

Footprints

I see Ram Pyaare Yadav park his two-wheeler a few meters away from my shop. It is a three-wheeler actually, with brakes, gears, and the accelerator near his hand.

There is a row of small chappal shops lining the lane at the end of which he parks it. Ram Pyaare Yadav doesn't stop at any of them. He passes them all and walks straight to mine. He limps along like usual, but I don't see the normal mirth of Diwali either on his crumpled face or in his stumbling gait.

The man who runs a small 'tyre puncher' shop as he calls it has the ritual of buying chappals for his family every year before Diwali. "Chappals are better than Clothes. They are easier to buy, they fit better, and they are more useful," he once told me.

In normal years, he doesn't leave it to the last day before Diwali like he did this year. There is a lot to do on the evening before Diwali at home in normal years. The sweets, the decoration, the crackers, the puja preparation. I see him limping along towards me. His hands are empty. His face is squalid.

"Happy Diwali, Ram Pyaare," I greet him.

"Namaste, Ram Ram," he greets back, wiping his brow with his sleeve on the hot afternoon.

The heat and the physical labour of his work might be getting to him, I think. More bikes and cars, more tyres, more punctures to fix, I guess. His tapering hair has more grey than black now. He has been a customer ever since it was all black. He is not growing younger; I feel like teasing him.

But he seems to be in a hurry, in a mood for finishing his business.

"Have you got the sizes?" I ask him.

He never remembers sizes for his four children. Four is a lot, of course. Some years back, he got all of them to the shop. But it led to a lot of fights and choices, and in trying to placate each of them, he ended up spending more than he had planned. So now, for the past few years, he doesn't get them.

He pulls out a few sheets of paper from his pocket. Those sheets have the footprints of his children. He doesn't need to remember sizes. Sizes change every year. All of them are growing children. The youngest must be six or seven now, and the oldest must now be thirteen or fourteen. I am not sure.

So, for the past many years, on the day before Diwali, he traces their footprints out on the sheets of paper. Each child stands on the sheet, and he traces out the outline. Then he gets me the sheet. Till a few years back, every second or third year, the number of sheets increased. He had become a friend. So I used to joke about it, and he used to blush. Now they are constant at four.

I look at the traces and get a chappal for the first sheet.

He doesn't match it with the tracing like every year. He doesn't ask me for any style or colour options too. He hands me over the second sheet. This time I have to stand up.

It's a girl's footprint. The girl's chappals are on the other side. I get him a pair of chappals I know his girls like. I get three pieces in different colours and styles. He simply picks one, puts it aside and neglects the others.

Number three is a sandal for the second girl. He doesn't twist the sandals for strength or check the quality like every year. Nor does he check the price or ask for a different colour. It is black and cream. He pockets it and puts it aside.

“130 and 170 for the chappals, 230 for this sandal,” I say. Like every year, the fourth one is always free for him. I total it up and give him a further 30-rupee discount.

“500,” I say.

He doesn't say anything.

“Ok?” I ask. He nods, looking at the floor. I had put a buffer of another twenty rupees like every year. He puts his hand in his pocket and removes a crisp note. He hands me over the note without any haggling. I stand up to prepare the bill, albeit surprised.

He puts the three pairs in the bag he has got and starts walking in a hurry.

I watch him limp fast to his three-wheeler and tie the bag to the handle, while I am still preparing the bill. I want to stop him. He didn't give me the fourth footprint. I shout out his name. I need to give him the free fourth pair, like every year.

But this year is different. This year Diwali is not normal. He doesn't stop.

Funeral

In Varanasi, Pappu Pandey gazed at his dear friend Lalu Mishra's dead body on the pyre. He stood next to Lalu's son Pratap waiting for proceedings to begin. He was at a makeshift crematorium ghat next to the main one at Manikarnika. It was for people who had passed away due to the lethal pandemic virus. Pappu was among the less than ten close friends and relatives allowed to attend it. He stood in the middle of four other similar funerals of bodies of pandemic patients. They were all wrapped in personal protective equipment body bags.

"Lalu seems to have lost a lot of weight during his illness," Pappu whispered in the ears of another common friend.

"Yes, true. This virus is extremely dangerous. See what it reduced our dear Lalu to," the other said in a choked voice.

"In two weeks, he lost all the weight that he could not lose in his entire life." Pappu couldn't resist a backhanded joke even in such a sombre atmosphere. His five-decade long relationship with Lalu was such - always full of life and banter.

Lalu's son Pratap overheard this conversation. A shadow of doubt crept into his mind. He had a closer look at the bag that had his father's wrapped body. Indeed, my father has slimmed down a lot, in fact, it is a drastic shrinkage in size, Pratap thought. They weren't allowed to see Lalu during his almost two week stay in hospital. Pratap felt it was tragic for his father to have shrunk so much.

He looked around with searching eyes. "Can I have one last look at my father?" he asked the healthcare staff standing next to the pyre. All the attendees had masks and gloves on, so it was tough to recognise relatives with all the distancing. But healthcare staff were the most covered of all. With their full body suits, Pratap could identify them from a distance.

"Yes, only one person. Who are you?" he asked Pratap.

"I am his son," Pratap replied.

The healthcare worker gestured at Pratap to come towards him and went near the head side of the body bag. He then opened the zip, and asked Pratap to come and have a final look.

Pratap saw an old man in his 70s with a haggard face and wrinkled cheeks. He didn't seem to have any teeth as his mouth collapsed with pouting lips.

"This is not my father," Pratap howled at the healthcare worker. "I am certain. This is not him."

Pappu Pandey heard Pratap and rushed towards him. He peeped into the head in the bag and vouched for Pratap.

"Yes, this is not Lalu Mishra. You have given us the wrong body." Pappu proclaimed with confidence, raising his hand along with his voice. Pratap pulled it down.

The healthcare worker put his gloved finger on his lips and ordered Pappu to stay silent. He then removed his mobile phone and called the hospital.

"Body of Lalu Mishra is missing. His relatives claim this is not his body," he said on the phone. Pratap and Pappu looked on with worried, angry eyes.

"Wait one second," the healthcare worker said, and walked over to the other end of the body bag. Pratap and Pappu walked behind him in worried, angry eagerness.

"Yes, tell me. #CV19-UP-09324. Tag seems to be correct," the healthcare worker said in a puzzled tone.

"What tag are you looking at? We are telling you this is not Lalu." Pappu shouted, pushing himself forward with the momentum of all his ninety *kilos* even at this age. "Where is Lalu?" he questioned, raising his voice.

"This is...I am telling you... not Lalu Mishra," the healthcare worker yelled into the phone. Then after a few seconds of pause, he howled even louder. "What?" he yelled and disconnected the phone.

"Hospital said that the handing over of the body is complete. Check others in the crematorium," the healthcare worker reported in a morose expression.

Pappu Pandey's eyes turned red, and he grabbed the healthcare worker by the neck on hearing this. "You bloody....," he yelled.

"No...no...," the worker shouted.

"I will turn you into a dead body now. Let your family search for it," Pappu shouted, and got ready to punch him on his face.

Pratap got into immediate, quick action. He along with couple of others jumped at the scene, sensing the urgency.

"Pappu uncle, forget him. We have to find Papa," Pratap said.

He disengaged Pappu from the healthcare worker and took him along holding his hand. Pappu muttered under his breath with glaring eyes while walking away.

They walked to the funeral next to them that was about to start. Pratap looked at the body on the pyre. It was again too short and small to be his father. He moved on. The next one was that of a woman. He skipped it. The third one seemed like a man who matched his father's body in size.

"Sir, I am sorry. But there seems to be a mix-up," Pratap said.

"Of what?" the man standing next to the body asked, startled.

"Of...umm.. bodies," Pratap replied. "Our healthcare worker says ..err... my father's body...hmm.. is sent here but.. err.. we don't have it," he stuttered.

"We.. umm... have the wrong one," Pappu Pandey barged in.

They could see that the man's expression was changing as they spoke from grief to sympathy. But Pappu's next demand saw it change to anger.

"I have to check your late relative's face," he said.

"What nonsense!" the man shouted. "We are in the middle of last rites and rituals...."

"Sir, only one check. Let me please see if, by chance, he is my father. Else, you can have a glimpse of your loved one for one last time. Sir, please understand...," Pratap pleaded with folded hands.

The man's anger subsided with Pratap's plea. He gestured by his hands to Pratap to go ahead. The healthcare worker unzipped the bag so that they could see the face.

"We are sorry, Sir," Pratap said. He moved on with Pappu, who had also resigned himself to their unprecedented, stark fate by now.

The utter despair of not finding his father's body overcame Pratap's mind and emotions.

"What the hell!!!" he cried out loud. "Where is my father?" he questioned the healthcare worker.

This time Pappu held Pratap by his hand and tried pacifying him. Then he whispered in his ear. "We should go to the hospital. For all you know, Lalu might still be alive," he said. Hope awakened in Pappu's voice and face.

Pratap looked with eyebrows raised towards Pappu. He wiped his face in a hurry and decided that Pappu uncle had no chance of being right. But his mind asked him - what if he is? He told everyone assembled for the funeral to wait there while they go to the hospital and return.

On reaching the hospital, they thought of going straight to the mortuary. But the flash of hope that Pappu had given birth to in Pratap's mind took them to the patient ward first.

"Lalu Mishra," the nurse on duty checked the list of patients. She then looked at Pappu and Pratap and asked, "You are the patient's relatives?"

"Yes, I am his son," Pratap said.

"And I am his brother," Pappu clasped Pratap's hand and replied.

"Patient expired last night." The nurse confirmed in a sombre tone after going through the sheet.

"Oh, are you sure?" Pappu persisted.

"Yes, see here, #CV19-UP-09324," she showed them the list. "Lalu Mishra."

"Because we got the wrong body," Pappu told the nurse, whose mouth gaped open in surprise.

"Wrong body??" she exclaimed, with her palm on her forehead. Then she rechecked her list. "Patient is no more. If you got a wrong body, check with the mortuary."

Pratap and Pappu walked fast with dejected faces towards the mortuary. It had been a dim, baseless hope. But a faint glimmer that the hospital had made a mistake in declaring Lalu dead had lit inside their being. It extinguished as fast as it had taken light.

"Lalu Mishra. #CV19-UP-09324. We got the wrong body," Pappu Pandey thrust himself towards the person in charge at the mortuary. "We want to return it and get the correct one," he added.

He later realised that it sounded odd. Like an online delivery received wrong. He felt like he was at the exchange counter. Even in this sombre mortuary, Pappu didn't lose his mood of jest and banter with his dear friend. He hoped that the man there doesn't say goods once delivered will not be taken back.

"Yes, we are sorry for the mix-up. Sunil told us," the man said, with a surprisingly empathetic tone. His eyes probed at a register. His voice sounded tired with overwork.

"Sunil?" Pappu asked.

"The healthcare worker with you," the man said.

"How can you be only sorry?" Pratap raised his tone. "Where the hell is my father?" he shouted.

"Calm down Sir. This is not a shopping mall," the man replied in a soft, exhausted tone. "We understand your situation. But this pandemic has caused so many deaths. Mortuary is full of bodies," he added in a worn-out voice.

"Besides, the policy of giving bodies started only last week. Earlier they only gave ashes due to infection risk." The man put a lid on Pratap's grievance and continued voicing his weary tirades. "We are tracing your father's body," he said, on seeing silence from Pratap and Pappu.

He was on many phone calls for a while after that, while they waited.

"We have traced it. The man who took it is coming here in fifteen minutes. Please go to the crematorium, and get back the body you have," he said.

Pratap and Pappu rushed back to the crematorium. They told the health care worker Sunil the update that they had got from the hospital. He already knew about the status and was waiting for them to arrive. He had repacked the body and got it loaded into the ambulance. Pratap and Pappu told everyone else to wait for them to return with Lalu Mishra's body. They got into the ambulance. Sunil drove them to the hospital.

On reaching the mortuary, they went back to the man.

"We have got the body back," Pratap said.

"That man there took your father's body," he said, and pointed to a man standing near the notice board with his back to them. He was an elderly gentlemen wearing white *kurta pyjamas*.

"Hello Sir," Pratap called him out. "I am Pratap. You took my father's body. We took your body in the mix-up. I mean your dead relative's body." Pratap clarified. He tried to exchange pleasantries with an unknown stranger. This was a much unanticipated situation. He shuffled his feet in discomfort.

The man turned around. He had traces of a faint smile on a jaded face. He was an old man in his late 60s or more. But his face had an inexplicable zest for life. He had a white beard and wore a cap.

"He is not my relative," the man said.

"I am Aslam Sharif," he introduced himself. "I used to be a hospital worker here. Retired from the mortuary ten years back. Since then, I collect unclaimed bodies every day. I give them a dignified funeral," he said. Pratap and Pappu had expressions of shock with raised eyebrows and a wrinkled forehead.

"I am sorry your father's body got mixed up and was handed over to me as unclaimed today morning," the man said. He then turned his gaze skyward and raised his hands in prayer. He looked at the man at the mortuary counter. "Unfortunately, I have already performed the last rites," he murmured. "Please take these ashes. May God give peace to his soul," he whispered, and walked away towards Sunil. As he went towards Sunil, Pratap and Pappu saw him take out a handkerchief and wipe the tears on his face.

"Sunil, can you tell me where the actual unclaimed body is?" Sharif asked Sunil and walked towards the ambulance.

Pratap and Pappu stood with their feet locked to the ground holding the ashes of Lalu Mishra in their hands.

The man at the mortuary saw them in their stunned state and woke them from their traumatic jolt.

"Don't worry Sir. Sharif would have done the last rites as per your religious rituals. He has been performing this noble service for many years," he said. And then he added, "You are in Varanasi near the holy Ganga, Sir. Lalu Mishra's soul will rest in peace."

Pratap and Pappu recovered, if only for a while, and left with the ashes of Lalu Mishra.

The man at the mortuary, then, scolded the clerk sitting next to him with a tight slap on his face. "How many times have I told you not to drink on night duty?"

Fountain Pen

"No Papa, I didn't lose the pen," I cried in agony, as Papa slapped my open palm with the cane he had in his right hand.

"This will teach you that you shouldn't speak lies. If you have lost the pen, don't say you haven't lost it," Papa said. "Open your other hand," he demanded.

I opened my other palm and closed my eyes tight. Slap, the cane went and hit my other palm. "Aah," I cried out aloud. With tears flowing from my eyes, I went and hugged my mother. From the corner of my eye, I could see that she had a tear on her cheek as well.

"This will teach you that you should always speak the truth," Papa said, and got up.

This was the first time Papa had hit me. This was also the first time I and my mother cried together.

On my 9th birthday, three days back, Papa had gifted me a fountain pen because I loved to write. It was an expensive one with its own ink pump. It had this very cool mechanism to dip it, nib down, into the ink bottle, and suck in the ink by pressing the pump. I had learnt how to use it after a couple of messy attempts. Those attempts had led to blue stained shorts that my mother had later washed. The nib was golden with a nice, curvy shape. I started using the pen for my tuition classes on the very same day. For two days, every one of my school mates had asked me about the awesome fountain pen. I showed it to them in all eagerness and stared at their looks of awe with pride.

But on that day, I didn't remember where I placed the pen. But I remember not having misplaced it. I don't even remember whether I had taken it to the tuition class. After I returned home in the evening, I realised that I didn't have the pen with me. It was a shocking realisation. I knew that Papa won't like it. It was a new, expensive pen

gifted only three days back. I checked my box and emptied my bag. It wasn't there. I checked my notebooks to see if I had written using the fountain pen. The notebooks had my notes of the day written in a blue ballpen. It meant that I hadn't used the new fountain pen in the tuition classes. I called my classmates and asked them.

"Do you remember seeing my new fountain pen in my box today?" I checked with three of them, one by one.

The first one of them said, "Yes." The next one said, "No." And the third one said, "Umm...."

I didn't know whom to trust. So I concluded that the precious new fountain pen was missing, even before the tuition class. But I was sure I had not lost it. I only didn't know where it was, I told myself. I knew I would find it. It was only a matter of time.

I went and told my mother.

"Search it in your cupboard. You must have kept it somewhere," she insisted.

"It's not there," I shouted back from the cupboard after searching it.

"Papa is not going to be happy," she said. I felt a shiver go down my spine. Papa never liked us misplacing things. I knew that. But I was sure I hadn't misplaced it. It wasn't my fault, I reassured myself. He should understand.

"I will tell him," I said with newfound bravery. "Why should I be afraid if I haven't misplaced it?" I asked her.

"You know Papa doesn't like lies even more. You shouldn't lie if you have lost it," my mother reminded me.

"But I am not lying, I have not lost it. Otherwise, won't I remember where I lost it? It is just that I am not finding it," I argued.

My mother smiled at me and said, "Ok then, go find it," and went to the kitchen.

But I didn't find it, though I looked for it all evening. And then, Papa came back late in the evening. He asked my mother what I was doing.

"He is searching for his new pen," she replied casually. She bit her tongue as soon as she said it. She repented saying it later.

"Why? What happened? Has he lost it? Or has he broken it?" Papa raised his voice in anger and demanded the status of the new pen.

I heard his reverberating baritone and felt a tremor pass through my body. My hands shivered and started flipping through all the sections of my cupboard. But the pen was nowhere to be found.

That is when Papa's loud voice calling out my name fell on my shocked ears. I felt numb and went to him.

"Have you lost your new fountain pen?" he howled at me. He looked like he was irate. I tried to present my argument. That's when, for the first time in my life, I got the cane on my hands, both of them. It was for telling a lie that I had not lost the new pen. But that was true, I revolted within. I hadn't lost it, I cried within. But my cries weren't heard.

After getting the cane on both my palms, my mother wiped my tears. I wiped hers too. She felt that I got a beating due to her. She didn't say it, but her eyes said so. She put me on my bed and fed me my dinner.

At the time I was about to go to bed, my younger brother came home. He had gone to his friend's house for a birthday party and dinner. He was in a good mood and flashed the return gift that he had received at the party.

"SShhhh...", my mother signalled with her finger to her lips, indicating that I was sleeping. But my eyes were open, and I peeked through my blanket at my brother and mother. My mother smiled and told both of us to stay silent. My brother sat on the bed and opened his return gift bag in excitement. He showed us the pencils and sketch pen box he had received.

That is when I saw something familiar. It was shining from my brother's shirt pocket. It was my new fountain pen.

"What is that doing on your shirt?" I pointed out and asked my brother.

"Oh, that's your new pen," he said.

"I know that. But why do you have it? Give it to me," I yelled. "I will go and show it to Papa."

"SShhhh," my mother said. "Don't shout."

"How do you have it?" she asked my brother in a whisper, so that my father doesn't hear it.

"I took it to show it to my friends at the party. It is so nice. It impressed everyone. Everyone said wow," he murmured.

"When did you take it?" my mother asked.

"I took it from his box today morning," he replied, with a sly confession on his face.

"Why didn't you tell him?" my mother demanded an explanation, in a stifled voice but still in a very soft tone.

My brother didn't reply. He looked around, and then looked down at the floor. My mother understood and fell silent. She snatched the pen from my brother and kept it with her. My brother continued staring at the floor.

"But my pen...", I gave a hushed cry.

"You will get it.. tomorrow," she cut me off with a staunch murmur. "Now, both of you go to sleep," she said, and walked away with the pen. I scowled at my brother for taking my pen without telling me. I told him that I got a beating because of him. He smiled and said sorry.

We woke up the next day, and heard my mother tell my father that she had found the pen when she cleaned our cupboards.

"I found it under his cupboard," she said. "It was under piles of his books," she informed him.

"I knew he had lost it," my father said, with a gleam in his eye. "I knew he was lying from his face itself yesterday."

He sipped his cup of tea and bit into his breakfast. "Now that he has got his punishment, he has learned his lesson. Give it back to him," he added with a glow of satisfaction.

"If we don't teach our children to speak the truth, who will?" he remarked, while having his breakfast. My mother nodded in agreement.

I felt like telling him that I hadn't lost the pen. My brother had taken it. But I stopped short in my step. I looked at my mother who gave me a glare and ordered me to stop with a signal of round eyes.

After my father went to work, she gave me my pen back.

She had a sorry look on her face. I understood why she did what she did.

"I couldn't save you, dear, from a whacking yesterday," she said, pressing my hand. "But at least, spared your brother today," she said with a mischievous giggle and tapped my cheek. "And saved your new fountain pen from going into the dustbin."

I felt something move in the depths of my stomach. I forced a smile on my face but somehow it didn't come through. An awkward expression made my face its home.

I saw my brother cackle. He gave me a high five. "Nice pen," he said. I gave him a blank, confused look. He said, "it's alright. It was only two cane shots. I am sorry for that. But at least you got your new fountain pen back!"

"Write a poem. Tomorrow we will read it out to Papa. He will be happy, don't worry," he reassured me with a tap on my shoulder.

I looked at my new fountain pen. I decided that I was not going to write anything with it. I was going to misplace it. This time for real.

Balu Auto

There were only three things in his life that truly mattered to Balu Auto: Shankar, Lord Shankar, and Auto Shankar.

You might wonder that you know Lord Shankar in the centre, but who are the other two? Let me explain. The first Shankar is Balu Auto's son. The third is, well, Auto Shankar, the matinee idol of all auto drivers and whose picture you find stuck on the front screen of all city auto-rickshaws.

Balu Auto was no different. In fact, he had the pictures of all three on the front screen of his auto. In the centre was Lord Shankar. On the left, was his son Shankar. And on the right was Auto Shankar.

Therefore, early in the morning after he had bowed down to Lord Shankar in the middle, when his son Shankar threw tantrums over his lunch box, Balu Auto felt his heart grow weak.

"Why do you give me the same thing every day in my lunch box?" the tween boy cried. "Everyone gets burgers and pizzas, and all I have is this sambar rice every day."

Shankar was in his uniform ready to leave for school while his mother ran behind him trying to convince him that sambar rice was the healthiest and tastiest meal a ten-year-old could have. The boy had a grimace on his face.

"Shankar, burgers and pizzas aren't healthy food," the mother tried, slyly stealing a glance at her husband. He knew what the real reason for not having them was. Balu walked close to his son.

"Listen, Shankar. Which burger do you want?" he asked. The boy's eyes lit up while his mother's eyebrows went up, and forehead frowned. Balu twisted his mouth and pointed his palm towards her indicating he will handle it. "I will get you a burger in the evening," he promised, much to his delight.

"Any burger is ok, as long as it is a real burger," he proclaimed with an apparent concession, but quickly added a rejoinder to compensate, "But I want it with fries and a cool drink."

Balu gave him a thumbs up widening the grin on Shankar's face. The boy tapped his foot and gave a thumbs down scowl to his mother who broke into a smile. He galloped out of the house with joy deciding to tolerate the

sambar rice in anticipation of the evening meal and went and sat in his father's auto. "Appa, time to go to school," he shouted.

Balu's wife muttered under her breath to her husband, "You were the one who wanted to send him to an English medium school." He signalled to her that he will manage it. He rushed to his auto.

Shankar waved goodbye to his mother while Balu prayed to Lord Shankar in front of him grateful for another day and started his auto.

Balu squeezed his auto between a school bus and a car, right in front of the school gate. Shankar got off and, before starting to walk inside, looked behind and yelled, "Appa, burger." Balu nodded with a smile. The boy scampered off to school with a grin, swinging from side to side.

While Balu chugged along the road slowly waiting for the first fare of the morning, his phone rang. "Balu Auto?" the voice at the other end asked. It was a man from an apartment close to his house who were his regular customers for small trips.

"Yes, Sir, Good morning!"

"Balu Auto, Good morning! My car has broken down and we have some guests. We need to take them around the city. Can you come?" the man enquired.

"Yes, Sir, I will come," Balu replied in full gusto.

He was at the gate of the apartment in quick time. The man came out with a couple and their son.

"First take them to the National Park and then to City Mall," the man said.

"I will pick you up from the City Mall in the afternoon. The car should be fixed by then. Give me a call when you get there," he instructed his guests.

Balu dropped the guests to the National Park in a jiffy and told them to find him at the gate once they are done. He looked around for a short trip fare nearby while they were inside. His phone rang.

"I am cooking food. Don't bother about the burger. We will convince him," his wife said.

"No, no, no!!" Balu yelled. "I will get him his burger," he told her.

"But why do you want to spend so much unnecessarily just for the tantrum of a child who doesn't understand it?" she argued.

"Shankar is our only son. If not for him, who will we spend for?" he said. "Nothing doing. I have promised him. I will get it," he said.

The guests spent a long time in the park, and by the time they reached City Mall, it was late.

"Balu Auto, is there a fast-food restaurant nearby?" the man asked. "My son is hungry, and we will have lunch before going to City Mall," he added. The child shouted, "Daddy, Burger."

Balu Auto smiled and took them to the closest place he knew. He waited outside while they had their lunch.

"Balu Auto," the child called aloud from the restaurant after a while, waving at him, with his fingers pointing to his mouth. Balu signalled to him that he was not hungry and fine where he was. The child ran inside, and, after a couple of minutes, the man walked out with a bag.

"We have ordered this for you," he said. "Have your lunch, you must be hungry too," the man said.

“No, Sir, this is unnecessary,” Balu argued. But the man shoved the bag in Balu’s hand.

“Take it, don’t worry,” he said and went back in.

Balu saw that the bag had a burger, fries, and a bottle of Coke. He looked skyward and folded his hands. He touched Lord Shankar in the centre of his screen in gratitude. He knew what to do with it. He hung the bag on his handle and had a few gulps of water while he waited for the guests to return.

Balu dropped them at City Mall where their host was already waiting for them. He thanked Balu and paid him his fare. Balu looked at his watch. It was almost 3 pm. Shankar’s school would be close to getting over for the day. It was time to pick him up.

Balu looked at the bag hanging at his handle and checked it again. He folded his hands again at Lord Shankar on the centre of his screen and said a small prayer of thanks for making this arrangement.

His mind was filled with the anticipation of Shankar’s happiness on seeing what his Appa had got for him. He drove his auto to the school gate. Fast.

Balu loved the sound and energy that spread in the air when the children came out after school. It enthused him like nothing else. On seeing their auto at the gate, Shankar sprinted the last stretch from his school building in a jiffy. He dashed into Balu with a smile.

Balu asked him about the various subjects that he had never got a chance to study while they sat in the auto. Shankar shoved his bag on the back seat and jumped inside. Balu went ahead and pulled out the burger bag from his handle.

“Look here, Shankar!” he showed it. Shankar’s face was filled with a wide grin on seeing the labels. He jumped towards Balu and pulled the bag from his father’s hand.

He peeped inside and saw the contents. He broke into a jig on his seat with the bag in hand. Balu turned around and started his auto with a smile of satisfaction.

“Appa, I am hungry,” Shankar said on the way home. He pulled out the burger from the bag and started opening it.

“Wait till we get home,” Balu said knowing fully well that Shankar wasn’t going to listen to him.

“Home is still a long way away,” Shankar said and took a bite of the burger. “Yummy, Yummy.”

The smile on his face was that of unbridled joy. He held the burger in his right hand and placed the fries bag on the seat picking them up with his other hand. Balu watched the scene in his rear-view mirror and let it be. After a couple of minutes, the bottle of Coke had also found its way to the seat.

“Are you thirsty too?” Balu asked Shankar with a wink.

“Yes, Appa, very thirsty,” Shankar replied laughing. He took a gulp of the drink in between the chomping. Half the burger, fries and Coke were over soon.

A few drops of the drink spilled on to Shankar’s shirt and the seat when Balu got the auto to a halt at the red signal. Balu turned around and wiped it clean while seeing his son munching his meal.

As they waited at the red signal, a beggar woman with two kids came towards Balu.

The woman had torn rags on her body, dishevelled hair, and eyes in deep sockets on an unkempt face. The two kids, a boy, and a girl between six and nine years old, had filled noses and unclean eyes. Their upper body was naked. They had a small strip of cloth that covered their lower bodies. Their feet were bare and dusty.

“Sir, hungry. Food Sir,” the woman went close to Balu and begged. Balu removed his wallet and picked up a five-rupee coin and tried to put it in her hand. But she pulled her hand away and pointed to her mouth. She pointed to the children, and implored, “Two days, no food, Sir.”

Balu looked behind and saw Shankar with the burger and fries in his hands. “Shankar, keep them back in the bag. Eat later,” he ordered. Shankar immediately shoved everything in the bag.

The two children went towards Shankar now. They pointed their fingers to their mouth, and with a crying face, asked him to give them food.

“Shankar, give them this,” Balu said and handed the five-rupee coin to Shankar. When Shankar tried to place it on their palms, they turned it away too and pointed to the bag of food in his hand. Shankar looked at them with pity with the bag in hand.

Balu neglected the beggars and turned his attention to the road again. He desperately waited for the signal to turn green. It was still red. Thirty seconds more.

And then, unknown to Balu, Shankar handed over the bag with its contents to the beggar children. Just like that. With a smile. The two kids lapped it up and peeped inside with a look of complete, utter surprise. The beggar woman folded her hands towards Balu with a look of gratitude. Balu turned back to see what had happened.

Shankar and the two beggar kids were smiling.

When all the good things in this world get over, the grin on a child’s face will still remain beautiful.

As the signal turned green and the car behind him honked, Balu started his auto with a prayer in his heart to Lord Shankar in the centre of his screen.

On the back seat, his son Shankar waved goodbye to the beggar kids who waved back even harder.

The Mask

The hall of the Satra was packed with people – some tourists and most locals.

The smell of betelnut chewed by many in the audience filled the air. The beat of cymbals and drums announced the arrival of the Goswami’s and their performing troupe of masked actors. Jataayu with his long beak and Ravana with his ten heads entered the podium with their finely etched features. Following them were a bunch of other characters all masked up from face through their body.

Jataayu spread his wings filling the space with awe, and making children snuggle into the sari’s of their mothers. Ravana guffawed out aloud spreading a tremor of sorts in the hall. The audience cheered and filled the air with claps of applause. Every act of the actors was received with a deafening cheer by both the locals and the tourists. All the masked actors walked across the hall of the Satra increasing the excitement before they went to the space behind a partition waiting for the act to begin. Even before the performance began, the mere presence of the masks of Majuli enthralled the audience and filled them with anticipation as they had for centuries before.

Soumen Goswami sat next to the group of tourists that he had guided across the river island of Majuli during the day, before inviting them for the performance in the evening.

Soumen Goswami was 'donated' by his parents to the Satra when he was all of four years old. It was an ascetic Satra, the temple and institution of learning for celibate monks to spread the devotion of Vishnu and to live their life in devotion chanting His name. Some said he came from a family of priests. Some said his family in mainland Assam was too poor to afford a good education for Soumen, their fifth son, and this donation was a way out. It doesn't matter. Soumen was brilliant.

By the age of fourteen, he knew the Gita and the Bhagavat Purana by heart and by the age of eighteen, he was accomplished in all the Vaishnav rituals. At twenty-five, he was the most influential Goswami in Majuli after the Satradhikaar (the head monk), and also a spiritual advisor to many important people in the region. He was dynamic, forward-looking, and believed in staying in tune with society and the people of Majuli and outside. He was also idealistic yet practical.

Soumen changed the culture of the Satra and of Majuli. It was as a teenager that I first met him when he had started playing the role of a tourist guide for a bunch of tourists in Majuli.

We were never allowed in the Satra when I was younger. We were the river people – impure, the ones who ate meat, not just fish, but pig, and brewed rice beer. They called us indigenous though we came here to the Brahmaputra from somewhere far away. My parents said their ancestors came here from Tibet or maybe Myanmar – no one knows. All I know is that, during my younger days, the Goswami's didn't let us inside the Satra, even to watch their bhaonas – the dramas, the plays about Gods and Goddesses and Rakshasas and Demons. That was till Soumen changed it.

Now my community sat on the floor of the hall next to everyone else and enjoyed the performance. Not just that, today many of us were going to play small acts along with the Goswami's in the Ram Lila. The Vaanar Sena – monkey army - and the foot soldiers were filled with boys from my village.

And topping it all, today I was playing the role of Sita in the Jataayu act. Ravana will be abducting me despite the defiance of Jataayu and his valiant fight. Jataayu will be killed despite his best attempts. On stage. It's a pity that the one killing him is Ravana. I walked down the hall towards the podium where Jataayu and Ravana waited for me. All of us were ready for the act under our masks.

**

From my home on the island formed due to the silt carried by the Brahmaputra, the river appears calm and serene. But you should see it during the monsoons. It is Mother Kali incarnate, angry and sweeping all evil away. At that time, islands come and go. People on the mainland put sandbag embankments, but they are of no use. The river is stronger than everything that comes in its way.

I was born on the banks of the Brahmaputra twenty-one years back. I have changed home five times in my short life. The river eats it up every few years.

But the river also gives us fish, and it also gives us rice. So I can't complain. I spent my childhood with my father on our boat on the Brahmaputra. I watched him cast his net in the river sitting inside the boat. I remember that I cheered loudly whenever I saw the fish getting entangled, as if miraculously, after a few minutes of the net being cast. I clapped for him when he caught fish the way I clapped for Soumen when he played the role of Lord Krishna in the Ras Leela when I was a small girl.

When I was sixteen, my father had no choice but to get me married off to a man fifteen years older to me and without a job or a boat. My father tried avoiding it a lot, but I knew he had no choice as the community in my village wouldn't have left him alone otherwise.

I cried watching him snivel in silence when I went to my husband's house, if I could call it one. It was a dilapidated and worn-out single room with a thatched roof and a muddy floor patched with cow dung. It didn't even have the stilts that our home had to prevent the flooding from the river. Nor did it have the strong bamboo walls that almost every fisherman's house in our village had. What was worse was that there was no chance it could ever have one. He had no money to build the walls, and whatever he got from odd jobs, he squandered on his daily drink.

After tolerating and trying to change him for a couple of years, I realised that there was no way out. My father was helpless when he saw the mistake he had made in front of his own eyes.

I knew I was stuck. I had to fend for myself.

One day Soumen came to our village with a bunch of people.

"They build these houses on stilts, so that the flood waters from the river don't enter," he explained to one of them while walking around in his white dhoti and kurta.

"Oh, wow, that is quite innovative," one of the women in the group said. She wore a stylish hat on her head, a pair of sunglasses and a blue t-shirt over blue pants. I watched her from the corner of my house. She saw me stare and came closer, walking past the hen and chicken on the way.

"Can I take a photograph with her?" the woman asked Soumen. He walked towards me and asked me if it is ok for her to take a photograph. It was the first time in my nineteen years that someone had asked me what I wanted. I broke into a smile and asked for a minute to go inside and comb my dishevelled hair. I walked out ready after straightening the crumpled portions of my dress. The woman smiled watching me and with her fingers rolled in a thumbs up indicated that I looked good.

After clicking the photograph, Soumen asked me if there was any rice beer at home. I nodded but asked him to hold on till I check. There was a glassful of it. He asked me to get it out for the guests.

"This is a local drink which they brew at home themselves. If you are interested, you could taste it," he told the men in the group. Two of them walked forward to pick up the glass. I watched them sip our apong, the rice beer, and the expression on their face change into one of unexpected delight.

"It is nice," one of the men said, and to my utter surprise, he passed on the glass to the woman next to him. She held the glass and took a sip too. I was surprised that her own husband let her do it.

"Does she have more which we can carry to our hotel?" the other man asked Soumen, who asked me the same in our local language. I shook my head. That was the last glassful. He said that I should keep some stock at home in the future. "The guests will pay you. You will have useful money," he said in our dialect. I nodded and made a note of it.

He glanced inside to check if my husband was at home. I told him he was not there. When he asked me where he was and when he will be back, I turned my head to the floor, gazing nowhere in silence. He realised what I meant. He did not embarrass me anymore. He did not peruse any further.

"I think we can move ahead to the next spot if you are ok," he said turning his attention to the guests. The woman came forward and held my hand, saying thank you. I smiled as they walked off from our village and waved them goodbye. Soumen stole a glance at me as he walked out with them. The expression in his eyes told me something. I had a feeling that better days were in store.

**

The guests did not stop coming. In fact they kept on increasing over the next few months. Soumen had decided that he was going to get Majuli on the tourist map of Assam. He took the guests to the Satra during the day and showed them how masks were made for the bhaonas. In the afternoon he showed them the traditional villages of

the river people where pots were baked. Many of the guests bought pots. Finally, he used to get them to my village. Everyone photographed the houses on the stilts and tasted the rice beer.

“Get more rice from your father,” Soumen told me one day.

My father was with me that day when Soumen came. When I looked at him, he nodded in agreement and after that, I always had a barrel of beer at home in stock. The guests kept coming with regularity every few days. Almost everyone made it a point to taste the local drink. Some took more with them. With the money, I was able to get a stove at home to replace the wooden fireplace.

When I served sticky bamboo rice with fried fish to the guests in one of the subsequent visits along with the apong, Soumen smiled at me. “You have become a good cook,” he complimented me, on seeing the happy faces of the guests, though he did not eat or drink anything because of his vows.

My husband returned late that night after four days. I didn’t know where he had gone but he had got the news from the village grapevine. That he was angry was an understatement. His mouth stank of alcohol and his blood-red eyes poured wrath. He shouted at me for letting outsiders inside while he was not at home and serving the rice beer to them. I can’t even mention what he called me.

When I dared look up at him to explain and to give him rice, he slapped me with his palm. I fell on the floor. The rice spilled from my hand. I held my swollen cheek and wiped the tears rolling down.

He kept shouting at me while I cleaned up the mess. “This will teach you how to welcome guests of that Goswami in my house, specially when I am not there,” he shouted, slapping my back.

He then took the money I had carefully stored in a glass bottle behind the stove and went away.

When Soumen came on the following day with more guests, he saw the red mark on my cheeks and the bruise on my forehead. While the guests took photographs, he had a quick word with my father, who told him what had happened. Then, from a distance, as I watched, Soumen pointed the guests to the houses with the stilts. He told them that the local villagers brewed rice beer here but there is no stock today. He walked away staring at me from a distance. His face was livid. I knew the reason.

My husband came back after another week when he realised that the guests had not stopped. I wasn’t willing to take it lying down. The consequences were there for me to suffer and all to see. My swollen cheeks and the bruises on my arms did not hide my misery. Every few days when Soumen came with the guests, he glared at those injuries and continued with the visits. He let me serve the guests and told them stories about our village. The expression in his face whenever he stole a glance at me conceal the boiling indignation underneath. I often felt was like my river in monsoon.

A few months later, Soumen came to our village with one of the mask makers who, with his masks, added the magic of life to the bhaonas. He met my father and asked him if we could go to his boat to have a chat. I walked with my father while Soumen and the mask maker followed us to the river.

“Ram Lila is in a few months,” he told my father as we sat on the boat. “The Satra wants villagers to participate. We want them to play roles in the bhaonas,” he said.

I flashed a grin, despite my paining jaw, on hearing that. My father had a look of surprise. Coming from a generation that was used to being treated like outcasts in the celebrations to being asked to play a role in them was something he didn’t think would happen within his own lifetime.

“From our village?” my father asked, astonished at the proposal.

“Yes,” Soumen replied with a serene smile. “And from your family,” he added.

My father sat up and took notice of what Soumen had to say. He folded his hands and searched for the feet of the Goswami. Soumen held my father's folded hands and stopped him from bending down to his feet. He asked my father to take a seat.

"You are older than me. Please don't embarrass me," Soumen said. "I would like your daughter to play a role in the Ram Lila," he added.

My father looked at me with a terse smile. He had no doubt in his mind that he was going to let me play whatever role Soumen asked me to. This was more than what he had expected.

"Whatever you say," he said to Soumen with his hands still folded in gratitude. I was more than eager waiting for whatever was in store to unfold.

"We are enacting the Jataayu act. I want her to play the role of Sita," Soumen said. I was overjoyed on hearing this. I had never expected that I would be asked to play such a central role. My father nodded in agreement but then glanced in a manner that cast a shadow of doubt over the proposal.

He turned towards Soumen and said, "I would be glad but her husband... umm.. she will have to..."

"Don't worry. We will take care of it. We want him to play a role as well," Soumen interjected.

My father and I exchanged furtive, worried glances at each other. We didn't expect that he had a role for my husband. I didn't expect my husband to agree playing it too. But Soumen was adamant.

"Yes, I will speak to him," he said. "I know that he may not agree, but, by the grace of the Lord, I am sure he will let you play Sita and also play the role I have in mind for him," he turned to me and spoke. I could see a firm conviction and determination in his eyes. My father saw it too and nodded.

"I want him to play the role of Ravana," Soumen clarified to our surprise.

**

I do not know how and why my husband agreed.

But the mask maker's assistant came to our hut after a few days to take measurements for the masks of Sita and Ravana. He knew that my husband was at home. My husband wasn't amenable to it but grudgingly agreed to let him take them. I didn't ask him anything. But I noticed that he had kept a couple of bottles of his drink next to my jar of money. My money in the jar was intact though.

For the next few weeks, Soumen called me every few days to the Satra for the rehearsal of the performance. He called my husband too, but he seldom joined. I saw him there only on a couple of occasions. But whenever I came back from my rehearsal in the Satra, I saw that my husband had got an extra bottle of liquor with him. He took it with him when he went out, away for days. Whenever he came back drunk, he continued beating and abusing me. His visits to the Satra did not reduce that. It seemed like he was filled with more anger now, venting it on me in his drunken stupor.

After a few weeks, Soumen came to our village again with the mask maker, but this time a doctor also accompanied them. He told my father that the Satra was starting a primary health centre in our village and the doctor would be attending to the villagers every alternate day. He looked at me as if to suggest that I take some medicines for my wounds. I nodded in acquiescence and in prayer.

Soumen then asked my father if he was going for fishing. When my father nodded, Soumen asked him if they could have a chat while he was on his boat. My father broke into a tacit smile. He more than welcomed Soumen and the mask maker on his boat with folded hands. I followed them.

My father cast his small net in the river. Soumen and the mask maker watched him. My father then removed a small pouch from his undershirt. The pouch had a green liquid paste which he always carried while going on fishing. He removed a rod from a corner of the boat and bunch of worms from a box under his seat in the boat. He then dipped the worms in the pouch and attached them to the end of the rod. He then sat on his seat in the boat and dipped the rod in the water.

I had seen him do this during my childhood. I knew the fish would now miraculously come near his rod and fall dead in his net. I waited for it to happen, as always. When he dipped the rod in the water, there were no fish. But in the next few minutes, a school of fish gathered around his rod, turning, twisting, and forming sweeping, glinting shapes in the water under the sunlight.

All of them rushed to nibble the worms on the rod that my father held. My father poked at each of the fish as they came close to the rod ensuring that they don't catch the worm easily but don't swim away in fear. He kept poking at the fish with full vigour, ensuring that the rod made injuries on the skin of their body. Lo and behold, like every time, one by one, the fish fell dead in his net, as if, in a few moments, they had lost all the energy in their bodies that they had till a few minutes back.

"That is a miracle, isn't it?" Soumen smiled as he watched my father's net fill with fish dropping in it.

My father flashed a grin, proud of his fishing prowess that he had developed over the years.

"Where is the secret potion?" Soumen asked my father, who removed the pouch from his undershirt. It contained the green liquid paste which he had dipped the worms in.

"After I cast a net, the fish get into the net because of the worm. No fish can resist it. But this is the one that gets us the catch," my father explained, displaying the pouch. "It is a paste of a small shrub found only in Majuli," he added. "No fish can survive even a small prick of it on its skin," he said.

Soumen took hold of the pouch and had a look at it. "Be careful with it, da-da," my father warned.

I stood in the boat, nervous in the manner in which Soumen was playing with the pouch, lest the green liquid paste inside it hurt him. He handed it over to the mask maker and raised his eyebrows as if asking a question. The mask maker had a look at the pouch and peeped inside to see the green paste. He nodded his head looking at Soumen.

"Can I carry a small sample of this?" Soumen asked my father. "I have a small pond near the Satra and could use this on the fish there like you, but just once," he added.

My father was more than happy. He took out another small pouch from his undershirt and handed it over to Soumen. "Here it is, da-da. But use it only in small quantity. For a small fish, you don't want the entire pond to be spoilt," he said.

"Yes, I will keep that in mind," Soumen said, with a smile and handed it over to the mask maker.

My father gathered the fish he had caught in the net and piled them together in his boat. He then used his oars to row us all to the shore. We got off the boat and, after my father and Soumen turned around and prayed to the mighty river Brahmaputra, we started walking back to the village.

"I think we are all set for the Ram Lila next week," Soumen said on our way back.

I nodded with a smile in anticipation of the big event and so did my father. "I will see you all at the Satra then," he said and along with the mask maker went away.

**

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When the show began in the evening, drums and cymbals rang aloud. A number of acts from the Ramayana were performed before my moment of reckoning arrived.

Putting on my mask of Sita, I pleaded with Ravana not to abduct me, but he pulled me, like the man behind the mask always did. When he beat me and started pulling me to his chariot, I resisted. But as per the act, he started taking me away.

That was when Jataayu with his mighty beak swayed on to the scene. Hearing Sita's cries for help, the courageous bird, Jataayu flew to her help. The audience was spellbound with the battle that ensued. With his sharp green beak, deadly dark green talons and a focused gaze, Jataayu fought valiantly with Ravana. He first tried to appeal to his sense of duty, but when that didn't work, the combat became fierce.

He poked and pierced Ravana with his sharp claws and pointed beak, inflicting many wounds on his body. The crowd cheered Jataayu as he shattered Ravana's arrows and jabbed his body causing injuries. The music reached a crescendo accompanying the blows.

The unexpected ferocious battle with an old bird angered Ravana. As a final assault on the aging Jataayu, overcome by a bout of extreme wrath, Ravana severed the wings of the old bird, while at the same time, holding on tight to Sita who wept in grief and compassion. The beats went sombre when Jataayu fell to the floor and died a martyr's death to a round of continuous clapping.

The tourists and the locals in the audience were thrilled with the performance. After I left the stage after the act, they came and congratulated me for it. I was happy and fell at Soumen's feet in an act of genuine, heartfelt gratitude. I searched for my husband to see if he was around. But after the Jataayu act when he had dragged me on the stage, I did not see him again. I thought he must have gone back as usual to his drink, and hence, in a contrast of sorts, I ambled back all alone to my village in the night. I saw the effigy of Ravana was set afire in flames, marking the end of the Ram Lila.

**

My drunkard, abusive husband was found dead near the banks of the Brahmaputra, a few meters away from the waters of the mighty river in the early morning of the day after the Ram Lila.

When I got the news, I jumped in the air all alone inside my hutment, in an instinctive reaction in joy. There has never been a happier day in my life. I waited for the smile on my face to subside.

I stepped out after I had put on the sombre mask of grief. I was now a young widow for everyone else. But if you ask me, I was now a free woman the way I look at it.

Free from the tortures of living with the mask of a happily married tribal fisherwoman in a village on the banks of the Brahmaputra when deep inside I was suffocating to death, day in and day out.

Whoever did this is not a murderer but a liberator. I think I know who it is.

Love unmask everyone, a wise man said, but sometimes, love also forces some to take up a mask.

Scooter for Sale

While returning from his morning walk, Ramesh Tipnis pinned up the printout on the ground floor notice board of C Wing, Keshav Kunj apartment. "Scooter for Sale" the headline said.

“Used Lambretta GP150 1975 registered model with Petrol variant, manual transmission, driven for 72,000 kms in good condition available for sale. Second owner, great condition, best vehicle with good comfort. Call Ramesh on 9453298435.”

When he went back home to his flat, his son Rohan was about to leave for office. Ramesh told him about the notice.

“Who reads society notices any more, Papa?” Rohan said.

“Oh, is it? But you said let us put up an advertisement, so I got it printed yesterday,” Ramesh said.

“Yes, but for a forty-year-old scooter, we need to post it everywhere. Otherwise, it won’t get sold,” Rohan said, while putting on his shoes and watched his shaky father. “Anyway, no problem,” he added, picking up his bag. “I will take a picture of the ad from the notice board on my way out and post it on our company group.. and .. a few other online marketplaces. I will give your number.”

At around 1.15 pm, after Ramesh had finished his lunch, his phone rang.

“Sir, you have a Lambretta scooter for sale?” the voice on the other side said.

“Yes, it’s a GP150 1975 model,” Ramesh replied.

“Can I come to see it?”

“Yes, you can come, but give me a call before coming.”

“Is now.. as in.. in the next half an hour ok?”

Ramesh looked at his wristwatch and mumbled, “Umm.. now.. in the afternoon.. well.. “

“Ok, Sir, I will come after 4 pm.. Is the address the same as mentioned in the ad?”

“Yes.. it is the same. Your good name, please?”

“Siddharth.. or Sid.. I will be there at 4 pm, Sir.. thanks.”

He got a couple of more calls, but they asked for the price and when Ramesh didn’t give any firm reply, they disconnected. Then there was a call at 2.30 just as he felt he should get some sleep.

“Sir, you have an old Lambretta for sale?” the voice on the other side asked.

“Yes, but it is in good condition.. your good name, please?”

“Stanley from Stanley Vintage Bike Garage..”

“Oh.. I see.. well.. I don’t think.. umm.. I want to sell to a.. garage....”

“But Sir.. I will offer a great price.. I have lots of buyers.”

“No.. thanks.” Ramesh said and disconnected. Ramesh tried to lie down for his afternoon siesta but could not get any sleep. At 3.30 he got off his bed and made his afternoon tea.

As he sipped it, he remembered that this was the time, many years back, when he used to go to Rohan’s school on his scooter to pick him up. It had been his regular routine for many years.

Come back from his office for lunch around 1.30. Have a siesta for an hour. Then have the hot tea made by his wife. Leave to pick up Rohan and drop him home. Then go back to office to spend a few hours in the evening. All on this scooter that was for sale.

But that ended many years back. A flood of memories were about to enter his head.

But before that could happen, the intercom rang. It was the security guard from the main gate.

“Sir, there is a visitor named Siddharth,” he said.

“Yes, let him in. Tell him to wait downstairs. I will come down to the ground floor lobby,” Ramesh said and disconnected. He looked at the wall clock. It was 4 pm sharp. He picked up the scooter keys and the bunch of house keys and stepped out.

A man in his thirties, a few years older than his son Rohan, wearing a pair of jeans and a blue t-shirt waited in the lobby, reading the notice, while Ramesh Tipnis took the steps down.

A warm smile and a firm handshake welcomed Ramesh. “Hello Sir, I am Sid.”

Ramesh pointed him to the place where the scooter was parked without saying anything. Sid sauntered along, with a visible spring in his step.

“This is the scooter,” Ramesh stopped a few meters from the Lambretta.

“It is a beauty, Sir. I am so glad that you still have it,” Sid said glancing at the scooter.

“I bought it after my marriage, after the first owner had hardly used it, more than thirty years back..”

“It is a few years older than me, Sir..”

“Yeah, it has served me.. and .. umm...my wife.. well.. and even our son – Rohan – he is in office right now. They spent a lot of time sitting pillion on it..”

“Oh yes.. I can understand, Sir..”

“But, of late, in fact, over the past few years, it has been giving a few.. in fact, a lot of problems. Plus, my son got a car, and there is no parking space for it. So,.. well.. we thought.. in fact, he has been saying so for a while.. he has been asking me, in fact.. to get rid of it.. you know..”

There were a few seconds of silence while both Ramesh and Sid watched the scooter.

“There seems to be a dent on this side on the back..”

“Oh, yeah.. that dent is almost seven years old. You know.. I tried to overtake an autorickshaw.. My wife was sitting on the back seat.. and.. umm.. to avoid an accident, I had to swerve it to the right..”

“I see.. but we can easily fix it with some body work and tinkering..”

“Yeah.. Also, before you decide to buy it, you may notice there are a few scratches on the front, lots of wear and tear, and the head light is weak, and..,” Ramesh took Sid to the front of the scooter.

“Yes, Sir.. no problem – in fact, these 6V lamps are very dim.. I am planning to put bright 12V ones.”

“Yeah, they are, isn't it?”

“I plan to do a full body paint job too.. I have a colour in mind.. Racing Blue, it used to be popular..”

Ramesh flashed a big smile. “Oh.. you know quite a bit about these scooters. In fact, I bought this one in maroon, second hand, at that time because there was a long waiting period for the new Racing Blue then..”

“Wow.. Sir. Actually.. I had seen one Racing Blue a few months back – it was a newer one 1989 or so.. But it is not the same as the older ones with the original Italian parts, Sir..” Sid said.

Ramesh watched Sid with awe. He was glad that Rohan had posted the ad and managed to get a potential customer, nay a die-hard fan, like Sid for his beloved scooter.

“But I have found out,” Sid continued, “that some of the older parts like brake lining, cables, clutch plates, and shocks aren’t available anymore, but can be replaced using the ones in newer scooters.”

“Yes, you might have to do that. It will cost you some money though. I hope you have.. “

“Sure Sir. I have thought about it.. No worries..”

Ramesh looked at the scooter again and stared back at Sid.

“It is also a bit difficult to maintain it, you know. Such an old model. Besides, it is tough to ride it on today’s city roads.. Nowadays, there are so many options. So, you will have to think if you really want it. Plus, you have to be careful while riding it..”

“Yes, Sir. I have another commuter bike. I plan to use this one only for small distances. You know, like dropping my son to kindergarten or riding my wife to some neighbourhood shop.”

Ramesh looked the other way. “So, what about the price you will pay?” he asked with a slight sniffle.

“You didn’t mention it in the advert, Sir. Is there something you are expecting?”

“These scooters.. are old ones.. They are like vintage. It is tough to put a price on them.”

“It is ok, Sir. Please don’t hesitate. Whatever you have in mind, tell me openly.”

They had tried to sell the scooter but without success three years back. Some collector’s garage had offered 60,000 at that time, which Rohan felt was a good price, but Ramesh had walked away.

“How about 80,000?” Ramesh put his best foot forward. Sid shuffled his feet with his head down.

“Sir.. are you sure? I really do want this scooter. It will be in safe hands; you can be certain..”

“Final offer of 75,000,” Ramesh said, ready to walk away, and perhaps glad that the scooter would remain unsold yet again, despite all his efforts and Rohan’s insistence.

But to his surprise, Sid flashed a smile. “Done Sir. 75,000 it is,” Sid said, and put his hand forward.

Ramesh had an awkward expression, as his lips curled at the thought of parting with his scooter.

“I have 20,000 just now,” Sid said, and got his wallet out. “I will get you the remainder by 8 pm,” he added, and thrust a bundle of currency notes in Ramesh’s palm. “Thanks a lot, Sir.”

Ramesh accepted the money and asked, “Don’t you want to take a look at the registration papers?”

“No. Sir. I believe they will be in order, isn’t it?” Sid asked.

“Yes, there are.. well.. all fine. I will sign the transfer documents and keep them ready,” Ramesh said.

“Sure, Sir. I will be back,” Sid said and started turning back.

“By the way, I had.. umm.. a request for you.. well.. to consider if you could?” Ramesh mumbled.

“Yes, Sir?”

“Can you pick up the scooter tomorrow? You can pay the remaining amount then itself if you like...”

“Sir.. any particular reason?”

“Well.. nothing actually.. just that it will be dark by the time you come back.. and my son.. Rohan will also be back late.. Besides, tomorrow is a good day.. You know, a bit more auspicious than today. Mornings are also better. But if you insist that you want it today, then..”

“No, Sir. It is ok. I will come back tomorrow morning. What time does your son leave?”

“Around 9 am or so..”

“Ok, Sir. I will come to pick up the scooter at 8.30 am. Hope you have no second thoughts..”

“No.. No.. absolutely not. Don’t worry. It is yours.. for all practical purposes.. It is yours.. Thanks!”

Ramesh Tipnis saw Sid off at the gate and returned to have one last look at his Lambretta. Then, he rushed home up the stairs to get his helmet.

The breeze flew through his thin remaining hair as he sped the scooter on the Palm Beach Road. It was next to the seashore where he had first driven the scooter with his wife, and perhaps, fallen in love with both.

“I am selling her,” he whispered, hoping that she listened from the pillion seat. She wasn’t there anymore physically, but he hoped she heard him from wherever she was in spirit.

Their long chats on the long rides on this scooter over the years stayed with him. So many of their life’s major decisions had been made after chats on the scooter.

“I hope you will not miss her,” he murmured softly.

“I think it is time now. I am getting older, you know,” he said. He imagined her smile. How often had she told him that he was getting old?

“I hope you will forgive her,” he said. His mind went back to that fateful day. He added after a brief pause, “And me, too.”

Suppressing a feeble snivel welling up inside him, he turned back to take her home for one last time.

One mistake cannot be held against a companion that had done so much over the years, isn’t it? Moreover, hadn’t the error been his? Or had it not been? He was done with exhausting his head with all these questions. He had found no real answers.

He told Rohan all the good things about Sid in the evening over dinner, and how he was certain that they have found a good owner for the scooter.

“That is very good, Papa. Don’t back out this time, though.. It has been seven years,” Rohan said, in a tone of doubtful relief.

“Oh.. No.. No.. not at all. I have taken the advance, too,” Ramesh affirmed, showing the notes. Rohan stared at his father for a while. This time he felt surer that the scooter was, well and truly, indeed for sale.

The next day Sid came to their house sharp at 8.30 am.

“Sir, I have got the remaining money,” he said, beaming at Ramesh and Rohan.

“Great! Here are the papers.. and the keys,” Ramesh said, this time with a twinkle in his eye.

Rohan and Ramesh walked downstairs to see Sid, and the Lambretta, off.

As Sid rode it out of the gate, Ramesh had one last look at the dent and scratches on his Lamby. He was glad that the new owner was getting rid of them by painting the scooter anew.

He was relieved that the new owner was going to replace the weak headlamps. On the walk back, a teardrop rolled down his cheek as the thought struck him again. Was that replacement something that he should have done seven years back?

A Rainy Day

On a wet, gloomy, rainy morning, when the alarm rang, Supriya snoozed it again. She pulled the blanket over her ears. A few more snoozes followed. Her eyes sensed a streak of mild sunlight peeping into her bedroom from the window curtains. Though the sun was not seen, that small ray of light on the dark morning was enough for Supriya to open her eyes. The thundering clouds and the sound of rainwater pitter pattering on her windowsill did not let her sleep.

She saw her husband snoring next to her and envied him. She glanced at the watch to check the time again. The doorbell would ring soon. It did as she expected.

Supriya ambled along the living room of her ground floor flat C-101 in Keshav Kunj apartment and opened the door. It was her maid servant. She picked up the wet newspaper lying on the water puddle outside the door and walked inside.

“Where is the milk?” Supriya asked her.

“Madam, it spilled on the floor,” the maid replied pointing outside.

Supriya walked across the door and saw the mess outside. The milk boy had placed the milk packet on the floor. There was a hole in the packet. The milk had spilled over on the floor from that leak.

Supriya sensed the blood in her veins boiling. She curled her lips and shook her head. How many times do I have to tell this milk boy to be careful when he delivers the milk? She said in her mind.

She picked up the milk packet. She held it up in her hand against the light to check it. From one corner of the packet, the milk was leaking out. Half the milk in the packet was gone. The rainwater and the spilled milk had formed a small puddle in the corridor outside the door of her flat.

Supriya walked straight to the drawer of her living room unit and got her mobile. She searched for the phone number of Manjunath, the newspaper and milk boy. She called that number in a hurried frenzy. The phone rang but there was no response. She gritted her teeth.

She clicked a picture of the mess outside her door on her mobile. Then she clicked a photograph of the torn leaky milk packet. Before she stepped out in a hurry to search for Manjunath, she pulled the rain jacket. Thank God she had picked it up in the mall last weekend, she thought.

When she came back dejected on not finding the milk boy, her husband was sitting on the sofa.

“Where did you go, so early, in the rain?” he asked.

“Look at this,” she yelled pointing to the milk-water puddle.

“Again, today?” her husband asked. “Does he throw the packets or what?”

“I have no idea, but this is getting too much,” she howled.

He looked at her without a word and walked across the table to pick up the wet newspaper.

“Again today, that packet was on the floor,” Supriya shrieked. “I have clicked the photos. He is not picking up the phone. I am going to send them to him. And post them to our society group. Let everyone know how careless he is. There is a limit to everything.”

“Hmm.. should I go get milk from the grocery shop?” he asked, trying to change the subject.

“I went there. It’s closed. It is raining,” Supriya retorted. “No tea today. You can have it black if you want. I have a breakfast meeting and need to leave early,” she said, and stepped into the bath.

Manjunath stopped his bicycle in front of the gate of the apartment. He got off to deliver milk and newspaper to the seven houses in it. He had just completed his deliveries to the flats in the Keshav Kunj apartment next to this one.

The plastic that covered his dripping hands, head and chest was not enough to protect him from the rain. The rainwater had seeped inside on to his body, leaving him drenched. As soon as he got off, he rechecked the milk packets on the bicycle stand to ensure they were safe. He had covered them with the other plastic sheet, and he felt relieved that they were fine.

He untangled the rope that tied up the bag of those packets to the bicycle stand. Then he picked the bag putting it on his shoulder. He kept a handkerchief on his drenched head and walked towards the building. Once he was inside the lobby, he checked his phone while waiting for the lift. He had the habit of starting from the top floor and walking down, completing the milk deliveries on the way.

He had received twenty messages on his phone, eight of them from “Supriya Madam C-101 Keshav Kunj.” When he saw the messages, a sultry smile appeared on his wet lips.

“I forgot to ring the bell today.” He crunched his mouth and slammed his palm on his forehead. Some of his customers wanted him to ring the bell, and some of them thought it disturbed them. Supriya Madam from C-101 was ambivalent. Sometimes she scolded him for ringing the bell so early in the morning. On other occasions in the past, she had scolded him for not ringing it. But today, Manjunath thought he should have rung the doorbell on C-101.

“It is the cat at it again,” he thought to himself. He had seen the cat today while stepping out of that building. She had curled up on the edge of the ground floor lobby seeking some warmth in the cold rainy weather. It had struck him that once he stepped outside the building, she might step inside.

He called Supriya’s number after seeing the eight messages and the two missed calls.

“Madam, it is because of the cat,” he reported.

“Which cat? You keep talking about it, but I never see it,” Supriya yelled into the phone.

The cat was a cunning creature, Manjunath knew. It had its share of milk and sneaked out before anyone found out. On a couple of occasions, Manjunath had thought of catching it, but failed.

“Madam, there is a stray cat on the ground floor, it drinks the milk,” he explained.

“I don’t know that. If you know there is a cat, you should ring the bell, so that I pick up the packets. Do you know how much we suffer when there is no milk? This is not the first time,” she scolded.

Manjunath listened without any retort. He stayed silent. He had no choice. “Sorry, Madam. Next time I will ring the bell,” he said. He hoped that would be the end of it, but it wasn’t.

“But this time, I am going to cut your money. And I have told everyone in the apartment to do that,” Supriya said. “This is the third time this month you were careless. Unless you are more careful, Manjunath, you will not get paid for the milk delivery. Keep that in mind,” she said, and hung up.

Manjunath saw the remaining messages after that on his phone. Four more flats in the apartment had the same complaint. Two of them on the ground floor and two on the first. The cat was on a roll today, he thought to himself. He had to do something about it, he felt, but he didn’t know what.

He shrugged his shoulders. He glanced into the curtain of rain outside. He continued completing the rest of the deliveries. He didn’t feel particularly angry. He felt amused. Perhaps, a bit helpless.

He dawdled back to his bicycle in the rain. He calculated the losses he was going to suffer this month. He covered his head with the plastic sheet and got on to his bicycle.

The raincoat will have to wait.
