were chopping a man. That scared me, I turned back."

Ashraf sat down weakly. "You were wise. What will we do now?" He was too frightened to think.

"Why do we need a new board?" said Narayan. "We can use the back of this old one. All we need is some paint."

He went next door again, and the hardware-store owner let him have a blue tin that was open. "It's a good idea," he said. "What name are you going to paint?"

"Krishna Tailors, I think," said Narayan at random.

"The blue will be perfect." He pointed to the horizon, where smoke and a red glow filled the sky. "I heard it's the lumberyard. But don't tell Ashraf now."

Night had fallen by the time they finished painting the letters and remounting the signboard. "On that old wood the paint looks very new," said Ashraf.

"I'll rub a handful of ashes over it," said Ishvar. "Tomorrow morning, when it's dry."

"If we are not all reduced to ashes while we sleep," said Ashraf softly. The fragile sense of security woven out of his neighbours' assurances was starting to fray.

In bed, every noise in the darkness was danger approaching to threaten his family, until he was able to identify it as something innocuous. He relearned the familiar sounds to which he had fallen asleep all his life. The thud of the coal-merchant's charpoy, who liked to sleep in the open, in the backyard (he slammed it down every night to shake out the bedbugs). The crash of the banya's door being locked for the night; swollen and sticking, it needed a firm hand. The clang of someone's pail—Ashraf had never found out whose, and what was being done with it at this late hour.

Sometime after midnight, he awoke with a start, went downstairs to the shop and began removing the three framed Koranic quotations that hung on the wall behind the cutting table. Ishvar and Narayan stirred, roused by his fumbling in the dark, and put on the light.

"It's all right, go to sleep," he said. "I suddenly remembered these frames." The wall paint was darker where the frames had

hung. Ashraf tried unsuccessfully to wipe away the difference with a damp rag.

"We have something you can put up instead," said Narayan. He dragged out their trunk from under the cutting table and found three cardboard-stiffened pictures equipped with little string loops for hanging. "Ram and Sita, Krishna, and Laxmi."

"Yes, definitely," said Ashraf. "And tomorrow we will burn these Urdu magazines and newspapers."



AT EIGHT-THIRTY A.M. Ashraf opened the shop as usual, releasing the padlock from the collapsible steel doors on the outside, but without folding them back. The interior wooden door was kept ajar. Like the day before, the street was deserted.

About ten o'clock, the coal-merchant's son called through the grating. "Father said to ask if you need anything from market, in case it is open. He said it's better if you don't go."

"God bless you, son," said Mumtaz, "yes, a little milk, if possible, for the children. And any kind of vegetables—a few potatoes or onions, anything you can find."

The boy returned empty-handed in fifteen minutes; the market was bare. Later, the coal-merchant sent a pitcher of milk from his cow. Mumtaz relied on the dwindling flour and lentils in the house to prepare the day's meals. Well before dusk, Ashraf padlocked the grating and bolted the doors.

At dinnertime the youngest ones wanted Ashraf to feed them like yesterday. "Ah, you are getting fond of that game," he smiled.

After the meal, Ishvar and Narayan rose to return downstairs, to let the family prepare for bed. "Stay," said Ashraf, "it is still early, nah. Without customers, the devil makes the hours move slowly."

"It should get better from tomorrow," said Ishvar. "They say the soldiers are soon taking charge."

"Inshallah," said Ashraf, watching his youngest play with a rag doll he had made for her. The oldest girl was reading a school book. The other two amused themselves with scraps of cloth,

pretending to be dressmakers. He signalled to Ishvar and Narayan to observe their exaggerated actions.

"You used to do that when you were new here," he said. "And you loved to wave the measure tape, make it snap." They laughed at the memory, then lapsed into silence again.

The quiet was broken by a hammering at the shop door. Ashraf jumped up, but Ishvar stopped him. "I'll look," he said.

From the upstairs window he saw a group of twenty or thirty men on the pavement. They noticed him and shouted, "Open the door! We want to talk to you!"

"Sure, one moment!" he called back. "Listen," he whispered, "all of you go next door, very quietly, from the upstairs passage. Narayan and I will go down."

"Ya Allah!" cried Mumtaz softly. "We should have left when we had the chance! You were right, my husband, and I called you foolish, I am the foolish one who did not—"

"Shut up and come on, quick!" said Ashraf. One of the girls started to sniffle. Mumtaz took the child in her arms and quieted her. Ashraf led them out while Ishvar and Narayan descended to the shop. The banging was furious, directed with hard objects through the grating upon the wooden doors.

"Patience!" shouted Ishvar, "I first have to undo the locks!" The crowd fell silent when the two figures became visible through the grating. Most of them had some sort of crude weapon, a stick or a spear; others had swords. A few men were wearing saffron shirts, and carried tridents.

The sight of them made Ishvar tremble. For a brief moment he was tempted to tell them the truth and step out of the way. Ashamed of the thought, he unlocked the grating and pushed it open a bit. "Namaskaar, brothers."

"Who are you?" asked the man in front.

"My father owns Krishna Tailors. This is my brother."

"And where is your father?"

"Gone to our native place—a relative is sick."

There was some consultation, then the leader said, "We have information that this is a Muslim shop."

"What?" said Ishvar and Narayan in unison. "This has been our father's shop for twenty years!"

From the back of the crowd came complaints. No need for so much talk! Burn it! We know it's a Muslim shop! Burn it! And those who lie to protect it—burn them, too!

"Is it possible that Muslims work in this shop?" asked the leader. "Business is not good enough to hire anyone," said Ishvar. "Barely enough work for my brother and me." Men shuffled up beside him, trying to look inside the shop. They were breathing hard, and he could smell their sweat. "Please, see all you want," he said, moving aside. "We have nothing to hide."

The men glanced around quickly, taking in the Hindu deities on the wall behind the cutting table. One of the saffron-shirted men stepped forward. "Listen, smart boy. If you are lying, I will myself skewer you on the three points of my trishul."

"Why should I lie?" said Ishvar. "I'm the same as you. You think I want to die to save a Muslim?"

There was more consultation outside the shop. "Step on the pavement and remove your pyjamas," said the leader. "Both of you."

"What?"

"Come on, hurry up! Or you won't need pyjamas anymore!" In the ranks there was impatience. They banged their spears on the ground and shouted to torch the place. Ishvar and Narayan obediently dropped their pyjamas.

"It's too dark to see," called the leader. "Give me a lantern." The light was handed over from behind the group. He bent low, held it close to their naked crotches, and was satisfied. The others crowded round to look as well. There was general agreement that the foreskins were intact.

Now the hardware-store owner opened his upstairs window and shouted, "What's going on? Why are you harassing Hindu boys? Have you run out of Muslims?"

"And who are you?" they shouted back. "Who am I? I am your father and your grandfather! That's who I am! And also the owner of this hardware store! If I give the word,

the whole street will unite as one to make mincemeat of you! Don't you have somewhere else to go?"

The leader did not think it worthwhile to take up the challenge. His men started to drift away, hurling obscenities to save face. They turned to arguing among themselves about a wasted night and faulty information that had made them look like fools.

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"THAT WAS beautiful acting," said the hardware-store owner, patting Ishvar and Narayan heartily on the back. "I was watching the whole thing from upstairs. You know, if there had been any danger of you getting hurt, I would have called everybody to help. But I thought it's better if there is no confrontation, if you can convince them and they leave quietly." He looked around to make sure everyone believed Mumtaz fell on her knees before the two apprentices. Her dupatta slid from around her neck and draped their feet. "Please, Chachi, don't do that," said Ishvar, shuffling back and forth. "And ever, my life, my children, my husband's life, my home—everything, I owe to you!" she clung to them, weeping. "There is no repayment possible!"

"Please get up," begged Ishvar, holding her wrists and trying to make her stand.

"From now on, this home is your home, as long as you will honour us with your presence!"

Ishvar finally succeeded in disentangling his ankles from her hands. "Chachi, you are like our mother, we have shared your food and home for seven years."

"Inshallah, you will stay and eat with us for seventy more." Still sobbing, she replaced the dupatta around her neck, lifting a corner to wipe her eyes.

Ishvar and Narayan returned downstairs. After the children were asleep, Ashraf went downstairs too. The boys had not yet rolled out their sleeping mats. The three sat silently for a few minutes. Then Ashraf said, "You know, when the banging started, I thought we were finished."

"I was also scared," said Narayan.

Their next silence lasted longer. Ashraf cleared his throat. "I came down to say one thing only." Tears were rolling down his cheeks; he paused to wipe them. "The day I met your father—the day I told Dukhi to send me his two sons for tailor-training. That day was the luckiest of my life." He embraced them, kissed their cheeks three times, and went upstairs.

Ashraf would not hear of the brothers returning to the village, and Mumtaz supported him in this. "Stay on as my paid assistants," he said, though he knew very well he could not afford it.

Roopa protested to Dukhi that it was high time she had her two sons back. "You sent them to apprentice. Now they have learned the trade, so why are they still living with strangers? Are their own mother-father dead or something?"

But no one could predict how two Chamaars-turned-tailors would fare in the village. True, these new times were full of hope, changes were in the air, and the optimism that came with independence was shining bright. Ashraf even felt safe enough to turn over the Krishna Tailors sign and display the Muzaffar Tailoring side again.

Still, it was uncertain if centuries of tradition could be overturned as easily. So they agreed that Ishvar would stay on as Ashraf's assistant, and Narayan would return to test the waters. This suited all sides: Muzaffar Tailoring Company would just barely support one assistant; Dukhi would have the help of wages sent from town; and Roopa would have her younger son back.

She took down the parcel that had hung from the ceiling for seven years. The string knots had shrunk and could not be untied. She cut the string, unwrapped the protective sackcloth, then washed the vest and choli. It was time to wear them again, she told Dukhi, to celebrate the homecoming.

"It hangs a little loose," he said.

"Mine, too," said Roopa. "The fabric must have stretched."

He liked her explanation. It was easier than contemplating the lean years that had shrunk them both.

* * * * *

IN THE VILLAGE, the Chamaar community was quietly proud of Narayan. Gradually, they found the courage to become his customers, though there was not much money in it for Narayan because they could rarely afford to have something new tailored. Garments thrown away by the upper castes clothed their bodies.

Mostly, he altered or mended. He used an old hand-cranked sewing-machine that Ashraf had procured for him. It was restricted to a straight lock stitch, but sufficed for the work he did.

Business improved when word spread to neighbouring villages of the one who had done the unthinkable: abandoned leather for cloth. They came as much to see this courageous Chamaar-tailor, this contradiction in terms, as to get their clothes looked after. Many were a little disappointed with their visit. Inside the hut was nothing extraordinary, just a young man with a tape measure around his neck and a pencil behind one ear.

Narayan maintained a record of jobs and transactions as Ashraf had taught him, noting names, dates, and amounts owing. Roopa appointed herself to manage the business, standing around importantly while he measured the client and entered the figures in his book. She kept his pencils sharp with her paring knife. She could not read his register but retained an accurate account in her head. When someone who had yet to settle the balance from a previous job came with more work, she stood behind the client and rubbed her thumb and finger together to remind her son.

One morning, about six months after Narayan's return to the village, a Bhunghi ventured towards the hut. Roopa was heating water over a fire outside, happily listening to the muffled clank of the sewing-machine, when she saw the fellow approach cautiously. "And where do you think you're going?" she yelled, stopping him in his tracks.

"I am looking for Narayan the tailor," said the man, timidly holding up some rags.

"What?!" His audacity flabbergasted her. "Don't give me your tailor-failor nonsense! I'll bathe your filthy skin with this boiling water! My son does not sew for your kind!"

"Ma! What are you doing?" shouted Narayan, emerging from the hut as the man bolted. "Wait, wait!" he yelled after the fellow.

Terrified that retribution was in pursuit, the Bhunghi ran faster.

"Come back, bhai, it's all right!"

"Another time," called the frightened man. "Tomorrow, maybe."

"Okay, I'll wait for you," said Narayan. "Please come for sure." He returned to the hut, shaking his head and ignoring his mother, who glared furiously at him.

"Don't you shake your head at me!" she said indignantly. "What-all nonsense is this, calling him back tomorrow? We are not going to deal with such low-caste people! How can you even think of measuring someone who carts the shit from people's houses?"

Narayan was silent. After working for a few minutes, he went outside to the fire, where she was still stirring her vigorous rage into the pot.

"I think, Ma, that you are wrong," he said, keeping his voice so soft that it was almost lost in the crackling fire. "I think I should sew for anybody who comes to me, Brahmin or Bhunghi."

"You do, do you? Wait till your father comes home, see what he says about it! Brahmin yes, Bhunghi no!"

That evening Roopa told Dukhi about their son's outrageous ideas, and he turned to Narayan. "I think your mother is right."

Narayan dropped his hand from the crank and braked the fly wheel. "Why did you send me to learn tailoring?"

"That's a stupid question. To improve your life—why else?"

"Yes. Because the uppers treat us so badly. And now you are behaving just like them. If that's what you want, then I am going back to town. I cannot live like this anymore."

Roopa was stunned by the ultimatum, and horrified when Dukhi turned to her and said, "I think he is right."

"Father-of-Ishvar, make up your mind! First you say I am right, then you say he is right! From side to side you sway, like a pot without an arse! And this is what comes from sending him to town! Forgetting our village ways! It will only lead to trouble!" Boiling and bubbling, she left the hut, calling Amba, Pyari, Padma, and Savitri to come and hear what-all crazy things were happening in her unfortunate household.

"Toba, toba!" said Savitri. "Poor Roopa, so upset she is shaking."

"Children—Hai Ram," said Pyari, throwing up her hands. "How easily they forget about a mother's feelings."

"What to do," said Amba. "We feed them milk from our breast when they are babies, but we cannot feed them good sense." "Be patient," said Padma. "Everything will be all right." After bathing in their sympathy, Roopa was calmer. The thought of losing her son a second time made her think carefully. She forgave him his lunatic proposals and agreed to turn a blind eye to them on the basis of a compromise: she would reserve the right to control entry into her hut; some customers would have to conduct their transactions outside.

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TWO YEARS later Narayan could afford to build his own hut, next to his parents'. Roopa wept that he was abandoning them. "Again and again he breaks his mother's heart," she complained. "How will I look after him and his business? Why must he separate?"

"But Ma, it's only thirty feet away," said Narayan. "You are welcome there any time to sharpen my pencils."

"Sharpen pencils, he says! As if that's all I do for him!"

Eventually, though, she got accustomed to the idea and made it a point of pride, speaking of the other hut to her friends as her son's factory. He bought a large worktable, a clothes stand, and a new foot-operated sewing-machine which could do straight and zigzag stitches.

For this last purchase he went to take Ashraf Chacha's advice. The little town had grown since his departure, and Muzaffar Tailoring Company was doing well. Ishvar had rented a room near the shop. From assistant, Ashraf had elevated him to partner. The brothers agreed that their father need not work anymore, between them they would provide for their parents.

"You are such good boys," said Dukhi, when Narayan told him of the decision. "We are truly blessed by God."

Roopa fetched the vest and choli made long ago by their children, and faded by now. "Remember these?"

"I didn't know you still had them." "The day you and Ishvar brought these for us, you were so young, both of you," she said, starting to cry. "But even then I

knew, in my heart, that everything would be all right in the end.” She went to announce the good tidings to her friends, who hugged her and teased her that she would soon become rich and not have anything to do with them.

“But one thing is certain,” said Padma. “Time for marriage has come close.”

“You must start looking for two suitable daughters-in-law,” said Savitri.

“Don’t delay any longer,” said Pyari.

“We will help you with everything, don’t worry,” said Amba. The happy news spread within their community, and outside it. Among the upper castes, there was still anger and resentment because of what a Chamaar had accomplished. One man in particular, Thakur Dharamsi—who always took charge of the district polls at election time, delivering votes to the political party of his choice—taunted the tailor periodically.

“There is a dead cow waiting for you,” he notified Narayan through a servant. Narayan merely passed on the message to other Chamaars, who were happy to have the carcass. Another time, when a goat perished in one of the drains on Thakur Dharamsi’s property, he sent for Narayan to unclog it. Narayan politely sent his reply that he was grateful for the offer but was no longer in this line of work.

Among the Chamaars in the village, he was now looked upon as the spokesman for their caste, their unelected leader. Dukhi wore his son’s success modestly, out of sight, indulging himself only sometimes, when he sat smoking with his friends under the tree by the river. Slowly, his son was becoming more prosperous than many upper-caste villagers. Narayan paid to have a new well dug in the untouchable section of the village. He leased the land on which the two huts stood, and replaced them with a pukka house, one of only seven in the village. It was large enough to accommodate his parents and his business. And, thought Roopa fondly, a wife and children before long.

Dukhi and she would have preferred the older son’s marrying first. But when they offered to find him a wife, Ishvar made it clear he was not interested. By now, Roopa had learned that trying

to make her sons do what they did not want to do was a futile endeavour. "Learning big-town ways," she grumbled, "forgetting our old ways," and left it at that, turning her attention to Narayan.

They made inquiries, and a suitable girl from another village was recommended. A showing-day was fixed, when the boy's family would call on the girl's family. Roopa made certain that Amba, Pyari, Padma, and Savitri were included in plans for the visit—they were like family, she said. Ishvar chose not to go, but arranged a twenty-seven-seater Leyland to transport the bride-viewing party.

The battered little bus arrived in the village at nine in the morning, and stopped in a cloud of dust. The opportunity for a bus ride attracted volunteers for the auspicious event, many more than could be accommodated in that modest conveyance. "Narayan is like a son to me," said one. "It's my duty to come. How can I let him down at this most important time?"

"I will not be able to hold my head up if you don't take me," pleaded another, refusing to take no for an answer. "Please don't leave me behind."

"I have attended every single bride-showing in our community," bragged a third. "You need my expertise." Many took their going for granted, and climbed aboard without bothering to check with Dukhi or Roopa. When the excursion was ready to commence an hour later, there were thirty-eight people crammed inside, and a dozen sitting cross-legged on the roof. The driver, who had witnessed nasty accidents with low branches along rural roads, refused to proceed. "Get down from the top! Down, everybody, down!" he yelled at the ones settled serenely in lotus positions. So the dozen from the roof had to be left behind, and the bus set off at a sensible crawl.

They reached their destination two and a half hours later. The girl's parents were impressed by the bus and the size of the visiting delegation, as was the entire village. The thirty-eight visitors stood around uncertainly. There was not room for everyone inside the dwelling. After much agonizing, Dukhi selected a group of seven, including his best friends, Chhotu and Dayaram. Padma and Savitri also made it in, but Amba and Pyari had to wait outside

with the unlucky thirty-one, watching the proceedings through the doorway.

Inside, the inner circle had tea with the parents and described the journey. "Such fine scenery we saw along the way," said Dukhi to the girl's father.

"Once, all of a sudden, the bus made a big noise and stopped," said Chhotu. "It took a while to start again. We were worried about being late."

By and by, the parents compared genealogies and family histories, while Roopa talked modestly of Narayan's success to the girl's mother. "So many customers he has. Everybody wants to have clothes made by Narayan only. As if there is no other tailor in the whole country. My poor son works morning till night, sewing, sewing, sewing. But his expensive new machine is so good. What-all wonderful things it can do."

Then it was time for the bride-viewing moment. "Come, my daughter," called the mother casually. "Bring something sweet for our guests."

The girl, Radha, sixteen years old, entered with a platter of laddoos. Conversation ceased. Everyone took a good look as she went around with her head modestly lowered and eyes averted. Outside, there was much whispering and jockeying for position as they tried to catch a glimpse.

Narayan kept his eyes on the laddoos when she stopped in front of him. He was nervous about looking—her family was watching for his reaction. The platter had almost reached the end of its circuit. If he didn't see her now, there would be no second chance, she would not return, that was certain, and he would have to make a blind decision. Look, oh look! he persuaded himself—and looked. He caught a profile of her features as she bent before her mother.

"No, daughter," said the mother, "none for me," and with that, Radha disappeared.

Then it was time to go home. During the return journey, those who had been unable to see or hear from outside were fully briefed. Now everyone had the facts, and were able to take part

in final discussions back in the village. Opinions were entertained in order of seniority.

“Her size is good, and colour is good.” “The family also looks honest, hardworking.” “Maybe horoscopes should be compared before final decision.” “No horoscopes! Why horoscopes? That is all brahminical nonsense, our community does not do that.”

Thus it continued for a while, and Narayan listened silently. His approval at the end, though not essential, did serve to strengthen the consensus, to his parents’ relief and the gathering’s applause.

Now the arrangements went ahead. Some of the traditional expenditures were sidestepped at Narayan’s insistence; he did not want Radha’s family indebted to the moneylender in perpetuity. All he would accept from them were six brass vessels: three round-bottomed, and three flat.

Roopa was furious. “What-all do you understand about complicated things like dowry? Have you been married before?”

Dukhi was also upset. “Much more than six vessels is due. It is our right.”

“Since when has our community practised dowry?” asked Narayan quietly.

“If it’s okay for the uppers to do it, so can we.”

But Narayan stood firm, with Ishvar’s backing. “Learning big-town ways,” grumbled their mother, foiled again. “Forgetting our village ways.”

There was a last-minute hitch. Two days before the wedding, under coercion from Thakur Dharamsi and others, the village musicians withdrew their services. They were too frightened to even meet with the family and discuss the problem. So Ishvar arranged for replacements from town. Narayan did not mind the cost of transporting them and their instruments. It was a small price, he felt, for frustrating the landlords.

The new musicians did not know some of the local wedding songs. The elders among the guests were quite concerned—strange anthems and chants could be unpropitious for the marriage. “Especially for producing children,” said an old woman who used

to assist at births before her infirmity. “The womb doesn’t become fertile just like that, without correct procedure.”

“True,” said another. “I have seen it with my own eyes. When the songs are not sung properly, nothing but unhappiness for husband and wife.” They conferred in worried groups, debating and discussing, trying to determine the antidote that would thwart the impending ill-fortune. They looked disapprovingly at those who were enjoying all that alien music and dancing.

The celebrations lasted three days, during which Chamaar families in the village ate the best meals of their lives. Ashraf and his family, the guests of honour, were lodged and looked after in Narayan’s house, which made some people unhappy. There were mutterings about an inauspicious Muslim presence, but the protests were few and muted. And by the third night, to the elders’ relief, the musicians were able to pick up many of the local songs.

A son was born was born to Radha and Narayan; they named him Omprakash. People came to sing and rejoice with them at the happy occasion. The proud grandfather personally carried sweets to every house in the village.

Later that week, Dukhi's friend Chhotu came with his wife to see the newborn. Taking Dukhi and Narayan aside, he whispered, "The uppers chucked the sweets in the garbage."

They did not doubt his word; he would know, for he collected the trash from many of those houses. The news was hurtful but Narayan laughed it away. "More for the ones who found the packages."

Visitors continued to arrive, marvelling at how healthy the baby looked, considering it was a Chamaar's child, and how it was always smiling. "Even when he is hungry there is no puling or mewling," Radha became fond of boasting. "Just makes a tiny *kurr-kurr*, which stops as soon as he gets my breast." daughters were born after Omprakash. Two survived.

Their names were Leela and Rekha. No sweets were distributed.

Narayan began teaching his son to read and write, conducting the lessons while sewing. The man sat at the sewing-machine, the child sat with slate and chalk. By the time Omprakash was five, he could also do buttons with great style, imitating the flourish with which his father licked the thread and shot it through the needle's eye, or his flair in stabbing the needle through the cloth.

"All day he spends stuck to his Bapa," grumbled Radha happily, surveying the adoring father and son.

Her mother-in-law reviewed the scene and drank it in with pleasure. "Daughters are a mother's responsibility but sons are for the father," pronounced Roopa, as though she had been granted a brand-new revelation, and Radha received it as such, nodding solemnly.

In the week following Omprakash's fifth birthday, Narayan took him to the tannery, where the Chamaars were busy at work. Since his return to the village, he had continued to join in their labours periodically, helping with whatever stage of skinning, curing, tanning, or dyeing that was in progress. And now he proudly showed his child how it was done.

But Omprakash held back. Narayan did not like this behaviour. He insisted the boy dirty his hands.

“Chhee! It stinks!” shrieked Omprakash.

“I know it stinks. Do it anyway.” He seized the boy’s hands and dunked them in the tanning vat, plunging him in to the elbows. He was ashamed of his son’s display before his fellow Chamaars.

“I don’t want to do this! I want to go home! Please, Bapa, take me home now!”

“Tears or no tears, you will learn this work,” said Narayan grimly.

Omprakash sobbed and wailed, going into convulsions of rage, wrenching his hands away. “You do that and I will throw your whole body inside,” his father threatened, soaking the arms again and again.

The others tried to persuade Narayan to let it be—the child might have a fit or seizure of some sort, they feared, the way he was screaming hysterically. “It’s his first day,” they said. “Next week he will do better.” But Narayan forced him to keep at it till he called a halt an hour later.

Omprakash was still crying when they got home. On the porch, Radha was massaging her mother-in-law’s scalp with coconut oil. They upset the bottle in their rush to comfort him. Roopa tried to hug her grandson but the thin grey strands hanging greasy and stiff over her forehead made him pull away. He had never seen his grandmother look so frightful.

“What is ailing him? What have you done to him, my poor little laughing-playing child?”

Narayan explained how they had spent the morning, and Dukhi laughed to hear it. The entire episode made Radha furious. “Why must you torment the boy? There is no need to make my Om do such dirty work!”

“Dirty work? You, a Chamaar’s daughter! Saying it is dirty work!”

She was startled by the outburst. It was the first time Narayan had shouted at her. “But why does he—”

“How will he appreciate what he has if he does not learn what

his forefathers did? Once a week he will come with me! Whether he likes it or not!"

Radha silently appealed to her father-in-law and began mopping up the coconut oil. Dukhi acknowledged her by tilting his head. Later, when he and Narayan were alone, he said, "Son, I agree with you. But no matter what we think, once a week is only a game. It will never be for him like it was for us. And thank God for that."

Omprakash spent the rest of the day in misery, in the kitchen, clinging to his mother. Radha kept patting his head while doing her work. "Won't only leave me alone," she grumbled happily to her mother-in-law. "I still have to chop the spinach and make the chapatis. God knows when I'll finish."

Roopa crinkled her forehead. "When sons are unhappy, they remember their mothers."

In the evening, while his father was relaxing on the porch, his eyes closed, Omprakash crept out and began massaging his feet, the way he had seen his mother do it. Narayan started, and opened his eyes. He looked down, saw his son and smiled. He held out his arms to him.

Omprakash leapt into them, flinging his hands round his father's neck. They stayed hugging for a few minutes without speaking a word. Then Narayan pried the child's fingers loose and sniffed them. He offered his own to him. "See? We both have the same smell. It's an honest smell."

The child nodded. "Bapa, shall I do some more chumpee for your feet?"

"Okay." He watched fondly as his son squeezed the heel, rubbed the arch, kneaded the sole, and massaged each toe, copying Radha's methodical manner. Roopa and Radha stood concealed in the doorway, beaming at each other.

The weekly leather-working lessons continued for the next three years. Omprakash was taught how to pack the skins with salt to cure them. He collected the fruit of the myrobalan tree to make tannin solution. He learned to prepare dyes, and how to impress the dye in the leather. This was the filthiest task of them all, and it made him retch.

The ordeal ended when he was eight. He was sent to his uncle Ishvar for exposure to a wider range of sewing skills at Muzaffar Tailoring Company. Besides, the school in town now accepted everyone, high caste or low, while the village school continued to be restricted.



RADHA AND NARAYAN were not as desolate as Roopa and Dukhi had been when their sons had left to apprentice with Ashraf Chacha. A new road and bus service had shrunk the gap between village and town. They could look forward to frequent visits from Omprakash; besides, they had their two little daughters at home.

Still, Radha felt unjustly deprived of her son's presence. A popular song about a bird that was the singer's constant companion, but which for some inexplicable reason had decided to fly away, became Radha's favourite. She ran to their new Murphy transistor and turned up the volume, shushing everyone when the familiar introduction trickled forth. When her son was home, the song meant nothing to her.

Omprakash's sisters resented his visits. No one paid attention to Leela and Rekha if their brother was in the house. It started as soon as he stepped in the door.

"Look at my child! How thin he has become!" complained Radha. "Is your uncle feeding you or not?"

"He looks thin because he has grown taller," was Narayan's explanation.

But she used the excuse to lavish on him special treats like cream, dry fruits, and sweetmeats, bursting with pleasure while he ate. Now and then her fingers swooped into his plate, scooped up a morsel and tenderly transported it to his mouth. No meal was complete unless she had fed him something with her own hands.

Roopa, too, relished the sight of her lunching, munching grandson. She sat like a referee, reaching to wipe away a crumb from the corner of his mouth, refilling his plate, pushing a glass of lussi within his reach. A smile appeared on her wrinkled face,

and the sharp light of her memory flickered over those pitch-dark nights from many years ago when she would creep out into enemy territory to gather treats for Ishvar and Narayan.

Omprakash's sisters were silent spectators at the mealtime ritual. Leela and Rekha watched enviously, knowing better than to protest or plead with the adults. During rare moments when no one was around, Omprakash shared the delicacies with them. More often, though, the two girls wept quietly in their beds at night.



NARAYAN sat on the porch at dusk with his father's aged feet in his lap, massaging the cracked, tired soles. Omprakash, fourteen now, was expected home tomorrow on a week-long visit.

"Ah!" sighed Dukhi with pleasure, then asked if he had checked on the newborn calf.

There was no answer. He repeated his question, nudging Narayan's chest with the big toe. "Son? Are you listening?" "Yes Bapa, I was just thinking." He resumed the massage, staring into the dusk. His fingers worked with extra vigour to make up for his silence.

"What is it, what's bothering you?"

"I was just thinking that...thinking how nothing changes. Years pass, and nothing changes."

Dukhi sighed again but not with pleasure. "How can you say that? So much has changed. Your life, my life. Your occupation, from leather to cloth. And look at your house, your—"

"Those things, yes. But what about the more important things? Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals."

"Those kinds of things take time to change."

"More than twenty years have passed since independence. How much longer? I want to be able to drink from the village well, worship in the temple, walk where I like."

Dukhi withdrew his foot from Narayan's lap and sat up. He

was remembering his own defiance of the caste system, when he had sent his little sons to Ashraf. He felt pride at Narayan's words, but also fear. "Son, those are dangerous things to want. You changed from Chamaar to tailor. Be satisfied with that."

Narayan shook his head. "That was your victory."

He resumed massaging his father's feet while the dusk deepened around them. Inside, Radha was lost in happy preparations for her son's arrival the next day. By and by, she brought a lamp to the porch. Within seconds it attracted a cluster of midges. Then a brown moth arrived to keep its assignation with the light. Dukhi watched it try to beat its fragile wings through the lamp glass.

* * * * *

THAT WEEK, parliamentary elections were being conducted, and the district was under siege by politicians, sloganeers, and sycophants. As usual, the assortment of political parties and their campaigning antics assured lively entertainment for the village.

Some people complained that it was difficult to enjoy it all properly, with the air hot enough to sear the lungs—the government should have waited for the rains to come first. Narayan and Dukhi attended the rallies with their friends, taking Omprakash along to see the fun. Roopa and Radha resented the time stolen from the boy's brief visit.

The speeches were crammed with promises of every shape and size: promises of new schools, clean water, and health care; promises of land for landless peasants, through redistribution and stricter enforcement of the Land Ceiling Act; promises of powerful laws to punish any discrimination against, and harassment of, backward castes by upper castes; promises to abolish bonded labour, child labour, sati, dowry system, child marriage.

"There must be a lot of duplication in our country's laws," said Dukhi. "Every time there are elections, they talk of passing the same ones passed twenty years ago. Someone should remind them they need to apply the laws."

"For politicians, passing laws is like passing water," said Narayan. "It all ends down the drain."

On election day the eligible voters in the village lined up outside the polling station. As usual, Thakur Dharamsi took charge of the voting process. His system, with the support of the other landlords, had been working flawlessly for years.

The election officer was presented with gifts and led away to enjoy the day with food and drink. The doors opened and the voters filed through. "Put out your fingers," said the attendant monitoring the queue.

The voters complied. The clerk at the desk uncapped a little bottle and marked each extended finger with indelible black ink, to prevent cheating.

"Now put your thumbprints over here," said the clerk.

They placed their thumbprints on the register to say they had voted, and departed.

Then the blank ballots were filled in by the landlords' men. The election officer returned at closing time to supervise the removal of ballot boxes to the counting station, and to testify that voting had proceeded in a fair and democratic manner.

Sometimes, there was more excitement if rival landlords in the district were unable to sort out their differences and ended up supporting opposing candidates. Then their gangs battled it out. Naturally, those who captured the most polling booths and stuffed the most ballot boxes got their candidate elected.

This year, however, there were no fights or gun battles. All in all, it was a dreary day, and Omprakash was depressed as he returned home with his father and grandfather. Tomorrow he had to go back to Muzaffar Tailoring Company. The week had passed much too quickly.

They sat on the charpoy outside the house to enjoy the evening air while Omprakash fetched water for them. The trees were loud with frantic birdsong. "Next time there is an election, I want to mark my own ballot," said Narayan.

"They won't let you," said Dukhi. "And why bother? You think it will change anything? Your gesture will be a bucket falling in a well deeper than centuries. The splash won't be seen or heard."

"It is still my right. And I will exercise it in the next election, I promise you."

"Lately you are brooding too much about rights. Give up this dangerous habit." Dukhi paused, brushing away a column of red ants marching towards the foot of the charpoy. The creatures scurried in all directions. "Suppose you do make the mark yourself. You think they cannot open the box and destroy the votes they don't like?"

"They cannot. The election officer must account for every piece of paper."

"Give up this idea. It is wasting your time—and your time is your life."

"Life without dignity is worthless."

The red ants had regrouped, though it was too dark for Dukhi to see. Radha brought the lamp out to the dusk-devoured porch, instantly populating it with shadows. The fragrance of wood smoke clung to her clothes. She lingered for a moment in the silence, searching her husband's face.

* * * * *

"GOVERNMENT has no sense," the people complained about the state assembly elections. "No sense at all. It's the wrong month—with the earth parched and the air on fire, who has time to think about voting? Two years ago they made the same mistake."

Narayan had not forgotten his promise to his father two years ago. He went off alone to vote that morning. The turnout was poor. A ragged queue meandered by the door of the schoolhouse set up as the polling station. Inside, the smell of chalk dust and stale food made him remember the day when he was a small boy, when he and Ishvar had been beaten by the teacher for touching the slates and books of upper-caste children.

He swallowed his fear and asked for his ballot. "No, that's okay," explained the men at the table. "Just make your thumbprint here, we will do the rest."

"Thumbprint? I will sign my full name. After you give me my ballot."

Two men in line behind Narayan were inspired by him. "Yes, give us our ballots," they said. "We also want to make our mark."

"We cannot do that, we don't have instructions."

"You don't need instructions. It is our right as voters."

The attendants whispered among themselves, then said, "Okay, please wait." One of them left the polling station.

He returned shortly with a dozen men. Thakur Dharamsi, who, sixteen years ago, had ordered the musicians not to play at Narayan's wedding, was with them. "What is it, what's the trouble?" he asked loudly from outside.

They pointed at Narayan through the door.

"So," muttered Thakur Dharamsi. "I should have known. And who are the other two?"

His assistant did not know their names.

"It doesn't matter," said Thakur Dharamsi. His men entered with him, and it became very crowded inside. He wiped his brow and held out the wet hand under Narayan's nose. "On such a hot day you make me leave my house to sweat. Are you trying to humiliate me? Don't you have some clothes to sew? Or a cow to poison and skin?"

"We'll go as soon as we mark our ballots," said Narayan. "It is our right."

Thakur Dharamsi laughed, and his men joined in approvingly. They stopped when he stopped. "Enough jokes. Make your thumbprint and go."

"After we vote."

This time he did not laugh, but raised his hand as though in farewell and left the booth. The men seized Narayan and the other two. They forced their thumbs to the ink pad and completed the registration. Thakur Dharamsi whispered to his assistant to take the three to his farm.

* * * * *

THROUGHOUT the day, at intervals, they were flogged as they

hung naked by their ankles from the branches of a banyan tree. Drifting in and out of consciousness, their screams grew faint. Thakur Dharamsi's little grandchildren were kept indoors. "Do your lessons," he told them. "Read your books, or play with your toys. The nice new train set I bought you."

"But it's a holiday," they pleaded. "We want to play outside."

"Not today. Some bad men are outside." He shooed them away from the rear windows.

In the distance, in the far field, his men urinated on the three inverted faces. Semiconscious, the parched mouths were grateful for the moisture, licking the trickle with feeble urgency. Thakur Dharamsi warned his employees that for the time being the news should not spread, especially not in the downstream settlement. That might disrupt the voting and force the election commission to countermand the results, wasting weeks of work. In the evening, after the ballot boxes were taken away, burning coals were held to the three men's genitals, then stuffed into their mouths. Their screams were heard through the village until their lips and tongues melted away. The still, silent bodies were taken down from the tree. When they began to stir, the ropes were transferred from their ankles to their necks, and the three were hanged. The bodies were displayed in the village square.

Thakur Dharamsi's goondas, freed now from their election duties, were turned loose upon the lower castes. "I want those achhoot jatis to learn a lesson," he said, distributing liquor to his men before their next assignment. "I want it to be like the old days, when there was respect and discipline and order in our society. And keep an eye on that Chamaar-tailor's house, make sure no one gets away."

The goondas began working their way towards the untouchable quarter. They beat up individuals at random in the streets, stripped some women, raped others, burned a few huts. News of the rampage soon spread. People hid, waiting for the storm to blow over.

"Good," said Thakur Dharamsi, as night fell and reports reached him of his men's success. "I think they will remember this for a long time." He ordered that the bodies of the two

nameless individuals should be left by the river bank, to be reclaimed by their relations. "My heart is soft towards those two families, whoever they are," he said. "They have suffered enough. Let them mourn their sons and cremate them."

That was the end of the punishment, but not for Narayan's family. "He does not deserve a proper cremation," said Thakur Dharamsi. "And the father is more to blame than the son. His arrogance went against everything we hold sacred." What the ages had put together, Dukhi had dared to break asunder; he had turned cobblers into tailors, distorting society's timeless balance. Crossing the line of caste had to be punished with the utmost severity, said the Thakur.

"Catch them all—the parents, wife, children," he told his men. "See that no one escapes."

As the goondas broke into Narayan's house, Amba, Pyari, Savitri, and Padma screamed from the porch to leave their friends alone. "Why are you harassing them? They have done nothing wrong!"

The women's families pulled them back, terrified for them. Their neighbours did not dare to even look outside, cowering in their huts in shame and fear, praying that the night would pass quickly, without the violence swallowing any more innocents. When Chhotu and Dayaram tried to sneak away for help to the district thanedar, they were chased down and knifed.

Dukhi, Roopa, Radha, and the daughters were bound and dragged into the main room. "Two are missing," said Thakur Dharamsi. "Son and grandson." Someone checked around, and informed him that they were living in town. "Well, never mind, these five will do."

The mutilated body was brought in and set before the captives. The room was dark. Thakur Dharamsi sent for a lamp so the family could see.

The light tore away the benevolent cloak of darkness. The naked corpse's face was a burnt and broken blur. Only by the red birthmark on his chest could they recognize Narayan.

A long howl broke from Radha. But the sound of grief soon mingled with the family's death agony; the house was set alight.

The first flames licked at the bound flesh. The dry winds, furiously fanning the fire, showed the only spark of mercy during this night. The blaze swiftly enfolded all six of them.

* * * * *

BY THE TIME Ishvar and Omprakash heard the news in town, the ashes had cooled, and the charred bodies were broken and dispersed into the river. Mumtaz Chachi held Omprakash close to her while Ashraf Chacha accompanied Ishvar to the police station to register a First Information Report.

The sub-inspector, suffering from an earache, kept poking around inside with his little finger. He found it hard to concentrate. "What name? Spell it again. Slowly."

To ingratiate themselves with the figure of authority, Ashraf advised him on a home remedy, although he was seething with anger and wanted to slap the fellow across his face to make him attend. "Warm olive oil will give you relief," he said. "My mother used to put it for me."

"Really? How much? Two or three drops?"

Then, with great reluctance, the police went to the house to verify the allegations in the First Information Report. They reported that nothing was found to support charges of arson and murder.

The sub-inspector was cross with Ishvar. "What kind of rascality is this? Trying to fill up the F.I.R. with lies? You filthy achhoot castes are always out to make trouble! Get out before we charge you with public mischief!"

Too stunned to speak, Ishvar looked at Ashraf, who tried to intervene. The sub-inspector cut him off rudely: "This matter doesn't concern your community. We don't interfere when you Muslims and your mullahs discuss problems in your community, do we?"

For the next two days, Ashraf kept the shop closed, crushed by the helplessness he felt. Mumtaz and he did not dare console Omprakash or Ishvar—what words were there for such a loss,

and for an injustice so immense? The best they could do was weep with them.

On the third day, Ishvar asked him to open up the shop, and they began sewing again.

I will gather a small army of Chamaars, provide them with weapons, then march to the landlords' houses," said Omprakash, his sewing-machine racing. "It will be easy to find enough men. We'll do it like the Naxalites." Head bent over his work, he described for Ishvar and Ashraf Chacha the strategies employed by the peasant uprisings in the northeast. "At the end of it we'll cut off their heads and put them on spikes in the marketplace. Their kind will never dare ~~to approach our community again~~ thoughts of revenge. His own first impulse had been the same; how could he blame his nephew? The hands were easy to divert with sewing, but the tormented mind was difficult to free from turmoil. "Tell me, Om, how do you know so much of this?"

"I read about it in newspapers. But isn't it common sense? In every low-caste family there is someone mistreated by zamindars. They will be eager to take revenge, for sure. We'll slaughter the Thakurs and their goondas. And those police ~~hands~~ afterwards, what?" asked Ishvar gently, when he felt it was time for his nephew to turn his thoughts away from death, towards life. "They will take you to court and hang you."

"I don't care. I would be dead anyway if I was living with my parents, instead of safely in this shop."

"Om, my child," said Ashraf. "Vengeance should not be our concern. The murderers will be punished. Inshallah, in this world or the next. Maybe they already have, who knows?"

"Yes, Chachaji, who knows?" echoed Omprakash sarcastically and went to bed.

Since that terrible night six months ago, Ishvar had given up their lodging in the rooming house, at Ashraf's insistence. There was plenty of space in the house, he claimed, now that his daughters had all married and left. He partitioned the room over the shop—one side for Mumtaz and himself, the other for Ishvar and his nephew.

They heard Omprakash moving around upstairs, getting ready for bed. Mumtaz sat at the back of the house, praying. "This revenge talk is okay if it remains talk," said Ishvar. "But what if he goes back to the village, does something foolish."

They fretted and agonized for hours over the boy's future, then ascended the stairs to retire for the night. Ashraf followed Ishvar around the partition where Omprakash lay sleeping, and they stood together for a while, watching him.

"Poor child," whispered Ashraf. "So much he has suffered. How can we help him?"

The answer, in time, was provided by the faltering fortunes of Muzaffar Tailoring Company.



A YEAR had passed since the murders when a ready-made clothing store opened in town. Before long, Ashraf's list of clients began to shrink.

Ishvar said the loss would be temporary. "A big new shop with stacks of shirts to choose from—that attracts the customers. It makes them feel important, trying on different patterns. But the traitors will return when the novelty wears off and the clothes don't fit."

Ashraf was not so optimistic. "Those lower prices will defeat us. They make clothes by the hundreds in big factories, in the city. How can we compete?"

Soon the two tailors and apprentice were lucky to find themselves busy one day a week. "Strange, isn't it," said Ashraf. "Something I've never even seen is ruining the business I have owned for forty years."

"But you've seen the ready-made shop."

"No, I mean the factories in the city. How big are they? Who owns them? What do they pay? None of this I know, except that they are beggaring us. Maybe I'll have to go and work for them in my old age."

"Never," said Ishvar. "But perhaps I should go." "Nobody is going anywhere," Ashraf's fist banged the worktable. "We will share what there is here, I said it only as a joke. You think I would really send away my own children?" "Don't be upset, Chachaji, I know you didn't mean it." Before long, however, the joke turned into a serious

consideration as customers continued to flee to the ready-made store. "If it goes on like this, the three of us will be sitting from morning till night, swatting flies," said Ashraf. "For me, it does not matter. I have lived my life—tasted its fruit, both sweet and bitter. But it is so unfair to Om." He lowered his voice. "Maybe it would be best for him to try elsewhere."

"But wherever he goes, I would have to go," said Ishvar. "He is still too young, too many foolish ideas clogging his head." "Not his fault, the devil encourages him. Of course you have to be with him, you are now his father. What you can both do is, go for a short time. Doesn't have to be permanent. A year or two. Work hard, earn money, and come back."

"That's true. They say you can make money very quickly in the city, there is so much work and opportunity."

"Exactly. And with that cash you can open some kind of business here when you return. A paan shop, or a fruit stall, or toys. You can even sell ready-made clothes, who knows." They laughed at this, but agreed that a couple of years away would be best for Omprakash.

"There is only one difficulty in the way," said Ishvar. "I don't know anyone in the city. How to get started?"

"Everything will fall into place. I have a very good friend who will help you find work. His name is Nawaz. He is also a tailor, has his own shop there."

They sat up past midnight, making plans, imagining the new future in the city by the sea, the city that was filled with big buildings, wide, wonderful roads, beautiful gardens, and millions and millions of people working hard and accumulating wealth.

"Look at me, getting excited as if I was leaving with you," said Ashraf. "And if I was younger I would, too. It will be lonely here. My dream was that you and Om would be with me till the end of my days."

"But we will be," said Ishvar. "Om and I will return soon. Isn't that the plan?"



ASHRAF WROTE to his friend requesting him to put up Ishvar and Omprakash when they arrived, help them settle in the city. Ishvar withdrew his savings from the post office and purchased train tickets.

The night before departure, Ashraf gifted them his treasured pair of dressmaking and pinking shears. Ishvar protested it was too much. "Our family has already received so many kindnesses from you, for more than thirty years."

"An eternity of kindness could not repay what you and Narayan did for my family," said Ashraf, swallowing. "Come on, put the shears in your trunk, make an old man happy." He dried his eyes but they grew moist again. "Remember, you are welcome here at any time if it does not work out."

Ishvar clasped his hand and held it to his chest. "Maybe you will visit the city before we come back."

"Inshallah. I have always wanted to go on haj once before I die. And the big boats all sail from the city. So who knows?"

Mumtaz woke early the next morning to make their tea and prepare a food package for their journey. Ashraf sat silent while they ate, overcome by the moment. He spoke only once, to ask, "You have Nawaz's address safe in your pocket?"

They drained their cups and Omprakash gathered them for washing. "Let it be," a tearful Mumtaz stopped him. "I'll do it afterwards."

It was time to leave. They hugged Ashraf and Mumtaz, kissing their cheeks three times. "Ah, these useless old sockets of mine," said Ashraf. "They keep leaking, it's a sickness."

"And we are catching it from you," said Ishvar, as he and Omprakash wiped their own eyes. The sun had not yet risen when they picked up the trunk and bedding and walked towards the railway line.

It was night when the tailors arrived in the city. Groaning and clanking, the train pulled into the station while an announcement blared like gibberish from the loudspeakers. Passengers poured out into the sea of waiting friends and families. There were shrieks of recognition, tears of happiness. The platform became a roiling swirl of humanity. Coolies conducted aggressive forays to offer their muscular services.

Ishvar and Omprakash stood frozen on the edge of the commotion. The sense of adventure that had flowered reluctantly during the journey wilted. "Hai Ram," said Ishvar, wishing for a familiar face. "What a huge crowd."

"Come on," said Omprakash. He took the trunk, struggling urgently against the barrier of bodies and luggage, as though assured that once they were past it, everything would be all right—the city of promise lay beyond this final obstacle.

They ploughed their way through the platform and emerged in the railway station's gigantic concourse, with its ceilings high as the sky and columns reaching up like impossible trees. They wandered around in a daze, making inquiries, asking for assistance. People fired back hurried answers to their questions, or pointed, and they nodded gratefully but learned nothing. It took them an hour to discover they needed a local train to reach Ashraf's friend. The journey took twenty minutes.

Someone they asked for directions pointed them down the right road. The shop-cum-residence was a ten-minute walk from the station. The pavements were covered with sleeping people. A thin yellow light from the streetlamps fell like tainted rain on the rag-wrapped bodies, and Omprakash shivered. "They look like corpses," he whispered. He gazed hard at them, searching for a sign of life—a rising chest, a quivering finger, a fluttering eyelid. But the lamplight was not sufficient for detecting minute movements.

Relief began replacing their fears as they neared the home of Ashraf Chacha's friend. The nightmare of arrival was about to end. To get to the shop they crossed the planks thrown across the open sewer. Omprakash's foot almost went through a rotten patch in the wood. Ishvar grabbed his elbow. They knocked on the door.

"Salaam alaikum," they greeted Nawaz, gazing upon him with expressions appropriate towards a benefactor.

Nawaz barely reciprocated the greeting. He pretended to know nothing about their coming. After numerous denials he conceded there had been a letter from Ashraf, and grudgingly agreed to let them sleep under the awning behind the kitchen for a few days, till they found accommodation. "I do this for no one but Ashraf," he emphasized. "The thing is, there is hardly room here for my own family."

"Thank you, Nawazbhai," said Ishvar. "Yes, just for a few days, thank you."

They could smell food cooking, but Nawaz did not invite them to eat. Finding a tap outside the building, they washed their hands and faces, and drank, cupping their palms. Light from the house spilled out through the kitchen window. They sat below it and finished the chapatis Mumtaz Chachi had packed, listening to noises from the buildings around them.

The ground under the awning was littered with leaves, potato peelings, unidentifiable fruit stones, fish bones, and two fish heads with vacant eye sockets. "How can we sleep here?" said Omprakash. "It's filthy."

He looked around, and spied a besom beside Nawaz's back door, propped against the downpipe. He borrowed it to sweep the rubbish aside, while Ishvar brought mugfuls of water and splashed the ground before giving it a second going-over with the besom.

The sound brought Nawaz out to investigate. "This place not good enough for you? No one is forcing you to stay."

"No no, it's perfect," said Ishvar. "Just cleaning it a little."

"That's my property you are using," he pointed to the besom.

"Yes, we were—"

"The thing is, you must ask before you take something," he snapped and went in.

They waited till it was dry under the awning, then unrolled their sleeping mats and blankets. Noise from the surrounding buildings did not abate. Radios blared. A man yelled at a woman, beating her, stopping for a bit when she screamed for help, then

starting again. A drunkard shouted abuse, and there was boisterous laughter at his expense. The grind of the traffic was constant. A flickering glow at one window made Omprakash curious; he rose and peered inside. He beckoned to Ishvar to come, look. "Doordarshan!" he whispered excitedly. After a minute or two, someone inside spotted them gazing at the television and told them to be off.

They returned to their bedding and slept badly. Once, they were awakened by shrieks that seemed to come from an animal being slaughtered.

* * * * *

THERE WAS no offer of morning tea from inside the house, which Omprakash found quite offensive. "Customs are different in the city," said Ishvar.

They washed, drank water, and waited around till Nawaz opened his shop. He saw them on the steps, craning, trying to look inside. "Yes? What do you want?"

"Sorry to trouble you, but do you know we are also tailors?" said Ishvar. "Can we do sewing for you? In your shop? Ashraf Chacha told us—"

"The thing is, there is not enough work," said Nawaz, retreating within as he spoke. "You will have to search elsewhere." Ishvar and Om wondered aloud on the steps outside—was this it, the full extent of Nawaz's help? But he came back in a minute with paper and pencil for them, dictating names of tailoring shops and instructions to get there. They thanked him for the advice. "By the way," said Ishvar, "we heard some terrible screams last night. Do you know what happened?"

"It was those pavement-dwellers. One fellow was sleeping in someone else's spot. So they took a brick and bashed his head. Animals, that's what they all are." He returned to his work, and the tailors left.

After stopping for tea in a stall at the street corner, the two spent a futile, frightening day locating the addresses. The street signs were missing sometimes, or obscured by political posters

and advertisements. They had to stop frequently to ask storekeepers and hawkers for directions.

They tried to follow the injunction repeated on several billboards: “Pedestrians! Walk On Pavement!” But this was difficult because of vendors who had set up shop on the concrete. So they walked on the road with the rest, terrified by the cars and buses, marvelling at the crowds who negotiated the traffic nimbly, with an instinct for skipping out of the way when the situation demanded.

“Just takes practice,” said Om with an experienced air.

“Practice at what? Killing or getting killed? Don’t act smart, you’ll get run over.”

But the only mishap they witnessed that day involved a man’s handcart; the rope securing a stack of boxes snapped, scattering the goods. They helped him to reload the cart.

“What’s in them?” asked Om, curious about the rattling.

“Bones,” said the man.

“Bones? From cows and buffaloes?”

“From people like you and me. For export. It’s a very big business.”

They were glad when the cart rolled away. “If I knew what was inside, I would never have stopped to help,” said Ishvar.

By evening, the addresses on the list had been exhausted, yielding neither work nor hope. They tried to make their way back to Nawaz’s shop. Though they had walked this route in the morning, nothing seemed familiar now. Or everything looked the same. Either way it was confusing. Approaching darkness made it worse. The cinema billboards they had hoped to use as landmarks led them astray because all of a sudden there seemed to be so many of them. Was it a right turn or left at the *Bobby* advertisement? Was it the lane with the poster of Amitabh Bachchan - facing geldinghállainofn the belt, while drikning him flashing a hero-type smile at a demure, rustic maiden?

Famished and tired, they at last found Nawaz’s street, and debated whether to buy food before returning to the awning. “Better not,” decided Ishvar. “Nawaz and his bibi will be insulted

if they are expecting us to eat with them today. Maybe last night they were just unprepared."

Their host was at his sewing-machine as they passed the shop. They waved but he didn't appear to notice, and they went round to the back. "I am finished," said Omprakash, unrolling the bedding and letting himself drop.

Lying on their backs, they listened to Nawaz's wife working in the kitchen. A tap was running, glasses rattled, and something clanged. Presently they heard his voice calling "Miriam!" She left the kitchen, and her words were too soft for them to hear. Then from the front came his loud, surly tone again, "No need for all that, I told you already."

"But it's just a little tea," said Miriam. Now husband and wife were both in the kitchen.

"Haramzadi! Don't argue with me! No means no!" They heard the sharp sound of a slap, and Omprakash flinched. A cry escaped her lips. "Let them go to a restaurant! The thing is, you pamper them and they'll never leave!"

Miriam's sobs prevented them outside from picking up what she said, except for fragments: "But why..." and then "...Ashraf's family..."

"Not my family," he spat.

The tailors left the awning and went to the stall where they had stopped for morning tea. After devouring a plate of puri-bhaji, Omprakash said, "What I wonder is, how Ashraf Chacha can have someone so horrible for his friend."

"All people are not the same. Besides, Nawaz's years in the city must have altered him. Places can change people, you know. For better or worse."

"Maybe. But Ashraf Chacha would be ashamed to hear him now. If only we had somewhere else to stay."

"Patience, Om. This is our first day. We'll find something soon."

But in four weeks of searching, they obtained a mere three days of work, at a place called Advanced Tailoring. The proprietor, a man named Jeevan, hired them to meet a deadline. The work was very simple: dhotis and shirts, a hundred of each.

"Who needs so many?" asked Omprakash in amazement. Jeevan strummed his pursed lips with one finger, as though checking the instrument for tuning. He did this whenever he was about to make what he thought was a significant utterance. "Don't repeat it to anyone—the clothes are for bribes." Ordered by someone running in a by-election, he explained. The candidate was going to distribute them to certain important people in his constituency.

There was room for only one tailor in Advanced Tailoring, but Jeevan had props in the back that quickly converted the place into a workshop for three. At a height of four feet from the floor, he arranged planks horizontally on brackets in the walls, making a temporary loft. The planks were supported below with bamboo poles. Then he rented two sewing-machines, hoisted them into the loft, and sent Ishvar and Om up after them.

They settled gingerly on their stools. "Don't be scared," said Jeevan, strumming his lips. "Nothing will happen to you, I have done this many times before. Look, I am working under you—if you collapse, I also get crushed."

The structure was shaky, and trembled heavily when the treadles worked. Traffic passing in the street made Ishvar and Om jiggle up and down on the stools. If a door slammed somewhere in the building, their scissors rattled. But they soon got used to the unsteadiness of their existence.

Returning to solid earth after working twenty hours a day for three days, they found the absence of vibrations quite strange. They thanked Jeevan, helped him dismantle the loft, and returned exhausted to their awning.

"Now for some rest," said Omprakash. "I want to sleep the whole day."

Nawaz came repeatedly to register his disapproval while they lay recovering. He posed in the back door, looking disgusted, or muttering to Miriam about useless, lazy people. "The thing is, work only comes to those who genuinely want it," he preached. "These two are wasters."

Ishvar and Omprakash were too tired to feel indignation, let alone anything stronger. After their day of recuperation, it was

back to the routine: asking for directions in the morning and searching for work until evening.

"God knows how much longer we have to suffer those two," the complaint emerged through the kitchen window. Nawaz did not trouble to lower his voice. "I told you to refuse Ashraf. But did you listen?"

"They do not bother us," she whispered. "They only—"

"Careful, that one hurts, you'll cut my toe!"

Ishvar and Omprakash exchanged questioning looks while Nawaz continued his harangue. "The thing is, if I wanted people living under my back awning, I would rent it for good money. You know how dangerous it is, keeping them for so long? All they have to do is file a claim for the space, and we'd be stuck in court for—aah! Haramzadi, I said be careful! You'll make a cripple out of me, slashing away with your blade!"

The tailors sat up, startled. "I have to see what's going on," whispered Omprakash.

He stretched up on tiptoe and peered through the kitchen window. Nawaz was seated on a chair, his foot upon a low stool. Miriam knelt before it with a safety razor blade, slicing away slivers of tough skin from his corns and calluses.

Omprakash lowered himself from the window and described the sight for his uncle. They chuckled a long time about it. "What I am wondering is, how that chootia gets corns if he sits at his sewing-machine all day," said Omprakash.

"Maybe he walks a lot in his dreams," said Ishvar.

* * * * *

ROUGHLY four months after the tailors' arrival, Nawaz began scolding them one morning when they asked him for advice. "Every day you pester me while I am working. This is a very big city. You think I know the names of all the tailors in it? Go search for yourself. And if you cannot find tailoring, try other things. Be a coolie at the railway station. Use your heads, carry wheat and rice for ration-shop customers. Do something, anything!" Omprakash could see his uncle discomposed by the outburst,

so he was quick to retort. “We wouldn’t mind that at all. But it would be an insult to Ashraf Chacha who trained us for so many years and gave us his skills.”

Nawaz was embarrassed by the reminder of that name. “The thing is, I am very busy right now,” he mumbled. “Please go.”

In the street, Ishvar patted his nephew’s back. “Sabaash, Om. That was a first-class reply you gave him.”

“The thing is,” mimicked Omprakash, “the thing is, I am such a first-class fellow.” They laughed and toasted their tiny victory with half-glasses of tea at the street corner. The celebration was short-lived, however, extinguished by the reality of their dwindling savings. Out of desperation Ishvar took up work for a fortnight in a cobbler’s shop that specialized in custom-made shoes and sandals. His job was to prepare the leather for soles and heels. To induce the hardness required in this type of leather, the shop used vegetable tanning. He was familiar with the process from his village days.

They kept the job a secret, for Ishvar was much ashamed of it. The reek from his hands was strong, and he preserved his distance from Nawaz.

Another month passed, their sixth in the city, with their prospects bleak as ever, when Nawaz opened the back door one evening and said, “Come in, come in. Have some tea with me. Miriam! Three teas!”

They approached and put their heads around the doorway. Had they heard him correctly, they wondered?

“Don’t stand there—come, sit,” he said cheerfully. “There is good news. The thing is, I have work for you.”

“Oh, thank you!” said Ishvar, instantly bursting with gratitude. “That’s the best news! You won’t be sorry, we will sew beautifully for your customers—”

“Not in my shop,” Nawaz rudely snuffed out the exuberance. “It’s somewhere else.” He tried to be pleasant again, smiling and continuing. “You will enjoy this job, believe me. Let me tell you more about it. Miriam! Three teas, I said! Where are you?”

She entered with three glasses. Ishvar and Omprakash stood up, joining their palms: “Salaam, bibi.” They had heard her gentle

silvery voice often, but it was the first time they found themselves face to face with her. In a manner of speaking, that is, for a black burkha hid her countenance. Her eyes, caged behind the two lace-covered openings, were sparkling.

"Ah, good, tea is ready at last," said Nawaz. He pointed out the spot where he wanted the glasses set down, then waved his hand at her in a curt dismissal.

After a few sips he got back to business. "A rich Parsi lady came here this afternoon while you were out. Her shoe fell in the gutter." He snickered. "The thing is, she has a very big export company, and is looking for two good tailors. Her name is Dina Dalal and she left her address for you." He drew it out of his shirt pocket.

"Did she say what kind of sewing?"

"Top quality, latest fashions. But easy to do—she said paper patterns will be provided." He watched them anxiously. "You will go, won't you?"

"Yes, of course," said Ishvar.

"Good, good. The thing is, she said she was handing out these slips at many shops. So lots of tailors will be applying." On the back of the paper he wrote down directions and the train station where they should get off. "Now don't get lost on your way there. Go to sleep early tonight, wake up early in the morning. Nice and fresh, clear-headed, so you can win the job from the lady."



LIKE A MOTHER bustling her charges on the first day of school, Nawaz opened the back door at dawn and roused them by shaking their shoulders, presenting a big smile to their reluctant eyelids. "You don't want to be late. Please come in for tea after washing and gargling. Miriam! Two teas for my friends!" He murmured encouragement, advice, caution while they drank. "The thing is, you have to impress the lady. But it must not sound like big talk. Answer all her questions politely, and never interrupt her. Don't scratch your head or any other part—fine women like her hate that habit. Speak with confidence,

in a medium voice. And take a comb with you, make sure you look neat and tidy before you ring her doorbell. Bad hair makes a very bad impression.”

They listened eagerly, Omprakash making a mental note to buy a new pocket-comb; he had broken his, last week. When the tea was drunk Nawaz sped them on their way. “Khuda hafiz, and come back soon. Come back successful.”

* * * * *

THEY RETURNED after three o’clock, explaining sheepishly to an anxious Nawaz that though they had got there on time, finding the train station for the return journey had been difficult.

“But that would be the same station you got off at in the morning.”

“I know,” Ishvar smiled embarrassedly. “I just cannot tell what happened. The place was so far, we had never been there before, and we—”

“Never mind,” said Nawaz, magnanimous. “A new destination always seems further away than it really is.”

“Every street looks the same. Even when you ask people, the directions are confusing. Even that nice college boy we met on the train had the same problem.”

“You be careful who you talk to. This is not your village. Nice boy could steal your money, cut your throat and throw you in the gutter.”

“Yes, but he was very kind, he even shared his watermelon sherbet with us and—”

“The thing is, did you get the work?”

“Oh yes, we start from Monday,” said Ishvar.

“That’s wonderful. Many, many congratulations and felicitations. Come inside, sit with me, you must be tired. Miriam! Three teas!”

“You are too generous,” said Omprakash. “Just like Ashraf Chacha.”

The sarcasm was lost on Nawaz. “Oh, it’s my responsibility to

help Ashraf's friends. And now that you have found jobs, my next duty is to find you a place to stay."

"No rush, Nawazbhaji," said Ishvar, mildly alarmed. "We are happy where we are, your awning is beautiful, very comfortable."

"Just leave it to me. The thing is, it's almost impossible in this city to find a house. When something becomes available you must grab it. Come on, finish your tea, let's go."

* * * * *

"LAST STOP!" called the conductor, clanging his ticket punch against the chrome railing. The bus skirted the gloomy slum lanes, groaned as it turned the corner, and stopped.

"This one is the new colony," said Nawaz, indicating the field which was in the process of being annexed by the slum. "Let's find the man in charge."

They entered between two rows of shacks, and Nawaz asked someone if Navalkar was around. The woman pointed. They found him in a shack that was his office.

"Yes," said Navalkar, "we still have a few places for rent." His straggly moustache fluttered with studied exaggeration in front of his mouth when he spoke. "Let me show you."

They returned through the two rows of shacks. "This corner house," said Navalkar. "It's vacant, if you want it. Come, look inside."

As he opened the door of the shack, a pariah dog departed through a hole in the back. The mud floor was partially covered with planks. "You can put more pieces of wood if you like," suggested Navalkar. The walls were a patchwork, part plywood and part sheet metal. The roof was old corrugated iron, waterproofed in corroded areas with transparent plastic.

"The tap is out there, in the middle of the lane. Most convenient. You won't have to go far for water, like they do in other, inferior colonies. This is a nice place." He swept his arm around to take in the field. "Newly developed, not too crowded. The rent is one hundred rupees per month. In advance."

Nawaz tapped the walls with his fingers like a doctor examining

a chest, then stamped his foot on a floor plank, making it wobble. He made an approving face. "Well built," he whispered to the tailors.

Navalkar gave a circular nod. "We have even better huts. You want to see?"

"No harm in looking," said Nawaz.

They were led behind the rows of tin-and-plastic jhopadpattis to a set of eight brick-walled huts. The roofs once again were of rusted corrugated metal. "These are two hundred and fifty rupees per month. But for that money you get a pukka floor, and electric light." He pointed to the poles that fed wires to the huts, pirated from the street-lighting supply.

Inside, Nawaz inspected the bare bricks and scratched one with his thumb nail. "Very good quality," he said. "You want to know what I think? For the first month, take the cheaper house. Then if your job goes well and you can afford it, move to this one."

Navalkar kept up his circular nodding. The tailors' silence made Nawaz uneasy. "What's the matter, you don't like it?"

"No no, it's very nice. But money is the problem."

"Money is a problem for everyone," said Navalkar. "Unless you are a politician or a blackmarketeer."

When the forced laughter concluded, Ishvar said, "The advance rent is difficult."

"Don't you have even a hundred rupees?" asked Nawaz disbelievingly.

"It's because of the tailoring lady. She told us we must bring our own sewing-machines. And we have just enough for the rental deposit. These last few months without work, we have been spending and—"

"You useless people!" Nawaz spat, seeing his plan to be rid of them begin to disintegrate. "Wasting your money!"

"If we can stay with you a little longer," pleaded Ishvar, "we could save enough—"

"You think this house is going to wait for you?" he snarled, and Navalkar shook his head on cue.

Desperate, Nawaz turned to him. "Can you make an exception,

Mr. Navalkar? Twenty-five rupees today, which I will pay. And twenty-five from the tailors each week, for the rest."

Navalkar curled his lips, gnawing at the moustache with his lower incisors. He brushed back the wet hairs with his knuckles. "For your sake only. Because I trust you."

Nawaz counted out the money before any minds could be changed. They returned to the first shack, where Navalkar put a lock on the plywood door and gave the key to Ishvar. "Your house now. Live well."

They picked their way through the cracked earth of the field and waited at the bus stop. The tailors looked worried. "My congratulations and felicitations to you again," said Nawaz. "In one day you have found jobs and a new house."

"Only with your help," said Ishvar. "Is Navalkar the landlord?" Nawaz laughed. "Navalkar is a little crook working for a big crook. A slumlord called Thokray, who controls everything in this area—country liquor, hashish, bhung. And when there are riots, he decides who gets burned and who survives."

Seeing the apprehension on Ishvar's face, he added, "You don't have to deal with him. Just pay your rent regularly, you will be all right."

"But then, whose land is this?"

"No one's. The city owns it. These fellows bribe the municipality, police, water inspector, electricity officer. And they rent to people like you. No harm in it. Empty land sitting useless—if homeless people can live there, what's wrong?"

* * * * *

ON THIS LAST night, Nawaz's relief spurred him to greater generosity. "Please eat with me," he invited them in. "Honour me at least once before you go. Miriam! Three dinners!"

He inquired if they were happy under the back awning. "If you prefer, you can sleep indoors. The thing is, that's where I was going to put you anyway, when you first arrived. But I thought to myself, the house is so cramped and crowded, better outside in the fresh air."

"Yes yes, much better," said Ishvar. "We have to thank you for your kindness for six months."

"Has it really been that long? How fast the time has flown." Miriam brought the food to the table and left. Even obscured by the burkha, Ishvar and Omprakash had been able to see her eyes cloud with embarrassment at her husband's hypocrisy.

IV
Small Obstacles

Mirror, razor, shaving brush, plastic cup, loata, copper water pot—Ishvar arranged them on an upturned cardboard carton in one corner of the shack. Trunk and bedding took up most of the remaining space. He hung their clothes from rusted nails protruding through the plywood walls. “So everything fits nicely. We have jobs, we have a house, and soon we’ll find a wife for you.”

Om did not smile. “I hate this place,” he said.

“You want to go back to Nawaz and his awning?”

“No. I want to go back to Ashraf Chacha and his shop.”

“Poor Ashraf Chacha—deserted by his customers.” Ishvar picked up the copper pot and moved to the door.

“I’ll get the water,” offered Om.

He went to the tap in the lane, where a grey-haired woman watched him fumble with the handle to start the flow. Nothing happened. He kicked the standpipe and rattled the spout, shaking out a few drops.

“Don’t you know?” the woman called. “It only runs in the morning.”

Om turned to see who was speaking. She was standing very short in her darkened doorway. “Water only comes in the morning,” she repeated.

“No one told me.”

“Are you a child that you must be told everything?” she scolded, stepping out of her shack. Now he could see she was not short, just badly stooped. “Can’t you use your own intelligence?”

He tried to decide which would best demonstrate his intelligence: retorting or walking away. “Come,” she said, and retreated within. He glanced in the doorway. She spoke again from the darkness, “Are you planning to wait by the tap till dawn?”

Opening the lid of a round-bottomed earthen matka, she transferred two glassfuls into his copper pot. “Remember, you have to fill up early. Wake up late, and you go thirsty. Like the sun and moon, water waits for no one.”

A LONG QUEUE had formed at the tap in the morning when the tailors emerged with toothbrushes and soap to await their turn. From the next shack a man came out smiling, blocking their

way. He was bare above the waist, and his hair hung to his shoulders. "Namaskaar," he greeted them. "But you cannot go like that."

"Why not?"

"If you stand at the tap, brushing your teeth, soaping and scrubbing and washing, you'll start a big fight. People want to fill up before the water goes."

"But what to do?" said Ishvar. "We don't have a bucket."

"No bucket? That's only a small obstacle." Their neighbour disappeared inside, and came back with a galvanized pail. "Use this till you get one."

"What about you?"

"I have another—one bucketful is enough for me." He gathered his hair in a tail and tugged it before spreading it out again. "Now. What else do you need? A small can or something, for toilet?"

"We have a loata," said Ishvar. "But where should we go?"

"Come with me, it's not far." They collected their water, deposited the heavy pail in their shack, then walked towards the railway lines beyond the field with their loata. The water in it sloshed a little as they scrambled over mounds of concrete rubble and broken glass. A foul-smelling stream, greyish yellow, trickled through the mounds, carrying a variety of floating waste in its torpid flux.

"Come to the right side," he said. "The left side is for ladies only." They followed, glad to have a guide; it would have been awkward to have blundered. Women's voices, mothers coaxing their children, rose from that direction, along with the stench. Further down, men were squatting on the tracks or by the ditch to the side, near the prickly scrub and nettles, their backs to the railroad. The ditch was a continuum of the roadside sewer where the hutment colony pitched its garbage.

Past the crouching men, the three found a suitable spot. "The steel rail is very useful," said their neighbour. "Works just like a platform. Puts you higher than the ground, and the shit doesn't tickle your behind when it piles up."

"You know all the tricks, for sure," said Om, as they undid their pants and assumed their positions on the rail.

"Takes very little time to learn." He indicated the men in the scrub. "Now squatting there can be dangerous. Poisonous centipedes crawl about in there. I wouldn't expose my tender parts to them. Also, if you lose your balance in those bushes, you end up with an arseful of thorns."

"Are you speaking from experience?" asked Om, teetering on the rail with laughter.

"Yes—the experience of others. Careful with your loata," he cautioned. "If you spill the water you'll have to go back with a sticky bum."

Ishvar wished the fellow would be quiet for a minute. He did not find the jocularity helpful to the task, especially when his bowels were reacting disagreeably to the communal toilet. It had been decades since he used to go outdoors, as a child. With his father, in the morning's half-darkness, he remembered. When the birds were loud and the village was quiet. And afterwards, washing in the river. But the years with Ashraf Chacha taught him big-town ways, made him forget the village ways.

"Only one problem with squatting on the rail," said their long-haired neighbour. "You have to get up when the train comes, whether you have finished or not. Railway has no respect for our open-air sundaas."

"Now you tell us!" Ishvar craned his neck in both directions, searching up and down the track.

"Relax, relax. There's no train for at least ten minutes. And you can always jump off if you hear a rumbling."

"That's very good advice, as long as one isn't deaf," said Ishvar peevishly. "And what's your name?"

"Rajaram."

"We're very lucky to have you for our guru," said Om.

"Yes, I'm your Goo Guru," he chortled.

Ishvar was not amused, but Om roared with laughter. "Tell me, O Great Goo Guruji, do you recommend that we buy a railway timetable, if we are to squat on the tracks every morning?"

"No need for that, my obedient disciple. In a few days your gut will learn the train timings better than the stationmaster."

The next train was not heard till they had finished, washed,

and buttoned their pants. Ishvar decided he would sneak out tomorrow morning before Rajaram awoke. He did not want to squat next to this philosopher of defecation.

Along the line, men and women abandoned the tracks and waited by the ditch for the locomotive interruption to pass; the ones in the bushes stayed put. Rajaram pointed at a train compartment as it glided slowly in front of them.

“Look at those bastards,” he shouted. “Staring at people shitting, as if they themselves are without bowels. As if a turd emerging from an arse-hole is a circus performance.” He flung obscene gestures at the passengers, making some of them turn away. One observer took exception and spat from his window seat, but a favourable wind returned it trainward.

“I wish I could bend over, point, and shoot it like a rocket in their faces,” said Rajaram. “Make them eat it, since they are so interested in it.” He shook his head as they walked back to their shacks. “That kind of shameless behaviour makes me very angry.”

“My grandfather’s friend, Dayaram,” said Om, “he was forced to eat a landlord’s shit once, because he was late ploughing his field.”

Rajaram emptied the last drops of water from his can into his palm and slicked back his hair. “Did that Dayaram develop any magic power afterwards?”

“No, why?”

“I’ve heard of a caste of sorcerers. They eat human shit, it gives them their black powers.”

“Really?” said Om. “Then we could start a business—collect all these lumps from the track, package them and sell to that caste. Ready-made lunches, teatime snacks, hot and steaming.” Rajaram and he laughed, but Ishvar strode ahead, disgusted, pretending he hadn’t heard.

Om returned to the tap for another bucketful. The line had grown considerably. A few places ahead he saw a girl with a big brass pot balanced against her hip. When she raised her arms to lift it to her head, his eyes were drawn to the swell of her blouse. The weight thrust a fine sharpness into her hips as she passed.

Water overbrimmed the pot and sloshed, trickling down her

forehead. Glistening drops hung in her hair and eyelashes. Like morning dew, thought Om. Oh, she was lovely. For the rest of the day he felt he would burst with longing and happiness. By the time the tap went dry, the hutment colony had finished its morning ablutions, leaving the ground charted with little rivulets of foam and froth. As the day wore on, the earth and sun readily swallowed it all. The smell from the railroad-latrine endured longer. The capricious breeze escorted the stench for hours into the shacks before changing direction.

* * * * *

LATE IN THE EVENING, Rajaram was cooking on a Primus stove outside his door as the tailors returned from exploring the area around the slum. They heard the oil hissing in the frying pan. "Have you eaten?" he asked.

"At the station."

"That can be expensive. Get a ration card as soon as possible, cook your own food."

"We don't even have a stove."

"That's only a small obstacle. You can borrow mine." He told them about a woman in the colony who hawked vegetables and fruit in residential neighbourhoods. "If something remains in her basket at the end of the day—a few tomatoes, peas, brinjal—she sells it cheaply. You should buy from her, like me."

"Good idea," said Ishvar.

"Only one thing she won't sell you—bananas."

Om snickered, expecting a juicy punch line, but there wasn't one. The monkey-man in the colony had a standing agreement with the woman. Her blackened or damaged bananas went to his two main performers. "The poor dog has to find his own food, though," said Rajaram.

"Which dog?" "Monkey-man's dog. He's part of the act—the monkeys ride him. But he is always in the garbage, looking for food. Monkey-man can't afford to feed them all." The Primus sputtered twice; he pumped it up and stirred the pan. "Some people say

Monkey-man does dirty, unnatural things with the monkeys. I don't believe it. But even if he does, so what? We all need comfort, no? Monkey, prostitute, or your own hand—what difference? Not everyone can have wives."

He poked the sizzling vegetables to check if they were done, then extinguished the stove and spooned out a helping on a plastic plate for the tailors.

"No, we ate at the station, really."

"Don't insult me—have one bite at least."

They accepted the plate. A man with a harmonium slung from his neck overheard them while passing. "Smells good," he said.

"Save one bite for me also."

"Yes, sure, come on." But the man squeezed out a chord, waved, and continued on his way.

"Have you met him? Lives in the second row." Rajaram stirred the pan and helped himself. "He begins work in the evening. Says people are more generous if he sings when they are eating or relaxing. Have some more?"

Their refusal was final this time. Rajaram finished what remained. "It's very nice for me that you are renting this house. On the other side of me," he said, lowering to a whisper, "lives a useless fellow—drunk all the time. Beats his wife and his five-six children if they don't bring back enough from begging."

They looked at the shack, where all was quiet at present. The children were not in evidence. "Sleeping it off. To start again tomorrow. And she must be on the streets with the little ones."

The tailors sat with their neighbour for the rest of the evening, talking about their village, about Muzaffar Tailoring Company, and about the job they were starting on Monday with Dina Dalal. Rajaram nodded at the familiar story. "Yes, thousands and thousands are coming to the city because of bad times in their native place. I came for the same reason."

"But we don't want to stay too long." "Nobody does," said Rajaram. "Who wants to live like this?" His hand moved in a tired semicircle, taking in the squalid hutments, the ragged field, the huge slum across the road wearing its malodorous crown of cooking smoke and industrial effluvium.

"But sometimes people have no choice. Sometimes the city grabs you, sinks its claws into you, and refuses to let go."

"Not us, for sure. We are here to make some money and hurry back," said Om.

Ishvar did not want to discuss their plans, fearing contamination by doubts. "What's your trade?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Barber. But I gave it up some time ago. Got fed up with complaining customers. Too short, too long, puff not big enough, sideburns not wide enough, this, that. Every ugly fellow wants to look like a film actor. So I said, enough. Since then I've done lots of jobs. Right now, I'm a hair-collector," said Ishvar tentatively. "What do you have to do, as a hair-collector?"

"Collect hair."

"And there is money in that?"

"Oh, very big business. There is a great demand for hair in foreign countries."

"What do they do with it?" asked Om, sceptical.

"Many different things. Mostly they wear it. Sometimes they paint it in different colours—red, yellow, brown, blue. Foreign women enjoy wearing other people's hair. Men also, especially if they are bald. In foreign countries they fear baldness. They are so rich in foreign countries, they can afford to fear all kinds of silly things."

"And how do you collect the hair?" asked Om. "Steal it from people's heads?" There was a sneer in his voice.

Rajaram laughed good-naturedly. "I go to pavement barbers. They let me take it in exchange for a packet of blades, or soap, or a comb. In haircutting saloons they give it free if I sweep the floor myself. Come—come inside my house, I'll show you my stock."

Rajaram lit a lamp to dispel the early dusk within the shack.

The flame flickered, steadied, and blossomed into orange, revealing gunny sacks and plastic bags stacked high against the wall.

"The sacks are from pavement barbers," he said, opening one under their curious gaze. "See, short hair."

They held back from the unappetizing contents, and he plunged in his hand to display a greasy clump. "Not more than two or three inches long. Fetches twenty-four rupees a kilo from the export agent. It's only good for making chemicals and medicines, he tells me. But look inside this plastic bag."

He untied the string and drew out a handful of long tresses. "From a ladies' barber. So beautiful, no? This is the valuable stuff. It's a very lucky day for me when I find this kind of hair. From eight to twelve inches, it brings two hundred rupees a kilo. Longer than twelve, six hundred rupees." He fingered his own hair and held it out like a violin.

"So that's why you are growing yours."

"Naturally. God-given harvest will put food in my stomach."

Om took the tresses and stroked them, not repulsed as he had been by the mounds of short clippings. "Feels good. Soft and smooth."

"You know," said Rajaram, "when I find hair like this, I always want to meet the woman. I lie awake at night, wondering about her. What does she look like? Why was it cut? For fashion? For punishment? Or did her husband die? The hair is chopped off, but there is a whole life connected to it."

"This must have been a rich woman's hair," said Om.

"And why do you think so?" asked Rajaram, with the air of a mentor examining the novice.

"Because of the fragrance. Smells like expensive hair tonic. A poor woman would use raw coconut oil."

"Perfectly correct," he tapped Om's shoulder approvingly. "By their hair shall you know them. Health and sickness, youth and age, wealth and poverty—it's all revealed in the hair."

"Religion and caste also," said Om.

"Exactly. You have the makings of a hair-collector. Let me know if you get tired of tailoring."

"But would I be able to stroke the hair while it's still attached to the woman? All the hair? From top to bottom, and between the legs?"

"He's a clever rascal, isn't he?" said Rajaram to Ishvar, who was threatening to hit his nephew. "But I am strictly a professional. I

admit that sometimes, seeing a woman with long hair, I want to run my fingers through it, twine it around my wrist. But I have to control myself. Till the barber severs it, I can only dream."

"You would dream a lot about our new employer if you saw her," said Om. "Dina Dalal's hair is beautiful. She probably has nothing to do all day but wash it and oil it and brush it and keep it looking perfect." He held the tresses against his head, clowning. "How do I look?"

"I was planning to find you a wife," said his uncle. "If you prefer, we can find a husband." Laughing, Rajaram took back the hair and replaced it carefully in the plastic bag.

"But I am thinking," said Ishvar. "Wouldn't a hair-collector get more business in a place like Rishikesh? Or a temple town like Hardwar? Where people shave their heads and offer their locks to God?"

"You are correct," said Rajaram. "But there's a big obstacle in the way. A friend of mine, also a hair-collector, went south, to Tirupati. Just to check out the production in the temples there. You know what he found? About twenty thousand people a day, coming to sacrifice their hair. Six hundred barbers, working in eight-hour shifts."

"That must produce a huge hill of hair."

"Hill? It's a Himalayan mountain of hair. But middlemen like me have no chance to collect it. After the hair is dedicated, the very holy Brahmin priests put it in their very holy warehouse. And every three months they hold an auction, where the export companies buy it directly."

"You don't have to tell us about Brahmins and priests," said Ishvar. "The greed of the upper castes is well known in our village."

"It's the same everywhere," agreed Rajaram. "I'm still waiting to meet one who will treat me as his equal. As a fellow human being —that's all I want, nothing more."

"From now on you can have our hair," said Om generously.

"Thank you. I can cut it for you free, if you like, as long as you're not fussy." He tucked away the sacks of hair and brought out his comb and scissors, offering a crop on the spot.

"Wait," said Om. "I should first let it grow long like yours. Then you can get more money for it."

"Nothing doing," said Ishvar. "No long hair. Dina Dalal won't like a tailor with long hair."

"One thing is certain," said Rajaram. "Supply and demand for hair is endless, it will always be big business." As they returned outside into the evening air, he added, "Sometimes, it also turns into big trouble."

"Why trouble?"

"I was thinking about the hair of the beard of the Prophet. When it disappeared from the Hazrat-Bal mosque in Kashmir some years ago. You remember?"

"I do," said Ishvar. "But Om was just a baby then, he doesn't know."

"Tell me, tell me. What happened?"

"Just that," said Ishvar. "The sacred hair disappeared one day, and there were big riots. Everyone was saying the government should resign, that the politicians must have something to do with it. To cause trouble, you know, because Kashmiris were asking for independence."

"What happened was," added Rajaram, "after two weeks of riots and curfews, the government investigators announced they had found the sacred hair. But the people were not happy —what if the government is fooling us? they asked. What if they are passing off some ordinary hair for the sacred one? So the government got a group of very learned mullahs and put them in complete charge of inspecting the hair. When they said it was the correct one, only then did calm return to the streets of Srinagar."

Outside, the smoke of cooking fires had taken control of the air. A voice yelled in the darkness, "Shanti! Hurry with the wood!" and a girl responded. Om looked: it was her, the one with the big brass pot. Shanti, he repeated silently, losing interest in the hair-collector's story.

Rajaram propped a rock against the door of his shack so the wind wouldn't blow it open, then escorted the tailors on a tour of the neighbourhood. He showed them a shortcut to the train

station through a break in the railroad fence. "Keep walking through that gully, till you see the big advertisements for Amul Butter and Modern Bread. It will save you at least ten minutes when you go to work."

He also warned them about the slum abutting their field. "Most of the people in that bustee are decent, but some lanes are very dangerous. Murder and robbery is definitely possible if you walk through there." In the safe part of the slum, he introduced them to a tea stall whose owner he knew, where they could have tea and snacks on credit, paying at the end of the month.

Late that night, as they sat outside their shack, smoking, they heard the harmonium player. He had returned from work, and was playing for pleasure. The reedy notes of his instrument, in the bleak surroundings, were rich as a golden flute. "Meri dosti mera pyar," he sang, and the song about love and friendship took the sting out of the acrid smoke of smouldering fires.

The Rations Officer was not at his desk. A peon said the boss was on his meditation break. "You should come back on Monday."

"But we have to start our new jobs on Monday," said Ishvar.
"How long is the meditation break?"

The peon shrugged. "One hour, two hours, three—depends on how much weight is on his mind. Sahab says without the break he would turn into a madman by the end of the week." The tailors decided to wait in line.

It must have been a relatively easy week for the Rations Officer, for he returned thirty minutes later, looking suitably revitalized, and gave the tailors a ration-card application form. He said there were experts on the pavement outside who, for a small fee, would fill it out for them.

"That's okay, we know how to write."

"Really?" he said, feeling snubbed. He prided his ability to appraise at a glance the applicants flowing past his desk every day—their place of origin, financial status, education, caste. His face muscles twitched, tightening in defiance of his just-completed meditation. The tailors' literacy was an affront to his omniscience. "Complete it and bring it back," he dismissed them with a petulant flutter of fingers.

They took the form into the corridor to fill in the blanks, using a window ledge to write on. It was a rough surface, and the ballpoint went through the paper several times. They tried to nurse the pockmarked sheet back to health by flattening the bumps with their fingernails, then rejoined the line to face their interlocutor.

The Rations Officer scanned the form and smiled. It was a superior smile: they may have learned how to write, but they knew nothing about neatness. He read their answers and stopped in triumph at the address portion. "What's this rubbish?" he tapped with a nicotine-stained finger.

"It's the place where we live," said Ishvar. He had entered the name of the road that led to their row of shacks on the north side. The space for building name, flat number, and street number had been left blank.

"And where exactly is your house?"

They offered additional information: the closest intersection, the streets east and west of the slum, the train station, names of neighbourhood cinemas, the big hospital, the popular sweetmeat shop, a fish market.

"Stop, enough," said the Rations Officer, covering his ears. "I don't need to hear all this nonsense." He pulled out a city directory, flipped a few pages, and studied a map. "Just as I thought. Your house is in a jhopadpatti, right?"

"It's a roof—for the time being."

"A jhopadpatti is not an address. The law says ration cards can only be issued to people with real addresses."

"Our house is real," pleaded Ishvar. "You can come and see it."

"My seeing it is irrelevant. The law is what matters. And in the eyes of the law, your jhopdi doesn't count." He picked up a stack of forms and shuffled them to align the edges. Tossed back to their corner, they landed in disarray, raising dust. "But there is another way to get the ration card, if you are interested."

"Yes, please—whatever is necessary."

"If you let me arrange for your vasectomy, your application can be approved instantly."

"Vasectomy?"

"You know, for Family Planning. The nussbandhi procedure."

"Oh, but I already did that," lied Ishvar.

"Show me your F.P.C."

"F.P.C.?"

"Family Planning Certificate."

"Oh, but I don't have that." Thinking quickly, he said, "In our native place there was a fire in the hut. Everything was destroyed."

"That's not a problem. The doctor I send you to will do it again as a special favour, and give you a new certificate."

"Same operation, two times? Isn't that bad?"

"Lots of people do it twice. Brings more benefits. Two transistor radios."

"Why would I need two radios?" smiled Ishvar. "Do I listen to two different stations, one with each ear?"

"Look, if the harmless little operation frightens you, send this young fellow. All I need is one sterilization certificate."

"But he is only seventeen! He has to marry, have some children, before his nuss is disconnected!"

"It's up to you."

Ishvar left in a rage, Om hurrying after him to calm him down as he fumed at the shocking, almost blasphemous, suggestion. No one noticed, though, because the corridor was crowded with people like Ishvar, lost and stumbling, trying to negotiate their way through the government offices. They waited around in varying stages of distress. Some were in tears, others laughed hysterically at bureaucratic absurdities, while a few stood facing the wall, muttering ominously to themselves.

"Nussbandhi, he says!" seethed Ishvar. "Shameless bastard! For a young boy, nussbandhi! Someone should cut off the ugly rascal's pipe while he is meditating!" He fled down the corridor, down the stairs, and out through the building's main door.

A small, clerkish-looking man on the pavement, noticing Ishvar's agitation, rose from his wooden stool to greet them. He wore glasses and a white shirt, with writing material spread before him on a mat. "You have a problem. Can I help?"

"What help can you give?" said Ishvar dismissively.

The man touched Ishvar's elbow to make him stop and listen. "I am a facilitator. My job, my speciality, is to assist people in their dealings with government offices." His runny nose made him sniff several times during the course of his introduction.

"You work for government?" asked Ishvar, suspicious, pointing at the building they had just left.

"No, never, I work for you and me. To help you get what the government people make difficult to get. Hence my title: Facilitator. Birth certificates, death certificates, marriage licence, any types of permits and clearances—I can arrange it all. You just select what information you want on it, and I will have it issued." He removed his glasses and smiled his most facile smile, then lost it to six violent sneezes. The tailors jumped back to avoid the spray.

"All we wanted was a ration card, Mr. Facilitator. And the fellow

wanted our manhood in exchange! What kind of choice is that, between food and manhood?"

"Ah, he wanted the F.P.C."

"Yes, that's what he called it."

"You see, since the Emergency started, there's a new rule in the department—every officer has to encourage people to get sterilized. If he doesn't fill his quota, no promotion for him. What to do, poor fellow, he is also trapped, no?"

"But it's not fair to us!"

"That's why I am here, no? Just pick the names you want on the ration card, up to a maximum of six, and whatever address you like. Cost is only two hundred rupees. Hundred now, and hundred when you get the card."

"But we don't have so much money."

The Facilitator said they could come back when they did, he would still be here. "While there is government, there will be work for me." He blew his nose and returned to his spot on the pavement.



TAKING RAJARAM'S shortcut, the tailors trotted down the platform towards the wasteland of track and cinder, watching the train slide out of the station to disappear into the evening. "The closer he gets to the stable, the faster the tired horse gallops," said Ishvar, and Om nodded.

Their first day with Dina Dalal was over. borne along by the homeward-bound flock, exhausted from ten hours of sewing, they shared the sanctity of the hour with the crowd, this time of transition from weariness to hope. Soon it would be night; they would borrow Rajaram's stove, cook something, eat. They would weave their plans and dream the future into favourable patterns, till it was time to take the train tomorrow morning.

The end of the platform sloped downwards to become one with the gravel hugging the rails. Here was the crucial opening in the endless cast-iron fence, where one of its spear-pointed bars

had corroded at the hands of the elements, and broken away with a little help from human hands.

The swelling knot of men and women trickled through the gap, far from the exit where the ticket-collector stood. Others, with an agility prompted by their ticketless state, ran farther down the tracks, over cinders and gravel sharp against bare soles and ill-shod feet. They ran between the rails, stretching their strides from worn wooden sleeper to sleeper, vaulting over the fence at a safe distance from the station.

Though he had a ticket, Om yearned to follow them in the heroic dash for freedom. He felt he too could soar if he was alone. Then he glanced sideways at his uncle who was more-than-uncle, whom he could never abandon. The spears of the fence stood in the dusk like the rusting weapons of a phantom army. The ticketless men seemed ancient, breaching the enemy's ranks, soaring over the barbs as if they would never come down to earth.

Suddenly, a posse of tired policemen materialized out of the twilight and surrounded the gap-seeking crowd. A few constables gave half-hearted chase to the railing jumpers in the distance. The only energetic one among them was an inspector brandishing a swagger-stick and shouting orders and encouragement.

"Catch them all! Move, move, move! No one gets away! Back to the platform, all you crooks! You there!" he pointed with the swagger-stick. "Stop lagging! We'll teach you to travel without tickets!"

The tailors' attempt to inform someone, anyone, that they actually had tickets was drowned in the noise and confusion. "Please, havaldar, we were only taking a shortcut," they implored the nearest uniform, but were herded along with the rest. The ticket-collector wagged a reproving finger as the captive column shuffled past him.

Outside, the prisoners were loaded onto a police truck. The last few were levered in with the help of the tailgate. "We're finished," said someone. "I heard that under Emergency law, no ticket means one week in the lockup."

For an hour they were kept sweating in the truck while the inspector attended to some business in the ticket office. Then the

truck started down the station road, followed by the inspector's jeep. They journeyed for ten minutes and turned into a vacant lot, where the tailgate was thrown open.

"Out! Everybody out! Out, out, out!" shouted the inspector with a penchant for triplets, slapping the swagger-stick against the truck tyre. "Men on this side, women on that side!" He organized the two groups into a formation of rows six deep.

"Attention everyone! Grab hold of your ears! Come on, catch them! Catch, catch, catch! What are you waiting for? Now you will do fifty baithuks! Ready, begin! One! Two! Three!" He prowled among the rows, supervising the knee-bends and counting, performing sudden about-turns to catch them off guard. If he found someone cheating, not doing a full squat or releasing their ears, he let them have it with his stick.

"...forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty! That's it! And if you are found again without a ticket, I will make you remember your grandmothers! Now you can go home! Go! What are you waiting for? Go, go, go!"

The crowd dispersed rapidly, making jokes about the punishment and the inspector. "Stupid Rajaram," said Om. "From now on I'm not going to believe anything from his mouth. Get a ration card, he told us, it's very easy. Take the shortcut, you'll save time."

"Ah, no harm done," said Ishvar genially. Back at the railway station he had been quite frightened. "Look, the police spared us some walking, we are almost at the colony."

They crossed the road and continued towards the hutments. The familiar hoarding loomed into view, but the illustration was different. "What happened?" said Om. "Where did Modern Bread and Amul Butter go?"

The advertisements had been replaced by the Prime Minister's picture, proclaiming: "Iron Will! Hard Work! These will sustain us!" It was a quintessential specimen of the face that was proliferating on posters throughout the city. Her cheeks were executed in the lurid pink of cinema billboards. Other aspects of the portrait had suffered greater infelicities. Her eyes evoked the discomfort of a violent itch somewhere upon the ministerial

corpus, begging to be scratched. The artist's ambition of a benignant smile had also gone awry—a cross between a sneer and the vinegary sternness of a drillmistress had crept across the mouth. And that familiar swatch of white hair over her forehead, imposing amid the black, had plopped across the scalp like the strategic droppings of a very large bird.

"Look at it, Om. She is making the sour-lime face, just like yours when you are upset."

Om obliged by duplicating the expression, then laughed. The towering visage continued to deliver its frozen monition to trains rumbling by on one side, and buses and motorcars scrambling in clouds of exhaust on the other, while the tailors trudged to the hutment colony.

The hair-collector emerged as they were unlocking their shack. "You naughty children, you are so late," he complained.

"But—"

"Never mind, it's only a small obstacle. The food will soon get warm again. I put off the stove because vegetables were drying up." He disappeared inside to return with the frying pan and three plates. "Bhaji and chapati. And my special masala wada with mango chutney, to celebrate your first day at work."

"How much trouble you're taking for us," said Ishvar.

"Oh, it's nothing."

Rajaram let the food heat for a minute, then handed out the plates with the four items neatly arranged around the circumference. A substantial amount still remained in the pan.

"You cooked too much," said Ishvar.

"I had a little extra money today, so I bought more vegetables. For them," he pointed with his elbow at the other shack. "That drunken fellow's little ones are always hungry."

While they ate, the tailors described the police action against ticketless travel. The gift of dinner softened the accusing tone Om had planned to use; he told it like a traveller's adventure instead.

Rajaram clapped a dramatic hand to his forehead. "What foolishness on my part—I completely forgot to warn you. You see, it's been months and months since a raid." He slapped his forehead again. "Some people travel all their lives without buying

a single ticket. And you two get caught on the first day. Even with tickets," he chuckled.

Ishvar and Om, appreciating the irony, started laughing too. "Just bad luck. Must be a new policy because of Emergency."

"But it was all a big show. Why did the inspector let everyone go, if they are really getting strict?"

Rajaram thought about it while chewing, and fetched glasses of water for everyone. "Maybe they had no choice. From what I hear, the jails are full with the Prime Minister's enemies—union workers, newspaper people, teachers, students. So maybe there is no more room in the prisons."

While they were mulling over the incident, cries of joy went up near the water tap. It had started gurgling! And so late in the night! People watched the spout, holding their breath. A few drops dribbled out. Then a little stream. They cheered it like a winning racehorse as it gathered strength, gushing full and strong. A miracle! The hutment dwellers clapped and shouted with excitement.

"It has happened once before," said Rajaram. "I think someone made a mistake at the waterworks, opening the wrong valve."

"They should make such mistakes more often," said Ishvar.

Women ran to the tap to make the most of the fortuitous flow.

Babies in their arms squealed with delight as cool water glided over their sticky skin. Older children skipped about gleefully, bursting into little involuntary dances, looking forward to the generous drenching instead of the meagre mugfuls at dawn.

"Maybe we should also fill up now," said Om. "Save time in the morning."

"No," said Rajaram. "Let the little ones enjoy. Who knows when they'll get a chance like this again."

The festivities lasted less than an hour; the tap went dry as suddenly as it had started. Children soaped in anticipation had to be wiped off and sent to bed disappointed.



OVER THE NEXTfortnight, the slumlord erected another fifty

ramshackle huts in the field, which Navalkar rented out in a day, doubling the population. Now the fetid smell from the ditch hung permanently over the shacks, thicker than smoke. There was nothing to distinguish the small hutment colony from the huge slum across the road; it had been incorporated into the inferno. The rush at the water tap assumed riotous proportions. Accusations of queue-jumping were exchanged every morning, there was pushing and shoving, scuffles broke out, pots were overturned, mothers screamed, children wailed.

The monsoon season started, and on the first night of rain, the tailors were awakened by the roof leaking on their bedding. They sat huddled in the only dry corner. The rain poured down beside them in a steady stream and gradually lulled them into slumber. Then the rain slowed. The leak became an aggravating drip. Om began counting the splashes in his head. He reached a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, counting, adding, tallying, as though hoping to dry them out by attaining a high enough number.

They ended up sleeping very little. In the morning, Rajaram climbed onto the roof to examine the corrugated iron. He helped them spread a piece of plastic, not quite wide enough, over the leaking area.

Later that week, heartened by the remuneration from Dina Dalal, Ishvar was able to plan a little shopping excursion to buy a large plastic sheet and a few other items. “What do you say, Om? Now we can make our house more comfortable, ~~hasn't~~” Ishvar's suggestion was greeted with a mournful silence. They stopped at a pavement stall selling polythene bowls, boxes, and assorted tableware. “So, what colour plates and glasses shall we get?”

“Doesn't matter.”

“A towel? That yellow one with flowers, maybe?”

“Doesn't matter.”

“Would you like new sandals?”

“Doesn't matter” came yet again, and Ishvar finally lost his patience. “What's wrong with you these days? All the time with Dinabai you make mistakes and argue. You take no interest in tailoring. Anything I ask, you say doesn't matter. Make an effort,

Om, make an effort." He cut the shopping expedition short, and they started back with two red plastic buckets, a Primus stove, five litres of kerosene, and a package of jasmine agarbatti.

Ahead they heard the familiar *dhuk-dhuka dhuk-dhuka* of Monkey-man's little handheld drum. The string-tied rattle bounced upon the skin as he spun his wrist. He was not looking to collect a crowd, merely accompanying his charges home. One of his little brown monkeys had hitched a ride on his shoulder, the other ambled along listlessly. The emaciated dog followed at a distance, sniffing, chewing newspaper in which food had once been wrapped. Monkey-man whistled, and called "Tikka!" and the mongrel trotted up.

The monkeys started teasing Tikka, tweaking his ears, twisting his tail, pinching his penis. He bore his tormentors with a dignified calm. His reprieve came when the red plastic buckets swinging from Om's hands attracted the monkeys' attention. They decided to investigate, and hopped in.

"Laila! Majnoo! Stop it!" scolded their master, tugging the leashes. They bobbed their heads out over the bucket rims.

"It's okay," said Om, enjoying their pranks. "Let them have some fun. They must have worked hard all day."

They walked together to the hutment colony, the tailors, Monkey-man, and his animals, moving to the drum's hypnotic *dhuk-dhuka*. Laila and Majnoo soon tired of the buckets and began clambering over Om, sitting on his shoulders or his head, hanging from his arms, clinging to his legs. He laughed all the way home, and Ishvar smiled with pleasure.

Om's playfulness vanished when he and the monkeys parted company. Once again he sank into his gloom, casting a nauseated look in Rajaram's direction, who was sorting his bags of hair outside the shack. The little black mounds looked like a collection of shaggy human heads.

Seeing the two laden with purchases, Rajaram complimented them. "Makes me happy to see you started on the road to prosperity."

"You need spectacles if you think this is the road to prosperity," snapped Om. He went inside and unrolled the bedding.

"What's the matter with him?" asked Rajaram, hurt.

"I think he's just tired. But listen, today you must eat with us. To celebrate our new stove."

"How can I refuse such good friends?"

They prepared the food together, and called Om when it was ready. Halfway through the meal, Rajaram asked if he could borrow ten rupees. The request took Ishvar by surprise. He had assumed the hair-collector was doing well in his line of work, judging by his enthusiastic talk during the past fortnight.

The hesitation showed on his face, for Rajaram added, "I'll return it in a week, don't worry. Business is little slow right now. But a new style is coming into fashion for women. Everyone will start chopping off their plaits. Those long chotelas will fall straight into my lap."

"Stop talking about hair," said Om. "It makes my stomach sick." After dinner, instead of sitting outside to chat and smoke with them, he said he had a headache and went to bed. His uncle came in an hour later and stood watching the back of Om's head for a minute. Poor child, what a burden of terrible memories he had to carry. He leaned across and saw his eyes were open. "Om? Headache gone?"

He groaned and answered no.

"Patience, Om, it will go." To cheer him up, he added, "Our stars must be in the proper position at last. Everything is going well, hahn?"

"How can you keep repeating such rubbish? A lousy, stinking house we live in. Our jobs are terrible, that Dinabai watching us like a vulture, harassing us, telling us when to eat and when to belch."

Ishvar sighed; his nephew was in one of his implacable black moods. He lit two sticks from the jasmine agarbatti package. "This will make our house smell nice. Sleep well, your headache will be gone in the morning."

Late at night, after the harmonium player's song was silent and Tikka stopped barking, it was the noises from the hair-collector's shack that continued to keep Om awake. There was a visitor. A woman giggled, then Rajaram laughed. Soon he was panting, and

the sounds through the plywood walls tormented Om. He thought of them naked amid those eerie bags of hair, contorting in the erotic poses of cinema posters. He thought of Shanti by the water tap, her lovely shining hair, the tightness of her blouse when she lifted the big brass pot to her head, the things he could do with her in the bushes by the railroad. He looked at his uncle, sound asleep. He got out of bed, went to the side of the shack, and masturbated. The woman next door was just departing. He hid in the shadows till she was gone.

He fell asleep after midnight only to be awakened by piercing screams. This time Ishvar was roused as well. "Hai Ram! What can that be?"

Outside, they ran into Rajaram, smiling contentedly. Om scowled at him with equal parts of envy and disgust. People were emerging from shacks all down the row. Then word spread that it was a woman in labour, and everyone went back to sleep. The screams ceased after a while.

In the morning, they heard that a girl had been born during the early hours. "Let's go and give them good wishes," said Ishvar.

"You go if you like," said Om gloomily.

"Ah, don't be so unhappy," he ruffled his hair. "We will find a wife for you, I promise."

"Find her for yourself, I don't need one." He moved out of reach and snatched the comb on the packing case to restore his hair.

"Back in two minutes," said Ishvar. "Then off to work." Om sat in the doorway, fingering a piece of chiffon he had slipped in his pocket yesterday from the scraps littering Dina Dalal's floor. How comforting it felt, liquid between his fingers—why couldn't life be like that, soft and smooth. He caressed his cheek with it, observing the drunkard's children running about, sprawling in the dust, passing the time till their mother took them out to beg. One of them found a curiously shaped stone, which he showed off to his siblings. Then they chased a crow probing a lump of something rotten. The mettlesome bird refused to fly away, hopping, circling, returning to the putrefying tidbit to provide more fun for the children. How

could they be so happy? wondered Om—dirty and naked, ill-fed, sores on their faces, rashes on their skin. What was there for anyone to laugh about in this wretched place?

He slipped the chiffon back into his pocket and wandered to Monkey-man's shack. Laila was grooming Majnoo, and he settled down to watch. A minute later, they had jumped onto his shoulders, combing their delicate infant-sized fingers through his hair.

Seeing that Om did not mind, Monkey-man smiled and let them be. "They do it to me also," he said. "Means they like you. Best way of keeping a clean head."

Laila found something in Om's hair and held it up to examine. Majnoo grabbed it from her paw and put it in his mouth.

...
OM CHOSE a black Hercules at the rental shop on the road to Dina Dalal's flat. It had an impressive spring-loaded carrier over the rear wheel and a large shiny bell on the handlebars.

"But why do you need a cycle?" persisted Ishvar. His nephew smiled cunningly while the man used a spanner to adjust the seat height.

"One month has passed since we started working for her," said Om. "That's long enough, I've made my plan." The freshly pumped-up tyres withstood the inspecting squeeze of his fingers. He wheeled it out into the main street. "Today is her day to go to the export company, right? And I'm going to follow her taxi on my cycle." Swinging one leg lightly over the saddle, he rolled off.

"Careful," said Ishvar. "Traffic is heavy, it's not our village road." On the kerb he quickened his pace to keep up. "The plan is good, Om, but you forgot one thing—her padlocked door. How will you get out?"

"Wait and see." Freewheeling alongside his uncle, Om was in high spirits. The mudguards rattled and the brakes were spongy, though the bell worked perfectly. *Tring-tring tring-tring*, his thumb urged it on, *tring-tring*. Brimming with confidence, he plunged into the traffic

on his carilloning cycle, on the wheels that would help put the future right.

He returned to the safety of the kerb, and Ishvar breathed easier. The scheme was absurd, but he was happy that his nephew was enjoying himself. He watched him swing the handlebars from side to side and backpedal, to keep from racing ahead. Om on the saddle performed an intricate dance, the dance of balancing-at-slow-speed. Soon, hoped Ishvar, he would forsake his crazy ideas and perform with equal facility the arduous dance of sewing-for-the-employer.

At Om's prompting, Ishvar got on the carrier behind the saddle. He sat sideways, legs straight out. With his feet inches off the ground, sandals grazing the road now and then, they sailed away. Om's optimism pealed in the *tring-tring* showers spouting from the bell. For a while the world was perfect.

Soon, the tailors neared the corner where the beggar was wheeling his platform around. They stopped to toss him a coin. It landed with a clink in the empty can.

* * * * *

THEY HID THE bicycle at a safe distance from Dina Dalal's door, in a cobwebby stairwell that smelled of urine and country liquor. Chaining it to a disused gas pipe, they emerged brushing off the invisible threads clinging to their hands and faces. Ghosts of the webs continued to bother them for some time. Their fingers kept returning to their foreheads and necks to remove strands that were not there.

...

DINA'S FINGERS flitted like skittish butterflies, folding the dresses for delivery to Au Revoir Exports. She checked the paper patterns to make sure everything was accounted for. The manager had been repeatedly dire about them. "Guard the patterns with your life," Mrs. Gupta always said. "If they fall in the wrong hands my entire company will be ruined."

Dina thought this was somewhat exaggerated. Nonetheless, she could not help feeling, while sorting through the brown-paper

sections of bodice and sleeve and collar, that her own torso and arms and neck were at stake. Of late, she sensed a haughtiness in Mrs. Gupta, as though the manager had discovered they were not social equals. She no longer left her desk to greet her and see her off, nor did she offer tea or a Fanta.

Her fingers returned nervously to the folded garments, picking one up at random, examining its seams and hems. Would this lot pass Mrs. Gupta's inspection? How many rejections? The angelic tailors had fallen from grace; carelessness was rife now in their handiwork.

From his corner, Om watched as Dina completed her weekly performance of fretfulness. His thoughts were bent on bracing himself; the moment was approaching.

It was now.

She snapped shut her handbag.

He stabbed his left index finger with the scissors.

The pain, sharper than expected, jolted him. He had assumed that because it was anticipated, it would be less intense, the way it was with anticipated pleasure. The blood spurted in bright-red arcs upon the yellow voile.

"Oh my goodness!" said Dina. "What have you done!" She grabbed a snippet of cloth from the floor and pressed it over the cut. "Raise the hand, raise it up or more blood will flow."

"Hai Ram!" said Ishvar, removing the soiled garment from under the presser foot of the Singer. Just when he thought his nephew was improving, he did this. His obsession to find the export company was not good.

"Quick, soak that dress in the bucket," said Dina. She got the tincture of benzoin from her first-aid box and applied it liberally. The cut was not as serious as the blood had led her to believe. She indulged in the relief of a scolding.

"Careless boy! What were you trying to do? Where is your mind? A skinny person cannot afford to lose so much blood. But always there is so much anger, so much haste in whatever you do."

Still stunned by what his scissors had accomplished, a lukewarm scowl was the best Om could reply with. He liked the pungent

fragrance of the golden-brown liquid coating his finger. She taped a cotton wad tightly over the cut as the bleeding slowed to a trickle.

"Your finger has made me late. Now the manager will be upset." She did not mention the cost of the blood-stained garment. Better to see if the voile was salvageable before discussing restitution.

She took the bundle of dresses to the door and picked up the padlock.

"It's paining too much," said Om. "I want to go to doctor."

And now Ishvar understood: the encounter of scissors and finger was part of his nephew's foolish plan.

"Doctor for this? Don't be a baby," she said. "Rest with your hand up for a while, you will be all right."

Om screwed his face into caricatures of agony. "What if my finger rots and falls off because of your advice? It will be on your head, for sure."

She suspected the act was put on to shirk the afternoon's work, but it planted the seed of unease in her mind. "What do I care—go if you want," she said brusquely.

The stress of dealing with these two fellows, their sloppy work, their tardiness, was wearing her out, she felt. Mrs. Gupta was bound to cancel the arrangement sooner or later. The only question was, which would disappear first, the tailors or her health. She envisioned two leaky faucets: one said Money, the other, Sanity. And both were dripping away simultaneously.

Thank goodness that Maneck Kohlah was arriving tomorrow. At least his room and board was one hundred per cent guaranteed income.

* * * * *

OM WATCHED from a distance, holding aloft his punctured finger until Dina was inside the taxi. Then, spurred by the smell of success, he rushed to his hiding place.

By the time he unlocked the bicycle and wheeled it out from under the stairs, the taxi had disappeared. He raced to the side street and—there it was, waiting at the red traffic light.

He caught up, staying two cars away. Keeping her in sight was

as important as keeping himself out of sight. He sped up, slowed down, ducked behind buses, changed lanes like a demon. Cars honked in protest. People shouted at him and made nasty gestures. He was forced to ignore them, the taxi and bicycle requiring all his concentration.

So confident was he now of tracking the destination, he was trembling. It was a curious palpitation, the excitement of the hunter mingling with the trepidation of the hunted.

The street merged into the main road, and the traffic was thicker now, deranged and bad-tempered, worse than anything he had encountered so far. Within minutes he was panting with frustration. The taxi was lost and found half a dozen times, slipping farther away. Scores of identical yellow and black Fiats swarming the street, their bulky meters sticking out on the left side, did not make his task easier. Om began to lose his nerve. The brief early-morning ride from the train station was no preparation for the hysteria of midday traffic. It was like seeing wild animals lethargic in zoo cages, then coming upon them in the jungle. Making a final desperate bid, he squeezed between two cars and was knocked off his bicycle. People screamed from the pavement.

“Hai bhagwan! Poor boy is finished!”

“Crushed to death!”

“Careful, his bones might be broken!”

“Catch the chauffeur! Don’t let him run! Bash the rascal!”

Feeling bad about generating so much needless concern, Om stood up, dragging the bicycle after him. He had scraped his elbow and bruised one knee, but was otherwise unhurt.

Now it was the chauffeur’s turn. He emerged boldly from the car where he had been cowering. “You have eyes or marbles?” he screamed. “Can’t see where you’re going? Causing damage to people’s property!”

A policeman arrived and checked most solicitously on the passengers in the car. “Everybody all right, sahab?” Om looked on, a little dazed, and also frightened. Were people who caused accidents sent to jail? His finger was bleeding again, throbbing madly.

A man in an ochre-coloured safari suit, snuggled in the back of the car, fished out his wallet. He passed the policeman some money, then beckoned his chauffeur to the window. The chauffeur put something in Om's hands. "Now go! And be more careful or you'll kill somebody! Use your God-given eyes!"

Om looked down at what lay in his shaking hands: fifty rupees. "Come on, you paagal-ka-batcha!" shouted the policeman. "Take your cycle and clear the road!" He waved the car through with his smartest VIP salute.

Om wheeled the bicycle to the kerb. The handlebars were askew and the mudguards rattled more resolutely than before. He dusted off his pants, examining the black smears of grease on the ~~Chappi~~ How much did he give you?" asked someone on the pavement. "Fifty rupees."

"You got up too fast," said the man, shaking his head disapprovingly. "Never get up so fast. Always stay down and make some moaning-groaning noise. Cry for doctor, cry for ambulance, scream, shout, anything. In this type of case, you can pull at least two hundred rupees." He spoke like a professional; his twisted elbow hung at his side like a qualification.

Om put the money in his pocket. He braced the front wheel between his knees and tugged at the handlebars till they were straight. He walked the bicycle down a side street, leaving the crowd to continue analysing his accident.

Returning to the flat was useless, the padlock would be on the door, hanging dark and heavy, like a bullock's lost scrotum. He was also reluctant to turn in the bicycle early—a day's rent had been paid in advance. He wished he had listened to his uncle in the morning. But the plan seemed so perfect when he had imagined the sequence of events, shining with success, like the sunlight gilding the handlebars. Imagination was a dangerous thing.

He mounted the bicycle where the traffic was less threatening, and took the seaward road. No longer quarry or pursuer, he could enjoy the ride now. The tinkling bell of the candy-floss man outside a school caught his ear. He stopped and squinted into the

man's neck-slung glass container, getting a hazy look at the pink, yellow, and blue cottony balls through the side that was cleanest.

"How much?"

"Twenty-five paise for one. Or try a lottery for fifty paise—win from one to ten balls."

Om paid and dipped a hand into the brown-paper lottery bag. The chit he pulled out had a 2 scrawled on it.

"What colours?"

"One pink, one yellow."

The man plopped off the round lid and reached inside. "Not that one, the one next to it," directed Om.

The sweet fluff melted quickly in his mouth. Got the bigger pink ball for sure, he thought, pleased with himself as he separated a ten-rupee note from the crackling group of five. The man wiped his fingers on the neck-sling before taking it. Om pocketed the change and continued towards the sea.

At the beach he paused to read the chiselled name under a tall black stone statue. The plaque said he was a Guardian of Democracy. Om had studied about the man in his history class, in the story of the Freedom Struggle. The photo in the history book was nicer than the statue, he decided. Letting the bicycle lean against the pedestal, he rested in the statue's shade. The sides of the pedestal were plastered with posters extolling the virtues of the Emergency. The obligatory Prime Ministerial visage was prominent. Small print explained why fundamental rights had been temporarily suspended.

He watched two men making juice at a sugar-cane stall in the sand. One fed the sticks to the crushing wheels while the other swung the handle. The latter was shirtless, his muscles rippling, skin shining with sweat as he heaved mightily at the machine. His job was harder, thought Om, and he hoped they took turns, or it would not be a fair partnership.

The frothing golden juice made Om's mouth water. Despite the money in his pocket, he hesitated. Recently, he had heard stories in the bazaar about a cane stall that had pulped a gecko along with cane. An accident, they said—the thing was probably

lurking about the innards of the machine, licking the sugary rods and gears, but many customers had been poisoned.

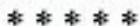
Liquid lizards kept swimming into Om's thoughts, alternating with glassfuls of golden juice. Eventually the lizards won, squelching all desire for the drink. Instead, he bought a length of sugar cane, peeled and chopped into a dozen pieces. These he munched happily, chewing the juice out of them, one by one. He spat each husky mouthful in a tidy pile at the statue's feet. His jaws tired quickly, but the ache was as satisfying as the sweetness.

The desiccated shreds attracted a curious gull. Next time he spat, he aimed for the bird. It dodged the missile and poked around in the macerated remnants, scattering the neat little hill before turning away disdainfully.

Om tossed it his last piece, unchewed. The gull's interest was renewed. It investigated thoroughly, refusing to believe its beak was not up to tackling sugar cane.

A street urchin shooed away the gull and snatched the prize. She took it to the juice stall and washed off the sand in the bucket where the men were rinsing dirty glasses. Om felt drowsy watching her gnaw the chunk. He wished he could come here with the lovely shiny-haired girl. Shanti. He would buy bhel-puri and sugar cane for both of them. They would sit in the sand and watch the waves. Then the sun would set, the breeze would come up, they would snuggle together. They would sit with their arms around each other, and then, for sure...

Dreaming, he fell asleep. When he awoke the sun was still harsh, and shining in his eyes. An hour and a half of rental time remained on the bicycle, but he decided to turn it in anyway.



ISHVAR WAS certain that his nephew had reached his goal, if the grinning insouciance with which he took his place at the Singer was any indication.

Dina, having returned hours ago, began scolding him. "Wasting time, that's all it is. Were you taking a tour of the whole city? How far away is your doctor—at the southernmost tip of Lanka?"

"Yes, I was carried through the sky by Lord Hanuman," he replied, wondering if she could have spied him on the bicycle.

"This fellow is getting very sharp."

"Too sharp," said Ishvar. "If he isn't careful, he will cut himself again."

"And how is the finger that was going to rot?" she inquired.
"Has it fallen off yet?"

"It's better. Doctor checked it."

"Good. Do some work, then. Start pushing your feet, there are lots of new dresses."

"Hahnji, right away."

"My goodness. No more grumbling? Whatever medicine your doctor prescribed, it's working. You should take a dose every morning."

Unexpectedly, the last hour of the day, usually the most difficult, passed with banter and laughing. Why couldn't it be like this every day, wished Dina. Before they left, she took advantage of their good mood to move part of the furniture from her bedroom into the sewing room.

"Are you rearranging the whole flat?" asked Ishvar.

"Just this room. I have to prepare for my guest."

"Yes, the college boy," said Om, remembering. They rolled up the mattress from the bed, carried in the frame and slats, then replaced the mattress. The Singers, stools, worktable were crammed closer together to make space. "When does he arrive?"

"Tomorrow night."

She sat alone in the sewing room after they were gone, watching the floc and fibres float in the electric light. The heavily starched cloth from the Au Revoir mills mingled its cloying textile sweetness with the tailors' scent of sweat and tobacco. She liked it while their bustle filled the room. But the smell was depressing during the empty evenings, when something acrid suspired from the bolts, stiffening the air, clouding it with thoughts of dingy factories, tubercular labourers, bleak lives. The emptiness of her own life appeared starker at this hour.

* * * * *

“So. WHAT’S the name of the company?” asked Ishvar.

“I don’t know.”

“The address?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then why so pleased? Your cunning plan got you nothing.”

“Patience, patience,” he mimicked his uncle. “It got me something.” He flashed the money and narrated his afternoon’s adventures.

Ishvar began to laugh. “Only to you could such things happen.” Neither of them seemed disappointed—it may have been the money, or relief at the failure: finding the export company would have led to some difficult choices.

A mobile Family Planning Clinic was parked outside the hutment colony when they got home. Most of the slum-dwelling multitudes were giving it a wide birth. The staff were handing out free condoms, distributing leaflets on birth-control procedures, explaining incentives being offered in cash and kind.

“Maybe I should have the operation,” said Om. “Get a Bush transistor. And then the ration card would also be possible.”

Ishvar whacked him. “Don’t even joke about such things!”

“Why? I’m never getting married. Might as well get a transistor.”

“You will marry when I tell you to. No arguments. And what’s so important about a little radio?”

“Everybody has one nowadays.” He was imagining Shanti at the beach, twilight fading, while his transistor serenaded them.

“Everybody jumps in the well, you will also? Learning big-city ways—forgetting our good, humble small-town ways.”

“You get the operation if you don’t want me to.”

“Shameless. My manhood for a stupid radio?”

“No, yaar, it’s not your manhood they want. The doctor just cuts a tiny little tube inside. You don’t even feel it.”

“Nobody is taking a knife to my balls. You want a transistor? Work hard for Dinabai, earn some money.”

Rajaram came up, displaying the condoms he had collected at the clinic. They were handing out four per person, and he wondered if they would get their quota for him if they didn't need it. "Who knows when the van will come this way again," he said.

"Are you a frequent fucker or what?" said Om, laughing but envious. "Not going to keep us awake again tonight, are you?"

"Shameless," said Ishvar and tried to whack him as he skipped away to visit the monkeys.

* * * * *

DINA REREAD the letter from Mrs. Kohliah that had arrived with the first rent cheque, postdated to Maneck's moving day. The three pages listed instructions concerning the care and comfort of Aban Kohliah's son. There were tips about his breakfast: fried eggs should be cooked floating in butter because he disliked the leathery edges that got stuck to the pan; scrambled eggs were to be light and fluffy, with milk added during the final phase. "Having grown up in our healthy mountain air," continued the letter, "he has a large appetite. But please don't give him more than two eggs, not even if he asks. He must learn to balance his diet."

About his studies, Aban Kohliah wrote that "Maneck is a good, hardworking boy, but gets distracted sometimes, so please remind him to do his lessons every day." Also, he was very particular about his clothes, the way they were starched and ironed; a good dhobi was indispensable to his sense of well-being. And Dina should feel free to call him Mac because that was what everyone in the family called him.

Dina snorted and put away the letter. Eggs floating in butter, indeed! And a good dhobi, of all things! The nonsense that people foisted on their children. When the boy had visited last month, he seemed nothing like the person described in his mother's letter. But that was always the case—people hardly ever saw their children as they really were.

To prepare the room for his arrival, Dina carried out her clothes, shoes, and knickknacks, making space for them amid the

tailoring paraphernalia. Place was found in the trunk on the trestle for her stock of homemade sanitary pads and snippets. The larger leftovers of fabric, with which she had recently started to design a quilt, went into her cupboard's bottom shelf. The pagoda parasol remained hanging from the top of the boarder's cupboard, it wasn't going to bother him there.

Her old bedroom was empty and ready for Maneck Kohlah. Her new bedroom was—horrible. I'll probably lie sleepless, gasping for breath, she thought, hemmed in by the stacks of cloth. But it was out of the question to put the boarder in with the sewing-machines. That would make him run back to his college hostel.

She selected pieces of cloth from the bundle under the bed and settled down to make more patches for the quilt. Concentrating on the work made the anxieties about tomorrow fade. Ridiculous, she felt, to even think of competing with Aban Kohlah and the luxuries of her home in the north. Giving Maneck the bedroom was the only concession she would make.

V
Mountains

When Maneck Kohlah finished moving his belongings from the college hostel to Dina's flat, he was soaking with sweat. Fine strong arms, she thought, watching him carry his suitcase and boxes noiselessly, setting things down with care.

"It's so humid," he said, wiping his forehead. "I'll take a bath now, Mrs. Dalal."

"At this time of the evening? You must be joking. There's no water, you have to wait till morning. And what's this Mrs. Dalal again?"

"Sorry—Dina Aunty."

Such a good-looking boy, she thought, and dimples when he smiles. But she felt he should get rid of the few hairs at his upper lip that were trying so hard to be a moustache. "Shall I call you Mac?"

"I hate that name."

He unpacked, changed his shirt, and they had dinner. He looked up from his plate once, meeting her eye and smiling sadly. He ate little; she asked if the food was all right.

"Oh yes, very tasty, thank you, Aunty."

"If Nusswan—my brother—saw your plate, he would say that even his pet sparrow would go hungry with that quantity."

"It's too hot to eat more," he murmured apologetically.

"Yes, I suppose compared to your healthy mountain air it's boiling here." She decided he needed putting at ease. "And how is college?"

"Fine, thank you."

"But you didn't like the hostel?"

"No, it's a very rowdy place. Impossible to study."

There was silence again through several morsels, the next attempt at conversation coming from him. "Those two tailors I met last month—they still work for you?"

"Yes," she said. "They'll be here in the morning."

"Oh good, it will be nice to see them again."

"Will it?"

He didn't hear the edge in it, and tried to nod pleasantly while she began clearing the table. "Let me help," he said, pushing back his chair.

“No, it’s okay.”

She soaked the dishes in the kitchen for the morning, and he watched. The flat depressed him, the way it had when he had come to inspect the room. He would be gone in less than a year, he thought, thank God for that. But for Dina Aunty this was home. Everywhere there was evidence of her struggle to stay ahead of squalor, to mitigate with neatness and order the shabbiness of poverty. He saw it in the chicken wire on the broken windowpanes, in the blackened kitchen wall and ceiling, in the flaking plaster, in the repairs on her blouse collar and sleeves.

“If you are tired you can go to bed, don’t wait for me,” she said. Taking it to be a polite dismissal, he withdrew to his room—her room, he thought guiltily—and sat listening to the noises from the back, trying to guess what she was doing.

Before going to bed herself, Dina remembered to turn on the kitchen tap in order to be roused by its patter at first flow. She lay awake for a long while, thinking about her boarder. The first impression was good. He didn’t seem fussy at all, polite, with fine manners, and so quiet. But maybe he was just tired today, might be more talkative tomorrow.

Maneck did not sleep well. A window kept banging in the wind, and he felt unsure about rising to investigate, afraid of stumbling in the dark, disturbing Mrs. Dalal. He tossed and turned, haunted by the college hostel. Finally escaped, he thought. But it would have been much better to go straight home...

He was up early; the open tap turned out to be his alarm clock as well. After cleaning his teeth he returned to his room and did pushups in his underwear, unaware that Dina, having finished in the kitchen, was watching through the half-open door.

She admired the horseshoe of his triceps as they formed and dissolved with his ascent and descent. I was right last night, she thought, nice strong arms. And such a handsome body. Then she blushed confusedly—Aban in school with me...young enough to be my son. She turned away from the door.

“Good morning, Aunty.”

She turned around cautiously, relieved to see he was wearing his clothes. “Good morning, Maneck. Did you sleep well?”

"Yes, thank you."

She acquainted him with the bathroom and the working of the immersion water heater, then left. He shut the door to undress, moving carefully in the small, unfamiliar space. Hot water steamed, ebullient in the bucket. He tested it with the fingertips, then plunged his hand past the wrist, exulting in the warmth. He realized it was only the dank monsoon day making the steam threaten and cloud so thick, no more scalding than the dreamy mist that would be hugging the mountains at home now.

If he shut his eyes he could picture it: at this hour it would be swirling fancifully, encircling the snow-covered peaks. Just after dawn was the best time to observe the slow dance, before the sun was strong enough to snatch away the veil. And he would stand at the window, watch the pink and orange of sunrise, imagine the mist tickling the mountain's ear or chucking it under the chin or weaving a cap for it.

Soon he would hear the familiar sounds from downstairs as his father opened up the store and stepped outside to sweep the porch. First, his father would greet the dogs who had spent the night on the porch. There was never any trouble with the strays; Daddy had an arrangement with them: they could sleep here and feed on scraps so long as they left in the morning. And they always went obediently at first light, albeit with reluctance, after nuzzling his ankles. In the kitchen Mummy would stoke the boiler with shiny black coal, fill the tea kettle, slice the bread, and keep an eye on the stove.

At this hour, as the pan hissed and sputtered, the aroma of fried eggs would begin to travel upstairs and to the porch. The appetizing emissary would deliver wordless messages to Maneck and his father. Then Maneck would leave the moving-mist panorama and hurry to breakfast, hugging his parents, whispering good morning to each before sitting down at his place. His father had a special big cup, from which he took great gulps of tea while still standing. He always drank his first cup standing, moving around the kitchen, gazing out the window at the early-morning valley. When Maneck was sick with a cold or had exams at school, he was allowed to drink from his father's cup, with its bowl so

huge that Maneck thought he would never finish, never drain its depths, and yet he had to keep drinking if he was to triumph and reveal the star-shaped design at the bottom, changing colour through the final trace of liquid, appearing and disappearing as he sloshed it around...

Shaking water off his wet forearm, Maneck tried to shut the leaking tap—a bad washer—and gazed abstractedly at the steamy swirls haloing his bucket of hot water. His homesick imagination made him see the hills float through the fog again, passing from nimbus to nothing. He sighed, stood on the high step enclosing the bathing area, and hung his clothes on the empty nail next to his towel. The third nail was occupied by a brassière, with something else behind it—knitted from strong, rough yarn, like a thumbless glove. Curious, he pulled it out to examine. A bath mitt, he decided, and stepped off the ledge, picking up the mug to splash himself with water from the ~~bath~~ he saw the worms. *Phylum Annelida*, he remembered from biology class. They were crawling out of the drain in formidable numbers, stringy and dark red, glistening on the grey stone floor, advancing with their mesmeric glide. Maneck froze for an instant before leaping back to the safety of the ledge.

* * * * *

WEEKS EARLIER, when Dina had first heard that the boarder found for her by Zenobia was the son of a girl who had gone to school with them, her memory could not leap back across the years to pluck out the face in question.

“She had a beauty spot on her chin,” reminded Zenobia, “and her nose was slightly crooked. Though I think it made her look quite cute.”

Dina shook her head, still unable to remember.

“Do you have the class photo for...let’s see,” and Zenobia counted on her fingers, “1946, ’47, ’48, ’49—that’s it, 1949.”

“Nusswan would not give me the money to buy it. Have you forgotten how my brother was, after Daddy died?”

“Yes, I know. Such a wretch. Making you wear those ridiculous

long uniforms and those heavy, ugly shoes. You poor thing. Makes me mad even after all these years."

"And because of him I lost touch with everyone. Except you."

"Yes, I know. He didn't allow you to stay for choir or dramatics or ballet or anything."

All that evening they enjoyed the pleasures of reminiscing, laughing at the follies and tragedies of their pasts. Very often there was a little sadness in their laughter, for these memories were of their youth. They remembered their favourite teachers, and Miss Lamb, the principal, who was called Lambretta because she was always scooting up and down the halls. They calculated how old they would have been in the sixth standard, when they had started French, and the French teacher, whom they had nicknamed Mademoiselle Bouledogue, began terrorizing their lives three times a week. Everyone assumed the name was an example of the cruelty of schoolgirls, but it had been bestowed as much for her heavy jowls as for her pugnacious approach to irregular verbs and ~~conjugations~~. After ~~conjugations~~ left, Dina measured out half a cup of rice, picked out the pebbles from the grain, and boiled the water. The last drop of daylight was used up, and the kitchen light had to be switched on. Through the open window she heard a mother calling her children in from play. Then the smell of frying onions swooped in. Everywhere the cooking hour had begun.

As the rice cooked, she thought how pleasant it had been to remember her school-days—better than the brooding and daydreaming she had been doing lately about Nusswan and Ruby; her father's house; her nephews, Xerxes and Zarir, grown men now at twenty-two and nineteen, whom she seldom met more than once a year.

After dinner, she sat at the window, watching the balloonman across the road tempt the passing children. Somewhere, a radio began blaring the signature tune for "Choice of the People." Eight o'clock, thought Dina, as Vijay Correa's voice introduced the first song. She worked on her quilt for an hour or so. Before going to bed she soaped her clothes and left them in the bucket, ready for the morning wash.

Zenobia stopped by again the next evening on her way home from the Venus Beauty Salon and took a large envelope out of her purse. "Go on, open it," she said.

"Oh, it's the class photograph," Dina exclaimed with delight.

"Look at us all," said Zenobia wistfully. "We must have been about fifteen." She pointed out the girl in the second row.

"Yes, I remember her now. Aban Sodawalla. Though you can't see her beauty spot in this picture."

"How the girls teased her about it. And that mean poem someone made up, remember? Aban Sodawalla has no grace, needs a soda to clean her face."

"See the spot upon her chin, pick it out with a pointy pin," completed Dina. "How stupid we were then, chanting such nonsense."

"I know. And by sixteen, the whole jing-bang lot of us was trying to copy the beauty spot. Weren't we silly, trying to paint it on."

Dina studied the photograph again for a moment. "I remember her most clearly in the fourth standard. Eight or nine years old. The three of us were always together then. She was the one very good at skipping rope, wasn't she?"

"Yes, exactly." Zenobia was pleased that at last a firm connection was made. "Trouble with a capital t, the teacher called us, remember?"

They picked up the trail of nostalgia where they had left it the day before: the games they had played during the short and long recess, and the fun of plaiting one another's hair, comparing ribbons, exchanging hair-clips. And when their breasts began to grow, how they would stoop their shoulders to try and reduce the embarrassing protuberances, or wear cardigans to disguise them, even in sweltering heat, and discuss their first periods, walking oddly while they got used to sanitary pads. And then the teasing about imagined boyfriends and kisses, and fantasies of moonlight walks in romantic gardens.

Most of all, Dina and Zenobia marvelled at how, during those years of their terrible innocence, all the girls had known practically everything about one another's lives. "Then your father passed

away," said Zenobia. "And that brother of yours wouldn't allow you to have any friends. But you know, you didn't miss that much —after the final year most of us lost contact with the gang anyway."

With high school completed, some of their companions had had to go to work because their families were poor; others went on to college, and some were not allowed to, because college could be harmful to the lives of soon-to-be wives and mothers—they were kept home to help in the kitchen. If there were no younger sisters to wear the blouse and pinafore of the school uniform, it was cut into kitchen cloths, to wipe the stoves or carry hot pots and pans. Then the ex-schoolgirls were vague, even secretive, when they chanced to meet. There was an air of embarrassment about how they were spending their days, as though they had colluded in a collective betrayal of their youth and childhood. Most of them knew practically nothing about one another's lives.

"You were the only one I kept in touch with—you and Aban Sodawalla, of course," said Zenobia.

She continued with the rest of their schoolmate's story: soon after matriculation, Aban had been introduced by family friends to a certain Farokh Kohlah, who was visiting the city, and who had a business in the north, far away, in a hill-station. The Sodawalla family immediately approved of him. How tall and straight stood the young Parsi gentleman, Mr. Sodawalla had said, such a fine bearing, thanks to the healthy life in the mountains. Mrs. Sodawalla was most impressed by the young gentleman's light pigmentation. Not white like a European ghost, she told her friends, but fair and golden.

In view of the possibilities, the Sodawalla family took a tactical vacation the following year at the hill-station. And, in time, the strategy produced the desired results. Aban fell in love with Farokh Kohlah and the natural beauty of the place. Then she married and settled there.

"She still writes to me once a year, without fail," said Zenobia. "That's how I knew she was looking for a room for her son."

"Which was very lucky for me," said Dina. "Thanks for all your help."

"Don't mention it. But God only knows how Aban has managed to live all these years in some tiny hill town. Especially after being born and brought up in our lovely city. To be honest, I would go crazy."

"If they have their own business, they must be rich people," said Dina.

Zenobia was doubtful. "How wealthy can you get these days, with a small shop in some little hill place?"



ONCE, THOUGH, Maneck's family had been extremely wealthy. Fields of grain, orchards of apple and peach, a lucrative contract to supply provisions to cantonments along the frontier—all this was among the inheritance of Farokh Kohlah, and he tended it well, making it increase and multiply for the wife he was to marry and the son who would be born.

But long before that eagerly awaited birth, there was another, gorier partition, when two nations incarnated out of one. A foreigner drew a magic line on a map and called it the new border; it became a river of blood upon the earth. And the orchards, fields, factories, businesses, all on the wrong side of that line, vanished with a wave of the pale conjuror's wand.

Ten years later, when Maneck was born, Farokh Kohlah, trapped by history, was still travelling regularly to courthouses in the capital, snared in the coils of the government's compensation scheme, while files were shuffled and diplomats shuttled from this country to the other. Between journeys he helped his wife to run their old-fashioned general store in town. The shop was all that remained from his vast fortune, having escaped the cartographic changes by being located on the right side of that magic line.

For years the shop had languished, more a hobby or a social club than a business. The real income had come from those other, lost, sources. Now it needed to be nurtured for all it was worth. Aban Kohlah turned out to be a natural manager in the General

Store. "I can easily handle all this," she said to her husband. "You have more important things to do."

A cradle was set up behind the counter to ensure that she was not separated from her child. She ordered the goods, kept accounts, stocked shelves, served customers, and, in her free moments, revelled in the magnificent view of the valley from the back of the shop. Life in the hills suited her perfectly.

Farokh Kohliah had worried at first that his wife would miss the city and her relatives. He feared that once the novelty of the exotic locale had worn off, the complaining would begin. His worries turned out to be needless; her love for the place only increased with the passage of time.

The cradle was soon outgrown, and Maneck was crawling round and about the counter, then toddling among the shelves. Mrs. Kohliah's vigilance was now strained to the limit. She was afraid that the boy might bring things crashing down on his head. But whenever her back had to be turned, the customers took over, helping to keep him safely busy, playing with him, amusing him with coins and key-rings, or the brilliant hues of their handmade scarves and shawls. "Hello, baba! Ting-ting! Baba, ak-koo!"

By the time he was five, Maneck was proudly assisting his parents in the shop. He stood behind the counter, his black hair barely visible over the edge, waiting to hear the customer's request. "I know where it is! I'll get it!" he would say, and run to fetch the item under the fond glances of Mrs. Kohliah. Standing the school bus the following year, he continued to help out in the evening. He devised his own system for the regulars, keeping their everyday purchases—three eggs, loaf of bread, small butter packet, biscuits—ready and waiting on the counter at their expected time.

"Look at that son of mine," said Mr. Kohliah proudly. "Just six, and what initiative, what organizational skill." He savoured the pleasure of watching Maneck greet the shoppers and chat with them, describe the aggressive pack of langurs he had seen from the schoolbus that morning, or join in the discussion about a dried-up waterfall. The easygoing manner of the townspeople came naturally to Maneck, having been born and brought up

here, and it delighted his father that he mixed so well with everyone.

Sometimes, at dusk, in the bustle of the shop, Mr. Kohlah, surrounded by his wife and son and the customers, who were also friends and neighbours, almost forgot the losses he had suffered. Yes, he would think then, yes, life was still good.

The Kohlahs sold newspapers, several varieties of tea, sugar, bread and butter; also candles and pickles, torches and lightbulbs, biscuits and blankets, brooms and chocolates, scarves and umbrellas; then there were toys, walking-sticks, soap, rope, and more. There was no grand system of inventory selection—just basic groceries, household necessities, and a ~~the shop's~~ casual approach to commerce made it the favourite with locals as well as with the neighbouring settlements. If someone could not afford a full packet of, say, biscuits, Mrs. Kohlah would think nothing of tearing it open and selling half; she had faith that someone else would come along for the other half. If an item was not in stock, Mr. Kohlah would gladly order it as long as the customer was not particular about the delivery date. Even if the delivery date was crucial, there was not much to be done because deliveries depended on the roads, and roads depended on the weather, and everyone knew weather depended on the One Up Above. The morning newspaper usually arrived by early evening, when the regulars gathered on the porch to smoke or sip tea and discuss the news as they read it, calling out the headlines to Mr. Kohlah if he was pottering around inside the shop.

For all the vast inventory it carried, the shop's backbone, ultimately, was a secret soft-drink formula handed down in the Kohlah family for four generations. There was a little factory in the cellar where the soft drinks were mixed, aerated, and bottled. An assistant washed and prepared the empties, and loaded the crates for delivery. To maintain the formula's secret, Mr. Kohlah did the actual mixing and manufacturing himself; his eyepatch testified to that, covering the hole created by a defective bottle exploding under the pressure of carbonation.

With a handkerchief covering the mess on his face, he had gone

upstairs to his wife. Barely a year had passed since their marriage, and it was their first crisis. Would she weep and wail, or faint, or stay composed? He was as curious about her reaction as he was concerned about his eye.

Seven months pregnant, Aban Kohlah was quite in control. "Farokh, would you first like a peg of brandy?" He said yes. She had a tiny sip herself, then drove him to the hospital down in the valley. The doctor said he was lucky to be alive—his spectacles had broken the impact of the glass projectile, keeping it from reaching his brain. But it was impossible to ~~savethe~~ say that was all right. "One eye is sufficient for the things I am looking forward to seeing," he smiled, touching his wife's swollen belly. Whereas, he added, the ugliness of the world would now trouble him only half as much.

He refused to have a glass eye fitted after the socket had healed. An eyepatch became part of his daily attire. He wore it while working in the store, and at social occasions. On his long evening walks through the hillside forest, however, the patch occupied his pocket while he admired for the umpteenth time the beauty of the place and munched on a carrot.

The loss of his eye allowed him to indulge his fondness for carrots. It had been kept in check by Mrs. Kohlah, who said that though carrots were a good thing, any kind of mania was a bad thing. But now she had to allow his passion full play: carrot juice, carrot salad, carrot-ma-gose, carrots in his pocket as walking companions.

"I need carrots," insisted Mr. Kohlah. "My one remaining eye must stay fitter than ever, it has to do double duty."

Their little son, growing quickly, soon learned about his father's craze. When he was scolded for misbehaving, he would steal a carrot from the kitchen and carry it to his father as a peace offering, risking a second scolding from his mother.

After the accident Mr. Kohlah was extra careful in the cellar. He allowed no one in the area while the tired old machines rattled and hissed, filling bottles with the fizz of Kohlah's Cola and the till with the tinkle of much-needed money.

His friends, fearing for his safety, showed their concern by

joking about it. “Careful, Farokh, it can be dangerous when you go underground. Cola mining is as risky as coal mining.” But he laughed with them and ignored their hints.

Sacrificing subtlety, they suggested he should seriously consider replacing the ancient equipment, give some thought to modernizing and expanding the operation. “Listen, Farokh, look at it rationally,” they urged. “Kohlah’s Cola is so good, it deserves to be known throughout the country, not just in our little corner.”

But modernization and expansion were foreign ideas, incomprehensible to someone who refused even to advertise. Kohlah’s Cola (or Kaycee, as it was known) was famous through all the little settlements perched on hillsides for miles around.

Word of mouth had been good enough for his forefathers, he said, and it was good enough for him.

From time to time contenders emerged with fanfare, touting rival brands, but soon went out of business, unable to compete with the Kohlah family’s product. Nothing could approach Kaycee, claimed the faithful patrons—its delicious flavour was as unique as the air in the mountains. The soft drink and the General Store flourished.

And so, by the time Maneck started school, the business was on a sound footing. Mr. Kohlah carefully guarded the formula that had salvaged their livelihood, waiting for the day when he would reveal it to Maneck, as his father had revealed it to him. An air of contentment surrounded his life, a quiet pride at having survived the ordeal by fire. It surfaced when neighbours gathered in the evening and the talk shifted gently to times gone by, to the stories of their lives; and when Mr. Kohlah’s turn came he told of his family’s glory days, not from self-pity or notions of false grandeur, nor to sing his own achievement in the present, but as a lesson in living life on the borderline—modern maps could ruin him, but they could not displace his dreams for his family. Of course, the stories had all been heard before, many times over, yet there was always room for one more telling. And Mr. Kohlah was not the only one guilty of repetition.

Most of his and Mrs. Kohlah’s friends were army men and their wives, who, grown used to a lifetime of British-style cantonment

living, had chosen to retire here in the hills, unable to countenance a return to dusty plains and smelly cities. They too had oft-told tales to tell, of bygone days, when discipline was discipline and not some watered-down version unworthy of the name. When leaders could lead, when everyone knew their place in the scheme of things, and life proceeded in an orderly fashion, without daily being threatened by chaos.

When these retired brigadiers, majors, and colonels came to tea at the Kohlahs', they arrived suited and booted, as they called it, with watches in their fobs and ties around their necks. These trappings might have seemed comical to a nationalist bent of mind but had talismanic value for their wearers. It was all that stood between them and the disorder knocking at the door. Mr. Kohlah himself was partial to bow ties. Mrs. Kohlah served the tea on Aynsley bone china; the cutlery was Sheffield. If it was a special dinner at Navroze or Khordad Sal, she used the Wedgwood set.

"Such a lovely pattern," said Mrs. Grewal. "When will they learn to make such beautiful things in this country?"

Brigadier and Mrs. Grewal were the Kohlahs' closest neighbours, and dropped in fairly often. Mrs. Grewal was also the unchallenged leader of the army wives. Taking the cue from her, someone lightly struck a crystal glass to test the purity of its music; another inverted a plate to gaze lovingly at the manufacturer's monogram. Praise was lavished in equal portions on the food and on the bowls and platters that held it. Chaos was successfully kept at bay for yet another day.

Later, the talk turned, as it had countless times before, to the nightmare that would haunt them to the end of their days—they anatomized the Partition, recited the chronology of events, and mourned the senseless slaughter. Brigadier Grewal wondered if the sundered parts would some day be sewn together again. Mr. Kohlah fingered his patch and said anything was possible. Consolation, as always, was found in muddled criticism of the colonizers who, lacking the stomach for proper conclusions, had departed in a hurry, though the post-mortem was tempered by nostalgia for the old days.

After such evenings, Mr. Kohlah wondered why his air of contentment felt ruffled—not undermined, but as though someone or something was trying to tamper with it. He enjoyed the dinners and tea parties greatly, and would not have absented himself for anything; yet there was a sense of unease, like a smell which should not have been there, of ~~something rotten~~two for his equilibrium to return. Then he began to feel again that yes, it had been the right decision not to leave his home in the hills, it was still a good place for his family. “The air and water is so pure, the mountains so beautiful, and the business is doing very well,” wrote he and Mrs. Kohlah to the relatives who periodically beseeched them to leave. “Nowhere else can Maneck have better expectations ~~for~~ ^{of} Maneck ~~had~~“been consulted he would have agreed completely; and never mind the future, the present would have been reason enough for him, for his happy childhood universe. His days were rich and full—school in the morning and afternoon, the General Store after that, followed by a walk with his father, late in the evening, when he would stride manfully alongside to keep up, or else Daddy would tease him that slow coaches got left behind.

But Sundays were the best days. On Sundays a gaddi man called Bhanu came to tidy the garden behind the house. Maneck looked forward all week to being outdoors with Bhanu, wandering around the property and doing chores under his direction. The area beyond the first fifty yards, where it began to slope downhill, wild with shrubs and trees and thick undergrowth, was the most interesting. There, Bhanu taught him the names of strange flowers and herbs, things which did not grow near the front of the house with the roses and lilies and marigolds. He pointed out the deadly datura plant and the one that was its antidote, and leaves that mitigated the poison of certain snakes, others which cured stomach ailments, and the stems whose pulp healed cuts and wounds. He showed Maneck how to squeeze a snapdragon to make its jaws open. Late in the year, when the weather turned chilly, they gathered dead twigs and branches as the afternoon drew to a close, and made a small fire.

Sometimes Bhanu brought along his daughter, Suraiya, who was the same age as Maneck. Then Maneck divided his time between chores and play. At noon, Mrs. Kohlah called the children in for lunch. Suraiya was shy about eating at the table; there were no chairs in her house. It was a few visits before she would run in with Maneck and readily take her place. Bhanu continued to eat his food outside.

One afternoon, Suraiya squatted on the far slope among the bushes. Maneck waited out of sight for a moment, then followed her curiously. She smiled as he approached. He heard the soft hiss, and bent over to look. Her little stream had made a frothy puddle.

He unbuttoned his pants beside her and produced a fluid arc.
“I can do soo-soo standing,” he said.

Laughing, she finished and pulled up her underpants. “So can my brother, he also has a small soosoti like yours.”

It became a ritual from then on to go in the bushes every time Suraiya came to work with her father. Gradually, their curiosity led them to closer anatomical examinations.

“What is it?” asked Mrs. Kohlah when they came in to tea.
“Why are you two giggling all the time?”

Over the next few Sundays she began watching from the kitchen window, and saw them go repeatedly down the slope, where her eyes could not follow. Her attempt to sneak up on them failed. They heard her footsteps before she was anywhere near, and ran out laughing.

Later, she confided her suspicions to Mr. Kohlah. “Farokh, I think you need to keep an eye on Maneck. While Suraiya is here.”

“Why, what has he done?”

“Well, they go in the bushes and—” she blushed. “I haven’t actually seen anything, but....”

“The little rascal,” smiled Mr. Kohlah. The following Sunday he stayed out in the garden, supervising Bhanu’s work and patrolling the periphery of the slope. It became part of his routine for the rest of that year. The children had to exercise all their cunning to evade the adult’s watchful eye.

When Maneck completed the fourth standard, Mr. Kohlah

began to investigate the possibility of sending him to a boarding school. The quality of instruction available in the local day school had become quite appalling, Brigadier Grewal and everyone else agreed. "A good education is the most important thing," they said.

The boarding school they selected was eight hours away by bus. Maneck detested the decision. The thought of leaving the hill-station—his entire universe—brought him to a state of panic. "I like my school here," he pleaded. "And how will I work in the shop in the evening if you send me away?"

"Stop worrying about work, you're only eleven," laughed Mr. Kohlah. "You have to enjoy your boyhood first. It will be great fun, living with fellows your own age. You will love the school. And the store will still be here when you come home for holidays."

* * * * *

MANECK learned to tolerate boarding school but not to love it. He felt an ache of betrayal. Not one day passed without his remembering the house, his parents, the shop, the mountains. He found his classmates very different from the boys he had known. They behaved as though they were better than he. The older boys talked about girls, and touched the younger boys. Someone showed him a deck of playing cards that had pictures of naked women. The dark patches between their legs horrified him. It couldn't be, the pictures had to be fake, he thought, remembering the smooth, sweetly whispering hole of Suraiya.

"That's hair—that's the way it's supposed to be," said the older boy. "These are genuine photographs. Look, I'll show you." He undid his pants to display his pubic hair, also releasing his tumescent penis from its confines.

"But you're a boy, it doesn't prove anything about girls," said Maneck. He wanted a closer look at the cards. The fellow would not let him unless he did him a favour. He held Maneck very close, rubbing against him and moaning. It was a strange sound, thought Maneck, as though he was trying to do kakka. The cards were handed over after the fellow had spurted.

Maneck returned home for the Divali vacation, let two days pass, then tried to convince his parents not to send him back. He kept it up till Mr. Kohlah got annoyed. "There will be no more talk on this subject," he said.

Maneck went to bed without wishing them good night. The omission tormented him for a long time, leaving a hollow that sleep refused to fill. After midnight had struck, he considered going to his parents' room and rectifying his foolish defiance. But pride, and the fear of angering Daddy again, kept him in his own bed.

Up at dawn, he hugged his mother by the stove and murmured good morning, then skirted his father at the kitchen window and slipped into his chair. "His little lordship is still sulking," said Mr. Kohlah, smiling.

Maneck looked down at his cup, frowning into it. He did not want to lose control of his mouth and smile back.

It was Sunday, and Bhanu came as usual to work in the garden. Suraiya was not with him. Maneck tagged along for a while before asking about her.

"She is with her mother," said Bhanu. "She will be with her from now on."

Maneck felt another segment of his universe collapse. He did not return to the garden after lunch. Mrs. Kohlah took him aside and said it was not nice to be unkind to Daddy who loved him so much. "What he is doing, sending you to a fine school, is for your own good. You should not think of it as punishment."

In the evening, Mr. Kohlah bade his son sit beside him on the sofa. "Boarding school is not forever," he said. "Remember, Mummy and I miss you more than you miss us. But what is the choice? You don't want to be ignorant, unable to read or write, like these poor gaddi people who go through their whole lives cold and hungry, with a few sheep or goats, struggling to survive. Remember, the slow coach gets left behind. Once you obtain the Secondary School Certificate in another six years, nobody is going to send you away. You will take charge of this business."

Maneck allowed himself a smile as his father continued, "In

fact, the sooner it is, the better for me. I can relax and go hiking all day."

Next morning at breakfast, Mr. Kohlah gave him the special big cup to drink from. Then he let him sit behind the till to make change for their customers. Maneck cherished that day for the rest of the school year. Whenever the pain of banishment surfaced, he summoned the happy memory to counterbalance his despair, his dark thoughts of rejection and loneliness.



DESPITE his initial dread of the eternity that was six years, time chipped away three of them at its steady pace. Maneck turned fourteen, and came home for the May vacation.

That year, for the first time, his parents were going to leave him on his own for two days while they attended a wedding. Instead of closing down the place and sending him to a neighbour's house, Mr. Kohlah decided, as a special treat, to let him run the shop alone.

"Just do things the way we do when I'm here," he said. "Everything will go smoothly. Don't forget to count the soft-drink crates taken by the driver. And phone for tomorrow's milk—very, very important. If there is a problem, call Grewal Uncle. I've told him to check on you later on." Mr. and Mrs. Kohlah went around the shop one more time with Maneck, reminding and pointing, then departed.

The day passed like any other. There were flurries of activity followed by periods of calm during which he wiped the glass cases, dusted the shelves, cleaned the counter. The regulars inquired about his parents' absence, and praised his ability. "Look at the boy, keeping the barracks shipshape. Deserves a ~~medal~~ and Aban could retire tomorrow if they wanted to," said Brigadier Grewal. "Nothing to worry about, with Field Marshal Maneck in charge of General Store." Everyone present laughed heartily at that.

Late in the evening, quiet descended upon the square as daylight began to fade. Maneck went to switch on the porch lamp, feeling

proud of his day's work. It was almost time to close the store. All that remained was to empty the till, count the money, and enter the amount in the book. From the porch he saw the shop's interior, and paused. That big glass case in the centre, with soaps and talcum powders—it would look much nicer in the front. And the old newspaper table near the entrance, scarred and wobbly—wouldn't it be better off pushed to the side?

The idea pursued Maneck and seized his imagination while he warmed his food. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed like a smart rearrangement of the display. He could easily manage it alone, tonight. What a surprise for Mummy and Daddy when they came back.

After eating his dinner, he returned to the darkened shop, switched on the light, and dragged the old table out of the way. The glass case was more difficult, heavy and cumbersome. He emptied the merchandise and pushed it slowly to its new, prominent spot. Then he replaced the cans and cartons, but not in their boring old stacks—he arranged them in interesting pyramids and spirals. Perfect, he thought, standing back to admire the effect, and went to bed.

The next evening, Mr. Kohlah walked in and saw the alterations. Without pausing to greet Maneck or ask how things were, he told him to shut the door, hang out the Closed sign.

“But there's still one hour left,” said Maneck, hungry for his father's praise.

“I know. Shut it anyway.” Then his father ordered him to put everything back the way it was. His voice was barren of emotion.

Maneck would have preferred it if his father had scolded or slapped him, or punished him in any manner he wanted. But this contempt, this refusal to even talk about it, was horrid. The enthusiasm drained from his face, leaving behind a puzzled anguish, and he felt on the verge of tears.

His mother was moved to intervene. “But Farokh, don't you think it looks nice, what Maneck has done?”

“The looks are irrelevant. What instructions did we give when we trusted him with the shop for two days? This is how he repays

the trust. It's a question of discipline and following orders, not of looking nice."

Maneck returned the displays to their old places, but for the rest of his school vacation he refused to enter the shop. "Daddy doesn't need me—I don't want to be there," he said bitterly to his mother. "He only wants a servant in the shop."

In bed at night she conveyed to Mr. Kohlah that Maneck's feelings were badly hurt. "I am aware of that," he said, facing away from her on the pillow. "But he must learn to walk before he can run. It's not good for a boy to think he knows everything before his time."

She persevered, and was successful just before the vacation came to an end. Peace was restored between father and son one morning when Mr. Kohlah started reorganizing one of the glass cases and called Maneck into the shop to ask his opinion. As school reopening day approached, they began working together again in the soft-drink factory in the cellar, Maneck taking down the cleaned empties, then carrying up the crates of freshly bottled Kaycee.

On the last night, Mr. Kohlah said, while switching off the machine, "I'll miss you when you leave tomorrow." The motor's dying throbs left his words clutching helplessly at the dank subterranean air. He hugged Maneck as they went up the stairs together.



BOARDING SCHOOL was the cause of Maneck's second unwilling departure from the mountains. The first had come when he was six, when he and his mother went to visit her family in the city, travelling by train for two days. He had been fascinated by the towering buildings and palatial cinema houses, the avalanche of cars and buses and lorries, and the brightness of streets as the lights went on when night had fallen. But after the first few days, he had missed his father terribly. He was thrilled to return home when their holiday was over.

"I am never going to leave the mountains again," he said.
"Never, ever."

Mrs. Kohlah whispered something in Mr. Kohlah's ear, who was waiting on the station platform to receive them. He smiled, embraced Maneck, and said neither was he.

But the day soon came when the mountains began to leave them. It started with roads. Engineers in sola topis arrived with their sinister instruments and charted their designs on reams of paper. These were to be modern roads, they promised, roads that would hum with the swift passage of modern traffic. Roads, wide and heavy-duty, to replace scenic mountain paths too narrow for the broad vision of nation-builders and World Bank officials. minister was garlanded as a band played. It was the Bhagatbhai Naankhatai Marching Band: three brass winds, a pair of snares, and a bass drum. Their uniforms were white, with the letters BNMB in gold braid on their backs; on the bass drum, the initials were painted in red. The band's specialty was wedding processions, and the ministerial programme included the paean of the bride's mother, the lament of the bride's mother-in-law, the bridegroom's triumphal progress, an ode to the matchmaker, and a hymn to fertility. But the BNMB expertly adapted the repertoire for the occasion. The

drums tattooed away militarily, heralding the march of progress, while the trombone eschewed its mournful matrimonial glissandi in favour of a sunburst staccato.

The audience of unemployed villagers cheered on cue, anxious to earn their attendance money. Speeches were delivered from a makeshift platform. The minister swung a golden pickaxe that missed its mark. He grinned at the crowd and swung again.

After the dignitaries left, the workers moved in. Progress was slow at first, so slow that Mr. Kohlah and all the inhabitants of the hills harboured an irrational hope: the work would never be completed, their little haven would remain unscathed. Meanwhile, Brigadier Grewal and he organized meetings for the townspeople where they condemned the flawed development policy, the shortsightedness, the greed that was sacrificing the country's

natural beauty to the demon of progress. They signed petitions, lodged their protest with the authorities, and waited.

But the road continued to inch upwards, swallowing everything in its path. The sides of their beautiful hills were becoming gashed and scarred. From high on the slopes, the advancing tracks looked like rivers of mud defying gravity, as though nature had gone mad. The distant thunder of blasting and the roar of earth-moving machines floated up early in the morning, and the dreaminess of the dawn mist turned to nightmare.

Mr. Kohliah watched helplessly as the asphalting began, changing the brown rivers into black, completing the transmogrification of his beloved birthplace where his forefathers had lived as in paradise. He watched powerlessly while, for the second time, lines on paper ruined the life of the Kohliah family. Only this time it was an indigenous surveyor's cartogram, not a foreigner's imperial map.

When the work was finished, the minister returned to cut the ribbon. In the years since the ground-breaking ceremony, he had grown more corpulent but not less clumsy. He shuffled up to the ribbon and dropped the golden scissors. Seven eager sycophants leapt to the rescue. A tussle ensued; the scissors were wrested away by the strongest of the seven and restored to the minister. He fixed them all with a fierce glare for calling so much attention to a simple slip, then smiled for the crowd and cut the ribbon with a flourish. The crowd applauded, the Bhagatbhai Naankhatai Marching Band struck up, and in the offkey din of the brass winds no one noticed the minister struggling quietly to extricate his pudgy fingers from the scissors.

Then the promised rewards began rolling up the road into the mountains. Lorries big as houses transported goods from the cities and fouled the air with their exhaust. Service stations and eating places sprouted along the routes to provide for the machines and their men. And developers began to build luxury hotels.

That year, when Maneck came home for the holidays, he was puzzled (and later alarmed) to discover his father perpetually irritable. They found it impossible to get through the day without

quarrelling, breaking into argument even in the presence of customers.

"What's the matter with him?" Maneck asked his mother. "When I'm here, he ignores me or fights with me. When I'm at school, he writes letters saying how much he misses me."

"You have to understand," said Mrs. Kohlah, "people change when times change. It does not mean he doesn't love you."

For Mrs. Kohlah, this unhappy vacation would also be remembered as the one during which Maneck abandoned his habit of hugging his parents and whispering good morning. The first time that he came down and took his place silently, his mother waited with her back to the table till the pang of rejection had passed, before she would trust her hands with the hot frying pan. His father noticed nothing.

Stomach churning, Mr. Kohlah was absorbed in watching the growth of development in the hills. His friends and he agreed it was a malevolent growth. The possibility of increased business at the General Store was no consolation. All his senses were being assaulted by the invasion. The noxious exhaust from lorries was searing his nostrils, he told Mrs. Kohlah, and the ugly throbbing of their engines was ripping his eardrums to shreds.

Wherever he turned, he began to see the spread of shacks and shanties. It reminded him of the rapidity with which the mange had overtaken his favourite dog. The destitute encampments scratched away at the hillsides, the people drawn from every direction by stories of construction and wealth and employment. But the ranks of the jobless always exponentially outnumbered the jobs, and a hungry army sheltered permanently on the slopes. The forests were being devoured for firewood; bald patches materialized upon the body of the hills.

Then the seasons revolted. The rain, which used to make things grow and ripen, descended torrentially on the denuded hills, causing mudslides and avalanches. Snow, which had provided an ample blanket for the hills, turned skimpy. Even at the height of winter the cover was ragged and patchy.

Mr. Kohlah felt a perverse satisfaction at nature's rebellion. It was a vindication of sorts: he was not alone in being appalled by

the hideous rape. But when the seasonal disorder continued year after year, he could take no comfort in it. The lighter the snow cover, the heavier was his heart.

Maneck said nothing, though he thought his father was being overly dramatic when he declared, "Taking a walk is like going into a war zone."

Mrs. Kohlah had never been one for walking. "I prefer to enjoy the view from my kitchen," she said whenever her husband invited her. "It's less tiring."

But for Mr. Kohlah, long, solitary rambles were the great pleasure of his life, especially after winter, when every outing was graced by delicious uncertainty—what lay round the next bend? A newborn rivulet, perhaps? Wildflowers he had not noticed yesterday? Among his more awesome memories was a mighty boulder riven by a shrub growing out of it. Sometimes he was the victim of a sweet ambush: a prospect of the valley from a hitherto unseen angle.

Nowadays, every stroll was like a deathwatch, to see what was still standing and what had been felled. Coming upon a favourite tree, he would stop under its branches a while before moving on. He would run his hand along the gnarled trunk, happy that an old friend had survived another day. Many of the rocky ledges that he used to sit on to watch the sunset had been removed by dynamite. When he did find one, he rested for a few minutes and wondered if it would be here for him the next time.

Before long they began talking in town about him. "Mr. Kohlah's screw is getting a little loose," they said. "He speaks to trees and rocks, and pats them like they were his dogs."

When Maneck heard the gossip, he burned with shame, wishing his father would stop this embarrassing behaviour. He also boiled with anger, wishing to slap some sense into the ignorant, insensitive people.



ON THE FIFTH anniversary of the new road, the local punchayet, dominated by a new breed of businessmen and entrepreneurs,

organized a small celebration, inviting everyone to participate. Repulsed by the very idea, Mr. Kohliah left the shop early that evening. He pulled off his eye-patch and started on his walk. The rented loudspeakers, from their perches on tree branches in the town square, followed him for some distance with tinny music and the babble of empty speeches.

He must have walked about three miles when the light of day turned towards the promise of sunset. Strains of pink and orange were weaving their ephemeral threads through the sky. He stopped to gaze westwards, eager to savour the moment. At times like these he wished for two eyes again, to get a wider sweep of the landscape.

Then his gaze was pulled downwards, across the treeless hillside. From hundreds of shacks there rose the grey, stinging smoke of frugal cooking fires. The gauze obscured the horizon. Facing upwind, he could smell the acrid haze and, behind it, the stench of human waste that it grimly tried to shroud. He shifted his weight uncertainly. A twig snapped under his feet. He stood still, asking himself what he was waiting for. He heard the stark voices of mothers calling, the shrieks of children, the barking of pariah dogs. He imagined the miserable contents of the pots blackening over the fires while hungry mouths waited around.

Suddenly, he noticed that dusk had fallen: the sunset was forfeited behind the pall. And the entire scene was so mean and squalid by twilight, so utterly beyond his ability to accept or comprehend. He felt lost and frightened. Waves of anger, compassion, disgust, sorrow, failure, betrayal, love—surged and crashed, battering and confusing him. For what? Of whom? And why was it? If only he could...

But he could make no sense of his emotions. He felt a tightness in his chest, then his throat constricted as if he were choking. He wept helplessly, silently.

The evening darkened. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his eyes. It was a moment before he realized, dabbing at phantom tears, that only the good eye was wet. Strange, he could have sworn the missing one had cried too.

Returning home through the gloom, he decided there was no

meaning in going for walks from now on. If meaning there was, it was too new and terrifying for him to explore.

There was no place of escape. Not for himself, at any rate. His dreams had succumbed, as they must, during their collisions with the passing years. He had struggled, he had won, he had lost. He would keep on struggling—what else was there for him?

But for his son, he began considering other options for the first time.



BETWEEN THEM, relations did not improve when Maneck came home for the two-week break before his final term. Their most frequent arguments concerned the running of the store. Maneck was full of ideas about merchandising and marketing, which his father rejected outright.

"At least let me finish talking," said Maneck. "Why are you so stubborn? Why not give it a try?"

"This is not a little hobby that we can try and toy with," said Mr. Kohlah, his face mournful. "It's our bread and butter."

"Are you fighting again, you two?" said Mrs. Kohlah. "I'm going crazy listening to it."

"You have no control over your son," said Mr. Kohlah, even more mournful. "Can you not do something about his non-stop keech-keech? He contradicts everything I say. He thinks he has a new formula for success—he thinks this is a science experiment."

He refused to let Maneck order new brands of soap or biscuits which were proving popular elsewhere. Suggestions to improve the lighting in the dingy interior, paint the walls, renovate the shelves and glass cases to make the display more attractive were all received like blasphemy.

Maneck had trouble reconciling this absurdly cautious man with the image that had grown in his head from stories told by his mother, and by his father's friends: of the fearless individual who had descended a rope into the rain-swollen gorge to rescue a puppy; who had shrugged off the loss of his eye to flying glass as though it was no more than a mosquito bite; and who had once

thrashed three thieves that had wandered into the store looking for easy prey, tempted by the sight of the lone woman behind the counter, not reckoning on her husband bottling soft drinks in the cellar—like sacks of rice Mr. Kohlah had tossed them around, said his friends.

And now his father was disintegrating all because of the construction of a silly road. Maneck, too, had lately seen the world being remade around him. But with optimism surging through youthful veins, he was certain that things would sort themselves out. He was fifteen: he was immortal, the hills were eternal. And the General Store? It had been there for generations and would be there for generations more, there was no doubt in ~~his mind~~, Mr. Kohlah also hoped it would be thus—that a miracle would restore the past. But he had read the signs, and the message was unfavourable. Snuggled amid the goods that the loathsome lorries transported up the mountains was a deadly foe: soft drinks, to stock the new ~~shops and hotels~~ they dribbled into town in small quantities—a few crates that were easily outnumbered by the ever-popular Kaycee. Out of curiosity, people would occasionally sample the newcomers, then shrug and turn their backs; Kohlah's Cola was still number one.

But the giant corporations had targeted the hills; they had Kaycee in their sights. They infiltrated Mr. Kohlah's territory with their boardroom arrogance and advertising campaigns and cut-throat techniques. Representatives approached him with a proposition: "Pack up your machines, sign over all rights to Kohlah's Cola, and be an agent for our brand. Come grow with us, and prosper."

Of course Mr. Kohlah refused the offer. For him it was not merely a business decision but a question of family name and honour. Besides, he was certain his good neighbours and the people of these settlements were not fickle, they would stay loyal to Kohlah's Cola. He was prepared to put up a fair fight against the competition.

But, like bow ties and watch-chains, fair fights had gone out of style while Mr. Kohlah wasn't looking. The corporations

handed out free samples, engaged in price wars, and erected giant billboards showing happy children with smiling parents, or a man and woman tenderly touching foreheads over a bottle out of which two straws penetrated the lovers' lips. The dribble of new soft drinks turned into a deluge. Brands which had been selling for years in the big cities arrived to saturate the town.

"We must strike back," said Maneck. "We should also advertise—give out free samples like them. If they want to use hard sell, we do the same."

"Hard sell?" said Mr. Kohlah disdainfully. "What kind of language is that? Sounds absolutely undignified. Like begging. These big companies from the city can behave like barbarians if they want to. Here we are civilized people." He gave Maneck his mournful gaze, disappointed with him for even suggesting it.

"Look at him," Maneck appealed to his mother. "He's making his long face again. Anything I say, he makes that face at me. He doesn't give my ideas any consideration."

So Kohlah's Cola never stood a chance. The General Store's backbone was broken, and the secret formula's journey down the generations was nearing its end.

* * * * *

MR. KOHLAH went ahead with the alternate plan for his son, who would soon be obtaining his Secondary School Certificate. He began making inquiries and sending away to various colleges for their prospectuses.

"Are you sure this is necessary, Farokh?" asked Mrs. Kohlah.

"The slow coach gets left behind," he answered. "And I don't want the same thing to happen to Maneck."

"Oh Farokh, how can you say that? Just look at your success—you lost everything during Partition, yet you made such a good life for all of us. How can you call yourself a slow coach?"

"Maybe I'm not—maybe the world is moving too fast. But the end result is the same."

He would not be distracted from his purpose, and career

possibilities were discussed with the faithful family friends. They agreed it was an excellent idea to keep the options open.

"Not that your business is going to fail," said Brigadier Grewal. "But it's good to be prepared on all fronts. Nice to have a big gun in reserve."

"Exactly my thinking," said Mr. Kohlah.

"Would be so nice if he could be a doctor or lawyer," said Mrs. Kohlah, plunging straight into the glamour areas.

"Or an engineer."

"Chartered accountant is also very prestigious," said Mrs. Grewal.

It was up to the army chaps to steer the discussion into the practical realm. "We have to deal with the reality on the ground. The choice is limited by Maneck's marks."

"Which is not to say that he isn't talented."

"Not at all. Sharp as a bayonet, like his father."

"And he is good with his hands," agreed Mr. Kohlah, taking the compliment in stride.

Something technical for Maneck, that much was certain, they all agreed. Preferably in an industry that would grow with the nation's prosperity. The answer, in a country where most of the population lived in tropical or subtropical climates, was obvious and unanimous: "Refrigeration and air-conditioning." And the best college granting diplomas in this field, they discovered, was in Mrs. Kohlah's native city by the sea, the one she had forsaken to marry Mr. Kohlah.

When the final term ended, Maneck came home to discover what had been decided for him and protested vehemently. The second betrayal was not received with a slow ache, as the first one had been. It exploded inside him.

"You promised that when I got my S.S.C. I could work with you! You said you wanted me to take over the family business!"

"Calm down—you will, you will," said Mr. Kohlah, mustering more conviction than he felt. "This is just in case. You see, in the past it was easier to plan for the future. Nowadays, things are more complicated, too much uncertainty."

"It's a waste of time," said Maneck. He was sure that his father

was doing this to be rid of him—to be rid of his interference in the General Store, as though he were a rival. “If you want me to learn a trade or something, I can become a mechanic at Madanlal’s Garage. In the valley. Why do I have to go so far ~~Mr.~~ Kohlah made his mournful face. Brigadier Grewal laughed good-humouredly. “Young man, if you are planning a second line of defence, make sure it’s a strong one. Or don’t bother.”

The family friends said Maneck was a very lucky fellow, and should be grateful for the opportunity. “At your age, we would have been thrilled to spend a year in the most modern, most cosmopolitan city in the whole country.”

So Maneck was enrolled in the college, and preparations were made for his departure. A new suitcase was purchased. His clothes were sorted through, and tickets booked for the various legs of the journey.

“Don’t worry,” said his mother. “Everything will be all right when you come back after a year. Daddy is just concerned about your future. All these changes—they have happened too fast for him. He should be calmer in a year’s time.”

She began to assemble the items he would take with him in boxes. Fearful of forgetting something, she frequently consulted the suggested checklist in the college handbook. She kept opening and shutting the suitcase, taking things out and putting them back in, counting and rearranging. The woman who effortlessly managed the General Store’s merchandise began going to pieces over her son’s packing.

Time and again, she asked for her husband’s advice. “Farokh, how many towels shall I include? Do you think Maneck will need his good trousers, the grey gabardine ones? How much soap and toothpaste, Farokh? And which medicines shall I pack?”

His answer was always the same: “Don’t bother me with silly things. You decide.” He refused even to come near the growing pile of clothes and personal effects, as though denying its existence. If he had to pass by the open suitcase on the table in the upstairs passage, he would avert his eye.

Mrs. Kohlah understood perfectly well the meaning of her husband’s behaviour. She had assumed that inviting him to share

in the planning and packing might help him, make it easier for him to get through the days that were causing so much pain to all of them.

After his brusque responses, she preferred to leave him alone. In any case, she was the stronger of the two when it came to coping with such matters, though neither of them had experienced this long a separation from Maneck. Distance was a dangerous thing, she knew. Distance changed people. Look at her own case—she could never return now to live with her family in the city. And just going to boarding school had made Maneck shun the good-morning hug that he had never missed, ever, not even on days when he was sick, when he came down so lovingly, put his arms around her, then went back to bed. What else would he shun after this separation? Already he was getting more solitary, harder to talk to and share things with, always looking so depressed. How much more would he change? What things would the city do to her son? Was she losing him now forever?

Musing and worrying, in the midst of serving customers, she wandered absentmindedly from the shop to Maneck's boxes. Mr. Kohliah sensed something amiss upstairs, shut off the soft-drink machines in mid-flow and came bounding up the cellar steps to apologize to the lingering clientele.

He curbed his annoyance that morning. The next time it happened, however, he burst out, “Aban! What emergency are you attending to in the bedroom, may I ask?”

Sarcasm was difficult for him, and rare, so it surprised him and hurt her. But she refused to be drawn into an argument, answering mildly, “I remembered something very important. Had to check it right away.”

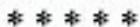
“Your mania will drive us crazy. Please understand once and for all—if you forget something we can always mail a parcel.”

But the things she was concerned about could not be contained or sent in parcels, and attempts to explain them also went frustratingly awry, the words coming out all wrong. “You don’t take an interest in Maneck’s packing, you don’t want the responsibility. And then you say things like mania and crazy to me? Don’t you fear for him? What has happened to your feelings?”

Despite his own confused anger, Mr. Kohlah understood the meaning of his wife's behaviour. A week after this exchange, he was awakened in the night by her rising to leave the room. The clock had finished striking twelve a few minutes ago. He pretended to be asleep. He heard the swish and rustle of her feet as she felt about for her slippers. When she had shut the door behind her, he rose softly and followed.

The floorboards felt cold to his bare feet. He padded down the dark passage and, rounding the corner, saw her standing before the suitcase. He retreated a step. She stood motionless, her head bent, her hands immersed in Maneck's clothes. When the cloud-hidden moon emerged, the silver light illuminated her face. An owl hooted, and he was glad that he had stayed silent, had followed her secretly like this, to see her so beautiful, so absorbed, as she stood there, embodying their years together, their three lives fused in her being, vivid in her face and in her ~~the~~ owl hooted again. The moonlight wavered, hesitating, letting a cloud slide across. Her hands stirred within Maneck's suitcase. The dogs on the porch barked—at what ghost?

Farokh Kohlah heard the ticking of the clock, and then the single bong of twelve-fifteen. He felt grateful to the night for giving him this opportunity, this vision by moonlight. He returned to bed, and did not disturb her when she slid under the sheet minutes later.



THE TIME for last-minute instructions had arrived. More or less repeating the advice given all along, after Maneck's going away had first become reality, his parents cautioned him against mixing at college with those who gambled or drank or smoked. They told him to be careful with his money, and to cultivate a healthy scepticism, for people were very different in the city. "All your life here, we never once discouraged your friendly nature. Whether your companions were rich or poor, and whatever caste or religion—those differences were not important. But now you are

facing the most crucial difference of all, by leaving here for the city. You must be very, very careful."

Mr. Kohlah was planning to accompany his son on the bus ride into the valley, and then by auto-rickshaw to the railway station. But the part-time assistant who had promised to arrive early to take over the morning chores did not show up. So Maneck started off alone on the long day-and-a-half trip to the city.

"Be sure to get a coolie at the station," said his father. "Don't try to carry everything yourself. And fix the amount before he touches the luggage. Three rupees should be enough."

"Aren't you going to hug him?" said Mrs. Kohlah, exasperated, as the two shook hands.

"Oh, all right," said Maneck, and put his arms around his father.

The *Frontier Mail* was in the station when the shuddering auto-rickshaw drew up at the gate. Maneck paid, then followed the coolie over the footbridge to reach the southbound platform. He paused for a moment at the top, the train stretched long and thin underneath him with people scurrying around it. Like ants trying to carry off a dead worm, ~~he thought~~ had walked on, and he ran to catch up. Near the waiting room a vendor was roasting maize, fanning the crepitating coals. Maneck decided to come back for some after finding his seat.

"Fifty rupees from now on," he overheard the stationmaster, who was collecting his weekly tribute of maize and money. "You have the best location. That's what others are willing to pay for it."

"All day the burning smoke blinds my eyes and throttles my lungs," said the vendor. "And just look at my fingers—charred black. Have some pity, sahab." He turned the corncobs deftly to keep them from scorching. "How to afford fifty rupees? Police also have to be kept happy."

"Don't pretend," said the stationmaster, tucking the money into a pocket of his starched white uniform. "I know how much you earn."

Now and again a kernel exploded with a sharp burst. The sound and aroma faithfully nudged Maneck's memory of his first train journey: his mother and he, going to visit their relations.

Daddy had come to see them off. "You're getting too heavy," he had groaned playfully, lifting Maneck to give him a good view of the steam engine. How huge it was, and the train, like a string of bungalows, stretched so far, in a long, long line. Daddy carried him down to the end of the platform, close to the hissing, clanking monster, while Maneck busily tackled his corncob. He bit into it, and milk-white juice spotted Daddy's spectacles.

Daddy made a yanking gesture, which the engine driver understood; he gave a smart tap to his cap visor and sounded the whistle for Maneck. The piercing shriek, so close it seemed to spring from his own heart, startled him into dropping the cob. "Never mind," said Daddy. "Mummy will buy you another."

He bundled Maneck through the window into his seat, next to Mummy, as the final announcement was made. The train moved, and the station began to float past them. Daddy waved his hand, smiling, blowing kisses. He walked beside the compartment, then ran a bit, but was soon left behind to disappear like the fallen corncob lying on the station platform. Everything familiar swept out of sight...

Maneck found his compartment and paid the coolie after the luggage was stowed away. The bungalow on wheels from his childhood had shrunk. Time had turned the magical to mundane. The whistle sounded. No time to buy the maize. He sank into the seat beside his fellow passenger.

The man did not encourage Maneck's efforts at conversation, answering with nods and grunts, or vague hand movements. He was neatly dressed, his hair parted on the left. His shirt pocket bristled with pens and markers in a special clip-on plastic case. The two seats facing them were occupied by a young woman and her father. She was busy knitting. By the fragment hanging from the needles, Maneck tried to decipher what it might be—scarf, pullover sleeve, sock?

The father rose to go to the lavatory. "Wait, Papaji, I'll help you," said the daughter, as he limped into the aisle on one crutch. Good, thought Maneck, she would have to take the upper berth. The view would be better, from his own upper berth. In the evening, Maneck offered his neatly dressed neighbour a Gluco biscuit. He whispered thank you. "You're welcome," Maneck whispered back, assuming the man had a preference for speaking softly. In return for the biscuit he received a banana. Its skin was blackened in the heat, but he ate it all the same.

The attendant began making the rounds with blankets and sheets, readying the berths for sleep. After he left, the neatly dressed man took a chain and padlock from the bag that held his bananas and shackled his trunk to a bracket under the seat. Leaning towards Maneck's ear, he explained confidentially, "Because of thieves—they enter the compartments when passengers fall asleep."

"Oh," said Maneck, a little perturbed. No one had warned him

about this. But maybe the chap was just a nervous type. "You know, some years ago my mother and I took this same train, and nothing was stolen."

"Sadly, now the world is much changed." The man took off his shirt and hung it neatly on a hook by the window. Then he removed the plastic case from the pocket and clipped it to his vest, careful not to snare his chest hair in the formidable spring. Seeing Maneck watching, he whispered with a smile, "I am very fond of my pens. I don't like separating from them, not even in sleep."

Maneck smiled back, whispering, "Yes, I also have a favourite pen. I don't lend it to anyone—it spoils the angle of the nib." The father and daughter did not take kindly to these whispers which excluded them. "What can we do, Papaji, some people are just born rude," she said, handing him his crutch. They went off again to the bathroom, hurling a frosty glance at the opposite seats.

It went unnoticed, for Maneck had begun to worry about his suitcase. The pen-lover's soft words about thieves ruined his night, and he forgot all about the woman in the upper berth. By the time he remembered, she was under cover from prying eyes, Papaji having tucked in the sheet around her neck.

Before climbing into his own berth, Maneck positioned his suitcase so that one corner would be visible from above. He lay awake, peering at it every now and then. The young woman's father caught him looking a few times, and eyed him suspiciously. Towards dawn, slumber overpowered Maneck's vigilance. The last thing he saw while surrendering to sleep was Papaji balanced on one crutch, curtaining off his daughter with a bedsheet as she descended without exposing so much as a calf or an ankle till the attendant came to collect the bedclothes. The young woman was already busy with her knitting, the inscrutable woollen segment dancing below her fingers. Tea was served. Now the neatly dressed pen-lover was more talkative. The cluster of pens was back in his shirt pocket. Maneck learned that yesterday's reticence had been due to a throat ailment.

"Thankfully, it has eased a little this morning," said the man, as he coughed and threatened to hawk.

Remembering how he had returned the man's hoarse whispers by whispering back dramatically, Maneck felt a little embarrassed. He wondered if he should apologize or explain, but the pen-lover did not appear to bear any resentment.

"It's a very serious condition," he explained. "And I am travelling to seek specialist treatment." He cleared his throat again. "I could never have imagined, long, long ago, when I started my career, that this was what it would do to me. But how can you fight your destiny?"

Maneck shook his head in sympathy. "Was it a factory job? Toxic fumes?"

The man laughed scornfully at the suggestion. "I'm an LL.B., a fully qualified lawyer."

"Oh, I see. So the lengthy speeches in dusty courtrooms strained and ruined your vocal cords."

"Not at all—quite the contrary." He hesitated, "It's such a long story."

"But we have lots of time," encouraged Maneck. "It's such a long journey."

Papaji and daughter had had enough of them exchanging comments in low voices. Papaji was certain that their soft laughter contained a leering note, aimed directly at his innocent daughter. He scowled, picked up his crutch, took his daughter by the hand, and stomped one-leggedly down the aisle. "What to do, Papaji," she said. "Some people just have no manners."

"I wonder what's wrong with those two," said the pen-lover, watching the precise, machinelike movement of the crutch. He uncorked a small green bottle, sipped, and put it aside. Fingering his pens affectionately, he tried out the freshly medicated larynx with the opening sentence of the story of his ~~throat~~ law career, which was my first, my best-loved career, started a very long time ago. In the year of our independence."

Maneck counted rapidly. "From 1947 to 1975—twenty-eight years. That's a lot of legal experience."

"Not really. Within two years I changed careers. I couldn't

stand it, performing before a courtroom audience day after day. Too much stress for a shy person like me. I would lie in bed at night, sweating and shivering, scared of the next morning. I needed a job where I would be left to myself. Where I could work *in camera*."

"Photography?"

"No, that's Latin, it means in private." He scratched his pens as though relieving an itch for them, and looked rueful. "It's a bad habit I have, because of my law training—using these silly phrases instead of good English words. Anyway, seeking privacy, I became a proofreader for *The Times of India*."

How would proofreading ravage the throat? wondered Maneck. But he had already interrupted twice and made a fool of himself. Better to keep quiet and listen.

"I was the best they had, the absolute best. The most difficult and important things were saved for my inspection. The editorial page, court proceedings, legal texts, stock market figures. Politicians' speeches, too—so boring they could make you drowsy, send you to sleep. And drowsiness is the one great enemy of the proofreader. I have seen it destroy several promising reputations.

"But nothing was too tricky for me. The letters sailed before my eyes, line after line, orderly fleets upon an ocean of newsprint. Sometimes I felt like a Lord High Admiral, in supreme command of the printer's navy. And within months I was promoted to Chief Proofreader.

"My night sweats disappeared, I slept well. For twenty-four years I held the position. I was happy in my little cubicle—my kingdom with my desk, my chair, and my reading light. What more could anyone want?"

"Nothing," said Maneck. "Exactly. But kingdoms don't last for ever—not even modest little cubicle kingdoms. One day it happened, without warning."

"What?" "Disaster. I was checking an editorial about a State Assembly member who made a personal fortune out of the Drought Relief Project. My eyes began to itch and water. Thinking nothing of it, I rubbed them, wiped them dry, and resumed my work. Within

seconds they were wet again. I dried them once more. But it kept on happening, on and on. And it was no longer a tear or two which could be ignored, but a continuous stream.

“Soon, my concerned colleagues were gathered around me. They crowded my little cubicle, pouring comfort upon what they thought was grief. They presumed that reading about the sorry state of the nation, day after day—about the corruption, the natural calamities, the economic crises—had finally broken me. That I was dissolving in a fit of sorrow and despair.

“They were wrong, of course. I would never let emotions stand in the way of my professional duties. Mind you, I’m not saying a proofreader must be heartless. I’m not denying that I often felt like weeping at what I read—stories of misery, caste violence, government callousness, official arrogance, police brutality. I’m certain many of us felt that way, and an emotional outburst would be quite normal. But too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart, as my favourite poet has written.”

“Who’s that?”

“W.B. Yeats. And I think that sometimes normal behaviour has to be suppressed, in order to carry on.”

“I’m not sure,” said Maneck. “Wouldn’t it be better to respond honestly instead of hiding it? Maybe if everyone in the country was angry or upset, it might change things, force the politicians to behave properly.”

The man’s eyes lit up at the challenge, relishing the opportunity to argue. “In theory, yes, I would agree with you. But in practice, it might lead to the onset of more major disasters. Just try to imagine six hundred million raging, howling, sobbing humans. Everyone in the country—including airline pilots, engine drivers, bus and tram conductors—all losing control of themselves. What a catastrophe. Aeroplanes falling from the skies, trains going off the tracks, boats sinking, buses and lorries and cars crashing. Chaos. Complete chaos.”

He paused to give Maneck’s imagination time to fill in the details of the anarchy he had unleashed. “And please also remember: scientists haven’t done any research on the effects of mass hysteria and mass suicide upon the environment. Not on

this subcontinental scale. If a butterfly's wings can create atmospheric disturbances halfway round the world, who knows what might happen in our case. Storms? Cyclones? Tidal waves? What about the land mass, would it quake in empathy? Would the mountains explode? What about rivers, would the tears from twelve hundred million eyes cause them to rise and flood?"

He took another sip from the green bottle. "No, it's too dangerous. Better to carry on in the usual way." He corked the bottle and wiped his lips. "To get back to the facts. There I was with the day's proofs before me, and my eyes leaking copiously. Not one word was readable. The text, the disciplined rows and columns, were suddenly in mutiny, the letters pitching and tossing, disintegrating in a sea of stormy paper."

He passed his hand across his eyes, reliving that fateful day, then stroked his pens comfortingly, as though they too might be upset by the evocation of those painful events. Maneck took the opportunity to slip in a bit of praise, to ensure that the story continued. "You know, you're the first proofreader I've met. I would have guessed they'd be very dull people, but you speak so...with such...so differently. Almost like a poet."

"And why shouldn't I? For twenty-four years, the triumphs and tragedies of our country quickened my breath, making my pulse sing with joy or quiver with sorrow. In twenty-four years of proofreading, flocks of words flew into my head through the windows of my soul. Some of them stayed on and built nests in there. Why should I not speak like a poet, with a commonwealth of language at my disposal, constantly invigorated by new arrivals?" He gave a mighty sigh. "Until that wet day, of course, when it was all over. When the windows were slammed shut. And the ophthalmologist sentenced me to impotence, saying that my proofreading days were behind me." "Couldn't he give you new spectacles or something?"

"That wouldn't have helped. The trouble was, my eyes had become virulently allergic to printing ink." He spread his hands in a gesture of emptiness. "The nectar that nurtured me had turned to poison."

"Then what did you do?"

"What can anyone do in such circumstances? Accept it, and go on. Please always remember, the secret of survival is to embrace change, and to adapt. To quote: 'All things fall and are built again, and those that build them again are gay.'"

"Yeats?" guessed Maneck.

The proofreader nodded, "You see, you cannot draw lines and compartments, and refuse to budge beyond them. Sometimes you have to use your failures as stepping-stones to success. You have to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair." He paused, considering what he had just said. "Yes," he repeated. "In the end, it's all a question of balance."

Maneck nodded. "All the same, you must have missed your work very much."

"Well, not really," he dismissed the sympathy. "Not the work itself. Most of the stuff in the newspaper was pure garbage. A great quantity of that which entered through the windows of my soul was quickly evacuated by the trapdoor."

This seemed to Maneck to contradict what the man had said earlier. Perhaps the lawyer behind the proofreader was still active, able to argue both sides of the question.

"A few good things I kept, and I still have them." The proofreader tapped audibly, first on his forehead, then on his plastic pen case. "No rubbish or bats in my belfry—no dried-up pens in my pocket-case."

The thump of the single crutch signalled the return down the aisle of Papaji and daughter. Maneck and the proofreader greeted them with pleasant smiles. But they were not to be so easily placated. While passing through to his seat, Papaji lunged with his crutch at the proofreader's foot. He would have successfully speared it had the proofreader not anticipated the attack," said Papaji, gruff with disappointment. "What to do, clumsy mistakes happen when you have only one good leg in a world of two legs."

"Please don't worry," said the proofreader. "No harm has been done."

The daughter resumed knitting, and Papaji concentrated his grim look outside the window, startling the occasional farmer

working his field who happened to catch the angry eye. Maneck wanted the proofreader to continue. "So are you retired now?"

He shook his head. "Can't afford to. No, luckily for me, my editor was very kind, and got me a new job."

"But what about your throat trouble?" Maneck assumed that the point of the entire narration had somehow been overlooked.

"That happened in the new job. Because of his position, the editor-in-chief was friendly with many politicians and was able to set me up for freelancing, in morcha production." Seeing the question on Maneck's face, he explained, "You know, to make up slogans, hire crowds, and produce rallies or demonstrations for different political parties. It seemed simple enough when he presented me with the opportunity."

"And was it?"

"There was no problem on the creative front. Writing speeches, designing banners—all that was easy. With years of proofreading under my belt, I knew exactly the blather and bluster favoured by professional politicians. My *modus operandi* was simple. I made up three lists: Candidate's Accomplishments (real and imaginary), Accusations Against Opponent (including rumours, allegations, innuendoes, and lies), and Empty Promises (the more improbable the better). Then it was merely a matter of taking various combinations of items from the three lists, throwing in some bombast, tossing in a few local references, and there it was—a brand-new speech. I was a real hit with my clients." A smile played on his face as he remembered his successes.

"My difficulties lay in the final phase, out on the street. You see, I had spent my working life in an office, in silence, and my throat was unexercised. Now suddenly I was yelling instructions, shouting slogans, exhorting the crowds to repeat after me. This was *terra incognita* for a person of my background. It became too much. Much too much for my underused larynx. My vocal cords suffered such injuries, the doctors tell me they will never fully recover."

"That's terrible," said Maneck. "You should have let the others scream and yell. After all, that's what the crowds are hired for, aren't they?"

"Correct. But the habit of my old job—doing everything myself, down to the smallest detail—was a hard habit to break. I could not leave it to the rented crowd to do the shouting. After all, the success of a demonstration is measured in decibels. Clever slogans and smart banners alone will not do it. So I felt I must lead by example, employ my voice enthusiastically, volley and thunder, beseech the heavens, curse the forces of evil, shriek the praises of the benefactor—bellow and clamour and cry and cheer till victory was mine!"

Excited by his remembrances, the proofreader forgot his limitations and began raising his voice. He plucked a pen from his pocket and gesticulated with it like a conductor's baton. Then his symphonic descriptions were cut short by a violent fit of hacking and choking and gasping.

Papaji and daughter cringed, shrinking backwards into their seats, fearing contagion from the vile-sounding cough. "What to do, Papaji," sniffed the daughter, covering her nose and mouth with her sari. "Some people just have no concern for those around them. So shamelessly spreading their germs."

The proofreader caught his breath and said, "You see? You see the extent of my suffering? This is the result of the morcha profession. A second impotence." He lifted his hands and clutched himself round the neck. "You could say that I have cut my own throat."

Maneck laughed appreciatively, but the proofreader had not intended to be humorous. "I have learned from my experience," he said with gravity. "Now I keep a strong-throated assistant at my side, to whom I whisper my instructions. I teach him the phrasing, the cadence, the stressed and unstressed syllables. Then he leads the shouting brigades on my behalf."

"And his throat is okay, no problems?" "Yes, quite okay, on the whole. He used to be a sergeant-major before he left the army. Still, I have to keep him supplied with mentholated throat lozenges. In fact, he is meeting me at the station. There is always a lot of demand in the city for morchas. Various groups are in a state of perpetual agitation—for more

food, less taxes, higher wages, lower prices. So we will also do some business while I get my medical treatment."

Towards the end of the story, his voice sank to the feeble whisper that he had struggled to produce last night, and Maneck asked him to please not strain himself any further.

"You're quite right," said the proofreader. "I should have stopped talking ages ago. By the way, my name is Vasantrao Valmik," and he held out his hand.

"Maneck Kohlah," he replied, shaking it, while Papaji and daughter looked the other way, wanting to take no part in an introduction with these two ill-mannered individuals.

It was Thirty-Six hours after leaving home that Maneck arrived in the city, clothes covered in dust and eyes smarting. His nose ached, and his throat felt raw. He wondered what additional damage the journey had inflicted on the poor proofreader's ravaged vocal cords.

"Bye-bye, Mr. Valmik—all the best," he said, struggling outside with his suitcase and boxes.

Standing woebegone on the platform, looking around for his retired sergeant-major, Vasantrao Valmik was hardly able to croak a reply. He raised a hand in farewell, which stroked his pens on the way down.

Maneck's taxi from the train station to the college hostel made a small detour around an accident. An old man had been hit by a bus. The conductor flagged down passing buses, transferring his passengers while waiting for the police and ambulance.

"Have to be young and quick to cross the street," mused the taxi driver.

"True," said Maneck.

"Bastard bus drivers, they buy their licence with bribes, without passing the test," the driver took an angrier tone, moving into the opposing lane of traffic to overtake. "Should all be sent to jail."

"You're right," said Maneck, only half-listening. Filtered through his exhaustion, the city seemed to roll past the taxi window like the frames of a film reel. On the pavement, children were pelting pebbles at a dog and bitch joined in copulation.

Someone emptied a bucket over the animals to separate them. The taxi narrowly missed hitting the dog as it darted into traffic.

At the next signal light, police were arresting a man who had been beaten up by a gang of six or seven young fellows. The mohulla's residents had spilled into the road to witness the culmination of the drama. "What happened?" the taxi driver leaned out his window to ask an onlooker.

"Threw acid in his wife's face." The signal changed before they found out why. The driver speculated that maybe she was fooling around with another man;

or she may have burnt the husband's dinner. "Some people are cracked enough to do anything."

"Could have been a dowry quarrel," said Maneck.

"Maybe. But in those cases they usually use kerosene, in the kitchen."

It was late evening when Maneck reached the hostel. At the warden's office he was given his room number, keys, and a list of rules: Please always keep room locked. Please do not write or scratch on walls with sharp instruments. Please do not bring female visitors of the opposite sex into rooms. Please do not throw rubbish from windows. Please observe silence at night. Maneck rumpled the cyclostyled list and tossed it on the little desk. Too enervated to eat or wash, he unpacked a white bedsheet and went to sleep.

Something crawling along his calf woke him. He rose on one elbow to deliver a furious swat below the knee. It was dark outside. He shivered, and his heart thumped wildly with the panic of not being able to remember where he was. Why had his bedroom window shrunk? And where was the valley that should lie beyond it, with pinpoints of light dancing in the night, and the mountains looming darkly in the distance? Why had everything vanished? Maneck covered him like a blanket as his eyes were able to trace the outline of his luggage on the floor. He had travelled. By train. Travelling made everything familiar vanish. How long had he slept—hours or minutes? He peered at his watch to unravel the puzzle, pondering the glowing numbers.

He started, suddenly remembering what it was that had woken him. The crawling thing on his leg. He jumped out of bed, kicked the suitcase, knocked into the chair, and felt around frantically on the wall. The switch. Click. His finger gave life to the naked ceiling bulb, and the bedsheet gleamed like a fresh, dazzling snowfield. Except for the side where he had slept, smudged by the dust from his face and clothes.

Then he saw it on the edge of the white expanse. Under the glare of the light it scuttled towards the gap between bed and wall. He grabbed a shoe and smacked wildly in its general direction. It was a very poor shot; the cockroach disappeared. Chagrined,

he fought off his fatigue and tackled the problem with more determination. He pulled the bed away from the wall, slowly, not to alarm the fugitive, till there was a space for him to squeeze in. The exposed bit of floor revealed a conference of cockroaches. He crouched stealthily, raised his arm, and unleashed a flurry of blows. Three succumbed to his shoe, the rest disappeared under the bed. He got down on his hands and knees, resolved that they would not escape to haunt him later. Meanwhile, his ankle began to itch, and his scratching fingers felt a red swelling. He discovered similar itchy bumps on his arms.

There was a knock on the door. He hesitated, loath to leave his prey—if they managed to hide, he would be at their mercy for the rest of the night.

A voice called, “Hi! Everything okay?”

Maneck crawled out from under the bed and opened the door.

“Hi,” said the visitor. “I’m Avinash. From the next room.” He put out his right hand; the left held a spray pump.

“I’m Maneck.” He dropped the shoe and shook hands, then glanced quickly over his shoulder in case the enemy was trying to flee.

“Heard the banging,” said Avinash. “Cockroaches, right?”

Maneck nodded, picking up his shoe again.

“Relax, I got you some advanced technology.” Grinning, he held up the spray pump.

“Thanks, but it’s okay,” said Maneck, vigorously scratching the red trophies on his arms. “I killed three and—”

“You don’t know this place. Kill three, and three dozen will arrive marching in single file, to take revenge. It’s like a Hitchcock movie.” He laughed and came closer, lightly touching the red bumps on Maneck’s arms. “Bedbugs.”

His advice was to fumigate the room and wait outside for forty-five minutes. “It’s the only way you’ll be able to sleep tonight, believe me. This is my third year in the hostel.”

They removed the sheet, lifted the mattress, and treated the frame and slats. The rest of the room was also sprayed—along the window ledge, in the corners, inside the cupboard. The

suitcase and boxes were moved to Avinash's room, to keep the bugs and cockroaches from seeking refuge in them.

"I feel bad using up so much of your spray," said Maneck.

"Don't worry, you'll have to buy your own can of Flit. You can do mine later. The rooms need spraying at least once a week."

They settled down to wait for the insects to die, Maneck on the only chair, Avinash on the bed. "So," he said, leaning back upon his elbows.

"Thanks for your help."

"It's okay, yaar, no big deal." There was a pause, to see which way the conversation would go. It didn't. "You want to play chess, or draughts or something, to pass the time?"

"Okay, draughts." Maneck liked his eyes, the way they looked directly into his.

It was easier to start talking once they began the game, their heads bowed over the board. "So where are you from?" asked Avinash, obtaining his first king.

The account of the hill-station, the settlements, the mountains, the langurs, the snow fascinated Avinash. He confessed, as he won the game and set up the board again, that he had never travelled anywhere.

"The house was built by my great-grandfather, on a hill," continued Maneck. "And because of the steep slope, we have steel cables to keep it tied in place."

"Wait a sec—you think I was born yesterday?"

"No, really. There was an earthquake, and the foundation shifted downhill. That's why the cables were connected." He explained how the repair work had been done, and described technical details.

His earnestness convinced Avinash. The idea of a house on a leash, tethered to mountain rock, amused him. "Sounds like a house with suicidal tendencies."

They laughed. Avinash moved up one of his men and said, "Crown me." A few moves later, he won again. "So what does your father do?"

"We have a shop."

"Ah, a businessman. Must be making solid money, sending you all the way here to study."

The slight jeer in his voice offended Maneck. "It's just a small store, and very hard work for my parents. They sent me to study because the business is going downhill and—"

They looked up at the same instant, laughing at his chosen word. Maneck decided he had answered enough questions. "What about you? You're also studying here, your father must be well off to afford it."

"Sorry to disappoint you. I got a scholarship."

"Congratulations." Maneck contemplated his next move. "And what does your father do?"

"Employed in a textile mill."

"He's the manager?"

Avinash shook his head.

"Accountant?"

"He operates the machinery. He's been running a fucking loom for thirty years, okay?" His voice shook on the brink of a rage, then he calmed down.

"I'm sorry," said Maneck, "I didn't mean to..."

"Why sorry? I'm not ashamed of the truth. I should be sorry, that I have no more interesting story than this. No mountains, no snow, no runaway houses—just a father who has given his years to the mill, and got TB in exchange."

They turned their faces to the board again, and Avinash kept talking. After winning the scholarship, he had been looking forward to his own room in the hostel. All his life he had lived with his parents and three sisters in a one room-and-kitchen rented to them by the mill. His father had had tuberculosis for a few years now, but was forced to keep working amid the dust and fibres to support the family. Besides, if he were to quit, they would have to vacate the mill's quarters, and there was nowhere else to go.

The hostel had been a big disappointment when Avinash had arrived, filthy, with rats and cockroaches everywhere. "Our home may be one room and kitchen, but at least we keep it clean." Then there were the frustrations of being President of the Student Union

and Chairman of the Hostel Committee. "I regret getting elected. There is nothing in the college prospectus to prepare you for hostel life."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't want to spoil your first day by describing it. What you've seen so far is nothing. But if students took an interest, demanded improvement, the bathrooms and toilets would easily be repaired. The money for maintenance is all going into someone's pocket. Just like the canteen. The caterer has a fat contract, and provides garbage for the students. But you get to choose your garbage—veg or non-veg."

"I'm not fussy about food," said Maneck bravely.

Avinash laughed. "We'll see. Actually, it's not much of a choice. I think the veg food is the same as non-veg, but minus the gristle and bone."

Maneck concentrated; he thought one of his men was at last going to breach the defences.

"The trouble is," said Avinash, devouring the hopeful piece, "most of the students in the hostel are from poor families. They are afraid to complain, all they want is to finish their studies and find a job so they can look after their parents and brothers and sisters."

Foiled again, Maneck crowned another king for Avinash and lost the game two moves later. He didn't mind that he kept losing, because his opponent did not gloat.

"You look sleepy," said Avinash. "No wonder you can't focus on the game."

"It's okay, let's play one more. But you know, you are different from the other students."

Avinash laughed. "How can you tell? You've just arrived."

Maneck considered, running a finger around the concentric grooves that embellished the surface of the draughtsmen.

"Because...because of everything you just said. Because you became the president, to improve things."

Avinash shrugged. "I don't think so. I'm planning to resign. I should be spending my time and energy on studies. I was the first one ever to finish high school in our family. Everyone's relying

on me. My three young sisters, too. I must collect money for their dowries, or they won't be able to get married." He paused, smiling. "When they were small they used to bite my fingers, when I helped my mother to feed them." He laughed at the memory. "My father says that all the blood he spits will not be in vain if I get my degree and a good job."

They raised their faces from the board, and Avinash fell silent. It had been easy to keep talking while their eyes were glued to the pieces. The logic of the checkered board had been in control, towing both the game and the conversation. Now the thread was broken. Embarrassment and awkwardness came tumbling out.

"I must unpack."

"Your room should be fine now. Let's check."

They carried back the suitcase and boxes, swept up the dead cockroaches, and made the bed. "Don't push it to the wall again," said Avinash. "Safer to leave at least a foot." He also suggested immersing the bed's legs in cans of water, to discourage things from climbing up. "We can do that tomorrow. You'll be okay for tonight."

* * * * *

MANECK complained to the warden's office that nothing happened when he pulled the chain in the toilet.

"That's because there is no water supply for the flush tank," said the clerk, looking up from Scotch-taping some torn documents. "The building contractor did not connect the pipes, to save money. College has taken him to court. But don't worry, the sweeper who cleans the bathrooms is looking after the problem."

"How?"

"With buckets of water."

"What time does the sweeper come?"

"Before the hostel awakes—four a.m., sometimes five a.m."

Maneck immediately made a firm resolution: to be first in the toilet every morning, no matter how early he had to rise for that privilege.

The next day, hearing him up before dawn, Avinash came to check. "What's wrong? Are you sick or something?"

"No, I'm fine—why?"

"Do you know what time it is? Five-fifteen."

"I know. But I hate someone's shit staring me in the face when I go to the toilet."

Avinash was annoyed that he had dragged himself out of bed for no reason, then laughed. "You rich boys. When will you get used to reality?"

"I told you I'm not rich. The bathroom at home is plain, just like this. But there's water in the flush. And not such a stink."

"The problem with you is, you see too much and smell too much. This is big-city life—no more beautiful snow-covered mountains. You have to learn to curb your sissy eyes and nose. And another thing you better be prepared for is ragging."

"Oh no," said Maneck, remembering his boarding school. "Haven't these fellows grown up yet? What do they do? Pour water in the bed? Salt in the tea?"

"Something like that."

In his letter home at the end of the week, Maneck was hard-pressed to find things to say that would not be mistaken for whining. He didn't want Brigadier and Mrs. Grewal, and all the others who would share the letter, to think he was a softie who couldn't manage by himself.

After the first fortnight, however, when Avinash and he had become good friends, he could almost believe what he had been told before leaving home: that he would have an enjoyable time in college.



ONE EVENING, over draughts, Maneck confessed his ignorance of chess. Avinash said he could teach him in three days. "That is, if you're seriously interested in learning the game."

Since they were both non-vegetarian and sat in the same section of the dining hall, the chess lesson began during dinner, with

paper and pencil. Maneck said the diversion made the canteen swill easier to swallow.

“Now you’re learning,” said Avinash. “That’s the secret—to distract your senses. Have I told you my theory about them? I think that our sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing are all calibrated for the enjoyment of a perfect world. But since the world is imperfect, we must put blinders on the senses.”

“The world of the hostel is more than just imperfect. It’s a gigantic deformity.”

After eating, they adjourned to the common room, where it was still quiet. A few students were gathered around the carrom board. Each time the striker slammed into the ledge and rebounded, the spectators followed with a murmur of approval or commiseration. Another group came in, laughing and boisterous, and started a game of capping-the-fan: tossing a pen cap at the slow ceiling fan and trying to land it on one of the three blades. After several attempts, the game’s originator climbed onto a chair, arrested the fan, and placed the pen cap on it. They turned up the speed to raucous cheers as the cap came flying off. Next, they grabbed one among them and raised him towards the fan, threatening to shove him into the blades. He shrieked and howled—out of fear, and also because it was expected of him. Maneck and Avinash watched their antics for a while, then went upstairs to continue the chess lesson. Avinash’s chessmen were waiting on his desk, in a plywood box with a maroon, high-gloss varnish. Removing the sliding lid, he emptied the box onto the board.

The plastic pieces that tumbled out were crudely moulded; green felt lined their bases. Maneck noticed a sheet of paper face-down in the bottom of the box, and flipped it over.

“Hey, that’s private,” said Avinash.

“Solid,” said Maneck, reading the certificate in admiration: the set had been awarded as first prize in the 1972 Interclass Chess Tournament. “I never knew my teacher was a champion.”

“I didn’t want to make you nervous,” said Avinash. “Come on now, pay attention.”

By the third day Maneck had learned the basics of the game.

They were in the dining hall, pondering a problem Avinash had sketched out, with white to play and mate in three moves. Suddenly, there was a commotion in the vegetarian section. Students leapt from their places, tables were overturned, plates and glasses smashed, and chairs flung at the kitchen door. It was not long before the reason for the uproar was learned by the entire dining hall: a vegetarian student had discovered a sliver of meat floating in a supposedly vegetarian gravy of lentils.

The news spread, about the bastard caterer who was toying with their religious sentiments, trampling on their beliefs, polluting their beings, all for the sake of fattening his miserable wallet. Within minutes, every vegetarian living in the hostel had descended on the canteen, raging about the duplicity. Some of them seemed on the verge of a breakdown, screaming incoherently, going into convulsions, poking fingers down their throats to regurgitate the forbidden substance. Several succeeded in vomiting up their dinners.

But there were no fingers long enough to reach the meals digested since the beginning of term. That vile stuff was already absorbed to become part of their own marrow, and the cause of their anguish. They retched and spat and groaned, and spun in circles, holding their heads, crying about the calamity, unwilling to acknowledge that their stomachs were empty, there was nothing left to bring up.

The hysteria found a more satisfying focus when the kitchen workers were dragged out. Smelling of rancid oil and sweat and hot stoves, the six men trembled before their accusers. Their white uniforms carried stains from their labours with the evening's menu—brown splashes of lentils, dark green streaks ~~the prospect~~ of vengeance acted like an antacid on the violated vegetarian innards. Nausea retreated; the outpouring of bile and vomit and greenish-yellow effluent was replaced by a torrent of verbal violence.

“Smash the fucking rascals!”

“Break their faces!”

“Make them eat meat!”

The threats did not immediately become blows because the six

wisely fell to their knees, setting up a loud wailing. Their snivelling and begging for mercy was as hysterically incoherent as the vegetarians' emetic exertions had been.

Avinash observed the drama unfold for a minute, then pushed back his chair. "I have an idea. Will you look after my chess board?"

"You'll simply get hurt," said Maneck. "Why are you interfering?"

"Don't worry, I'll be okay."

Maneck returned the chessmen to the box, watching from his corner. The kitchen workers and students were still locked in their respective poses: discovered Crime cowering for clemency at the feet of implacable Retribution. It would have been funny had it not been for the real danger of the workers' being pounded to a pulp. But so far, the invisible line was holding, separating the potential from its realization. Strange, that invisible lines could be so powerful, thought Maneck—strong as brick walls.

"Stop! Wait a sec!" shouted Avinash, putting himself between the frightened kitchen workers and the students.

"What?" they asked impatiently, recognizing their Hostel Committee Chairman and Student Union President.

"Hang on for a minute. What's the point of thrashing these guys? The crooked caterer is the one to blame."

"He'll get the message if we give his workers a pasting. Won't dare to show his face here again."

"You're wrong. He'll just come with police protection."

A great opening gambit, thought Maneck—the invisible line reinforced.

Avinash pleaded with the vegetarians, and everyone else disgusted with the food, to join him in lodging a complaint with the college administration. "Let's do this democratically, let's not behave like goondas on the street. It's bad enough that the bloody politicians do."

Check, thought Maneck. Cleverly manoeuvred. Some were in favour and some against the suggestion. There was a fresh volley of vegetarian threats, while the kitchen workers responded with a broadside of grovelling and whimpering. But

the intensity was starting to diminish in both camps. More voices were raised in support of Avinash's appeal. The vegetarian offensive gradually fell silent, and the kitchen workers ceased their salvos of weeping, though they maintained their knees in readiness for a swift descent should the need arise again.

Plans were made to organize a large protest outside the Principal's office next morning. Enthusiasm for the chosen course of action was general by now. Even the strictest vegetarians stopped puking, composed themselves, and went off to undertake their pollution-cleansing ablutions, promising to gather with the others in the morning.

Checkmate, thought Maneck. The invisible line was impregnable.

"I guess you're what is called a born leader," he said to Avinash later that night, half-teasing, half-admiring.

"Not really. A born fool. I should stick to my decision—to give up all this and pay attention to my studies. Come on, let's go upstairs."

* * * * *

THE CANTEEN agitation's success astonished Avinash and his followers. The Principal dictated a letter of termination addressed to the caterer. The Hostel Committee was authorized to select a replacement.

Now the jubilant students held a victory celebration and grew more ambitious. Their President promised that, one by one, they would weed out all the evils of the campus: nepotism in staff hiring, bribery for admissions, sale of examination papers, special privileges for politicians' families, government interference in the syllabus, intimidation of faculty members. The list was long, for the rot went deep.

The mood was euphoric. The students fervently believed their example would inspire universities across the country to undertake radical reforms, which would complement the grass-roots movement of Jay Prakash Narayan that was rousing the nation with a call to return to Gandhian principles. The changes would

invigorate all of society, transform it from a corrupt, moribund creature into a healthy organism that would, with its heritage of a rich and ancient civilization, and the wisdom of the Vedas and Upanishads, awaken the world and lead the way towards enlightenment for all humanity.

It was easy to dream noble dreams for those few days after the canteen protest. With so much determination and good intention circulating within the student body, numerous subcommittees were created, agenda adopted, minutes recorded, and resolutions passed. The canteen meals improved. Optimism ~~Gandhi~~, however, had had enough of it. He wanted his life, and Avinash's, to return now to their earlier routine. This business of endless agitation was tiresome. He tried to wean Avinash from his new passion, making what he thought was a crafty move: he invoked his friend's family. "I think you were right. What you said before, you know, about focusing completely on studies, for the sake of your parents, and for your sisters' dowries. You really should."

The reminder troubled Avinash, glooming his brow. "I often feel guilty about that. I'll give up my chairmanship. Soon as these few remaining problems are fixed."

"What problems?" Maneck was impatient. "In all your meetings you haven't once mentioned the filthy toilets and bathrooms. Cockroaches and bedbugs should be on the agenda. Mahatma Gandhi wouldn't have liked your approach, he believed firmly in cleanliness—physical purity precedes mental purity precedes spiritual purity."

The objection cheered Avinash, and he laughed, throwing his arm over Maneck's shoulders as they crossed the quadrangle. "I didn't know you were an expert in Gandhian philosophy. Tell me, would you like to chair the cockroach subcommittee? I'll second the motion."

Maneck attended a few rallies and protests, only in order to support his friend. After a while, even that wasn't a sufficient reason. The process was so tediously repetitious, he stopped going.

* * * * *

AVINASH DID not have time for chess in the evenings anymore. They still ate together but were seldom alone, and Maneck resented it. A crowd hung around his friend, discussing and arguing about things he did not understand and was not interested in understanding. Their talk was filled with words like democratization, constitution, alienation, degeneration, decentralization, collectivization, nationalism, capitalism, materialism, feudalism, imperialism, communalism, socialism, fascism, relativism, determinism, proletarianism—ism, ism, ism, ism, the words flying around him like buzzing insects.

Why couldn't these fellows talk normally? wondered Maneck. To amuse himself he began counting their various isms, and stopped when he reached twenty. Sometimes, dogs came into their debates—imperialist dogs, running dogs of capitalism. Sometimes the dogs were pigs, capitalist pigs. Money-lending hyenas and landowning jackals also put in occasional appearances. And lately, besides the isms, there was this Emergency that they kept going on about, behaving as if the sky had fallen. Maneck went to his room as soon as he finished his meal. He still had the plastic chessmen, and he set them up to play against himself. He made a move, then turned the board around. After a while it became boring. He tried the book Avinash had lent him, containing a series of endgame problems in increasing degrees of difficulty.

Hard though it was, Maneck continued to shun his friend's company. Then, just as he was weakening after a few days of loneliness, deciding to give him a second chance, Avinash knocked on the door.

"Hi, what's new?" he slapped Maneck's back affectionately.

"This game."

"Playing alone?"

"No, with me." Maneck toppled his own king.

"Haven't seen you much lately. Aren't you curious about what's been happening?"

"You mean in college?" "Yes—and everywhere else, since the Emergency was declared." "Oh, that." Maneck made an indifferent face. "I don't know much about those things."

"Don't you read the newspapers?"

"Only the comics. All the political stuff is too boring."

"Okay, I'll make it simple and quick for you, so you don't fall asleep."

"Good. I'll time you." Maneck checked his watch. "Ready, begin."

Avinash took a deep breath. "Three weeks ago the High Court found the Prime Minister guilty of cheating in the last elections. Which meant she had to step down. But she began stalling. So the opposition parties, student organizations, trade unions—they started mass demonstrations across the country. All calling for her resignation. Then, to hold on to power, she claimed that the country's security was threatened by internal disturbances, and declared a State of Emergency."

"Twenty-nine seconds," said Maneck.

"Wait, there's a bit more. Under the pretext of Emergency, fundamental rights have been suspended, most of the opposition is under arrest, union leaders are in jail, and even some student leaders."

"You better be careful."

"Oh, don't worry, our college is not that important. But the worst thing is, the press is being censored—"

"Not much point then in reading newspapers, is there?"

"And she has retroactively changed the election laws, turning her guilt into innocence."

"And you don't have time to play chess because of this."

"I'm playing it all the time. Everything I do is chess. Come on, let's see how much you've learned." He set up the board, then concealed a white and a black pawn behind his back. Maneck guessed correctly and started the game by advancing the king's pawn. Half an hour later he had won, much to his surprise.

"Serves me right, for teaching you so well," said Avinash. "But we'll have to have a return match soon."

Now it would be like before, thought Maneck. Once again he would have Avinash to himself. His secret wish was that the Principal would ban the bloody Student Union because of the Emergency, as other universities were doing. Then there would be nothing to distract his friend.

But Maneck remained disappointed; their chess games did not resume. He knocked at Avinash's door on several evenings, and there was no answer. Twice he slipped a note under the door: "Hi. Where have you been hiding? Afraid to face me over the chessboard or what? See you soon—Maneck."

After the second note, when he saw him in the dining hall, Avinash only had time for a quick wave. "Got your message," he said. "Free tomorrow?"

"Sure."

And next night Maneck waited in his room, but his friend did not turn up. Angry and hurt, he went to bed promising himself this was it. If Avinash wanted to see him, he could chase after him for a change.

He missed Avinash. Strange, he thought, how a friendship could spring up suddenly one evening, facilitated by cockroaches and bedbugs. And then fizzle out just as suddenly, for reasons equally ludicrous. Maybe it was silly to have assumed it was a friendship in the first place.

* * * * *

EVERYTHING disgusting about the hostel that Maneck had learned to live with began to nauseate him with a renewed vengeance. As an antidote, he developed a morning waking routine: when his eyes opened, he shut them again and, head still on the pillow, imagined the mountains, swirling mist, birdsong, dogs' paws pattering on the porch, the cool dawn air on his skin, the excited chatter of langurs, breakfast cooking in the kitchen, toast and fried eggs upon his tongue. When all his senses were thus anointed by home imaginings, he reopened his eyes and got out of bed. On campus, a new group, Students For Democracy, which had surfaced soon after declaration of the Emergency, was now in the

ascendant. Its sister organization, Students Against Fascism, maintained the integrity of both groups by silencing those who spoke against them or criticized the Emergency. Threats and assaults became so commonplace, they might have been part of the university curriculum. The police were now a permanent presence, helping to maintain the new and sinister brand of law and order.

Two professors who chose to denounce the campus goon squads were taken away by plainclothesmen for anti-government activities, under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act. Their colleagues did not interfere on their behalf because MISA allowed imprisonment without trial, and it was a well-known fact that those who questioned MISA sooner or later answered to MISA; it

~~was safer not to tangle with something so powerful~~
was safer not to tangle with something so powerful
as President of the original Student Union, surely he was in grave danger from the new groups on campus. At night, he listened for sounds from the room next to his. The door shutting softly, the clatter of the metal cupboard, the wheeze of the spray pump, the thunk of the bed revealed that his friend was fine, that he had not been assaulted or taken away into secret detention.

Manek hurried between hostel and college without stopping to watch the daily farces of bullying, toadying, and submission. The office of the campus newspaper was attacked, the writers and editors roughed up and sent packing. The paper used to indulge in light satire and occasionally poke fun at the government or university administration, although satire had become increasingly difficult in recent times, for the government was practising the art in its own reports to the censored media, better than the campus paper had ever done.

After taking over, Students For Democracy released a statement in the next issue that the publication's new voice would be more representative of the college population. The rest of the paper was filled with a model code of conduct for students and teachers.

One morning, classes were cancelled and a flag-raising ceremony was organized in the quadrangle. Attendance was compulsory, enforced by Students Against Fascism. The president

of Students For Democracy took the microphone. He appealed to the figures of authority to come forward, prove their love for the country, set an example of patriotic behaviour.

On cue, lecturers, associate professors, full professors, and department heads approached the dais, en masse, in a feeble show of spontaneity. The organizers tried furtively to slow them down, to make it look like a genuine outpouring of support. But it was too late to improve the choreography. The entire teaching staff had already lined up at the table, like customers at a ration shop. They obediently signed statements saying they were behind the Prime Minister, her declaration of Emergency, and her goal of fighting the anti-democratic forces threatening the country from within.

As much as fear, Maneck felt a loathing for the entire place. But for his teachers he had only pity. They slipped away from the flag-raising ceremony, looking guilty and ashamed.

That night, the hostel room next to his own remained silent. The familiar sounds refused to rise and signal Avinash's well-being. Maneck lay awake, worrying into the early hours of the morning. Should he report to the warden's office that his friend was missing? But what if he had gone to visit his family, or something innocent like that? Better to wait a day or two.

At dinnertime he looked about the dining hall for a glimpse of Avinash, in vain. He asked someone at his table, casually, "What's the Managing Committee of the Student Union up to these days?"

"Those fellows have all split the scene, yaar. Gone underground. It's too risky for them to hang around here."

The reply reassured Maneck. He was convinced now that Avinash was just lying low somewhere, hiding in his parents' flat in the mill tenements, perhaps. And he would return soon—after all, how long could this Emergency and goondaism go on? Besides, he would not be caught easily. Not the way he played chess.

The former canteen caterer was back on the job, wreaking his gastric revenge. Maneck felt vindicated as he remembered the vegetarian incident that had started it all—he had told Avinash not to interfere, that it would end badly.

Nowadays, when the meal was particularly ghastly, he got

himself sandwiches or samosas at a stall in the lane outside the college. He was luckier than most because he got a bit of pocket money from home. It was comforting to watch tomatoes being sliced and bread being buttered, and to hear the roar of the stove, the hot hiss of frying in oil.

One evening, as he returned to the hostel from his roadside snack, the cry of Rag-ging! Rag-ging! Rag-ging! went up in the corridor, like a hunting call. He watched in the games room as two first-year automotive students were cornered, surrounded by twelve others. They stripped the pants off one, held him bent over the Ping-Pong table, and handed an empty soft-drink bottle to the other. He was ordered to demonstrate what had been learnt about pistons and cylinders in the class on internal combustion engines. They overcame his reluctance by threatening to make him the cylinder if he refused to cooperate. Maneek stunk away in terror. From then on, he went straight to his room after dinner and locked himself in. He made sure that he had whatever he needed—newspaper, library books, glass of water—so he would not have to leave his sanctuary when the raggers were on the prowl.

One night, after he had changed into his pyjamas, his stomach began rumbling in a nasty way. Must be the samosa chutney at the roadside stall, he assumed. Shouldn't have eaten it, there had been something peculiar about the taste.

He badly needed the toilet, filthy as it would be at this hour. He opened the door cautiously. The corridor was empty. He walked rapidly, looking over his shoulder. Halfway down the hall they pounced out of a storage room and caught him. He fought back. “Please! I have to go to the toilet! Very badly!”

“Later,” they said, twisting his arms behind him to make him stop struggling.

“Ahhhh!” he screamed.

“Listen, it’s just a game,” they reasoned with him. “Why turn it into a fight? You’ll simply get hurt.”

He stopped resisting, and they eased up on his arms. “Good boy. Now tell us, what subject are you taking?”

“Refrigeration and air-conditioning.”

"Okay, we'll just give you a little test. To see if you've been studying like a good boy."

"Sure. But can I go to the toilet first?"

"Later." They led him to the workshop, where there was a large working model of a freezer, and asked him to take off his clothes. He did not move. They closed in to undress him.

"Please!" he begged, kicking and pulling away. "Please don't! No, please!" He prayed that Avinash would appear miraculously and save him, as he had saved the kitchen workers from the vegetarians.

The ruggers were very efficient, taking less than a minute to hold Maneck down and strip him. "Now listen carefully," they said. "The first part of the test is simple. We are refrigerating you for ten minutes. Don't panic." They tumbled him into the freezer, doubled over to fit the confined space, and heaved the door shut. The darkness of a coffin closed in around him.

They waited to be amused by his reaction. For a while there was nothing. Then a banging commenced, and continued for the next two minutes, followed by a brief silence. His hammering started again—weaker now, and sporadic, faltering, picking up, fading.

The blows became alarmingly feeble before dying out altogether. They looked at their watches; only seven minutes of the promised ten had elapsed. They decided to open the door.

"Aagh! Chhee!" They fell back as the stench hit them. "Bastard shat in the freezer!"

Maneck was stiff and could not emerge. They pulled him out moulded in a stoop and slammed the door to seal away the smell. He looked around, dazed, unable to straighten.

They offered mock applause. "Very good. Full marks for the first test. Bonus marks for the shit. Well done. Now comes the second part."

His blue lips trembled as he tried to speak. His hands reached stiffly for the pyjamas. Someone snatched them away. "Not yet. For the second part, you must demonstrate that your thermostat is working."

Numb, he gaped uncomprehendingly.

"You said you're taking refrigeration and air-conditioning. What's the matter, don't you know what a thermostat is?"

Maneck shook his head and made another pathetic slow-motion grab for his pyjamas.

"*This is your thermostat, you idiot,*" said one of them, slapping the frigid penis. "Now show us if it's working."

Maneck looked down at himself as if he were seeing it for the first time, and they clapped again. "Very good! Thermostat correctly identified! But is it working?"

He nodded.

"Prove it." He was not sure what they wanted. "Come on, make it work. Shake it up." They took up the chant. "Shake-it-up! Shake-it-up! Shake-it-up!"

Maneck understood, and discovered his lips had thawed enough to speak. "Please, I cannot. Please, let me go now?"

"The second part of the test must be completed. Or we'll have to repeat the first part, freeze you with your shit this time. Thermostat checkup is compulsory."

Maneck held his penis weakly, moved his hand to and fro a few times and let go.

"It's not working! Try harder! Shake-it-up! Shake-it-up!"

He started to sniffle, working his foreskin back and forth while they chanted. Desperate to end the humiliation, he laboured hard, his wrist aching, feeling nothing in the penis, worried that something was wrong, that the freezer had damaged it. After much effort he ejaculated without a proper erection.

They broke into cheers, whistling and hooting. Someone returned his pyjamas, and they dispersed. To avoid walking back with them, he stayed in the workshop until it was quiet outside the building.

He washed his thighs and legs where he had soiled himself, then returned to his room. He got into bed and lay on his back in the dark, shivering, staring at the ceiling. He wondered what would happen the next time the instructor opened the freezer.

An hour later the trembling was still in his limbs, and he fetched the blanket from the cupboard. He knew what he was going to do—as soon as he felt warmer, he would get up and pack. In the

morning he would take a taxi to the railway station and go home on the *Frontier Mail*.

What would his parents say, though? He could guess Daddy's reaction—that he had run away like a coward. And Mummy would first take his side, then she would listen to Daddy and change, as always. Change, always. That's what the proofreader had said on the train—cannot avoid change, have to adapt to it. But surely that did not mean accepting a change for the worse.

For half the night Maneck struggled with his thoughts, slowly packing his boxes and suitcase. The other half of the night he spent unpacking, and writing to his parents. He wrote that so far he had not been truthful with them, and was sorry, but he had wanted to spare them the worry: "The hostel is such a horrible place, I cannot stay here anymore. Not only is it dirty and stinking, which I can tolerate, but the people are disgusting. Many of them are not even students, and I don't know how these goondas are allowed to live in a student hostel. They take hashish and ganja, get drunk, fight. Gambling goes on openly, and they sell drugs to the students." He thought a bit, then added, "One of them even tried to sell to me." That should make them think twice. "It is all absolutely horrible, and I want to return as soon as possible. I'll work in the shop without interfering, and do as you tell me, I promise."

Surely this was drastic enough, he felt, to make his parents act. There was no need to reveal the real shame.



SECRETLY, Mr. and Mrs. Kohlah were both delighted that Maneck wanted to come home. They missed him intensely but had never dared talk about it, not even to each other. They preferred to pretend, especially in company, how proud and happy they were that their son was away getting a worthwhile education.

And Maneck's urgent letter did nothing to change this. They carefully controlled their responses to keep up appearances. "What a pity if he comes back so soon," said Mr. Kohlah.

"Yes," said Mrs. Kohlah. "He will lose his only chance for a good career. What do you think, Farokh? What should we do?"

Mr. Kohlah knew in his heart that if his son was unhappy he should return home immediately. But perhaps there ought to be some effort made, however halfhearted, at finding another solution—it would surely be expected by everyone, including their friends. Or he might be accused of being too soft a father.

"Seems to me there is definitely a problem at the college hostel," he said cautiously.

"Of course there is! My son does not lie! And he simply cannot be allowed to remain in such a wicked place, full of vice and rogues and ruffians, just for the sake of a college diploma! What kind of parents would we be?"

"Yes, yes, calm down, I am trying to think." He massaged his forehead. "If the hostel is not suitable, maybe we should find him some other lodging. Privately, in someone's home. That would solve the problem."

"That's a good idea," said Mrs. Kohlah, playing along. She did not want to carry the lifelong label of the possessive mother who had ruined her son's future. "What about asking my relatives?"

"No, they live too far from the college, remember?" Besides, who could tell what kind of namby-pamby thoughts they would fill Maneck's head with. After twenty years they still hadn't got used to the idea of Aban living away from them.

"If only we can find him a nice safe room somewhere," she said. "Somewhere that we can afford." Which was next to impossible, she imagined cheerfully, in a city where millions were living in slums and on the pavements. And not just beggars—even people with jobs who had the money to pay rent. Only, there was nothing to rent. No, there was no chance for Maneck, he would be home soon. And she broke into a smile at that happy thought.

"What are you smiling for when we have such a big problem on our hands?" said Mr. Kohlah.

"Was I smiling? No, nothing, just thinking of Maneck."

"Hmm," he grunted, finding it difficult to contain his own pleasure. "You can try writing to that friend of yours. She might know of some place."

"Yes, good idea. After dinner tonight I'll write to Zenobia," agreed Mrs. Kohlah, joyful in the knowledge that it would be a waste of a stamp.

They returned to their chores. The ordeal of masking delight with disappointment was over. Now it was just a question of waiting till their lukewarm efforts failed and their son came home.

In a few days, however, they had to pretend all over again, but in reverse, when, to their bitter surprise, accommodation was swiftly arranged for Maneck. Now they had to force a display of satisfaction that his education was going ahead, and sweep away the remains of their short-lived hopes.

Mrs. Kohlah resentfully wrote a thank-you letter to Mrs. Dalal, at the address Zenobia had sent. "I wonder if Dina is still as beautiful as she was in high school," she said, relishing the sound as she tore the page from the writing pad. The rip was in harmony with her present mood.

"You can ask Maneck. He will soon be able to give you a full report from her flat," said Mr. Kohlah. "Even send you an up-to-date photo if you like." He could not help feeling, as he watched her at the desk, that the busybodies from his wife's past were interfering in his family life, conniving to keep his son away from him.

Immediately afterwards, he realized he was being silly. He brought out his bank book and wrote a cheque for the first month's rent. Mrs. Kohlah enclosed it with her letter to Mrs. Dalal.

* * * * *

DINA LISTENED closely for sounds of life from the silent bathroom. What was he up to, why was there no splashing of water? "Maneck! Is everything all right? Is the water hot enough? thank you."

"You found the mug? Should be next to the bucket. And you can sit on the wooden stool if you like."

"Yes, Aunty." Maneck felt awkward about mentioning the worms, which were advancing in battalions from the drain. He

hoped they would soon return to their underground home of their own accord. But maybe I should have returned home on the train, of my own accord, he thought bitterly. How stupid of me to write a letter. Hoping Daddy would allow me to come back.

Dina kept waiting to hear the mug's clatter and the splash of water. The silence outlasted her patience. "What's wrong, Maneck? Can you please hurry up? I have to bathe too, before the tailors come."

She hoped there would be some time today to cash the rent cheque. First, however, she had to see Maneck off to college and start things on the right footing. He wouldn't be a problem once he became used to her routine. And learned to use modern gadgets, like the immersion heater. Poor boy had no idea what it was. And when she'd asked him what they did at home for hot water, he described the boiler stoked with coal every morning. How primitive. But he had made his own bed, folding everything neatly—that was impressive.

She went to the bathroom door and asked again, "Are you managing all right?"

"Yes, Aunty. But some worms are crawling out of the gutter."

"Oh, them! Just throw a little water and they will go away."

There was a splash, and then silence again.

"Well?"

"They're still coming."

"Okay, let me take a look."

He started to put on his clothes, and she knocked. "Come on, please wrap your towel and open the door. I don't have time to stand here all morning."

He dressed fully before letting her in.

"Shy boy. I'm as old as your mother. What was I going to see? Now. Where are those worms that frightened you?"

"I was not frightened. They just look so disgusting. And there are so many of them."

"Naturally. It's the season for worms. The monsoon always brings them. I thought you would be used to such things, where you live. In the mountains, with wild animals."

"But certainly not in the bathroom, Aunty."

"In my bathroom you'll have to get used to it. All you can do is push the worms back by throwing water. Cold water—don't use up the hot." She demonstrated, brushing past him to reach the bucket, hurling mugfuls that sent the creatures sliding towards the drain. "See? There they go, into the gutter."

The soft lines of her outstretched upper arm did more to reassure him than the water technique. Bent over the parapet, her back pulled the nightgown taut against her hips, revealing the underwear outline. His eyes lingered, turning away when she straightened.

"Well? Are you going to bathe now? Or do you want me to stay with you, stand on guard against the worms?" He blushed, and she, worried about the tailors arriving, said, "Listen, because this is your first morning, I will do something special for you."

She fetched the bottle of phenol from the shelf outside the WC, uncorked it, and trickled the white fluid onto the worms. It worked instantaneously, transforming them into a writhing red mass, and then into little lifeless coils.

"There. But remember, phenol is very expensive, I cannot waste it every day. You will have to learn to bathe with them."

He shut the door and undressed again. The picture of her beside him, bending, reaching, pulsated through his limbs. But the antiseptic odour of phenol hanging in the air tugged in the opposite direction.

VI

Day at the Circus, Night in the Slum

The early-morning gathering of red double-deckers outside the slum was noticed first by a child from the drunk's family. The little girl came running in to tell her mother. She saw Ishvar and Om awake outside their shack, and told them too. Her father was adrift in his alcoholic slumber.

The drivers honked flurries of greetings to one another as they parked; twenty-two buses lined up in two perfect rows. The tailors collected their water and proceeded towards the train tracks. Rain had fallen during the night. The ground was soft, the mud sucking at their feet like a many-mouthed creature.

"Let's go early to Dinabai today," said Om.

"Why?"

"Maneck will have arrived."

They found a spot that was to Ishvar's liking, and squatted. He was glad that the hair-collector with his pointless chatter was not in sight. He hated conversations at toilet, even sensible ones.

His luck did not last; Rajaram materialized along the curve in the tracks, spotting them at the far end of the ditch. He squatted beside them and began speculating about the buses.

"Maybe they are starting a new terminal," said Om.

"Would be convenient for us."

"But wouldn't they first build a station office or something?"

They washed up and went to the mud-spattered vehicles to investigate. Khaki-uniformed drivers leaned in the doorways or rested on their haunches along the kerb, reading newspapers, smoking, or chewing paan.

"Namaskaar," called out Rajaram to no one in particular.

"Where are you taking your red chariots today?"

One of them shrugged. "Who knows. Supervisor said to bring the buses, wait for special assignment."

The rain started again. Drops rang out on the roofs of the empty buses. The drivers withdrew inside their vehicles and shut the grimy windows.

Soon, the twenty-third bus arrived, its windshield wiper swinging ineffectively, loose and slow, like a wet pendulum. This one was packed full, the upper deck devoted to uniformed

policemen who stayed on board while the lower deck spewed out men with briefcases and pamphlets.

They stretched, eased their pants riding high at the crotch, and entered the slum. To save their leather sandals in the rain-muddied field, some walked tiptoe with heels aloft, balancing under open umbrellas. Others squelched along on their heels to favour the soles, scrutinizing the ground for grass tufts, stones, broken bricks—anything that might provide a less mucky step.

Their performance on the tightrope of mud soon collected a crowd. A puff of wind caught the umbrellas; the men wobbled. A stronger gust pulled them off balance. The audience began to laugh. Some children imitated the funny walk. The visitors abandoned their sandals to the mud and, mustering dignity, walked towards the water-tap queue.

The one with the finest footwear said they were party-workers with a message from the Prime Minister. “She sends her greetings and wants you all to know that she is holding a big meeting today. Everyone is invited to attend.”

A woman placed her empty bucket under the tap. The drumroll of water blurred the man’s words, and he modified his pitch. “The Prime Minister especially wants to talk to honest, hardworking people like you. These buses will take you to the meeting, free of charge.”

The water queue moved forward disinterestedly. A few whispered among themselves, and there was laughter. The party-worker tried again. “The Prime Minister’s message is that she is your servant, and wants to help you. She wants to hear about things from your own lips.”

“Tell her yourself!” someone shouted. “You can see in what prosperity we live!”

“Yes! Tell her how happy we are! Why do we need to come?”

“If she is our servant, tell her to come here!”

“Ask your men with the cameras to pull some photos of our lovely houses, our healthy children! Show that to the Prime Minister!”

There was more scornful laughing, and murmurings about unpleasant things that could be done to party-workers who

bothered poor people at watertime. The visitors retreated for a brief consultation.

Then the leader spoke again. "There will be a payment of five rupees for each person. Also, free tea and snack. Please line up outside at seven-thirty. Buses will leave at eight."

"Go push the five rupees up your arse!"

"And set fire to the money!"

But the insults tapered off quickly, for the new offer was creating interest. The party-workers fanned out through the slum to spread the message.

A ragpicker asked if his wife and six children could come too. "Yes," said the organizer, "but they won't get five rupees each. Only you." The hopeful father turned away, crestfallen, and was tempted again when the offer of free tea and snack was extended to the whole family.

"It sounds like fun for sure," said Om. "Let's go."

"Are you crazy? Waste a day of sewing?"

"Not worth it," Rajaram agreed with Ishvar. "These people are giving us bogus talk."

"How do you know? Have you been to such a meeting?"

"Yes, they are always the same. If you were jobless, I would say go, take their five rupees. It's fun the first time to see the government's tamasha. But to give up a day of tailoring or hair-collecting? No."

At seven-thirty the queue by the buses was barely long enough to fill one double-decker. There were unemployed day-labourers, some women and children, and a handful of injured dockyard mathadis. The party-workers discussed the situation and agreed to put into motion their alternate plan.

Shortly, Sergeant Kesar, who was in charge of the constables, gave his men the order to alight. A dozen were instructed to block the slum exits, the rest followed him inside. He tried to move with a slow swaggering walk, but his flat feet in the mud made it more of a slippery waddle. He had a megaphone, which he raised to his mouth with both hands, holding it like a trumpet.

"Attention, attention! Two people from each jhopdi must get

on the bus! In five minutes—no delay. Otherwise, you will be arrested for trespassing on municipal property!"

People protested: how could they be trespassing when rent had been paid in full? The hutment dwellers went in search of Navalkar, the one who collected the rent, but his shack was empty.

"I wonder if the Prime Minister knows they are forcing us," said Ishvar.

"She only knows important things," said Rajaram. "Things her friends want her to know."

The policemen began rounding up the busloads. The double-deckers filled slowly, looking redder now with the dust and mud washed off by rain. Arguments in some shacks were easily settled when the policemen raised their lathis to emphasize the importance of complying.

Monkey-man was willing to go, but wanted to take his monkeys too. "They will enjoy the ride, they have such a good time on the train when we go to work," he explained to a party-worker. "And I won't ask for extra tea or snack, I'll share mine with them."

"Don't you understand plain language? No monkeys. It's not a circus or something."

Behind him, Rajaram whispered to his friends, "That's exactly what it is."

"Please, sahab," implored Monkey-man. "The dog can stay alone. But not Laila and Majnoo, they will cry all day without me."

Sergeant Kesar was called to arbitrate. "Are your monkeys properly trained?" he asked.

"Police-sahab, my Laila and Majnoo are beautifully trained! They are my obedient children! Look, they will give you a salaam!" He signalled; the monkeys raised their paws to their heads in unison.

Sergeant Kesar was greatly amused, and returned the salute, laughing. Monkey-man slapped the leashes against the ground, and the monkeys genuflected. Sergeant Kesar's delight overflowed.

"Actually speaking, I see no harm in allowing the monkeys," he said to the party-worker.

"Excuse me, Sergeant," said the party-worker, taking him aside.

"The problem is, the monkeys might be seen as some kind of political comment, and the enemies of the party could use it to ridicule us."

"It's possible," said Sergeant Kesar, swinging his megaphone. "But it could also be seen as proof of the Prime Minister's power to communicate not only with humans but with animals too."

The party-worker rolled his eyes. "Do you want to take responsibility for it in writing? With a memorandum in triplicate?"

"Actually speaking, that is not part of my jurisdiction."

Sergeant Kesar returned sadly to Monkey-man and broke the news. "I'm sorry, this is an important meeting for the Prime Minister. No monkeys allowed."

"Wait and see," said Rajaram softly to the people in line. "The stage will be full of them."

Monkey-man thanked Sergeant Kesar for trying. He locked Laila and Majnoo in the shack with Tikka and returned looking miserable. The buses were almost full now, and the convoy was ready for departure as soon as the few remaining stubborn cases were persuaded with caning and slapping to climb aboard. "I have seen nothing so unfair," said Ishvar. "And what will Dinabai be thinking?"

"We cannot help it," said Om. "Just enjoy the free ride."

"Right," said Rajaram. "If we have to go, might as well have fun. You know, last year they took us in lorries. Packed like sheep. This bus is more comfortable."

"At least a hundred people in each one," said Ishvar. "Over two thousand altogether. What a big meeting it will be."

"That's only from our colony," said Rajaram. "Buses must have been sent everywhere. The meeting will have fifteen or twenty thousand people in all, wait and see."

...

AFTER TRAVELLING for an hour, the buses reached the outskirts of the city. Om announced that he was hungry. "I hope they give us our tea and snack when we arrive. And the five rupees."

"You're always hungry," said Ishvar in a falsetto. "Do you have worms?" They laughed, explaining the joke about Dina Dalal to Rajaram.

Soon they were on rural roads. It had stopped raining. They passed villages where people stood and stared at the buses. "I don't understand," said Ishvar. "Why drag us all the way here? Why not just take these villagers to the meeting?"

"Too complicated, I think," said Rajaram. "They would have to visit so many villages, with people scattered all over—two hundred here, four hundred there. Much easier to get them wholesale in the city jhopadpattis." He broke off excitedly, pointing. "Look! Look at that woman—at the well! What beautiful long hair!" He sighed. "If only I could wander the countryside with my scissors, harvesting what I need. I'd soon be rich."

They knew they were nearing their destination when the traffic increased and other vehicles passed them, also ferrying the Prime Minister's made-to-measure audience. Occasionally, the buses moved over to allow a flag-flying car filled with VIPs to sweep past in an orgy of blaring horns.

They stopped near a vast open field. As the passengers alighted, an organizer told them to memorize their bus number for the return journey. He directed people to their seating area, repeating applause instructions for each batch. "Please watch the dignitaries on stage. Whenever they begin to clap, you must also clap." about the money?"

"You will get it when the rally is finished. We know your tricks. If we pay you first, you crooks run off halfway in the speech."

"Keep moving! Keep moving!" called an usher, helping the new arrivals along with a pat on the back.

"Don't push!" snarled Om, sweeping the hand off his back.

"Aray Om, stay calm," said Ishvar.

Bamboo posts and railings divided the field into several enclosures, the main one being at the far end, containing a covered stage at an elevation of thirty feet. In front of the stage was the area for prominent personages. This was the sole section furnished with chairs, and arguments were in progress to determine their allocation. The chairs were of three types: padded, with arms, for VVIPs; padded, but without arms, for VIPs; and bare metal, folding, for the mere IPS. Invitees were bickering and wrangling with the ushers, pressuring them to add a V to their status.

"Try to stay near the edge of the field, near that tent," said Rajaram. "That's where they must have the tea and snacks." But volunteers wearing round tricolour cloth badges herded the arrivals into the next available enclosure.

"Look at that, yaar!" said Om in awe, pointing at the eighty-foot cutout of the Prime Minister to the right of the stage. The cardboard-and-plywood figure stood with arms outstretched, waiting as though to embrace the audience. An outline map of the country hung suspended behind the head, a battered halo.

"And look at that arch of flowers!" said Ishvar. "Like a rainbow around the stage. Beautiful, hahn? You can smell them from here."

"See, I told you you'd enjoy it," said Rajaram. "First time, it's always fun."

They made themselves comfortable on the ground and examined the faces in their vicinity. People smiled and nodded. The soundman went on stage to check the microphones, making the loudspeakers screech. A hush of anticipation descended on the audience and dissipated almost instantly. Buses continued to disgorge passengers by the thousands. The sun was hot now, but Ishvar said that at least it wasn't raining.

Two hours later the enclosures were full, the field was packed, and the first casualties to fall to the sun were carried away to be revived under the shade of nearby trees. People questioned the wisdom of holding a rally at the hottest time of the day. An organizer explained there was no choice, the Prime Minister's astrologer had charted the celestial bodies and selected the hour.

Eighteen dignitaries began taking their places on stage. At twelve o'clock there was a roar in the sky and twenty-five thousand heads turned upwards. A helicopter circled the field thrice, then began its descent to land behind the stage.

A few minutes later, the Prime Minister, in a white sari, was escorted up to the stage by someone in a white kurta and Gandhi cap. The eighteen notable personages took turns garlanding their leader, bowing, touching her toes. One dignitary outdid the rest by prostrating full length before her. He would stay at her feet, he said, till she forgave him.

The Prime Minister was baffled, though no one could see her

look of puzzlement because of the eighteen garlands engulfing her face. An aide reminded her of some minor disloyalty on the man's part. "Madamji, he is repenting, he says he is sorry, most sincerely."

The live microphones ensured that the sun-scorched audience was at least able to enjoy the onstage buffoonery. "Yes, okay," she said impatiently. "Now get up and stop making a fool of yourself." Chastened, the man jumped up like a gymnast completing a somersault.

"See?" said Rajaram. "I told you it's going to be a day at the circus—we have clowns, monkeys, acrobats, everything."

When the storm of manufactured adulation had passed, the Prime Minister tossed her garlands, one by one, out into the audience. The VIP seats and dignitaries cheered wildly at this grand gesture.

"Her father also used to do that, when he was Prime Minister," said Ishvar.

"Yes," said Rajaram. "I saw it once. But when he did it, he looked humble."

"She looks like she is throwing rubbish at us," said Om.

Rajaram laughed. "Isn't that the politician's speciality?"

The member of parliament for the district started the welcome address, thanking the Prime Minister for showing such favour to this poor, undeserving place. "This audience is small," he said, sweeping his hand to indicate the captive crowd of twenty-five thousand. "But it is a warm and appreciative audience, possessing a great love for the Prime Minister who has done so much to improve our lives. We are simple people, from simple villages. But we understand the truth, and we have come today to listen to our leader..."

Ishvar rolled up his sleeves, undoing two buttons and blowing down his shirt. "How long will it last, I wonder."

"Two, three, four hours—depends on how many speeches," said Rajaram.

"...and take note, all you journalists who will write tomorrow's newspapers. Especially the foreign journalists. For grave mischief has been done by irresponsible scribbling. Lots of lies have been

spread about this Emergency, which has been declared specially for the people's benefit. Observe: wherever the Prime Minister goes, thousands gather from miles around, to see her and hear her. Surely this is the mark of a truly great leader."

Rajaram took out a coin and began playing Heads or Tails with Om. Around them, people were making new friends, chatting, discussing the monsoon. Children invented games and drew pictures in the dust. Some slept. A mother stretched out her sari-draped legs, nestled her baby in the valley of her thighs, and began exercising it while singing softly, spreading the arms, crossing them over the chest, raising the tiny feet as far as they would go.

The minders and volunteers patrolled the enclosures, keeping an eye on things. They did not care so long as people amused themselves discreetly. The only prohibited activity was standing up or leaving the enclosure. Besides, this was just a warm-up speech.

"...and yet there are people who say she must step down, that her rule is illegal! Who are these people uttering such falsehoods? Brothers and sisters, they are the pampered few, living in big cities and enjoying comforts that you and I cannot even dream about. They do not like the changes the Prime Minister is making because their unfair privileges will be taken away. But it is clear that in the villages, where seventy-five per cent of our people live, there is nothing but complete support for our beloved Prime Minister."

Near the end of his speech he gave a hand signal to someone waiting in the wings with a walkie-talkie. Seconds later, coloured lights hidden in the floral proscenium arch began to flash powerfully enough to compete with the midday sun. The audience was impressed. The feeble mandatory clapping for the member of parliament's speech now became genuine applause for the visual display.

While the flashing lights still dazzled, the noise of a helicopter filled the sky again, its *whup-whup-whup* approaching from behind the stage. Something dropped from the belly of the turbulent machine. Out of the package floated—rose petals!

The crowd cheered, but the pilot had mistimed it. Instead of

showering the Prime Minister and dignitaries, the petals fell in a pasture behind the stage. A goatherd who was grazing his animals thanked the heavens for the honour, then hurried home to tell his family about the miracle.

The second package, intended for the VIP enclosure, landed on target but failed to open. Someone was carried away on a stretcher. By the time the third package was released over the general audience, the pilot had mastered the technique, and it was a perfect drop. An obliging breeze came up, scattering the petals generously. Children in the crowd had a lovely time chasing them down.

On stage there was more bowing and scraping, then the Prime Minister approached the cluster of microphones. One hand maintaining the sari at her neck, she began speaking. Every sentence was followed by thunderous applause from the stage and the VIP enclosure, which, in turn, set off the conscientious ones in the audience. Her speech seemed in danger of being strangled by an excess of clapping. Finally, she stepped away from the podium and whispered something to an aide, who gave instructions to the dignitaries. The effect was immediate. From now on, the clapping was more sensibly apportioned.

She adjusted the white sari that was slipping off her head and continued. "There is nothing to worry about just because the Emergency is declared. It is a necessary measure to fight the forces of evil. It will make things better for ordinary people. Only the crooks, the smugglers, the blackmarketeers need to worry, for we will soon put them behind bars. And we will succeed in this despite the despicable conspiracy, which has been brewing since I began introducing programmes of benefit for the common man and woman. There is a foreign hand involved against us—the hand of enemies who would not wish to see us prosper."

Rajaram took out a deck of cards and began shuffling, to Om's delight. "You came prepared, for sure," he said.

"Of course. Sounds like it's going to be a long one. Playing?" he asked Ishvar, and dealt him in. The people near them perked up, grateful for the distraction. They shifted around and formed a circle to watch the game.

“...but no matter, for we are determined that disruptive forces will be put down. The government will continue to fight back until there is no more danger to democracy in our country.”

Om refused to clap now, he said his hands were aching. He played his card, and someone near him blurted: Mistake, mistake. Om realized his error, took back the card and played another, while the features of the new Twenty-Point Programme were outlined.

“What we want to do is provide houses for the people. Enough food, so no one goes hungry. Cloth at controlled prices. We want to build schools for our children and hospitals to look after the sick. Birth control will also be available to everyone. And the government will no longer tolerate a situation where people increase the population recklessly, draining the resources that belong to all. We promise that we will eliminate poverty from our cities and towns and villages.”

The card game had gradually become quite boisterous. Om was smacking his cards down with gusto, accompanied by fanfares. “Tan-tan-tana-nana!” he sang at his next turn.

“Is that all?” said Rajaram. “So much noise for that? Only a small obstacle! Beat this if you have the strength!”

“Hoi-hoi—wait for my chance,” said Ishvar, trumping the hand and making the other two groan. The onlookers provided a chorus of approval for his smart play.

Before long, an audience-monitor came over to investigate. “What is this nonsense? Show some respect for the Prime Minister.” He threatened to withhold their money and snack if they did not behave themselves and pay attention to the speech. The cards were ordered put away.

“...And our newly formed flying squads will catch the gold smugglers, uncover corruption and black money, and punish the tax evaders who keep our country poor. You can trust your government to fulfil the task. Your part in this is very simple: to support the government, support the Emergency. The need of the hour is discipline—discipline in every aspect of life, if we are to reinvigorate the nation. Shun all superstitions, don’t believe in horoscopes and holy men, only in yourself and in hard work.

Avoid rumours and loose talk if you love your country. Do your duty, above all else! This, my brothers and sisters, is my appeal to you! Jai Hind!"

The eighteen on stage rose as one to congratulate the Prime Minister on a most inspiring speech. Another brisk round of fawning commenced. At the end of it, the party official who would officially thank the Prime Minister went smirking and simpering to the microphone.

"Oh, no!" said Om. "One more speech? When do we get our snack?"

After the stock acknowledgements and hackneyed tributes were exhausted, the speaker pointed dramatically at the sky towards the far end of the field. "Behold! Yonder in the clouds! Oh, we are truly blessed!"

The audience looked up and around for the source of his rapturous seizure. There was no whirring helicopter this time. But on the horizon, floating towards the field, was a huge hot-air balloon. The canopy of orange, white, and green drifted across the cloudless blue sky in the silence of a dream. It lost some height as it neared the crowds, and now the sharp of sight could recognize the high-hoovering face behind dark glasses. The figure raised a white-clad arm ~~and, we are~~ twice blessed today in this meeting!" the man sang into the microphone. "The Prime Minister on stage with us, and her son in the sky above us! What more could we ask for?"

The son in the sky, meanwhile, had started throwing leaflets over-board. With a flair for the theatric, he first released a single sheet to tantalize the audience. All eyes were riveted on it as it swooped and circled lazily. He followed this with two more leaflets, and waited, before getting rid of the lot in fluttering handfuls.

"Yes, my brothers and sisters, Mother India sits on stage with us, and the Son of India shines from the sky upon us! The glorious present, here, now, and the golden future, up there, waiting to descend and embrace our lives! What a blessed nation we are!"

Down to earth floated the first few leaflets, containing the Prime Minister's picture and the Twenty-Point Programme. Once again,

the children had fun running after them to see who could capture the most. The hot-air balloon cleared the airspace, leaving the field to the helicopter for a final assault.

This time it was flying much lower than before. The risk paid off in accuracy: a grand finale of rose petals showered the stage. But the Prime Minister's eighty-foot cutout began to sway in the tempest of the helicopter's blades. The crowd shouted in alarm. The figure with outstretched arms groaned, and the ropes strained at their moorings. Security men waved frantically at the helicopter while struggling to hold on to the ropes and braces. But the whirlwind was much too strong to withstand. The cutout started to topple slowly, face forward. Those in the vicinity of the cardboard-and-plywood giant ran for their lives.

"Nobody wants to be caught in the Prime Minister's embrace," said Rajaram.

"But she tries to get on top of everyone," said Om.

"Shameless boy," said his uncle.

They hurried to the refreshments, where an endless line was being kept in order by security men. A shortage of cups prevented it from moving faster. The snack—one pakora per head—had run out. The servers' hands grew ungenerous with the diminishing supply of tea. They began doling out half-cups. "It's not less tea," they explained to those who protested the stinginess. "It's just more concentrated."

While the queue crawled forward, ambulances swept past the edge of the field, sirens blaring, come to collect the casualties of the eighty-foot Prime Minister's collapse. After an hour of waiting, Ishvar, Om, and Rajaram were still at the back of the line when the tea was depleted. Simultaneously, there was an announcement: the buses would be leaving in ten minutes. Frantic about being stranded, everyone abandoned the quarrel with the tea-dispensers and rushed to the departure area. They were paid four rupees each as they boarded the bus.

"Why four?" asked Ishvar. "They told us five when we came."

"One rupee for bus fare, tea and snack."

"We didn't even get tea and snack!" Om thrust his face furiously before the other's. "And they said the bus was free!"

"Heh? You want free bus ride? Your father's Divali or what?" Om tensed. "I'm warning you, don't take my father's name."

Ishvar and Rajaram coaxed him onto the bus. The man about one looking like an insect and talking like a tiger.

They sat glumly through the return journey, thirsty and tired. "What a waste of a day," said Ishvar. "We could have stitched six dresses. Thirty rupees lost."

"And how much hair I would have collected by now."

"Maybe I should visit Dinabai when we get back," said Ishvar. "Just to explain. Promise her we'll come tomorrow."

Two hours later, the bus stopped in unfamiliar surroundings. The driver ordered everyone off. He had his instructions, he said. As a precaution, he rolled up his window and locked himself in the cabin.

The hutment dwellers rattled the door, spat on it, kicked the sides a few times. "You indecent people!" shouted the driver. "Damaging public property!"

A few more blows were rained on the bus before the crowd moved on. Ishvar and Om had no idea where they were, but Rajaram knew the way. There was thunder, and it began raining again. They walked for an hour. It was night in the slum when they arrived.

"Let's eat something quickly," said Ishvar. "Then I'll go and pacify Dinabai."

While he pumped up the Primus stove and struck a match, the darkness was torn to shreds by a terrifying shriek. It seemed neither human nor animal. The tailors grabbed their hurricane-lamp and ran with Rajaram towards the noise, towards Monkey-man.

They found him behind his shack, trying to strangle his dog. Tikka was on his side, his eyes bulging, with Monkey-man's knees upon him. The dog's legs pawed the air, seeking a purchase to help him flee the inexplicable pain around his neck. Monkey-man's fingers squeezed harder. His insane screams mingled with Tikka's fearful howling. The terrible harmony of human and animal cries continued to rend the night.

Ishvar and Rajaram succeeded in prying loose Monkey-man's

fingers. Tikka struggled to stand. He did not run, waiting faithfully nearby, coughing, pawing at his face. Monkey-man tried to grab him again but was foiled by others who had gathered.

"Calm down," said Rajaram. "Tell us what's wrong."

"Laila and Majnoo!" he wept, pointing to the shack, unable to explain. He tried to lure back the dog, making kissing sounds.

"Tikka, Tikka, come, my Tikka!"

Seeking pardon, the beast approached trustingly. Monkey-man got in a kick to his ribs before the others pulled him back. They raised the lantern and looked inside the shack.

The hissing light fell on the walls, then found the floor. They saw the monkeys' corpses lying in a corner. Laila and Majnoo's long brown tails, exuberant in life, seemed strangely shrunken. Like frayed old rope, the tails draggled on the earthen floor. One of the creatures had been partially eaten, the viscera hanging out, dark brown and stringy.

"Hai Ram," said Ishvar, covering his mouth. "What a tragedy." "Let me look," said someone trying to push through the crowd. It was the old woman who had shared her water with Om on the first day, when the tap was dry. The harmonium player said she should be let through immediately, she could read entrails as fluently as a swami could read the Bhagavad Gita.

The crowd parted, and the old woman entered. She asked that the lantern be brought closer. With her foot she nudged the corpse till the entrails were better exposed. Bending, she stirred in them with a twig.

"The loss of two monkeys is not the worst loss he will suffer," she pronounced. "The murder of the dog is not the worst murder he will commit."

"But the dog," started Rajaram, "we saved him, he is—"

"The murder of the dog is not the worst murder he will commit," she repeated with grim forcefulness, and left. Her audience shrugged, assuming that the old woman, despite her fierce demeanour, was a little disoriented and upset by the event.

"I'll kill him!" Monkey-man began wailing again. "My babies are dead! I'll kill that shameless dog!"

Someone led Tikka to safety while others tried to talk sense

into Monkey-man. "The dog is a dumb animal. When animals get hungry, they want to eat. What's the point of killing him? It's your fault for locking them in together."

"He played with them like brother and sister," he wept. "All three were like my children. And now this. I'll kill him."

Ishvar and Rajaram led Monkey-man away from his shack. Comforting him would be easier if the gory little bodies were out of sight. They entered Rajaram's shack, then quickly marched out again. The bundles of hair all over the place, like macabre hairy little corpses, were not something Monkey-man could tolerate in his present condition. So they went into the tailors' shack, and gave him a drink of water. He sat with the glass in his hands, whimpering, shaking, muttering to himself. Ishvar decided that dropping in on Dinabai now was out of the question, it was too late. "What a day it's been," he whispered to Om. "We'll explain to her tomorrow."

They stayed with Monkey-man past midnight, letting him grieve for as long as he liked. A burial was planned for Laila and Majnoo, and they convinced him to forgive the dog. The question of livelihood was raised by Rajaram: "How long will it take you to train new monkeys?"

"They were my friends—my children! I don't want any talk of replacing them!"

He was silent for a while, then, oddly enough, broached the subject himself. "I have other talents, you know. Gymnastics, tightrope walking, juggling, balancing. A new act without monkeys is possible. I'll think later about what to do. First, I must finish mourning."

Dina Displayed her displeasure when Maneck returned late from college. And this on his very first day, she thought. Nobody believed in punctuality anymore. Perhaps Mrs. Gupta was right, the Emergency wasn't such a bad thing if it taught people to observe the time.

"Your tea was ready over an hour ago," she said, pouring him a cup and buttering a slice of Britannia Bread. "What kept you?"

"Sorry, Aunty. Very long wait at the bus stop. I was late for class in the morning as well. Everybody is grumbling that the buses seem to have disappeared from the road."

"People are always grumbling."

"The tailors—they finished work already?"

"They didn't come at all."

"What happened?"

"If I knew, would I look so worried? Coming late is like a religion for them, but it's the first time they've been absent for the whole day."

Maneck bolted the tea and went to his room. Kicking off his shoes, he sniffed the socks—a slight smell—and put on his slippers. There were some boxes left to unpack. Might as well do it now. Clothes, towels, toothpaste, soap went into the cupboard. A nice odour came from the shelf. He breathed deeply: reminded of Dina Aunty, she was lovely—beautiful hair, ~~kind face~~. Unpacking finished, he was at a loss for things to do. The umbrella hanging from the cupboard caught his eye. He opened it, admired the pagoda shape, and pictured Dina Aunty walking down the street with it. Like the women at the racecourse in *My Fair Lady*. She looked much younger than Mummy, though Mummy had written they were the same age, forty-two this year. And that she had had a hard life, many misfortunes, her husband dying young, so Maneck was to be kind to her even if she was difficult to get along with.

That would explain Dina Aunty's tone, he thought, the hard life. The way she talked, her voice sounding old, having endured a vast range of weather. Her words always sharp—the words of a tired, cynical person. He wished he could cheer her up, make her laugh once in a while.

The little room was getting on his nerves. What a bore this was, and the rest of the academic year was going to just drag on and on. He picked up a book, flipped through it, tossed it back on the desk. The chessmen. He arranged the board and made a few mechanical moves. For him, the joy had seeped out of the plastic shapes. He tumbled them back into the maroon box with its sliding top—from the prison of their squares into the prison of the coffin.

But he, at least, had escaped his prison, he thought, had seen the last of that bloody hostel. His only regret was not being able to say goodbye to Avinash, whose room remained locked and silent. Probably still hiding at his parents’—it would be foolhardy to return while the Emergency regime governed the campus and people continued to disappear.

Maneck remembered the early days with him, when their friendship was new. Everything I do is chess, Avinash had once said. Now he was under a serious check. Had he castled in time, protected by three pawns and a rook? And Dina Aunty, playing against her tailors, making her moves between front room and back room. And Daddy, attempting to take on the soft-drink opponents who did not observe the rules of the game, who played draughts using chess pieces.

Evening deepened the shadows in the room, but Maneck did not bother with the light. His whimsical thoughts about chess suddenly acquired a dark, depressing hue in the dusk. Everything was under threat, and so complicated. The game was pitiless. The carnage upon the chess-board of life left wounded human beings in its wake. Avinash’s father with tuberculosis, his three sisters waiting for their dowries, Dina Aunty struggling to survive her misfortunes, Daddy crushed and brokenhearted while Mummy pretended he was going to be his strong, smiling self again, and their son would return after a year of college, start bottling Kohlah’s Cola in the cellar, and their lives would be full of hope and happiness once more, like the time before he was sent away to boarding school. But pretending only worked in the world of childhood, things would never be the same again. Life seemed so hopeless, with nothing but misery for everyone...

He slapped shut the folding chessboard: a puff of air kissed his face. Where his cheeks were wet with tears, the kiss felt cold. He dried his eyes and slapped the two sides together again, like bellows, then fanned himself with the board.

Dina Aunty's call of "Dinnertime," when it finally came, was like a release from jail. He was at the table instantly, hovering about, not sitting till his place was indicated.

"Have you got a cold?" she asked. "Your eyes look watery."

"No, I was resting." She didn't miss much, he thought.

"I forgot to ask yesterday—do you prefer knife and fork, or fingers?"

"Anything, it doesn't matter."

"What do you do at home?"

"We use cutlery."

She set a knife, fork, and spoon around his plate, leaving hers unadorned, and brought the food to the table.

"I can also eat with fingers," he protested. "You don't have to give me special treatment."

"Don't flatter yourself, cheap stainless steel is not special." She filled his plate and sat opposite him. "When I was young, we always had proper place settings. Sterling silver. My father was very particular about such matters. After he died our habits changed. Especially when my brother Nusswan married Ruby. She got rid of it. She said we didn't need to ape foreigners while God had given us perfectly good fingers. Which is true in a way. But I think she was just lazy about cleaning all the cutlery."

Halfway through the meal Dina washed her hands and fetched a knife and fork for herself. "You've inspired me," she smiled. "It's been twenty-five years since I used these things."

He looked away, trying not to make her fingers nervous. "Will the tailors come tomorrow?"

"I hope so," she said, dismissing the topic briefly.

Then her anxiety drew her back to it. "Unless they've found better jobs, and disappeared. But what else can I expect from such people? Ever since I started this tailoring business, they've made my life a misery. Day after day, they drive me mad with worry about finishing the dresses on time."

"Maybe they are sick or something."

"Both together? Maybe it's the sickness that comes out of a booze bottle—I did pay them yesterday. No discipline at all, no sense of responsibility. Anyway, I don't know why I'm bothering you with my problems."

"That's okay." He helped her carry the dirty dishes to the kitchen. The stray cats were mewing outside. He had heard them last night while falling asleep, and dreamt of the pariah dogs congregating on the front porch of the General Store, and Daddy feeding them, making his usual joke, that he would soon have to open a new branch for his canine customers through the window, Maneck—in the garbage pail," said Dina, as he tossed out the scraps.

"But I want to feed the cats, Aunty."

"No, don't encourage them."

"They're hungry—see how they're waiting."

"Nonsense. Nuisances outside my window, that's what they are. And they break in to make a mess in the kitchen. Only good thing about them is their intestines. To make violin strings, my husband used to say."

Maneck was sure she would see it his way if he talked about the cats every day as though they were human; that was the trick Daddy used. When her back was turned he threw out the remainder. Already he knew which was his favourite: the brown and white tabby with a misshapen ear who was saying, Hurry with the food, I haven't got all day.

After clearing up, Dina invited him to sit with her in the front room, read or study, do whatever he liked. "You don't have to lock yourself away in there. Treat this as your home. And if you need something, don't be shy to ask."

"Thank you, Aunty." He had been dreading the return to his jail cell before bedtime. He took the armchair across from her and rifled a magazine.

"Have you been to see your mummy's family yet?"

He shook his head. "I hardly know them. And we have never got along with them. Daddy always says they are so dull, they are in danger of boring themselves to death."

"Tch-tch-tch," she frowned and smiled simultaneously, sorting her fabric remnants and patches. The half-dozen squares she was shaping to fit together were spread out on the sofa.

Maneck came closer. "What are these?"

"My cloth collection."

"Really? What for?"

"Does there have to be a reason? People collect all kinds of things. Stamps, coins, postcards. I have cloth, instead of a photo album or scrap-book."

"Yes," he said, nodding doubtfully.

She let him watch for a while, then said, "Don't worry, I'm not going crazy. These pieces are to make a quilt. A nice counterpane for my bed."

"Oh, now I see." He began looking through the heap, making suggestions, picking out fragments which he thought would go well together. Some, like the swatches of chiffon and tusser, felt gorgeous between his fingers. "Too many different colours and designs," he said.

"Are you trying to be a critic or what?"

"No, I mean it's going to be very difficult to match them properly."

"Difficult, yes, but that's where taste and skill come in. What to select, what to leave out—and which goes next to which."

She snipped off some jagged edges and temporarily tacked the six selections together, to obtain a better perspective. "What do you think?" she asked.

"So far so good."

A nice friendly boy, she felt. Her fears about a spoilt brat could not have been more unfounded. And it was good to have someone to talk to. Someone besides the tailors, who were always mistrustful of her—not that she trusted them either.



NEXT AFTERNOON she intercepted Maneck on the verandah when he returned from college and whispered that the tailors had turned up. "But don't say a word about how upset I was yesterday."

"Okay." The queen's gambit, he thought, tossing his books on the bed. He went into the front room as the tailors emerged for their tea break.

"Ah, there he is, there he is!" said Ishvar. "After a whole month we meet again, hahn?"

He put out his hand and asked Maneck how he was, while Om stood by grinning. Maneck said he was fine, and Ishvar said they were both first class, thanks mainly to the regular work provided by Dinabai, who was such a good employer. He smiled at her to include her in the conversation.

~~three days apart—nothing—behaving as if they were old friends. And to think they had met just once before, on the train, trying to find her flat.~~

In the evening, when the tailors were getting ready to put away the skirts, she gave them some parting advice: "Better tell the Prime Minister your jobs are in danger if she takes you again to a meeting. There are two more tailors begging me for work."

"No no," said Ishvar. "We definitely want to work for you. We are very happy working for you."

Dina sat alone in the back room after the tailors left. The space still seemed to vibrate with the Singers. Soon the evening gloom would materialize, infect the fibre-filled air, drape itself over her bed, depress her from now till morning.

But as dusk fell and the streetlamps came on, her spirit remained buoyant. Like magic, she thought, the difference made by another human presence in the flat. She returned to the front room to have her little planned talk with Maneck.

Queen to king's knight, he thought.

"You realize why I have to be strict with them," she said. "If they know I'm desperate, they'll sit on my head."

"Yes, I understand. By the way, Aunty, do you play chess?"

"No. And I should tell you right now—I don't like your chatting so much with them. They are my employees, you are Aban Kohlah's son. A distance has to be kept. All this familiarity is not good."

Things were worse the following afternoon. She could not

believe her ears—the impudence of that Omprakash, boldly asking Maneck, “You want to come with us for tea?” And worst of all, on Maneck’s face glimmered the inclination to say yes. Time to step in, she decided.

“He has his tea here. With me.” There was ice in Dina’s voice.

“Yes, but maybe...maybe just for today I can go out, Aunty?”

She said if he wanted to waste his parents’ payment for ~~and board~~, it was fine with her.



AT THE Vishram Vegetarian Hotel the air was alive with hearty cooking smells. Maneck felt he had only to stick out his tongue to sample the menu. His stomach rumbled hungrily.

They sat at the solitary table and ordered three teas. The spills from countless spicy meals had imparted a pungent varnish to the wood. Ishvar took the packet of beedis from his pocket and offered it to Maneck.

“No, thanks. I don’t smoke.”

The tailors lit up. “She won’t let us smoke at our machines,” said Om. “And now the room is so crowded with her bed also in there. Place is like a dingy godown.”

“So what?” said Ishvar. “It’s not as if you have to run around in it catching goats or something.”

The cook in one corner of the restaurant was working within a circle of pots and pans. They could see their tea simmering in an open kettle. Three roaring stoves sent clouds of greasy smoke to the ceiling. Flames licked the black bottom of a huge karai full of boiling oil, bubbling dangerously and ready for frying. A drop of sweat from the cook’s shining brow fell into the oil; it spat viciously.

“You like your room?” asked Ishvar.

“Oh yes. Much better than the hostel.”

“We also found a place,” said Om. “At first I hated it, but now it’s all right. There are some nice people living near us.”

“You must come visit one day,” said Ishvar.

“Sure. Is it far?”

"Not very. Takes about forty-five minutes by train." The teas arrived with a splash, the cups sitting in little brown-puddled saucers. Ishvar slurped from the saucer. Om poured his puddle back into the cup and sipped. Maneck followed his example.

"And how is college?"

Maneck made a wry face. "Hopeless. But I'll have to finish it somehow, to please my parents. Then home I go, on the first train."

"Soon as we collect some money, we're also going back," said Ishvar, coughing and hawking. "To find a wife for Om. Hahn, my nephew?"

"I don't want marriage," he scowled. "How many times to tell you."

"Look at that sour-lime face. Come on, finish your tea, time's up." Ishvar got up to leave. The boys swallowed the last draughts and tumbled out of the little tea shop after him. They hurried back to Dina's flat, past the beggar on his rolling platform.

"Remember him?" said Om to Maneck. "We saw him on the first day. He's become our friend now. We pass him every day, and he waves to us."

"O babu!" sang the beggar. "Aray babu! O big paisawalla babu!" He smiled at the trio, rattling his begging tin. Maneck tinkled into it the small change from the Vishram.

* * * * *

"WHAT'S THAT smell?" Dina leaned forward angrily to sniff Maneck's shirt. "Were you smoking with those two?"

"No," he whispered, embarrassed that they would hear in the back room.

"Be honest. I stand in your parents' place."

"No, Aunty! They were smoking, and I was sitting next to them, that's all."

"If I ever catch you, I will write straight to your mummy, I'm warning you. Now tell me, did they say anything else about yesterday? The real reason they were absent?"

"No."

"What did you talk about?"

He resented the cross-examination. "Nothing much. This and that."

She did not pursue it, snubbed by his taciturnity. "There's another thing you better be warned about. Omprakash has lice."

"Really?" he asked interestedly. "You've seen them?"

"Do I put my hand in the fire to check if it's hot? All day long he scratches. And not just his head. Problems at both ends—worms at one, lice at the other. So take my advice, stay away if you know what's good for you. His uncle is safe, he's almost bald, but you have a nice thick thatch, the lice will love it."

* * * * *

DINA'S ADVICE went unheeded. As the days turned to weeks, the afternoon break at the Vishram Vegetarian Hotel became a regular affair for the three. Once, Maneck was delayed in returning from college, and Om whispered to Ishvar that they should wait for him.

"My, my," said Dina, overhearing. "Postponing your tea. Are you feeling well? Are you sure you will survive that long?"

Ishvar reflected upon why it annoyed Dinabai so much, their going off together. When Maneck arrived and Om leapt up from his Singer, he decided to stay behind. "You boys go, I want to finish this skirt."

Dina was all praise for him. "Listen to your uncle, learn from his example," she said to Om as the two left. She poured Maneck's tea into the segregated pink-roses cup and brought it to Ishvar. "You might as well drink it."

He thanked her for her trouble. He took a sip and remarked that Maneck and Om were getting on well, enjoying each other's company. "They are both the same age. Om must be fed up being with his old uncle all the time. Night and day we are togetherse." She said that in her opinion, if it weren't for the uncle's steady presence, Om would turn into a wastrel. "I only hope he is not a poor influence on Maneck."

"No no, don't worry. Om is not a bad boy. If sometimes he is disobedient or bad-tempered, it's only because he is frustrated and unhappy. He has had a very unfortunate life."

"Mine has not been easy either. But we must make the best of what we have."

"There is no other way," he agreed.

From that day, he stayed behind more and more while Dina continued to make tea in Maneck's name but poured it in Ishvar's cup. They chatted about matters both tailoring and non-tailoring. His half-smile of gratitude was always something she looked forward to, with the frozen half straining to catch up as his face beamed at the pink roses along the rim of the saucer.

"Om's sewing is improving, hahn, Dinabai?"

"He makes fewer mistakes."

"Yes yes. He is much happier since Maneck came."

"I am worried about Maneck, though. I hope he is studying properly—his parents are relying on it. They have a small shop, and it's not doing well."

"Everybody has troubles. Don't worry, I will talk to him, remind him to work hard. That's what these two young fellows have to do, work hard."

Ishvar noted that the tea breaks upset Dinabai no more. It confirmed his suspicion, that she was longing for company.

* * * * *

THE BOYS' conversation inevitably took a different turn when they were on their own. Om was curious about the hostel Maneck had abandoned. "Were there any college girls living there?" "You think I would leave if there were? They have a separate hostel. Boys are not allowed inside."

From the Vishram they could see a cinema advertisement on a roof across the road, for a film called *Revolver Rani*. The billboard was a diptych. The first panel showed four men tearing off a woman's clothes. An enormous bra-clad bosom was exposed, while the men's lips, parted in lewd laughter, revealed carnivorous teeth and bright-red tongues. The second panel depicted the same

woman, her clothes in tatters, mowing down the four men with automatic gunfire.

"Why is it called *Revolver Rani*?" said Om. "That's a machine-gun in her hands."

"They could have called it *Machine-Gun Maharani*. But that doesn't sound as good."

"Should be fun to see it."

"Let's go next week."

"No money. Ishvar says we must save."

"That's okay, I'll pay."

Om searched Maneck's face while drawing on the beedi, trying to decide if he meant it. "No, I can't let you do that."

"It's okay, I don't mind."

"I'll ask my uncle." His beedi went out and he reached for the matches. "You know, there's a girl who lives near our house. Her breasts look like that."

"Impossible."

The outright dismissal made Om study the poster again.

"Maybe you're right," he yielded. "Not exactly that big. They always paint them gigantic. But this girl has a solid pair, same beautiful shape as that. Sometimes she lets me touch them."

"Go, yaar, I wasn't born yesterday."

"I swear she does. Her name is Shanti. She opens her blouse and lets me squeeze them whenever I like," he said, giving his imagination free rein. Seeing Maneck laugh and slap his knee, he inquired innocently, "You mean you've never done that to a girl?"

"Of course I have," Maneck answered hastily. "But you said you live with your uncle in a small house. How would you get the chance?"

"Easy. There is a ditch at the side of the colony, and lots of bushes behind it. We go there after dark. But for a few minutes only. If she's away longer, someone would come looking for her." He puffed airily at the beedi as he fabricated explorations that involved Shanti's hair and limbs, and complicated excursions into her skirt and blouse.

"Good thing you're a tailor," said Maneck. "You know all the ins and outs of clothing."

But Om continued undiscouraged, stopping short only of the final foray. "Once, I was on top of her, and we almost did it. Then there was a noise in the bushes so she got scared." He drained his saucer and poured more from the cup. "What about you? Ever done it?"

"Almost. On a railway train."

It was Om's turn to laugh. "You're a champion fakeologist, for sure. On a train!"

"No, really. A few months ago, when I left home to come to college." Catalysed by Om's fantasies, Maneck's inventiveness took the field at a gallop. "There was a woman in the upper berth opposite mine, very beautiful."

"More beautiful than Dinabai?"

The question made him pause. He had to think for a moment.

"No," he said loyally. "But the minute I got on the train, she kept staring at me, smiling when no one was watching. The problem was, her father was travelling with her. Finally night came, and people began going to sleep. She and I kept awake. When everyone had fallen asleep, including her father, she pushed aside the sheet and pulled one breast out from her choli."

"Then what?" asked Om, happy to enjoy the imaginary fruits. "She began massaging her breast, and signalled for me to come over. I was scared to climb down from my berth. Someone could wake up, you know. But then she put her hand between her legs and began rubbing herself. So I decided I had to go to her."

"Of course. You'd be a fool not to," Om breathed hard.

"I got down without disturbing anyone, and in a second I was stroking her breast. She grabbed my hand, begging me to climb in with her. I wondered what was the best way to get up there. I didn't want to jolt her father's berth underneath. Suddenly there was a movement. He turned over, groaning. She was so frightened that she pushed me away and started snoring loudly. I pretended I was on my way to the bathroom."

"If only the bastard had kept sleeping."

"I know. It's so sad. I'll never meet that woman again." Maneck felt suddenly desolate, as though the loss were real. "You're lucky Shanti lives near you."

"You can see her one day," said Om generously. "When you visit me and Ishvar. But you won't be able to talk to her, just look at her from far. She's very shy, and meets me secretly, as I said." They gulped their tea and ran all the way back, for they had exceeded the time.



BATATA WADA, bhel puri, pakora, bhajia, sherbet—Maneck paid for all the snacks and drinks at the Vishram because Om got just enough from Ishvar for one cup of tea. The allowance from Maneck's parents was sufficient for the treats, since he no longer needed to supplement canteen food. The following week he kept his word and took Om to see *Revolver Rani* after the day's sewing was done. He offered to pay for Ishvar too, who refused, saying his time would be better spent finishing one more dress.

"How about you, Aunty? Want to come?"

"I wouldn't see such rubbish if you paid me," said Dina. "And if your money weighs too much in your pocket, let me know. I can tell your mummy to stop sending it."

"Bilkool correct," said Ishvar. "You young people don't understand the value of money."

Undeterred by the reproaches, they set off for the cinema. She reminded Maneck to come straight home after the film, his dinner would be waiting. He agreed, grumbling to himself that Dina Aunty was taking her self-appointed role of guardian too seriously.

"The old woman's prophecy came true," said Om, as they started towards the train station. "Half of it, anyway—Monkey-man finally took his revenge."

"What did he do?" "A terrible thing. It happened last night." Tikka had been back living with Monkey-man, and his neighbours assumed the two were friends again. But after the hutment dwellers had gone to sleep, Monkey-man put a wooden crate outside his shack and adorned it with flowers and an oil lamp. A photograph of Laila and Majnoo riding on Tikka's back was propped up in the centre. It was a Polaroid shot taken long ago by an American tourist.

charmed by the act. The altar was ready. Monkey-man led Tikka before it, made the dog lie down, and slit his throat. Then he went around letting people know he had fulfilled his duty.

"It was horrible," said Om. "We got there and saw poor Tikka floating in his blood. He was still twitching a little. I almost vomited."

"If my father was there, he would have killed Monkey-man," said Maneck.

"Are you boasting or complaining?" "Both, I guess." He kicked a stone from the footpath into the road. "My father cares more about stray dogs than his own son."

"Don't talk rubbish, yaar."

"Why rubbish? Look, he feeds the dogs every day on the porch. But me he sent away. All the time I was there, he kept fighting with me, didn't want me around."

"Don't talk rubbish, your father sent you here to study because he cares for your future."

"You're an expert on fathers or what?"

"Yes."

"What makes you?"

"Because my father is dead. That quickly makes you an expert. You better believe me—stop talking rubbish about your father."

"Okay, my father is a saint. But what happened to

Monkey-man?"

"People in the colony were angry, they said we should tell the police, because ever since the monkeys died, Monkey-man has two small children living with him, three-four years old. They are his sister's son and daughter, training for his new act. And if he went mad, it would be dangerous for the children. But then others in the colony said there was no point putting crooks in charge of the insane. Anyway, Monkey-man loves the children. He has been taking very good care of them."

They alighted from the train, pushing their way through the crowd waiting to climb on. Outside the platform, a woman sat in the sun with a small basket of vegetables beside her. She was drying her laundered sari, one half at a time. One end was wound wet round her waist and over her shrunken breasts, as far as it

would go. The drying half was stretched along the railway fence, flowing from her body like a prayer in the evening sun. She waved to Om as the two passed by.

“She lives in our colony,” he said, weaving through the traffic to cross the lane towards the cinema. “She sells vegetables. She has only one sari.”

Revolver Rani ended later than they had expected. While the credits rolled, they began inching down the aisles, lingering, not wanting to miss the reprise of the soundtrack. Then the fluttering national flag appeared on the screen, “Jana Gana Mana” started to play, and there was a rush for the exits.

But the outward-bound audience ran into an obstacle. A squad of Shiv Sena volunteers guarding the doors blocked their way. People at the back, unaware of the reason for the bottleneck, began shouting. “Side please! Aray bhai, side please! Move on, mister! Filmshow finished!”

The crowd in the front couldn’t go forward, however, threatened by the Shiv Sena’s waving sticks and an assortment of signs: RESPECT THE NATIONAL ANTHEM! YOUR MOTHERLAND

NEEDS YOU DURING THE EMERGENCY! PATRIOTISM IS A SCARED DUTY! No one was allowed to leave till the flag faded on the screen

and the lights came on.

“Why is patriotism a scared duty?” laughed Om. “They need to frighten people to be patriotic?”

“These idiots can’t even spell sacred, and they are telling us what to do,” said Maneck.

Om observed that the protesters were about fifty in all, whereas the audience was over eight hundred strong. “We could have easily over-powered them. Dhishoom! Dhishoom! Like that fellow in the film,” he said, clenching his fists before his chest.

In high spirits, they began repeating some of the more dramatic lines they remembered from *Revolver Rani*. “Blood can only be avenged by blood!” growled Maneck, with a swordfighting flourish.

“Standing on this consecrated earth, I swear with the sky as my witness that you will not see another dawn!” proclaimed Om.

“That’s because I wake up late every day, yaar,” said Maneck.

The sudden departure from the script made Om lose his pose with laughing.

Outside the railway station, the woman was still sitting with her vegetable basket. The dry half of the sari was now wrapped around her, with the wet stretch taking its turn along the fence. The basket was almost empty. "Amma, time to go home," said Om, and she smiled.

On the station platform, they decided to try the machine that said Weight & Fortune 25P. Maneck went first. The red and white wheel spun, lightbulbs flashed, there was a chime, and a little cardboard rectangle slid out into the curved receptacle.

"Sixty-one kilos," said Maneck, and read the fortune on the reverse. "A happy reunion awaits you in the near future." That sounds right—I'll be going home when this college year is finished."

"Or it means you will meet that woman on the train again. You can finish her breast massage. Come on, my turn." He climbed on, and Maneck fished in his pocket for another twenty-five-paise coin.

"Forty-six kilos," said Om, and turned it over. "You will soon be visiting many new and exciting places." That doesn't make sense. Going back to our village—that's not a new place."

"I think it means the places in Shanti's blouse and skirt."

Om struck a stance and raised his hand, reverting to the film dialogue. "Until these fingers are wrapped around your neck, squeezing out your wretched life, there shall be no rest for me!"

"Not when you weigh only forty-six kilos," said Maneck. "You will have to first practise on a chicken's neck."

The train arrived, and they ran from the ticket window to get on. "These train tickets look exactly like the weight cards," said Om.

"I could have saved the fare," said Maneck.

"No, it's too risky. They've become very strict because of Emergency." He described the time when Ishvar and he had been trapped in a raid on ticketless travellers.

The rush hour was over, and the compartment was sparsely occupied. They put up their feet on the empty seat. Maneck

unlaced his shoes and pulled them off, flexing his toes. "We walked a lot today."

"You shouldn't wear those tight shoes, yaar. My chappals are much more comfortable."

"My parents would get very upset if I went out in chappals." He kneaded the toes and soles, then pulled up his socks and put on the shoes.

"I used to massage my father's feet," said Om. "And he would massage my grandfather's feet."

"Did you have to do it every day?"

"I didn't have to, but it was a custom. We sat outside in the evenings, on the charpoy. There would be a cool breeze, and birds singing in the trees. I enjoyed doing it for my father. It pleased him so much." They swayed slightly in their seats as the train rocked along. "There was a callus under the big toe of his right foot—from treadling his sewing-machine. When I was small, that callus used to make me laugh if he wiggled the toe, it looked like a man's face."

Om was silent for the rest of the way, gazing pensively out the window. Maneck tried to distract him by imitating the characters in *Revolver Rani*, but a weak smile was all he could get out of him, so he lapsed into silence as well.



"YOU SHOULD have come with us," said Maneck. "It was fun. What thrilling fights."

"No, thank you, I've seen enough fighting in my life," said Ishvar. "But when are you visiting our house?" Maneck's spending regularly on Om was creating too much obligation, he felt, it was time to reciprocate in some small way. "You must have dinner with us soon."

"Sure, any time," answered Maneck, reluctant to make a commitment. It would upset Dina Aunty—the cinema trip had been bad enough.

Fortunately, Ishvar did not press for a firm date right then. He put the cover over his Singer and left with Om.

"Well, I hope you enjoyed yourself," said Dina. "Going against my wishes, mixing more and more with him in spite of what I told you."

"It was just one film show, Aunty. For the first time Om went to a big theatre. He was so thrilled."

"I hope he is able to sew tomorrow, and you can concentrate on your studies. These films about fighting and killing can only have a bad effect on the brain. In the old days the cinema was so sweet. A little dancing and singing, some comedy, or a romance. Now it's all just guns and knives."

Next day, as though to vindicate Dina's theory, Om joined the bodice of a size-seven dress to the skirt of a size eleven, squeezing the excess into the gather at the waist. The mistakes were repeated in three garments and not discovered till the afternooneverything else, fix this first," said Dina, but he ignored her.

"It's all right, Dinabai," said Ishvar. "I will separate the seams and stitch them again."

"No, he made the mistakes and he should correct them."

"You do them," scowled Om, scratching his scalp. "I have a headache. You gave me the wrong pieces so it's your mistake."

"Listen to him! Lying shamelessly! And take your fingers out of your hair before you get oil on the cloth! Scratch-scratch-scratch the whole day!"

The argument was still going when Maneck returned from college. The tailors did not break for tea. He went to his room and shut himself in, wishing they would stop. For the rest of the afternoon the squabble kept dribbling under his door, creating a pool of distress around him.

At six, Dina knocked and asked him to come out. "Those two have left. I need the company of a sane person."

"Why were you fighting, Aunty?"

"I was fighting? How dare you! Do you know the whole story, to say who was fighting?"

"I'm sorry, Aunty. I meant, what was the fight about?" "Same reason as always. Mistakes and shoddy work. But thank God for Ishvar. I don't know what I would do without him. One

angel and one devil. Trouble is, when the angel keeps company with the devil, neither can be trusted.”

“Maybe Om behaves this way because something is upsetting him—maybe it’s because you lock them in when you go out.”

“Ah! So he’s told you that, has he? And did he say why I do it?”

“The landlord. But he thinks it’s just an excuse. He says you make them feel like criminals.”

“His guilty conscience makes him feel that way. The landlord’s threat is real, you remember it too. Don’t let the rent-collector’s sweet smile fool you into admitting anything. Always pretend you are my nephew.” She began tidying the room, picking up the scraps, stuffing the fragments in the bottom shelf. “That Ibrahim’s eyeballs can see the whole flat right from the front door, the way they wander, round and round. Faster than Buster Keaton’s. But you are too young to know Buster Keaton.”

“I’ve heard Mummy mention the name. She said he was funnier than Laurel and Hardy.”

“Never mind that—there is also a second reason. The tailors will put me out of business if I don’t lock them in. Do you know Om tried to follow me to the export company? Did he tell you that? No, of course not. My tiny commission sticks in their throats. As it is, I can barely manage.”

“Shall I tell Mummy to send more money? For my rent and food?”

“Absolutely not! I am charging a fair price and she is paying it. You think I am telling you all this because I want charity?”

“No, I just thought—”

“My problems are not a beggar’s wounds! Only a beggar removes his cloth to shock you with his mutilation. No, Mr. Mac Kohlah, I’m telling you all this so you understand your beloved Omprakash Darji a little better.”



THE NEXT TIME she went to Au Revoir Exports, Dina decided to take Maneck further into her confidence. “Listen, I’m not pad-locking the door today. Since you are home, I’ll leave you in

charge." The responsibility would draw him over to her side, she was sure; besides, Om wouldn't attempt the bicycle caper twice. After Dina had departed, Ishvar continued sewing, uncomfortable about taking his customary rest on her sofa with Maneck present. But Om stopped immediately, and escaped to the front room. "Two hours of freedom," he announced, stretching and letting himself drop on the sofa next to Maneck. While he smoked, they browsed through Dina's old knitting books. Models wearing various styles of sweaters adorned the inside pages. Luscious red lips, creamy skin, and luxuriant hairdos dazzled them from the dog-eared glossy paper. "Look at those two," said Om, indicating a blonde and a redhead. "You think the hair between their legs is the same colour?"

"Why don't you write a letter to the magazine and ask? 'Dear Sir, We wish to make an inquiry regarding the colour of your models' choot hair—specifically, if it matches the hair on their heads. The models in question appear on page forty-seven of your issue dated'"—he flipped to the cover—"July 1961.' Forget it, yaar, that's fourteen years ago. Whatever colour it was then, it must be grey or white by now."

"I should ask Rajaram the hair-collector," said Om. "He's an expert on hair."

The boys restored the knitting books to their corner and went into Maneck's room. The pagoda parasol amused them for a while, then they explored the kitchen, calling to the cats, who refused to approach the window since it was not dinnertime. Om wanted to throw water at them, make them yowl, but Maneck wouldn't let him.

In the back room they examined the collection of cloth pieces, the beginnings of the quilt. "You boys don't meddle with Dinabai's things," warned Ishvar, glancing up from the machine.

"Just look at all this cloth," said Om. "She steals from us, not paying us properly, and also from the company."

"You are talking nonsense, Omprakash," his uncle said. "Those are little garbage pieces that she puts to good use. Come on, get back to your machine, stop wasting time."

Om replaced the makings of the quilt and pointed to the trunk

on the trestle in the corner. Maneck raised his eyebrows at the daring suggestion. They opened it, and discovered her supply of homemade sanitary pads.

"You know what those are for?" whispered Om.

"Little pillows," said Maneck, grinning, picking up a couple of the lumpy pads. "Little pillows for little people."

"My little man can rest his head on it." Om slung one between his legs.

"Stop fooling with the trunk there," said Ishvar.

"Okay, okay." They took a handful of pads into the front room and continued clowning.

"What's this?" said Maneck, holding two above his head.

"Horns?"

"No," he wagged them. "Donkey's ears."

Om held one behind him. "Rabbit's tail."

They held them at their crotches like phalluses and pranced around the room, making large masturbatory gestures. The knot at the end of Maneck's pad came undone. The stuffing fell out, leaving the casing flopping in his hand.

"Look at that!" laughed Om. "Your lund has already gone to sleep, yaar!"

Maneck took a firm new pad and struck Om's with it. A duel ensued but the weapons collapsed quickly, scattering fabric snippets around the room. They picked up two more and began rushing at each other in a gallop, like jousters on horseback, their sanitary lances sticking out at their flies.

"Tan-tanna tan-tanna tan-tanna!" they trumpeted and attacked. Backing up to their corners, they adjusted the pads at their crotches while Om reared and neighed like a charger champing at the bit.

Just as they were ready to tilt again, Dina opened the front door and entered through the verandah. The fanfare died in mid-flourish. She got as far as the sofa, then froze. The scene left her speechless: the floor littered with the scraps of her carefully prepared sanitary pads, the two boys standing guiltily, clutching their embarrassing toys.

They dropped their hands and started to hide the pads behind

their backs, then realized the gesture was as futile as it was silly. They lowered their heads.

"You shameless boys!" she managed to utter. "You shameless boys!"

She ran to the back room where Ishvar was still ploughing away at his machine, blissfully unaware of the goings-on in the front room. "Stop!" she said, her voice trembling. "Come and see what those two have been doing!"

Om and Maneck had put aside the pads, but Dina thrust one each into their hands. "Go on!" she said. "Do it for him, let him see your shameless behaviour!"

Ishvar did not need to see. He gathered that something filthy had been going on, especially if she was so upset. He went to Om and slapped him across the face. "You I cannot slap," he said to Maneck. "But someone should. For your own good."

He led Om into the back room and flung him upon his stool. "I don't want another word from you, now or ever. Just do your work quietly till it's time to leave."



DINNER WAS a silent meal; only the knives and forks spoke. Dina cleared up quickly, then went into the sewing room and bolted her door.

As if I were a sex maniac or something, thought Maneck, feeling miserable. He waited for a while in the front room, hoping she would come out, give him a chance to apologize. His ears picked up the opening and closing of a drawer. The creaking of her bed. A clatter that could be her hair-brush. The thud of the tailors' stools being pushed aside. He heard the sound of the trunk lid, and his face burned with shame. Then the bright line under her door went dark, and his wretchedness engulfed him.

Would she write to his parents and complain? Surely he deserved it. For almost two months now, she had treated him so well in her flat, and he had behaved disgustingly. For the first time since leaving home, he had felt at peace, unthreatened, thanks to

Dina Aunty. Rescued from the hostel that had made him ill, with that tightness in the chest, that nauseated feeling every morning.

Now he had brought it all back, through his own doing. He switched off the light beside the sofa and dragged himself to his room.



MORNING COULD not alleviate Maneck's shame from last night. To help keep it burning, Dina slammed the plate of two fried eggs before him at breakfast. When it was time to leave for college and

he called out "Bye, Aunty," she would not come to wave.

Woefully, he shut the door upon the empty, accusing verandah.

The first hint of forgiveness quivered in the air after dinner. Like the night before, she retreated to the back room instead of bringing the quilt to the sofa; however, she kept her door ajar.

Waiting hopefully in the front room, he passed the time listening to the neighbours. Someone screamed retributive warnings—at a daughter, he presumed. "Mui bitch!" came a man's voice. "Behaving like a slut, staying out so late at night! You think eighteen years is too old to get a thrashing? I'll show you! When we say back by ten o'clock, we mean ten o'clock!"

Maneck glanced at his watch: ten-twenty. Still Dina Aunty did not emerge. Neither did the light go off. At their usual bedtime of ten-thirty, he decided to peek in and say good night.

She was in her nightgown, her back to the door. He changed his mind and tried to retreat, but she saw him through the crack. Oh God, he thought, panicking—now she would assume he was spying.

"Yes?" she said sharply.

"Excuse me, Aunty, I was just coming to say good night."

"Yes. Good night." Her stiffness persisted.

He re-echoed the words and began edging away, then stopped. He cleared his throat. "Also..."

"Also what?"

"Also, I wanted to say sorry...for yesterday..."

"Don't mumble from outside the room. Come in and say what you have to say."

He entered shyly. Her bare arms in the nightgown looked so lovely, and through the light cotton, the shape of...but he dared not let his eyes linger. Mummy's friend was the unsummoned thought that terrified him as he finished his apology.

"I want you to understand," she said. "I was not angry with your shameful act because of any harm to me. I was ashamed for you, to see you behaving like a loafer. Like a roadside maval. From Omprakash I cannot expect better. But you, from a good Parsi family. And I left you to watch after them, I ~~trusted~~ you." he hung his head. She raised her hands to her hair, re-inserting a clip that had become ineffective. He found the fuzz in her armpits extremely erotic.

"Go to bed now," she said. "Next time, use better judgement."

As he fell asleep, thinking of Dina Aunty in the nightgown, she began to merge with the woman on the train, in the upper berth.

VII
On the Move

After the incident with the sanitary pads, Dina was certain that neither Ishvar nor Om would dare follow through with a dinner for Maneck at their house. And even if they did, he would refuse, for fear of offending her.

In a few days, however, the invitation was indeed renewed, and acceptance seemed to linger close at hand. "I don't believe it," she whispered angrily to Maneck. "After what you did that day, isn't it enough? Haven't you upset me enough?"

"But I apologized for that, Aunty. And Om was also very sorry. What's the connection between the two things?"

"You think sorry makes it all right. You don't understand the problem. I have nothing against them, but they are tailors—my employees. A distance has to be maintained. You are the son of Farokh and Aban Kohlah. There is a difference, and you cannot pretend there isn't—their community, their background."

"But Mummy and Daddy wouldn't mind," he said, trying to explain he hadn't been brought up to think this way, that his parents encouraged him to mix with everyone.

"So you are saying I am narrow-minded, and your parents are broad-minded, modern people?"

He grew tired of arguing. Sometimes she seemed to him on the verge of being reasonable, only to make another absurd statement: "If you are so fond of them, why don't you pack your things and move in with them? I can easily write to your mummy, tell her where to send the rent next month."

"I just want to visit once. It feels rude to keep refusing. They think I'm too big to go to their house."

"And have you thought of the consequences of one visit? Good manners is all very well, but what about health and hygiene? How do they prepare their food? Can they afford proper cooking oil? Or do they buy cheap adulterated vanaspati, like most poor people?"

"I don't know. They haven't fallen sick and died as yet."

"Because their stomachs are accustomed to it, you foolish boy, and yours is not."

Maneck pictured the hideous canteen food his own stomach had endured, and the roadside snacks devoured for weeks on end.

He wondered if mentioning that would make her modify her culinary theories.

"And what about water?" she continued. "Is there a clean supply in their neighbourhood, or is it contaminated?"

"I'll be careful, I won't drink any water." His mind was made up, he was going. She was getting too bossy. Even Mummy never controlled his life the way Dina Aunty was trying to.

"Fine, do as you please. But if you catch something, don't think I'll be your nurse for one moment. You'll be sent back by express delivery to your parents."

"That's all right with me."

The next time Ishvar and Om asked him, he said yes. She flushed, and ground her teeth. Maneck smiled innocently.

"Tomorrow then, okay?" said Ishvar with delight. "We'll leave together at six o'clock." He inquired what he would like to eat. "Rice or chapati? And which is your favourite vegetable, hahn?"

"Anything," answered Maneck to all questions. The tailors spent the rest of the afternoon discussing the menu, planning their humble feast.



ISHVAR WAS first to notice that the smoke from cooking fires did not linger over the hutment colony. He tripped on the crumbling pavement, his eyes searching the horizon. At this hour the haze should have been clouding thick. "Everyone fasting or what?"

"Forget worrying about everyone—I'm starving." "You're always starving. Do you have worms?" Om did not laugh; the joke was growing stale. The absence of smoke bothered Ishvar. In its place a dull roar, as of heavy machinery, hung in the distance. "Repairing the roads at night?" he wondered, as the noise rose with their approach. Then, thinking about Maneck's dinner, he said, "Tomorrow we will shop in the morning, keep everything ready. We shouldn't waste time after work. Now if you were married, your wife would have the food cooked and waiting for our guest." "Why don't you get married?"

"I'm too old." But, he thought, teasing aside, it really was high time for Om—not wise to delay these things.

"But I've even selected a wife for you," said Om.

"Who?"

"Dinabai. I know you like her, you're always taking her side. You should give her a poke."

"Shameless boy," said Ishvar, thumping him lightly as they turned the corner into the slum lane.

The rumbling ball of sound that had been rolling towards them, slow and placid in the dusk, grew larger, louder. Then it detonated. The air was suddenly filled with noises of pain and terror and anger.

"Hai Ram! What's going on?" They ran the final distance and came upon a battle in progress.

The hutment dwellers were massed on the road, fighting to return to their shacks, their cries mingling with the sirens of ambulances that couldn't get through. The police had lost control for the moment. The residents surged forward, gaining the advantage. Then the police rallied and beat them back. People fell, were trampled, and the ambulances supplemented their siren skirls with blaring horns while children screamed, terrified at being separated from their parents.

The hutment dwellers straggled back from the pulse of the assault, spent, venting their anguish in helpless outrage. "Heartless animals! For the poor there is no justice, ever! We had next to nothing, now it's less than nothing! What is our crime, where are we to go?"

During the lull, Ishvar and Om found Rajaram. "I was there when it all started," he said, panting. "They went in and—just destroyed it. And just smashed—everything. Such crooks, such liars—"

"Who did it?" they tried to make him talk slowly. "The men, the ones who said they were safety inspectors. They tricked us. Sent by the government, they said, to check the colony. At first the people were pleased, the authorities were taking some interest. Maybe improvements were coming—water, latrines, lights, like they kept promising at voting time. So we did as they

told us, came out of the shacks. But once the colony was empty, the big machines went in."

Most of the bulldozers were old jeeps and trucks, with steel plates and short wooden beams like battering rams affixed to the front bumpers. They had begun tearing into the structures of plywood, corrugated metal, and plastic. "And when we saw that, we rushed in to stop them. But the drivers kept going. People were crushed. Blood everywhere. And the police are protecting those murderers. Or the bastards would be dead by now. how can they destroy our homes, just like that?"

"They said it's a new Emergency law. If shacks are illegal, they can remove them. The new law says the city must be made beautiful."

"What about Navalkar? And his boss, Thokray? They collected this month's rent only two days ago."

"They are here."

"And they're not complaining to the police?"

"Complaining? Thokray is the one in charge of this. He is wearing a badge: Controller of Slums. And Navalkar is Assistant Controller. They won't talk to anyone. If we try to go near them, their goondas threaten to beat us."

"And all our property in the shacks?"

"Lost, looks like. We begged them to let us remove it, but they refused."

Ishvar suddenly felt very tired. He moved away from the crowd and crossed the lane, where he sank to his haunches. Rajaram hitched up his pants and sat down beside him. "No sense crying for those rotten jhopdis. We'll find somewhere else, it's only a small obstacle. Right, Om? We'll search together for a new house."

Om nodded. "I'm going to take a closer look inside."

"Don't, it's dangerous," said Ishvar. "Stay here, with me."

"I'm here only, year," said Om, and wandered off to examine the demolition.

The evening was on the edge of darkness. A vigorous lathi-charge had finally cleared the area near the front of the colony. Slippers and sandals lost by the fleeing crowd littered the ground, strewn like the flotsam of a limbless human tide. The

police cordon, now firmly in place, kept the rage of the residents smouldering at a safe distance.

The bulldozers finished flattening the rows of flimsy shacks and tackled the high-rental ones, reversing and crunching into the brick walls. Om felt nothing—the shack had meant nothing to him, he decided. Maybe now his uncle would agree to go back to Ashraf Chacha. He remembered Maneck, coming to visit tomorrow. He laughed mirthlessly about telling him the dinner was off—cancelled due to the unexpected disappearance of their house.

Sergeant Kesar's megaphone blared in the dusk: "Work will be stopping for thirty minutes. Actually speaking, this is simply to give you a chance to collect your personal belongings. Then the machines will start again."

In the crowd, the announcement was received with some scorn—a goodwill gesture from the police to avoid more trouble. But most were grateful for the opportunity to retrieve their few possessions. A desperate scramble commenced in the wreckage. It reminded Om of children on garbage heaps. He saw them every morning from the train. He rejoined his uncle to become part of the bustle among the ruins.

The machines had transformed the familiar field with its carefully ordered community into an alien place. There was much confusion amid the people rooting for their belongings. Which piece of ground had supported whose shelter? And which pile of scantlings and metal was theirs to comb through? Others were turning the turmoil to advantage, grabbing what they could, and fights broke out over pieces of splintered plywood, torn rexine sheets, clear plastic. Someone tried to seize the harmonium player's damaged instrument while he was burrowing for his clothes. He fought off the thief with an iron rod. The tussle inflicted more wounds on the harmonium, ripping its bellows.

"My neighbours have become robbers," he said tearfully. "Once, I sang for them, and they clapped for me."

Ishvar offered him perfunctory solace, anxious about his own possessions. "At least our sewing-machines have a safe home with Dinabai," he said to Om. "That's our good fortune."

They dragged aside the corrugated sheet that used to be the roof, and uncovered the trunk. The lid had sustained several deep dents. It swung open with a protesting squeal. Om aimed a kick at the biggest depression and the lid moved less stubbornly. They cleared more debris and came upon the small mirror they used for shaving. It was intact: the aluminium frying pan had fallen over it like a helmet.

"No bad luck for us," said Om, stuffing both items into the trunk. The Primus stove was crushed beyond repair, and he tossed it back. Ishvar found a pencil, a candle, two enamel plates, and a polythene glass. Om found their razor, but not the packet of blades. By shifting more pieces of plywood they unearthed the copper water pot. Someone else spied it at the same moment, grabbed it, and ran.

"Thief!" shouted Om. Nobody paid attention. His uncle stopped him from chasing the man.

They pulled out their wicker mat, sheets, blankets, and the two towels used for pillows. Shaking out clouds of dust, Ishvar rolled it all into one neat bedding bundle and wrapped it with sackcloth.

Rajaram's concern was solely for his hoard of hair. The stock was ravaged, the plastic sacks ripped, their contents spilled. "One month's precious collection," he grieved. "All scattered in the mud." The allotted thirty minutes were running out. Ishvar and

Om helped him gather what they could, concentrating on retrieving the longest specimens.

"It's hopeless," said Rajaram bitterly. "The bastards have ruined me. The locks and plaits have broken up, it's impossible to join them together. Like trying to recover grains of sugar out of a cup of tea."

The three made their way through the police barricade, where the Controller of Slums was giving instructions to his workers. "Levelled smooth—that's how I want this field. Empty and clean, the way it was before all these illegal structures were built." The debris was to be dumped in the ditch by the railway tracks.

The dispossessed lingered outside, watching numbly. The workers flattened walls and corners that had survived the first assault, then stopped, claiming it was too dark for the equipment

to shift the rubble without tumbling into the ditch. The Controller of Slums could not risk that, there was much work ahead for his machines, many unlawful encroachments to be razed. He agreed to postpone the final phase till the morning, and the workers departed.

"I'll spend the night here," said Rajaram. "I might find something valuable in the field. What about you?"

"We should go to Nawaz," said Ishvar. "Maybe he'll let us sleep under his back awning again."

"But he was so mean to us."

"Still—he might help us find a house, like he did last time."

"Yes, it's worth trying," said Rajaram. "And I'll check what happens here. Who knows, some other gang boss might be planning to build new shacks."

They agreed to meet next evening and exchange information. "Can you do me a favour in the meantime?" asked Rajaram. "Keep these few plaits for me? They are very light. I have nowhere for them."

Ishvar agreed, and put them in the trunk.

* * * * *

THERE WERE strangers living in Nawaz's house. The man who answered the door claimed to know nothing about him.

"It's very urgent for us to find Nawazbhai," said Ishvar. "Maybe your landlord has some information. Can you give me his name and address?"

"It's none of your business." Someone shouted from inside, "Stop pestering us so late at night!"

"Sorry to disturb you," said Ishvar, rehoisting the bedding bundle and retreating down the steps.

"Now what?" panted Om, his face showing the weight of the trunk.

"Your breath has leaked out already?"

He nodded. "Like a broken balloon."

"Okay, let's have tea." They went to the stall at the corner, the

one they had frequented during their months on the back porch. The owner remembered them as friends of Nawaz.

"Haven't seen you for some time," he said. "Any news of Nawaz since the police took him?"

"Police? For what?"

"Smuggling gold from the Gulf."

"Really? Was he?"

"Of course not. He was just a tailor, like you." But Nawaz had quarrelled with somebody whose daughter was getting married. The man, well connected, had given him a large assignment—wedding clothes for the entire family. After the wedding he refused to pay, claiming that the clothes fit badly. Nawaz kept asking for his money to no avail, then found out where the man's office was. He showed up there, to embarrass him among his colleagues. "And that was a big mistake. The bastard took his revenge. That same night the police came for Nawaz."

"Just like that? How can they put an innocent man in jail? The other fellow is the crook."

"With the Emergency, everything is upside-down. Black can be made white, day turned into night. With the right influence and a little cash, sending people to jail is very easy. There's even a new law called MISA to simplify the whole procedure."

"What's MISA?"

"Maintenance of... something, and Security...something, I'm not sure."

The tailors finished the tea and departed with their loads. "Poor Nawaz," said Ishvar. "Wonder if he was really up to something crooked."

"Must have," said Om. "They don't send people to jail for nothing. I never liked him. But now what?"

"Maybe we can sleep at the railway station."



THE PLATFORM was thick with beggars and itinerants bedding

down for the night. The tailors picked a corner and cleaned it, whisking away the dust with a newspaper.

"Oiee, careful! It's coming in my face!" screamed someone.

"Sorry, bhai," said Ishvar, abandoning the sweeping. The urge to talk about tomorrow's dawning homeless, about what to do next, was strong, but each wanted the other to broach the subject. "Hungry?" he asked.

"No."

Ishvar wandered down anyway to the railway snack shop. He bought a spicy mix of fried onions, potatoes, peas, chillies, and coriander, stuffed into two small buns. Carrying it back to Om, a little guilt accompanied his passage through the gauntlet of hungry eyes ranged along the platform. "Pao-bhaji. One for you and one for me."

The glossy magazine page the bun was served on felt soggy. Little circles of warm grease were starting to appear. Om ate hungrily, finishing first, and Ishvar slowed down to save him a piece of his. "I'm full, you have it."

They took turns visiting the drinking fountain; the trunk and bedding needed guarding. After this, no further distractions were available. "Maybe Rajaram will have good news tomorrow evening," Om started tentatively.

"Yes, who knows. We could even build something ourselves, once the tamasha dies down. With plywood and sticks and plastic sheets. Rajaram is a smart fellow, he will know what to do. The three of us could live together in one big hut."

They visited the wasteland beyond the station to urinate, and had another drink of water before untying the bedding. The frequency of trains diminished as the night deepened. They lay down with their feet resting protectively on the trunk.

After midnight, they were awakened by a railway policeman kicking at the trunk. He said sleeping on the platform was prohibited.

"We are waiting for the train," said Ishvar.

"This is not that kind of station. No waiting room. Come back in the morning."

"But these other people are sleeping."

"They have special permission." The policeman jingled the coins in his pocket.

"Okay, we won't sleep on the platform, we will just sit."

The policeman left, shrugging. They sat up and rolled away the bedding.

"Ssst," called a woman lying next to them. "Ssst. You have to pay him." The plastic sheet she lay upon rustled loudly at her slightest movement. Her feet were wrapped in bandages blotched by a dark-yellow ooze.

"Pay him for what? It's not his father's platform."

She smiled, cracking the grime on her face. "Cinema, cinema!" she pointed excitedly at the film posters lining the platform wall. "One rupee per beggar. Fifty paise for child. Cinema every night."

Ishvar secretly raised a hand to his forehead and gave the loose-screw sign, but Om insisted on explaining. "We're not beggars, we're tailors. And what will he do if we don't pay? Can't take us to jail for it."

The woman turned on her side, observing them closely, silent except for the random giggling. A half-hour passed, and there was no sign of the policeman.

"I think it's safe now," said Om. He unrolled the bedding and they lay down again. She was still watching them amusedly. A faint smell of rot came from her bandaged feet.

"Are you going to look at us all night?" said Om. She shook her head but kept staring. Ishvar quietened his nephew, and they closed their eyes.

Within minutes of their dozing off, the policeman returned with a bucket of cold water and emptied it over the sleeping tailors. They howled and jumped off their bedding. The policeman walked away wordlessly, giving his empty bucket a jaunty swing. The woman on the plastic sheet was shaking with laughter. "from somewhere!" hissed Om, and Ishvar shushed him. He need not have bothered; the woman's hysterical laughter drowned the words. She slapped her hands with delight on the plastic sheet, making it flap.

"Cinema! Cinema! Johnnie Walker comedy!" she managed to get out between laughs.

"She knew! The crazy witch knew and didn't tell us, yaar!" Thoroughly soaked, they picked up everything and moved to the only remaining spot, at the end of the platform, where the urine smell was strong. The dry clothes in the trunk were a precious treasure. They took turns changing. Their wet things were spread out on the trunk's open lid. The sheets and blanket were hung on a broken sign fixture protruding from the platform wall.

The wicker mat dried quickly but they were afraid to lie down. Shivering, they sat guarding their belongings, swaying with sleep, nodding off occasionally. Due to the drenching, they needed to visit the wasteland several times. After the station was asleep, walking down to the tracks was not necessary. They emptied their bladders off the edge of the platform.

* * * * *

THE RAILWAY snack shop crashed open its steel shutters at four a.m. Cups and saucers started clinking, pots and pans banged. Ishvar and Om gargled at the drinking fountain, then bought two teas and a loaf of crusty bread. The hot liquid cleared their sleep-logged heads. The plan for the day began falling into place: at a suitable hour they would take the train to work, sew till six as usual, then return to meet Rajaram.

"We'll leave the trunk with Dinabai, just for tonight," said Ishvar. "But we won't say our house is destroyed. People are scared of the homeless."

"I'll give you anything if she lets us leave it there." They spent two more hours on the platform, smoking, watching the early-morning commuters who were mainly vendors waiting with baskets of pumpkin, onions, pomfret, salt, eggs, flowers balanced on their heads. An umbrella repairer was preparing for work, anatomizing broken umbrellas, salvaging the good ribs and handles. A contractor with his band of painters and masons, armed with ladders, pails, brushes, trowels, and hods, went by smelling like a freshly painted house.

The tailors got on a train at six-thirty. They were at Dina's flat

by seven. She flung a dustercoat over her nightgown and opened the door.

“So early?” Trust them to be inconsiderate, she thought—the sun barely up, the washing to do, Maneck’s breakfast still to make, and here they were, expecting attention.

“The trains are at last running on time. Because of the Emergency,” said Om, feeling rather clever.

She concluded that the brazen excuse was designed to infuriate her. Then Ishvar added placatingly, “Longer day means more dresses, hahn, Dinabai?”

True enough. “But what’s all this big fat luggage?”

“We have to take it to a friend in the evening. Oh, Maneck.

Before I forget. You must forgive us, dinner is not possible today. Something very urgent has come up.”

“That’s okay,” said Maneck. “Another time.”

She made them leave the trunk and bedding by the door. It could be crawling with bugs, for all she knew. And their behaviour was very suspicious. If it was urgent, they could have gone to their friend now. Especially since they were so early. But at least Maneck’s dinner invitation was cancelled, which was a relief.

All that day, Ishvar was not his usual steady self, and once, he almost joined a skirt and bodice back to front. “Stop!” she cried as the needle drove in the first line of stitches. “You, Ishvar? If Omprakash did this it would be no surprise. But you?” Smiling sheepishly, he severed the delinquent stitches with a safety razor blade.

At four o’clock they wanted to leave, two hours earlier than usual. So much for the extra dresses they were going to sew, she thought, but was glad to see them go, taking with them the weight that hung in the air.

Before she realized the trunk was left behind, they had shut the door and hurried away to the station.



HEAVY RAIN had fallen during the day, submerging much of last night’s debris in muddy little ponds. Pieces of plywood or metal

rose through the water like sails and shipwrecks. Seagulls screeched over the transfigured slum. Some former residents were wandering outside, gazing at the land, but Rajaram was nowhere to be seen.

"Maybe he found out there is no chance of building here again," said Ishvar.

The portly Sergeant Kesar was not in evidence at the moment. Six constables from his new enforcement squad were guarding the field. They approached the tailors and the others hanging around, and warned them, "If you try to put up any new jhopdis, we'll have to take you straight to jail."

"Why?"

"It's our assignment—slum prevention and city beautification." The constables returned to their post at the corner.

"I think we should go back and tell Dinabai the truth," said Ishvar.

"Why?"

"She might help us."

"In your dreams," said Om.

A work crew was erecting two new hoardings, one on each side of the road. They pasted the Prime Minister's face over the boards, then debated about the accompanying message. There was a variety to choose from. They unrolled the banners and spread them out over the pavement for consideration, using stones to hold down the corners.

The workers were unanimous concerning the first slogan: THE CITY BELONGS TO YOU! KEEP IT BEAUTIFUL! The second was posing some difficulty. The supervisor wanted to use FOOD FOR THE HUNGRY! HOMES FOR THE HOMELESS! His subordinates advised him that something else would be more appropriate; they recommended THE NATION IS ON THE MOVE!

The tailors waited around till the displays were completed. The crowd clapped as the huge frames were raised. The posts were embedded in holes, buttressed with diagonal braces, and the earth tamped down. Someone asked Om if he could please read what the two boards were saying. Om translated for him. The man contemplated the meaning for a moment, then went away shaking

his head, muttering that this time the government had gone completely mad.

* * * * *

“I KNEW YOU would come back,” said Dina. “You forgot your trunk.” They shook their heads, and she saw how scared and exhausted they were. “What’s wrong?”

“A terrible misfortune has fallen on our heads,” said Ishvar.

“Come inside. Would you like some water?”

“Hahnji, please.” Maneck fetched it in their segregated glass. They drank and wiped their lips.

“Dinabai, we’ve had very bad luck. We need your help.”

“Times are such, I don’t know how much help I can be to anyone. But tell me anyway.”

“Our home...it’s gone,” said Ishvar timidly.

“You mean your landlord kicked you out?” She sympathized. “Landlords are such rascals.”

He shook his head. “I mean...gone completely,” and he swept his palm through the air. “It has been destroyed by big-big machines. All the houses in the field.”

“They said it was illegal to live there,” added Om.

“Are you serious?” said Maneck. “How can they do that?”

“They are the government,” said Ishvar. “They can do anything they want. Police said it’s a new law.”

Dina nodded, remembering that as recently as last week, there had been ringing praise from Mrs. Gupta for the proposed slum clearance programme. How unfortunate for the tailors, though. Poor people. And she was right about one thing—they did live in an unhygienic place. Thank goodness Maneck was spared from eating with them. “It’s terrible,” she said. “Government makes laws without thinking.”

“Now you know why we had to cancel dinner,” said Om to Maneck. “We felt bad to tell you in the morning.”

“You shouldn’t have,” said Maneck. “It would have given us more time to think of some way to help and—” He broke off, silenced by Dina knitting her brow fiercely in his direction.

"Rent was already paid for this month," said Ishvar. "Now we have no house or money. Can we sleep on your verandah...for a few nights?"

Maneck turned, appealing to Dina as she weighed her response. "Myself, I have no objection," she said. "But if the rent-collector sees, there will be trouble. He will use it as an excuse to say I have made this an illegal guest house. Then you and Maneck and me, and your sewing-machines—everything will land on the street, roofless."

"I understand," said Ishvar. His pride would not let him push against the rejection. "We'll try elsewhere."

"Don't forget to take your trunk," said Dina.

"Can we leave it for tonight?"

"Leave it where? There's no room to even move in this flat."

Disgusted by her answer, Om passed the bedding to his uncle and picked up the trunk. They nodded and left.

Dina followed them to the door, locked it, and walked back into the glare of Maneck's reproach. "Don't look at me like that," she said. "I had no choice."

"You could have let them stay at least tonight. They could have slept in my room."

"That would be trouble with a capital t. One night is enough for the landlord to bring a case against me."

"And what about the trunk? Why can't you keep it for them?"

"What's this, a police interrogation? You've lived such a sheltered life, you've no idea what kind of crookedness exists in a city like this. A trunk, a bag, or even a satchel with just two pyjamas and a shirt is the first step into a flat. Personal items stored on the premises—that's the most common way of staking a claim. And the court system takes years to settle the case, years during which the crooks are allowed to stay in the flat. Now I'm not saying Ishvar and Om came tonight with this plan in their heads. But how can I take the risk? What if they get the idea later from some rascal? Any trouble with the landlord means I have to ask for Nusswan's help. My brother is absolutely unbearable. He would crow and crow about it."

Maneck looked out the window, trying to sort out the degree

of Dina Aunty's suspicion. He imagined the invasion of dirty laundry that she feared, the fabricated occupation force.

"Don't worry so much about the tailors," she said. "They'll find somewhere to stay. People like them have relatives all over the place."

"They don't. They came just a few months ago from a faraway village." He was pleased to see a trace of worry in slow migration across her face.

Then she was annoyed. "It's amazing. Just amazing how much you know about them, isn't it?"

They ignored each other for most of the evening, but while working on the quilt after dinner, she spread out the squares and tried to get him to talk. "Well, Maneck? How does it look now?"

"Looks terrible." He was not ready to forgive her while the tailors remained unaccommodated in the night.

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THE SIGN READ "Sagar Darshan—Ocean View Hotel." The only sea in sight was the rectangle of blue painted on the weather-beaten board, with a little sailboat perched upon a wave.

Inside, a youth in a frayed white uniform sat on the floor by an umbrella stand, staring at pictures in *Filmfare*. He did not look up as the tailors came in. A grey-haired man, eating busily behind the counter, broke pieces from a loaf of bread and dipped them in quick succession into a series of four stainless-steel saucers.

"Thirty rupees per night," he mumbled through an overloaded mouth, revealing a gold tooth in the process. Masticated fragments of his dinner flew past the moist lips onto the counter. He swept them to the floor, then polished away the smudge with his sleeved elbow.

"See? I told you, we cannot afford a hotel," said Ishvar as they retreated.

"Let's try another one." They checked place after place: Paradise Lodge, at twenty rupees a night, located over a bakery with a badly insulated ceiling, so that the searing heat of oven flames could be felt upstairs; Ram

Nivas, the sign-board stating that all castes were welcome, whose rooms reeked with a horrible stench, courtesy of a small chemical factory next door; Aram Hotel, where their luggage was almost stolen while they inquired, the would-be thief bolting as they retraced their steps down the hallway.

"Had enough?" said Ishvar, and Om nodded.

They lifted their loads and started towards the train station, pausing to inspect every doorway, awning, and façade that might offer shelter. But wherever shelter was possible, the place was already taken. To discourage pavement-dwellers, one shop had laid down in its entrance an iron framework covered with spikes, on hinges that could be unlocked and folded away in the morning. This bed of nails was being used by an enterprising individual—first, a rectangle of plywood over the spikes, and then his blanket.

"We will have to learn things like that," said Ishvar, watching admiringly.

They passed the beggar on his platform, who greeted them with the usual rattle of his tin. Intent in their search, they didn't acknowledge him. He gazed forlornly after them. There were a few empty places outside a furniture store that was still open. "We could try there," said Om.

"Are you crazy? You want to get killed for taking someone's spot? Have you forgotten what happened on the pavement near Nawaz's shop?"

They passed the store that never closed, the twenty-four-hour chemist's. The lights were going out in the main section as the sales clerks left. The dispensing side stayed bright, with a compounding on duty.

"Let's wait here," said Ishvar. "See what happens."

Someone put a wooden stool outside, in the entranceway that was shared by the chemist's and the antique shop next door. Steel shutters descended like eyelids on the two windows. Soaps, talcum powders, cough syrups on one side, and bronze Natarajas, Mughal miniatures, inlaid jewel boxes on the other, all vanished from view. The two managers locked up and handed over the keys to the nightwatchman.

The tailors waited till the nightwatchman loosened his belt, pulled off his shoes, and got comfortable on the wooden stool. Then they approached with their packet of beedis. "Matches?" asked Ishvar, making the striking gesture with his hand.

The nightwatchman stopped rubbing his calves to dig in his pocket. The tailors shared a match. They offered the beedis to the nightwatchman. He shook his head, producing a pack of Panama cigarettes. The three puffed silently for a while. "So," said Ishvar. "You sit here all night?" "That's my job." He reached for the night stick that leaned against the door and tapped it twice. The tailors smiled, nodding.

"Anyone sleeps in this entrance?"

"No one."

"Sometimes you must feel like taking a rest."

The nightwatchman shook his head. "Not allowed. I have to watch two shops." He leaned towards them and confided, pointing inside to the night compounder, "But he. He takes a rest. He takes a long sleep, inside, on a mat on the floor, every night. For that, the rascal gets paid, and much more than me."

"We have no place to sleep," said Ishvar. "The colony where we lived—it was destroyed by the government yesterday. With their machines."

"That's happening often these days," said the nightwatchman. He continued his complaint about the compounding. "That fellow has very little work at night. Sometimes a customer comes for medicine. Then I unlock the door and wake the rascal to mix the prescription. But if he has been sleeping his mind is cloudy. He has trouble reading the labels." He leaned closer again. "Once, he put wrong things in the medicine mixture. Customer died, and police came to investigate. Manager and police talked. Manager offered money, police took money, and everybody was happy."

"Crooks, all of them," said Ishvar, and they nodded in agreement. "Can you let us sleep here?"

"It's not allowed."

"We could pay you."

"Even if you pay, where's the space?"

"Space is enough. We can put our bedding near the door if you move your stool just two feet."

"And what about other things? There is no storage place."

"What things—just one trunk. We will take it with us in the morning."

They shifted the stool and unrolled the bedding. It fit exactly.

"How much can you pay?" asked the nightwatchman.

"Two rupees each night."

"Four."

"We are poor tailors. Take three, and we will do some free tailoring also for you. We can repair your uniform." He pointed to the worn knees and fraying cuffs.

"Okay. But I'm warning you, sometimes the nights are very noisy here. If a customer comes for medicine you will have to move. Then don't say I spoiled your sleep. No refund for spoiled sleep." And if the night compounder should ask, they were to say two rupees, because the rascal would demand a ~~cut~~ ^{cool} ~~cool~~, it agreed the tailors to all his conditions. After another beedi, they took needles and thread out of the trunk and got to work. The nightwatchman sat in his underwear while they fixed his uniform.

"First class," he said, slipping on his trousers.

The compliment gratified Ishvar, and he said they would be pleased to mend other things for him and his family. "We can do everything. Salwar-kameez, ghaghra-choli, baby-baba clothes."

The nightwatchman shook his head sadly. "You are kind. But wife and children are living in my native place. I came here alone, looking for work."

Later, as the tailors slept, he watched them from his wooden stool. When Omprakash twitched in his sleep, it reminded him of his children: those special nights with the family still together, and he present at his babies' dreamings.

...

THE STREET awoke early to rouse the tailors before dawn. In fact, the street never slumbered, explained the nightwatchman, only drowsed lightly between two a.m. and five a.m.—after the insomniac gambling and drinking ended, and before the

newspapers, bread, and milk arrived. "But your sleep was beautiful," he smiled proprietorially.

"It was two nights' sleep poured into one," said Ishvar.

"Look, the rascal is still snoring inside." As they peered through the window, the compounder's eyes opened suddenly. He scowled at the three faces flattened against the glass, turned over, and went back to sleep.

They smoked in the entranceway, observing the streetsweeper at work, collecting the previous night's cigarette and beedi stubs. His broom made neat designs in the dust. Later, they rolled up the bedding, paid three rupees, and departed with their loads, promising to be back in the evening.

Om's left shoulder and arm were aching from the trunk, but he refused to let his uncle take it. "Use your right hand," said Ishvar. "Give them both equal exercise, they will grow strong."

"Then both will be useless. How will I sew?"

They stopped at the railway station and washed before proceeding to the Vishram Vegetarian Hotel for tea and a bun.

"You didn't come yesterday," said the cashier-cum-waiter.

"We were busy—looking for a place to rent."

"Now that is something you could spend your whole life searching for," put in the cook from his corner, shouting over the roaring, blue-flamed stoves.

In the window Om noticed a large picture of the Prime Minister that hadn't been there before, along with a poster of the Twenty-Point Programme. "You have a new customer or what?"

"That's no customer," said the cashier. "That's the goddess of protection. Her blessing is a business necessity. Compulsory puja."

"How do you mean?"

"Her presence keeps my windows from being smashed and my shop from being burned. You follow?"

The tailors nodded. They told the cashier and the cook about the Prime Minister's meeting into which they had been dragooned. Their stories of the helicopter, the rose petals, the hot-air balloon, and the huge cutout had them laughing.



AFTER THE FIRST night of sound sleep, the nightwatchman's forecast about nocturnal disturbances proved accurate. He apologized each time he had to shake the tailors awake. In his system of beliefs, nothing was more despicable than depriving a fellow human being of either food or sleep. He helped move the bedding to unlock the door, comforting them as they stumbled around in the dark, Om's drowsy head on one shoulder, Ishvar leaning heavily on the other.

They kept muttering while the customers waited for their medicine. "Why do all these people have to fall sick at night only?" grumbled Ishvar. "Why are they harassing us?"

"What a headache I have," moaned Om.

The nightwatchman gently rubbed his brow. "Not long now. Only two minutes more, okay? Then you can sleep very, very peacefully. I promise, I won't let any more customers disturb you." But he had to break his promise over and over.

Later they learned about an outbreak of dysentery—bad milk had been sold in the neighbourhood. If the tailors had stayed around during the day, they would have discovered that illness was an impartial thief who struck in sunshine and darkness.

~~Fifty nightwatchmen and eighty nursing children~~ the official figure from the compounder, who explained that fortunately it was bacillary dysentery, and not the more serious amoebic variety.

Lugging the trunk and bedding, the tailors arrived at work ready to collapse, dark circles around their red-streaked eyes. Work fell further behind. Ishvar's impeccable seams strayed often. Om with his stiff arm had trouble doing anything right. The Singers' rhythms turned sour; the stitches were no longer articulated gracefully in long, elegant sentences but spat out fitfully, like phlegm from congested lungs.

Dina read the deterioration in their haggard faces. She feared for their health and the approaching delivery date—the two were

joined like Siamese twins. The trunk's weight hung heavy on her conscience.

That evening, the sight of Om straining to lift his load yanked her to the verge of saying the trunk could stay. Maneck watched her from the doorway, anxious to hear it. But the other fears made her leave the words unspoken.

"Wait, I'll come with you," said Maneck, hastening to the verandah. Om protested feebly, then surrendered the trunk to him.

Dina was relieved—and angry and hurt. Nice of him to help, she thought. But the way he did it. Walking out without a word, making her seem like a heartless person.

* * * * *

"HERE IT IS, our new sleeping place," said Om, and introduced the nightwatchman: "Our new landlord."

The latter laughed, beckoning them into the entrance. They huddled together on the steps to smoke and watch the road. "Ah, what kind of landlord am I? I cannot even guarantee a good night's sleep."

"Not your fault," said Om. "It's all this sickness. And on top of that, I keep having bad dreams."

"So do I," said Ishvar. "The nights are full of noises and shapes and shadows. Too scary."

"I am sitting here with my stick," said the nightwatchman. "What's there to be scared of?"

"It's hard to give it a name," said Ishvar, coughing and extinguishing his beedi.

"We should just go back to our village," said Om. "I'm fed up of living like this, crawling from one trouble to another."

"You prefer to run towards it?" Ishvar squeezed the tip of the beedi to make sure it was out, then reinserted it in the packet. "Patience, my nephew. When the time comes, we will go back."

"If time were a bolt of cloth," said Om, "I would cut out all the bad parts. Snip out the scary nights and stitch together the good

parts, to make time bearable. Then I could wear it like a coat, always live happily.”

“I’d also like a coat like that,” said Maneck. “But which parts would you cut out?”

“The government destroying our house, for sure,” said Om. “And working for Dinabai.”

“Hoi-hoi,” cautioned Ishvar. “Without her, where would the money come from?”

“Okay, let’s keep the paydays and throw out the rest.”

“What else?” asked Maneck.

“Depends how far back you want to go.”

“All the way. Back to when you were born.”

“That’s too much, yaar. So many things to cut, the scissors would go blunt. And there would be very little cloth left.”

“How much nonsense you boys are talking,” said Ishvar. “Been smoking ganja or what?”

The evening sky darkened, summoning the streetlights. A torn black kite swooped down from the roof like an aggressive crow, startling them. Om grabbed it, saw that it was badly damaged, and let it go.

“Some things are very complicated to separate with scissors,” said Maneck. “Good and bad are joined like that.” He laced his fingers tight together.

“Such as?”

“My mountains. They are beautiful but they also produce avalanches.”

“That’s true. Like our teatime at Vishram, which is good. But the Prime Minister sitting in the window gives me a stomach-ache.”

“Living in the colony was also good,” suggested Ishvar.
“Rajaram next door was fun.”

“Yes,” said Om. “But jumping up in the middle of a shit because of a fast train—that was horrible.”

They laughed, Ishvar too, though he insisted that that had happened just once. “It was a new train, even Rajaram didn’t know about it.” He cleared his throat and spat. “Wonder what happened to Rajaram?”

Pavement-dwellers began emerging through the gathering dusk. Cardboard, plastic, newspaper, blankets materialized across the footpaths. Within minutes, huddled bodies had laid claim to all the concrete. Pedestrians now adapted to the new topography, picking their way carefully through the field of arms and legs and faces.

"My father complains at home that it's become very crowded and dirty," said Maneck. "He should come and see this." "He would get used to it," said the nightwatchman. "Just like I did. You watch it day after day, then you stop noticing. Especially if you have no choice."

"Not my father, he would keep grumbling."

Ishvar's cough came back, and the nightwatchman suggested asking the compounder for medicine.

"Can't afford it."

"Just go and ask. He has a special system for poor people." He unlocked the door to let him in.

For those who could not pay the price of a full bottle, the compounder sold medicine by the spoonful or by the tablet. The poor were grateful for this special dispensation, and the compounder made up to six times the original price, pocketing the difference. "Open your mouth," he instructed Ishvar, and deftly poured in a spoonful of Glycodin Terp ~~Vasaka~~.

"Come tomorrow night for another spoonful."

The nightwatchman inquired how much he had been charged for the dose. "Fifty paise," said Ishvar, and the nightwatchman made a mental note to demand his cut.



FOR THREE more days the trunk hung from Om's arm during the march between the nightwatchman and Dina Dalal. The distance was short but the weight made it long. He was sore from shoulder to wrist, the hand useless for guiding the fabric through the machine. To feed the cloth accurately to the voracious needle

took two hands: the right in front of the presser foot, and the left behind.

"The trunk has paralysed me," he said, giving up.

Dina watched him, her compassion muted but not dead. My spirited little sparrow is really not well today, dragging his injured wing, she thought. No more hopping and chirping, no more arrogance and argument.

In the midst of a morning filled with tangled threads and twisted seams, the doorbell rang. She went to the verandah to look, and returned very annoyed. "It's someone asking for you. Disturbing our work in the middle of the day."

Surprised and apologetic, Ishvar hurried to the front door. "You!" he said. "What happened? We went to the colony that evening. Where were you?"

"Namaskaar," said Rajaram, joining his hands. "I feel very bad about it, what to do. I got a new job, they needed me right away, I had to go. But look, my employer has more jobs to fill, you should apply."

Ishvar could sense Dina trying to listen in the background. "We'll have to meet later," he said, and gave him the address of the chemist's.

"Okay, I'll come there tonight. And look, can you lend me ten rupees? Just till I get paid?"

"Only have five." Ishvar handed it over, wondering if Rajaram's habit of borrowing money was going to become a nuisance. The earlier loan was still unpaid. Should never have let him know where we work, he thought. He returned to his Singer and told Om about their visitor.

"Who cares about Rajaram, I'm dying here." He extended his sore left arm, the limb delicate as porcelain.

The gesture finally melted Dina. She brought out her bottle of Amrutanjan Balm. "Come, this will make it better," she said.

He shook his head.

"Dinabai is right," said Ishvar. "I'll rub it for you."

"You keep sewing, I'll do it," said Dina. "Or the balm smell from your fingers will fill the dress." Besides, she thought, if he

starts wasting time, I might as well start begging for next month's rent.

"I'll apply it myself," said Om.

She uncapped the bottle. "Come on, take off your shirt. What are you shy about? I'm old enough to be your mother."

He unbuttoned reluctantly, revealing a vest with many holes. Like Swiss cheese, she thought. A salty-sour odour tarried about him. She dug a dark-green blob out of the bottle and started at the shoulder, spreading the cold unguent down towards the elbow in frigid one-finger lines. He shuddered. The chill of it made his skin horripilate. Then she began to massage, and the salve released its heat, causing his arm, her hand, to tingle. The goose flesh dwindled and vanished.

"How is it?" she asked, kneading the muscles.

"Cold one minute, hot the next."

"That's the beauty of balm. Nice zhumzhum feeling. Just wait, the pain will soon be gone."

The odour from his flesh had disappeared, drowned in the balm's pungency. How smooth the skin, she thought. Like a child's. And almost no hair, even on his shoulder.

"How does it feel now?"

"Good." He had enjoyed the rub.

"Anything else hurting?"

He pointed from elbow to wrist. "All this."

Dina hooked out another blob and rubbed his forearm. "Take some of it with you tonight, apply it when you go to bed.

Tomorrow your arm will be good as new."

Before washing her hands she went to the kitchen, to the dusty shelf by the window. Standing on tiptoe and still unable to see, she felt around. The blind hand dislodged a pivotal box. Things came sliding down: board and rolling pin, the coconut grater with its circular serrated blade, mortar and pestle.

She dodged the avalanche, letting the kitchen implements crash to the floor. The tailors came running. "Dinabai! Are you okay?" She nodded, a bit shaken but pleased to glimpse the look of concern on Om's face before he erased it.

"Maybe we could fix the shelf a little lower," said Ishvar, helping her replace the fallen items. "So you can reach it."

"No, just leave it. I haven't used these things in fifteen years." She found what her fingers had been groping for: the roll of wax paper in which she used to wrap Rustom's lunch. She blew off the dust and tore out a hanky-sized square, transferring green daubs of Amrutanjan onto it.

"Here," she said, folding the piece into a little triangular packet. "Don't forget to take it with you—your balm samosa."

"Thank you," laughed Ishvar, trying to prompt Om into showing his appreciation. And against Om's wishes, a sliver of gratitude pushed a weak smile across his face.

In the evening, as they were leaving, she mentioned the trunk.
"Why don't you leave it where you sleep?"

"There's no room for it there."

"Then you might as well keep it here. No sense carrying this burden morning and night."

Ishvar was overcome by the offer. "Such kindness, Dinabai! We are so grateful!" He thanked her half a dozen times between the back room and verandah, joining his hands, beaming and nodding. Om, once again, was more careful in spending his gratitude. He slipped out a softly murmured "thank you" while the door was shutting.

"See? She is not as bad as you think."

"She did it because she wants money from my sweat."

"Don't forget, she applied the balm for you."

"Let her pay us properly, then we can buy our own balm."

"It's not the buying, Omprakash—it's the applying I want you to remember."

* * * * *

RAJARAM CAME to the chemist's on a bicycle, which impressed Om. "It's not exactly mine," said the hair-collector. "The employers have provided it for the job."

"What is this job?"

"I must thank my stars for it. That night, after the colony was

destroyed, I met a man from my village. He works for the Controller of Slums, driving one of the machines for breaking down houses. He told me about the new job, and took me next morning to the government office. They hired me straight away."

"And your work is also to destroy homes?"

"No, never. My title is Motivator, for Family Planning. The office gives me leaflets to distribute."

"That's all? And the pay is good?"

"It depends. They give me one meal, a place to sleep, and the cycle. As Motivator, I have to go around explaining the birth-control procedures. For each man or woman I can persuade to get the operation, I am paid a commission."

He said he was happy with the arrangement. Gathering just two vasectomies or one tubectomy each day would equal his takings as a hair-collector. His responsibility ended once the candidates signed the forms and were shepherded to the clinic.

There were no restrictions, anyone qualified for the operation, young or old, married or unmarried. The doctors were not fussy. "In the end, everybody is satisfied," said Rajaram. "Patients get gifts, I get paid, doctors fill their quotas. And it's also a service to the nation—small families are happy families, population control is most important."

"How many operations have you collected so far?" asked Ishvar. "So far, none. But it's only been four days. My talking style is still developing force and conviction. I'm not worried, I'm sure I'll succeed."

"You know," said Om, "with this new job, you could continue the old one side by side."

"How? There isn't enough time for hair-collecting."

"When you take patients to the clinic, does the doctor shave the beards between their legs?"

"I don't know."

"He must," said Om. "They always shave before the operation. So you can collect all that hair and sell it."

"But there is no demand for such short, curly hair."

Om sniggered at the answer, and Rajaram caught on. "Rascal,

making fun of me,” he laughed. “But listen, the office is hiring more Motivators. You should apply right away.”

“We are happy with tailoring,” said Ishvar. “But you told me the woman was difficult, and cheating you.” “Still, it’s the profession we trained for with Ashraf Chacha.

Motivator—now that’s something we know nothing about.”

“That’s just a small obstacle. They will teach you the job at the Family Planning Centre. Don’t be afraid to change, it’s a great opportunity. Millions of eligible customers. Birth control is a growth industry, I’m telling you.”

But Rajaram’s efforts to persuade the tailors and the nightwatchman were unsuccessful. He picked up his bicycle and got ready to leave. “Any one of you interested in vasectomy? I can use my influence and give you special treatment, double gift.” They declined the offer. “By the way, what about your hair in our trunk?” asked Ishvar. “Can you keep it a little longer? Once I finish my probation

period as Motivator, I can get rid of those plaits.”

He waved and disappeared down the road, ringing his bicycle bell in farewell. Om said the job did sound interesting, in a way. “And the cycle would be wonderful to have.”

Ishvar’s opinion was that only someone like Rajaram, speaking with his long, dangerous tongue, could succeed as a Motivator. “Telling us we are afraid to change. What does he know? Would we have left our native place and come all the way here if we were afraid of change?”

The nightwatchman agreed. “In any case, no human being has a choice in that matter. Everything changes, whether we like it or not.”

* * * * *

DURING THE EVENING, Dina went repeatedly to look at the tailors’ dented trunk. Maneck watched her with amusement, wondering how long she would keep it up. “I hope you are happy,” she said after dinner. “Now pray that my kindness does not come back to hurt me.”

"Stop worrying so much, Aunty. How can it hurt you?"

"Do I have to explain everything again? I only did this because that poor skinny tailor is starting to look like his battered trunk. You think I am unkind to them, that I don't care about their problems. You will think it strange if I tell you this, but after they leave in the evening I miss them—their talking and sewing and joking."

Maneck did not think it strange at all. "I hope Om's arm is better tomorrow," he said.

"One thing is certain, he wasn't pretending. The way his muscles felt while applying the balm, I knew he was in pain. I have experience in massaging. My husband had chronic backaches."

She used Sloane's Liniment in those days, she said, more efficacious than Amrutanjan Balm, making his knotted muscles ease under her very fingers. "Rustom would say there was magic in my hands that worked better than the doctor's antispasmodic intramuscular injection."

She examined her hand wistfully, holding it before her. "They have a long memory, these fingers. They still remember that feeling, of Rustom's muscles relaxing." She lowered her hand. "And in spite of his aching back he loved to cycle. Every chance he got, he jumped on it and pedalled off."

Till bedtime came, Dina kept talking about Rustom: how they had met, and how her jackass of a brother had reacted, and then the wedding. Her eyes shone, and Maneck was touched by the stories. But he couldn't understand why listening to her was making him bend once again under the familiar weight of despair, while she was delighting in her memories.

VIII
Beautification

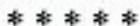
In about a week, the alchemy of time had translated the noisy nocturnal street outside the chemist's shop into a lulling background for the tailors. Now their sleep was no longer poisoned by nightmares. The shadows and disturbances—bookies yelling out the midnight Matka numbers, winners hooting with delight, dogs howling, drunks locked in mortal combat with their demons, the crash of milk-bottle racks, doors slamming on bakery vans—all these became, for Ishvar and Om, the bonging of hours by a faithful clock.

"I told you the street was nothing to be frightened of," said the nightwatchman.

"True," said Ishvar. "Noises are like people. Once you get to know them, they become friendly."

The rings around their eyes began to fade, their work improved, and their sleep grew pleasant. Ishvar dreamt a wedding celebration in the village; Om's bride was beautiful. And Om dreamt about the deserted slum. Shanti and he, holding hands, fetched water from the tap, then romped through the wasted field, now transformed into a garden teeming with flowers and butterflies. They sang, danced around trees, made love while flying aboard a magic carpet of clouds, machine-gunned Sergeant Kesar and his evil policemen as well as the Controller of Slums, and restored the hutment dwellers to their rightful place.

The chemist's shop was the centre of the tailors' new routine. They picked out a change of clothing from the trunk when leaving Dina's flat at the end of the day. Soap and toothbrushes went back and forth with them. After dinner at the Vishram, they washed their clothes in the railway station bathroom and dried them in the chemist's entrance. Electrical wiring that had lost its moorings hung like a clothesline for the laundry. Pants and shirts floated like truncated sentries while they slept. On windy nights the garments danced on the wire, friendly funambulating ghosts.



THEN CAME the night of noises that were strangers on the street. Police jeeps and a truck roared down the road and parked across

from the chemist's. Sergeant Kesar barked short, sharp instructions to his men; the constables' sticks thudded hollowly on cardboard boxes sheltering sleepers along the pavement; heavy steps in regulation footwear pounded the footpath.

The noises, like menacing interlopers, barged their way into the tailors' slumber. Ishvar and Om awoke trembling as though from a bad dream, and crouched fearfully behind the nightwatchman. "What's happening? What do you see?" they asked him.

He peered around the entrance. "Looks like they are waking all the beggars. They are beating them, pushing them into a truck."

The tailors shook off their sleep and saw for themselves. "That really is Sergeant Kesar," said Om, rubbing his eyes. "I thought I was dreaming about our jhopadpatti again."

"And that other chap, the one next to Sergeant Kesar—he also seems familiar," said Ishvar.

The small, clerkish-looking man was hopping along like a rabbit, sniffling with a heavy cold. He periodically snorted back the mucus and gulped it. Om edged forward. "It's that fellow who wanted to sell us a ration card for two hundred rupees—the Facilitator."

"You're right. And he is still coughing and sneezing. Come on back, better stay hidden, it's safer."

The Facilitator was making notes on a clipboard, keeping count as the truck was loaded. "Wait a second, Sergeant," he protested. "Look at that one—completely crippled. Leave her out, no." "You do your work," said Sergeant Kesar, "I'll do mine. And if you have extra time, look after your spectacles."

"Thank you," said the Facilitator, his hand shooting up to halt the slide of his glasses. On the way down, the fingers collected the pearl dangling at his nose. It was a smooth combination of gestures. "But please listen to me, no," he sniffed. "This beggar is useless in her condition."

"Actually speaking, that's not my concern. I have to follow orders." Tonight, Sergeant Kesar had decided he was going to tolerate no nonsense, his job was getting harder by the day. Gathering crowds for political rallies wasn't bad. Rounding up

MISA suspects was also okay. But demolishing hutment colonies, vendors' stalls, jhopadpattis was playing havoc with his peace of mind. And prior to his superiors' formulating this progressive new strategy for the beggary problem, he had had to dump pavement-dwellers in waste land outside the city. He used to return miserable from those assignments, get drunk, abuse his wife, beat his children. Now that his conscience was recuperating, he was not about to let this nose-dripping idiot complicate matters.

"But what good is she to me?" objected the Facilitator. "What kind of labourer will such a cripple be?"

"With you it's always the same complaint," said Sergeant Kesar, sticking his thumbs in the black leather belt that followed the generous curve below his belly. He was a fan of cowboy films and Clint Eastwood. "Don't forget, they will all work for free."

"Hardly free, Sergeant. You're charging enough per head."

"If you don't want them, others will. Actually speaking, I am sick and tired of listening to your moaning every night. I cannot pick and choose healthy specimens for you—this isn't a cattle market. My orders are to clear the streets. So you want them or not?"

"Yes, okay. But at least tell your men to hit carefully, not to make them bleed. Or it becomes very difficult for me to find places for them."

"Now there I agree with you," said Sergeant Kesar. "But you don't need to worry, my constables are well trained. They know the importance of inflicting hidden injuries only."

The sweep continued, the policemen performing their task efficiently, prodding, poking, kicking. No obstacle slowed them down, not shrieks nor wails nor the comical threats of drunks and lunatics.

The policemen's detached manner reminded Ishvar of the streetsweeper who came for the garbage at five a.m. "Oh no," he shuddered, as the team reached the street corner. "They're after the poor little fellow on wheels."

The legless beggar made a break for it. Pushing the ground with his palms, he propelled the platform forward. The policemen

were amused and cheered him on, wanting to see how fast his castors could go. The escape attempt ran out of energy outside the chemist's. Two constables carried him to the truck, platform and all.

"Just look at this one!" cried the agitated Facilitator. "No fingers, no feet, no legs—a great worker he will be!"

"You can do what you like with him," said one constable.

"Let him out beyond the city limits if you don't need him," said the other. A slight push, and the platform rolled till it came to rest at the front end of the truck bed.

"What are you saying, how can I do that? I have to account for all of them," said the Facilitator. Remembering Sergeant Kesar's ultimatum, he looked over his shoulder cautiously, biting the cap of his ballpoint—had he heard? To make up, he voiced agreement for a change. "Those blind ones are fine. Blindness is no problem, they can do things with their hands. Children also, many little jobs for them."

The constables ignored him as they pursued their quarry. Once the initial panic had subsided, the beggars went meekly. Most of them had endured such roundups outside businesses or residences that persuaded the police, with a little baksheesh, to remove the eyesores. Sometimes the policemen themselves stationed the beggars there, then eagerly awaited the lucrative removal request.

Lined up by the truck, the pavement-dwellers were counted off and asked to give their names, which the Facilitator noted on his clipboard along with sex, age, and physical condition. One old man remained silent, his name locked away in his head, the key misplaced. A policeman slapped him and asked again. The grizzled head rolled from side to side with each blow.

His friends tried to help, calling out the various names they used for him. "Burfi! Bevda! Four-Twenty!" The Facilitator selected Burfi, and entered it on the roster. For the age column he used a rough estimate by appearance.

The drunks and the mentally disturbed were a little more difficult to deal with, refusing to move, screaming abuse, most of it incoherent, and making the police laugh. Then one drunk began swinging his fists wildly. "Rabid dogs!" he shouted. "Born of

diseased whores!" The constables stopped laughing and set on him with their sticks; when he fell, they used their feet.

"Stop, please stop!" beseeched the Facilitator. "How will he work if you break his bones?"

"Don't worry, these fellows are tough. Our sticks will break, they won't." The unconscious drunk was thrown into the truck. On the pavement, discussion was adjourned with truncheons in the kidneys and, in extremely voluble cases, a crack on the skull.

"These are not hidden injuries!" the Facilitator protested to Sergeant Kesar. "Look at all that blood!"

"Sometimes it's necessary," said Sergeant Kesar, but he did remind his men to curb their zeal or it would stretch out the night's work by involving doctors and bandages and medical reports.

Still concealed within the chemist's entrance, the tailors wondered what was happening now. "Are they leaving? They finished?"

"Looks like it," said the nightwatchman, and the sound of engines starting confirmed it. "Good, you can go to sleep again."

Sergeant Kesar and the Facilitator checked the roster. "Ninety-four," said the latter. "Need two more to complete the quota."

"Actually speaking, when I said eight dozen I was giving an approximate number. One truckload. Don't you understand? How can I predict in advance exactly how many we are going to catch?"

"But I told my contractor eight dozen. He will think I am cheating him, no. Can't you look for two more?"

"Okay," said Sergeant Kesar wearily, "let's find two more."

Never again would he deal with this fellow. Whining and whimpering non-stop, like a whipped dog. If it weren't a question of paying for his daughter's sitar lessons, he would chuck these overtime assignments without a second thought. Not only did he have to deal with scum like the Facilitator; the late nights also kept him from rising before dawn and putting in an hour of yoga as he used to. No wonder he was so short-tempered these days,

he reflected. And suffering all this stomach acidity. But what choice? It was his duty to improve his child's marriage prospects.

The tailors and the nightwatchman heard the approach of thumping feet and sticks. Two silhouettes, faceless as their shadows, looked inside the entrance. "Who's there?"

"It's all right, don't worry, I am the nightwatchman and—"

"Shut up and come out! All of you!" Sergeant Kesar's patience had been devoured by the Facilitator.

The nightwatchman rose from his stool, decided it would be prudent to leave his night-stick behind, and stepped onto the pavement. "Don't worry," he beckoned the tailors forward. "I will explain to them."

"We have done nothing wrong," said Ishvar, buttoning his shirt.

"Actually speaking, sleeping on the street is breaking the law. Get your things and into the truck."

"But police-sahab, we are sleeping here only because your men came with machines and destroyed our jhopadpatti."

"What? You lived in a jhopadpatti? Two wrongs don't make a right. You could get double punishment."

"But police-sahab," interrupted the nightwatchman, "you cannot arrest them, they were not sleeping on the street, they were inside this—"

"You understand what shut up means?" warned Sergeant Kesar. "Or you want to find out what lockup means? Sleeping in any non-sleeping place is illegal. This is an entranceway, not a sleeping place. And who said they are being arrested? The government is not crazy that it would go around jailing beggars." He stopped abruptly, wondering why he was making a speech when his men's lathis would get quicker results.

"But we are not beggars!" said Om. "We are tailors, look, these long fingernails to fold straight seams, and we work at—"

"If you are tailors then sew up your mouths! Enough, into the truck!"

"He knows us," Ishvar pointed at the Facilitator. "He said he could sell us a ration card for two hundred rupees, payable in instalments and—"

"What's this about ration cards?" demanded Sergeant Kesar, turning.

The Facilitator shook his head. "They're confusing me with some crooked tout, it looks like."

"It was you!" said Om. "You were sneezing and coughing, snot coming from your nose just like it is now!"

Sergeant Kesar motioned to a constable. The stick came down across Om's calves. He yelped.

"No, please, no beating," pleaded the nightwatchman. "It's all right, they will listen to you." He patted the tailors' shoulders. "Don't worry, this is definitely a mistake, just explain to the people in charge and they will let you go."

The constable lifted his stick again, but Ishvar and Om began rolling up the bedding. The nightwatchman embraced them before they were led off. "Come back soon, I'll keep this place for you."

Ishvar tried one last time. "We really have jobs, we don't beg—"

"Shut up." Sergeant Kesar was in the midst of calculating his proceeds for the night's haul, and arithmetic was not his strong point. The interruption forced him to start the sum over again.

The tailors climbed onto the truckbed, then the tailboard was slammed shut and the bolt shot into place. The men assigned to escort the transport took their seats in the police jeep. The Facilitator settled the final amount with Sergeant Kesar and got in beside the truck driver.

The truck, recently used for construction work, had clods of clay stuck to its insides. Underfoot, stray gravel stabbed the human cargo. Some who were standing tumbled in a heap as the driver threw the gears into reverse to turn around and return the way he had come. The police jeep followed closely behind.

* * * * *

THEY TRAVELED through what remained of the night, the bumps and potholes making their bodies collide ceaselessly. The beggar on castors had the worst of it, shoved back each time he skidded into someone. He smiled nervously at the tailors. "I see you often on my pavement. You've given me many coins."

Ishvar moved his hand in a think-nothing-of-it gesture. "Why don't you get off your gaadi?" he suggested, and with Om's help the beggar removed the platform from under him. His neighbours were relieved. Inert as a sack of cement, he clutched the board to his chest with his fingerless hands, then cradled it in his abbreviated lap, shivering in the warm night.

"Where are they taking us?" he yelled above the engine's roar.
"I'm so scared! What's going to happen?"

"Don't worry, we'll soon find out," said Ishvar. "Where did you get this nice gaadi of yours?"

"My Beggarmaster gave it to me. Gift. He is such a kind man." Fear made his shrill voice sharper. "How will I find Beggarmaster again? He will think I have run away when he comes tomorrow for the money!"

"If he asks around, someone will tell him about the police."
"That's what I cannot understand. Why did police take me?
Beggarmaster pays them every week—all his beggars are allowed to work without harassment."

"These are different police," said Ishvar. "The beautification police—there's a new law to make the city beautiful. Maybe they don't know your Beggarmaster."

He shook his head at the absurdity of the suggestion. "Aray babu, everybody knows Beggarmaster." He began fidgeting with the castors, finding comfort in spinning the wheels. "This gaadi here, it's a new one he gave me recently. The old one broke?" asked Om.

"Accident. There was a slope, I crashed off the pavement. Almost damaged somebody's motorcar." He giggled, remembering the event. "This new one is much better." He invited Om to inspect the castors.

"Very smooth," said Om, trying one with his thumb. "What happened to your legs and hands?"

"Don't know exactly. Always been like this. But I'm not complaining, I get enough to eat, plus a reserved place on the pavement. Beggarmaster looks after everything." He examined the bandages on his hands and unravelled them using his mouth,

which silenced him for a few minutes. It was a slow, laborious procedure, involving a lot of neck and jaw movement.

The palms revealed, he scratched them by rubbing against the tailors' bedding. The sackcloth's delicious roughness relieved the itch. Then he began retying the bandages, the arduous process of neck and jaw in reverse. Om moved his own head in sympathy—up, and down, around, carefully, yes, around again—stopping when, feeling a little foolish, he realized what he was doing.

"The bandage protects my skin. I push with my hands to roll the gaadi. Without bandages they would start bleeding against the ground."

The casually offered fact made Om uncomfortable. But the beggar kept talking, easing his own fear and anxiety. "I did not always have a gaadi. When I was little, too little to beg on my own, they carried me around. Beggarmaster used to rent me out each day. He was the father of the one who looks after me now. I was in great demand. Beggarmaster would say I earned him the highest profits."

The panic in his voice had been routed by the memory of happier days. He recalled how well the renters would care for him and feed him, because if they were neglectful, Beggarmaster would thrash them and never do business with them again. Luckily, due to his reduced size, he resembled a baby till he was twelve. "A child, a suckling cripple, earns a lot of money from the public. There were so many different breasts I drank milk from during those years," he smiled mischievously. "Wish I could still be carried around in women's arms, their sweet nipples in my mouth. More fun than bumping along all day on this platform, banging my balls and wearing out my buttocks."

Ishvar and Om were surprised, then laughed with relief. Passing him by on the pavement with a wave or a coin was one thing; sitting beside him, dwelling on his mutilations was another—and quite distressing. They were happy that he was capable of laughter too.

"At last my baby face and baby size left me. I became too heavy

to carry. That's when Beggarmaster sent me out on my own. I had to drag myself around. On my back."

He wanted to demonstrate, but there was no room in the crammed truck. He described how Beggarmaster had trained him in the technique, as he trained all his beggars, with a personal touch, teaching them different styles—whatever would work best in each case. "Beggarmaster likes to joke that he would issue diplomas if we had walls to ~~the gallows~~ laugh again, and the beggar glowed with pleasure. He was discovering a new talent in himself. "So I learned to crawl on my back, using my head and elbows. It was slow going. First I would push my begging tin forward, then wriggle after it. It was very effective. People watched with pity and curiosity. Sometimes little children thought it was a game and tried to imitate me. Two gamblers placed bets every day on how long I would take to reach the end of the pavement. I pretended not to know what they were doing. The winner always dropped money in my can. It took me very long to get to the different spots which Beggarmaster reserved for me. Morning, noon, and night—office crowd, lunch crowd, shopping crowd. So then he decided to get me the platform. Such a nice man, I cannot praise him enough. On my birthday he brings sweet-meats for me. Sometimes he takes me to a prostitute. He has many, many beggars in his team, but I'm his favourite. His work is not easy, there is so much to do. He pays the police, finds the best place to beg, makes sure no one takes away that place. And when there is a good Beggarmaster looking after you, no one dare steal your money. That's the biggest problem, stealing."

A man in the truck grumbled and gave the beggar a shove. "Simply screeching like a cat on fire. No one's interested in listening to your lies."

The beggar was silent for a few minutes, adjusting his bandages and toying with the castors. The tailors' drowsy heads started to loll, alarming him. If his friends fell asleep he would be left alone in the dark rush of this terrifying night. He resumed his story to drive away their sleep.

"Also, Beggarmaster has to be very imaginative. If all beggars

have the same injury, public gets used to it and feels no pity. Public likes to see variety. Some wounds are so common, they don't work anymore. For example, putting out a baby's eyes will not automatically earn money. Blind beggars are everywhere. But blind, with eyeballs missing, face showing empty sockets, plus nose chopped off—now anyone will give money for that. Diseases are also useful. A big growth on the neck or face, oozing yellow pus. That works well.

"Sometimes, normal people become beggars if they cannot find work, or if they fall sick. But they are hopeless, they stand no chance against professionals. Just think—if you have one coin to give, and you have to choose between me and another beggar with a complete body."

The man who had shoved him earlier spoke again. "Shut up, you monkey, I'm warning you! Or I'll throw you over the side! At a time like this we don't want to listen to your nonsense! Why don't you do an honest job like us?"

"What work do you do?" inquired Ishvar politely, to calm him down.

"Scrap metal. Collecting and selling by weight. And even my poor sick wife has her own work. Rags."

"That's very good," said Ishvar. "And we have a friend who is a hair-collector, although he recently changed to Family Planning Motivator."

"Yes babu, all very good," said the beggar. "But tell me, metal-collector, without legs or fingers, what could I do?"

"Don't make excuses. In a huge city like this there is work even for a corpse. But you have to want it, and look for it seriously. You beggars create nuisance on the streets, then police make trouble for everyone. Even for us hardworking people."

"O babu, without beggars how will people wash away their sins?"

"Who cares? We worry about finding water to wash our skins!"

The discussion got louder, the beggar yelling shrilly, the metal-collector bellowing back at him. The other passengers began taking sides. The drunks awoke and shouted abuse at everyone.

"Goat-fucking idiots! Off-spring of lunatic donkeys! Shameless eunuchs from somewhere!"

Eventually, the commotion made the truck driver pull over to the edge of the road. "I cannot drive with so much disturbance," he complained. "There will be an accident or something."

His headlights revealed a stony verge and tussocks of grass. A hush descended over the truck. The darkness was deep on both sides, betraying nothing—beyond the road's narrow shoulders, the night could be hiding hills, empty fields, a thick forest, or demon-monsters.

A policeman came through the beam of light to warn them. "If there is any more noise, you will be thrashed and thrown out right here, in the jungle, instead of being taken to your nice new homes."

The silenced truckload started moving. The beggar began to weep. "O babu, I'm feeling so frightened again." He fell into a stupor of exhausted sleep after a while.

The tailors were wide awake now. Ishvar wondered what would happen when they didn't turn up for work in the morning. "Dresses will be late again. Second time in two months. What will Dinabai do?"

"Find new tailors, and forget about us," said Om. "What else?"

* * * * *

DAWN TURNED the night to grey, and then pink, as the truck and jeep left the highway for a dirt road to stop outside a small village. The tailboard swung open. The passengers were told to attend to calls of nature. For some, the halt had come too late.

The beggar tilted on one buttock while Om slid the platform under him. He paddled himself to the edge of the truck and waved a bandaged palm at two policemen. They turned their backs, lighting cigarettes. The tailors jumped off and lowered him to the ground, surprised at how little he weighed.

The men used one side of the road, the women squatted on the other; children were everywhere. The babies were hungry and

crying. Parents fed them from packages of half-rotten bananas and oranges and scraps scavenged the night before.

The Facilitator went on ahead to arrange for tea. The village chaiwalla set up a temporary kitchen near the truck, building a fire to heat a cauldron of water, milk, sugar, and tea leaves. Everyone watched him thirstily. The early sun dabbled through the trees, catching the liquid. Boiling and ready in a few minutes, it was served in little earthen bowls.

Meanwhile, word of the visitors percolated swiftly through the little village, and its population gathered round to watch. They took pride in the pleasure the travellers obtained from sipping the tea. The headman greeted the Facilitator and asked the usual friendly, villager questions about who, where, why, ready to offer help and advice.

The Facilitator told him to mind his business, take his people back to their huts, or the police would disperse them. Hurt by the rude behaviour, the crowd left.

The tea was consumed and the little earthen bowls were returned to the chaiwalla. He proceeded to shatter them in the customary way, whereupon some pavement-dwellers instinctively rushed to save them. "Wait, wait! We'll keep them if you don't want them!"

But the Facilitator forbade it. "Where you are going, you will be given everything that you need." They were ordered back into the truck. During the halt, the sun had cleared the tree tops. Morning heat was rapidly gaining the upper hand. The engine's starting roar frightened the birds, lifting them from the trees in a fluttering cloud.



LATE IN the day the truck arrived at an irrigation project, where the Facilitator unloaded the ninety-six individuals. The project manager counted them before signing the delivery receipt. The worksite had its own security men, and the police jeep departed.

The security captain ordered the ninety-six to empty their pockets, open up their parcels, place everything on the ground.

Two of his men moved down the line, passing hands over their clothes in a body search and examining the pile of objects. This need not have taken long, since half of them were near-naked beggars and the possessions were meagre. But there were women too, so it was a while before the guards finished the frisking. They seized screwdrivers, cooking spoons, a twelve-inch steel rod, knives, a roll of copper wire, tongs, and a comb of bone with teeth deemed too large and sharp. A guard gave Om's plastic comb the bending test. It broke in two. He was allowed to keep the pieces. "We're not supposed to be here, my uncle and I," he said.

The guard pushed him back in line. "Talk to the foreman if you have a complaint."

The extremely ragged were issued half-pants and vests, or petticoats and blouses. The beggar on castors got only a vest, there being nothing suitable to fit his cloth-swaddled amputated lower half. Ishvar and Om did not get new clothes, nor did the ragpicker and the metal-collector. The latter, whose many sharp-edged items had been confiscated, was chagrined, considering it most unfair. But the tailors felt the new clothes were poorly stitched, and preferred what they were wearing. They were shown to a row of tin huts, to be occupied twelve to a hut. Everyone rushed in a frenzy to the nearest of the identical shelters and fought to get inside. The guard drove them back, allocating places at random. A stack of rolled-up straw mats stood within each hut. Some people spread them out and lay down, but had to get up again. They were told to store their belongings and reassemble for the foreman.

The foreman was a harried-looking individual, sweating profusely, who welcomed them to their new houses. He took a few minutes to describe the generous scheme the government had introduced for the uplift of the poor and homeless. "So we hope you will take advantage of this plan. Now there are still two hours of working-time left, but you can rest today. Tomorrow morning you will start your new jobs."

Someone asked how much the salary was, and if it would be paid daily or weekly.

The foreman wiped the sweat from his face, sighed, and tried again. "You didn't understand what I said? You will get food, shelter, and clothing. That is your salary."

The tailors edged forward, anxious to explain their accidental presence in the irrigation project. But two officials got to the foreman first and led him away for a meeting. Ishvar decided against running after him. "Better to wait till morning," he whispered to Om. "He's very busy now, it might make him angry. But it's clear that the police made a mistake with us. This place is for unemployed people. They will let us go once they know we have tailoring jobs."

Some people ventured to lie down inside the huts. Others chose to spread their mats outside. Blazing under the daylong sun, the tin walls enclosed a savage heat. The shade cast by the corrugated metal was cooler.

A whistle blew at dusk and workers returned from their tasks. After thirty minutes it blew again, and they made their way to the camp's eating area. The newcomers were told to go with them. They lined up outside the kitchen to receive their dinner: dal and chapati, with a green chilli on the side.

"The dal is almost water," said Om.

The server overheard him and took it personally. "What do you think this is, your father's palace?"

"Don't take my father's name," said Om.

"Come on, let's go," said Ishvar, pulling him away. "Tomorrow we'll tell the top man about the policeman's mistake."

They finished eating in silence, concentrating like everyone else on the food's hidden perils. The chapatis were made from gritty flour. The meal was punctuated by the diners spitting out small pebbles and other foreign bodies. Tinier fragments which could not be caught in time were triturated with the food.

"THEY SHOULD have been here more than an hour ago," Dina said to Maneck when breakfast was done.

She's after the poor chaps again, he thought, gathering the books he needed for the day's classes. "Does it matter that much, if it's piecework?"

"What do you know about running a business? Your mummy

and daddy pay your fees and send you pocket money. Wait till you start earning your living.”

When he returned in the afternoon, she was pacing by the door. The instant his slightly bent key rattled in the keyhole, she turned the knob. “No sign of them all day,” she complained to him. “I wonder what excuse they’ll have this time. Another meeting with the Prime Minister?”

As the afternoon meandered towards evening, her sarcastic tone was elbowed aside by anxiety. “The electricity bill is due, and the water bill. Rations to be bought. And Ibrahim will arrive next week to collect the rent. You’ve no idea how harassing he can be.”

Her worries continued to bubble like indigestion after dinner. What would happen if the tailors did not come tomorrow even? How could she get two new ones quickly enough? And it wasn’t just a question of these dresses being late—a second delay would seriously displease the high and mighty empress of Au Revoir Exports. This time the manager would place the black mark of “unreliable” next to her name. Dina felt that perhaps she should go to the Venus Beauty Salon, talk to Zenobia, request her to again use her influence with Mrs. Gupta.

“Ishvar and Om wouldn’t stay absent just like that,” said Maneck. “Something urgent must have come up.”

“Rubbish. What could be so urgent that they cannot take a few minutes to stop by?”

“Maybe they went to see a room for rent or something. Don’t worry, Aunty, they’ll probably be here tomorrow.”

“Probably? Probably is not good enough. I cannot *probably* deliver the dresses and *probably* pay the rent. You, without any responsibilities, probably don’t understand that.”

He thought the outburst was unfair. “If they don’t come tomorrow, I’ll go and ask what’s wrong.”

“Yes,” she brightened. “It’s a good thing you know where they live.” Her anxiety seemed to diminish. Then she said, “Let’s visit them right now. Why spend the whole night worrying?”

“But you always say you don’t want them thinking you are desperate. If you run there at night, they’ll see you are helpless without them.”

"I am not helpless," she said emphatically. "Just one more difficulty in life, that's all it is." But she decided to wait till morning, agreeing that he should check on them before going to college. She was too distracted to continue working on the quilt; the squares and scraps sat in a pile on the sofa, hiding their designs.

* * * * *

MANECK ran back from the chemist's shop, frantic. Near the Vishram Vegetarian Hotel he slowed down for a quick look inside, hoping that Ishvar and Om might be sipping their morning tea. Empty. He reached the flat, panting, and repeated the nightwatchman's account for Dina.

for "I beggars have gotten into the police truck—and so doh knows where they are now!"

"Hmm, I see," she said, weighing the story for truth and substance. "And how long is their jail sentence? One week, two weeks?" If those rascals were trying a new job somewhere, playing for time, this would be the way to do it.

"I don't know." Distraught, he did not detect her question's cynicism. "It's not just them—everyone from the street, all the beggars and pavement-dwellers were taken away by the poliDohn't make me laugh, there's no law for doing that."

"It's a new policy—city beautification plan or something, under the Emergency."

"What Emergency? I am sick and tired of that stupid word." Still sceptical, she took a deep breath and decided to be direct. "Maneck, look at me. Straight in my eyes." She brought her face closer to his. "Maneck, you would not be lying to me, would you? Because Ishvar and Om are your friends, and they asked you to?"

"I swear on my parents' name, Aunty!" he drew away from her, shocked. Then the accusation made him angry. "You don't have to believe me, think what you like. Next time don't ask me to do your work." He left the room.

She followed him. "Maneck." He ignored her. "Maneck, I'm

sorry. You know how worried I am about the sewing—I said it without thinking.”

A moment’s silence was all he could maintain before forgiving her. “It’s all right.”

Such a sweet boy, she thought, he just cannot stay upset. “How long have they been sleeping outside the—what is it, chemist’s shop?”

“Since the day their home was destroyed. Don’t you remember, Aunty? When you wouldn’t let them sleep on your verandah?”

She bristled at the tone. “You know very well why I had to refuse. But if you were aware of it, why didn’t you tell me? Before something like this happened?”

“Suppose I had. What difference? Would you have let them stay here?”

She avoided the question. “I still find it hard to believe this story. Maybe that watchman is lying—covering up for them. And in the meantime I will have to go begging to my brother for the rent.”

Manek could sense the things she was trying to juggle, conceal, keep in proportion: concern, guilt, fear. “We could check with the police,” he suggested.

“And what good will that do? Even if they have the tailors, you think they will unlock the jail on my say-so?”

“At least we’d know where they are.”

“Right now I’m more worried about these dresses.”

“I knew it! You’re so selfish, you don’t think about anyone but yourself! You just don’t—”

“How dare you! How dare you talk to me like that!”

“They could be dead, for all you care!” He went to his room and slammed the door.

“If you damage my door, I’ll write to your parents! For compensation, remember!”

He kicked off his shoes and fell in bed with a thump. It was half past nine, he was late for college. To hell with it—to hell with her. Enough of trying to be nice. He jumped off the bed and exchanged his shirt for an old wear-at-home one from the

cupboard. The door clattered off the lower hinge. He jiggled it into the bracket and banged it shut.

He flopped on the mattress once more, his finger angrily tracing the floral design carved in the teak headboard. The bed was the identical twin of the one in the sewing room. Dina Aunty's and her husband's—they must have slept side by side on them. A long time ago. When her life was filled with happiness, and the flat with the sounds of love and laughter. Before it went silent and dingy.

He could hear her pacing in the next room, could sense her distress in the footsteps. And barely a week ago the work had been going so well, after she gave the Amrutanjan Balm to Om. Massaging his arm had put her in a good mood, she had started reminiscing about her husband's back, about their lives.

All the things she told Maneck came back now to crowd his room: those enchanted evenings of music recitals, and emerging with Rustom from the concert hall into the fragrant night when the streets were quiet—yes, she said, in those days the city was still beautiful, the footpaths were clean, not yet taken over by pavement-dwellers, and yes, the stars were visible in the sky in those days, when Rustom and she walked along the sea, listening to the endless exchange of the waves, or in the Hanging Gardens, among the whispering trees, planning their wedding and their lives, planning and plotting in full ignorance of destiny's plans for them.

How much Dina Aunty relished her memories. Mummy and Daddy were the same, talking about their yesterdays and smiling in that sad-happy way while selecting each picture, each frame from the past, examining it lovingly before it vanished again in the mist. But nobody ever forgot anything, not really, though sometimes they pretended, when it suited them. Memories were permanent. Sorrowful ones remained sad even with the passing of time, yet happy ones could never be re-created—not with the same joy. Remembering bred its own peculiar sorrow. It seemed so unfair: that time should render both sadness and happiness into a source of pain.

So what was the point of possessing memory? It didn't help

anything. In the end it was all hopeless. Look at Mummy and Daddy, and the General Store; or Dina Aunty's life; or the hostel and Avinash; and now poor Ishvar and Om. No amount of remembering happy days, no amount of yearning or nostalgia could change a thing about the misery and suffering—love and concern and caring and sharing come to nothing, ~~Mother~~. began to weep, his chest heaving as he laboured to keep silent. Everything ended badly. And memory only made it worse, tormenting and taunting. Unless. Unless you lost your mind. Or committed suicide. The slate wiped clean. No more remembering, no more suffering.

Poor Dina Aunty, how much of the past she was still carrying around with her, although she deceived herself that these were happy memories she was dwelling upon. And now the problems with the sewing, the rent, the rations...

He felt ashamed of his earlier tantrum. He got out of bed, tucked in his shirt, dried his eyes, and went to the back room, where she was pacing the prison of her incomplete dresses.

"When do you have to deliver them?" he asked gruffly.

"Oh, you're back? Day after tomorrow. By twelve o'clock." She smiled to herself, having expected him to sulk for an hour; he had emerged in thirty minutes. "Your eyes look watery. Have you got a cold?"

He shook his head. "Just tired. Day after tomorrow—that's two whole days. Lots of time."

"For two expert tailors, yes. Not for me alone."

"I'll help you."

"Don't make me laugh. You, sewing? And me with my eyes. I can't see to put my finger through a wedding ring, let alone thread the eye of a needle."

"I'm serious, Aunty."

"But there are sixty dresses, six-zero. Only the hems and buttons are left, true, but it's still a lot of work." She picked one up. "See the waist, all puckered? That's called 'gather.' Now it measures"—she stretched the tape—"just twenty-six inches. But because of the gather, the hemline of the skirt is, let's see, sixty-five inches, to be done by hand. That takes a lot of—"

"How will they know if you do it by machine?"

"The difference is like night and day. And then eight buttons on each dress. Six in the front, one on each sleeve. An hour's work per dress for someone like me. Sixty hours altogether."

"We have forty-eight till delivery time."

"If we don't eat or sleep or go to the bathroom, yes."

"We can at least try. You can deliver what we finish, and make an excuse that the tailors fell sick or something."

"If you're really willing to help..."

"I am."

She started to get things ready. "You're a good boy, you know? Your parents are very fortunate to have a son like you." Then she turned abruptly. "Wait a minute—what about college?"

"No lectures today."

"Hmm," she said dubiously, selecting the thread. They took the dresses into the front room, where the light was better. "I'll teach you buttons. Easier than hems."

"Anything. I learn quickly."

"Yes, we'll see. First you measure and mark the places with chalk, in a straight line. It's the most important step, or the front will look crooked. Thank goodness these are plain poplin dresses, not slippery chiffon like last month." She took him through the paces, emphasizing that the stitches in the four-holed button should be parallel and not crisscross.

He tried the next one. "Oh, to have young eyes again," she sighed, as he moistened the thread between his lips and passed it through the needle. Finding the holes in the button from the blind side took a bit of poking around with the needle. But he managed to finish in fair time, and snipped the ~~thread at the top~~ between them they had finished sixteen buttons and three hemlines. "See how long it takes?" she said. "And now I must stop to make lunch."

"I'm not hungry."

"Not hungry today, no lectures today. Very strange."

"But it's true, Aunty. Forget lunch, I'm really not hungry."

"And what about me? Worrying all yesterday, I didn't eat a single bite. Today at least may I have the pleasure?"

"Work before pleasure," he smiled down at the button, looking up from the corner of his eye.

"Planning to be my boss, are you?" she said with mock sternness. "If I don't eat, there will be no work and no pleasure. Only me fainting over needle and thread."

"Okay, I'll take care of lunch. You keep on hemming."

"Proper housewife you are becoming. What will it be? Bread and butter? Tea and toast?"

"A surprise. I'll be back soon."

Before leaving the flat he readied six needles with thread, to spare her pitting her eyes in contest with the little silvery ones.

* * * * *

"WASTING MONEY like that," scolded Dina. "Your parents already pay me for your food."

Maneck emptied the alayti-palayti from A-1 Restaurant into a bowl and brought it to the table. "It's out of my pocket money. I can spend it any way I like."

Chunks of chicken liver and gizzard floated tantalizingly in the thick, spicy sauce. Bending over the bowl, she sniffed. "Mmm, the same wonderful fragrance that made it a favourite of Rustom's. Only A-1 makes it in rich gravy—other places cook it too dry." She dipped a spoon, raised it to her lips, and nodded. "Delicious. We could easily add a little water without harming the taste. Then it will be enough for lunch and dinner."

"Okay. And this is specially for you," he handed her a bag.

She felt inside and withdrew a bunch of carrots. "You want me to cook these for us?"

"Not for us, Aunty—for you, to eat raw. Good for your eyes. Especially since they'll be very busy now."

"Thank you, but I prefer not to."

"No alayti-palayti without carrot. You must have at least one with your lunch."

"You're crazy if you think I will eat raw carrots. Even my mother could not make me." While she got the table ready, he

scraped a medium-sized specimen, lopped off the ends, and placed it next to her plate.

"I hope that's yours," she said.

"No carrot, no alayti-palayti." He refused to pass her the bowl.
"I make the rules. For your own good."

She laughed but her mouth started to water while he ate. She picked up the vegetable by the thin end as though to hit him over the head with it, and bit into it with a vengeance. Grinning, he passed her the bowl. "My father says his one eye is equal to most people's two because he eats carrots regularly. A carrot a day keeps blindness away, he claims."

Throughout the meal, she grimaced each time she crunched into it. "Thank goodness for the delicious alayti-palayti. Without the gravy this raw roughage would stick in my throat."

"Now tell me, Aunty," he said when they finished eating. "Are your eyes any better?"

"Good enough to see you for the devil that you are."
The sewing picked up speed after lunch, but late in the afternoon Dina's eyelids grew heavy. "I have to stop now for tea. Okay, boss?"

"Fifteen minutes only, remember. And one cup for me too, please."

She went to the kitchen, smiling and shaking her head.

* * * * *

SEVEN O'CLOCK, and her mind turned to dinner duties. "That alayti-palayti sitting in the kitchen is making me hungry earlier than usual. What about you? Now, or wait till eight?"

"Whenever you like," he mumbled through lips clutching an empty needle. He unrolled a length of thread from the spool.
"Look at that! First time sewing, and already acting like a crazy tailor! Take it out of your mouth! At once! Before you swallow it!"

He removed the needle, a little sheepish. She had hit the mark—he was trying to copy Om's jaunty way of sticking things

between his lips: pins, needles, blades, scissors, the daredevilry of juxtaposing sharp, dangerous objects with soft, defenceless flesh.

“How will I explain to your mother if I return her son with a needle stuck in his craw?”

“You never shouted at Om for doing it.”

“That’s different. He’s trained, he grew up with tailors.”

“No, he didn’t. His family used to be cobblers.”

“Same thing—they know how to use tools, to cut and sew. And besides, I should have stopped him. His mouth can bleed just like yours.” She went to the kitchen, and he kept working till dinner was on the table.

Halfway through the meal, she remembered what he had said about the tailors. “They were cobblers? Why did they change?”

“They requested me not to tell anyone. It’s to do with their caste, they are afraid of being treated badly.”

“You can tell me. I don’t believe in all those stupid customs.” So he briefly related the story Ishvar and Om had shared with him in bits and pieces, over weeks, over cups of tea in the Vishram Vegetarian Hotel, about their village, about the landlords who had mistreated the Chamaars all their lives, the whippings, the beatings, the rules that the untouchable castes were forced to observe.

She stopped eating, toying with her fork. She rested an elbow on the table and balanced her chin on the fist. As he continued, the fork slipped from her fingers, clattering outside the plate. He concluded quickly when he came to the murders of the parents and children and grandparents.

Dina retrieved her fork. “I never knew...I never thought...all those newspaper stories about upper- and lower-caste madness, suddenly so close to me. In my own flat. It’s the first time I actually know the people. My God—such horrible, horrible suffering.” She shook her head as though in disbelief.

She tried to resume eating, then gave up. “Compared to theirs, my life is nothing but comfort and happiness. And now they are in more trouble. I hope they come back all right. People keep saying God is great, God is just, but I’m not sure.”

"God is dead," said Maneck. "That's what a German philosopher wrote."

She was shocked. "Trust the Germans to say such things," she frowned. "And do you believe it?"

"I used to. But now I prefer to think that God is a giant quiltmaker. With an infinite variety of designs. And the quilt is grown so big and confusing, the pattern is impossible to see, the squares and diamonds and triangles don't fit well together anymore, it's all become meaningless. So He has abandoned it." "What nonsense you talk sometimes, Maneck."

While she cleared the table he opened the kitchen window and miaowed. Out went bits of bread and alayti-palayti. Hoping it was not too pungent for the cats, he returned to the sewing room and picked up another dress, reminding Dina Aunty to hurry.

"This boy is going crazy. Not letting me rest even five minutes after dinner. I'm an old woman, not a young puppy like you."

"You're not old at all, Aunty. In fact, you're quite young. And beautiful," he added daringly.

"And you, Mr. Mac, are getting too smart," she said, unable to hide her pleasure.

"There's only one thing that puzzles me."

"What?"

"Why someone who looks so young should sound so elderly, grumpy all the time."

"You rascal. First you flatter me, then you insult me." She laughed as she folded and pinned the hem, holding up the dress to check if the border was even. Adjusting the edges, she said, "Now I can appreciate the long nails on the tailors' fingers. You really became friends with them, didn't you? And them telling you all about their life in the village."

He looked up briefly, and shrugged.

"Day after day they sat here working, and wouldn't say anything to me. Why?"

He shrugged again.

"Stop speaking with your shoulders. Your quiltmaking God has sewn a tongue inside your mouth. Why did they talk to you but not to me?"

"Maybe they were afraid of you." "*Afraid* of me? What nonsense. If anything, I was afraid of them. That they would find the export company and cut me out. Or that they would get better jobs. Sometimes I was afraid even to point out their errors—I would correct the mistakes myself at night, after they left. For what reason could they be afraid of me?"

"They thought you'd find better tailors and get rid of them."

She considered it in silence for a moment. "I wish you had told me before. I could have reassured them."

He shrugged again. "That wouldn't change anything, Aunty. You could have saved them only by giving them a place to sleep."

She flung down the sewing. "You keep on saying that! Keep on, don't worry about my feelings! Repeat it till I am blinded by guilt!"

Maneck pricked himself as the needle surfaced through the button. "Ouch!" he sucked the thumb.

"Go on, you callous boy! Tell me I am responsible, tell me I left them out on the street because I am heartless!"

He wished he could cancel the hurt of his words. She fumbled with the hem, beginning to cough as though something was stuck. It sounded like an attention-getting cough to him, and he brought her a glass of water.

She said, after drinking, "You were right about carrots. I can see much better."

"It's a miracle!" he raised his hands theatrically, bringing a smile to her face. "Now I am incarnated as Maharishi Carrot Baba, and all the opticians will lose their business!"

"Oh stop being silly," she said, draining the glass. "Let me tell you what I can see better. When I was twelve my father decided to go and work in an area of epidemic. It worried my mother very much. She wanted me to change his mind—you see, I was his favourite. Then my father died while working there. And my mother said if I had followed her advice I might have saved him."

"That wasn't fair."

"It was and it wasn't. Just like what you said."

He understood.

* * * *

DINA ROSE, lifted the glass hen squatting on the worktable, and put away the thimble, scissors, and needle in its porcelain box.

"Where are you going, Aunty?"

"Where do you think—to a Lalya's wedding? It's ten o'clock, I'm going to bed."

"But we only finished sixteen dresses. Today's quota is twenty-two."

“Listen to the senior manager.”

"My plan is to do twenty-two today, thirty tomorrow, and eight the day after, so everything can be delivered by noon."

"Wait a minute, mister. What about college, tomorrow and the day after—what about studies? I don't think they give a refrigeration diploma for sewing buttons."

“Lectures are cancelled for the next two days.”

“Right. And I’m winning the State Lottery on the third day.”

"Forget it, Aunty. You're always doubting me." He continued to sew, exhaling injury and martyrdom in his sighs, dragging the needle as though its thread were an iron chain. "It's okay, I'll keep working, you go to bed."

“And miss your Oscar-winning performance?”

He dropped a button, groaned, and bent to find it, feeling about with his fingers like an old man. "Go, Aunty, go and rest, don't worry about me," he waved a trembling hand.

"You said you were good at acting, but I didn't think you were this good. Okay, let's finish one more dress."

The bidding was open; he sat up briskly. "We need six more for today's quota."

“Forget your quota. I said one.”

"At least three, then."

“Two is my final offer. And no more argument. But first I need something from the kitchen.”

She returned shortly, a steaming mug hooked in the fingers of each hand, and set one down beside him. "Horlicks. To refresh

us." As proof, she took a swallow and sat tall in her chair, shoulders back, face beaming.

"You sound like an advertisement," he said. "And it doesn't even need a professional model, you look so pretty."

"Don't think flattery will get you a cup every day. I cannot afford that."

Blowing and sipping, they joked their way through two more dresses. Near midnight, Dina's was the only light left on in the building. The lateness of the hour, the streets fallen silent outside the window, the flat enveloped in darkness, all lent a conspiratorial air to their innocent activity.

"That makes eighteen," she said, as they finished after midnight. "And not a single stitch left in these fingers. Now can we go to sleep, boss?"

"Soon as they are properly folded."

"Yes, Mr. Mac Kohlah."

"Please—I hate that name."

While passing through to their rooms she hugged him, whispering, "Good night. And thank you for helping."

"Good night, Aunty," he said, and floated happily to bed.

An Hour Before sunrise the whistle blast ended the night, snatching back the labourers from its dark, comforting bosom. They spilled out from the tin huts in a trickle towards the food area. Two pariah dogs sniffed at dusty feet, lost interest and slunk away around the kitchen. Tea was served with last night's chapatis. Then the whistle blew again to ~~The men come to work~~ they were assembled separately and assigned their chores by the foreman. There were jobs for everyone with the exception of the beggar on the rolling platform. "You stay here," said the foreman. "I will decide later for you."

Om was teamed with a group of six to start a new ditch. Ishvar's task was to carry gravel where concrete was being mixed. The foreman came to the end of the list, and the scraggy army dispersed to their locations as directed by the overseers. The tailors waited till everyone had gone.

"There is a mistake, sahab," said Ishvar, approaching the foreman with his palms together.

"Name?"

"Ishvar Darji and Omprakash Darji."

The foreman read off their assignments again. "No mistake."

"The mistake is that we should not be here, we—"

"All you lazy rascals think you should not be here. The government will no longer tolerate it. You *will* work. In return you will get food and a place to sleep."

"We *have* work, we are tailors, and the policeman said to speak to you—"

"My duty is to give you jobs and shelter. You say no, and the security men will take you away."

"But why are we being punished? What is our crime?"

"You are using the wrong word. It's not a question of crime and punishment—it's problem and solution." He beckoned to two khaki-uniformed men patrolling with sticks. "We have no trouble here, all the people are happy to work. Now you decide."

"Okay," said Ishvar. "But we would like to talk to the top man."

"The project manager will come later. He is busy with his morning prayers."

The foreman personally escorted the tailors to the worksite.

He handed them over to their respective supervisors with instructions to watch them carefully, to make sure they worked without slacking. The beggar rolled alongside them on his platform. Where the path ended, the rough terrain was impossible for his castors. He turned back, waving to the tailors, promising to wait by their hut in the evening.

* * * * *

THE HILLSIDE was alive with a flock of tiny crouching figures. At first the children seemed frozen by sunlight; then the sound of their hammers revealed the movement of their hands. Pounding rock, making gravel. Clumps of dead grass pocked the sere slope. The greening hand of rain had yet to touch this earth. Occasionally, a boulder got away and crashed somewhere below. In the distance, the rumbling of earth movers, cranes, and cement mixers rose like a wall upon which the steady ring of stone-chipping hammers carved a pattern. From the sky, the sledge of heat pounded relentlessly.

A woman filled Ishvar's gravel basket and helped him hoist it to his head. The effort made her hands tremble, quivering the wrinkled skin pouches under her arms. He staggered beneath the weight. When she let go, he felt the load start to unbalance. He clawed the sides desperately, tilting his head the other way, but the falling basket fell, jerking his neck sharply.

"I have never done this kind of work," he said, embarrassed by the heavy shower of gravel that stung their feet.

Wordlessly she slanted the basket against her shins and bent over to fill it again. Her skimpy grey plait slid forward over the shoulder. Wouldn't be much use to Rajaram the hair-collector, thought Ishvar absently. With each pull of the hoe her plastic bangles made dull clinks. Soft echoes of the stone-hammering children. He watched her forearms glisten with sweat, the powerful back-and-forth movement. Then he noticed, behind him, others in the backed-up gravel chain. He knelt to assist her, anxious to make up for his clumsiness. He scooped gravel into the basket with his hands.

"Filling is my task, carrying is yours," she said.

"It's okay, I don't mind."

"You don't, but the overseer will."

Ishvar desisted, and asked if she had done this work a long time.

"Since I was a child."

"Pay is good?"

"Enough to keep from starving." She showed him how to hold his head and shoulders to carry the weight, and they raised the load. he staggered again but managed to retain the basket.

"See, it's easy once you learn to balance," she encouraged, and pointed him on his way towards the men mixing concrete. Tottering, faltering several times, he reached his destination and dumped the gravel. Then it was back with the empty basket to the woman, who filled it. Again, and again, and again.

A few trips, and the sweat was streaming down his face; the ground spun; he asked if he could go for a drink of water. The overseer refused. "The bhiste will come when it's time for water."

With the man watching, the woman filled the basket as slowly as she dared. Ishvar was grateful for the restful seconds she stole for him. He shut his eyes and took deep breaths.

"Pile it to the brim!" the overseer screamed. "You are not paid for filling half-baskets!" She pulled in four additional hoefuls. While lifting the load she tipped it slightly to get rid of the extra weight.

Ishvar stumbled back and forth, fighting dizziness as the morning ground him down. His mind was emptied of all thought. The blasting at the other end of the site sent dust clouds rolling through the gravel area, and women pulled their saris over their noses. He felt that were it not for the pounding hammers to guide him, he would lose his way in the fog. The feeling of sightlessness persisted even when the air cleared. Clinging to the rope of sound, he hovered between the gravel and the concrete mixers.

It seemed an age before the water-carrier arrived. The stone-breaking hammers fell silent. Ishvar heard the slurp of thirsty tongues before he saw the man. The swollen waterskin hung from the bhiste's shoulder like a dark-brown animal, its

leather strap cutting deep into him. His steps unsteady under the heavy bulge of water, the blind man passed among the labourers. Whoever was thirsty touched his hand to stop him. He sang softly, a song he had made up:

*O call to me and I
Will quench your thirst for water.
But who, on earth, can grant
My parched eyes' desire?*

Ishvar fell on his knees before the bhistee, positioned his mouth under the leather spout and drank. Then he moved his mouth, and cold water splashed over his grateful face. The overseer shouted, "Careful, don't waste! That's for drinking only!" Ishvar rose hurriedly and returned to his gravel basket. By the time the bhistee reached the place where Om was working, the waterskin had grown lighter. So had the bhistee's steps. The six ditch-diggers drank first, and then the women who were assigned to carry away the loosened earth. Their babies played near the ditch. The women scooped water in their palms to let the children slurp it.

Om wet his fingers and slicked back his hair. He pulled out his half-comb and whipped it through. "Aray, hero-ka-batcha!" yelled the overseer. "Get back to work!"

Om put away the comb, returning his ragged attention to the digging. He enjoyed the moment when the women bent over to gather up the rubble, their breasts hanging forward in their cholis. With the load on their heads, they repositioned their saris and walked away, tall and stately, their limbs flowing with liquid smoothness. Like Shanti at the tap, he thought, with the brass pot that made her hips sway.

As the hours strained to pass, the women were not enough to distract him from the torment of the work. Bent double at the ditch, the pickaxe unwieldy in hands accustomed to scissors and needle and thread, he struggled with the hard ground. The shame of seeming weak in the women's eyes kept him going. Blisters which had flared within minutes of commencing the job were

now in full eruption. He could barely straighten his back, and his shoulders were on fire.

One of the babies by the ditch started to cry. The mother dropped her basket and went to it. "Saali lazy woman," said the overseer. "Get back to work."

"But baby is crying." She picked up the child. Its tears were tracing glistening paths down the dust-coated cheeks.

"It's natural for babies to cry. They cry and then they stop. Don't give me excuses." He moved towards her as though to take it from her arms. She returned it gently to the rubble, to amuse itself.

When the whistle sounded for lunch, Om, like Ishvar, felt he was too exhausted to eat the watery mix of vegetables. But they knew they must, if they were to survive the rest of the day. They swallowed the food quickly and slipped into the shadow of their tin hut to rest a little.

The whistle ended the lunch break. Within minutes of returning to the site they started retching; a gush of vomit followed. Emptying their bellies took a fraction of the time spent in filling them. Fighting dizziness, they hunkered down, refusing to move. Close to the ground they felt safe.

The overseer whacked their heads a couple of times, pulled at their collars, and shook them by the shoulders. The tailors moaned to be excused. The foreman was sent for.

"What's the matter now? You are determined to make trouble or what?" asked the foreman.

"We are sick," said Ishvar. As proof, he pointed to the two pools of vomit being investigated by a crow. "We are not used to this kind of work."

"You will get used to it."

"We want to meet the manager."

"He is not here." The foreman put a hand under Ishvar's arm and pulled. Ishvar rose, swaying from side to side, his mouth vomit-streaked, and lurched towards the foreman. The latter pushed him back hastily, afraid of getting vomit on himself.

"Okay, go. Sleep for some time. I will see you later."

No one bothered them for the rest of the day in the tin hut. At

dusk they heard people proceeding towards the kitchen area. Ishvar asked Om if he wanted to eat. "Yes, I'm hungry," he said, and they sat up. Feeling dizzy again, they lay down. They did not resist the returning drowsiness.

Some time later the beggar rolled in on his platform, with food. He paddled very slowly, taking care not to spill the dinner balanced upon his stumps. "I saw you becoming sick. Eat, it will give you strength. But chew properly, no rushing."

The tailors thanked him for the food. He watched with satisfaction as they took the first bite, refusing to share. "I've already eaten."

Ishvar emptied the water mug, and the beggar started rolling to fetch more. "Wait, I'll get it," said Om. "I'm all right now."

The beggar was having none of that, and soon returned with a full mug. He inquired if they wanted extra chapatis. "I made friends with someone in the kitchen, I can get as many as I like."

"No no, bas, we are full, thank you," said Ishvar, then asked him his name.

"Everybody calls me Worm."

"Why?"

"I told you, babu. Before my Beggarmaster gave me the gaadi, I used to crawl around."

"But now you have the gaadi. What's your real name?"

"Shankar."

He stayed with them for another half-hour, chatting, describing the irrigation project where he had been wandering all day. Then he suggested they try to sleep and wake up strong for tomorrow's work. In a few minutes, when they were snoring lightly, he rowed away on his platform, smiling happily to himself.

IX
What Law There Is

Out of a doorway a woman beckoned to Dina, and furtively displayed a basket. "Tamaater, bai?" the woman whispered. "Big, fresh tamaater?"

Dina shook her head. She, as always, was searching for tailors, not tomatoes. Further ahead, someone stood concealed in an alcove with a box of leather wallets; another half-hidden man balanced a stack of bananas in his arms. Everyone was on the lookout for the police and ready to run. The rubble of broken stalls littered the ground.

She wandered through several bleak streets where pavement life had been sucked away by the Emergency. But perhaps her chances of finding replacements for Ishvar and Om were better now, she comforted herself. Perhaps the tailors who used to ply their trade from roadside stalls would seek alternate work.

Delivering the final dresses to Au Revoir Exports, she had casually advised Mrs. Gupta that her employees were going on a two-week vacation. As the tailorless fortnight drew to a close, however, she realized her optimism was misplaced. The manager had to be informed that resumption of work was being further postponed.

Dina started by praising Mrs. Gupta's hair. "It looks lovely. Did you just come from Venus Beauty Salon?"

"No," said Mrs. Gupta grouchily. "I had to go to a strange place. Zenobia has let me down."

"What happened?"

"I needed an urgent appointment, and she said to me she was all booked up. To me—her most faithful client."

Oh no, thought Dina, wrong topic. "By the way, my tailors have been delayed."

"That's very inconvenient. For how long?"

"I'm not sure, maybe two more weeks. They have fallen sick in their village."

"That's what they all say. Too many production days are lost to such excuses. Probably drinking and dancing in their village. We are Third World in development, but first class in absenteeism and strikes."

Stupid woman, thought Dina. If she only knew how hard poor Ishvar and Om worked, and how much they had suffered.

"Never mind," said Mrs. Gupta. "The Emergency is good medicine for the nation. It will soon cure everyone of their bad habits."

Wishing the manager's head could be cured of its chronic brainlessness, she agreed. "Yes, that would be a great improvement."

"Two more weeks, then—and no more delays, Mrs. Dalal. Delays are the by-products of disorder. Remember, strict rules and firm supervision lead to success. Indiscipline is the mother of chaos, but the fruits of discipline are sweet."

Dina listened in disbelief, and said goodbye. She wondered if Mrs. Gupta had taken up writing slogans for the Emergency, as a sideline or hobby. Or perhaps she had suffered an overdose of the government's banners and posters, and lost the capacity for normal speech.

* * * * *

WHILE THE manager's words hung like an ultimatum over Dina and the second fortnight commenced, the rent-collector arrived on his appointed day. He lifted his right hand towards the maroon fez as if to raise it. Stiffness in his shoulder kept the greeting incomplete. The hand dropped to the collar of his black sherwani, tugging it in a surrogate salutation.

"Oh, rent-collector," she sniffed. "Wait. I'll bring the money." "Thank you, sister," smiled Ibrahim winsomely, as the door shut in his face. He relinquished the collar to rub his snuff-streaked nostrils. His fingers missed the light shower of brown dust that had rained on his clean-shaven upper lip, stark amid the full white beard.

He felt under the sherwani, got hold of the tip of his handkerchief, and pulled. He mopped his brow, then thrust it back into the trouser pocket, pushing repeatedly till all but a dangling corner disappeared.

Sighing, he leaned against the wall. Midday, and he was

exhausted. Even if he finished his rounds early, there was nowhere to go—from nine a.m. to nine p.m. he had rented his room to a mill-worker on night shift. Doomed to roam the streets, Ibrahim occupied park benches, sat on bus-shelter stiles, sipped a glass of tea at a corner stall till it was time to return home and sleep in the mill-worker's smell. This was life? Or a cruel joke? He no longer believed that the scales would ever balance fairly. If his pan was not empty, if there was some little sustenance in it for his days and nights, it was enough for him. Now he expected nothing better from the Maker of the Universe.

He decided to find Dina's receipt while waiting outside her door. Cautiously, the rubber band was pulled upwards. He brought it safely as far as the edge of the folder, then it snapped, stinging his nose and making him drop the folder.

The contents scattered. He went down on his knees to recover the precious pieces of paper. His hands fluttered methodlessly among them. For every two he picked up, one slipped from his fingers. A slight breeze rustled the pages ominously, and he panicked. He swept with his palms to gather them together, not caring that the sheets were being crumpled.

Dina opened the door with the rent money in her hand. For a second she thought the old man had fallen. She bent to help. Then, realizing what had happened, she straightened away from the landlord's emissary, watching the enemy's discomfort.

"Sorry," he smiled upwards. "Old hands are clumsy hands, what to do." He managed to cram everything back inside the plastic folder. The large rubber band was slipped around a wrist for safekeeping. He rose to his feet, and staggered. Dina's hand shot out to steady him.

"Heh, heh, don't worry. Legs are still working, I think."

"Please count it," she sternly presented the money.

With both hands clutching the unsecured folder, the money remained unaccepted. He listened intently for the chatter of the sewing-machines. Nothing. "Please, sister, can I sit for a minute to find your receipt? Or everything will fall again to the ground. Hands are shaking too much."

The need for a chair was real, she knew, and he would exploit

it, without question. "Sure, come in," she opened wide the door. There was nothing to lose today.

Excitement augmented Ibrahim's tremors of fatigue. At last, after months of trying, he was inside. "All the papers are mixed up," he said apologetically, "but I'll find your receipt, don't worry, sister." He listened again for sounds from the back room. Ah, but they were quiet as mice, of course.

"Yes, here it is, sister." The name and address were already entered. He filled in the amount received and the date. A signature writhed its way across the revenue stamp at the bottom, and the money was taken.

"Count it, please."

"No need, sister. A twenty years' tenant like you—if I cannot trust you, who can I trust?" Then he began counting it all the same. "Only to make you happy." From an inside pocket of the shewani he withdrew a thick wad of notes and thickened it further with Dina's contribution. Like the plastic folder, the money was secured by a rubber band.

"Now," he said, "what else can I do for you while I am here? Taps leaking? Anything broken? Plaster all right in the back room?"

"I'm not sure." The cheek of it, she thought indignantly. Tenants could complain till they were exhausted, and here this crook was pretending with his automatic smile. "Better check for yourself."

"Whatever is your wish, sister."

In the back room he rapped the walls with his knuckles. "Plaster is fine," he muttered, unable to hide his disappointment at the silent sewing-machines. Then, as though noticing the Singers for the first time, he said, "You have *two* machines in this room."

"There is no law against two machines, is there?"

"Not at all, I was just asking. Although these days, with this crazy Emergency, you can never tell what law there is. The government surprises us daily." His laugh was hollow, and she wondered if a threat was concealed in the words.

"One has a light needle, the other heavy," she improvised.

"Presser feet and tensions are also different. I do a lot of

sewing—my curtains, bedsheets, dresses. You need special machines for all that.”

“They look exactly the same to me, but what do I know about sewing?” They went into Maneck’s room, and Ibrahim decided to put subtlety aside. “So this must be where the young man lives.” “What?”

“The young man, sister. Your paying guest.”

“How dare you! How dare you suggest I keep young men in my flat! Is that the kind of woman you think I am? Just because—” “Please, no, that’s not—”

“Don’t you dare insult me, and then interrupt me! Just because I am a poor defenceless widow, people think they can get away with saying filthy things! Such courage you have, such bravery, when it comes to abusing a weak and lonely woman!”

“But sister, I—”

“What has happened to manhood today? Instead of protecting the honour of women, they indulge in smearing and defiling the innocent. And you! You, with your beard so white, saying such nasty, shameful things! Have you no mother, no daughter? You should be ashamed of yourself!”

“Please forgive me, I meant no harm, I only—”

“Meant no harm is easy to say, after the damage is done!”

“No sister, what damage? A foolish old man like me repeats a silly rumour, and begs your forgiveness.”

Ibrahim made his escape clutching the plastic folder. The attempt to raise his fez in farewell was, like the earlier greeting, short-circuited. He substituted again with a yank at the shewani’s collar. “Thank you, sister, thank you. I will come next month, with your permission. Your humble servant.”

She played with the idea of taking him to task for using “sister” so hypocritically. He had been let off too lightly towards the end, she felt. Still, he was an old man. She would have preferred to scold a younger hireling of the landlord’s.

In the afternoon she re-enacted the scene for Maneck, some sections twice at his urging. He enjoyed it the most when she came to the slandered-woman bit. “Did I show you my pose for the harassed and helpless woman?” She crossed her arms with

hands on shoulders, shielding her bosom. "I stood like this. As if he was going to attack me. Poor fellow actually looked away in shame. I was so mean. But he deserved it."

Their laughter acquired a touch of brave desperation after a while, like slicing a loaf very thin and pretending that bread was plentiful. Then the quiet in the room was sudden. The last crumb of fun had been yielded by the rent-collector's visit.

"The play is acted and the money digested," she said.

"At least the rent is paid up, and water and electricity too."

"We cannot eat electricity."

"You can have my pocket money, I don't need it this month," he said, reaching for his wallet.

She leaned forward and touched his cheek.

* * * * *

ANOTHER fortnight flew by, as swiftly, it seemed to Dina, as the rows of stitches that used to spill merrily from the Singers during happier days. She did not notice that already, in her memory, those months with Ishvar and Om, of fretting and tardiness, quarrels and crooked seams, had been transmuted into something precious, to be remembered with yearning.

Towards the end of the month, the hire-purchase man came to inquire about the sewing-machines. The instalment was overdue. She showed him the Singers to prove they were safe, and talked him into a grace period. "Don't worry, bhai, the tailors can cover your payment three times over. But an urgent family matter has delayed them in their native place."

Her daylong searches for new tailors continued to yield nothing. Maneck sometimes went with her, and she was grateful for his company. He made the dreary wanderings less dispiriting. Happy to skip college, he would have gone more often had it not been for her threats to write to his parents. "Don't create extra problems for me," she said. "As it is, if I don't have two tailors by next week, I will have to borrow from Nusswan for the rent." She shuddered at the prospect. "I'll have to listen to all his rubbish again—I told you so, get married again, stubbornness breeds unhappiness."

“I’ll come with you if you like.”

“That would be nice.”

At night, they busied themselves with the quilt. The stack of remnants was shrinking in the absence of new material, making her resort to pieces she had avoided so far, like the flimsy chiffon, not really suitable for her design. They sewed it into little rectangular pouches and stuffed in fragments of more substantial cloth. When the chiffon ran out, the quilt ceased to grow.

Welcome," The Forman greeted the Facilitator, as he delivered a fresh truckload of pavement-dwellers at the work camp.

The Facilitator bowed and presented an enormous cellophane-wrapped box of dry fruits. He was making a tidy profit between what he paid Sergeant Kesar and what he collected from the foreman; the wheels had to be kept oiled.

Cashews, pistachios, almonds, raisins, apricots were visible through the windows in the lid. "For your wife and children," said the Facilitator, adding, "Please, please take it, no," as the foreman made a show of refusing. "It's nothing, just a small token of appreciation."

The project manager, too, was delighted with the arrival of new pavement-dwellers. The scheme allowed him great liberties in manipulating the payroll. What the free labour lacked in efficiency, it made up in numbers. The expanding irrigation project no longer needed to hire extra paid workers.

In fact, a few were laid off; and the remaining day-labourers began to feel threatened. In their view, this influx of starving, shrivelled, skeletal beings was turning into an enemy army. Regarded at first with pity or amusement as they struggled with puny little tasks, the beggars and pavement-dwellers now seemed like invaders bent on taking away their livelihood. The paid workers began directing their resentment at them.

Harassment of the newcomers was constant. Abuse, pushing, shoving became commonplace. A spade handle would emerge out of a ditch to trip somebody. From scaffoldings and raised platforms, spit descended like bird droppings but with greater accuracy. At mealtimes a flurry of suddenly clumsy elbows overturned their plates, and since the rules denied a second serving, the beggars and pavement-dwellers often ate off the ground. Most of them were used to foraging in garbage, but the water-thin dal soaked quickly into dry earth. Only solids like chapati or bits of vegetable could be salvaged.

Their supplications to the foreman were ignored. The view from the top showed a smooth, economical operation with little need for managerial intervention.

By the end of the first week, Ishvar and Om felt they had spent

an eternity in this hell. They were barely able to rise for the dawn whistle. Dizzy spells made the world dance around them when they got out of bed. Their morning steadied somewhat after their glass of strong, overboiled tea. They staggered through the day, listening to the bewildering threats and insults of overseers and paid workers. They fell asleep early in the evening, cradled in the scrawny lap of exhaustion.

One night their chappals were stolen while they slept. They wondered if it was one of the men who shared the tin hut with them. They went barefoot to complain to the foreman, hoping he would issue replacements for them.

"You should have been more careful," said the foreman, stooping to buckle his sandals. "How can I guard everybody's chappals? Anyway, it's not a big problem. Sadhus and fakirs all travel with naked feet. And so does M. F. Husain."

"Who is M. F. Husain, sahab?" asked Ishvar humbly.
"Government minister?"

"He is a very famous artist in our country. He never covers his feet because he does not want to lose contact with Mother Earth. So why do you need chappals?"

There was no footwear available in the camp supplies. The tailors looked inside their hut one more time in case someone had taken the chappals by mistake. Then they walked carefully to the worksite, trying to avoid sharp stones.

"I will soon get back the feet of my childhood," said Ishvar. "You know, your grandfather Dukhi never wore chappals. And your father and I could not afford our first pair till we had finished apprenticing with Ashraf Chacha. By then our feet had become like leather—as though the Chamaars had tanned them, tough as cowhide."

In the evening Ishvar claimed that his soles were already hardening. He examined the dust-caked skin with satisfaction, enjoying the roughness under his fingers. But it was excruciating for Om. He had never gone with unprotected feet.

At the start of the second week, Ishvar's dizziness persisted past the morning glass of tea, getting worse under the burgeoning

dome of heat. The sun battered his head like a giant fist. Towards noon, he stumbled and fell into a ditch with his load of gravel.

"Take him to Doctor sahab," the overseer ordered two men. Ishvar put his arms over their shoulders and hopped on one foot to the work camp's dispensary.

Before Ishvar could tell Doctor sahab what had happened, the white-coated man turned away towards an array of tubes and bottles. Most were empty; nevertheless, the display looked impressive. He selected an ointment while Ishvar, balancing on one leg, held up his injured ankle to encourage an examination. "Doctor sahab, it's paining over there."

He was told to put his foot down. "Nothing broken, don't worry. This ointment will cure your pain."

The white-coated man gave him permission to rest for the remainder of the day. Shankar spent a lot of time with Ishvar in the hut, leaving at intervals on his rolling platform to fetch food and tea. "No, babu, don't get up, tell me what you want."

"But I have to make water."

Shankar slipped off his platform and motioned to him to get on. "You shouldn't put weight upon your injured foot," he said.

Ishvar was touched that he who had no feet should care so much about another's. He seated himself gingerly on the platform, crossed his legs, and began rolling, using his hands the way Shankar did. It was not as easy as it looked, he discovered. The trip to the latrine and back exhausted his arms.

"Did you like my gaadi?" asked Shankar.

"Very comfortable."

The next day Ishvar had to leave his bedding and hobble to the gravel area, though his ankle was swollen and painful. The overseer told him to fill baskets with the women instead of transporting them. "You can do that job sitting down," he said.

There were other accidents too, more severe than Ishvar's. A blind woman, set to crushing rocks, had, after several successful days, smashed her fingers with the hammer. A child fell from a scaffolding and broke both legs. An armless man, carrying sand in panniers on a shoulder yoke, suffered neck injuries when he lost his balance and the yoke slipped.

By week's end, scores of newcomers were classified as useless by the foreman. Doctor sahab treated them with his favourite ointment. In his more inspired moments he even used splints and bandages. Shankar was assigned to ferrying the patients' meals. He enjoyed the task, looking forward eagerly to mealtimes, paddling his platform from the hot kitchen to the groaning huts with a newfound sense of purpose. At every stop he was showered with the invalids' grateful thanks and blessings. What he really wanted, though, was to nurse their injuries and alleviate their pain, which Doctor sahab seemed unable to do. "I don't think he is a very clever doctor," he confided to Ishvar and Om. "He keeps using the same medicine for everyone."

The patients cried out for help through the long, hot days, and Shankar talked to them, moistened their brows with water, gave them assurances of better times to come. When the workers returned in the evening, hungry and exhausted, the ceaseless moaning irritated them. It continued deep into the night, and they could not sleep. After a few nights, someone finally went to complain.

Annoyed at being awakened, the foreman admonished the injured. "Doctor sahab is looking after you so well. What more do you people want? If we took you to a hospital, you think you'd be better off than here? Hospitals are so overcrowded, so badly run, the nurses will throw you in filthy corridors and leave you to rot. Here at least you have a clean place to rest." Over the next few days, the foreman, shorthanded, was forced to rehire the laid-off paid workers. They quickly realized this was the answer to their problem: incapacitate the free labour, and the jobs would return.

Animosity towards the beggars and pavement-dwellers reached dangerous proportions. The day-labourers began pushing them off ledges and scaffoldings, swung carelessly with pickaxes, let boulders accidentally roll down hillsides. The number of casualties increased sharply. Shankar welcomed his new charges. He poured his entire soul into the added responsibility.

Now the project manager took a different view of the victims' complaints. Security staff was increased, and ordered to patrol

the worksite at all times, not just at night. Day-labourers were warned that negligence on the job would be punished by dismissal. The attacks decreased, but the irrigation project began to look like an armed camp.

The next time the Facilitator arrived with a fresh load of pavement-dwellers, the foreman complained that his free labour was a bad investment. He pretended the injuries had been sustained prior to their arrival. "You have stuck me with feeding and housing too many unproductive cripples."

The Facilitator opened his register to the delivery date in question, and showed him details pertaining to the detainees' physical condition. "I admit there were a few bad ones. But that's not my fault. The police shoves everybody, living and half-dead, into my truck."

"In that case, I don't want any more."

The Facilitator tried to pacify the foreman and rescue the deal.

"Give me a few days, no, I'll sort something out. I'll make sure you won't suffer a total loss."

In the meantime, the latest consignment waiting to be unloaded from the truck included various types of street performers. There were jugglers, musicians, acrobats, and magicians. The foreman decided to give them a choice—join the labour force like the other pavement-dwellers, or entertain the camp in return for boarding and lodging.

The entertainers chose the latter option, as the foreman had expected. They were housed separately from the rest, and told to prepare for a performance that night. The project manager agreed with the foreman's proposal. The diversion would be good for the morale of the labourers, and would help relieve the tension and bad blood threatening the work camp.

The show was held after dinner, under the lights of the eating area. The security captain agreed to be master of ceremonies. Tumbling tricks, a man juggling wooden clubs, and a tightrope walker started the proceedings. Then there was a musical interlude with patriotic songs, which elicited a standing ovation from the project manager. Next, a husband-and-wife contortionist team proved very popular, followed by card tricks and more jugglers.

Shankar, who sat with Ishvar and Om to watch the entertainment, was having a splendid time, bouncing on the platform with excitement, clapping heartily, though his bandaged palms only produced muffled reports. "I wish the others could also enjoy," he said from time to time, thinking of his patients in the tin huts. He could hear their groans during the moments of quiet when the audience became silent, tense with anxiety, as a performer did something particularly daring with knives and swords or on the tightrope.

The project manager kept nodding approvingly at the foreman; the decision had been a good one. The last entertainer was waiting in the kitchen's shadow. The props of the previous act were cleared away. The security captain announced that for the finale they would witness an amazing display of balancing. The performer stepped into the light.

"It's Monkey-man!" said Om.

"And his sister's two children," said Ishvar. "Must be the new act he told us he was planning."

The children were not included in Monkey-man's opening move, some brief juggling of the sort already seen. It was received poorly. Now he introduced the little girl and boy, lifting them in the air, one in the palm of each hand. Both had colds, and sneezed. He proceeded to tie them to the ends of a fifteen-foot pole. Then he lowered himself to the ground, rolled onto his back, and balanced the pole horizontally on the soles of his bare feet. When it was steady, he began spinning it with his toes. The children revolved on the rudimentary merry-go-round, slowly at first, while he assayed the equilibrium and the rhythm, then faster and faster. They hung limply, making no sound, their bodies a blur. The cheering was scattered, the audience anxious and uncertain. Then the clapping became urgent, as though they hoped the hazardous feat would end if they gave the man his due, or, at the very least, the applause would somehow sustain the balance, keep the children safe.

The pole began to slow down, and stopped. Monkey-man untied the children and wiped their mouths; centrifugal force had drawn a stream of mucus from their runny noses. Next he laid

them face to face on the ground. This time they were both tied to the same end of the pole, their feet resting on a little crossbar. He tested the bindings and erected the pole.

The children were lifted high above the ground. Their faces disappeared into the night, beyond the reach of the kitchen lights. The audience gasped. He raised the pole higher, gave it a little toss, and caught the end upon his palm. His stringy arm muscles quivered. He moved the pole to and fro, making the top end sway like a treetop in a breeze. Then another little toss, and the pole was balanced on his thumb.

A cascade of protest spilled from the spectators. Doubt and reproach swirled in the area of darkness around Monkey-man. In the deafness of his concentration he heard nothing. He started walking back and forth within the circle of light, then running, tossing the pole from thumb to thumb.

"It's too dangerous," said Ishvar. "I don't find it enjoyable." Shankar shook his head too, mesmerized on his platform, swaying his trunk to the swaying of the pole.

"Would have been better if he stuck to monkeys," said Om, his eyes fixed on the tiny figures in the sky.

Then Monkey-man threw his head back and balanced the pole on his brow. People rose angrily to their feet. "Stop it!" yelled someone. "Stop it before you kill them!"

Others joined in, "Saala shameless budmaas! Torturing innocent children!"

"Saala gandoo! Save it for the mohallas of the heartless rich! We are not interested in watching!"

The shouting dislocated Monkey-man's focus. He could hear again. He hurriedly lowered the pole and untied the children. "What's wrong? I'm not mistreating them. Ask them yourself, they enjoy it. Everybody has to make a living."

But the uproar did not give him much of a chance to defend himself. Even more than with Monkey-man, people were upset with the foreman who had arranged this cruel entertainment, and they screamed at him to let him know. "Monster from somewhere! Worse than Ravan!"

The security guards quickly dispersed the audience to their

huts for the night, while the project manager's former approval turned to censure. He shook his finger in the foreman's face. "It was an error in judgement on your part. These people neither need nor appreciate kindness. If you are nice to them, they sit on your head. Hard work is the only formula."

No more performances were scheduled. Next day the street entertainers were apportioned among various work crews. Monkey-man became the most unpopular person in the irrigation project, and before the week was out he joined the casualties with severe head injuries. Ishvar and Om felt sorry for him because they knew he was really so tenderhearted.

"Remember the old woman's prophecy?" said Om. "The night his monkeys died?"

"Yes," said Ishvar. "About killing his dog and committing an even worse murder. Right now, the poor fellow looks as though he himself has been murdered."

* * * * *

THE FACILITATOR returned to the irrigation project a fortnight later with someone he introduced to the foreman as "the man who will solve your crippling labour problems."

The foreman and the Facilitator laughed at the joke. The new man's face remained deadly serious, acquiring a hint of displeasure.

They went to the tin huts where the injured were prostrate, forty-two in all. Shankar was trundling back and forth among them, stroking one's forehead, patting another's back, whispering, comforting. The smell of festering wounds and unwashed bodies wafted through the doors, nauseating the ~~foreman~~ my office if you need me," he excused himself.

The visitor said he would prefer to take a quick look at the injuries and estimate their potential. "Only then can I make a reasonable offer."

They stepped inside the first hut, temporarily blinded by the move from harsh sunlight into semidarkness. Shankar wheeled

his platform around to see who it was. Craning his neck, he let out a shriek of recognition.

"Who's that?" said the visitor. "Worm?" His eyes had not adjusted to the interior, but he knew the familiar rumble of rolling castors. "So this is where you are. All these weeks I wondered what happened to you."

Shankar paddled his platform towards the man's feet, his palms flailing the ground excitedly. "Beggarmaster! The police took me away! I did not want to go!" Relief and anxiety merged in his sobs as he clutched the man's shins. "Beggarmaster, please help me, I want to go home!"

The distraction in the hut prompted the injured to start moaning and coughing, pleading for attention, hoping that this stranger, whoever he was, had at long last brought them deliverance. The Facilitator moved closer to the door for fresh air.

"Don't worry, Worm, of course I'll take you back," said Beggarmaster. "How can I do without my best beggar?" He completed a quick inspection of the disabled and turned to leave. Shankar wanted to accompany him right then, but was told to wait. "First I have to make some arrangements."

Outside, Beggarmaster asked the Facilitator, "Is Worm included in the lot?"

"Of course he is."

"I won't pay you for what is already mine. I inherited him from my father. And my father had him since he was a child."

"But see it from my side, no," bargained the Facilitator. "I had to pay the police for him."

"Forget all that. I am willing to give two thousand rupees for the lot. Worm included."

The amount was higher than the Facilitator had expected. Taking into account the rebate promised to the foreman, he would still make a nice profit. "We have much business ahead of us," he said, concealing his delight. "I don't want to haggle. Two thousand is okay, you can take your Worm." He chuckled. "And any bugs or centipedes that you like."

A look of disapproval darkened Beggarmaster's face. This time

he sharply rebuked the Facilitator. “I don’t like people making fun of my beggars.”

“I meant no harm.”

“One more thing. Your truck must take them back to the city—that’s part of the price.”

The Facilitator agreed. He led Beggarmaster to the kitchen and brought him a glass of tea to make up for offending him. Then he went to find the foreman, whose cut was still to be negotiated.



ROWING FULL TILT, Shankar sped to tell his two friends the happy news, but was intercepted by the overseer, who refused to let the rhythm of the work be interrupted. He shooed him away, stamping his foot, pretending to pick up a stone. Shankar retreated.

He waited till the lunch whistle blew, and caught up with Ishvar and Om near the eating area. “Beggarmaster has found me! I’m going home!”

Om bent to pat his shoulder, and Ishvar comforted him, “Yes, it’s okay, Shankar, don’t worry. One day we’ll all go home, when the work is finished.”

“No, I am going home tomorrow, really! My Beggarmaster is here!” They continued to disbelief till he explained in more detail.

“But why are you so happy to go?” asked Ishvar. “You are not suffering like us slaves. Free meals, a little fetching and carrying on your gaadi. Don’t you prefer this to begging?”

“I did enjoy it for a while, especially looking after you, and the other sick ones. But now I miss the city.”

“You’re lucky,” said Om. “This work is going to kill us, for sure. Wish we could go back with you.”

“I can ask Beggarmaster to take you. Let’s talk with him.”

“Yes, but we...okay, ask him.”

They found Beggarmaster sipping tea on a bench near the kitchen. Shankar rolled up and tugged at his trouser cuff. “What’s the matter, Worm? I asked you to wait in the hut.” But he left his

tea to kneel beside him, listening, nodding, then tousling his hair and laughing. He came over to the tailors.

"Worm says you are his friends. He wants me to help you."

"Hahnji, please, we will be very grateful."

He sized them up doubtfully. "Do you have any experience?"

"Oh yes. Many years' experience," said Ishvar.

Beggarmaster was sceptical. "It doesn't look to me like you could be successful."

Om was indignant. "I can tell you we are very successful." He held up his two little fingers like votive candles. "Our long nails have broken in all this rough work, but they will grow back. We are fully trained, we can even take measurements straight from the customer's body."

Beggarmaster began to laugh. "Measurements from the body?"

"Of course. We are skilled tailors, not hacks who—"

"Forget it. I thought you wanted to work for me as beggars. I have no need for tailors."

Their hopes crashed. "We are no good here, we keep falling sick," they pleaded. "Can you not take us? We can pay you for your trouble." Shankar added his appeal to theirs, that they had been so kind to him from the moment the police had thrown him in the truck that terrible night, almost two months

~~Beggarmaster~~ and the Facilitator discussed the deal in low voices. The latter wanted two hundred rupees per tailor, because, he said, he would have to make it attractive for the foreman to release two able-bodied specimens: Ishvar's sprained ankle did not qualify.

Gripping his tea glass, Beggarmaster returned to the tailors. "You can come if the foreman agrees. But it will cost you."

"How much?"

"Usually, when I look after a beggar, I charge one hundred rupees per week. That includes begging space, food, clothes, and protection. Also, special things like bandages or crutches."

"Yes, Shankar—Worm—told us about it. He praised you and said you are a very kind Beggarmaster. What luck for him that you came here."

Pleased as he was with the compliment, he clarified the matter

without undue modesty. "Luck has little to do with it. I am the most famous Beggarmaster in the city. Naturally, the Facilitator contacted me. Anyway, your case is different, you don't need looking after in the same way. Besides, you've been good to Worm. Just pay me fifty a week per person, for one year. That will be enough."

They were staggered. "That means almost two thousand five hundred each!"

"Yes, it's minimum for what I am offering."

The tailors calculated the payments between them. "Three days' worth of sewing each week will go to him," whispered Ishvar. "That's too much, we won't be able to afford it."

"What choice?" said Om. "You want to toil to death, in this Narak of heartless devils? Just say yes."

"Wait, I'll bring him down a bit." Ishvar approached the man with a worldly expression on his face. "Listen, fifty is too much—we'll give you twenty-five a week."

"Get one thing straight," said Beggarmaster coldly. "I'm not selling onions and potatoes in the bazaar. My business is looking after human lives. Don't try to bargain with me." He turned away disdainfully to go back to the kitchen bench.

"Now look what you've done!" said Om, panicking. "Our only chance is finished!"

Ishvar waited a moment and shuffled back to Beggarmaster. "We talked it over. It's expensive, but we'll take it."

"You're sure you can afford it?"

"Oh yes, we have good jobs, regular work."

Beggarmaster nibbled his thumbnail and spat. "Sometimes, one of my clients will vanish without paying, after enjoying my hospitality. But I always manage to find him. And then there is big trouble for him. Please remember that." He finished his tea and accompanied the Facilitator to make a renewed offer to the foreman.

When the lunch hour ended, the tailors were reluctant to rejoin the gravel gang and ditch-diggers. With the promise of rescue so close, their resignation to the back-breaking labour vaporized; fatigue overwhelmed them.

"Aray babu, just be a little patient," said Shankar. "It's only one more day, don't cause any trouble. You don't want them to beat you. Stop worrying now, the foreman will agree, my Beggarmaster is very influential."

Bolstered by Shankar's encouragement, they found the strength to return to the overseer. In the late afternoon, they listened anxiously for the bhiste's song. His arrival signalled the last two hours of work. They drank from his waterskin and got through the remainder of the day.

At dusk, when they stumbled back to their hut, Shankar was waiting, squirming excitedly on his platform. "It's all decided. They are taking us tomorrow morning. Stay ready with your bedding, don't miss the truck. Now I must make my preparations."

He went to find the mechanic in charge of heavy machinery, who gave him oil for his castors. The grit and dust of the construction site was beginning to slow them down. Shankar wanted the platform in prime condition for his return to the pavement. He brought back the can cradled against his stomach. Om helped to lubricate the sluggish wheels.

Early next morning, a security guard ordered Shankar, the tailors, and the injured to assemble at the gate with their things. Those unable to walk were carried by men seconded from a work detail. They did it resentfully, grudging the invalids their imminent freedom. It was the tailors, however, who bore the brunt of the embittered glances.

"See how lucky we are, Om," said Ishvar, gazing upon the damaged bodies accumulating in the truck. "We could be lying here with broken bones if our stars were not in the proper position."

Monkey-man was still comatose from his head injury, and Beggarmaster refused to take him. But he wanted the children; they had real potential, he said. The little boy and girl resisted removal, weeping and clinging to their motionless uncle. They had to be dragged away when the truck was ready to leave. Facilitator and foreman balanced the debits and credits with a rebate towards the next delivery. Then there was a short

delay. The foreman insisted that clothing issued on arrival be removed before departure—he had to account for every article to his superiors.

“Take what you want,” said Beggarmaster. “But please hurry, I have to get back in time for a temple ceremony.”

The ones who had been carried to the truck were incapable of undressing themselves. The workers, about to return to their regular tasks, were ordered to assist them. They vented their frustration by tugging the garments roughly off the injured bodies. Beggarmaster did not pay attention to it. When Shankar’s turn came, however, he made sure they were gentle with his ~~nest~~. The pavement-dwellers were as naked, or half-naked, as the day they had entered the labour camp; the gate opened and the truck was allowed to leave.

Dressing up to visit Nusswan's office was Maneck's idea. "We should go there looking tiptop. He'll give you more respect. Appearances are very important to some people."

In Dina's present state, anything that sounded like half-sensible advice was welcome. She touched up his grey gabardine trousers with the iron. For herself, she selected her most effective frock, the blue one from her second wedding anniversary, with the vivacious peplum that came alive with walking. Would it still fit? she wondered. Shutting the adjoining door, she tried it on, pleased to discover that a little squeezing was all it took to fasten the zipper. She went into the front room.

"How about some makeup, Aunty?"

Unused for years, the lipstick poked up its head reluctantly as she rotated the base. She made a false start and smudged the lip line, but the labial acrobatics soon came back to her, the pursing and puckering and tautening, the simian contortions that seemed so absurd in the mirror.

The rouge was caked stiff, but under the discoloured crust there was enough to blush her cheeks. The round velvet pad had desiccated into a leathery scab. Once, Rustom had teased her while she was making up, and she retaliated by rouging his nose with the pad. Soft as a rose petal, he had said.

If Nusswan mentioned marriage today, she didn't know what she would do—overturn his desk, perhaps. She surveyed herself in the mirror. Her reflection nodded approvingly. She hoped that Maneck's theory linking appearance and respect was correct.

"Are you ready?" she called into his room.

"Wow! You look absolutely beautiful."

"That's enough from you," she scolded, inspecting him from head to toe. He passed muster except for his shoes. She made him shine them before they left.

* * * * *

THE OFFICE PEON made the two wait in the corridor while he disappeared to check with the boss. "Just watch, Nusswan will be busy," she predicted.

The man returned to announce in a regretful voice, "Sahab is busy." The peon had worked here for many years, but it always embarrassed him to have to abet his employer's charade. "Please sit for a few minutes." He lowered his head and ~~Godness~~ knows why Nusswan still tries to impress me in these silly ways," said Dina. "His busyness will end in exactly fifteen minutes."

But in her second prediction she was proved wrong, for the peon had mentioned to Nusswan that his sister was beautifully dressed today and accompanied by someone.

"Who?" said Nusswan. "Have we seen her before?"

"Not her, sahab. Him."

Very curious, thought Nusswan, feeling his chin where he had nicked it that morning. "Young? Old?"

"Young," said the peon. "Very young."

Even more curious, decided Nusswan, his imagination wandering wishfully. Boyfriend, maybe? Dina was very attractive at forty-two. Almost as beautiful as she was twenty years ago, when she married that poor, unfortunate Rustom. Unfortunate from beginning to end. In looks, in money, in his life span....

Nusswan paused in his thoughts, gazed ceilingward, and patted his cheeks alternately, reverently, with his right fingertips, to ensure that his brother-in-law rested in peace. He had no desire to speak ill of the departed. So sad, his death. But also a God-given second chance for Dina to set things right, find a more suitable husband. If only she had grabbed the chance.

Such a terrible thing her pride was, and her strange idea of independence. Working like a slave to earn a pittance, humiliating the whole family. And now this latest fiasco with the export company. Slowly, he had learned to let his skin grow thick. But shaking off embarrassment was easier than discarding his sense of duty. She was still his little sister, he had to do his best for her. What a waste, he thought, what a waste of a life. Like watching a tragic play. Only, instead of three hours it had lasted almost three decades—a family estranged, Xerxes and Zarir growing up deprived of the love and attention of their Dina Aunty, she hardly knowing her two nephews. So much sadness and misery.

But perhaps there was still a chance of a joyful ending. There could be nothing better than becoming one happy, united family again. Soon it would be time for grandchildren in his own life. If Dina had abdicated as aunty, she could be a grand-aunty.

And this young man with her today, her boyfriend. If they were serious and got married, how wonderful. Even if the chap was only thirty, he should consider himself lucky to have Dina—so attractive that she could put women half her age in the shade.

Yes, that was it—she wanted to introduce the fellow and get her older brother's approval. Or why bring him along? As to their age difference, there could be no objection, Nusswan decided reluctantly. One had to be broad-minded in these modern times. Yes, he would give them his blessing, even pay for this second wedding. As long as the expenses were reasonable—one hundred guests, modest flower arrangements, a small ~~hand~~ evening a lifetime, brooding, regretting, revising, it seemed like ages to Nusswan since their arrival had been announced. He checked his watch—it had been less than five minutes. He put the dial to his ear: it was working. Astonishing, how time and mind conspired in their tricks.

He told the peon to send in the visitors immediately. He wanted to continue in reality the celebration he had begun in imagination.

“What?” said Dina to the peon. “So soon?” She whispered to Maneck, “See, already you have brought us good luck—he never calls me in so fast.”

Nusswan rose and shot his cuffs, ready to extend a warm greeting to the man who would be brother-in-law. When he saw Maneck's youth enter the office, his knees almost gave way. His crazy sister had done it again! He clutched the edge of the desk, pale with visions of shame and scandal in the ~~Academy~~ coming into a European, Nusswan? Or are you sick?” asked Dina.

“I'm fine, thank you,” he answered stiffly.

“How are Ruby and the boys?”

“They are well.”

“Good. I'm sorry to trouble you when you are so busy.”

“It's all right.” Not two seconds in his office, and she was at

him. Stupid to have raised his hopes. Where Dina was concerned, it was wiser to despair. Not one paisa would he spend on this wedding. If child marriage was a terrible ancient scourge, child-and-adult marriage was a modern madness. He wanted no part of it. And the doctor telling him to watch his blood pressure, to curtail his activities on the Share Bazaar—while here was his own sister, doing her share to shorten his life.

“But where are my manners,” said Dina. “Talking on without introductions. Maneck, this is my brother, Nusswan.”

“How do you do?” said Maneck.

“Plea...pleased to meet you.” Nusswan fell back in his chair after shaking hands. A typewriter pounded away in the next room. The ceiling fan hiccuped discreetly. Under a paperweight, a sheaf of papers fluttered like a bird in trouble.

“Maneck has heard a lot about you from me,” said Dina, “and I wanted the two of you to meet. He came to live with me a few months ago.”

“Live with you?” His sister had gone mad! Where did she think she was, in Hollywood?

“Yes, live with me. What else would a paying guest do?”

“Oh yes! Of course! What else?” The relief was so keen, it was unbearable. He wanted to fall to his knees. Oh, thank God! Saved! Thank God Almighty!

Then, hiding behind the sunshine and rainbow that had burst on the horizon, Nusswan discovered his pot of sludge: there would be no wedding. He felt cheated. Just like her. Cruel, unfeeling, leading him on with false hopes. To think how genuinely happy he had been for her a few minutes ago. Once again she had mocked him.

“The prices keep going up,” she said. “I couldn’t manage, I had to take a boarder. And I was so lucky to find a wonderful boy like Maneck.”

“Yes, of course. Very nice to meet you, Maneck. And where do you work?”

“Work?” said Dina indignantly. “He is just seventeen, he goes to college.”

“And what are you studying?”

"Refrigeration and air-conditioning."

"Very wise choice," said Nusswan. "These days only a technical education will get you ahead. The future lies with technology and modernization." Filling the silence with words was a way of dealing with the tumult of emotions his sister had exploded in him. Empty words, to carry away the foolishness he felt.

"Yes, the country has been held back for too long by outdated ideologies. But our time has come. Magnificent changes are taking place. And the credit goes to our Prime Minister. A true spirit of renaissance."

Dina didn't mind his rambling, relieved that at least the matrimonial topic had not been revived. "I have a boarder, but I have lost my tailors," she said.

"What a pity," said Nusswan, slightly confused by her interruption. "The main thing is, now we have pragmatic policies instead of irrelevant theories. For example, poverty is being tackled head-on. All the ugly bustees and filthy jhopadpattis are being erased. Young man, you are not old enough to remember how wonderful this city once was. But thanks to our visionary leader and the Beautification Programme, it will be restored to its former glory. Then you will see and appreciate."

"I was able to finish the last dresses only because Maneck helped," put in Dina. "He worked so hard, side by side with me."

"That's very good," said Nusswan. "Very good indeed." The sound of his own voice had made him loquacious as usual. "Hardworking, educated people like Maneck is what we need. Not lazy, ignorant millions. And we also need strict family planning. All these rumours of forced sterilization are not helping.

You must have heard that nonsense."

Dina and Maneck shook their heads in unison.

"Probably started by the CIA—saying people in remote villages are being dragged from their huts for compulsory sterilization. Such lies. But my point is, even if the rumour is true, what is wrong in that, with such a huge population problem?"

"Wouldn't it be undemocratic to mutilate people against their will?" asked Maneck, in a tone that suggested total agreement rather than a challenge.

"Mutilate. Ha ha ha," said Nusswan, avuncular and willing to pretend it was a clever joke. "It's all relative. At the best of times, democracy is a seesaw between complete chaos and tolerable confusion. You see, to make a democratic omelette you have to break a few democratic eggs. To fight fascism and other evil forces threatening our country, there is nothing wrong in taking strong measures. Especially when the foreign hand is always interfering to destabilize us. Did you know the CIA is trying to sabotage the Family Planning Programme?"

Maneck and Dina shook their heads again, again in perfect unison and with straight faces. There was the subtlest touch of burlesque about it.

Nusswan eyed them suspiciously before continuing. "What's happening is, CIA agents are tampering with consignments of birth-control devices and stirring up trouble among religious groups. Now don't you agree that Emergency measures are necessary against such dangers?"

"Maybe," said Dina. "But I think the government should let homeless people sleep on the pavements. Then my tailors wouldn't have disappeared and I wouldn't have come here to bother you."

Nusswan lifted his index finger and waggled it like a hyperactive windshield wiper. "People sleeping on pavements gives industry a bad name. My friend was saying last week—he's the director of a multinational, mind you, not some small, two-paisa business—he was saying that at least two hundred million people are surplus to requirements, they should be eliminated."

"Eliminated?"

"Yes. You know—got rid of. Counting them as unemployment statistics year after year gets us nowhere, just makes the numbers look bad. What kind of lives do they have anyway? They sit in the gutter and look like corpses. Death would be a mercy."

"But how would they be eliminated?" inquired Maneck in his most likeable, most deferential tone.

"That's easy. One way would be to feed them a free meal containing arsenic or cyanide, whichever is cost-effective. Lorries could go around to the temples and places where they gather to beg."

"Do many business people think like this?" asked Dina curiously.

"A lot of us think like this, but until now we did not have the courage to say so. With the Emergency, people can freely speak their minds. That's another good thing about it."

"But the newspapers are censored," said Maneck.

"Ah yes, yes," said Nusswan, at last betraying impatience. "And what's so terrible about that? It's only because the government does not want anything published which will alarm the public. It's temporary—so lies can be suppressed and people can regain confidence. Such steps are necessary to preserve the democratic structure. You cannot sweep clean without making the new broom dirty."

"I see," said Maneck. The bizarre aphorisms were starting to grate on him, but he did not possess the ammunition to launch even a modest counterattack. If only Avinash were here. He would straighten out this idiot. He wished he had paid more attention when Avinash talked politics.

Still struggling with the earlier maxim, about breaking democratic eggs to make a democratic omelette, Maneck tried to formulate a variation by juggling democracy, tyranny, frying pan, fire, hen, hard-boiled eggs, cooking oil. He thought he had one: A democratic omelette is not possible from eggs bearing democratic labels but laid by the tyrannical hen. No, too cumbersome. And anyway, the moment was past.

"The important thing," said Nusswan, "is to consider the concrete achievements of the Emergency. Punctuality has been restored to the railway system. And as my director friend was saying, there's also a great improvement in industrial relations. Nowadays, he can call the police in just one second, to take away the union troublemakers. A few good saltings at the police station, and they are soft as butter. My friend says production has improved tremendously. And who benefits from all this? The workers. The common people. Even the World Bank and the IMF approve of the changes. Now they are offering more loans."

Keeping her expression as grave as she could, Dina said, "Nusswan, can I make a request please?"

"Yes, of course." He wondered how much it would be this time—two hundred rupees or three?

"About the plan to eliminate two hundred million. Can you please tell your business friends and directors not to poison any tailors? Because tailors are already hard to find."

Maneck smothered a laugh before it broke. Nusswan spied the facial effort as he said to her disgustedly, "It's useless talking to you about serious things. I don't know why I even bother."

"I enjoyed listening," said Maneck gravely.

Nusswan felt betrayed—first her, now him. He wondered what sort of mockery and ridicule took place at his expense when the two were alone.

"I had fun too," said Dina. "Coming to your office is the only entertainment I can afford, you know that."

Glowering, he began moving papers on his desk. "Tell me what you need and leave me alone. There's a lot of work to do."

"Be careful, Nusswan, your eyebrows are doing funny exercises." She decided not to press her luck further, and got down to business. "I haven't given up the export work. It's just a matter of time before I find new tailors. But till then I cannot accept more orders."

The moment of asking, the moment she hated, did not become less unpalatable with the brisk matter-of-fact explanation or the levity leading up to it. "Two hundred and fifty will be enough to get me through this month."

Nusswan rang for the peon, and filled out a cash voucher. Dina and Maneck were treated to a vehement display of penmanship, the ballpoint scratching savagely across the form. He crossed his t's and dotted his i's with heavy blows, as though competing with the typewriter being battered in the next room.

The peon carried the voucher to the cashier across the corridor. The run-down ceiling fan laboured like a noisy little factory. So much money, thought Dina, and he still hadn't air-conditioned the office. She lowered her eyes, fixing them on a sandalwood paper-knife stuck strategically inside a half-opened envelope. The peon delivered the money and retreated.

Nusswan began, "None of this would be necessary if only—"

He glanced at Dina, unable to reach her downcast eyes, then at Maneck, and abandoned the thought. "Here," he held out the notes.

"Thank you," she accepted, eyes still averted.

"Don't mention it."

"I'll return it as soon as possible."

He nodded, picking up the paper-knife, and opened the rest of the envelope.

* * * * *

"AT LEAST he spared me his favourite speech today, thanks to the Emergency," said Dina when they got off the bus. "That's something to be grateful for. 'And what is so terrible about marrying again?'" she imitated in a sanctimonious voice. "'You are still good-looking, I guarantee I can find you a good husband.' You won't believe the number of times he has said this to me."

"But I do, Aunty," said Maneck. "It's the one thing on which I agree with your brother. You *are* good-looking."

She smacked his shoulder. "Whose side are you on?"

"On the side of truth and beauty," he pronounced grandly.

"But it must be quite funny when Nusswan and his business friends get together and talk their nonsense."

"You know what I was remembering, in his office? When he was a young boy. He would talk about becoming a big-game hunter, about killing leopards and lions. And wrestling crocodiles, like Tarzan. One day, a little mouse came into our room, and our ayah said to him, Baba look, there is a fierce tiger, you can be the hunter. And Nusswan ran away screaming for Mummy."

She turned the key in the lock. "Now he wants to eliminate two hundred million. His big talk never stops."

They entered the flat and were confronted by the silent sewing-machines. Their laughter now seemed out of place; it dwindled rapidly and died.

X

Sailing Under One Flag

The truck growled into the city after midnight along the airport road. Sleeping shanty towns pullulated on both sides of the highway, ready to spread onto the asphalt artery. Only the threat of the many-wheeled juggernauts thundering up and down restrained the tattered lives behind the verges. Headlights picked out late-shift workers, tired ghosts tracing a careful path between the traffic and the open sewer.

“Police had orders to remove all jhopadpattis,” said Ishvar.
“Why are these still standing?”

Beggarmaster explained it was not so simple; everything depended on the long-term arrangements each slumlord had made with the police.

“That’s not fair,” said Om, his eyes trying to penetrate the rancid night. Splotches of pale moonlight revealed an endless stretch of patchwork shacks, the sordid quiltings of plastic and cardboard and paper and sackcloth, like scabs and blisters creeping in a dermatological nightmare across the rotting body of the metropolis. When the moon was blotted by clouds, the slum disappeared from sight. The stench continued to vouch for its presence.

After a few kilometres the truck entered the city’s innards. Lampposts and neon fixtures washed the pavements in a sea of yellow watery light, where slumbered the shrunken, hollow-eyed statuary of the night, the Galateas and Gangabehns and Gokhales and Gopals, soon to be stirred to life by dawn’s chaos, to haul and carry and lift and build, to strain their sinew for the city that was desperately seeking beautification. Om. “People are sleeping peacefully—no police to bother them. Maybe the Emergency law has been cancelled.”

“No, it hasn’t,” said Beggarmaster. “But it’s become a game, like all other laws. Easy to play, once you know the rules.”

The tailors asked to be let off near the chemist’s. “Maybe the nightwatchman will let us live in the entrance again.”

Beggarmaster insisted, however, on first seeing their place of work. The truck travelled for a few more minutes and stopped outside Dina’s building, where they indicated her flat.

“Okay,” said Beggarmaster, jumping out. “Let’s verify your

jobs with your employer.” He asked the driver to wait, and strode rapidly to the door.

“It’s too late to wake Dinabai,” pleaded Ishvar, wincing as he hurried on his bad ankle. “She’s very quick-tempered. We’ll bring you here tomorrow, I promise—I swear upon my dead mother’s name.”

The beggars and injured workers in the truck shivered, yearning for the comforting arms of motion that had cradled them through the journey. The idling engine’s rumbles endowed the night with a menacing maw. They began to cry.

Beggarmaster paused at the front door to study the nameplate, and made a note in his diary. Then he shot out his index finger and rang the doorbell.

“Hai Ram!” Ishvar clutched his head in despair. “How angry she will be, pulled out of bed this late!”

“It’s late for me also,” said Beggarmaster. “I missed my temple puja, but I’m not complaining, am I?” He pressed the bell again and again when there was no answer. The truck driver sounded his horn to hurry him up.

“Stop, please!” begged Om. “At this rate we’ll surely lose our jobs!” Beggarmaster smiled patiently and continued his jottings. Writing in the dark posed no difficulty for him.

Inside, the doorbell agitated Dina as much as it did the tailors. She rushed to Maneck’s room. “Wake up, quick!” He needed a few good shakes before he stirred. “Looks like an angel but snores like a buffalo! Wake up, come on! Are you listening? Someone’s at the door!” “Who?” “I glanced through the peephole, but you know my eyes. All I

can tell is, there are three fellows. I want you to look.”

She had not yet switched on the light, hoping the uninvited visitors would go away. Cautioning him to walk softly, she led the way to the door and held the latch. He took a peek and turned excitedly.

“Open it, Aunty! It’s Ishvar and Om, with someone!”

Outside they heard his voice and called, “Hahnji, it is us,

Dinabai, very sorry to disturb you. Please forgive us, it won't take long..." Their voices trailed off in a timorous question mark.

She clicked the switch for the verandah light, still cautious, and opened the door a bit—and then wide. "It is you! Where have you been? What happened?"

She made no attempt to disguise her relief. It surprised her: she relished the wholeness of it, her feelings rising straight to her tongue, without twisting in deception.

"Come inside, come!" she said. "My goodness, we worried about you all these weeks!"

Beggarmaster stood back as Ishvar limped over the threshold and forced a smile. From his ankle trailed Doctor sahab's filthy strips of cloth. Om followed close behind him, stepping on the bandage in his haste. Through the darkened doorway they crept shamefacedly into the verandah's revealing light.

"My goodness! Look at your condition!" said Dina, overcome by the haggard faces, dirty clothes, matted hair. Neither she nor Maneck spoke for a few moments. They stared. Then the questions rushed out, tripping one over the other, and the fragmented answers were equally frantic.

Still waiting at the door, Beggarmaster interrupted Ishvar and Om's confused explanations. "I just want to check—these two tailors work for you?"

"Yes. Why?"

"That's fine. It's so nice to see everybody happy and reunited." The truck honked again, and he turned to leave.

"Wait," said Ishvar. "Where to make the weekly payment?"

"I'll come to collect it." He added that if they wanted to get in touch with him at any time, they should tell Worm, whose new beat would be outside the Vishram Vegetarian Hotel.

"What payment, what worm?" asked Dina when the door had shut. "And who is that man?"

The tailors digressed from the main story to explain, starting with Beggarmaster's arrival at the work camp, then backing up to Shankar's account, racing forward again, getting confused, confusing their listeners. The harrowing stretch of time in hell was over; exhaustion was flooding the place vacated by fear. Ishvar

fumbled with the bandage to wrap it properly round his ankle. His hands shook, and Om tucked in the loose end for him.

“It was the foreman’s fault, he...”

“But that was before the Facilitator came...”

“Anyway, after my ankle was hurt, it was impossible...”

The thread of events eluded their grasp, Ishvar picking up a piece of it here, Om grabbing something there. Then they lost track of the narrative altogether. Ishvar’s voice faded. He pressed his head with both hands, trying to squeeze out the words. Om stammered and started to cry.

“It was terrible, the way they treated us,” he sobbed, clawing at his hair. “I thought my uncle and I were going to die there...”

Maneck patted his back, saying they were safe now, and Dina insisted the best thing to do was to have a good rest, then talk in the morning. “You still have your bedding. Just spread it here on the verandah and go to sleep.”

Now it was Ishvar’s turn to break. He fell on his knees before her and touched her feet. “O Dinabai, how to thank you! Such kindness! We are very afraid of the outside...this Emergency, the police...”

His display embarrassed her. She pulled her toes out of his reach. So urgent was his grasp, her left slipper stayed behind between his clutching fingers. He reached forward and gently restored it to her foot.

“Please get up—at once,” she said with a confused sternness. “Listen to me, I will say this one time only. Fall on your knees before no human being.”

“Okayji,” he rose obediently. “Forgive me, I should have known better. But what to do, Dinabai, I just can’t think of how to thank you.”

Still embarrassed, she said there had been enough thanks for one night. Om unrolled the bedding after wiping his eyes on his sleeve. He asked if they could wash the dust from their hands and faces before sleeping.

“There’s not much water, just what’s in the bucket, so be frugal. If you are thirsty, take from the drinking pot in the kitchen.” She locked the verandah door and went inside with Maneck.

"I'm so proud of you, Aunty," he whispered.
"Are you, now? Thank you, Grandpa."

* * * * *

MORNING LIGHT did not bring answers to the questions Dina had wrestled with all night. She could not risk losing the tailors again. But how firm to stand, how much to bend? Where was the line between compassion and foolishness, kindness and weakness? And that was from her position. From theirs, it might be a line between mercy and cruelty, consideration and callousness. She could draw it on this side, but they might see it on that side.

The tailors awoke at seven, and packed up their bedding. "We slept so well," said Ishvar. "It was peaceful as paradise on your verandah."

They took a change of clothes from the trunk and prepared to leave for the railway bathroom. "We'll have tea at Vishram, then come back straight—if it's all right."

"You mean, to start sewing?"

"Yes, for sure," said Om with a weak smile.

She turned to Ishvar. "What about your ankle?"

"Still hurts, but I can push the treadle with one foot. No need to delay."

She noticed their cracked and bruised feet. "Where are your chappals?"

"Stolen."

"Sometimes there is broken glass on the street. Drunks smashing their bottles. You cannot gamble with your three remaining feet." She found an old pair of slippers which fit Om; Maneck gave Ishvar his tennis shoes.

"So comfortable," said Ishvar. "Thank you." Then he inquired timidly if they could borrow five rupees for tea and food.

"There is much more than five rupees coming to you from the last order," she said.

"Hahnji? Really?" They were overjoyed, having presumed that leaving the work incomplete meant forfeiting the right to any payment, and said as much.

"It may be the practice with some employers. I believe in honest pay for honest work." She added jokingly, "Maybe you can share it with Maneck, he deserves something."

"No, I only helped with a few buttons. Dina Aunty did it all."

"Forget your college, yaar," said Om. "Become a partner with us."

"Right. And we'll open our own shop," said Maneck.

"Don't give bad advice," she scolded Om. "Everyone should be educated. I hope when you have children you will send them to school."

"Oh yes, he will," said Ishvar. "But first we must find him a wife."



AFTER MANECK left reluctantly for college and Dina went to Au Revoir Exports for new cloth, the tailors idled away the time at the Vishram Vegetarian Hotel. The cashier-cum-waiter welcomed back his regulars with delight. He finished attending to the customers at the front counter—a tumbler of milk, six pakoras, a scoop of curds—and soon joined them at the solitary table. "You two have lost weight," he observed. "Where have you been so long?"

"Special government diet," said Ishvar, and told him about their misfortune.

"You fellows are amazing," the sweaty cook roared over the stoves. "Everything happens to you only. Each time you come here, you have a new adventure story to entertain us."

"It's not us, it's this city," said Om. "A story factory, that's what it is, a spinning mill."

"Call it what you will, if all our customers were like you, we would be able to produce a modern *Mahabharat*—the Vishram edition."

"Please, bhai, no more adventures for us," said Ishvar. "Stories of suffering are no fun when we are the main characters."

The cashier-waiter brought them their tea and bun-muska, then went to serve more customers at the counter. The milk in

the tea had formed a creamy skin. Om spooned it into his mouth, licking his lips. Ishvar offered him his own cup, and he skimmed that off too. They separated the halves of the bun-muska to check if both sides were buttered. They were, lavishly.

During a pedestrian lull on the pavement, Shankar, who was already begging outside when they had arrived, rolled up by the door to greet them. Ishvar waved. "So, Shankar. Happy to be back and working hard, hahn?"

"Aray babu, what to do, Beggarmaster said it's the first day, relax, sleep. So I fell asleep here. Then coins began falling into my can. A terrible clanging sound—right beside my head. Every time I close my eyes, they fly open in fright. The public just won't let me rest."

His routine this morning was simple. He rattled the coins and made a whining noise, or coughed hoarsely at intervals till tears ran down his cheeks. For visual interest, sometimes he paddled the platform a few feet to the left, then back to the right. "You know, I specially asked Beggarmaster to move me here from the railway station," he confided. "Now we can meet more often."

"That's good," said Om, waving goodbye. "We'll see you again soon."

* * * * *

THE FLAT was padlocked, and they waited by the door. "Hope that crazy rent-collector is not prowling around the building," said Om. It was an anxious ten minutes before the taxi drove up. They helped Dina unload the bolts of cloth and carry them to the back room.

"Not too much weight, careful with your ankle," she cautioned Ishvar. "By the way, there's going to be a strike in the mill. No more cloth till it's over."

"Hai Ram, trouble never ends." Suddenly, Ishvar's mind returned to what he had done the night before, and he apologized again for having fallen at her feet. "I should have known better."

"That's what you said last night. But why?" asked Dina.

"Because someone did it to me once. And it made me feel very bad."

"Who was it?"

"It's a very long story," said Ishvar, unwilling to tell her everything about their lives, but eager to share a little. "When my brother—Om's father—and I were apprenticed to a tailor, we gave him some help."

"What did you do?"

"Well," he hesitated. "Ashraf Chacha is Muslim, and it was the time of Hindu-Muslim riots. At independence, you know. There was trouble in the town, and—we were able to help him."

"So he touched your feet, this Ashraf?"

"No." The memory embarrassed Ishvar, even after twenty-eight years. "No, his wife did, Mumtaz Chachi did. And it made me feel very bad. As though I was taking advantage in some way of her misfortune."

"That's exactly how I felt last night. Let's forget about it now." She had a dozen more questions to ask, but respected his reluctance. If they wanted to, they would tell her more some day when they were ready.

For now, she added the pieces to what Maneck had already revealed about their life in the village. Like her quilt, the tailors' chronicle was gradually gathering shape.

* * * * *

THROUGHOUT that first day, Dina continued to struggle with words to construct the crucial question. How would she phrase it when the time came? What about: Sleep on the verandah till you find a place. No, it seemed like she was anxious to have them there. Start with a question: Do you have a place for tonight? But that sounded hypocritical, it was plain they didn't. A different question: Where will you sleep tonight? Yes, not bad. She tried it again. No, it expressed too much concern—much too open. Last night had been so easy, the words had sprung of their own accord, simple and true.

She watched the tailors work all afternoon, their feet welded

to the treadles, till Maneck came home and reminded them of the tea break. No, they said, not today, and she approved. "Don't make them waste money. They have lost enough in these last few weeks."

"But I was going to pay." "Yours is not to waste either. What's wrong with my tea?" She put the water on for everyone and set out the cups, keeping the pink rose borders separate. Waiting for the kettle to start chattering, she mulled her word-puzzle. What if she started with: Was the verandah comfortable? No, it sounded hopelessly false.

At quitting time the tailors placed the covers mournfully over the sewing-machines. They rose heavily, sighed, and walked towards the door.

For a moment Dina felt like a magician. She could make everything become shining and golden, depending on her words—the utterance was all.

"What time will you return?"

"Whenever you wish," said Om. "As early as you like." Ishvar nodded in silence.

She took the opening; the pieces fell into place. "Well, no need to rush. Have your dinner, then come back. Maneck and I will also finish eating by then."

"You mean we can...?"

"On the verandah?"

"Only till you find yourselves a place," she said, pleased at how neutral her statements were—the line drawn precisely.

Their gratitude warmed her, but she cut short the offer of payment. "No. Absolutely no rent. I am not renting anything, just keeping you out of those crooked police hands."

And she made it clear that their comings and goings had to be reduced, the risk with the landlord was too great. The washing trip to the railway station every morning, for one, could be eliminated. "You can bathe and have tea here. As long as you wake up early, before the water goes. Keep in mind, I have only one bathroom." Which made Om wonder why anybody would be silly enough to have more than one, but he didn't ask.

"And remember, I don't want a mess in there."

They agreed to all her conditions and swore they would be no bother. "But we really feel bad staying for free," said Ishvar.

"If you mention money once more, you'll have to find somewhere else."

They thanked her again and left for dinner, promising to be back by eight and sew for an hour before bedtime.

"But Aunty, why refuse their offer of rent? They'll feel good if you take a little money. And it will also help you with the expenses."

"Don't you understand anything? If I accept money, it means a tenancy on my verandah."



STOOPED over the basin, Dina brushed her teeth with Kolynos. Ishvar watched the foam drip from her mouth. "I've always wondered if that's good for the teeth," he said.

She spat and gargled before answering, "As good as any other toothpaste, I think. Which one do you use?"

"We use charcoal powder. And sometimes neem sticks."

Maneck said that Ishvar and Om's teeth were better than his.

"Show me," she said, and he bared them. "And yours?" she asked the tailors.

The three lined up before the mirror and curled their lips, exposing their incisors. She compared her own. "Maneck is right, yours are whiter."

Ishvar offered her a bit of charcoal powder to try, and she squeezed half an inch of Kolynos on his finger. He shared it with Om. "Taste is delicious," they concurred.

"That's all very well," she said. "But paying for taste is a waste, unless you are talking about food. I think I will switch to charcoal and save money." Maneck decided to follow suit.



THE ENLARGED household turned the wheel of morning with minimal friction. Dina was the first to rise, Maneck the last. When

she had finished in the bathroom the tailors took their turns. They were in and out so fast, she suspected a deficiency in matters of personal hygiene, till she saw their well-scrubbed faces and wet hair. A deep breath in their proximity confirmed the clean odour of freshly bathed skin.

Though the bathroom was unimaginable luxury, the tailors did not linger. High-speed washing came naturally to them. Over the last several months they had honed their skills in public places, where time was critical. The faucet in the alley near Nawaz's awning; the single tap at the centre of the hutment colony; the crumbling toilets in the overcrowded railway bathroom; the trickling spout at the irrigation project: all these had helped to perfect their technique to the point where each could finish within three minutes. They never operated Dina's immersion heater, preferring cold water, and their tidy habits left everything neat. Their bodies in her bathroom still made Dina uncomfortable. She was watchful, waiting to pounce if she found evidence that her soap or towel had been used. If they were to live here for a few days, it would be on her terms, there would be no slackening of the reins.

What she disliked most was Ishvar's morning ritual of plunging his fingers down his throat to retch. The procedure was accompanied by a primal yowling, something she had often heard emanating from other flats, but never at such close quarters. It made her skin crawl.

"Goodness, you frightened me," she said when the series of yips and yelps rang out.

He smiled. "Very good for the stomach. Gets rid of stale, excess bile."

"Careful, yaar," said Om, siding with Dina. "Sounds like your liver is coming out with the bile." He had never approved of his uncle's practice; Ishvar had tried to teach him its therapeutic effects and had given up, faced with a lack of cooperation.

"What you need is a plumber," said Maneck. "To install a little tap in your side. Then all you do is turn it on and release the excess bile." He and Om began baying an accompanying chorus when Ishvar started howling again.

After a few days of their combined teasing, Ishvar moderated his habit. The yowls were more restrained, and his fingers no longer explored his gullet to quite the same daredevil depths.



OM SNIFFED Maneck's skin. "Your smell is better than mine. Must be your soap."

"I use powder as well."

"Show me."

Maneck got the can from his room.

"And where do you put it? All over?"

"I just take a little in my palm and spread it in the armpits and chest."

On the next payment day, Om purchased a cake of Cinthol Soap and a can of Lakmé Talcum Powder.



THE PATTERN of each day, thought Dina at the end of the first week, was like the pattern of a well-cut dress, the four of them fitting together without having to tug or pull to make the edges meet. The seams were straight and neat.

Ishvar, however, was still troubled that he and his nephew were taking advantage of Dina's goodness. "You won't accept any rent from us," he said. "You let us use your verandah and bathroom. You give us tea. This is too much, it makes us feel bad."

His declaration reminded her of her own guilt. She knew that everything she did was done from self-preservation—to keep the tailors from being picked up again by the police, and to have them out of sight of nosy neighbours and the rent-collector. Now Ishvar and Om were wrapping her in the mantle of kindness and generosity. Deceit, hypocrisy, manipulation were more the fabrics of her garment, she thought.

"So what is your plan?" she said brusquely. "To insult me with fifty paise for tea? You want to treat me like a roadside chaiwalla?"

"No no, never. But is there not something we can do for you in return?"

She said she would let them know.

At the end of the second week, Ishvar was still waiting to hear. Then he took matters into his own hand. While she was bathing, he fetched the broom and dustpan from the kitchen and swept the verandah, the front room, Maneck's room, and the sewing room. As he finished in each, Om got busy with the bucket and cloth, mopping the floors.

They were still at it when Dina emerged from the bathroom. "What's going on here?"

"Forgive me, but I have decided," said Ishvar firmly. "We are going to share the daily cleaning from now on."

"That does not seem right," she said.

"Seems just fine," said Om, briskly squeezing out the mop. Deeply moved, she poured the tea while they were finishing up. They came into the kitchen to replace the cleaning things, and she handed two cups to Om.

Noticing the red rose borders, he started to point out her error: "The pink ones for us," then stopped. Her face told him she was aware of it.

"What?" she asked, taking the pink cup for herself. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing," his voice caught. He turned away, hoping she did not see the film of water glaze his eyes.

* * * * *

"SOMEONE at the door for you," said Dina. "The same long-haired fellow who came once before."

Ishvar and Om exchanged glances—what did he want now? Apologizing for the interruption, they went to the verandah.

"Namaskaar," said Rajaram, putting his hands together. "Sorry to bother you at work, but the nightwatchman said you didn't sleep there anymore."

"Yes, we have another place."

"Where?"

“Nearby.”

“Hope it’s nice. Listen, can I meet you later to talk? Any time today, anywhere, your convenience.” He sounded desperate.

“Okay,” said Ishvar. “Come to Vishram at one o’clock. You know where it is?”

“Yes, I’ll be there. And listen, can you please bring my hair from your trunk?”

After Rajaram had left, Dina asked the tailors if something was wrong. “He’s not connected with that other man, I hope—the one who’s squeezing you for money every week.”

“No no, he does not work for Beggarmaster,” said Ishvar. “He’s a friend, probably just wants a loan.”

“Well, you be careful,” said Dina. “These days, friends and foes look alike.”

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THE VISHRAM was crowded, and Rajaram was waiting nervously on the pavement when they arrived. “Here’s your hair,” Ishvar handed him the package. “So. What will you eat?”

“Nothing, my stomach is full,” said Rajaram, but his mouth betrayed his hunger, masticating phantom food in response to aromas from the Vishram.

“Have something,” said Ishvar, feeling sorry for him. “Try something, it’s our treat.”

“Okay, whatever you two are eating.” He forced a laugh. “A full stomach is only a small obstacle.”

“Three pao-bhajis and three bananas,” Ishvar told the cashier-waiter.

They carried their food to the site of a collapsed building, just down the road, and chose a window ledge in the shade of a half-crumbled wall. A horizontal door served as their table. Its hinges and knobs had been scavenged; the collapse was several weeks old. Four children with gunny sacks were clambering in the rubble, sifting and searching.

“So how’s your work as a Family Planning Motivator?”

Rajaram shook his head, wolfing a large mouthful. “Not good.”

He are as though he hadn't seen food for days. "They asked me to leave two weeks ago." "What happened?" "They said I wasn't producing results." "Suddenly? After two months?" "Yes," he hesitated. "I mean, no, there were problems from the very beginning. After the training course, I was following the procedure they showed me. I visited different neighbourhoods every day. I carefully repeated the things they taught me, using the correct tone, sounding kind and knowledgeable, so no one would get scared. And usually people listened patiently, took the leaflets; sometimes they laughed, and young fellows made dirty jokes. But no one would sign up for the operation.

"A few weeks later, my supervisor called me into his office. He said I wasn't pursuing the right customers. He said it was a waste of time trying to sell a wedding suit to a naked fakir. I asked him exactly what he meant."

Rajaram repeated for the tailors the supervisor's reply—that people in the city were too cynical, they doubted everything, it was difficult to motivate them. Suburban slums were the places to tackle. After all, there lived the ignorant people most in need of the government's help. The programme, with its free gifts and incentives, was specifically designed for them.

"So I took his advice and went outside the city. And would you believe it? On the very first day my cycle got a puncture."

"A bad beginning," said Ishvar, shaking his head.

"Puncture was only a small problem. The real trouble came later." While the tyre was being fixed at a cycle shop, said Rajaram, he got to talking with an elderly man waiting in a bus shelter, not far from a fire hydrant. The elderly man needed a wash, and was hoping that street urchins would come along and turn on the hydrant.

For the sake of practice, and to see how long he could hold the fellow's attention, Rajaram began telling him he was a Motivator involved in the good works of the Family Planning Centre. He described the birth-control devices, named the sterilization operations, and the cash inducement for each: a tubectomy was

awarded more free gifts than a vasectomy, he explained, because the government preferred intervention that was final and irreversible.

That's the one I want, interrupted the old man, the expensive one, the tube-whatever one. Rajaram almost fell off his perch on the bus-shelter railing. No no, grandfather, it's not for you, I was just talking about it for the sake of talking, he said. I insist, said the old man, it's my right. But tubectomy can only be performed on a woman's parts, explained Rajaram, for a man's parts there is vasectomy, and at your age even that is unnecessary. I don't care about age, I'll take it, whichever is meant for my parts, persisted the old man.

"Maybe he badly wanted a transistor radio," said Om.

"That's exactly what I assumed," said Rajaram. "I thought to myself, if this grandfather desires it so much, who am I to argue? If music makes him happy, why deny him?"

So he got out the proper form, took a thumbprint, paid the tyre-repairer, and escorted his patient to the clinic. That evening, he received the money for his commission, his very ~~first~~ he regarded the puncture as the harbinger of good fortune: the pointed finger of fate, flattening his tyre and his bad fortune. The badge of Motivator clung with more honesty to his shirt. Brimming with confidence, he returned to the suburban area, certain that he could round up vasectomies and tubectomies by the score.

A week passed, and his peregrinations took him to his first customer's neighbourhood. He cycled among the shacks, seeking to motivate the masses, his head overflowing with various ways of saying the same thing, formulating phrases to make sterility acceptable, even desirable, when someone from the old man's family recognized him and began shouting for help: Motorwaiter is here! Aray, the rascal Motorwaiter has come again! Rajaram was soon surrounded by an angry crowd threatening to break every bone in his body. In response to his pleas for mercy and his terrorstricken cries of why? why? he learned that something had gone wrong with the operation. The old man's

groin had filled up with pus. When the rot began to spread, the clinic was no help, and the old man died.

Ishvar nodded in sympathy as he peeled his banana. He had always felt that the hair-collector's new job was fraught with danger. "Did they beat you badly?"

Rajaram unbuttoned his shirt and showed them the purple bruises on his back. Across the chest was a gouge, starting to heal, made by some sharp tool. He lowered his head to point out the torn patch of scalp where an attacker had pulled out a clump of hair. "But I was lucky to escape with my life. They told me I should have known better, the only reason their grandfather went for the operation was because of the cash bonus and gifts. The old man had wanted to help with his granddaughter's dowry. I went straight to my supervisor and made a complaint. How could I produce results, I said, if the doctors killed the patients? But he said the man died because he was old, and the family was simply blaming the Family Planning Centre."

"Goat-fucking bastard," said Om.

"Exactly. But guess what else the supervisor told me. From now on my job would be easier, he said, because of a policy change." The new scheme had been explained to Rajaram—it was no longer necessary to sign up individuals for the operation. Instead, they were to be offered a free medical checkup. And it wasn't to be viewed as lying, just a step towards helping people improve their lives. Once inside the clinic, isolated from the primitive influence of families and friends, they would quickly see the benefits of sterilization.

Rajaram picked the crumbs from his pao-bhaji wrapper, then tossed it in the rubble. "Even though I didn't like the new system, I agreed to try it. By now, everyone realized that Motivators were giving bogus talk to people. Wherever I went, city or suburb, they insulted me, called me a threat to manhood, a dispenser of nampusakta, a castrator, a procurer of eunuchs. And here I was, just doing a government job, trying to make a living. How can you function like this day after day? No, I said, this is not for me."

He told his employers he was willing to work in the old way, distribute leaflets and explain procedures, but no more deception.

They said the old way was no longer an option—quotas had fallen behind badly. Concrete results were needed to justify each Motivator's food, shelter, and bicycle.

"So last week I lost all three when they threw me out. Now I am desperate. There is nothing to do but go back to my old profession."

"Hair-collecting?"

"Yes, I'm going to sell these plaits right away," he indicated the package the tailors had brought from their trunk. "And I am also starting my original trade. Barbering. I'll have to do both because without storage space, hair-collecting will be limited. But I need eighty-five rupees. For combs, scissors, clippers, razor. Can you lend me the money?"

"Let me think it over," said Ishvar. "Meet us tomorrow."

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"WE WOULD really like to do something for him, Dinabai," said Ishvar. "He was our neighbour in the hutment colony, and very good to us."

"I don't have enough to advance you the amount." But she offered an alternate solution. From the back of her cupboard she dug out the haircutting tools Zenobia had set her up with, years ago.

"Aray wah," said Om, impressed. "You are also a barber?"

"Used to be—children's hairdresser."

Maneck fitted his hand around the clippers and pretended to tackle Om's puff. "That's a nice shrub to practise on."

"Are you exchanging air-conditioning for barbering?" said Dina. She placed the kit before Ishvar. "It's old, but still works. Your friend can have it if he likes."

"Are you sure? What if you need it again?"

"Not likely. My haircutting days are over." She said that with her eyes and forgotten skills, children's ears would be in danger.

"THERE is one more problem," said Rajaram, gratefully receiving the instruments when they met the next day.

"Now what?"

"My hair agent visits the city only once a month. And sleeping on the street, I have nowhere to store what I collect. Will you keep it in your trunk? For me? Your good friend?"

"A month's supply won't fit in the trunk," objected Ishvar, not anxious to accumulate the unappetizing parcels.

"But it will. I'm going to specialize in long hair—in a month there will be ten plaits at the most, if I'm lucky. Won't take up more than a corner of your trunk. And at month's end I'll sell them to the agent."

"Your coming to the flat so often—it will annoy our employer." He wished Rajaram would give up; he felt awkward making excuses to block him. "It isn't our home, you know, we cannot keep receiving visitors."

"That's only a small obstacle. I can meet you outside. Here, at Vishram, if you like."

"We rarely come here," said Ishvar, then caved in. "Okay, what you can do is, leave the packet with Shankar, the beggar outside, the one on wheels. He knows us. We'll introduce you."

"That beggar is your friend? Strange friends you make."

"Yes, very strange," said Ishvar, but the hair-collector, absorbed in smoothing the knots and tangles of his life, missed the irony.



IF WITH ISHVAR it was the bile-seeking fingers that bothered Dina, with Om it was the itchy scalp. She had tolerated the scratching in the old days, knowing it would end at six o'clock. Now, apart from the annoying sight and the constant, irritating rasp, she feared that the itch would migrate to her own hair.

She spoke privately to Ishvar: lice was as bad as any other kind of sickness, and his nephew's health would improve if the parasite was eradicated.

"But problem is money," said Ishvar. "I cannot afford to take him to doctor."

"You don't need a doctor for lice. There's a perfectly good home remedy." And when she explained the procedure, he remembered his mother using it too.

While topping up the stove, she filled an empty hair-oil bottle with kerosene. "Do it after tea," she said. "Massage it properly and leave for twenty-four hours. It can be washed off tomorrow."

"Only twenty-four? I thought the remedy said forty-eight. That's how long my mother used to leave it on."

"Then your mother was a brave woman. Anything can happen in forty-eight hours. We don't want your nephew turning into a human torch."

"What are you talking about?" puzzled Om. He took the bottle and unscrewed the cap. "Chhee! It's kerosene!"

"You expected rose water? You want to pamper the lice or kill them?"

"That's right," said Ishvar. "Don't fuss, your Roopa Daadi used to do it for your father and me when we were children."

Grumbling and cringing, Om bent over the basin, complaining that people didn't have enough kerosene to cook their food and here they were, wasting it on hair. Ishvar took a few drops at a time in his palm and worked it in. Under the lightbulb, the oil-streaked black hair turned iridescent. "Beautiful as a peacock," he said.

"Dig your fingers in," instructed Dina. "Spread it well." His energetic hands heeded her, rocking the protesting Om back and forth.

"Stop it, yaar! You'll poison me if it enters my blood!"

When he was done she gave him a broken spoon to scratch with. "Don't use your fingers, or you'll get it on the dresses." He sat at the machine, miserable, wrinkling his nose, exhaling forcefully to blow out the smell. Relieving the itch with the spoon was not as satisfying as using fingernails. Now and again, he shook his head like a wet dog while they teased him.

"Would you like to smoke a beedi? Take your mind off?" asked Ishvar. "I'm sure Dinabai will make an exception today."

"Of course I will. Shall I bring the matches?"

"Go ahead, laugh," said Om darkly, "while I choke to death on these fumes."

At lunchtime he told his uncle he was not going to the Vishram,

he couldn't possibly eat with the stink in his nose. So Ishvar stayed back as well.

Later in the afternoon, Maneck came home and started sniffing around. "Smells like a kitchen in here." Keeping his nose low like a bloodhound, he followed the scent to Om. "Are you starting a new career as a stove?"

"Yes, he is," said Dina. "Tonight we'll cook our meal on top of his head. He has always been a hot-headed fellow."

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IT WAS her own joke that first made Dina consider giving the tailors dinner in the flat that night. Other factors reinforced the idea. It would throw off that rascal Ibrahim completely; the tailors hadn't gone for lunch, and they wouldn't emerge for dinner. And besides, Om sitting patiently all day wearing kerosene deserved a reward.

So she chopped another onion and boiled three more potatoes to include them. The breadman arrived at dusk. Instead of two small loaves she bought four. "Maneck, come here," she called from the kitchen, and took him into her confidence.

"Really? That's great, Aunty! They'll be thrilled to eat with us!"

"Who said anything about eating with us? I'm going to put their plates on the verandah."

"Are you trying to be nice or offensive?"

"What's offensive about it? It's a good, clean verandah."

"Fine. In that case, I'll also eat on the verandah. I cannot take part in such an insult. My father feeds only stray dogs on the porch."

She grimaced, and he knew he had won.

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DINA REMEMBERED the last time all sides of the table had been occupied: on her third wedding anniversary, the night Rustom had been killed, eighteen years ago. She set out four plates and

called in the tailors. Their faces plainly showed what an immense honour they considered it.

"You have taken your cure like a good boy," she said to Om, "and now you get your dinner." She brought the pot to the table, and a scraped carrot for herself. The tailors regarded her curiously as she bit into it. "You are not the only one taking a home remedy. This is medicine for my eyes. Right, Dr. Mac?"

"Yes, it's a prescription for improving vision."

"You know, I've grown to like raw carrots. But I hope Om doesn't get fond of his medicine. Or we'll have to suffer the kerosene stink every day."

"But how does it work? Does it poison the lice in my hair?"

"I can tell you," said Maneck.

"You are a champion fakeologist," said Om.

"No, listen. First, every little louse soaks itself in the kerosene. Then, in the middle of the night, after you are asleep, Dina Aunty gives each one a tiny matchstick. At the count of three they commit suicide in bursts of tiny flames without hurting you. There'll be a beautiful halo round your head when it happens."

"That's not funny," said Dina.

"Suicide isn't supposed to be, Aunty."

"I don't want such a subject at dinnertime. Not even as a joke. You shouldn't even say the word."

She started eating, and Maneck picked up his fork, winking at Om. The tailors sat motionless, watching the food. When she looked up, they smiled nervously. Exchanging glances, they touched the cutlery, uncertain, hesitating to pick it up.

Dina understood.

How stupid of me, she thought, to set it out tonight.

Abandoning her own knife and fork, she used fingers to convey a piece of potato to her mouth. Maneck caught on as well, and the tailors started their meal.

"Very tasty," said Ishvar, and Om nodded agreement with his mouth full. "You eat bread every day?"

"Yes," said Dina. "Don't you like it?"

"Oh, it's very good," said Ishvar. "No, I was just thinking, must

be expensive to buy ready-made bread every day. You don't get wheat on your ration card?"

"It's available. But taking it to the mill for grinding, mixing flour, making chapati—that's too much for me to do. I used to when my husband was alive. Afterwards, I didn't care. Nothing worse than cooking for just one." She broke a piece of her loaf to soak up some gravy. "Must be expensive for you also, eating at Vishram."

Ishvar said yes, it was difficult, especially with having to pay Beggar master weekly. "When we had our own place in the colony and a Primus stove, we spent much less, even without the benefit of a ration card. We made chapatis every day."

"You can buy wheat on my card if you like. I only take rice and sugar."

"Problem is, where to cook?"

The question was rhetorical, but Maneck had an answer. He let the silence linger over the table for a few moments, then spoke up brightly. "I have a great idea. Ishvar and Om are used to making chapatis, right? And Dina Aunty has all that grain quota on the ration card, right? So you can share the cost of food, and we can eat together. Both sides will save money."

More than money, it would save trouble with the landlord, thought Dina, by defeating Ibrahim. He could wait twenty-four hours outside the flat and see no one. Nosey neighbours too, if they were planning to snitch to him, get into his good books to solve their own problems. And besides, fresh puris and chapatis were absolutely delicious.

But was this reason enough to get more familiar with the tailors? Was it wise to tamper with the line she had drawn so carefully? "I don't know," she said. "Ishvar and Om might not like to have my food every day."

"Not like? It's so tasty!" said Om.

She chewed slowly, giving herself time to think. "Well, we can try it for a week."

"That will be very good," said Ishvar.

"I'll make the chapatis," said Om. "I'm the chapati champion."

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THE GOVERNMENT truck was delivering fresh stock at the ration shop. Dina and the tailors joined the queue while two coolies unloaded fifty-kilo gunnies upon their backs. Sunlight flashed from the large steel hooks they swung to claw a grip into the burlap. Their dripping sweat, when it chanced to fall upon the beige jute sacking, created dark-brown dots. Inside the shop, the sacks of grain landed neatly in a row, like dead bodies in a morgue, beside the scales hanging from the ceiling by a heavy chain. These fellows are taking too long,” said Ishvar, “carrying one at a time. Go on, Om, show them how to carry two.”

“Don’t tease the poor boy,” said Dina, as he pretended to roll up his sleeves. “Why is he so thin anyway? Are you sure he does not have worms?”

“No no, Dinabai, no worms, trust me. Bas, I’ll soon get him married, and his wife’s cooking will put weight on him.”

“He’s too young for marriage.”

“Almost eighteen—that’s not young.”

“Dinabai is right, forget your crazy idea,” scowled Om.

“Sour-lime face.”

The line was growing longer. Someone shouted from the back to hurry up, and the banya emerged belligerently, ready to take on the heckler. “Use your sense when you speak! If the truck is not allowed to unload, what am I going to give you? Rocks and sand?”

“That’s what you usually sell us!” the heckler yelled back, and people laughed. “Have you ever tasted your own stock?” He was a small man with a large goitre, which drew the stares of the people in line.

“Aray saala, go! Nobody is forcing you to buy!”

Those near the heckler tried to prevent the argument from overheating. They reminded him it wasn’t wise to fight at a ration shop, it was impossible to win when you depended on them for your food. Someone said the swelling on his neck might burst if he got too excited.

"This swelling is also caused by rascal banyas!" he raged. "They sell bad salt—salt without iodine! These fat, greedy banyas are responsible for all our suffering! Blackmarketeers, food-adulterers, poisoners!"

The grain truck rolled away. A sprinkle of wheat from leaking sacks marked the place where it had stood. A barefoot man in a vest and short pants quickly collected the spilled grain in an empty vanaspati tin, then ran after the truck to its next destination; tonight he would eat well.

The attendant engaged the scales, and the shop began serving again. The appropriate entries were made in Dina's ration card. Besides the usual sugar and rice, she bought, under the tailors' guidance, her full quota of red and white wheat as well as the allotment of jowar and bajri, which they said was very tasty, very nourishing, and, best of all, not expensive.

They watched the scales while each item was weighed, gazing up at the pointer till the beam came to rest. A cloud of dust rose when the man tipped the pan into Dina's cloth bags. The grain cascaded with the sound of a soft waterfall. Afterwards, the tailors took the bags to the mill.

In the evening Om grew a little anxious about his chapati reputation. He mixed the flour and kneaded the dough more strenuously than he normally would have, concentrating hard while rolling out the chapatis, trying to make them perfectly round. A wayward arc meant that the dough was squished into a ball and rolled out again.

At dinner, everyone complimented his success. The praise was also delivered in the speed with which the eight he had made vanished. Pleased, he decided to make twelve from now on.

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THE CATS came miaowing as soon as the window opened. Maneck told Ishvar and Om the names he had given to some: John Wayne, who liked to swagger about, implying he had the alley under control; Vijayanthimala, his favourite, the brown and white tabby, prancing as though in a film-song dance sequence; Raquel Welch,

sitting languidly, stretching, never deigning to rush to the food; and Shatrughan Sinha, bully and villain, from whom the scraps had to be thrown far, to give others a chance.

“Who is John Wayne?” asked Om.

“American actor. Hero type—sort of like Amitabh Bachchan. Walks as though he has piles, and onions under his arms. Always wins in the end.”

“And Raquel Welch?”

“American actress.” He leaned closer. “Big breasts,” he whispered, while the miaowing continued below the window.

Om grinned. “Good thing I made extra chapatis today. Looks like she’s enjoying them.”

“What’s going on?” said Dina. “Now you are teaching my tailors your bad habits. Please shut that window.” She wondered if something uncontrollable had been started here, with all this cooking together and eating together. Too much intimacy. She hoped she wouldn’t regret it.

Ishvar stood aside while the two boys carried on. “They say it’s a blessed deed, Dinabai, to feed dumb animals.”

“Won’t be so blessed if they come inside in search of food. They could kill us with filthy germs from the gutter.”

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IN THE WC, the tailors’ urine smell that used to flutter like a flag in the air, and in Dina’s nose, grew unnoticeable. Strange, she thought, how one gets accustomed to things.

Then it struck her: the scent was unobtrusive now because it was the same for everyone. They were all eating the same food, drinking the same water. Sailing under one flag.

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“LET’S HAVE masala wada today,” proposed Ishvar. “Rajaram’s recipe.”

“I don’t know how to make that.”

“That’s okay, I can do it, Dinabai, you relax today.” He took

charge, sending Om and Maneck to buy a fresh half-coconut, green chillies, mint leaves, and a small bunch of coriander. The remaining ingredients—dry red chillies, cumin seed, and tamarind—were in the spice cabinet. “Now you two hurry back,” he said. “There’s more work for you.”

“Shall I do something?” asked Dina.

“We need one cup of gram dal.”

She measured out the pulse and immersed it in water, then put the pot on the stove. “If we had soaked it overnight it wouldn’t need boiling,” he said. “But this is fine too.”

When the boys returned, he assigned Om to grate the coconut and Maneck to slice two onions, while he chopped four green and six red chillies, the coriander, and the mint leaves.

“These onions are hot, yaar,” said Maneck, sniffing and wiping his eyes on his sleeve.

“It’s good practice for you,” said Ishvar. “Everyone has to cry at some time in life.” He glanced across the table and saw the fat white rings falling from the knife. “Hoi-hoi, slice it thinner.”

The dal was ready. He drained the water and emptied the pot into the mortar. He added half a teaspoon of cumin seed and the chopped chillies, then began mashing it all together. The drumming pestle prompted Maneck to add cymbals with his knife upon the pot.

“Aray bandmaster, are your onions ready?” said Ishvar. The medley in the mortar was turning into a rough paste, yellow with specks of green and red and brown. He mixed in the remaining ingredients and raised a bit to his nose, sampling the aroma. “Perfect. Now it’s time to make the frying pan sing. While I do the wadas, Om will make the chutney. Come on, grind the remaining copra and kothmeer-mirchi.”

The frying pan hissed and sizzled as Ishvar gently slid Ping-Pong-sized balls into the glistening oil. He pushed them around with a spoon, keeping them swimming for an even colour. Meanwhile, Om dragged the round masala stone back and forth across the flat slab. Maneck took over after a while. Drop by precious drop, the green chutney emerged from their effort.

Dina stood savouring the fragrance of the wadas that were

slowly turning mouth-watering brown in bubbling oil. She watched as the cleanup commenced with laughter and teasing, Ishvar warning the boys that if the grinding stone was not spotless he would make them lick it clean, like cats. What a change, she thought—from the saddest, dingiest room in the flat, the kitchen was transformed into a bright place of mirth and energy minutes later the treat was ready. “Let’s eat while it’s hot,” said Ishvar. “Come on, Om, get water for us.”

Everyone took a wada apiece and spread chutney over it. Ishvar waited for the verdict, beaming proudly.

“Superb!” said Maneck.

Dina pretended to be upset, saying he had never praised her meals with superlatives. He tried to wriggle out of it. “Your food is also superb, Aunty, but it’s similar to my mother’s Parsi cooking. That’s the only reason my tastebuds didn’t go crazy.”

Ishvar and Om were modest about their efforts. “It’s nothing. Very simple to make.”

“It’s delicious,” affirmed Dina. “Maneck’s idea of eating together was very good. If I knew from the beginning your food was so tasty, I would have hired you as cooks, not tailors.”

“Sorry,” Ishvar smiled at the compliment, “we don’t cook for money—only for ourselves and for friends.”

His words stirred her familiar residue of guilt. There was still a gulf between them; she did not see them as they saw her. Over the weeks, the tailors expanded their contribution from chapatis, puris, and wadas to vegetarian dishes like paneer masala, shak-bhaji, aloo masala. There were always four people, or at least two, bustling about the kitchen in the evening. My bleakest hour, thought Dina, has now become the happiest.

On days that she made a rice dish, the tailors had a break from chapatis but went to the kitchen to help, if they were not out searching for a room to rent. “When I was a little boy in the village,” said Ishvar, cleaning the rice, picking out pebbles, “I used to do this for my mother. But in reverse. We used to go to the fields after the harvest and search for grain left from threshing and winnowing.”

They were trusting her with bits of their past, she realized, and

nothing could be as precious. More pieces, to join to the growing story of the tailors.

"In those days," continued Ishvar, "it seemed to me that that was all one could expect in life. A harsh road strewn with sharp stones and, if you were lucky, a little grain."

"And later?"

"Later I discovered there were different types of roads. And a different way of walking on each."

She liked his way of putting it. "You describe it well."

He chuckled. "Must be my tailor training. Tailors are practised in examining patterns, reading the outlines."

"And what about you, Om? Did you also help your mother to collect grain?"

"No."

"He didn't need to," added Ishvar. "By the time he was born, his father—my brother—was doing well in tailoring."

"But he still sent me to learn about the stinking leather," said Om.

"You didn't tell me that," said Maneck.

"There are many things I haven't told you. Have you told me everything?"

"Learning about leather was to build character," explained Ishvar. "And to teach Om his history, remind him of his own community."

"But why did he need reminding?"

"It's a long story."

"Tell us," said Dina and Maneck, in unintentional unison, which made them laugh.

"In our village we used to be cobblers," began Ishvar.

"What he means is," interrupted Om, "our family belonged to the Chamaar caste of tanners and leather-workers."

"Yes," said Ishvar, taking the reins again, "a long time ago, long before Omprakash was born, when his father, Narayan, and I were young boys of ten and twelve, we were sent by our father, whose name was Dukhi, to be apprenticed as tailors..."

TEACH ME how to use them," said Om.

"What?"

"The knife and fork."

"Okay," said Maneck. "First lesson. Elbows off the table."

Ishvar nodded approvingly. He commented that it would impress everyone and increase Om's worth when they went back to the village to find him a wife. "Eating with fancy tools—that's a great skill, like playing a musical instrument."

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DINA'S QUILT started to grow again. With the tailors sailing vigorously through Au Revoir's export orders, remnants piled up like the alluvial deposits of a healthy river. She sat with the patches after dinner, selecting and blending the best of the recent acquisitions.

"These new pieces are completely different in style from the old ones," said Maneck. "You think they will look all right?"

"The counterpane critic is starting again," she groaned.

"Squares and triangles and polygons," said Om. "They are a bit confusing, for sure."

"It will look beautiful," said Ishvar with authority. "Just keep connecting patiently, Dinabai—that's the secret. Ji-hahn, it all seems meaningless bits and rags, till you piece it together."

"Exactly," she said. "These boys don't understand. By the way, there is lots of cloth in the cupboard, if you also want to make something."

Ishvar thought of Shankar—it would be nice to present him with a new vest. He described the problem to Dina: the amputated lower half, where nothing would stay put, neither a loincloth nor underwear nor pants, because of his constant squirming and manoeuvring on the platform. And once the garment had slipped off his waist, he was helpless until Beggarmaster came on his rounds.

"I think I have the answer," said Dina. She found her old school bathing-costume, a one-piece, and explained its design. Copying it would be easy, with a few modifications such as adding sleeves, a collar, and buttons along the front.

"Your idea is bilkool first class," said Ishvar.

He set aside sections of light-brown poplin, and next afternoon took his tape measure to the Vishram. Blowing on their tea saucers, Om and he watched through the window. Shankar was trying out a new routine on the pavement.

The ever-innovative Beggarmaster had lengthened the platform by attaching an extension. Shankar lay flat on his back, waving his thigh stumps in the air. His testicles dribbled out of the swaddling cloth during the turbulence. He kept tucking them back, but it required an arduous stretch to accomplish, and after a while he let the scrotum hang.

“O babu ek paisa day-ray,” he sang, rattling the begging tin on the first and third beats. It rested on his forehead between his fingerless palms. When he got tired he set it beside his head, leaving the hands free to wave like the thigh stumps.

He was sitting up by the time the tailors finished their tea. The view from the supine position was new for him, and he could only take it in small doses, spending the minutes in dread, afraid that somebody would step on him. Rush hour, when the hordes swept over the pavement, was a period of sheer terror.

Seeing Ishvar and Om emerge, he rowed his platform in from the kerb to chat with them.

“New improved gaadi, hahn, Shankar?”

“What to do, have to keep the public satisfied. Beggarmaster thought it was time for variety. He has been very kind since we came back from that horrible place. Even nicer than before. And he does not call me Worm anymore, uses my real name, just like you.”

He was excited by their plans to design a vest uniquely for him. The three moved into the privacy of the Vishram’s back alley where Ishvar could take some measurements.

“Must be nice for you,” said Om. “Being able to sleep on the job now.”

“You have no idea what a paradise it is,” said Shankar slyly. “It’s been only three days, and the things I’ve seen. Especially when the skirts go floating over my head.”

“Really?” Om was envious. “What do you see?”

"Words are too weak to describe the ripeness, the juiciness, of what my eyes have feasted on."

"Maybe my nephew would like to take your place on the gaadi for a day or two," said Ishvar drily.

"First he would have to do something about his legs," said Shankar, relishing his touch of black humour. "I know—just stop paying Beggarmaster. That will automatically produce broken limbs."

The gift was ready the next day, and when the tailors went out in the evening to continue their search for accommodation, they stopped by Shankar's pavement. They wanted to take him to the alley and help him into the vest to check the fit, but he was a little doubtful. "Beggarmaster would not like that," he said.

"Why?"

"The new cloth looks too good." He preferred not to wear it till it had been approved.

They went away disappointed, taking with them the parcel of hair from under Shankar's platform. For quite some time there had been nothing from the hair-collector, but in the last few days his deliveries had become regular. Their trunk was filling up.

"If long hair is very rare, how is Rajaram suddenly collecting so much of it?" wondered Om.

"I'm not going to bother my head with that fellow's hair."

The following week, the tailors finally saw the beggar dressed in their gift. It was hard to recognize at first, for Beggarmaster had modified the brown poplin. Soiled all over, with a hole torn into the front, the garment was now suitable for Shankar.

"That bastard Beggarmaster," said Om. "Wrecking our creation."

"Don't judge him by your clothes," said Ishvar. "You wouldn't go to work for Dinabai wearing a tie-collar or a big wedding turban, would you?"

XI
The Bright Future Clouded

After the verandah's security and comfort had blunted the urgency for new accommodation, the tailors' evening excursions in search of a room to rent became a halfhearted exercise. Ishvar felt a little guilty about this, felt they were taking advantage of Dina's hospitality, now entering its third month. To assuage his conscience, he got into the habit of describing the failures for her in minute detail: the places they visited, the chawls and kholis and sheds they inspected, and how narrowly they missed out.

"So disappointing," he said, on more evenings than one. "Just ten minutes before we got there, someone took the room. And such a nice room too."

But time had tranquillized Dina's worries about the landlord. She was quite content to let the tailors continue sleeping on the verandah. No one could have told her otherwise, not even Zenobia, who was horrified to discover their trunk and bedding there when she dropped in one evening.

"This is dangerous," she warned. "You are playing with fire."

"Oh, nothing will happen," said Dina confidently. She had repaid Nusswan's loan, there had been no more bother from the rent-collector, and the sewing was proceeding faster than ever.

The fearfully anticipated strike at Au Revoir Exports was also averted, which Mrs. Gupta celebrated as a triumph of good over evil. "The corporation has its own musclemen now," she explained to Dina. "It's a case of our goondas versus their goondas. They deal with the union crooks before they can start trouble or lead the poor workers astray. Mind you, even the police support us. Everybody is fed up with the nuisance of unions," tailors rejoiced when Dina brought home the good news.

"Our stars are in the proper position," said Ishvar.

"Yes," she said. "But it's more important that your stitches be in the proper position."

Ishvar and Om usually set off on their housing hunt after dinner, and sometimes before, if they were not cooking that day. She wished them good luck, but always added "See you back soon," and meant it. Maneck frequently went along. Left alone, her eyes kept turning to the clock as she awaited the ~~end~~ when the evening's wanderings were later reported to her,

her advice was: "Don't rush into anything." It would be foolish, she said, to pay a premium for a place which might be demolished again because it was illegally constructed. "Better to save your money and get a proper room that no one can throw you out of. Take your time."

"But you don't accept rent from us. How long can we burden you like this?"

"I don't feel any burden. And neither does Maneck. Do you, Maneck?"

"Oh yes, I have a big burden. My exams are coming."

"The other problem is," continued Ishvar, "my dear nephew cannot get married until we have our own place."

"Now that's something I can't help you with," said Dina.

"Who said I wanted to marry?" scowled Om, while she and Ishvar exchanged parental smiles.



A TIP about a possible half-room in the northern suburbs led them to the neighbourhood where they had searched for work on first arriving in the city. By the time they reached the location, the place had already been rented. They happened to be passing Advanced Tailoring Company, and decided to say hello to Jeevan.

"Ah, my old friends are back," Jeevan greeted them. "With a new friend. Is he also a tailor?"

Maneck smiled and shook his head.

"Ah, never mind, we'll soon turn you into one." Then Jeevan waxed nostalgic about the time the three tailors had worked round the clock to meet the by-election deadline. "Remember, we made a hundred shirts and hundred dhotis, for that fellow's bribes?"

"Felt like a thousand," said Om.

"I found later that he had parcelled out work to more than two dozen tailors. He gave away five thousand shirts and dhotis."

"Where do these rascal politicians get the money?"

"Black money, what else—from businessmen needing favours. That's how the whole licence-permit-quota raj works."

It turned out, however, that the candidate was defeated, despite

distributing the garments among his most important constituents, because the opposition kept making clever speeches: that there was no crime in using empty hands to accept fine gifts, as long as wise heads prevailed at voting time. "He tried to blame me for losing. That the voters rejected him because the clothes were badly stitched. I said, bring it and show me. I never saw him again." Jeevan cleared his work from the counter and brushed fluff off his shirt front. "Come, sit, drink a little tea with me."

The invitation to sit was only a figure of speech. The clutter in the tiny shop made it difficult to take literally. Renovations had been performed since the tailors were last here, and the rear had been partitioned to include a curtained booth for trial fittings. Ishvar accepted a saucer of tea at the counter; Jeevan sipped from the cup. The boys took theirs to the outside steps, to share.

It turned out to be a busy evening for Advanced Tailoring. "You have brought me good luck," said Jeevan. A family came to order outfits for their three little daughters, the mother proudly carrying the bundle of fabric under her arm, the father frowning fiercely. They wanted a blouse and long skirt for each child, in time for Divali.

Strumming his lips with one finger, Jeevan pretended to study his order book. "That's only a month away," he complained. "Everybody is in a hurry." He hummed and hawed, produced dentilingual clicks, then said it was possible, but only just.

The little girls hopped on their toes with relief and excitement. The fierce father snapped at them to stand still or he would break their heads. His family paid no attention to the excessive threat. They were used to this paternal aberration of speech.

Jeevan measured the cloth, a polyester design of peacocks. He frowned grimly, measured again, and pronounced, strumming his lips, that it was insufficient for three blouses and three long skirts. The children were ready to cry.

"The bowlegged bastard is lying," whispered Om to Maneck.
"Watch now."

He measured a third time and said, with the air of a

philanthropist, that there was another option. "It will be very difficult, but I can make knee-length frocks."

The parents desperately seized the alternative, requesting Jeevan to go ahead. He flapped his tape in the air and invited the children forward for measurements. They stood stiffly, like a puppeteer's dolls, turning, raising their heads, lifting their arms with frozen joints.

"The crook will swipe at least three yards from it, maybe four," murmured Om, vacating the steps to let the family depart. The three little girls complained softly that they wanted long skirts so, so much. Their father hugged them affectionately, threatening to knock their teeth out if they didn't behave themselves, and the happy family disappeared down the footpath.

Jeevan folded the cloth and tucked the page with the children's measurements inside it. "We tailors have to make a living, no?" he sought approval for his performance.

Ishvar nodded in a non-committal manner.

"These customers—always expecting too much from us,"

Jeevan tried again, hiding poorly behind banalities.

He was plucked out of his awkward moment by the appearance of another client. The woman, scheduled for a trial fitting, was handed the preliminary framework of her silk choli. She disappeared into the booth, drawing the curtain shut.

Maneck nudged Om, and they turned to watch. The swaying curtain settled a few inches from the floor, where the woman's sari could be seen caressing her sandalled feet. Jeevan wagged a finger at them, then leered at the booth himself.

"A thinner curtain would put spice in my life," said Om. They could hear the gentle tinkling of her bangles.

"Shoosh!" warned Jeevan, snickering. "You will cost me a regular customer."

The woman's reappearance made them stumble into a guilty silence. They examined her surreptitiously, glancing sideways with heads lowered. Her sari had been left off the shoulders to permit Jeevan to review the blouse-in-progress. "Arms raised a little, please," he said, slipping his tape measure under them. Now

his tone was clinical, like a doctor asking to see the patient's tongue.

Between the choli and the waistline her midriff was bare. She was wearing a hipster sari, in the modern fashion, showing her navel. Maneck and Om stared as Jeevan recommended two tucks at the back and a slightly deeper plunge for the neckline. She returned behind the curtain.

Om whispered to Maneck that this was the part he missed the most in working for Dinabai from paper patterns. "It gives me no chance to measure women."

"As if you could do anything while measuring."

"You don't know how much is possible, yaar." Doing a blouse, especially a tight choli like this one, he said, was heaven, because the tape went over the cups. Passing it around and reaching with the other hand to bring it to the front, you had to stand very close to her. This alone was exciting. Then your fingers held the tape in the hollow between the two breasts—so you didn't touch her—but it was always possible to graze a little. You had to be careful, and know when to press on. If she shrank as soon as the tape touched, it was dangerous to try anything. But some of them did not mind, and you could tell from their eyes and their nipples whether it was safe to move your fingers about.

"Have you ever done it?"

"Many times. At Muzaffar Tailoring, with Ashraf Chacha."

"Maybe I really should give up college and become a tailor."

"You should. It's more fun."

Maneck smiled. "Actually, I'm thinking of continuing college after my year is up."

"Why? I thought you hated it."

Maneck was silent for a moment, piano-playing on his knuckles. "I got a letter from my parents. Saying how much they are waiting for this year to finish, how lonely they are without me—same old rubbish. When I was there, they said go, go, go. So I've decided to write that I want to stay for three more years, do the degree course instead of the one-year diploma."

"You're stupid, yaar. In your place, I would return to my parents as early as possible."

"What's the point? To argue and fight again with my father? Besides, I'm having fun here now."

Om inspected his nails and ran a hand through his puff. "If you're planning to stay, you should change your subject to tailoring, for sure. Because you cannot measure women for refrigerators." He chuckled. "What are you going to say? 'Madam, how deep are your shelves?'"

Maneck laughed. "I could ask 'Madam, may I examine your compressors?' Or 'Madam, you need a new thermostat in your thermostat cavity.'"

"Madam, your temperature-control knobs require adjustment."

"Madam, your meat drawer is not opening properly."

The customer left as they were getting uproarious, and Ishvar said, "Come on, you two, time to go. What are you laughing so much about, hahn?"

"As if we don't know," grinned Jeevan, bidding them good luck and farewell. "Hope you soon find a room."

* * * * *

DURING reading week, prior to Manek's exams, the rent-collector paid an unscheduled afternoon call. The tailors silenced the sewing-machines at the sound of the doorbell.

"How are you, sister?" said Ibrahim, his hand rising fezwards.

"What is it now?" said Dina, barring his way. "Rent is already paid this month."

"Rent is not the problem, sister." Shrinking as he spoke, he blurted in one sentence that the office had sent him to deliver a final notice to vacate in thirty days because they had proof that she was using the flat for commercial purposes despite the warning months ago.

"Nonsense! What proof do they have?"

"Why get upset with me, sister," he pleaded, tapping the notebook in his pocket. "It's all here—dates, times, coming-going, taxi, dresses. And more proof is sitting in the back room."

"Back room? You want to show me?" She stood aside and gestured him in.

The outright challenge startled him. He had no choice but to accept. Entering with his head bowed, he made for the sewing room. The tailors, frozen at the Singers, waited nervously, while Maneck watched from his room.

"This is the problem, sister. You cannot hire tailors and run a business here." He moved his anguished hands to include the other bedroom. "And a paying guest, on top of that. Such insanity, sister. The office will throw you out for sure."

"You are talking rubbish!" she started the counterattack. "This man," she said, pointing to Ishvar, "he is my husband. The two boys are our sons. And the dresses are all mine. Part of my new 1975 wardrobe. Go, tell your landlord he has no case."

It was difficult to say whom she shocked more with the apocryphal revelation: Ishvar, blushing and playing with his scissors, or Ibrahim, wringing his hands and sighing.

Pressing home her advantage, she demanded, "You have anything else to say?"

Ibrahim hunched his shoulders till they looked sufficiently supplicatory. "Marriage licence, please? Birth certificates? Can I see, please?"

"My slipper across your mouth is what you will see! How dare you insult me! Tell your landlord, if he does not stop harassing my family, I'll take him straight to court!"

He retreated, muttering that he would have to make a full report to the office, why abuse him for doing his job, he did not enjoy it any more than the tenants did.

"If you don't enjoy it, leave it. At your age you shouldn't have to work anyway. Your children can look after you."

"I have to work, I am all alone," he said as the door shut.

The sweetness of her victory faded. She waited, hearing him panting outside, catching his breath before he could set off. In the moment of his brief words, her own life's lonely, troubled years came rushing back, reminding her how recent and unreliable was the happiness discovered in these last few months.

In the back room Ishvar had recovered from the matrimonial surprise. The boys were chortling away, teasing him about the

look on his face. "You keep talking about a wife for me," said Om. "Instead you got one for yourself."

"That was an amazing idea, Aunty. Did you plan it in advance?"

"Never mind that, you better plan for your exams."

* * * * *

COLLEGE CLOSED for the three-week Divali vacation, and Dina encouraged Maneck to be a tourist. "All this time it's been home to class and class to home. But there is so much sightseeing in this city. The museum and aquarium and the sculpted caves will fascinate you. Victoria Garden and the Hanging Gardens are also worth visiting, believe me."

"But I've seen them before."

"When? Years ago, with your mummy? You were just a little baba then, you cannot remember anything. You must go again. And you must also visit your Sodawalla relatives—they are your mummy's family."

"Okay," he said indifferently, and did not stir from the flat.

That week, the first fireworks of Divali were heard. "Hai Ram," said Ishvar. "What a bombardment."

"This is nothing," said Dina. "Wait till the actual date gets closer."

The noise delayed bedtime by roughly two hours each night, making Maneck's empty vacation days longer and emptier. To compensate he tried rising late, but the clamorous dawn, filled with clanging milkmen and argumentative crows, was always victorious.

Dina wrote down bus numbers and directions for him. "It's very easy to find these tourist attractions, you won't get lost," she said, thinking that perhaps that was what scared him. But Maneck did not budge.

Fed up with his moping about the house, she began scolding him. "All the time indoors, like a glum grandpa. It's not natural for a young man. And you're driving us crazy with your pacing up and down the whole day."

His idle presence now began to distract Om, who was once

again taking extended tea breaks with him at the Vishram, or playing cards on the verandah, showing a general disinclination to work. Ishvar reproached his nephew, and Dina reprimanded him as well, to no avail.

At the end of the week they took a different approach; they decided it would be best to let Om have a vacation too. Expecting him to slog at the Singer while his friend waited around was unrealistic. After all, it was bad enough having to earn his living at an age when he should have been going to college like Maneck.

So Om was told he could reduce his hours and sew from eight to eleven in the morning. "You have worked very hard these last few months," said Dina. "You deserve a holiday."

Now there was no keeping them at home. The minute Om finished his short shift, the two were not seen again till dinnertime. Then it was nonstop talk through the meal and until bedtime, for they were full of the things they had done.

"The sea was so rough, the launch was jumping like a wild horse," said Om. "It was scary, yaar."

"I'm telling you, Aunty, your paying guest and half your tailoring factory almost drowned at the jetty."

"Don't say inauspicious things," said Ishvar.

"After that launch ride, even the aquarium made me dizzy—all that water around us."

"But the fish were beautiful, yaar. And such stylish ways they have of swimming. As if they were out for a walk, or shopping in the bazaar, squeezing the tomatoes, or like police running after a thief."

"Some of them were so colourful, like the cloth from Au Revoir," said Maneck. "And the nose of the sawfish looked exactly like a real saw, I swear."

"Tomorrow, I want to get a massage at the beach," said Om. "We saw them today, with their oils and lotions and towels."

"Be very careful," warned Dina. "Those massagewallas are crooks. They give you beautiful chumpee till you are so relaxed, you fall asleep. Then they pick your pocket."

The next three days, however, were spent at the museum. Om came home and said that the builders must have modelled the

domed roof after his uncle's stomach. "If only I could honestly claim such prosperity," said Ishvar. For three evenings he and Dina heard all about the Chinese gallery, Tibetan gallery, Nepalese gallery, samovars, tea urns, ivory carvings, jade snuff boxes, tapestries.

Particularly transfixing had been the armour collection—the suits of mail, jade-handled daggers, scimitars, swords with serrated edges ("like the coconut grater on the kitchen shelf," said Om), bejewelled ceremonial swords, bows and arrows, cudgels, pikes, lances, and spiked maces.

"They looked like the weapons in that old film, *Mughal-e-Azam*," said Maneck, and Om added they would be useful to arm all the Chamaars in the villages, conduct a massacre of the landlords and upper castes, which made Ishvar frown disapprovingly till the boys' laughter reassured him.

And so they devoured their holidays with youthful appetites. The wonders of the city tumbled from their tongues for Ishvar, who enjoyed their sightseeing vicariously, and for Dina, who, in the tide of their enthusiasm, rediscovered something of her own school-days.



HALFWAY through the vacation a late monsoon surge darkened the skies. Heavy rain kept the boys indoors. Bored and restless, Maneck remembered the chessmen. Om had never seen a set, and the plastic figures captivated his imagination. He demanded to learn the game.

Maneck began naming the pieces for him: "King, queen, bishop, knight, rook, pawn." The sculpted words fell with a familiar caress upon his own ears. He took pleasure in feeling the pieces between his fingers again after so long, resurrecting them from their maroon plywood coffin in their customary squares, ready for battle.

Then, abruptly, the sound of his voice became the faraway echo of another—a voice that had once named the chessmen thus, for him, in the college hostel. He stopped, unable to proceed with

explaining the game. The voice began disinterring the bones of his recent past, the ones he was trying to forget, had half-forgotten, had never wanted to see again. Now they were suddenly surfacing with grotesque alacrity.

He stared at the chessboard, where every piece harboured a ghost within its square. Thirty-two ghosts began their own moves, a dancing, colliding, taunting army of memories willing to do battle with his will to forget. Then the dancing chessmen changed partners, and it was the face of Avinash smiling at him from all sixty-four squares.

With an effort, Maneck abandoned the board and went to the window. Rain was pounding the street. Someone's motorcycle lay covered under a loudly thrumming tarpaulin. The puddles around it were muddy and uninviting. There were no children playing or splashing, the street joyless in this rain that had stayed too long and was too torrential. He wished he had never opened the box of chessmen.

"What's wrong?" asked Om.

"Nothing."

"Come on, then. Stop wasting time, show me how to play."

"It's a stupid game. Forget it."

"Why do you have it, if it's stupid?"

"Someone lent it to me. I have to return it soon." He watched the sewer's whirlpool swallow empty cigarette packs and soft-drink bottlecaps. Kohlah's Cola would not be among them. Not while Daddy continued in his stubborn ways. What a success the business could have been. And he would never have had to come to this bloody college. Must have made a wrong move somewhere in life, he thought, to walk into this check.

"You just don't want to teach me," said Om, sweeping the pieces into the box. They fell with an accusing clatter. Maneck looked, and opened his mouth as though he would speak. Om did not notice, sliding on the lid.

Maneck lingered at the window a little longer before returning to the chessboard. "I don't want to give you any trouble," said Om sarcastically. "Are you sure you want to teach me?"

He said nothing, set the board up and began to explain the rules. The rain was beating hard on the motorcycle's tarpaulin. Over the next two days, Om learned how the pieces were moved and captured but the concept of checkmate continued to elude him. If Maneck constructed an example on the board, he grasped it perfectly, feeling the trapped king's helplessness with a visceral anguish. But to reach a similar dénouement on his own during play was beyond him, and he became impatient.

Maneck felt the failure was his—he was just not as good a teacher as Avinash. The corollaries of stalemate and draw were equally difficult. “Sometimes there aren’t enough pieces left on either side, so the king keeps endlessly moving out of check,” he explained over and over.

Again, Om understood when it was illustrated on the board; but the metaphor of kings and armies was not sustained to his satisfaction, and he refused to proceed beyond it. “Makes no sense,” he argued. “Look, your army and my army are battling, and all our men are dead. That leaves the two of us. Now one of us has to win, the stronger will kill the other, right?”

“Maybe. But the rules are different in chess.”

“The rules should always allow someone to win,” Om insisted. The logical breakdown troubled him.

“Sometimes, no one wins,” said Maneck.

“You were right, it *is* a stupid game,” said Om.



AFTER FIVE DAYS of rain the skies did not let up, and the two were a thorough nuisance in the flat. They amused themselves watching Ishvar and Dina at work. “Look,” whispered Maneck. “His tongue always pokes into his cheek when he starts the machine.” And they found hilarious her habit of hiding both lips between her teeth when measuring something.

“That’s too slow, yaar,” observed Om, as his uncle paused to load a bobbin from the spool. “I can wind it in thirty seconds.”

“You are young, I am old,” said Ishvar good-humouredly. He

slipped the fresh bobbin into the shuttle and slid the metal plate over it.

"I always keep six bobbins ready," said Om. "Then I can change them phuta-phut, without stopping in the middle of a dress."

"Aunty, you should also grow long nails on your little fingers, like Ishvar. It will look great."

Her patience quickly ran out. "You two are becoming trouble with a capital t. Just because you have a vacation doesn't mean you sit and eat up our heads with your nonsense. Either go out or start working."

"But it's raining, Aunty. You don't want us to get wet, do you?"

"You think the whole city pulls a blanket over its head because of a little rain? Take the umbrella, it's hanging from the cupboard in your room."

"That's a ladies' umbrella."

"Then get wet. But stop bothering us."

"Okay," said Om. "We'll go somewhere in the afternoon."

They removed themselves to the verandah, and Maneck suggested a second visit to the aquarium. Om said he had a better idea: "Jeevan's shop."

"Boring, yaar—there's nothing to do there."

Om revealed his plan: to convince Jeevan to let them measure female customers.

"Okay, let's go," grinned Maneck.

"I'll teach you this game," said Om. "Measuring the chest is easier than playing chess. And much more fun, for sure."

* * * * *

THE SHOP was quiet when they arrived. Jeevan was taking a nap, stretched out on the floor behind the counter. On a stool by his head a transistor radio played soft sarangi music. Om turned up the volume, and Jeevan awoke with a start.

He sat gulping air for a minute, his eyes bulging. "Why did you do that? It's a joke or what? Now I'll have a headache the whole afternoon."

He refused to even consider Om's offer of free help. "Measure

my customers? Forget it. I know what you are up to. That swelling between your legs will drag my shop's good name through the mud."

Om promised to behave professionally and not let his fingers wander. He declared that his skills were rusting due to working from paper patterns. "I just want to keep in touch with real tailoring."

"Tits are what you want to keep in touch with. You can't fool me. Stay away from my lady customers, I'm warning you."

Maneck wandered into the changing booth behind the curtain. "Wouldn't it be fun to hide in here when they came for a trial." Om inspected the interior too. He found three clothes hooks and a mirror, but nowhere to conceal oneself. "It's impossible," he concluded.

"You think so, do you?" said Jeevan. "Now let me show you smart boys something." He led them behind the counter, to the rear of the partition that formed the back of the booth. "Put your eye to that," he said, indicating a crack in one corner.

Om gasped. "You can see everything from here!" "Let me look," said Maneck, pushing him. "It's perfect, yaar!" Jeevan strummed his lips and smirked. "Yes, but don't get any ideas. I will be in a madhouse before I let you in here."

"Aray, please!" said Om. "It's such a perfect top-to-bottom free show!"

"Perfect, yes. Free, no. Everything has a price. You go for cinema, there is a ticket to buy. Take the train, and there is the fare to pay."

"How much?" asked Om.

"Never mind how much. I cannot risk my shop's honour."

"Please, yaar, Jeevan, please!"

He began to relent. "You'll behave yourselves? No going crazy at the sight of flesh?"

"We'll do whatever you say."

"Okay. Two rupees each."

Om watched Maneck check his pocket. "Yes, we have enough."

"But I want only one at a time back here. And no noise, not even breathing, understand?" They nodded. Jeevan examined the

order book. Two women were due that evening, one for a blouse and one for pants. "Who wants which?"

Maneck suggested tossing a coin. "Heads," said Om, and won. He closed his eyes, smiling, trying to decide, and selected pants. Jeevan said they had at least an hour to wait, the customers would be coming after five. Since the rain had eased up, the two decided to go for a stroll.

It was a tense, silent walk, the air heavy with expectation. They spoke just once, to concur that they should be getting back in case the women were early. Barely fifteen minutes had elapsed. They waited on edge in the shop, getting on Jeevan's nerves. There were four false alarms—people collecting repairs and alterations. At a quarter to six, their patience was rewarded.

"Yes, madam, your blouse is ready for trial," said Jeevan, giving the boys a discreet nod. He browsed through a stack of clothes to allow Maneck time to slide behind the counter into the dark space. Then, retrieving the blouse, he indicated the curtain to the woman. "In there, madam, thank you very much."

Maneck thought the pounding of his heart would knock down the partition. High heels tapping sharply on the stone floor, she entered, hung the new blouse on a hook, and drew the curtain. She pulled her neatly tucked top out of her skirt and unbuttoned it, her back towards him. He watched her reflection in the mirror.

He held his breath as the top came away. She was wearing a white brassière. Her thumbs travelled under the straps, shifting their position. Two red lines upon the skin of her shoulders marked the place. Then she moved her hands behind and unhooked the brassière.

For one insane moment he thought it was coming off. He clenched his fist. But the hook was merely moved to the next loop on the fraying elastic band. She rolled her shoulders a couple of times and adjusted the cups, pushing them higher till they settled snugly, and put on the new blouse.

Beads of perspiration rolled down Maneck's forehead and stung his eyes. She left the booth. He took the opportunity to inhale deeply. Through the crack, past the open curtain, he could see

Jeevan checking the fit. Om turned suddenly and winked at the crack, putting his hands on his chest and squeezing.

The blouse was satisfactory. She returned to change, and exited in less than a minute. Maneck waited; he could hear Jeevan thanking her and providing a final delivery date. Then the high heels tapped their way down the steps, and he emerged from the hiding place.

He wiped his brow on his sleeve, shaking out the shirt underneath his armpits. "It's so hot behind the partition."

"Don't blame the partition. Your heat rises from your lower part," laughed Jeevan. He gestured for the money, and Maneck paid up.

"How was it?" asked Om. "What did you see?"

"It was great. But she was wearing a bra."

"What did you expect?" said Jeevan. "My customers are not low-class village women. They work in big offices—secretaries, receptionists, typists. They apply lipstick and rouge, and wear top-quality underwear."

Om had to wait another half-hour before his customer arrived.

He sidled nonchalantly past the counter, disappearing before Jeevan found the garment and directed the woman into the booth.

When she stepped out Maneck wished he could have opted for this one. The way the new pants hugged her thighs and gripped her crotch brought a lump to his throat. Jeevan knelt before her to verify the inseam, and Maneck swallowed hard.

She returned behind the curtain. Seconds later, there was a muffled thud and a scream.

Jeevan jumped. "Madam! Is everything all right?"

"I heard a noise! From the back!"

"Please, madam, it's all right, I promise you," he grovelled with masterful calm and speed. "It's only rats. Please don't worry."

She came out flustered, flinging the pants on the counter. He reverently restored them to their hanger. "I'm very sorry you were frightened, madam. Rats are such a problem wherever you go in the city."

"You should do something about it," she said angrily. "It's not nice for your customers."