



The Legend of Lakshmi Prasad

Sandwiched between the river Kosi and the holiest of all rivers, the Ganga, there lies a village

surrounded by thousands of trees. The foliage is so dense that it is difficult to see the rooftops of

the small, brightly coloured houses that line up against the unpaved roads.

The trees all bear a precious fruit called jardalu, a golden mango so sweet that once eaten its taste

lingers in your mouth for days, like a drizzle of scented sunshine. But it's not just its magical fruit

trees that makes this village special. There's one thing even more remarkable about this place – it

is the only village in the entire district where the birth of a girl child is celebrated with joy.

Once upon a time, though, this village used to be just like all the others – a brown, dusty land with

small paddy fields, where boys were revered, while tiny baby girls were considered a burden and

sometimes drowned in the river. Things changed because of a young girl and her name was

Lakshmi Prasad.

'Ma! Take me also with you!' Lakshmi called out as she ran alongside the bullock cart. Surabhi

Devi, Lakshmi's mother, was going to the nearby town to shop for Lakshmi's older sister Sukriti's

wedding. She shooed her daughter away, her blue sari fluttering in the wind, and finally giving up,

Lakshmi came to a halt on the dusty road and watched the bullock cart with her mother

disappearing further and further away, towards Munger, a town that Lakshmi had heard so much

about but had never visited.

It began to rain and Lakshmi walked back home briskly. Her yellow salwar kameez, already too

short for her, was drenched and clung to her back. Her two pigtails, oiled and tied with black

ribbons, were swinging in the wind as she began to run towards her house.

Her sister was sitting under the covered porch with two of her friends and ignored Lakshmi as she

walked by, aside from a perfunctory wave.

Sukriti never seemed to have time for her nowadays. The three-year age gap between the two

sisters had not been a problem all these years when they played together, spending hours on the

swing under the banyan tree by their house.

Lakshmi would sit on the swing, her sister standing behind her on the wooden plank, her salwar

brushing against Lakshmi's back as they swung back and forth, the thick branch above creaking

with their weight.

But now all of a sudden, Sukriti didn't have the inclination for what she called childish games.

Wearing her mother's saris, she would sit with girls her own age, daydreaming and chattering

about her upcoming wedding and her life ahead as a grown-up woman with a household of her

own.

Lakshmi lay down on the mat spread out on the mud floor of her house. She looked around the

room with its soot-darkened walls. One wall was taken up by utensils and the cooking hearth. On

the other side stood a simple wooden shelf with idols of Brahma, the creator, Lakshmi, the goddess

of wealth, and Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom. A red hyacinth flower and the stub of an incense

stick decorated this simple altar.

She could hear snatches of the conversation on the porch interspersed with her sister's giggles.

Feeling left out, she came out to the porch and sat at the other end, pretending to look away from

the girls, into the rain.

Her sister and her friends lowered their voices, whispering among each other, and Lakshmi, now

frustrated and bored, began to interrupt their conversation with random observations much to their

annoyance.

She commented on a passing stray dog and the time a bee had stung Lachu, who lived next door.

Hoping to show her sister's friends how close she still was to Sukriti, she said, 'Remember,

Sukriti, we were playing langdi, and you got tired of catching me and we ate twelve whole

mangoes and buried all the seeds in two holes with our sticky hands? Come, let's go and see if the

seeds grew into saplings or not!’

Sukriti laughed condescendingly, wanting to let her friends know that she was infinitely more

mature than her younger sister. ‘Have you gone mad! It’s raining so heavily and if mango trees

grew in a few weeks then wouldn’t everyone leave the paddy fields and grow mangoes instead? It

takes years and years for a jardalu tree to grow and I don’t know any fool who will water it every

day and then wait for eight, nine years to get their reward, unless that silly fool is you!’

Lakshmi was stung by her sister’s taunts – more so because she had been going to water the two

mounds ever so often. No shoots had emerged yet but she had been hopeful.

Her eyes filled with tears. Determined not to let anyone see them, she replied defiantly, ‘All right

then, I am a fool and I won’t have to water it now because look at the sky, all the gods are doing it

for me!’ Then she angrily walked out into the rain without any idea of where she was heading,

leaving her sister and her friends tittering.

After Sukriti’s wedding, Lakshmi started helping her mother more and more with the cooking,

cleaning and washing – ‘training for her future role as a homemaker’, Surabhi Devi would say.

In the late afternoons she would take her father his lunch. Standing on the edge of the field, she

would wave out till he saw her. He would then walk towards her, wiping his face with his stained

cotton undershirt, hitching up his blue-and-white lungi as he climbed up the slope, his back already

bent with age and fatigue. He would first take a long sip of water and then they would share

chapattis with sliced onions and dal, crows hovering around them, waiting for their chance to get

at a morsel or two.

Bijendra Prasad was very fond of his little daughter. He always told her that she reminded him of

her grandmother. They had the same narrow hands and long face, the gap between the tip of the

nose and the lips disproportionately large, but pleasing all the same.

On balmy afternoons, he would sit with her after lunch and tell her stories from the Ramayana. One

day he told her about Shravan Kumar, who looked after his blind parents, spending his whole life

serving them. Engrossed in the story, he murmured, 'That is why a son is so important, for his old

parents to lean on. With daughters, all our life savings go away in giving and giving.'

Lakshmi, now sixteen, understood that he was talking about Sukriti and the intermittent demands by

her in-laws in the last year for more dowry, or gifts as they called it. But she didn't ask him about

it. Just at the mention of her sister's name, her father's mouth would tighten and he would rub his

bony collarbone wearily and say, 'Sukriti is all right, everything is all right, it is manageable.'

Till the day it wasn't and a sunken-eyed Sukriti, her skin stretched like paper over each protruding

rib, returned home, holding the gifts her in-laws had given her in return – burns on her back, from

boiling water and hot pans.

Sukriti was back and as they also discovered a few months later, looking at her growing stomach,

she had not come back alone. They sent news of her pregnancy to her husband in Tulsipur but no

one came to take her back.

Lakshmi began accompanying her sister for long walks in the afternoons. Sukriti's bitterness

brushed against her as they sat under the jardalu tree, squeezing the mango till it was soft, carefully

biting the skin off one end and sucking the pulp, feeling the sweet juice trickling down their throats.

The seeds they had planted had grown into tall saplings but it would still be a few more years

before they bore fruit.

Sukriti, her sari loosely draped over her stomach, her scarred back resting against the tree trunk,

would often sigh, 'Lakshmi, I hope this baby is a boy. Life is easier for them. We girls have

nothing. We go to live in other people's houses and they treat us like slaves. I would serve them

food, and then whatever was left on their plates, I was meant to pile it all up and that was my

dinner. A quarter chapatti from one plate, three spoons of rice from another, a single piece of

cauliflower if I was fortunate.

'And the taunts would never end. "What did you bring from your house that we should treat you

like a queen? Tell your father to send earrings for Diwali." Even my husband knew that he could

kick me like a dog and I would crawl back with my head bent, willing to serve him again because

there was nowhere else to go.'

Lakshmi looked at the branches filled with mangoes and asked her sister, 'Why can't we collect all

these mangoes and sell them in the market like we sell paddy? Won't we get some money then?'

Her sister replied, 'This is not our tree that we can collect the fruit and sell it!' To which Lakshmi

said, 'But what if it were?'

Sukriti just shook her head. ‘Stop daydreaming. This is just the way it is.
But for my son, it will be

different and with him in my arms I will go back to Tulsipur with my head
held high. I already

know what I will call him: Ramanand! Isn’t it a nice name?’

Seasons changed. The monsoon unleashed its fury but, aside from a cow
dying and their neighbour

Ghanshyam’s roof caving in, nothing momentous happened till the evening
of Chhath puja. This

was a big festival held in honour of the sun god and, as they did every year,
Lakshmi and Surabhi

Devi cleaned the house meticulously.

There were bananas to fry and sweets to be distributed. The entire village
would gather that

evening by the river and take dips in the twilight. The air would fill with
laughter and music as the

older women sang songs, beating a rolling pin against metal plates, a
rhythmic drumming that kept

time with racing heartbeats and the ritualistic dancing.

Surabhi Devi had finished making the thekuas, a sweet made of flour,
jaggery and ghee, when

Sukriti went into labour. Lakshmi sat on the porch outside with her father,
hearing her sister’s

screams till she heard a baby cry.

She rushed inside. The room was filled with the stench of metallic blood and stale sweat. The

midwife was holding the baby. She passed the baby to Surabhi Devi. After a long moment,

Lakshmi's mother looked up and said, 'It's a girl.' The four women in the room were silent while

the baby continued to wail.

For forty days, Sukriti stayed inside the house, her ears stuffed with cotton wool so that air did not

find a way to enter her body and disrupt its already weakened state. These were village customs

based on the principles of Ayurveda – a sari snugly tied around her stomach to help her womb

contract, herbal paste applied on the soles of her feet so that heat would travel up into her chest

and replenish her strength.

After a few weeks, Sukriti began to feel a little like her old self again. That's when her mother

suggested that it was time for her to go back to her husband's house.

Lakshmi was taken aback. Was her mother really going to pretend that Sukriti had just returned

home to give birth as was customary amongst most married women? But that was exactly what

Surabhi Devi had been saying to everyone in the village. Her pride would not let her admit the

sorry state of affairs.

Surabhi Devi spent hours talking to Sukriti, cajoling her, pleading that her husband would treat her

well now that they had a child together and her mother-in-law would mend her ways. Sukriti soon

started believing that things would truly change and was ready to go back to her marital home.

The journey, however, ended before it had begun. A few days later they received a message from

Tulsipur. Sukriti's in-laws had heard about the baby girl and had washed their hands of the mother

and child, claiming that Sukriti had not been pregnant when she left their house. This child was

illegitimate, they said.

Lakshmi looked at her sister, who had collapsed on the mud floor in despair, her thin arms

encircling her bent knees as she pressed her legs against her body. She stared emptily at the small

hammock where her child lay fast asleep while her mother cried, 'What will we do now? What

about Lakshmi? Who will marry her? We had nothing to give and now after this...'

Her father stood in a daze, a look of desperation seeping into his eyes. He said, 'I will sell the

field, I can work as a day labourer. It doesn't matter. We will give the boy's side whatever they

ask. We will manage.'

In all her seventeen years, Lakshmi had never felt such rage. A blinding rage where her heart

thumped, her hands trembled, even her ears felt like they were burning up with heat. In a quivering

voice, barely in her control, Lakshmi said, 'Enough with this managing, of this bending. Ma, I am

not getting married! Not till every girl in this village has something of her own. It's only when we

have something that people will stop treating us like we are nothing.

Lakshmi sat on the porch the entire night, an old shawl wrapped around her to keep her warm. Her

father came out twice, trying to convince her to sleep, but she refused to move. The hours went by.

Lakshmi stayed where she was, watching the waning moon in the cloudless night, hearing feral

dogs barking in the distance.

She would fall asleep intermittently, her head drooping against the wooden balusters, only to wake

up with a start again. She walked down from the porch just before dawn, her body stiff from sitting

in the cold. She looked out at the village, the dusty road in front of her house, the empty stretch

across, where once a long green snake had slithered over her foot, the banyan tree with her

wooden swing swaying in the breeze. She cracked her stiff knuckles, stretching her fingers out, as

she looked down at her hands, at her ten fingers. And then she found her answer.

Carefully cleaning her teeth with a neem twig, Lakshmi washed her face with a handful of water

from the metal pitcher that she had filled yesterday. Holding her aluminium lota firmly in her hand,

she walked to the fallow land behind her house and went through her morning ablutions, a singular

notion spinning within the labyrinth of her mind.

She got back home to find the household awake, her sister feeding little Radha, her breast and the

baby's head both covered with a yellow dupatta. Her mother peeled the ginger to add to the milk,

cardamom, tea leaves and sugar boiling on the hearth. Her father, his sunken eyes unable to meet

hers this morning, turned away, waving an incense stick in front of the clay gods.

When he finished his prayers, Lakshmi said, 'Babuji, will you come with me? Don't ask me

anything, just come.'

Bijendra Prasad walked through the village, his daughter by his side. They were conscious of eyes

curiously watching their long, purposeful strides. This was a place where people ambled; there

was no need to hurry and there really was no place to go to either.

They reached the village centre and Lakshmi knocked on Shankar Singh's door. He opened the

door and she began to speak, hesitantly at first, then faster and faster. The thoughts that had been

locked inside her, and had probably been rattling in her subconscious mind for years, had finally

been set free. Words falling, tripping, stumbling over each other, till she finally ran out of air. She

took a deep breath, stilled herself and waited for his reaction.

Shankar Singh, at eighty-three, was the oldest man in the village. He was also the most respected

as he had started the small school in the village and had taught simple arithmetic, reading and

writing to the village children for generations.

He looked carefully at the tall, ungainly girl, in a black blouse that was too big for her and a green

sari, both of which he was certain belonged to her mother. This little girl had thought of something

that had not occurred to anyone in the hundred years that the village had existed. He asked her for

time, time to absorb her ideas, and, most importantly, to convince all the people whose opinions

mattered in this small community.

The jardalu tree was filled with fruit, each branch weighed down by half a dozen golden mangoes.

Lakshmi had waited five months for this day – five long months in which Shankar Singh had gone

from door to door to convince the villagers of her remarkable idea. She stood under the tree with

him and her family, picked up makeshift cymbals made up of two metal plates and began slamming

them together. Soon all the villagers gathered around the tree.

Lakshmi asked Sukriti to pass little Radha, her head covered in a pretty bonnet, a black spot on her

forehead to ward off evil, to Surabhi Devi. The two sisters then used a long wooden stick and

broke ten ripe mangoes off the tree, deftly using a knife to slice open the fruit.

They cut out the seeds, and planted each one evenly in a straight row. Standing tall, eyes shining

bright, she spoke solemnly: ‘These ten trees are Radha’s trees. They will grow along with her,

taller and stronger with each year. When she is eight they will bear fruit. We will sell the fruit in

Munger and that money will be hers. After that, every year her trees will bear fruit and the money

will be saved for her, for her education, and for her marriage

‘Each time a daughter is born, we will celebrate and plant ten jardalu trees for her and they will

belong to her forever. Ten trees like the ten fingers with which we women
can hold our own

destinies firmly in our hands.'

A schoolgirl is riding her bicycle on the narrow paved road towards the
outskirts of the village;

sweat drenches her uniform as she pedals furiously. Ruchira is late. She
sees Badru, the old

village barber, walking towards her and she calls out, 'Badru Chacha, what
is the time?'

He takes out his mobile phone from the front pocket of his cotton shirt and
with a mouth full of

betel leaves which have permanently stained his teeth orange calls out to
her already receding

back, 'Four-thirty! Go slow, Ruchira beti!'

She reaches the clearing. The ceremony has already begun. Colourful mats
are spread out on the

grass and on them women in bright saris sit with harmoniums and drums.
She sees her friend Indu

sitting next to her mother, the two red plastic tambourines lying in her lap,
and quickly goes to take

her place beside her.

The seven-day-old baby is in her mother's arms while her ten jardalu
saplings are being planted

into the ground. The baby's mother, Vidhi, has a bright smile on her tired
face as she distributes

sweets to everyone.

Ruchira watches the ceremony keenly, her fingers idly playing with the bells on the tambourine.

She has her own ten trees in another spot closer to the village. On her fifteenth birthday, she will

perform a simple ritual where she will tie a sacred red thread around each trunk, promising to look

after them as they, in return, will look after her for the rest of her life.

Her mother had told her that this is the only village where people from any caste, even those with

no land of their own, can plant trees for their daughters wherever they find space, even by the side

of the road.

She wonders how this started – this ritual of the jardalu. But no one seems to quite remember, not

even her grandmother, who says that this is just the way things have always been here.

The last sapling is planted and the women begin playing their instruments and singing a song about

the benevolence of the great Lakshmi who blesses each woman in the village with happiness and

prosperity.

It is an old song, passed down through generations and the women singing are unaware that the

song is not about Goddess Lakshmi who resides in the heavens above, but alludes to a gangly girl

who once walked among the mango groves.

2 Salaam, Noni Appa

An elderly woman popped her head out of the window of a dented white Fiat. It belonged to Noni

Appa, who had just returned from Glory beauty parlour, which was why her carefully dyed brown

hair was twisted around eleven rollers and covered with a pink net.

She called out to the watchman snoozing by the gate, ‘Baburam, you duffer, open the gate.’

Baburam, who seemed to spend as much time daydreaming as he did watching the creaky gate of

Sea Breeze, shuffled forward and pushed the gate open.

Noni Appa, struggling with the shift stick, managed to push it into second gear and the car, moving

like it was suffering from a bad bout of hiccups, inched forward towards the small house by the

sea.

Noni Appa entered the weathered house and spotted her younger sister, Binni, sitting at the dining

table, drinking tea, peeling pine nuts and putting them in airtight containers.

Noni and Binni – these were not the names on their birth certificates. But over the years, whatever

nice Ismaili names they had been bequeathed by the great Aga Khan himself had probably been

wiped out of everyone's memories except theirs.

Binni was very animated this afternoon. She had received a parcel all the way from America. It

contained two very important things – a videotape and a note.

She started prattling in Kutchi, their native tongue, a language similar to Sindhi, yet distinctly

different. But her words literally and figuratively fell on deaf ears, as Noni Appa had as usual

forgotten to switch on her hearing aid and had thus missed the volley of words though she had not

missed the spectacle of her sixty-six-year-old, overweight sister bobbing her head up and down in

excitement.

Noni Appa leisurely adjusted her hearing aid which had got tangled within the folds of her cotton

dupatta and finally said, 'Koro thiyoh, Binni? What are you saying?'

Binni thrust the note under Noni Appa's nose. 'See this! Our second cousin Ibrahim, arrey, the

Houston-wala, has spoken to someone in the Jamatkhana there. There's a nice Ismaili boy for your

Mallika!'

Noni Appa sighed. 'Leave it, Binni. First of all Mallika is not going to leave London to move

to Houston and, more importantly, she says that she is perfectly fine being single.

Binni squealed. ‘She is going to die a spinster at this rate. How old is she now, forty-six? Put this

videotape in the VCR and at least see what a good match I have found for our Mallika.’

The room filled with the whirring sound of the video cassette player and then a wrinkled man

wearing a striped shirt and grey pants appeared on the screen and said, ‘Ya Ali Madad! My name

is Shakeel Norani and I am a dentist.’

The image on the screen changed to different clips of him – in his office, beaming with a dental

mirror in his hand, proudly pushing groceries in a trolley at a supermarket. The little show reel

ended with him sitting in a car, his face contorted with passion as he lip-synced to an old ghazal by

Mehdi Hassan.

Binni went on to explain, ‘He has asked for Mallika’s picture. Let’s send it quickly, unlike other

Ismaili boys he is very liberal-minded which is why he is accepting someone as old as her. In fact,

before this he had proposed to Maneka, that film actress, but the foolish girl rejected his offer and

married a doctor instead.

Noni Appa snorted. ‘Binni, this NRI dentist looks one year older than Allah Miya himself which

means he must be the same age as you! Let’s send him your photo. Just smile broadly in the picture

and once he sees your three missing teeth, I am sure he will make a new set of dentures for you as a

wedding gift!’ And she removed the tape from the machine and thrust it back in her disgruntled

sister’s plump hands.

Noni Appa and Binni had both reached a stage in life where time had spiralled on to itself and,

like their childhood days spent playing Dabba Eyes Spice in the by-lanes of Amreli, it was once

again just the two of them against the world, having lost husbands to meningitis and cancer

respectively and children to the lure of distant lands.

Noni Appa now filled her days helping out at Muskan, a school for special children, and her

evenings meticulously writing duas into endless lined notebooks, while Binni, with money to spare

and an empty bungalow where the windows rattled with both the sea air and loneliness, attempted

to keep herself busy by constantly trying to find an appropriate hobby, often recruiting her elder

sister as a companion cum guinea pig.

There had been art classes with poor Prahlad Bhai, where he kept trying to teach Binni to use a 2B

pencil and sketch in grids and she, ignoring him, would jump directly to oil paints and canvas.

There were cross-stitch classes which resulted in a piece of embroidery that proudly stated 'Home

Seet Home'.

By the time the W had been reported missing by Mrs Mastan, who had been sitting right next to

Binni, she had lost all interest in embroidery and was looking at Noni Appa across the table,

signalling her that it was time to leave.

After that there had been singing classes, baking lessons and attempts at joining a laughter club.

Binni and Noni Appa would walk to the beach dressed identically in printed salwar kurtas and

gleaming white sneakers. They would stand in a circle with elderly gentlemen in a variety of caps

perched on their balding heads, white shorts with socks pulled up to their knees, flailing their arms

about while trying to laugh at nothing at all. And finally today, Binni had decided that it was time

for them to try yoga.

The two sisters walked towards the garden. They were an incongruous pair. Noni Appa was

shorter than her sister, frail and delicately boned, while Binni was well rounded. She had a large

bosom and even larger hips, 'like a Coca-Cola bottle' as she liked to think of her formidable

figure.

Binni called out to Bhondhu, the cook and general dogsbody, to lay out three towels in the grass

before the yoga teacher arrived. She told her sister, 'Take your rollers out. You look completely

demented. And where are you going that you want to get all dolled up?' Noni Appa merely said, 'Is

the teacher here to make me breathe in and out rhythmically or to pant over my beauty?'

Fifteen minutes later, they were sitting cross-legged on their towels in front of Anand ji, their new

yoga teacher. Binni, who had once gone away for a seven-day vipassana retreat only to return in

three days, was giving more instructions than the yoga teacher himself.

'Anand ji, tell Appa how to do kapalbhati properly, can't even see her stomach go in and out! See

Noni Appa, like this, watch me.' And Binni, her entire body quivering, began violently inhaling

and exhaling, while making pitiful bellowing sounds like an asthmatic buffalo.

Noni Appa ignored her as she continued her breathing exercises albeit while occasionally

munching on pieces of papaya from a plate next to her as they sat facing their hapless yoga teacher.

Binni then insisted on performing a few asanas that she had circled in a book called *Tantra Kriya*

and *Yoga* that she had purchased the previous week in anticipation of the imminent yoga session.

She decided to try the locust pose where she was meant to lie down on her stomach and lift her

legs alternately, but she had modified it by making Anand ji lift her leg and lower it for fifty counts.

She then slowly flipped over on to her back, wanting to do the pawanmuktasana, which could

literally be translated as the wind-releasing pose, to alleviate her chronic constipation. The yoga

teacher first pushed her bent right knee to her abdomen and then the left, a movement that was

meant to internally massage the intestines.

Anand ji was now drenched in sweat, trying to push and pull Binni into some semblance of yogic

poses. His white cotton kurta with buttons going up asymmetrically towards his left shoulder was

sticking to his back and his thick grey hair was plastered to his head. The tall, elderly Gujarati

gentleman was panting slightly as he repeatedly wiped his face with a handkerchief.

Noticing the yoga teacher breathing heavily, Binni snorted. ‘Noni Appa, he tells us yoga means to

breathe only through the nose and himself panting with mouth fully open, Kutho type. Practise

yourself, Anand ji, and then teach us please.’ The class ended with both the sisters refusing to

chant ‘Om’ – a sound that reverberates inside the skull like a noisy vacuum cleaner meant to suck

away the garbage that the mind produces – with Binni adding, ‘We are not lassi-drinking Hindus,

you know?’ So Anand ji settled for making them close their eyes and make a humming sound

instead, like there was a bee trapped inside their mouths.

After Anand ji left, the two sisters had a quick discussion about him. Binni said, ‘He was all right,

nothing too great, Husna Ben recommended him like he was the great Patanjali himself.’ And Noni

Appa replied, ‘I feel good, Binni, my muscles feel all pulled and stretched, like a ball of dough

smoothened out into a nice flat chapatti.’ Noni Appa then climbed into her white Fiat again and,

with her foot constantly on the brake pad, carefully drove home.

She took the small elevator to her fourth-floor apartment in Juhu Scheme, unlocked the door and

walked into her tiny apartment. She freshened up, removed her rollers, fluffing her mid-length hair

into a wavy mass around her head, applied some maroon lipstick, changed into a grey sari and

clasped a string of tiny yellowing pearls around her neck. She uncapped a bottle of whisky and

poured some into two heavy crystal tumblers, topping each with cubes of ice.

Noni Appa leaned against the sliding windows and looked out at the towering gulmohar tree

across the street, its branches laden with red flowers, moving in the breeze like blazing fireflies.

She glanced around the ramshackle, rather mouldy living room, at the peeling plaster and the ever-

leaking roof of her home. She recalled entering this house as a new bride. The years of laughter

when Farhan would urge her to slip into her imported chiffon saris, the same string of pearls

dangling from her neck. He always wanted her to wear court shoes and not the Kolhapuri slippers

that other women sported on their feet. The evenings spent sitting on the rattan chairs in the balcony

outside, with a bottle of Black Label whisky and an ice bucket as she slowly acquired a taste for

‘Scotch on the rocks’ as he called it. Their daughter, Mallika, hanging a bird feeder on one side of

the balcony and diligently filling it with grain and water for the parrots, sparrows and crows that

flocked towards the tree-lined street.

She had dressed up for Farhan today, for what would have been their forty-eighth wedding

anniversary. She looked at the black-and-white picture of her husband with his shy smile and his

freckled nose, and placed the other glass of whisky in front of it on the mantel.

Clinking her own glass against it, she wished her dead husband a happy anniversary, wherever he

was and in whichever form he existed, though his body was six feet under, in the large graveyard

behind Galaxy theatre in Santacruz.

Noni Appa went out into the balcony and settled in one of the chairs. She sipped her drink,

watching the colours of the gulmohar tree, all the green and red, change to a dark shadow against

the night sky, as the sun began its journey to light up a day across some other distant land.

The next few days went by quickly, with Noni Appa spending more time than usual at Muskan. The

children were getting ready for their annual play, which would be staged in the first week of

September. There were costumes to be stitched, intense negotiations with a seven-year-old who

insisted that the cow she was meant to portray in the play should say ‘mew’ instead of ‘moo’ and a

vegetable stamping art class, to make the stage background, where Noni Appa ended up with

smudges of white paint on her blue linen dupatta. Then before she knew it, it was Thursday and she

once again drove up to Binni’s house for their second yoga class.

The house was deserted aside from Bhondu, who informed her, ‘Binni Memsaab has gone with

Shamim Didi to the market.’

‘And what about the yoga class?’ asked Noni Appa.

‘I think there is class because she asked me to put out three towels in the garden before she left.

Can I get you anything, Appa?’

Half an hour later, with two Glucose biscuits in her stomach and no sign of Binni, she was about to

leave when she saw a rickshaw pulling up outside the gate and Anand ji walked in.

Anand ji peered at Noni Appa, who was sitting elegantly at the table with her wavy brown hair

and pink lipstick, wearing a white cotton salwar kameez with embroidered blue flowers. She was

a far cry from the creature he had seen at their last class, with her hair in rollers, trapped under the

pink net like a captured hedgehog.

Noni Appa explained to the yoga teacher, 'Perhaps we should cancel today. Binni isn't home yet,

though of course, Anand ji, you must charge us for the class as you have come all this way.' But

Anand ji smiled. 'Mrs Machiwala, you are here, let's begin and Mrs Shroff can join us when she

arrives.'

He placed his striped cloth bag on the small glass table to their left and then sat cross-legged on

the towel, facing her.

They began stretching each joint, beginning at the toes. Noni Appa felt a flare of pain in her creaky

right hip as they went along but soon that subsided as well.

Then they did some simple breathing exercises and finally Anand ji asked her to lie down with her

eyes closed. 'Now we will begin the practice of yoga nidra. Make yourself comfortable. See that

darkness in front of your eyes, it is called chidakasha, now as I say the words, try and see the same

images in your chidakasha.

'The rising sun, a white lotus, a cloudy sky, a full moon,' Anand ji continued, throwing words at

her till he finally asked her to rub her palms briskly, cup her eyes, open them gently and sit up.

Noni Appa did not move, so Anand ji repeated his instructions once again. He peered at her and

thought that she had perhaps fallen asleep. He leaned over and clapped his hands sharply, right

near her face, to wake her up.

Noni Appa opened her eyes with a start, and when Anand ji asked her if she had fallen asleep, she

kept looking at him curiously. It was only a few minutes later that they both realized that Noni

Appa's hearing aid had fallen out as she had shifted to a supine position and she had not heard a

single word after 'Try to keep your mind blank as you lie down and close your eyes.'

'All this time I have been lying flat on the towel thinking that this is such a torturous experience.

Hai Allah, the mind is also a strange thing, the minute someone asks you to keep the slate clean,

squiggly lines of white chalk begin to appear, one line running into another in chaotic whirls,' she

laughed, after firmly fixing her hearing aid and adjusting the small dial to get rid of a high-pitched

drone.

They began discussing yoga and meditation as they stood up, with Anand ji explaining, 'That's

what yoga is meant to do, bring order to that mental chaos.' Noni Appa walked towards the

wrought iron chairs a few steps away and sat down heavily, feeling slightly dizzy. She suffered

from low blood pressure and wanted a cup of tea. She didn't know if it was the milk or just the

sugar but it always seemed to do the trick.

She called out to Bhondu and was surprised to see the other helper, Tito, open the French windows

and come out into the garden. 'Arrey Tito, you are back, how are you feeling now?' Noni Appa

asked. He had been with the family for over twenty years and had recently taken a few weeks off to

go back to his village, complaining of pain in multiple joints. Tito replied, 'First class, Noni Appa,

now I am fine.'

'Allah ka shukar hai!' said Noni Appa, asking him about his treatment. 'I went to a Baba in my

village, Appa, he muttered some prayers and hit me a few times with his broom. Bas, in five days

all sickness gone.'

Noni Appa shook her head incredulously and asked him to fetch some tea and a small snack. With

a quick gesture, motioning Anand ji to sit down on the white chair, she said, 'I am going to tell

Binni that next time she should just mutter a few choice curses and hit Tito with her vacuum

cleaner, I am sure he will get better even quicker.’

Anand ji, a generous smile lighting up his face at Noni Appa’s quip, protested, ‘That may not

work! He got better because he believes in prayers and his Baba, all mind over matter.’

Tito got the tea on a brightly polished silver tray, with floral teacups, white embroidered napkins

and a plate filled with cucumber and tomato sandwiches. Noni Appa quickly drained her cup of tea

and while Anand ji was getting ready to leave, dusting the crumbs of the cucumber sandwich off

his kurta, she rummaged inside her cavernous grey handbag and pulled out a pack of cards.

She began laying them out on one side of the table, getting ready to play solitaire after Anand ji’s

departure. Noni Appa had decided to wait for her sister, preferring to have an early dinner with

Binni instead of returning to her empty apartment and eating with her plate precariously balanced

on her knees, as she flipped through old issues of *Femina* and *Reader’s Digest* that she scoured

from the numerous raddiwalas at Juhu market.

To her surprise, Anand ji leaned across the table and asked, ‘Do you play little spider solitaire or

the one where you reshuffle the deck?’ Noni Appa looked up in surprise and asked, ‘Do you play

solitaire as well?’ Anand ji nodded with a smile.

After retiring from his job in the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation’s garden department he had

found it increasingly difficult to adjust to being at home for most of the day. The three classes he

taught, two in the morning and one in the evening, were the only respite from a home filled with the

high-pitched squeals of his wife and the non-stop commotion caused by her relatives who kept

walking through his door, like it was the revolving entrance of a motel. The incessant barking of

his two small Lhasa apsos, Gulab and Jamun, added to this chorus.

For Anand ji, sitting by himself in the bedroom with a game of solitaire spread over the printed

bed sheet, headphones plugged into his Walkman that invariably played Indian classical music as

he hummed along, seemed the only way he could find refuge in his own home.

‘Do you also play rummy?’ asked Noni Appa. And Anand ji, who was reluctant to return to his

noisy house as much as Noni Appa wanted to delay returning to her soundless one, nodded once

more.

Noni Appa picked up the half-spread deck from the table, shuffled the cards and dealt thirteen

cards each.

Under the slanting rays of the setting sun, they sat quietly, playing game after game on the rickety

glass table in the middle of the overgrown garden crowded with coconut trees.

‘Tu koro kaiyeti, what are you doing, Appa?’ A nasal voice pierced the air. Binni was back,

clutching two shopping bags from Kala Niketan, the sari shop next to Sahakari Bhandar.

Noni Appa shifted her glance from the cards gracefully fanned out in her right hand and said, ‘I am

reading tea leaves and predicting Anand ji’s future. What do you think, Binni, playing rummy, you

want to join in? And where were you all this time, you missed class also?’

Binni walked up to the table and frowned at her sister while breezily apologizing to Anand ji, who

stood up at her approach, greeting her with a ‘Namaste, Mrs Shroff’. Binni narrated a long-winded

story about a dog and a bicycle and Shamim, none of which explained the sari-filled packets in her

hand.

Anand ji merely said, ‘Please telephone my house in the afternoons if there is any change in the

class schedule,’ and when Noni Appa bid both Binni and him to sit down so that they could finish

the ongoing round of rummy, he played one last hand and got up to leave. Before Anand ji went, he

said, ‘Shubh ratri and do not forget to practise the first series of asanas before the next class on

Monday.’

The two old ladies sat at the dinner table eating keema patties, a bowl of yellow dal without salt

for Binni, who unlike her sister suffered from high blood pressure, a bowl of the regular variety

for Noni Appa, along with rice and homemade mango pickle.

Noni Appa asked Bhondur for some sliced onions sprinkled with lime and red chilli powder and in

between bites she said, ‘You are eating mutton today, better remember to take your Kayam Churna

tonight, otherwise you won’t go to the bathroom for days on end and then you become so grumpy!’

Binni nodded and Noni Appa continued, ‘Why did you miss Anand ji’s class today? It normally

takes you five sessions to get fed up of something. Do the yoga properly, Binni. Anand ji says all

your stomach problems, blood pressure, everything will come under control.’

‘You seem mighty impressed with that young fellow! Anand ji this and Anand ji that, playing cards

with him also,’ Binni teased.

Noni Appa shook her head. ‘What nonsense comes out of your mouth, Binni! First of all, he is

sixty-three, which is hardly young and...’

Binni interrupted, ‘But younger than you, Appa! And what you told me a few days ago about that

dentist, wait...let me remember, yes! And you, Appa, are two years older than Allah Miya himself,

so compared to you, he is a young fellow,’ and seeing her sister quiet, she laughed triumphantly.

‘Now what happened, you are not giving me any response only.’

Noni Appa looked at her sister affectionately, the right corner of her mouth twitching with a smile.

Little Binni, she had always been like this – brash, brazen, flirtatious, teasing her more reserved

elder sister, match-making her with dozens of boys who frequented the Jamatkhana when they were

young, and once even with poor Peer Saab despite his snowy white beard.

Their life together had been filled with banter, silly jibes and jests, which tragedies, deaths and

creaking bones had left unchanged. When she wrote duas in her book, she prayed for Binni’s long

life more than her own, because if not for her sister, her life would be an arid desert without any

laughter-filled oasis.

By the time November gave way to a surprisingly cool December with the markets selling

sweaters and shawls due to the unexpected cold wave, Noni Appa, Binni and the yoga teacher had

slowly settled into a comfortable routine. Anand ji would arrive promptly every Monday and

Thursday at four-thirty in the evening, though Binni would be missing half the time and threatened

to discontinue every alternate class.

Her sister would then convince her, ‘Get through this class first, Binni, then we will see about the

rest.’ They would finish their hour-long class and Noni Appa and Anand ji would play

innumerable rounds of rummy, sitting at the glass table outside.

Sometimes Noni Appa would raid her sister’s bar, calling out, ‘Arrey Bhondu, one small whisky

and three cubes of ice!’ and at other times like Anand ji she too would be content with a fresh lime

soda.

Binni, who found both cards and card players dreary, joined them only on the rare occasions that

Danish Bhai, the video library fellow, was late in sending her video cassettes of her favourite

Pakistani plays like *Buddha Ghar Pe Hai* and *Bakra Qiston Pe*.

Anand ji would leave around seven and Noni Appa would stay back at her sister's for an early

dinner before getting into her dented car and slowly driving home.

In the first week of January, Mallika came to visit Noni Appa from London. She got her mother and

aunt a suitcase filled with imported goodies: chocolates, perfume, hair dye and of course the one

thing that every Indian woman pesters her NRI relatives for, undergarments from Marks and

Spencer.

Binni eagerly took the coveted items from Mallika and dramatically declared, 'These British are

really third-rate people, I tell you, their only saving grace lies in their first-rate bras. Their

balcony-style Marks and Sparks gives such good support and pushes everything properly in place,

straight from basement level to perfect third-floor height!'

That Friday, Binni dragged Mallika to the Jamatkhana, hoping some nice Ismaili boy would

prostrate himself at her feet. In the car, Binni was chuckling away. 'Malla, you know, when your

father passed away, Appa was not that old, just close to fifty. She would go to the Jamatkhana in

her tightly draped sari and her pink lipstick...'

Noni Appa interrupted, ‘Again this story, Binni! How many times!’

Binni laughed and ignoring her sister’s protests continued, ‘Arrey let me say what I want. Haan, so

all the men in the Jamatkhana would look at her and keep trying to say “Ya Ali Madad” and then

when they would go completely out of control, they would find sources to...’

Mallika giggled. ‘What does out of control mean, Binni Masi? What would they do, explode in

their pants?’ And Noni Appa, horrified, almost banged into the autorickshaw that had suddenly

halted in front of her.

‘Chee, not dirty like that. They would send proposals, that’s all, and after that your mother, always

such a prude, with her constant “No Binni, I don’t want to get a bad reputation” would never even

greet them back,’ said a giggling Binni. ‘But I think things have changed, if you really want to know

what out of control is, Malla, then you have to look at your mother. These days she is panting all

over that yoga teacher, her boyfriend Anand ji!’

And imitating her sister with a wobbly falsetto voice, Binni continued, ““Anand ji, have a whisky

today, the weather is perfect for it!” Turning that poor vegetarian Gujju bhai to an alcoholic, that

also on my whisky.'

Mallika exclaimed, 'Mom, you didn't tell me all this!' Noni Appa, wanting to strangle her sister,

said, 'Ya Allah! It is nothing like that. Yes, I offered him a drink and so sometimes he has one now

when we play. Your masi hates cards so what should I do, just keep playing by myself?'

But the good-natured ribbing in the car didn't stop and, since Noni Appa could not turn her hearing

aid off while driving, she just had to bear with her family, her eyebrows raised in exasperation,

shaking her head at their sly digs.

That evening when the mother and daughter sat together in their balcony, Mallika asked, 'Mom, is

this Anand ji thing really true? You can tell me, I won't get upset. Honestly, it will reassure me. As

it is I worry about you being lonely here, how many times have I told you to come with me to

London, but you never listen!'

Noni Appa shook her head. 'It is nothing like that, Binni talks nonsense! Is this any age to have

boyfriends, you tell me? He is just a friend and it is nice to have some company rather than sitting

by myself all the time. He likes playing cards. Sometimes he sings, he likes classical music, or he

tells me about his days in the garden department and we talk about trees and plants, mealybug

infestations and borer worms that attack trees, quite interesting really.'

Mallika leaped straight to what had caught her attention. 'He sings for you? That sounds very

romantic!' Noni Appa laughed, 'To tell you the truth, Malla, he is actually a terrible singer.'

That night, long after Mallika had gone to sleep, Noni Appa lay tossing and turning in bed. She was

filled with an uneasy feeling that she couldn't quite put her finger on. She felt a strange heaviness,

as if something was lodged in her stomach.

She closed her eyes, deciding to try a meditative practice that Anand ji always claimed was an

excellent remedy for insomnia. Noni Appa could hear his familiar voice in her head, telling her to

relax every part of her body while visualizing a lotus at each chakra. But this time the soothing

effects of the meditation eluded her, her mind playing tricks, replacing all the lotuses with images

of Anand ji sitting cross-legged in the lotus pose instead.

Was the gentle, ever-smiling yoga teacher the cause of her discomfort? Had all her family's ribbing

stirred up emotions that she had perhaps kept trapped inside her mind somewhere?

Noni Appa got out of bed, refusing to poke inside her head further. She felt her bloated stomach

and decided that the only thing trapped inside her was probably wind. She boiled some water,

adding ajwain to it, an old remedy for indigestion that she had learned from her mother. She sat on

the sofa slowly sipping on her hot decoction, writing lines of duas meticulously in her book,

waiting for the oblivion of sleep.

Mallika returned to her life in London, leaving Noni Appa feeling a little more desolate, the house

a little more empty than it had been before her visit. She started spending more and more time with

Anand ji. They would sit for hours around the glass table, the dark sky leaching away light, the

cards in their hands growing dim, till they turned them face down on the table and started looking

at the stars instead, exchanging stories in the dimly lit garden.

Innocuous stories at first. Anand ji telling her about his days at a hostel in Rishikesh: ‘Soon I

realized that a senior student, Swami Yogeshwar who was my immediate guru, was more

interested in trying to teach me certain unnatural positions than the ones in the textbook. I took a

train and came straight back to Bombay. Finished my teacher training course in Nashik.’

And Noni Appa telling him about the mischief that she and Binni would be up to during their days

in a boarding school in Pune: ‘We climbed over every bathroom stall and locked it from inside.

When the rest of the girls arrived, they were convinced that there was a ghost in the bathroom who

did not like them using the toilet.’

As the days passed, and they stayed longer and longer under the night sky, darker stories were told

too.

Noni Appa telling him about the night she had gone with Farhan to a friend’s party and had

overheard a cutting remark by the host about them and Muslims in general. She had been horrified

and had tried to get Farhan to leave the party. But he had insisted on staying, nonchalantly walking

towards another couple and striking up a conversation.

‘I called the waiter, Anand ji, and I gulped two drinks down in less than a minute. Then I went out,

found our driver and went home without Farhan. He came after an hour, always had a bit of a

temper, you know, and he started yelling, “What do you think of yourself, leaving just like that!”

And for the first time I yelled back, “What do you think of yourself, who are you to talk to me like

this?”

‘He was stunned for a moment and then he said gruffly, “What is wrong with you, Noni?” And I

told him, “I am drunk, Farhan, and today I will say whatever I want.” Bas, he became like a

television on mute, his mouth kept opening and closing but no words came out.’ She laughed

recalling the incident, now that time and death had smoothened out all the disorderly creases in her

marriage.

Anand ji did not talk about his wife except for the time he told Noni Appa about having a close

brush with the law. Jyotsna, his wife, in a fit of anger had thrown a big steel utensil at him, it had

missed and gone out of the window, crashing down, and had fallen right beside a toddler playing in

the compound below.

The building chairman Dr Aggarwal had filed a complaint after calling Anand ji to his house and

saying, ‘Mr Anand, this was not the first object to go flying out from the windows of flat no. 501.

There are many UFOs that have previously taken off from the fifth floor of Clifton. This time I have

to take serious action.'

Anand ji had gone to the police station and luckily the case had been dismissed. 'But that was long

ago. Over the years she has also changed, from a volcano she has become a pressure cooker. She

still has a temper but instead of erupting she just makes a few shrill sounds and lets off steam.'

It was Anand ji's birthday in April. 'Which other day can it be on, has to be on April Fool's Day,'

Binni teased her sister, when Noni Appa suggested cutting a cake for Anand ji that evening.

Ignoring her sister's cackle, Noni Appa set out to make the day as special as she could for Anand

ji. She bought a cake from Monginis bakery, a few balloons and some streamers. She got him a

small gift as well, carefully wrapping six audiocassettes together, hits of Mohammed Rafi and

Mukesh, his favourite singers.

Having made all the arrangements, she took off for Glory beauty salon to get her hair set. On this

occasion, though, she removed the rollers in the parlour itself.

Anand ji was surprised to see a beaming Noni and Binni all dressed up and waiting for him on the

porch. They led him to the dining room festooned with the balloons and streamers, and with great

enthusiasm sang ‘Happy Birthday Anand ji’, with Bhondhu and Tito also joining the celebrations.

Later that evening, Binni started watching a programme on Doordarshan and Noni Appa and Anand

ji went out into the garden to sit in their favourite spot under the trees.

Noni Appa, tilting her face towards the starlit night, pointed out Orion’s belt and Orion’s two

brightest stars, Rigel and Betelgeuse, twinkling on both ends of the constellation.

Anand ji was looking at Noni Appa more than at the sky, thinking about the little celebration she

had put together for him. He felt a warm feeling come over him, starting from his chest and

spreading outward, though he had not yet sipped from the glass of whisky in his hand.

‘I didn’t know you liked stargazing,’ he said.

Noni Appa, absent-mindedly twisting her hair into a bun and tucking one loose end behind her ear,

nodded. ‘Yes, because of Abba, when we were little, he would tell Binni and me all about stars,

planets and galaxies. See that star there? The light from that star has travelled eight hundred years

to reach my eyes. Gazing at it is the smallest way I can pay tribute to its long journey.’

Anand ji gazed at the woman across the table, a tenderness in his eyes that belied the casual way

he sat leaning back in his chair. When Noni Appa caught him looking at her, she gave him a shy,

embarrassed smile with an almost imperceptible shrug of her tiny shoulders.

One balmy May evening, Anand ji suggested they go for a walk on the beach outside Sea Breeze.

Anand ji who had no intention of carrying on the charade that Noni Appa was just his student,

despite her insistence, had stopped accepting fees from her for several months. Their relationship

though was still undefined and unacknowledged.

When they reached the soft sand near the edge of the sea, Noni Appa removed her slippers and

walked barefoot along the shore, slowly, her hip feeling stiff as they walked on in companionable

silence. Anand ji cleared his throat and rather tunelessly started singing a popular song, 'Main pal

do pal ka shayar hoon', switching from song to song till Noni Appa laughed, 'Are you going to go

through the entire weekly countdown of Binaca Geetmala?'

She felt a sharp flare of pain in her hip and they sat down on the sloping sand dune, blending into

the landscape with half a dozen couples also on the beach, some with toddlers running towards the

sea and the mothers chasing after them.

They were sitting quietly, listening to the sound of the waves and the laughter of the children

playing in the sand, when Anand ji, who had stopped calling her Mrs Machiwala as they had got

closer, but had found no substitute, finally asked, ‘What does Noni mean, is it an Urdu word?’

Noni Appa smiled. ‘No, it is just a name our parents used to call us when we were little, Noni and

Binni, and it stuck. My real name is Noureen, but just call me Noni Appa like everyone else.’

Anand ji turned towards her, a hint of hesitation in his manner, till he said at last, ‘Appa means

elder sister, Noni. You are a few years older than me but you are not my sister.’ Stumbling over his

words, he said, ‘There is something I have wanted to tell you for a while. I don’t know how to say

it and don’t even know if I should, because I am a married man but I...’ He paused for a moment,

afraid and uncertain. Then gathering courage, he continued, ‘At our age I can’t say that my heart

flutters when I am near you, but it hums contentedly, and I want to spend the time I have left

listening to that sound.’

Noni Appa straightened the damp blue salwar sticking to her feet. She looked down at her

misshapen toes, arthritis having tugged at them till they had finally bent to its will, and said, ‘The

time to follow our heart has long gone by, Anand ji, the only thing left for the poor thing to do now

is to slowly stop.’

She gingerly stood up and they silently walked back together.

The next day Noni Appa spent the afternoon at Muskan, sitting on a chair facing the children who

had gathered around her. She was reading aloud from ‘The Brahmin and the Three Thugs’,

intermittently picking up little cut-outs of the characters glued to a stick. But today, unlike her

previous read-aloud sessions, she was merely going through the motions.

She found herself thinking about Anand ji, getting annoyed with him, with his need to voice what

had simply been understood. Why do people have to define relationships, underline each word till

the paper gives way beneath, she wondered.

Anand ji’s words had opened a door, spilling light on what Noni Appa had been hiding from

everyone including herself. So she had, she hoped, firmly slammed that door shut, because giving

up the pretence that this was a mere platonic friendship would mean giving up the relationship as

well.

She was a dignified widow, a woman who had led an exemplary life. There was a certain respect

in the way people said ‘Salaam, Noni Appa’ when she walked down the street.

She did not want the same people to start whispering about her, laughing at her, an old woman in

an unsavoury affair with a married man. Is this really how she wanted to be remembered? A life

spent meticulously polishing and maintaining a gleaming reputation, only to let it tarnish at the very

end?

She just hoped that Anand ji would now have the sense to leave things the way they were and that

he would not bring up this matter again.

Noni Appa lifted the cut-out of the goat, reading the next four lines, till she stopped abruptly, a

sharp-edged pain in her abdomen like a burning knife slicing through. She bent over, dropping the

cut-out – and suddenly the pain was gone just as quickly as it had appeared.

Aarti, another volunteer, got her a glass of water and Noni Appa gulped it down gratefully, wiping

her clammy forehead with her cotton handkerchief. A little disoriented, she answered Aarti’s

queries with, ‘Like Binni, I think I also can’t digest sprouts any more,’ referring to the moong salad

she'd had for lunch earlier.

Though Noni Appa and Anand ji did not exchange another word about fluttering or humming hearts

and went back to their regular ways, the following week brought a perilous predicament right to

their gates.

They were wrapping up their card game relatively early on Thursday evening – Noni Appa had

been feeling uneasy, the sandwiches lying untouched on the glass table. 'My stomach has just not

been all right these days, I am feeling nauseous, Anand ji, I think I will go in and lie down,' she

said and was getting up when an autorickshaw stopped outside the gate and she saw Baburam and

a plump woman in a printed sari arguing loudly, their words unclear as they melted into the sounds

of the busy lane.

Anand ji, who had his back to the gate, turned around as well on hearing the noise. He immediately

stood up in surprise. Seeing him, the woman bellowed, 'There he is, I told you my husband is

inside. Let me go, you harami, or I will hit you with my slipper!'

She pushed aside a confused Baburam, walked up to Anand ji and, before Noni Appa realized

what was happening, swung her bulky arm and slapped the yoga teacher right across the face.

She then turned towards Noni Appa and, giving her a quick, decisive glance, sneered, ‘This buddhi

is your seven o’clock group class in Bandra? You kept saying, na, “Jyotsna, it is difficult to get a

rickshaw from Pali Hill, takes twenty minutes even if I take the garage road.”

‘Sala harami, at your age having a chakkar with another woman!’ She turned to Noni Appa, adding,

‘And you, old hag. Have some shame. If you are so desperate to clean the cobwebs between your

legs then go stand on the road outside and look for a man, leave my husband alone!’

And continuing her yelling and screeching till Binni, Bhondur and Tito rushed out into the garden,

she dragged a stunned and silent Anand ji to the gate, hailing an autorickshaw swiftly and roughly

pushing her husband inside.

The din in Anand ji’s house reached deafening proportions that Thursday evening and showed no

signs of abating. Once again, picture frames were smashed, vases sent flying and mortars and

pestles were turned into masala-encrusted missiles.

So many objects seemed to be flying through the air in flat 501 and landing on its tiled floor that

one would have thought it was in fact the domestic airport rather than the residence of Anand and

Jyotsna Joshi. Even the dogs, Gulab and Jamun – that Anand ji had reluctantly agreed to buy in a

moment of absolute cowardice instead of firmly standing up to his wife – crouched behind the

sofa, ducking the attacks and adding their sharp barks to their mistress's screeches.

Anand ji, who had at first in guilt-ridden angst been silent, was now, as Sunday afternoon drew to

a close, slowly getting enraged at the lifelong bullying he had faced at his wife's hands.

He had never even held Noni's hand and over the last few days he had had to hear all sorts of

things. Jyotsna had ranted, 'All you men are like dogs, anyone gives you a biscuit, you wag your

tail and lick their hand, but here, God knows what all you must have licked of that dirty old

woman.'

Anand ji had tried to protest and Jyotsna had added yet another analogy about dogs. 'What is the

difference between you and Gulab?' she yelled, waving towards the tiny, hairy dog. 'He also tries

his luck anywhere he can, on Jamun, the sofa leg, the laundry basket, that elephant statue in the

corner, anything will do. Just like you trying your luck with that Muslim hag.' She continued, 'I am

warning you, if you ever go near that dirty woman again, I will leave this house and never come

back.'

Anand ji looked at Jyotsna, her hair dishevelled, face contorted with anger. Age, instead of giving

her the happy wrinkles of a life lived with smiles and laughter, had given her the furrowed brow

and two deep, vertical lines between her eyebrows that she had truly earned.

He could still see the remnants of the pretty twenty-two-year-old girl he had married. It had

seemed like such a splendid match then, with their religion, caste, economic backgrounds

completely in sync. Even their horoscopes had been perfectly matched, but living together had

soon shown them the vast differences between them.

The many years of anger and hurt now formed a mountain of indignant self-righteousness and regret

within him. A man can hear as much music as he pleases in his head but you can only accuse him of

disturbing the peace if he plays the record out loud, he told himself. He may have feelings for Noni

but there had been nothing between them. He was ready to stand his ground.

Anand ji had spent the last few decades keeping his head down and waiting for each storm in their

marriage to pass. A task that had been easier when he had been busy all day at the BMC office and

had his son, Sailesh, as a buffer in the evenings. And though their son would not admit it, Anand ji

knew that even Sailesh had fled their volatile home as soon as he could, citing reasons like ‘Better

prospects in Bangalore, Papa’.

He glanced now at the wreckage of their small living room. It seemed to him that it stood for the

wreckage of his life. The first time she had started throwing her weight around, he should have

refused to tolerate her temper tantrums, taken a firm stance. Perhaps they would never have

reached this point.

He contemplated the years he had left and was filled with dread at the prospect of sitting in his

room with his Walkman and headphones, playing solitaire, day after day, till he eventually ran out

of days.

He turned to his wife and, with a finality in his voice that she had never heard before, said,

‘Jyotsna, you are welcome to stay and you are welcome to go. You have always done as you

pleased and now finally so shall I.’

Leaving her dumbfounded, Anand ji went to his room and firmly locked the door.

Wanting to call her husband’s bluff, as she perceived it, Jyotsna threw a few things into a small bag

and, screeching through the locked door that he would come crawling to her in a few days, left that

very evening.

The next afternoon at exactly four-thirty as usual, Anand ji reached Sea Breeze. He decided that he

would talk to Noni today, and while playing rummy put all his cards on the table both literally and

figuratively.

He pushed the small gate open – Baburam was nowhere in sight – and walked towards the garden,

expecting to see Noni sitting on the wrought iron chair. He was surprised to see the lawn deserted.

He walked towards the house, calling out to Bhondhu, who came out of the kitchen and said, ‘Arrey

Anand ji, Memsaab is with Noni Appa in the hospital. Appa started vomiting continuously, she

was shivering even after we covered her with many blankets. It has been three days now.’

Anand ji felt a chill in his heart. He hurriedly inquired about the hospital and Bhondhu said that

Binni had taken Noni Appa to a hospital in Parle.

Nanavati Hospital was a large, white building with a creaky elevator and rickety wooden stairs.

The receptionist directed Anand ji to the first floor after sternly informing him that visiting hours

were only till 6 p.m.

He climbed up the stairs and entered the waiting area. He spotted Binni and her friend Shamim

sitting on the metal chairs. Binni looked pale and distraught, as if she hadn’t slept or eaten in days.

She had a white muslin dupatta around her head and her fingers were restlessly counting the beads

in her tasbih.

When Anand ji asked about Noni, she clutched his hand and said with a tremble, ‘Anand ji, it all

happened so suddenly. The doctors are saying she had some obstruction in her intestine and has

now developed peri...prito something...’ and she began weeping, unable to continue. Shamim then

added, ‘Peritonitis, they are saying her intestine ruptured and she developed peritonitis.’

Anand ji asked, 'How is she now?' And Binni sobbed, 'She is in the ICU. They did the surgery but

everything had already become septic inside. Dr Shah was just here. He was saying that she is not

responding to antibiotics, her pulse is falling, blood urea and creatinine are very high. Her kidneys

are shutting down. Allah can't be so cruel to take her from me, Anand ji. She is all that I have

left.'

Anand ji sat down on the metal chair, feeling drained all of a sudden, an overwhelming fatigue

creeping over him.

When visiting hours ended, Anand ji advised Binni to go home and rest. He would stay the night

and promised to call her as soon as he got any information.

He sat on the metal chair alongside numerous other people who also had their loved ones in the

ICU. Some slept with their bags serving as pillows, some prayed and some just sat looking fixedly

at the swinging doors of the ICU wing in apprehension.

Early dawn brought a flutter of activity in the waiting room with a middle-aged woman wailing

inconsolably when she was informed that her father had passed away. Anand ji rubbed his eyes,

rotated his stiff neck and walked up to the nurse's station to ask about Noni's condition.

A bespectacled nurse replied, 'It's same only. Doctor coming out, you ask to him.'

When Dr Shah came out of the ICU he informed Anand ji that Noni Appa's condition remained

critical. They had started her on a new antibiotic but if that did not work she would soon go into

multiple organ failure. Anand ji went into the ICU to see Noni.

He saw her lying on the bed, hooked to an IV pole, a tube in one nostril to suck out fluid from her

stomach and electrodes attached to her chest leading to a heart monitor. He reached out and

touched her cheek gently. Though he had imagined this moment dozens of times, not once had he

thought it would be at a time like this.

Binni came to the hospital a few hours later and Anand ji went home to freshen up. He made

himself a cup of tea and though he opened a packet of biscuits he found himself unable to eat any.

He lay down on the bed, closing his eyes, hoping to sleep for an hour but he kept seeing a lifeless

Noni lying on the hospital bed. Restless, he returned to the hospital.

Binni met him in the waiting room. She seemed ebullient. 'Anand ji, good news, Noni Appa is

conscious. You know, I had not told Mallika till now, but I will make a call in the evening and tell

her. These rubbish doctors had said that Noni Appa had nearly departed, but my Noni is too strong

and with Allah's blessings she has now made a U-turn.'

Noni Appa was in the hospital for fifteen days and Anand ji spent all his time with her once she

was moved out of the ICU to a regular room. He sat next to her, holding her hand, reading aloud to

her from a Hindi novel with a lurid cover that Binni had brought along.

After she complained about the smell of hospitals, the stomach-turning odour of vomit and

disinfectant, he brought her a new string of sweet-smelling jasmine flowers to keep near her

pillow every day.

When Noni Appa left the hospital, it was he who accompanied her to her flat. He picked up Noni

Appa's small suitcase, took the key from her, unlocked the door and entered the small house that

belonged to the long-departed Farhan and the nearly departed Noni.

Anand ji visited her every evening, sitting in the balcony with her, drinking a cup of tea while

making sure she drank enough juice and milk as it would be weeks before she could consume

solids again. As Binni bustled about in Noni Appa's small flat, gossiping loudly about the latest

scandals, Anand ji would sit by her side, propping a pillow behind her back, playing rummy with

her.

Noni Appa, who all these years had lived solely by the dictates of society, began realizing that all

the 'Salaams' and 'Ya Ali Madads' that people bestowed on her as a reward for being a

respectable woman were worthless, a currency that would buy her nothing aside from synthetic

eulogies at her funeral.

After her hospital stay and her brief tussle with the djinns of death, she had slowly come to the

conclusion that the only people truly there for her were Binni and Anand ji. So how did it matter

what the world deemed correct or incorrect?

She had to loosen these strings that tied her down because time was untying the knots with such

great speed at the other end and pulling her lower and lower to the ground each day, till soon she

would be buried underneath.

This time it was Noni who brought up matters of the heart. One evening, sitting in the balcony, she

said, ‘Do you remember what you said that day on the beach, Anand ji? I was so foolish that I

refused to hear you out, foolish that I have spent most of my life worrying about what people will

say, how they will perceive me.

‘Anand ji, I can see the finishing line in the mist ahead and I too want to reach the end listening to

my heart hum.’ And she held his arm, resting her head against his shoulder.

Soon Anand ji moved his meagre belongings into Noni Appa’s spare room. She had got it

repainted from a dull cream to an eggshell blue for him, erasing sticker marks and scratches from

the posters and picture frames that Mallika had once hung on the walls.

Anand ji had left Jyotsna the apartment in Clifton and the rental from a small flat they had in

Mahim. Jyotsna had tried to make things difficult by involving various relatives and friends to

intervene and even intimidate Anand ji into returning to Clifton.

But Anand ji had stood his ground. He had finally asked Sailesh to come down from Bangalore and

talk to his mother. Sailesh, having grown up witnessing the brittle relationship between his parents,

had explained to his mother the futility of continuing to live a life filled with conflict. In this final

stretch of their lives, he argued, it would be good for both of them to find peace and happiness.

Jyotsna then retreated into a stony silence.

Noni Appa, on her part, had written Mallika a letter outlining her plans. Mallika called her mother

promptly from London exclaiming, ‘What a sly fox you are, Mom!’ And then captivated by the

prospect that life doesn’t really end at sixty, as she had lately begun to fear, she asked, ‘Mom, so is

Anand ji the great love of your life then? The one you have been waiting for, to sweep you off your

feet?’

Noni Appa laughed. ‘Don’t be silly! Sweeping me off my feet – only your father could do that. We

are perfectly happy but it’s not my-heart-beating-fast kind of love. If it were, then at this age I

would have a heart attack, wouldn’t I? But it’s wonderful to have a companion.’

And while talking to her daughter about Anand ji, Noni Appa realized that in their own way they

had in fact found love, like a well-worn cashmere sweater that hugs in the right places and doesn’t

tug at the wrong ones while keeping you warm on wintry days.

Noni Appa brought two cups of tea and placed them on the small wooden table next to Anand ji. It

had taken a year but she had finally made a full recovery though she had still not dared to have her

favourite Scotch on the rocks.

She sat on the rattan chair opposite Anand ji. Waving towards the cloudy blue sky, he said, 'It has

not rained the whole day today, Noni, have you noticed? You know, it is said that during Tansen's

time he could light a fire by singing Raga Deepak and if you wanted it to rain all you had to do was

sing Raga Megh Malhar.'

And just like that Anand ji began singing 'Meghshyam Ghanashyam' in Raga Megh Malhar,

'Yeeeeaa aaa yeeeeeee ji...'

Noni Appa calmly switched off her hearing aid and continued sipping her tea slowly. An hour

later, the clouds darkened to a dusty grey and it started drizzling.

Anand ji looked at her with childlike glee – though it couldn't quite be considered a miracle since

it was July and Bombay was in the middle of the monsoon season. But she, patting him on his

shoulder, smiled all the same, as they sat together in silence, watching the rain fall, in the manner

of a leaky faucet, all drips and drops, on the branches of the gulmohar tree.

3 If weather permits

The weather forecast in the *Indian Express* had predicted a week of sunshine but on the day that

Elisa Thomas was getting married for the third time to the same man, it began to rain.

It had been a cloudless day during the simple civil ceremony at the courthouse in Bandra three

days ago. Overcast yesterday, when Elisa had become Ayesha, converting to her husband's

religion. The ceremony had lasted all of twenty minutes and the good Christian girl forgot her new

name as soon as she removed the mint green kurta and billowing silk sharara pants with their

intricate gold zardozi work embroidered in a little dusty workshop in faraway Lucknow.

Today, at her third wedding at St Thomas Marthoma Syrian Church, the pouring rain obscuring the

stained-glass windows made the interiors look dreary and grey.

Elisa Thomas tried to look calm as she stood still in front of the slightly damp and disgruntled

priest but all she could think about, as she glanced nervously towards the windows, was the garden

party after and whether the rains would cut short the celebrations.

She cut an imposing figure, three inches taller than the groom, her long, brown hair pulled tightly

away from her coffee-coloured face in a severe bun, her perpetually arched eyebrows looming

over her small, thickly lashed eyes. Today she was clad in a delicate white sari with a red silk one

draped over her head that she would change into for the wedding reception.

Her husband, Javed Gazi, a professional photographer, who at thirty-seven still nursed dreams of

joining the Indian cricket team as a fast bowler, wore a borrowed black suit and a stoic grimace.

Elisa's father, Pothen Thomas, or Acha as she called him, sat in the first pew holding on to his

Christianity like he was the weary custodian of the last crumbling communion wafer. He had lost

one battle when his eldest daughter, Rahel, married a Punjabi banker. And though the chances of

Elisa giving him three or four curly-haired grandchildren with names like Ninan and Cherian had

always been rather unlikely, having to finally face this grim reality filled him with bleakness.

He turned to his wife, Jincy, a string of orange kanakambaram flowers in her hair, a maroon silk

sari tightly wrapped around her overweight frame, dozens of gold rings gleaming on her fingers,

and whispered, 'All the nice Malayali IPS officers we kept inviting over for tea and Marie

biscuits, she rejected. And then she had to go and marry this Javed!'

Pothen Thomas's eyes misted up behind his thick black bifocals as he continued, 'You tell me, in

this India of so many billion peoples, she could not find a boy, okay not Christian or Malayali but

at least an Indian boy? Had to find this Muslim refugee from third-rate country Bangladesh!'

Jincy, without moving her eyes from her daughter and her new son-in-law, maintained a tight-

lipped smile on her heavily powdered face and whispered, 'Pothen, mark my words, it will not

last even six months!'

Jincy Thomas was wrong – it lasted for nine.

Room no. 10 at the Hotel du Globe et des Quatre-Vents was decorated with an antique bed, a silk

bedspread and fresh yellow flowers. The only drawback was that it was so tiny that they had

to squeeze past each other to go to the bathroom.

Elisa would usually open the room door and stand outside, in the hotel corridor, till she heard the

sound of the toilet flushing, waiting till her husband made the trek back towards the other side of

the room. But these inconveniences did not matter because she was in Paris.

Every morning, Javed and Elisa would open maps and notebooks at the pastry shop next door, and

over cups of steaming black coffee and buttery croissants they would plan their separate itineraries

for the day.

Though it was odd that two people on their honeymoon would choose to spend the entire day apart,

Javed only wanted to go to the art galleries and museums, while Elisa wanted to see all the tourist

attractions like the Arc de Triomphe and the Eiffel Tower. So they would go off on their

independent adventures and meet each other in time for dinner.

There was yet another odd thing about this honeymoon: there was no sex. No wooden headboard

banging against the wall; no long brown legs, covered in sweat, being pried apart; no moans

filtering through the wafer-thin wallpapered partitions and spilling into room no. 9, disturbing the

elderly German couple that Elisa saw sometimes in the corridor.

Javed and Elisa had been dating for eight years, an on-off-on-off relationship like a defective light

fixture. As time went by, they began sleeping with friends and sometimes strangers during their off

periods, but during their on periods, gradually without quite knowing why, they stopped having sex

with each other.

This desolate area of their relationship did not bother Elisa. She had married Javed partly because

she had a bond with him and also because she needed to get married before she would inevitably,

one weary day, succumb to one of the Malayali boys, a Varghese or a Joseph, it didn't matter

which, that her parents used as battering rams to break her defences down.

Walking down to Pont de l'Alma in the 8th Arrondissement to catch a ferry and see the Notre

Dame against the slanting evening sunlight, she felt that this life with Javed was good enough.

Elisa had been on another ferry ride, not so long ago, crossing over from Versova to Madh Island

with her older sister Rahel and Luke, her little nephew, holding a picnic basket. Rahel leaned

against the rusty iron railing, the salt air turning her blow-dried hair into a frizzy mess, and asked

her, 'Elisa, why are you like this? Don't you think you should stop slipping in and out of

relationships and find the right man?'

Taking a sip from a bottle of Kingfisher beer, Elisa replied, 'You know, this reminds me of

something a man told me just yesterday, "Things have a way of turning up when they want to be

found, though they may not always be the things you actually want to find.'"

Rahel, squinting in the sun, said, ‘That’s pretty profound, Eli, he’s a spiritual guru or something?’

And Elisa, the corners of her eyes crinkling up, laughed. ‘No! He was just stoned, Rahel!’

Javed was perhaps the right man, Elisa thought as she took pictures of the Jardin Tino Rossi,

wandering through the sculpture garden and surrounding lawns on her way back to the hotel. He

needed a lot of space, which meant that she, in return, got the space to do what she wanted as well.

There were no restrictions on her, no demands.

And she liked listening to him talk about art and books. Javed had lithographs, and a charcoal

sketch by Souza next to his study table. There was a dusty bookshelf in one corner of his bedroom,

with slim red volumes filled with poems by Rumi, Roald Dahl’s *Dirty Beasts*, a battered book of

Ghalib’s poetry. These were not things she had grown up with in her two-bedroom house that

always smelled of meen moilee, a watery fish curry that her mother insisted on making five times a

week.

Eight days in Paris and they were back in Bombay, enclosed in Javed’s small flat at Yari Road.

Elisa went back to working at her father’s real estate firm while Javed spent his days earning his

living as a photographer. In the evenings, he would practise his bowling, which inevitably led to a

sprained shoulder or an aching back, while she would go off visiting friends or occasionally paint,

leaving a series of unfinished canvases stacked in their garage below.

Javed was a quiet man who, aside from a beer or two on rare occasions, did not like drinking; nor

did he smoke or socialize. His only weakness was that he visited numerous psychiatrists, palmists,

fortune tellers and faith healers, trying to find anything that might dispel the dark fog that often

filled his mind.

It was Elisa who was the gregarious one, with hordes of friends and a bad smoking habit. She

would often go dancing till dawn and when she returned, her hair full of smoke, her mouth tasting

of wine, and tumbled into bed, he would move over, and turn his back to her, pretending to be

asleep.

With time, Javed got quieter and Elisa was out more often. The shadowy nebula of resentment in

Javed's mind seemed to get bigger and bigger till Elisa could feel it when she brushed against him.

It would encircle her when she passed him a cup of tea, sit between them during dinner, lie beside

them in bed – like an invisible third person in their marriage.

This silent stalemate could have continued indefinitely but it didn't. That December they travelled

to Goa with Elisa's friends to celebrate New Year's Eve. Javed, riding a motorbike with Elisa

holding on to him, poured half a bottle of Old Port rum down his throat. He told Elisa that he

wanted to die and rammed their bike into a passing truck.

Elisa wrenched the handlebars from him, so they ended up falling in a ditch on the side of the road

instead. Javed broke his nose, a rib and his right shoulder. Elisa had a scratch on her arm, straw in

her hair and dirt stains on her sparkly silver top.

She returned to the hotel, called her sister and said, 'Rahel, since it's New Year's Eve it's better to

start the next year on a good note. You will tell Achan to do the paperwork for me, right?' And she

returned home to live with her Achan and her Amma, in the house that always smelled of

meen moilee.

Two years went by where Elisa went from one relationship to the next like she was trying on a pair

of jeans, slipping it on, twirling around and then leaving it in a crumpled heap on the floor.

She eventually found one that came close to her idea of perfection – a Rajasthani man called Ajay

Shekhawat. But his family, inclined towards politics, had already arranged his marriage to a girl

that could strengthen their political clout. Afraid that Elisa would end up with a bullet in her head,

Jincy decided to take matters into her own hands. She bought the thirty-one-year-old Elisa a

conservative salwar kameez and took her to Trivandrum.

Chacko was the son of the local district collector Abraham Kurien, and at forty he had never been

married. He was tall, had the ubiquitous moustache that all South Indian men sport as a sign of

virility, a receding hairline and was wearing a Black Sabbath T-shirt with blue jeans. He sat next

to his father quietly watching Elisa.

Jincy began, ‘Elisa, you know Chacko’s uncle is a bishop and his grandfather was also a bishop.

Such distinguished people in your family, Mr Kurien.’

Over a meal of appams and some chakkakuru manga curry made with jackfruit seeds, coconut and

mango, Elisa discovered that Mr Kurien was an engaging man.

They sighed about the dwindling Jewish community in Kerala, the handful of Malabari Jews and

even fewer Paradesi Jews that were now left, making the Paradesi the smallest Jewish community

in the world. Mr Kurien regaled them with a ghost story about the Lakkidi gateway haunted by a

tribal leader called Karinthandan who during the Raj helped a British engineer find the shortest

route to Thamarassery and was murdered.

Elisa thought she could live in this large, rambling house with Mr Kurien and his son, on old-time

stories and funny anecdotes. At least here she wouldn't have to continually bump into her parents

and their reproachful faces. But first she needed to exchange a few words with her prospective

husband who had barely opened his mouth.

'So, Chacko,' said Elisa, after Mr Kurien led them to the first-floor study, 'what do you do?'

Chacko pulled out a joint from the pocket of his jeans and asked her, 'You smoke ganja?' When she

nodded tentatively, he lit the joint and offered it to Elisa. After she had a long drag, he said, 'I

studied management, we bought a seat in some college in America, but I didn't finish. I watch

television and drink beer.'

Though most women would have jumped out of their chair, screeching, 'Amma, save me!' Elisa

who had always looked at her life as if it were an episode of *Star Trek* – adhering faithfully to its

slogan ‘To boldly go where no man has gone before’ – immediately decided to explore this

uncharted, idle planet to a resounding round of applause by her elated parents. It wouldn’t be just

an adventure, she thought to herself, but she’d actually please her parents for the first time in her

adult life.

The weather forecast in Kerala’s leading newspaper, *Deepika*, stated that it would be a week

filled with clear skies and, unlike the much more widely circulated *Indian Express*, it was

accurate on both the days Elisa got married.

For the civil ceremony she had picked a white-and-red dress with daffodils and for the church

wedding she wore the same delicate white sari she had for her last wedding as she felt it would be

a waste to buy yet another one.

Elisa stood in front of Father James Chandy at St Rita’s Malankara Church in Trivandrum with

Chacko. Her entire family had gathered to watch her getting married for the fifth time except her

sister, Rahel, who refused to fly down saying, ‘Elisa, if you just want the excitement of jumping

without quite knowing where you are going to land, try skydiving. But I am not interested in

witnessing this holding the nose, ignoring the stinky water and taking a dip, just to see how it

makes you feel. If I were you, I would tell Amma and Achan to call off this farce.'

Elisa lashed out at her sister, 'And do what? Watch Achan watch me every day, wondering what

he's supposed to do with me now, when he can pass this ticking time bomb on to some other

unsuspecting Malayali victim? No thanks!'

Two days later, Elisa and Chacko left for their honeymoon in a white Maruti Gypsy with a boot

filled with snacks and beer. They were going to take turns and drive along a scenic route that took

them from Trivandrum all the way to Cochin.

Elisa drove for the first hour, Chacko looking out of the window, smoking a joint and passing it to

Elisa intermittently. When they switched places, Elisa grabbed a beer and, despite the heavy metal

music playing on the car stereo, soon fell asleep.

Elisa was dreaming, she was in a garden, in the coils of a labyrinth, the green hedge high above

her head. She was leaving a trail of teeth behind her as she walked on. There was a cat somewhere

though she could not see it.

The cat kept mewling and whimpering, her cries ringing in her ears. Elisa frowned, she was half

awake now. Her eyes shut but she could still hear the cat. She opened her eyes. The music was off

and Chacko, tears rolling down his cheeks, was bawling that he wanted to kill himself.

Elisa's first thought was, 'Crap! What are the chances of this happening all over again!' Followed

by, 'I need to take control of this vehicle before this crazy bugger rams it somewhere.' Elisa leaned

over, swerved the steering wheel towards the side of the road and made Chacko stop the car.

She tried talking to Chacko but he had withdrawn into silence. He kept snivelling and refused to

speak. She wondered what to do, contemplated heading back but decided that it was a nice road

trip to Brunton Boatyard in Cochin. She might as well see it all now. Everything was booked and

God knows when she would get the chance again.

Hundred and sixty kilometres later they reached Alleppey. Elisa parked the car, picked up their

bags and, followed by a silent Chacko, checked into the houseboat. She lay down on the bed,

looking at the sprawling backwaters from the wooden window as the houseboat cruised along the

narrow canals with paddy fields and coconut groves along the sides.
Chacko sat outside, near the

prow of the houseboat, his eyes shut, head drooping to one side, chewing on a piece of stale gum.

She ate rice with spicy prawn curry that burned the back of her throat and made her nose drip but a

silent Chacko refused to eat anything at all. His was not an aggressive silence. He would smile,

nod, and sit by the carrom board in the room fiddling with the wooden playing discs. It seemed to

be a congenial stupor.

The next morning they drove for a couple of hours to stay at a cardamom plantation in Thekkady.

Chacko seemed better. He even drove for an hour or so and they talked – about the best route to

take, the weather, an old aunt who believed in voodoo. Elisa decided to leave yesterday where she

felt it belonged, a hundred kilometres behind her.

The new bride consummated her marriage that night, reluctantly. Chacko reached out to her in the

dark. Though she tried telling him that it wasn't the right time, making excuses about menstruating,

Chacko went ahead.

Later, lying in the creaky, warm bed, she wondered if he had even noticed the spotless white bed

sheet that showed up her white lie but Chacko was snoring, sleeping in a fetal position, facing

away from her.

Elisa tried comforting herself with the fact that though the sex had been just about adequate, with a

little tutoring it had the potential to become pretty darn good.

But lying in a strange bed with an even stranger man, the brazen carefreeness that she usually

armed herself with failed her.

In the darkness, she sensed the empty space that lurked inside her, which she kept away with

laughter and company; the vast loneliness that had brought her to this point, where she was now

married to a man whom she not only hardly knew but had no interest in knowing better. Elisa spent

half the night staring at the ceiling fan as it turned round and round endlessly, moving continuously

but not going anywhere.

The drive to Brunton Boatyard was a long one and around midday Chacko started muttering about

meeting angels. This was interspersed with smiles and comments like 'It's better not to wake up a

hungry man than not to give him food.' And 'Nice line depth!'

Luckily he fell asleep, only to wake up just as they were pulling into the driveway of Brunton

Boatyard. He opened the door of the moving car and rushed inside, babbling feverishly, 'My angel

is waiting for me!'

Elisa sat in the car debating whether to simply turn the car around and drive all the way back to

Trivandrum, pack her bags and fly back to Bombay. Her reverie was broken when a security guard

and what seemed to be two men from the hotel management frantically requested her to come

inside.

She saw Chacko in the lobby, trying to grab a gym bag that was dangling from the shoulder of an

overweight, red-faced Russian man while hollering, 'I have found my angel! Come with me!'

Elisa managed to calm Chacko down and bundle him into their room. Back in the lobby, the

Russian asked her, 'Are you the wife? What is the problem with him?' As she tried to apologize to

him, Elisa explained, 'I don't know anything about him. You see, we have only been married for

five days.'

A few days later Elisa was back at the house that always smelled of meen moilee. Pothan Thomas

opened the door, looked at his daughter, then looked at the three suitcases next to her and called out

to his wife, ‘Jincy, come here! Again she has come back home!’ So Elisa decided to go and live

with Rahel instead.

Elisa was sitting at her desk at the office when she saw Chacko walking in with her father. It had

been two months since she had last seen him. Chacko gave Elisa one of his vacant smiles as he sat

in the reception area, while Pothan pulled his disgruntled daughter into his cabin.

Elisa said, ‘Acha, did you ask him to come here? I don’t want to have anything to do with him. He

is totally mad, you know!’ Pothan Thomas was livid. ‘Always everyone is mad, Elisa, everyone

but you! A woman who does not have a man’s name behind her is the mad one. People will trouble

her non-stop. Deaf and dumb but a man is a man is a man.’

So Elisa was made to leave Rahel’s house and move back into the house with Achan, Amma and

their house guests, Chacko and Mr Kurien.

If Elisa’s parents noticed anything strange about Chacko’s penchant for suddenly saying things like

‘There is a lock on my icebox!’ or staring silently at a dot on the wall for hours on end, they did not

comment.

One evening, over a dinner of – what else? – meen moilee, potatoes, dosas and steamed rice, Mr

Kurien said, ‘Elisa, give Chacko a chance. He has been through a lot. When he was hospitalized

the doctor said that he suffers from a minor mental illness like depression but he got better and they

released him. He is doing well now. His cousin Joseph Idiculas also had some problems like this,

but now he has three children. Elisa, have a child with Chacko and he will become all right, I

guarantee it.’

Elisa glanced at Chacko, who was now smiling softly at the rava dosa on his plate. She looked at

Jincy and Pothen, who were nodding agreeably, and said, ‘Mr Kurien, if you think having sex will

make your son better, then I am happy to arrange dozens of girls for him. But if you tell me to have

intercourse with him and have a baby, then I am not volunteering. I have no desire for my

gravestone to bear an epitaph stating “Here lies buxom Mother Teresa who sacrificed her life by

curing mental disabilities through her vagina.””

And as Pothen Thomas started thinking about all the paperwork he would have to do all over

again, Chacko looked up from his plate and in a strange moment of perfect lucidity said, ‘Elisa,

you have a kind vagina.’

A year later, Elisa sat with Rahel, knitting a white woollen blanket for her newborn niece. Rahel,

who still looked vaguely pregnant, despite the baby being three months old, sat in the rocking chair

putting her baby to sleep.

Pothen Thomas walked briskly into the room, holding a newspaper, and said, ‘Elisa, see this

newspaper! It says that Makhija Builders’ daughter, she is a Manglik. I know this fellow, I have

gone to his office also one or two times. She is having to marry a tree before she is getting married

to some diamond merchant chap.

‘This article tells that according to astrological texts, Mangliks can never have happy marriage till

they perform this tree wedding first, otherwise harm falls on the husband, he goes mental or even

dies. Your horoscope also says that you are a Manglik. I don’t know why we never thought of this,

maybe we should also try. And then after that, get you married to a nice Malayali boy...’

Rahel interrupted her father, ‘Acha, you are already talking about getting her remarried when that

mad Chacko is refusing to sign the divorce papers!’

Pothen ignored his daughter and continued, 'I know George Mathai is looking for his son. After all,

a man is a man is a man.'

Elisa, looking away from her father, her head towards the window, murmured, 'Yes Acha, deaf and

dumb, a man is everything, I have heard this before; but the day I want to settle down with a stable,

deeply rooted member of the community, I will marry the tree.'

Later that month, Elisa left her Achan and Amma and the house that always smelled of meen moilee

for the last time. She told Pothen that she knew she could not change her parents or change her own

mindset, so she was going to change the only thing she could, her postal address.

She was going to move to the small house her grandmother had left Rahel and her in their ancestral

home town of Oyoor located on the banks of the Ithikkara river.

Rahel had asked her, 'Won't you get lonely there, Eli?' and she replied, 'It will be far less lonely

than sharing a name and a bed with yet another stranger. Been there done that, have two marriage

certificates, not just the proverbial T-shirt.'

Elisa paused for a moment and then she said, 'Achan and Amma have always been so proud of

you, Rahel. “Our daughter is a senior director in the HR department of Microsoft,” they go around

telling everyone. But I am just a thorn in their side, one that pricks them every day when they see

my face; the daughter who can get nothing right including the simple task that even fools seem to

manage perfectly well, marriage.

‘To tell you the truth, I am looking forward to going, I will paint, read, maybe even open a school

for primary students, learn to like myself all over again.’

Looking at her sister getting all teary-eyed, Elisa exclaimed, ‘For God’s sake, don’t start crying

now, I am not going away forever, I’ll be back for a visit around Christmas.’

Elisa never reached Oyoor. On National Highway 66, close to Kayamkulam, a truck carrying

timber overturned and crashed into her small Maruti Suzuki.

On a postcard-perfect day with clear blue skies, Elisa Thomas was buried in the presence of her

distraught family. Pothen and Jincy had wanted to engrave Elisa’s gravestone with ‘Elisa Thomas:

Beloved daughter, sister and wife.’

But Rahel, half-crazed with grief, had screamed at her father, ‘Elisa would not even have been on

that road if it were not for you. Deaf and dumb but a man is a man is a man is not only the most

idiotic thing I have ever heard, but it is fucking grammatically fucking incorrect!’

The Christian cemetery at Sewri has a simple white arched gate. Tall, wide-branched trees dapple

sunlight over tombstones with marble cherubs and cast their shade over lonely, unmarked graves as

well. Far on the left side, next to a bush filled with tiny blue flowers, lies a simple tombstone with

an epitaph that says: Here lies Elisa, she briefly belonged to many, but truly to herself.

4 The Sanitary Man From a sacred Land

1

On a sweltering afternoon in a small town near Dewas in Madhya Pradesh, Bablu Kewat was

carefully cycling on a bumpy road. He took out a checked handkerchief from the breast pocket of

his maroon shirt and was about to wipe his sweaty forehead when he spotted two of his childhood

friends, Naamdev and Hariprasad, standing under the shade of a banyan tree, chewing tobacco.

Bablu raised his arm and called out to them. They looked at him and instead of returning his

greeting began to walk away from him, down the slope towards the paddy field. The smile on

Bablu's broad face faded. Looking weary, even his thin moustache seeming to droop in

disappointment, he hunched his shoulders and quickly pedalled on.

The dusty road began to narrow. Houses appeared on either side – bright-coloured structures,

some with television antennas popping out of the ubiquitous blue plastic sheets covering holes in

their roofs. He had to carefully navigate the bustling street crowded with women in green and

orange saris, strings of jasmine flowers wrapped around their buns like soft clouds of scented

wonder; little girls in blue uniforms, their pigtails tied with bright red ribbons, walking home after

school; and two- and three-wheelers that honked intermittently at stray cows blocking their path.

A sudden spray of tiny pebbles made Bablu's bicycle wobble. He looked around, trying to find the

mischief-maker, only to see some schoolboys, pebbles still in hand, looking straight at him and

laughing mockingly. He recognized one of the boys as the shopkeeper Ganjkaran's son but decided

to ignore them.

A small, freshly painted house loomed ahead, his pride and joy, coated with Asian Paints' White

Satin by Bablu himself just a few months ago. He parked his bicycle, unhooked the plastic bag

dangling from the handlebar, slung it over his shoulder and with a thick metal chain locked his

cycle to the pole outside his house.

As he was walking towards his door, he heard a familiar nasal voice call out, 'Pervert!' He looked

up – it was his neighbour's wife Parul, standing at her kitchen window glaring at him, her gold

nose pin gleaming in the sun as she washed the dishes.

He stood still, looking back at her. If he could not call her names, he could at least show her that

she did not cow him. She, aside from being an expert gossip, was an expert at the art of

intimidation and did not back down.

Minutes passed with both refusing to lower their gaze. Bablu began to get bored with this 'waiting

without blinking' game, and invented a new one. Keeping his gaze fixed on her, he began to chant

dha dhin dhin dha – the simple, repetitive beat that he had learnt playing the tabla as a child – and

began fumbling through a series of vigorous dance movements, flinging his arms about, balancing

precariously on one leg. It was the most eccentric kind of ballet, a clumsy cross between Kathak

and the moves he had seen in Bollywood films.

Parul looked at him puzzled, but when he continued with his ungainly pirouettes and started

advancing towards her, she nervously shrieked, ‘Gowri, Gowri! Come out!’

Bablu’s wife, Gowri, rushed outside, with Choti, their dog, following closely at her heels. Seeing

her husband leaping around like a lunatic in the sun, she said, ‘Stop this! What are you doing?’ He

immediately came to an awkward halt, not wanting to tell her what Parul had called him.

It would set off yet another argument between the two of them – and these had been happening too

often for his liking. He muttered softly, ‘If she is going to stare at me each time I come home, I may

as well give her something to look at.’

Parul, sensing that she once again had the upper hand, her prodigious stomach pressing against the

windowsill, leaned out of her kitchen window, pointed at Bablu and, in a voice dripping with

scorn, said, ‘Gowri, why don’t you take your husband to some big doctor, he is stark raving mad, I

tell you!’

Gowri, her head lowered, silently tugged at her husband's arm, pulling him towards the open front

door.

Bablu hung his shirt and grey pants on a hook behind the door and changed into an airy cotton vest

and a pair of worn-out pyjamas. He sat cross-legged on the cement floor waiting for Gowri to

place the steel plates filled with their lunch on the floor.

Gowri had not uttered a single word since they had walked inside. Her green glass bangles jingled

angrily as she went about her chores, the only sound that broke the stifling silence between the

husband and wife.

Bearing a single plate heaped with rice, cauliflower curry and some sliced onions, she placed it

with a sharp thud in front of him. Bablu looked at his wife searchingly.

A little more than a year ago Gowri had been a stranger and now here she was, his life partner, the

one person who was meant to stand by his side through the good and bad times.

Gowri was a small-built woman with a nondescript face, and deep-set brown eyes under her thick

eyebrows. Her most striking feature was a charming smile that revealed a tiny gap between her

two front teeth and softened her face to girlishness. It was the smile that he had noticed when they

first met at her mother's house. A smile that he had not seen for many weeks now.

Bablu caught her hand and pulled her down to sit beside him. 'Gowri, please stop this, come here.'

And when she did not respond, he asked, 'Do you also believe what I am doing is wrong?' Gowri

finally looked at him and said, 'It does not matter if it is right or wrong, please just stop all this.'

Everyone in the town is saying you have lost your mind. You want to know the truth? Even your

mother has gone to consult Goraksh Baba hoping he can suggest some remedy!'

Bablu sighed. 'There is no point in explaining anything to you people.' He finished his meal in

silence, feeling tired and heavy. And though he desperately wanted to lie down and rest, he

decided that this was the best time to finish his work. The roads would all be empty, the intense

afternoon heat driving everyone indoors.

Bablu stood up, opened the dented Godrej cupboard in one corner of the room, rummaged under

his shirts till he found the sanitary napkin and placed it inside the briefs that he had bought

especially for the occasion – it was a snug brown pair, very different from what he usually wore,

loose, striped boxers that dangled almost till his knees.

He then took out a rubber bladder filled with blood from the plastic bag he had brought home. He

inserted a tube at one end and strapped the contraption to his hip gingerly with duct tape, already

anticipating the pain when he would have to rip it off.

The other end of the tube he tucked inside his new briefs. He pulled on his pants and put his

maroon shirt back on. Calling out, ‘Gowri, I left something unfinished at the workshop; I will be

back in an hour or so,’ he left the house.

Bablu walked around the neighbourhood, pressing the rubber bladder every now and then and

feeling the damp, sticky blood accumulate on the sanitary napkin. Within half an hour there was a

noxious odour surrounding him.

To his dismay he discovered that the lower end of the tube had slipped away from the sanitary

napkin, out of his underwear, and there was blood all over his crotch. He wanted to rush home

immediately before anyone saw him but if Gowri spotted him with bloodstained pants it would

lead to a war worse than the Mahabharata. He hurried to a nearby well, hoping to swiftly scrub his

pants and then go home.

The well was deserted aside from three stray dogs fighting over a dead mouse and a sickly looking

goat lying down near it. He took off his pants, and as he sat scrubbing at the bloodstains, he saw

Parul's younger sister Lata walking towards the well.

She looked at Bablu quizzically as she came closer. He tried to stand up and pull his wet pants on,

but accidentally pressed the bladder instead and a large squirt of blood sprinkled over the well,

the goat and the muddy ground.

Lata stood still for a minute, shocked at this spectacle. Then she started screaming and made a

noisy getaway, startling several cows and four half-naked boys who were all defecating on the

side of the road one kilometre to the north.

The next day myriad rumours spread all over the small town. Bablu had turned into a demon, he

was a vampire who wanted to suck the blood of virgins, he was involved in perverse sexual

activities with female goats. Parul paraded Lata in front of the entire neighbourhood as the lucky

victim who all thanks to God's kindness had escaped from Bablu's diabolical intentions.

Gowri, who burst into hysterical tears on hearing about the incident, finally called her brother to

fetch her and went to stay at her mother's house for an indefinite period of time.

2

Bablu was not a vampire or a demon and aside from looking on in alarm when he accidentally

sprayed blood all over the goat he had no interest in it either, sexual or otherwise. He was a

simple welder whose life had been ripped apart all because he had wanted to give Gowri a gift.

Bablu and Gowri had had an arranged marriage, after meeting just once, briefly, in the presence of

both their families.

Gowri in a blue-and-gold sari with pink lipstick inexpertly applied over her lips entered the small

living room and sat across the tall, thin stranger who was about to be her prospective groom.

Bablu did not quite know what to make of this creature with her head bowed and her eyes

lowered, but as he kept looking at her, Gowri's little nephew sitting beside her whispered

something in her ear and she smiled, a radiant, toothy grin that lingered in her eyes for a few

moments even after she quickly schooled her features.

Kanchan Bua, Gowri's aunt, pointed at the potato-filled kachoris and the jalebis on the table and

addressed Bablu's mother, Bhairavi Kewat, 'Bhairavi ji, like I told you Gowri is a wonderful

cook, she has made the kachoris, do try one.'

Bablu's mother leisurely sipped her tea and then had a small bite of the piping-hot delicacy. She

was examining Gowri as she would a basket of tomatoes in Patri market, like she wanted to pick

her up and turn her around, fingers jabbing against the skin, looking for defects.

After a few minutes of silent deliberation over Gowri's possible virtues against her probable

imperfections, Bhairavi Kewat finally said, 'Kanchan ji, you were right, the kachoris are indeed

marvellous.' And the matter was settled.

A letter was sent shortly afterwards with Bablu's and, more importantly, his mother's consent. And

after a small wedding on an auspicious day in March, Gowri became Mrs Prabhash Ram Kewat,

Bablu's official name that was never used anywhere except on government documents like his

ration card.

In the first few months of their life together, Bablu would make it a point to surprise Gowri with

small gifts, telling her to close her eyes and then placing little objects in her hand, four bangles, a

packet of orange bindis, a 5 Star chocolate. These tiny gifts would be elaborately packed,

sometimes in large green leaves, sometimes with the glossy sections of old newspapers.

An arranged marriage is a peculiar situation where you marry a complete stranger and then go

about determinedly trying to fall in love with them. It is also crucial in the early stages of this

strange experiment that both parties try to put their best foot forward, husbands often by simply

refraining from publicly scratching their groins, and wives by trying to please their mothers-in-

law, formerly easy-going women who almost instantly turn into eagle-eyed perfectionists with the

arrival of a daughter-in-law.

Bablu Ram Kewat's whimsically wrapped gifts were his way of weaving tenderness into a

marriage that only had the hardened bricks of shared caste and economic backgrounds as its

foundations. His attempts seemed to work – because Gowri always had her childlike smile to offer

him as a gift of her own when he came home, weary from the workshop.

The morning sun crept stealthily into the room through the cracks in the wooden window, sweeping

away shadows in the dusty corners, alighting over Bablu's eyelids. He opened his eyes reluctantly

and stretched himself with a sigh of contentment, exposing the two holes in his vest under the left

armpit.

His mother and younger sister, Shalu, were both drinking tea in the kitchen and handed him a cup.

Looking for his wife, he sauntered out to the back porch and saw Gowri walking hurriedly towards

the bathroom, holding a bloodstained rag in her hand.

Concerned, he asked, 'Gowri, what happened? Did you cut your hand, show me!'

He caught her hand, taking the rag from her before she could react. Flushing with embarrassment,

his wife snatched her arm away. Bablu looked at her with surprise and at the bloodstained cloth in

his hand. Understanding dawned in his eyes.

Gowri silently took the rag from him and went inside the bathroom. Later when she found him still

in their room, she immediately busied herself, combing her wet hair in front of the small mirror on

the wall, opening an orange plastic box filled with cream from the shelf next to it and rubbing it on

her face.

He asked her, 'Gowri, can I ask you a question, that grubby cloth you had in your hand, is that what

you use, you know, for that uh...ladies' problem?'

She nodded hesitantly and before he could ask her any more questions, his mother called out from

the front porch, 'Bablu, I am going to Rachna's house, I might stay there tonight. Her husband has

still not come back from Ahmedabad and Pintu has got chickenpox. Haan, listen, she was also

asking if you can come there after you finish with the workshop, and fix her boiler?'

Bablu replied, 'Yes Ma, I will be there at six o'clock.' And then Bhairavi Kewat added, 'Arrey,

Bablu, this dog of yours has made a big mess near the steps, ask Gowri to clean it!'

He good-naturedly muttered 'Yes Ma' before taking an old newspaper and heading out to clean up

himself.

Cycling towards Dewas, where his workshop was located, he had to wait fifteen minutes at the

traffic lights. The dented red bus ahead of him refused to move as the driver was involved in a

screaming match with a rickshaw driver causing yet another traffic jam.

An old beggar woman, her hair dishevelled, skin covered in dust and wearing threadbare clothes,

walked up to him. Feeling sorry for her, Bablu took out a one-rupee coin from his pocket and

dropped it into the metal tin in her hand.

He watched her go to the autorickshaw standing next to him and engage in a long, hushed

conversation with the driver. Just as she moved away, he heard the driver say, 'Yes Ma ji.'

Curious, he asked the autorickshaw driver, 'You know her?'

The driver replied, 'Yes, she is the owner of this rickshaw and has two more, she was telling me

to park it under the shed tonight because it looks like it is going to rain.'

Bablu laughed. 'Bhaiya, what can I say except I think I am in the wrong business!'

Late for work, he quickly unlocked the shutters for the three employees waiting outside. He had

joined the workshop six years ago, first as a busboy, getting tea and tobacco for the owner,

Shantaram Seth, and then had slowly worked his way up to becoming a welder himself.

When Shantaram Seth had started drinking heavily, Bablu had not only ensured that Shantaram was

safe in bed each night, even carrying him on his back after finding him lying inebriated on the side

of the road, but had also gradually taken over the mortgage of the workshop. Over the last two

years he had run the business himself, growing it steadily.

He enjoyed working with machines and though he had been an indifferent student at best he still

remembered his science teacher's name, Mrs B. Sharma, and the egg incubator that he had made

under her supervision.

But when Bablu's father died leaving his mother struggling to support her small family, he had

dropped out of school to get a job and help her out.

Inherently a cheerful, optimistic man, he had no bitterness, reasoning with himself that, despite not

finishing high school, he had not done badly for himself. He just had a few more payments to make

to the moneylenders towards the mortgage and then he could save up and buy a brand-new scooter.

That evening on his way back from the workshop, Bablu decided to surprise Gowri with yet

another gift. He stopped his cycle outside a small store with a lopsided signboard that proudly said

G.K. Pundit and Sons. Walking up to the counter, he asked the store owner, 'Ganjkarani Bhaiya, I

want to buy a packet of...of...that thing they use, that...' Trailing off, unsure of the exact words to

use though he had seen the advertisements often enough on television.

A perspiring Ganjkaran put away the blue plastic flyswatter that he had been fanning himself with

and sniggered, 'Bablu, just say condoms, wasting so much time stammering!' And he pulled out a

small black packet labelled 'Kamasutra LongLast' depicting a man and a woman in the throes of

passion. 'No Ganjkaran Bhaiya, that other packet, which ladies use, you know, that time of the

month.' Ganjkaran smirked. 'Achha, sanitary pads! Wah, your wife has already made you her

puppy and taught you to fetch and carry?'

Seeing Bablu's narrowed eyes and realizing that he had forgotten the most important rule of

business, to be deferential to the customer, he added, 'Just a joke only! Tell me which brand you

want?'

Bablu was confused. It had never occurred to him that there were brands to choose from and he

asked Ganjkaran to give him whichever one the shopkeeper thought was the best.

Ganjkaran pulled out a packet from underneath the display counter that was filled with bars of Lux

soap, blue plastic Parachute oil bottles and bundles of pens and pencils.

Wrinkling his nose distastefully as if he was handling the day-old carcass of a mangy cat, he

quickly wrapped the packet in an old newspaper, looping a string around it several times before

knotting it, and slipped it into a black plastic packet. Bablu was startled at the exorbitant price and

dutifully took out forty rupees from his shirt pocket and paid him.

He began cycling towards his sister Rachna's house when it occurred to him that he should go and

collect some neem leaves for his nephew Pintu, who had contracted chickenpox.

He recalled the time he had been ill with the dreaded infection as a child. He shuddered now at the

memory of those ugly red scabs which had never stopped itching. His father had boiled some neem

leaves in water and given Bablu a bath with the decoction. The neem leaves and his father's

gentleness had soothed his irritated skin.

Ram Kewat had been a handloom weaver who worked primarily from home and unlike Bhairavi,

who dominated the household with both affection and her fierce temper, he had been a softer soul.

Nine years had passed since his father's death but rarely did a week go by without Bablu thinking

of him.

He turned on to a narrow dirt road, the wild shrubs and vegetation getting denser as he ventured

further. He reached the little clearing filled with neem trees and plucked two large handfuls of the

small spiky leaves, stuffing them in the black packet holding the sanitary napkins.

As his hand brushed against the bulky packet, curiosity overtook him. He unwrapped the

newspaper, tore open the plastic packaging and pulled out one of the cotton pads.

He examined the pad gingerly at first, like it was a strange new animal, one that would suddenly

wake up and bite his hand. After turning it one way and the other, he decided that it seemed to be

just plain cotton wrapped with a gauze sheet. He placed it on his palm, trying to calculate the

approximate weight of the pad. 'Ten grams,' he said to himself.

Having seen his father working with cotton yarn through his childhood, he knew that ten grams of

cotton would barely cost ten paise. But here he was paying four rupees for each of these pads. He

put the sanitary pad back in its packet.

Bhairavi Kewat and Rachna were sitting on the porch steps. They were looking out at Rachna's

little garden, past her broken gate, into the busy evening road filled with honking two-wheelers.

Rachna grumbled, ‘When is this Bablu ever on time? From our schooldays till now. I have to

always wait for him.’

When her mother made a soothing gesture, Rachna continued, ‘Oh Ma, I forgot to tell you – last

Tuesday, when you had gone to Durga Masi’s house, I was on my way to the market and stopped by

the house.

‘Gowri was just sitting and listening to the radio. I tell you, Ma – you should pull her up a little.

You know how particular I am. When she was getting me water, I quickly ran my hand around the

door jamb and on the windowsill and, will you believe it, my fingers were covered with dirt and

grime. God knows what that woman does all day besides daydreaming!’

Before Bhairavi Kewat could reply, they spotted Bablu. He pushed open the broken gate and

moved it back and forth before he walked up to the house. He said, ‘The whole metal plate has

broken into two. You should have told me, I will get the welding tools from the workshop and do it

tomorrow. Now show me your precious boiler.’

He thrust the neem leaves into his mother's hands, examined the boiler and after fiddling with it for

a few moments told his sister with a smile, 'It will work for now but I can't guarantee when it will

break down again. I suggest you fast every Monday for its long life, only God can help your boiler

after this.'

After reassuring his nephew who was playing Ludo with Shalu that soon all the itching, even

inside his ears and nostrils, would subside, he made an excuse and quickly left Rachna's house. He

was eager to get home and give his new wife her present.

5

'Close your eyes and give me your hand,' Bablu said. 'Here, now guess what I have got for you.'

Gowri ran her hands over the packet, her fingers grazing the newspaper as she began guessing. 'Is

it a sari, is it the same blue one I showed you in the window at Jagannath Saris?' And she excitedly

tore the newspaper wrapping and opened her eyes.

'Sanitary pads? And why is the packet torn?' she asked, perplexed.

Bablu was dismayed by Gowri's reaction. He mumbled, 'I opened the packet, had never seen a

pad before. I thought you didn't know about sanitary pads. I got it for you, Gowri, so that you could

use these only and not those dirty pieces of cloth.’

Gowri hesitantly replied, ‘Of course I know about pads. I have seen the same advertisements like

you, a girl in a white dress jumping on the grass, but if Shalu and I start buying these packets every

month, then let alone curd and ghee, we will not even have enough money to buy milk.’

Bablu looked at her dejectedly, his spirits sinking. Then she suddenly laughed, and her hand,

almost of its own accord, reached towards him, touching his cheek delicately.

It had taken Gowri a few minutes to understand that Bablu in his own idiosyncratic way was trying

to fill her life with small moments of joy that he could both envision and afford.

And disregarding all the old wives’ tales about not being intimate during the days of menstruation,

they made good use of Ma’s and Shalu’s absence, on the thick mattress, behind the floral bed sheet

that served as the partition wall of their tiny bedroom.

The next day while the sun was still shining fiercely in the summer sky, Bablu pulled down and

padlocked the metal shutters of the workshop. He then set off towards the main market.

On his way back, he took the diversion to the clearing with the neem trees to get some more leaves

for his nephew and decided to sit there and work on his new project.

He pulled out a pair of scissors, a needle and some thread, cotton and muslin cloth from his bag

and began flattening the cotton between his hands as if he were spreading out dough to make a

chapatti. Taking two large leaves from a nearby tree, he placed the cotton between them, pressing

firmly with his hands till it was flattened. He then wrapped the flattened cotton in the muslin cloth

and stitched up all the corners. Within twenty-four hours of first touching a sanitary napkin, Bablu

had managed to make his own.

Excited, he rushed home. Seeing his wife standing on the porch, waiting for him, he bounded up to

her and placed his ingeniously crafted sanitary napkin in her hand. 'Gowri, go quickly, try this and

tell me how it is. Those rascal multinationals are bloodsucking parasites, charging a fortune for

just a bit of cotton. I have made this pad in less than fifty paise. Go on, try it!'

Gowri looked surprised but nodded. 'All right, but not now, maybe after a few weeks,' she said

and walked towards the kitchen.

Bablu was bewildered. Walking behind her he pleaded, 'No, no, why after a few weeks, try it

now!’

She turned towards him and replied, ‘It is not a ceiling fan that I can switch on and off. It is over

now, yesterday was the last day. You just have to wait till next month.’

6

The smoke from the effigy of Ravana and the sound of exploding fireworks filled the evening sky.

It was Dussehra. The lanes of Mohana were crowded with people dressed in their finery, returning

home after seeing the annual Ramlila performance.

Gowri was walking back home with Bablu and his friend Akram. The streets were dark and Bablu

pointed out the silhouette of the moon hidden behind the clouds to Gowri. Akram, who along with

being the neighbourhood butcher also happened to be its resident poet, began spouting one of his

inane limericks:

‘The beauty of the moon,

I say I am immune,

Because without the sun,

It is only a pebble, you baboon.’

Akram, realizing that his audience seemed unmoved, added, ‘Bablu, now no one gives me my due

importance but if I get my poems printed in the *Dainik Bhaskar*, by God, my name will be on

everyone's lips in this town!'

Bablu put his arm around Akram's shoulder and replied, 'Akram Bhai, that is not a difficult

accomplishment. Go borrow money from whomsoever you meet and then disappear. Hordes of

people will walk around the market, saying, "Where is that bloody Akram?", "If you see that

bastard Akram, let me know!", "If I catch Akram, I will stab him with his own knife!"

Gowri, spotting Akram's dismayed face, stifled a giggle and Bablu, unable to control himself,

burst out laughing as well.

After Akram had turned towards his house, Bablu and Gowri walked quietly together to their

home. Their shoulders sometimes touched, their hands occasionally brushed against each other.

The night felt quiet and intimate. The autumn wind was cool, making Gowri wish she had carried a

shawl.

She asked Bablu, 'Achha, what is your favourite colour? I am thinking of making a sweater for

you, sleeveless or should I make one with long sleeves?' And she told him about her grandmother

who would sit with her spooling ball of coloured wool, using the needles to both knit and poke

people mercilessly when they were not paying attention to her.

Bablu laughed along with her. As they talked and teased one another, he realized that in the last

few weeks he had completely forgotten to ask Gowri about his homemade pad. ‘Gowri, did you try

it? The pad?’ he asked.

She didn’t reply at first and then eventually said, ‘Suno ji,’ the way she always referred to him,

‘yes, I tried it, it doesn’t work, I had to wash my clothes in less than ten minutes. I know you are

doing it to make me happy but please stop asking me about these things. It makes me very

uncomfortable. These are women’s matters, leave them to us.’

Bablu was astounded. Of all the eventualities that he had imagined as he amused himself while

cycling up and down to his workshop – Gowri declaring that she could never have imagined that

her husband was such a genius, of women all over India using sanitary napkins with his face

printed on the packet and even having a temple made in his honour like they did of so many South

Indian movie stars – he had not foreseen this easy dismissal of his creation.

‘But why?’ he spluttered. ‘How can you feel comfortable using a dirty rag?’

Gowri murmured, 'Leave it. I am satisfied with my cloth – after all I have been using it all these

years. It's what your mother and sisters do, what my mother does. Why think so much?'

'But do you like it, Gowri?' asked Bablu softly. 'Why should you feel satisfied? Isn't it unfair that

you can't afford a simple...'

Gowri interrupted him, 'Let's stop fighting over this. I know you mean well. But these are not

things that you should concern yourself with. Bas, no more now. Please? Promise me?'

He nodded at her and continued walking, seemingly undisturbed, changing the subject to the

Ramlila performance. 'Did you notice, the man who played Lakshman's part was completely

drunk, just stood there swaying on the side of the stage?' he asked his wife.

But the conversation had planted a seed in his mind.

The next day as Bablu unlocked the padlock that secured his cycle, he saw his neighbour's wife

Parul in the small courtyard outside her house. She had a thin towel wrapped around her freshly

washed hair as she took circles around the tulsi planted in a dingy white pedestal in the middle of

her small garden. He called out a greeting to her and she nodded sullenly.

Six months ago, Choti had ventured into her garden and pulled out some of her marigold plants.

Parul had come screaming into his house, threatening him, brandishing a broom in her hand like it

was Tipu Sultan's sword.

Bablu tried to assure her that the incident would not be repeated, but Choti, fearing that the portly

woman in the green sari with the broom raised in the air was posing a serious threat to her master,

lunged at her, knocking her down. After that, despite Bablu's repeated apologies, she had refused

to talk to him. A grudging nod with an under-the-breath cuss word was the most she would offer.

But his problems with Parul did not bother him today because he had something more important on

his mind. Bablu with the same uncompromising determination that had taken him from being an

errand boy to the owner of the workshop had just made a grand announcement to his wife, 'These

rascal big corporations are only trying to cheat people, charging so much money for a simple

cotton pad. You wait and see, Gowri, I will find a way to make a pad for you at quarter the price.'

7

Months passed with Bablu procuring different qualities of cotton and various materials to make

new pads. He would then give each one to Gowri in the manner of a courtier presenting rare

jewels to a king, only to watch Gowri proclaim all his experiments as wholly inadequate.

One evening as she was sitting on the back seat of his cycle, he broached the topic again. Gowri

had tried to understand her husband but she was beginning to get impatient and upset about this

unnatural obsession of his.

Trying hard not to show her annoyance, she said, ‘Suno ji, would it not be more sensible to put in

that much effort into earning more money so that we can just afford to buy sanitary pads every

month?’

Bablu replied, ‘I can try and earn more and buy an expensive packet of sanitary pads for my wife,

but what about everyone else’s wives?’ He continued, ‘I started with doing this just for you,

Gowri, but after you rejected four pads I made with different grades of cotton, I went to a doctor’s

clinic in Dewas. I asked the compounder there for a sample of the cotton they used for dressings.

‘I thought that perhaps it would be more absorbent than the samples I was finding. The compounder

asked me what I wanted the cotton for and when I explained, he said, “Bhai saab, you are the first

husband I have seen who has come into this clinic and even spoken about sanitary pads. Most

women use dirty cloth, leaves and even straw and you know what – they have seventy per cent

more chances of getting diseases. But no one seems to be bothered about these things.”

‘Seventy per cent, Gowri. It’s such a big number. I thought about his words for days as I looked at

the little girls running around our neighbourhood. They can’t even buy an extra pair of slippers –

how will they ever be able to afford sanitary pads from the market month after month?’

Gowri was silent for a few moments and then said, ‘I pray that no such diseases will come upon

those girls but let their fathers and husbands look after them. Your responsibility lies towards our

family, our future.’

And trying to avoid any further discussion, she said, ‘Suno ji, this Sunday let’s go see a movie in

the cinema, please,’ and Bablu nodded and cycled on. He didn’t raise the subject all evening and

Gowri hoped his silence was a good sign.

But Bablu remained single-minded, despite her best efforts. Each month he would present her a

new pad to try, each month she would ask him to discontinue his experiments.

Once this man had come bearing her sweet gifts, small tokens that had opened the doors of her

heart to him. But now continually dealing with the onslaught of his unseemly obsession, she felt

that she didn't know him any more.

Slowly, the delicate intimacy that had begun to grow between the couple began to turn into an

invisible chasm instead.

But Bablu faced a larger problem than his wife's mounting frustration – and this was her menstrual

cycle. In order to get feedback on his pads he had to wait an entire month. One day, he loudly

exclaimed, 'Gowri! At this rate it will take me decades to get this right.'

Unable to take it any more, she began sobbing. 'I don't know what sins I must have done in my past

life that all this is happening! I am not going to try any pad or anything any more. At least then you

will have to stop this madness.'

Bablu then began pestering his sisters to try his sanitary pads. Unfortunately, during a family lunch,

his nephew Pintu accidentally pulled a sanitary pad out of Bablu's bag and began waving it like a

flag in front of the entire gathering, including Uma ji, an elderly lady from the neighbourhood who

had dropped in to invite Bhairavi Kewat to her granddaughter's wedding.

Bhairavi tried to make light of the matter not wanting to create a scene in front of an outsider, but

after Uma ji left, Rachna berated her brother and along with their mother beseeched him to stop his

experiments saying that the whole family would be disgraced due to his sordid interest in women's

menstrual cycles.

But the damage was already done. Uma ji quickly spread the news about Bablu being a pervert

who carried sanitary napkins in his pocket and soon the whole town was talking about him and

treating him as the local pariah.

They did not spare the rest of the family either, entangling them in a mesh of coarse whispers and

contemptuous glances.

A few days later when Bablu was cycling back home from the workshop, he spotted Akram

standing at Madhukar's tea stall. Akram called out to him and Bablu stopped his cycle and joined

his friend. Akram had just returned from Lucknow the previous evening and began to regale his

friend with his adventures there.

In the middle of his stories, he realized that his friend seemed rather gloomy. 'What is the matter,

Bablu?’ he asked, seeing his friend staring vacantly at his tea. ‘Is everything all right?’

‘Akram Bhai, what is the point of telling you? You can’t help me with this. I desperately need to

find some women now.’

Akram smirked. ‘Bablu, you are a married man and if you feel like this, what do you think must be

happening to bachelors like us?’

Bablu just smiled, shook his head and explained his dilemma to Akram. Now that his family was

not cooperating, where would he find any women who would openly discuss menstruation, let

alone give him details about leakages, odours and soaking properties after using his sanitary pads?

Akram patted him on the back. Though he sympathized with his friend, he could not resist making a

joke at his expense: ‘Arrey Bablu, God should have made you a woman, then it would have been

so much easier to just test the pads yourself.’

But his little joke sparked an idea in Bablu’s mind. He roped a reluctant Akram into his project,

asking him to give him some fresh goat’s blood for testing. When the blood clotted almost instantly,

Bablu went back to the compounder at the doctor’s clinic in Dewas, who suggested the use of an

anticoagulant.

They then added this to the next batch and Bablu was finally ready. He had managed to assemble as

realistic a uterus as he could with his rubber bladder filled with blood and a plastic tube.

It was this that had led to the unfortunate incident at the well, and the ensuing infamy. Gowri,

unable to bear the humiliation, finally left him – saying she would only return when he had given

up his madness.

Bablu Kewat had reached a point in his life where he had lost his wife, his friends, money that he

could ill afford to waste and, as the world believed, his mind, all in pursuit of the sanitary pad

project.

But all these losses seemed only to strengthen his resolve. He was now on a path where his

salvation lay in succeeding. If he stopped midway he would forever be branded a lunatic at best, if

not a bloodthirsty vampire with sexual perversions.

8

It was a pleasant Sunday morning and Bhairavi Kewat had come with Shalu to Rachna's house in a

disturbed state. She was at her wits' end about how to deal with Bablu. It had been three months

since Gowri had left for her parents' home. Bablu had got paler and thinner and quieter in these

months but hadn't stopped working on his project.

She had tried cajoling him, screaming at him and had even put on a mighty good show of having

chest pains. But Bablu had promptly called Vaidya ji, the Ayurvedic doctor, from the market, who

after checking her pulse had declared, 'Behan ji, you have a lot of gas in your system,' and had

prescribed pills for indigestion.

Rachna too had her own complaints about Bablu. She had gone across to talk to him but he refused

to listen to her and said, 'Rachna, since you are so interested in my well-being, tell me, are your

periods due soon? Try my new pads and fill out all the details on this feedback sheet, please.'

Leaving Shalu behind to help Rachna with a few chores, Bhairavi Kewat left her daughter's house

in a confused state of mind.

She had always ruled her little household decisively and firmly, leaving very little rope for her

children to trip over. But now she felt like she was in the middle of a whirlwind she couldn't

control. Gowri's absence, the neighbours and their taunts, her son who seemed to have lost his

mind, it all seemed too much for her.

Bablu had not just been her favourite child, but had also been her strongest support all through the

years when both mother and son had worked endless hours to ensure the survival of their small

family.

He had always been such a good child and, unlike Rachna and Shalu, had never demanded

anything. She recalled the joy on his face when on rare occasions she made kheer for him, the way

he would nestle up next to her even as a twenty-year-old, his head on her lap, telling her amusing

anecdotes about his customers at the workshop. She did not understand how things had suddenly

shifted, what had led to the utter wreckage of their happy world.

She wearily pushed open the creaky gate to her house and walked inside. The door to the backyard

was open and she saw Bablu sitting on the floor, a handkerchief tied around his nose.

At first glance, she thought he was chopping chicken for their Sunday lunch but as she came closer

the smell sent her reeling. Her beloved son was sitting on the grass with dozens and dozens of used

sanitary napkins that he had picked out of the bins from a girls' hostel spread out around him. She

watched in disbelief as he picked one up, peered at it and then dropped it only to pick up another.

Bhairavi Kewat had a sobbing fit and within the hour she too had packed Shalu's bags along with

her own and left to go live with Durga Masi.

9

The days passed with a pensive Bablu cycling to the workshop and coming back to an empty

house. His heart was filled with bleakness but his work continued. His first priority was to find out

the exact specifications of the material used by the big corporations for their pads. On a cotton

trader's recommendation, he had sent the multinational company's pads to a lab for testing. They

sent him a letter stating: Material found to be cellulose. But none of the cotton traders he asked

knew anything about this material.

Desperate for information, he impulsively decided to call a college professor living in Indore.

Bhaskar Sharma was a relative so distant that he was tied to the family tree only by the frayed

rakhis that Bablu's long-departed chachi had tied on to his wrist annually on Raksha Bandhan

during their childhood years in Mohana.

Professor Sharma, an elderly gentleman who had managed to retain his thick hair except for a

small balding spot at the back that he carefully covered each morning, worked in the sociology

department at the Indian Institute of Technology.

He picked up the insistently ringing phone and at first had trouble trying to figure out exactly how

Bablu claimed to be related to him. But there is a mysterious part of every Indian's heart that

regards anyone from his home town as a member of his extended family. So the good professor

decided to hear out this nervous-sounding man.

Bablu poured his heart out to the sympathetic voice on the other end of the line. The professor

found himself deeply moved by his story. Impressed with Bablu's perseverance and his own

curiosity stimulated, he spent days scouring the Internet and finally managed to get hold of a few

details of a factory that supplied cellulose to Procter & Gamble. He then sent them an email on

Bablu's behalf and also gave him the factory's telephone number.

Bablu was not well versed in English, though he could read a little and communicate in broken

bits. Unable to contain his eagerness at finally making some progress, he hurriedly called the

number, pretending to be a wealthy textile mill owner in Indore.

‘Hello, I myself Mr Prabhash Kewat, textile mill owner this side, I wrote mail also, request kindly

for sample of raw material.’

A high-pitched voice replied, ‘Hello sir, this is Miranda Davis from the business development

department. I have been through your email, sir. If I may ask, how large is your plant?’

Bablu wondered about the relevance of this question and replied, ‘Madam, I have many plants tulsi

plant, champa plant, ashoka plant, katkal plant, you want size of which one?’

There was a long pause and Bablu, wondering if he had given himself away, waited anxiously for

her reply.

Fortunately, these bizarre answers only strengthened Ms Davis’s impression that he was indeed a

prosperous businessman who just had some language issues. She promptly dispatched the samples

to the address he had given her. A few weeks later they reached Mohana.

10

The brown cardboard box lay forlornly near the kitchen stove. Bablu, standing beside it, was

carefully chopping onions for some poha. He was puzzled. The samples he had received were not

cotton at all, but some mysterious strips of hardboard. He looked despondently at the boards lying

on the tiled floor, not quite knowing what to make of them.

Choti was barking incessantly in the backyard and Bablu went to check on her. The dog had

spotted Parul picking up dry clothes from the washing line in her backyard and was now trying to

leap over the wall to get at her. Parul sneered triumphantly at the sight of Bablu, rotating her index

finger in slow circles next to her right temple. 'Bablu and his dog, both mental!' She laughed

mockingly as she walked back into her house.

Bablu sat down gloomily on the steps leading to the backyard. Choti bounded up to him and, after

nuzzling his arm and wagging her tail around her master for a few moments, bounded inside the

house but Bablu didn't move. He felt a heaviness in his chest. After all this time and after so many

sacrifices, he had still not discovered what was used to make sanitary pads.

He glanced in the direction of Parul's backyard, now empty aside from a fluttering peacock-blue

sari. Perhaps she was right in calling him mental, for his pursuits had only brought catastrophe to

his door. He had been certain that he would finally succeed this time and then with his head held

high he would bring his family back home.

He sighed heavily and, placing his hands on his pyjama-clad legs for support, as if he had aged

decades while sitting on the steps, he slowly pushed himself up and shuffled inside the house to

finish preparing his meal.

He sliced the green chillies inexpertly into uneven pieces and, looking out of the kitchen window,

saw the first raindrops splattering on the grass outside.

The monsoons had been late this year but were finally here. Not that all the rain in the world could

wash away his troubles.

He glanced once again at the worthless boards, but he saw only one. That Choti, the rascal, must

have carried the other away. Bablu went out to the front porch and, sure enough, Choti had the

mangled board in front of her, one end chewed, and with her long nails she had scratched the board

all over.

Bablu picked up the board and looked at it carefully. The scratches had ripped the top layer of the

board and he could see a white downy material that had been compressed into the form of the

board. They had sent him the raw material pressed into sheets.

And as he would soon realize from the contents of an email that had been sent to Professor Sharma

asking for confirmation of delivery, it was not cotton at all, which is why his pads had never

worked efficiently – it was wood pulp cellulose from the bark of the pine tree.

Bablu had found the magic ingredient but as Professor Sharma said to him over the phone that

evening, ‘Kewat, I think you should let it go now. The machines that the large corporations use to

break down this material and turn it into sanitary napkins cost crores of rupees. Some trees are

impossible to climb no matter what ambrosial fruit hangs from their branches.’

But Bablu wasn’t going to give up when he had just made a small victory. Full of optimism, he

replied, ‘Professor saab, sometimes you have to carve your own footholds in the trunk as you go

along.’ So Bablu decided he would just have to try to make the machine himself.

11

It was a muggy night and the heat and the swarms of pests that thronged the stifling shanty located

in the by-lanes of Indore made a restless Bablu toss and turn on the mattress that he shared with

Choti.

The headman, along with the rest of the panchayat of Mohana, had, despite Bhairavi Kewat's

pleas, eventually given him an ultimatum. He had to accept either their stringent exorcism rites or

banishment from the town.

Bablu knew that the chances of surviving hanging upside down from a tree for an indefinite number

of days, while bearing lashings and being doused with boiling water, and the swallowing of

obscure potions, all in order to drive the devil out of his body, would be rather dim, especially

since he was certain that the only thing that seemed to be rattling inside him was a sense of purpose

and some common sense. But he knew it was no good trying to convince the town council.

He immediately vacated his house in Mohana and sold his workshop, sending a significant part of

the money to his mother, who was still staying with Durga Masi. He then moved to Indore and with

the leftover money rented a shed with a tin roof that multitasked as a workshop during the day and

a gloomy bedroom at night.

He had tried calling his mother a few times, but all the telephone calls ended with her weeping,

which would disturb him for days on end. Finally, the day before he was leaving for Indore, he

called her again, but Durga Masi picked up the phone and she firmly told her nephew that he had

done enough damage and he should now spare the family from any further humiliation. That was

the day Bablu realized that he had been totally cast aside by his loved ones.

He had not heard from Gowri in all this time and under these circumstances where he possessed

nothing to offer her, not even a home, he had tried to push her out of his mind. But ever so often

when he thought about her and his mother and sisters, the loneliness and hurt sometimes gnawed at

him so furiously that he could feel it rattling inside his chest, clawing to get out with each breath.

He sat up, scratching his armpit which seemed to be a rare and delicious delicacy as far as the

mosquitoes were concerned, and looked at the four small machines on the table in front of him.

It had taken him almost two years from the day he had first held the wood pulp boards in his hands.

Two years that he had spent largely at this workshop, taking up odd welding jobs during the day to

eke out a living and weary nights building his machines.

Undeterred by the size and complexities of the machines in the mammoth factories that produced

sanitary napkins, Bablu had tried to unravel the process to its bare bones. He needed to begin with

finding a way to break down the hardboard of the wood pulp.

He had tried to first make an electric machine attaching four table forks to the tip, forks that moved

horizontally back and forth, trying to mechanically replicate Choti's actions. After spending three

fruitless months which resulted in ruining one board as well as rewarding Bablu with a tear on his

right arm that required five stitches, he abandoned that line of pursuit.

A few weeks later, Bablu was installing grills in a small flat. The lady of the house was hovering

between supervising him and getting lunch ready. During a short break, he sat on the tiled kitchen

floor, gratefully sipping on the hot sugary tea that she had given him, watching her tossing coconut,

roasted chana dal, chopped ginger, green chilli and oil into a blender jar, the kitchen brimming

with the intermittent whistles from her pressure cooker and the whirring noise of the electric

mixer-grinder.

Taking the bus back to his workshop that evening, the image of the swivelling blades of the mixer

filled his head and he started working on a simple machine with modified parts of a high-powered

blender.

After months of trial and error, he finally succeeded in making a small machine that could break

down the cellulose board, safely and effectively.

His next task lay in taking the fibrous mass and flattening and assembling it into a rectangular cake,

the shape of a sanitary pad.

This turned out to be the simplest process. Taking inspiration from soap moulds and watching the

rotund, vest-clad dhobi across the street ironing and pressing disobediently creased bed sheets into

neat flattened piles, he made his second machine.

Then he devised a third apparatus that worked like a mechanical rotating toilet paper holder that

wrapped his pads. Now he faced one last hurdle – the hardest of all. How would he ensure that the

sanitary pads he made were not actually unsanitary?

That week, sitting on the rattan chair across Professor Sharma, who had turned out to be his only

support during the last few years, Bablu finally wept. The abandonment by his family, living on the

floor of his workshop, even the lack of a decent, home-cooked meal, and now this latest

impediment in his progress, had mounted one challenge on top of the other. His despair was finally

eating into his resolve.

Professor Sharma looked at the young man who had cast aside his entire world because of a single

idea, and felt a rush of deep compassion towards him. The professor had seen so much of himself

in Bablu, as a man struggling to rise above the terrain of his birth. Bablu's defeats felt like his, the

young man's advances, his victories.

He made Bablu stay for dinner and promised to look up the most efficient way of disinfecting the

sanitary napkins and assured Bablu that he would ask his colleagues at the institute as well. With

Mrs Sharma heaping his plate with her spicy dal and towering piles of aloo puri, and the

professor's calm reassurance, Bablu's spirits began to rise again.

Six months later, he had completed and tested the four machines he required for the manufacture of

his sanitary pads. They were a round appliance, fitted with the parts of a modified kitchen grinder

that would break down the hardboard; a core forming machine that turned the fluffy fibres into a

rectangular cake using moulds and an electric press; a finishing roller where the cakes were

wrapped; and an elementary contraption used at the final stage that disinfected the pads with

ultraviolet light.

Bablu waved the mosquitoes away and decided to get out of bed. He walked across to the table

that held his four precious machines and began carefully packing each one with bubble wrap and

styrofoam before lowering them into cardboard boxes.

On Professor Sharma's recommendation, he was going to take his low cost sanitary napkin making

invention for a demonstration at the Indian Institute of Technology.

12

The rain splattered against the weathered wooden shutters, splashing on to the iron grills. It

dampened Gowri's hair as she sat against the window, peering outside at the ripples on the green

pond filled with mottled green leaves and a squawking black duck.

She recalled sitting with Bablu on a rainy day just like this, brooding over a remark her mother-in-

law had carelessly tossed on their way back from the market the previous evening. Bhairavi

Kewat, walking arm in arm with Rachna, had said, 'Gowri, you should really follow Rachna's

example, she learned just by watching me and is such a good cook now!'

Gowri had returned home crestfallen and Bablu had tried to placate her later, as they leaned

against the railing of the porch steps. He said laughing, 'Ma is right; Rachna has been a good cook

since childhood! She could always fry people's brains, make their blood boil and cut them into

tiny pieces without using any equipment except her tongue, how can anyone compete with that!'

Sitting under the grey, stormy skies, Gowri, who had never seen her husband despondent, recalled

asking him, 'How are you always so upbeat?' And he, the colour of burnished cinnamon, had

smirked and said, 'I always carry a little sunshine within my skin, madam.'

Bablu with his silly antics and generous heart had made a place for himself in Gowri's life. She

had left Mohana thinking that he would come to his senses, stop all his bizarre experiments. With

that, all the malicious talk about him would also come to an end and he would come and take her

back. But though she kept waiting, he never tried to contact her.

13

The hall with its white panelled ceiling, fluorescent tube lights and uncomfortable-looking brown

chairs was filled with faculty and students from various departments. Bablu was waiting for Dr

Chattopadhyaya to finish a lecture on 'micro optical devices for optical logic, interconnects and

signal processing' after which there would be a short break for refreshments and then he and his

sanitary pad manufacturing machine would have their five minutes in the spotlight.

He had nervously finished assembling his machines backstage and was munching on a Glucose

biscuit when two men in suits standing next to him began a conversation. Dr Gupta, the

bespectacled, swarthy man, began by saying, 'Mehta, I am scheduled to give a talk at 3 p.m. on

correlations between insulin resistance and C-peptide. And you?'

The other man replied that his talk was scheduled for the following day. Dr Gupta turned to Bablu,

taking in his old grey pants, the blue shirt through which his white vest was visible, and his Bata

rubber slippers, and said, 'Aye boy, get us some tea.'

Bablu, his ears burning, did not reply and finally murmured, 'Sir, I am also here to present my

machine.' Dr Gupta looked at Bablu with scepticism and asked him which institute he belonged to.

Bablu replied, 'Sir, I have not been to any institute but I am eight standard pass from Saraswati

Vidyalaya, Mohana.' Dr Gupta murmured to his colleague, 'Mehta, do some pest control on your

campus. God knows what kind of uneducated idiots are walking around here!'

Bablu struggled to control his temper for a moment and then with his peculiar brand of self-

possession directed a disarming smile at Dr Gupta and in his impeccable Hindi replied, 'Sir, I am

uneducated but I am not an idiot. Idiots think that because something is complicated, it is superior,

whereas an intelligent man takes a complicated thing and makes it simple. I am a simple man who

has made a simple machine, now, sir, you do the rest of the calculations.'

He walked away, only to return with a cup of tea which he handed over to Dr Gupta, chuckling.

'Simple way to get tea – just a quick walk to the refreshments table. People unnecessarily make it

so complicated.'

Ten minutes later, Bablu Kewat presented his invention on stage along with price comparisons

between his finished product and the ones made by conglomerates, with an engineering student

translating his words into English. His presentation was received with thunderous applause.

That evening Professor Sharma called the workshop asking Bablu how the presentation had gone.

Bablu replied, 'It went well, though there was a man standing on the side, like the narrator of some

stage play, translating everything I said. I think I really need to learn English properly now,

Professor saab. It will really help me, if my English improves then I will be able to use the Internet

also to look things up myself and not trouble you all the time.’

Professor Sharma too had only studied in Hindi during his years in Mohana and he recalled his

agonizing struggle to catch up as a student at Jineshwar English Medium School in the ninth grade

when his father had moved the family to Indore.

He gave Bablu the number of his grandson’s tutor, Sarita Jagpal, who conducted group as well as

individual after-school classes nearby.

14

The dusty black scooter stopped in front of the peeling building called Palatial Towers. Sarita

parked it in one corner of the compound as her daughter Maina, her school bag dangling over one

shoulder and her Mickey Mouse water bottle slung around her neck, jumped off the back seat.

Sarita hurried across the dilapidated lobby carefully opening the iron lattice door that always

seemed ready to trap unsuspecting fingers, and stepped into the creaky elevator. It had been a long

day, and the traffic had been especially bad.

She jabbed the seventh-floor button three times before the lift conceded to take them up. She had

fifteen minutes to splash some water on her face and get a cup of tea, before her first student of the

day would appear at her doorstep.

Sarita's BA in English had not quite opened doors to a teaching job at a well-known school as she

had imagined. Instead it had landed her a place as the overqualified and underpaid supervisor,

errand girl and general dogsbody at the embroidery unit located in the stifling garage that belonged

to her employer, Mandira Sidhwani.

She supplemented her income and satisfied her desire to be part of India's education system by

taking evening tuition classes, the regular middle school mathematics and science, along with a

subject called 'Talking First Class English' as she had once seen it peculiarly advertised in the

classified section of a newspaper.

In a country that was still reeling from a hangover of its colonial days, intelligence was determined

not as much by a person's acumen as by their fluency in the English language – albeit a strange

version consisting of phrases that would make the pale-faced British go red in the face like 'Entry

from backside only'. So there was more than adequate demand for her classes.

Handing Maina a banana and her dog-eared copy of *The Jataka Tales*, she had brewed some tea

when the doorbell rang. On the other side of the door, beaming his gap-toothed smile towards her,

was her ten-year-old student Arvind Sharma and just behind him stood a tall man with a thin

moustache and a nervous demeanour.

It was the new student Professor Sharma had recommended. Usually she taught schoolchildren.

This would certainly be different, she thought to herself, looking at the nondescript man in front of

her.

Bablu walked into the small living room and sat at the chipped wooden table she indicated with a

wave. Arvind promptly sat by his side, hoisting his school bag on to the table, and began taking out

his books.

Bablu looked at the delicate-looking woman across the table in the blue salwar kameez, her

spectacles slipping off the bridge of her nose which she pushed back up with her index finger

repeatedly.

He began with the one sentence in English he felt confident of – ‘I myself Prabhash Kewat this

side.’ At which Sarita, looking amused, replied, ‘Which side is that? This side of the Indian border

or that side of the Pakistan one? This sentence is wrong.’

Taken aback, Bablu replied in Hindi, ‘How, madam? If you are on that side of the table, then I am

naturally on this side!’

Arvind started giggling and Sarita smiled. ‘I can see that I have my work cut out for me. And

please call me Sarita.’ Giving Arvind a sheet of word problems to solve, Sarita pulled out an

alphabet chart along with a printed sheet that stated ‘Lesson 2 – English Greetings, Introductions

and Farewells’ and began tutoring Bablu.

15

Trucks and jeeps with blaring music and screeching slogans were whizzing by. Enjoying the

December air, Bablu was sitting on the broad step of his workshop with Kailash Sahu, who owned

the adjacent restaurant, Mehfil, famous for its bhutte ki kheer, a delicacy of grated fresh corn, pan-

fried in ghee, milk and sugar.

Aditya Joshi, a junior officer at the Census office in Bhopal, making his customary trip through

Indore, was also leaning against the workshop wall beside them.

Though it was not yet seven in the evening Kailash was already drinking from a bottle of strong-

smelling country liquor while Bablu and Aditya Joshi were drinking cup after cup of watery tea

made with the same tea leaves that had started their duty at seven that morning at the tea stall

adjacent to the workshop.

Yet another truck passed by with a loudspeaker blaring ‘Vote for Sailesh Singh Pawar, Vote for

BJP!’ Pointing at the truck, Kailash asked, ‘Bablu, what do you think, who will win the election

this year?’

Bablu answered, ‘What is there to think, three times this crook Pawar has won and this year too

victory will be his.’

Aditya Joshi interjected, ‘Oof! Bablu Bhaiya, it is good if the Bharatiya Janata Party wins! See,

under this government, population of full and final Madhya Pradesh grew only by twenty per cent

and under the Congress party leadership it was growing at twenty-four per cent, so we have made

good progress, na?’

Bablu replied, ‘Aditya Bhai, the population has stabilized not because of the government but

because of cable television operators. They are the ones responsible for controlling the population

explosion by luring couples into watching blockbuster movies all Sunday long instead of thinking

about procreation.

‘This method of population control is a lot more effective than your government’s policies. They

only distributed free condoms thinking this would do the trick but the grateful citizens carefully

saved all the condoms, only to use them as water balloons during Holi.’

Aditya Joshi looked over his shoulder at the small sanitary making unit that Bablu had installed in

the workshop, having given up welding in order to concentrate on his new venture. He said, ‘Bablu

Bhaiya, you should pray that both the cable company continues showing hit movies and that the

grateful citizens use condoms for the purpose it is made. Otherwise no one will buy your sanitary

napkins, cheap or otherwise!’

Puzzled, Bablu asked, ‘Why?’

‘Bablu Bhaiya, because then all the ladies will get pregnant, na?’ said Aditya Joshi and was

greeted by Kailash’s chortling laughter which was interrupted by the ringing of the workshop

phone.

It was Professor Sharma in a state of high excitement. ‘Kewat, good news!’ he exclaimed. ‘IIT had

entered your machine for the National Innovation Awards after hearing your presentation. Your low

cost sanitary napkin machine has come first in the engineering category.
You should be very proud

– there were nine hundred and forty-three entries!’

Bablu felt dizzy with happiness. His pulse was racing and all he could croak out was ‘I can’t

believe this, Professor saab! How did all this happen?’

The professor replied, ‘There were many entries, how to extract gold from seawater, reach Mars

by a shorter route, use dung for car fuel – all ideas and theories in spiral-bound notebooks and

CDs. Yours was the only machine presented and with a strong social implication.

‘One more thing, Kewat. You must apply for a patent for your invention as soon as possible, this

country is full of untalented lazy scoundrels who are happy to bathe in a tub filled with another

man’s sweat. Come home tomorrow and we’ll discuss the details.’

Though this threw up a rather unhygienic visual, Bablu who was now habituated to the good

professor’s flowery analogies assured him that he would be at the professor’s house the very next

evening.

16

Gowri was standing with her younger sister, Vijaya, inside the Narasimha Mandir. It was crowded

with devotees offering flowers, fruits and coins.

The two sisters rang the bells of the temple, bowed down till their foreheads touched the mosaic

temple floor and said a silent prayer to the idol in front of them.

Gowri, as always, thought of her absent husband and asked Lord Vishnu for guidance during this

difficult phase of her life. She then took circles around the peepal tree in the temple courtyard and

quietly moved towards the gate.

On the way back, Gowri was unusually quiet and when her sister questioned her, she said, 'I was

just thinking about the time I had gone with him to a Hanuman ji temple in Ujjain. Everyone had

been talking about the great miracle there. We were looking at the large idol of Hanuman ji. It was

magnificent, life size, his crown was glistening gold and he had the most gentle eyes.

'The temple resounded with cries of "Jai Bajrang Bali" and the pandit ji put a coconut inside

Hanuman ji's mouth. Hanuman ji shut his mouth and in a few seconds crushed coconut appeared

from his silk-draped arm on to his open palm as prasad.

'I said to your brother-in-law, "This is so wonderful. Come quickly, let us also buy a coconut and

get our blessings.” And he laughed at me saying, “Gowri, it is wonderful but it is not god, just a

machine. Instead of teeth there is a hammer inside Hanuman ji’s mouth that crushes the coconut and

then a pipe takes those pieces through his arm.”

‘I scolded him and he started teasing me, “Oh Gowri, put batteries in a torch and you can

illuminate a room but it doesn’t mean that a small star has fallen from the sky. And when you plug a

radio into the socket, do you think Kishore Kumar’s ghost circles around the house haunting you

with his singing? But you know, I would love to open it from the back and see how it works, very

well made, I must say.”

‘Vijaya, I got so worried that he was uttering all this blasphemy that I shut my ears and started

chanting the Hanuman Chalisa. But after a few days he got a toy car from the market, the kind that

you turn a key on the side and it scoots forward, and with parts of a doll and old clocks, he made

something similar, a puppet that would swallow a gooseberry and crack it into bits.’

Vijaya replied, ‘Didi, you talk about him all the time. Why don’t you send him a letter and tell him

to come and fetch you? He is still your husband after all.’

Gowri murmured, ‘I can’t tell you how much I regret leaving Mohana. I wanted to run away from

all the innuendos and pointing fingers, but is this any better? All the women here also look at me

peculiarly because I am without a husband and I am fed up with all their smug whispers of “Poor

Gowri” and “What will happen to Gowri!” But where will I send my letter, Vijaya? No one knows

where he is. Some people say he has gone to Bihar, some say he lives in Indore, but no one has an

address, a contact number, nothing.’

17

Bablu Kewat and his unique invention were both aboard the Indore Dehradun Express. Bablu, with

his head reclining against the window, was reading the newspaper, his stomach satiated with the

two hot samosas that he had consumed ten minutes ago at Vikram Nagar station. As it happens on

train journeys, the stranger on the opposite berth started an innocuous conversation with him.

Prashant Batra – ‘But call me Prat’ – had a strange low hairline that began almost with his bushy

eyebrows. He was a freelance journalist who, having finished a story about the Kumbh Mela in

Ujjain for the *Guardian*, had decided to spend a few days white-water rafting at Rishikesh before

heading to Delhi.

Leaning towards Bablu, he began complaining about the condition of the train toilet. Bablu was

happy to participate in his still feeble English, starting with the one line he had now meticulously

practised, 'My name is Prabhash Kewat. Nice to meet you.'

'Look, Prat Bhai,' he said smiling, 'don't see toilet as toilet. See it as a device designed by our

kind and great government to benefit both the citizens and the country by helping Indians gain

immunity from many diseases while simultaneously controlling population. When you enter the

train toilet, all germs of full India are waiting to play kabaddi with you inside and in the beginning

you may get dysentery or cholera or something.

'If you die, then population control, and if you survive then you will have best health because after

this toilet-style of vaccination you will be immune to all germs. A win-win situation, Prat Bhai!'

Prashant Batra rubbed the sweat off his neck and started laughing at this eccentric man full of

strange sagacity. 'You work for the government?'

Bablu laughed. 'No, I have done many things in my life, but never a job where people try to do as

little as they can for as long as they can! I manufacture low cost sanitary napkins.'

Sensing a good story, Prashant Batra pushed Bablu to tell him more, opening his thermos and

pouring them some sweet milky tea.

And so Bablu began his long tale of trials and tribulations and his triumph when he won the

innovations award a year ago. He told the journalist that after getting a patent on the machine, he

had slowly realized the potential of what he had in his hands.

'I had a choice, Prat Bhai, I could sell my patent to another company and make money or I could do

something for the women in this country. One day, one of my employees brought his cousin, Bharti,

to meet me. He said that she desperately needed a job. She was a tiny woman with uncombed hair,

a torn blouse and a faded sari.

'I hired her and after six months I began to see changes. She had a new sari, her son began to go to

school. I also realized that my customers felt more comfortable talking to a woman about their

menstrual issues.

'I began to observe that when a woman's economic status improves, her entire family's condition

improves, whereas for a man that may not necessarily hold true.

‘He will spend on himself, buy a new bike, spend on drinks and friends but a woman will spend

all her money on her children. And that is when I decided that I would sell my machines only to

women so that they could start their own sanitary pad making units and earn their livelihoods along

with making low cost sanitary napkins accessible to the women in their neighbourhoods.’

Bablu then recounted his first forays in Bihar, where he had made his early contacts with the help

of a cotton trader. ‘I spoke to women, no, Prat Bhai, not about menstruation directly, otherwise all

the Bihari babus would have made sure that I would be the one using a sanitary pad once again,

this time as a bandage for my bleeding nose. I spoke to them about earning a livelihood, bas, they

were all excited.

‘I began selling my machines to groups of women, these women employed other women and they

started their own sanitary napkin making units. They supplied the pads to ladies in their

neighbourhood sometimes for money, sometimes in exchange for eggs and onion.

‘And today many of them are completely independent. You know that saying, even a cat becomes a

lioness in her own lair? These women are now roaring from their well-padded caves,’ he laughed.

‘I want to replicate this model in different states now and I want to try it in Uttarakhand next.’

Prashant had been listening in stunned silence to this extraordinary story. He said, ‘Well done! So

you took sanitary napkins and turned them into a security blanket also for women!’

Bablu was puzzled. ‘Why in the world would I make napkins and then stitch them up as a blanket

when I can just buy a ready-made blanket from Moolchand Market for seventy-five rupees? No,

Prat Bhai! You didn’t understand what I was saying!’

Laughing loudly, Prashant stood up and said, ‘I have understood, my friend, but now please excuse

me for a few moments.’ He pulled out a roll of toilet paper from his haversack and, with a bottle of

water and a bar of Lux soap proffered by Bablu, went to test his olfactory nerves, sanity and sense

of balance in the train toilet.

The train lurched to the left and Prashant Batra staggered to one side, his leg precariously close to

landing inside the toilet bowl. He tried to swiftly pull his pants up in order to get out of this rattling

death trap and ended up dropping his mobile phone and a bunch of coins from the back pocket of

his khaki chinos down the chute while just about managing to hold on to his wallet in the front

pocket.

A disgruntled Prashant returned to his compartment and when he told Bablu about his mishap

Bablu pulled out his newly purchased bulky Ericsson phone from his battered briefcase and said,

‘Don’t worry, Prat Bhai, what is mine is also yours. Use any time when both God and mobile

tower next bless us with signal.’

Hours later, when Bablu got off at Dehradun station, Prashant also hauled his luggage out, deciding

to accompany his new friend on his trip to the mountain village.

Fate had dropped Bablu Kewat in his lap and he knew he had a real story on his hands, one that the

world would want to know about. As he told Bablu when the two men got off the train, ‘Life is but

a play of chance in the game of choice.’

18

Asha Rani Nautiyal was standing outside her hut, her forehead furrowed with worry and her small

eyes narrowed into thin slits.

She buttoned her burgundy sweater tightly over her salwar kameez, bracing herself for the

inevitable argument that would follow when she asked her husband for money.

She walked into the hut prepared to confront him and ended up confronting his bare backside

instead. Her husband was drunk as usual, and he was lying comatose, with his underpants tangled

between his knees and his worn-out brown sweater rolled high over his stomach. The room was

filled with the stench of urine and liquor. She shook him awake.

Ridhim Nautiyal opened his bleary, red-rimmed eyes slowly. Annoyed at being woken up, he

pulled up his pants, hurled a volley of abuses at Asha Rani and, catching her by her long, wavy

hair with one hand, began raining blows on her head till she managed to push him away and run out

of the hut. There would be no getting money out of him today.

Asha wearily walked towards her three-year-old son playing in the mud next to their meagre

menagerie of goats and a few stray chickens. She looked over at the small fruit and vegetable field

that she had cultivated behind her house, hoping that the shrivelled scarecrow in the middle was

large enough to scare the monkeys away from the fruit-laden guava tree.

She pulled her son on to her lap, pulled off his woollen cap and started removing lice from his

hair, killing each bloodsucking pest between her thumbnails with a sharp clicking sound.

The door opened and her husband shuffled out. Throwing a cursory glance in their direction, he

headed towards the narrow road that led to the village centre. She didn't know if he would be back

for dinner or if it would be days before he returned.

The sky changed to a pink and gold twilight. Asha Rani sat still, watching the day fade, the

sleeping child bundled in her lap. Tilting her bruised face towards the snowy mountain peaks, she

wondered if God had anything else in store for her besides grinding her down day after day, till

there was nothing left but bone and gristle.

19

Bablu and Prashant arrived at the sarpanch's courtyard that also doubled as the council hall. With

the help of two members of Bandhu – the NGO that had invited Bablu – they set up three tables and

assembled the machines. By this time a crowd had gathered in the courtyard, looking at Bablu's

contraptions curiously.

Bablu did a demonstration for the gathering, explaining the cost of the product, the working of the

machine and how soon they could turn a profit. In Bihar, he had learned that when he tried to talk to

his audience about hygiene and health, he lost their attention. But profit and loss always interested

everyone.

Harish Negi, the rice trader, was the first to put his hand up, wanting to examine the machine

further before placing his bid. Bablu said, 'Bhai, this product is for women and will be made by

them. I am selling my machine at low rates only if it will benefit and provide a livelihood for

women.'

The words echoed in the courtyard. They were so simple but they held a promise of revolution.

After a few minutes of disconcerting silence, a woman standing at the back, with a bruised face

and a grubby child by her side, tentatively put her hand up.

Asha Rani Nautiyal bought the machine by giving Bablu the pieces of gold she had – a pair of

flower-shaped earrings and a small nose pin that had belonged to her grandmother. Still falling

short of the asking price, she threw in two goats and a hen and sealed the deal.

It was a leap into an unknown abyss for her, but then she was standing on the precipice of a cliff

that was crumbling under her feet.

Prashant followed Bablu everywhere with his camera, a writing pad and a pen that never stopped

moving those few weeks. He meticulously documented how Bablu helped Asha Rani set up a small

unit, enlisting Mrs Mehta from Bandhu to help with distribution in the nearby villages, before

Bablu and he took the train back to Indore.

20

Looking out of the window at the pouring rain, Sarita was grateful that she had to just go three

floors down for their neighbour Manisha's baby shower. But first she had to finish a class and

prepare the lunch boxes that Maina and she would carry the next morning.

She entered the minuscule kitchen, giving Maina a glass of milk. Putting the rice to boil in a

stainless steel pot on one burner, she began dicing the onion and eggplant. Leaving the vegetables

to gently cook and meld with all the spices, she wiped the sticky milk moustache off Maina's

mouth and quickly dressed her in a green salwar kameez – though Maina had almost outgrown the

salwar, it was nothing that tying the drawstring below the navel would not fix – and arranged her

hair in a simple braid.

Heading back to the kitchen, Sarita added some tomatoes and water to the pan. Leaving the curry to

simmer, she swiftly began draping her magenta silk sari with embroidered peacocks around her

thin frame.

Creating six straight-edged pleats meticulously, she draped the fabric over her shoulder and pinned

the sari to the blouse and petticoat with silver safety pins. She was contentedly humming an old

Hindi song, while occasionally checking on her curry, when the doorbell rang.

Bablu Kewat was standing in the doorway. In the months that he had been coming to her for

English lessons, she had always been dressed in a simple salwar kameez, her wavy hair in a single

plait and her reading glasses firmly perched on her nose, or sometimes pushed on her head like a

hairband.

Seeing her dressed in a sari, he blurted out in his still tottering English, 'Sarita ji, I went out of

town for some days and you are fully changed. Very tip-top today. You are looking very nice.'

Sarita replied with a frown, 'Prabhash, this isn't quite right.' Bablu felt his cheeks flush with

embarrassment, worried that perhaps he had been too forward. Then she laughed, 'Where do I

even begin with the “fully changed” and “tip-top” bits? But I must say that the “You are looking

very nice” part was perfect.’

And just like that his lessons had begun before he had even entered the shabby apartment.

21

The whirring fan sent a cold draught of the winter air towards Bablu, who was sitting on a lumpy

couch in the living room of a one-bedroom flat that he now rented near Jhanda Chowk. Balancing a

plate of congealing mattar paneer and cold chapattis on his bare legs, with Choti nestled beside

him, he thought of Sarita Jagpal as he had frequently done in the last few months. His mind lingered

on the way she always said his name, ‘Prabhash’.

No woman had ever called him by his first name. He was Bablu to his family and the people he

had grown up with in Mohana. Even Gowri had never used his name. She had always called him

Suno ji, a term that meant are you listening, but used by all the women in the community to call out

to their husbands.

It was a practice that had no constructive usage aside from creating mass confusion in crowded

markets when a woman sharply hissed, ‘Sunu ji, enough! Stop that nonsense right now!’ And fifteen

startled men fearfully dropped what they were doing before realizing it was some other ‘Sunu ji’

that was the target of that scathing tongue.

For a man as lonely as Bablu, whom every female member in his life had forsaken except for the

pet sitting by his leg, the utterance of his name was enough to stir up deep emotions. Emotions that

he had locked inside an unused part of his mind, securing the lid so firmly that their sour smell

would not reach him.

But Sarita and her gently mocking voice, with her intelligence and independence, and the trace of

uncertainty underneath, had seeped into those deep, dank parts of his self.

It had happened slowly. Bablu hadn’t even realized it until he had returned from Uttarakhand.

A few months ago, Sarita, seeing him trying to hail an autorickshaw after class, had offered to drop

him as far as the vegetable market as she was going in that direction too.

Sitting behind her on the scooter that balmy evening, he had been careful to tightly grip the metal

handrail at the back. He did not want to make her uncomfortable by jostling against her when the

scooter went into the numerous potholes that lent Hathipala Road the distinctive appearance of

belonging to the lunar surface.

They spoke little during the ride, their words often cut off by the loud tooting of horns from

homeward-bound commuters. Bablu, not wanting Sarita to spot him inadvertently looking at her in

the rear-view mirror, kept his gaze on the thin electricity wires running across poles, drooping

over newly patched roofs, criss-crossing the minaret of an old mosque, like a fine fishnet in the sky

He was keenly aware of the woman sitting in the driver's seat, her smell, her hair. The squawking

crows perched on the lines seemed to be watching him as well, judging him, causing an uneasy flip

of his heart that he only days later identified as guilt.

He got off along with her at the market, buying tomatoes, okra and cauliflower, things he did not

need, relishing walking beside her as she swung her rapidly filling plastic bag between them.

Sarita pointed out a billboard on the side of the road. It was a picture of a bespectacled man, in a

purple shirt, holding his hand out and apparently counting on his fingers. 'Arvind's English and

Mathematics' proclaimed the bold letters on the billboard and a quote seemingly from Mr Arvind

himself stated, ‘My students say that I am the father of fingering and formula.’ This informative

sentence was followed by a phone number and a small blurb – ‘The one and only in the world’.

Sarita laughed. ‘Be glad that you didn’t join this class, Prabhash. Anything passes for English these

days, really! I was lucky that I went to Sacred Heart Convent school where at least the teachers

had decent grammar skills that made up for their heavy Punjabi twang.’

And she told him about growing up in Ludhiana, where her love for academics and reading was

never understood by her family. Reminiscing with a distant smile on her face, she added, ‘In

Punjab all that we are meant to do is eat and drink. My parents thought books were meant only to

be thrown into the bonfire at Lohri.’

She told him a funny story about her uncle Jippy, who once leaped over the Lohri bonfire tipsily,

with the minor inconvenience of having set his kurta on fire. His brother-in-law then tried to douse

the fire by upending the glass of whisky in his hand over the burning kurta sleeve.

But she said nothing about an absent husband or how she ended up in Indore and he didn’t ask. He

in return, ignoring her protests that he should only speak in English in order to practice, reminded

her that class was now over, and switched to his impeccable Hindi.

He told her about his trip to Uttarakhand, meeting Prat Bhai on the train, about Asha Rani and her

goats. 'You know, Sarita ji, the more I travel around the country, the bigger my dreams get,' he

said. 'I want to install vending machines in schools all over the country. There are lakhs of young

girls who start missing school once they begin menstruating. So many of them drop out altogether. I

want to see them all finish their studies and enter the workforce, let them start making something of

their lives, rather than just making dal and curry for the rest of their days.'

Sarita nimbly skipped over a large pile of cow dung on the pavement and replied, 'You reminded

me of something, Prabhash. Many years ago, at my cousin Jasminder's wedding, eunuchs had come

outside her house to give their blessings and of course extract a hefty sum for the same. I will

never forget the words the elderly hijra sang, "Once he puts a garland over her head, the good wife

has to stay in the kitchen and cut onions till she is dead." And the younger eunuchs danced to this,

making graceful turns in their bright saris.

'Of course, after three more songs when Jasminder's father refused to pay them, all that grace

disappeared and one of the eunuchs lifted up her sari waist high and flashed him right in the face.'

Bablu laughed. 'It has happened to me too, at a traffic signal. I had no place to hide my face nor

could I roll up a window!'

'Why?' asked Sarita.

Bablu laughed. 'Because I was on my cycle, Sarita ji.'

They walked to a small tea stall and sat down on the stained wooden benches. Sarita, holding her

glass of milky tea in one hand and waving flies away with the other, kept glancing at Bablu. His

face was only half visible under the shadow of the tin roof. He had such calm brown eyes and an

uncomplicated gaze that he seemed to be largely focusing on the dented aluminium table between

them.

He was one of the few men she had met who looked at women not as objects to be slotted in their

place, or as beings that only existed to do their bidding.

Women have been looking for a cape and have been handed an apron for centuries. But here was a

man who wanted to help women swing their apron around, let it flutter down their backs and watch

them soar through the clear blue skies.

Prashant Batra submitted his story to the *Guardian* titled ‘The first man to wear a sanitary napkin’.

It was a four-page article chronicling Bablu Kewat’s journey from Mohana to Indore. And with

that, troops of ruddy-faced journalists wielding straw hats and bottled water along with their

dictaphones began descending on Bablu Kewat’s workshop from all over the world.

The *Times of India* was the first Indian newspaper to feature Bablu Kewat and his unique

invention. A half-page story on page six, sandwiched between an advertisement for Sintex water

storage tanks and an announcement that wished Sardar Ranga Singh a ‘Very Jolly Birthday Sir ji’.

Bablu Kewat had started getting famous.

There were television interviews where poker-faced anchors not quite focusing on the work he

was doing with non-profit and women’s groups kept trying to draw out salacious details of him

wearing a pad and leaking blood all over himself.

He was invited to speak at universities and companies and conferences across the country. Bablu

found himself enjoying these talks.

There was one rather memorable experience in Bhopal. It was a packed hall, with a panel of

dignitaries from around the world and attended by the Minister of Commerce, Industry and

Employment.

Bablu began his talk by pulling out a sanitary napkin from his pocket and waving it in front of the

startled guests asking, 'How many men here have touched a sanitary pad in their life?'

When no one responded, he walked up to the minister and said, 'Well sir, here is your chance,

come hold this, I promise it won't bite.' The startled minister looked helplessly around, waiting for

someone to rescue him and, with no escape in sight, gingerly took the sanitary pad in his hand.

Bablu continued, 'You're feeling embarrassed holding that pad, aren't you, sir? This shame in

discussing menstruation, in holding a sanitary pad, is one of the biggest hurdles we face. It is as if

menstruation is not a natural function, but a sin that women unwillingly commit through their uterus

and have to hide away from prying eyes, lest they be declared guilty of the crime of bleeding.

'This shame is the reason why women take their stained pieces of cloth, wash them secretively and

hang them to dry in places where even the rays of the sun cannot spot them. Then they end up using

those mouldy, bacteria-laden pieces of fabric, and get diseases. Let us all refuse to be part of this

game of shame because it is nothing but a losing game for all humanity.'

The audience was spellbound and couldn't stop clapping. Taking his sanitary pad back from the

hapless minister's hands, Bablu added with a twinkle in his eye, 'And I would like to end my

speech by thanking women and their menstrual cycles. Without them, this talk, along with our very

existence, would not be possible.'

Later, laughing about the event, he confessed to Sarita, 'Sarita ji, I told them only ten per cent of

women in India used a sanitary pad. Actually I fudged the number. It is only five per cent. I just

added five per cent more on stage because I did not want to embarrass Bharat Mata so much in

front of all foreigners.'

23

One evening, over cups of tea, Bablu was entertaining Professor Sharma with his most recent

adventures as a sanitary napkin salesman. Wherever he went, he encountered so many interesting

characters, and he hoarded up the stories to tell the professor and Sarita.

He recounted a tale about a woman in Chhattisgarh who refused to switch from her dirty rags to the

pads because she explained, 'If a dog gets hold of the menstrual pad and runs on the street, that's a

sign that my mother-in-law will die.'

'She refused to listen to me,' Bablu said, 'even though I tried explaining that if that were true, then

millions of women all over India would deliberately throw their sanitary pads on the streets,

hoping for dogs to carry them off.' Professor Sharma laughed while Bablu, biting into one of the

bhajiyas Mrs Sharma had prepared, said, 'These moong dal bhajiyas are almost as good as the

ones Ma used to make.'

He hadn't thought about his mother in a while and this sudden memory of her robbed him briefly of

words. Professor Sharma, sensing his mood shift, gently broached the topic of Bablu reuniting with

his family.

Bablu turned away and looking at Choti playing on the lawn he said, 'Whenever I think of them, my

heart feels heavy. They all abandoned me. Since the time I was fourteen I had sacrificed everything

for my mother and my sisters and when the time came to stand by me, they all fled.'

Professor Sharma asked, ‘And what about Gowri?’

Bablu replied, ‘My mother thought Gowri was the right woman for me and once she was in my life

I tried to be the right man for her but marriage is about understanding, Professor saab, and where

did she ever understand me?

‘You know, soon after she left, her brother came to see me. We were standing on the porch and he

called me all sorts of names. The neighbours gathered and then he pushed me down the stairs and

left. What had I ever done to deserve all this humiliation? I do not want to turn around and choke

on the dust of my footsteps, Professor saab. Now the only path for me lies ahead.’

24

On a rain-filled evening, sitting across Sarita’s dining table, his head bent over grammar textbooks

meant for sixth graders, in his idiosyncratic English, Bablu said, ‘I got mail, Sarita ji, from

Unilever. They are calling me to London and saying to give a talk in front of their top managers

about how I am making sanitary pads in such cheap way.

‘I don’t know how I will talk in English and all properly, little worry in my heart.’ And then he

laughed, adding, ‘Sarita ji, when I told to Sanjay, my neighbour on second floor, that I may be

going to London next month so can he giving Choti food and take her walking, he said, “No, no,

Kewat don’t go, even Bruce Lee was poisoned by these British people!”’

Sarita leaned across the table and, putting her hand over his, said, ‘Prabhash, I don’t know if the

British poisoned Bruce Lee, but I am pretty sure that you will not be poisoned at the Unilever

event, unless you decide to chew on their Lifebuoy soap.

‘Go and don’t worry about speaking on stage. It doesn’t matter if your English is incorrect. If you

feel more comfortable, just speak in Hindi. Remember all these people, these MBAs, are calling

you on stage because they know that despite all their education, you are more brilliant than them.

After all, it is you who have set up more than two hundred sanitary napkin manufacturing units in

seven states, as you never tire of telling me – not them. It is they who need to learn something from

you.’

Not long after, Bablu Kewat, with freshly oiled hair, a new pair of grey trousers, a mustard

sleeveless Nehru jacket and his new Bata shoes, stood in line at the airport waiting for his

boarding pass. The woman with immaculate red lipstick across the counter asked, ‘Sir, what

would you prefer, window or aisle?’

Not quite understanding the question, he nonchalantly replied, ‘I already have Windows on my

laptop so I will take the aisle.’

Bablu Kewat had a comfortable journey in his aisle seat to Heathrow. And at the Unilever

convention the next day, remembering Sarita’s words, he delivered a simple speech about both his

journey and his beliefs.

He ended his talk by saying, ‘Big business is like a mosquito, a parasite. It can make society ill.

My method of business is like a bee. You take nectar from the flower while benefiting the system.’

And then looking directly at his audience of executives with degrees from Harvard and Yale he

ended his speech, gently challenging them, ‘I classify people into three categories, uneducated, a

little educated and surplus educated. A little educated man like me has done this. Surplus educated

people, what are you going to do for society?’

The applause didn’t stop. Bablu stood on the stage, his heart bursting with pride, as the solitary

spotlight focused on him. He wished he could share this moment with someone. He thought about

his parents. They should have been here. His poor father, who had not gone further than the

perimeter of Mohana, and his mother, who had travelled just a bit further, to Dewas, cooking in

different homes, trying to raise three children.

The hurt he had nursed against his mother faded. He suddenly realized, as he stood alone on the

stage, that he was not here despite his mother, but because of her. Growing up, seeing her

struggling for her family's survival and her indomitable strength that seemed to deal with every

obstacle had made him see women in a role different from the customary one.

His journey had begun as a young boy when he decided to drop out of school to help his mother.

The lessons he had learned during that time, the understanding he gained, all had their role in

bringing him here, to this very auditorium. The yearning for his family, deeply buried in his heart,

returned to him with all the sharpness of a fresh wound.

After the conference, Bablu spent the rest of his trip riding the open red bus, seeing all the tourist

spots of London, the Big Ben, the Tower Bridge, standing at the gates of Buckingham Palace and

walking at length around Hyde Park till he got a dreadful shoe bite.

Then he headed back home but not before he bought a purse emblazoned with the Union Jack and a

matching keychain for Sarita, and an 'I love London' T-shirt for Maina.

25

Ropes of marigold flowers were hung in sweeping loops across the entrance of Bablu Kewat's

office. A pandit in a white dhoti was sitting on the floor, arranging numerous idols of gods and

goddesses on a silk-covered platform, decorating it with fruits and rice grains in intricate patterns,

waiting to add the book of accounts which would also be duly anointed with a sacred red dot and

placed at the altar.

Bablu had a lot to thank God for this year. In January he had been the recipient of one of the highest

awards given to civilians by the Government of India, the Padma Shri, and he had also been

commissioned by the chief minister of Bihar to help set up over a hundred sanitary pad making

units in the state.

Distributing Diwali bonuses along with packets of sweets to his workers, Bablu was waiting to

finish the ceremony and head to Sarita's house. He had purchased fireworks for Maina – sparklers,

Lakshmi bombs and rockets that would go high into the sky before bursting into an array of

dazzling stars.

The telephone on his desk rang and Bablu picked up the cordless phone, clamping it between his

ear and shoulder as he lifted yet another gift-wrapped box of sweets. At the other end, a hesitant

voice said, 'Hello? It's me.' And with a nervous laugh she added, 'Do you still remember me?'

Bablu felt a nerve twitch from his shoulder to his forearm, his throat went dry and he set the box of

sweets on the table, walking towards a quieter corner of the office.

There was only one appropriate reply that he could give. With a heart filled with an ache that was

both sweet and sour, like a half-ripened mango, still green on the other side, he said, 'It is not so

easy for a man to forget his wife.'

The night sky was filled with fireworks as the city celebrated Diwali. Sounds of excited voices

and laughter rang all around him but Bablu Kewat felt hollow as he stood next to Sarita.

He watched Maina make small circles with the sparklers in the dark and saw the warmth in

Sarita's eyes when he helped Maina put a rocket inside a glass bottle and lit the wick for her as

she gleefully watched it zigzag into the sky.

Later that evening, with the exhausted child asleep on the couch, he sat at the same chipped

wooden table where it had all begun and told Sarita about the conversation with his wife. Gowri

had told him that she had been looking for him unsuccessfully till someone sent her a magazine that

featured an article on him along with a phone number for Kewat Industries.

Bablu had felt numb through the conversation. As his wife spoke, Sarita's face had loomed in his

mind. He didn't know what to feel. And then there was a pause, a few muffled sounds of the phone

being handed over and, as he heard his mother's voice, Bablu had finally broken down.

26

The jeep hurtled down the dusty road from Dewas to Mohana, with Bablu holding the steering

wheel with one hand and now and then patting Choti with the other. The dog was sitting in the front

seat, barking occasionally, her tail wagging and her head hanging out of the window, perhaps

catching traces of long-forgotten trails.

Bablu was returning home but it had not been an easy decision. Since Gowri's phone call, Bablu

felt there was a flickering tube light in his head, going on and off, on and off.

He oscillated between dread and wistful yearning. He had deep misgivings, a fear of being

contained in a coop he had possibly outgrown, as he relived the past again and again.

Then the tube light flickered on and he could see himself sitting on the stairs with his mother as she

rubbed coconut oil into his hair on Sunday mornings, and images of sticky faces and mouths filled

with pink candy floss, gleaming in the sunlight as he walked back with his sisters from the local

fair.

And Gowri, lying down next to him in the dark, her long hair sprawled over the pillow, her red

bindi, as smudged as the kohl around her eyes, turning towards him and giggling at a now long-

forgotten jest. But then the tube light would flicker off and he would return to those dark days of

being alone, ostracized, abandoned.

Finally he had gone to meet Professor Sharma. Walking around the lawn, throwing a half-chewed

yellow ball for Choti, Professor Sharma said, 'Bablu, relationships may tear but they are not

clothes where you throw out a ripped shirt and replace it with a new one. A principled man must

try to stitch together his bonds carefully, time and again.’

Professor Sharma waved towards the porch where Mrs Sharma was sitting with her crochet and

said, ‘Look at me, Bablu, I will be wearing my shirt, faded and patched but softened with time, till

the day I eventually fade away myself.’

Bablu went to Sarita’s house later that evening. They sat across the table, separated it seemed by a

world rather than a piece of wood. He found it difficult to look into her eyes, eyes that suddenly

looked weary, with desolation lingering at their edges.

Close to breaking point himself, he continued, ‘Sarita ji, I thought my rickshaw was empty, I had

travelled such a long way, a distance measured not just in kilometres but in time itself, hours, days,

years where nothing was visible, even in the rear-view mirror. But I didn’t realize that the meter

had stayed down and the passenger who had stepped out could just as easily step back in. I have to

go back, Sarita ji, back to her, my mother and my town.’

Sarita did not say a word, though her pain was evident – in her hand that trembled slightly as she

sat still covering her mouth, in her rigidly held neck as she kept her gaze fixed on the table between

them. She then nodded once, almost imperceptibly, and walked him to the door.

A week after that Bablu packed up his life in Indore, loaded his jeep and here he was, six years

and forty-seven kilometres later.

He could see his house up ahead with the electricity pole outside, where he used to tether his

cycle, though time had diminished the gleam of fresh paint on the exterior. Bablu also noticed a

horde of people gathered at the gate with overstretched smiles and garlands in hand. They were

waiting for him as if he was a visiting minister distributing free televisions a day before voting

begins.

He parked on the side and walked towards them, spotting his family, half hidden by the crowd.

But before he could reach them, there were raucous cheers and people rushing to put their garlands

around his neck.

The headman, who had once decided to hang him upside down from a tree, clasped him to his

chest saying, 'Beta, I always told everyone, Bablu Kewat's grandfather was a very intelligent man

and that boy has gone on his Dada ji, he will be world famous one day.’

Parul’s husband, Mahesh, held Bablu’s hand – flipping over his palm, he traced a line on it and,

displaying his sudden knowledge of palmistry, turned to his beaming wife, declaring, ‘See, didn’t I

tell you, Parul, this boy has a luck line that sweeps across his entire palm, he was always destined

to be a great man, I have been saying this since he was a child.’

He saw Akram standing behind Ganjkaran and walked up to him, squeezing his friend’s shoulder

affectionately while Ganjkaran droned on, ‘Kewat saab, I still remember the day you came to me

and bought sanitary pads, many reporters had come to interview us and I told them that I knew right

at that moment our Kewat saab was a genius type of person.’

Bablu made his way through the crowd, towards his family, touched his sobbing mother’s feet as

he always had when greeting her, hugged his nephew, who sported a pubescent moustache and

pimples now, and his sisters. Gowri was standing in a corner, an uncertain smile fluttering on her

lips. She looked both frightened and hopeful. He took her by the hand and entered his home.

Sonal nestled on the front seat of the jeep, her small head leaning against the window as she played

with her Rubik's Cube. 'How much further, Papa?' she asked. Bablu looked at his ten-year-old

daughter and replied, 'Almost there, Sona, another ten minutes.'

Gowri did not understand the point of these excursions that the father and daughter embarked upon

ever so often, just like she didn't understand why when he could sell his machines for a greater

profit, he didn't. Why they could not move to a better house, or get a new car.

Rachna of course had her own ideas, that he was pretending to live a modest life while

squirrelling all his money into Swiss bank accounts. She was convinced that his frequent trips to

Europe to give lectures were just a cover-up for his unscrupulous activities. But Bablu had

stopped explaining himself a long time ago.

Sonal, having solved her cube many times and still unable to beat her best time of forty-three

seconds, started toying with the threaded lime and chilli that Bablu had hung on the rear-view

mirror. Tapping it like a ball and watching it sway, she said, 'Papa, isn't this meant to keep the evil

eye away? But you always say not to believe in superstitions, then why do you hang it?'

Bablu was silent. It was not a superstition but a souvenir from his past, a flashlight illuminating a

single moment, in a mind crowded with dusty memories. A fragile soap bubble filled with images

of sitting pillion behind a remarkable woman on her scooter, dodging potholes. Her stopping at a

traffic light, buying a cotton thread with lime and chilli from a street vendor, laughing as she said,

‘In English there is a saying “when life gives you lemons, you make lemonade”. But in India when

life gives us lemons, we turn them into talismans threaded with chillies to protect us from the

bumpy roads it takes us on.’

Unable to tell his daughter about a life spent making difficult choices, he said instead, ‘Some

superstitions are based on science – the juice from the lime and chilli keeps pests away. It is a

simple insecticide.’

Bablu parked the jeep at the edge of the Kheoni wildlife sanctuary and, holding his daughter’s

hand, walked into the woods, where he would show her how to pick the right stones to rub together

and make a fire, point out the monkeys taking calculated leaps as they jumped from branch to

branch, the disciplined black ants marching in a straight line like soldiers in a parade, and the

brown butterflies delicately sitting on wildflowers, feeding without destroying.

(This fictionalized story is based on Arunachalam Muruganantham and his marvellous

invention, the low cost sanitary pad making machine. All characters, places and incidents,

however, are the author's own creation.)

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Padma Shri Arunachalam Muruganantham or Muruga as I call him, not just

because my tongue trips over his name, but because he is also now a friend. Muruga is the inventor

of the low cost sanitary pad making machine and a social entrepreneur who works tirelessly to

remove the taboos around menstruation. I had to chase him for months before he finally agreed to

meet me and then, after lengthy interviews, gave me permission to fictionalize his story for this

book. A hug to Aarav and Nitara, for bearing with me and leaving me alone with my computer

whenever I yelped, ‘Don’t come close, there are insects on my desk!’ This was not an absolute

falsehood because during the last monsoon season we did have a bug infestation and I spent hours

at my computer, typing with one hand while scratching my legs with the other. Merliyn Joseph, you

amazing woman, I owe you one for patiently answering all my queries about Amma and meen

moilee and for the time I interrupted you in the middle of a movie and asked, ‘So when you die,

which cemetery are you likely to be buried in?’ To my wonderful Mom, I am not half the woman

you are but even that half seems to be enough. Rinke Khanna, may we both grow old like Noni

Appa and Binni. There is so much of us that went into dreaming up those two sisters. A hug to my

Nani for dragging me to the Jamatkhana for so many years. A big thank you to the fabulous Jaishree

Ram Mohan, Gavin Morris, Rachna Kalra, Harsimran Gill, Anish Chandy, Sonali Zohra and the

great team at Juggernaut Books for making it all happen. Chiki Sarkar, my wonderful publisher and

editor, once again, I could not have done this without you.