

The background is a vibrant, abstract painting of a mountain landscape. The colors are a mix of blues, purples, greens, and browns, creating a dreamlike atmosphere. In the center, there is a large, stylized face with prominent, dark, curved features that resemble a mustache or thick eyebrows. The face is rendered in shades of green and brown, blending with the surrounding landscape. The overall style is expressive and somewhat surreal.

A TRYST WITH LIFE

KANAN MISHRA

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To

***Ashirvad,
who is no more***

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WHO MISSED MY FATHER ?

The pet parrot was fluttering his wings and was talking in his usual noisy fashion when I woke up in the morning; but the response from my father was missing. It was his habit to correct the parrot's pronounciaton.

I ran to my father's study. The table with the small bookshelf on top was still there, but the chair was empty. And I suddenly remembered that he was to leave for London the previous night. I blamed myself for falling asleep inspite of my promise to keep awake till midnight. "Why didn't you call me when Bapa left" ? I asked my mother who was sitting silent in the cot lying in the farthest corner of the verandah. Her silence seemed to be all pervading and the whole house seemed absolutely quiet. "Oh; your father didn't want to disturb the children. All of you were fast asleep", my mother replied.

"Did he leave by aeroplane" ? I asked.

"No, he left by train. He will fly from Bombay", my mother replied and I became thrilled to think that my father would be travelling by an aeroplane. I had seen a plane once or twice flying in the sky above our house. It had looked like a kite, only silvery in colour.

"Will the aeroplane fly above our house now ? He might as well spot me looking down from above," I thought and ran to the open courtyard hoping that my father would have a better look of me if I stood there.

The aeroplane did not fly, but the parrot flew away. The cook, while giving him his morning meal of soaked grams, had forgotten to close the cage door.

The parrot sat on the branch of the neem tree that grew luxuriantly in the middle of the courtyard. His feathers were perfectly camouflaged by the green leaves, but we located him easily because of his prominent red beak and the neatly drawn black line down below his neck.

"Come on Shuka, come to your cage", my mother called him by name enticing him with a red chilli. But he flew away, became a mere speck of dot in the clean sky and then vanished.

"Poor parrot, he flew away because he missed your father," my mother told me.

"No, no, he flew away because the cage door was open", I corrected her, but she refused to listen.

"You don't know; he surely missed your father", my mother repeated again.

Then my four-year old brother woke up and started wailing. This was an essential part of his daily morning routine. He cried for no apparent reason.

"Why are you crying ? Be quiet", my mother told him placing her hand on his head in an effort to soothe and quieten him. But he would not stop.

"Poor boy, he cannot help it. He is missing his father".

My mother repeated and her voice sounded choked. I was going to correct her again that my brother didn't cry for that reason at all and it was simply a habit with him.

But I looked at my mother's eyes and saw two little teardrops collecting in the corners. There was something in that face that made me realise, although I was only six, that it was neither the parrot nor my brother who missed my father. It was she who missed him.



THE MOMENT

For me, it was simply a case of love at first sight. He looked like a doll with a pair of soft cloth boots, a pair of mittens and a cap that was stitched along with his dress. It was winter time. He was extremely fair, had a pretty mouth with lips like small rose petals and had a fringe of dark hair falling on his forehead. I took him in my arms. He saw a new face and started crying. But I showed him the neon lights of the airport. That changed his mood immediately and he looked at them with his round blue eyes.

And we brought him home. He was fidgety and we left him on the floor. He crawled all around. Then he caught hold of the chair, stood up and tried to climb to the top of it. And he went on climbing here and there for the entire month that he stayed with us. He lost his grip and fell down a number of times. But that didn't deter him from his single minded pursuit. He was ready to climb to the top of the Himalayas.

He developed great friendship with me and laughed and gurgled at whatever I did-be it a simple affectionate nod or a gesture asking him to drink from my coffee cup. All my actions propelled him to a paroxysm of laughter. And the laughter appeared more enchanting because of the dimple on his right cheek that he had inherited from me.

He crawled and explored every nook and corner of the house. He was fond of company and would never go to an empty room. And he tasted and licked everything - toys, balloons, spoons, cups, paper, clothes, it could just be anything. And his father got worried of contamination and went on boiling and sterilising

things, which ever was possible, throughout the day. But then oneday the little fellow discovered a marble chip in the mosaic floor. It fascinated him. He tried hard to dig it up with his tiny pearl-like nails and when failed to do so, simply lay down flat on his stomach and licked it. And his father, out of exasperation, gave up sterilising things thereafter.

Our neighbour oneday brought her one year old baby girl to our house and he immediately fell in love with her - expressing it with wild shrieks and a violent form of dance. Surely he inherited it from his father. Because his father, when was of his age, had done the same thing. He had danced naked and nonstop for almost fifteen minutes when our friend, an officer from Assam police, had brought his baby daughter to our house.

And he developed strange fascination for electric switches. Anytime I carried him, he would stand erect on my chest and would walk right upto my shoulder trying his best to stretch himself towards the switch that was high on the wall. Occasionally I would take his tiny finger and press the button. Klick-it would sound and he would feel elated. He was a brave boy. And the only thing that frightened him was the whistle of the pressure cooker. The moment he heard the sound, he would clasp me tight with both his arms and bury his face in my saree near the crook of my neck.

And he invented a new game. He would drop everything, his toy, a bunch of key or an apple given to him, down from the bed on which he sat and played. Then he would crawl to the side of the bed and lean dangerously with half of his body coming out of the mattress and look for the thing here and there. The moment he would locate it he would plead with his eyes to pick it up and give it back to him. And once we gave it, he would throw it down again. And this had to go on and on for hours together. He hated if the game was stopped.

He left with his parents after a month. We missed him and cried. There were no more toys, no more tiny bibs or T shirts lying here and there. There were no more cereal packets, sauce bottles and baby lotions cluttering the table top. The house became suddenly very quiet and there was no work for both of us. All that remained was a dull ache in our hearts and a sense of emptiness in our lives.

He talked to me last night. I lifted the telephone and a sweet musical voice asked me from the other side of the world- "How are you" ? I thanked him for his remembrance and asked him his name. He lisped 'Siyam'. He could not pronounce 'Soham'. He had just started talking and his father said he spoke three languages - English, Hindi and Sohamese.

And then I asked him if he knew the name of his grandmother. This time he didn't fumble, but told it clearly and with correct pronunciation - 'Kanan', putting a little stress on the first syllable. It was a wonderful feeling. The neck muscles around my throat tightened and I wept. I thought I had been living all along for this particular moment only - to hear him calling me by my name.



BIRTH OF A QUEEN

Ultimately, my father had to call his neighbour. The gentleman was kind-hearted, worked in the same college where my father was teaching and most important of all, was both elderly as well as experienced.

He inspected the little creature, red and wrinkled, not bigger than a fat fried lobster, lying almost inert on my father's huge pink palms and gave his wise comment.

"Of course the baby is weak and small; but there is nothing to worry. She will survive".

"But she is so small, I wonder"

Observing shades of bewilderment on my father's face, the gentleman asked, "Haven't you ever seen a new born baby in your life" ?

My father gave a shy smile and moved his head from one side to another signifying a huge emphatic 'No'. The old man burst out into uncontrollable laughter.

"How big do you think new born babies are ? As big as elephants" ? He patted my father's shoulder affectionately, assured my mother, who was standing behind the door with the veil drawn over her face, that all was well and left.

His presence and kind words not only brought a surge of relief to my anxious parents but also acted like a soothing tonic to their almost shattered nervous system. Now, for the first time they smiled and the taut muscles in their young faces relaxed and radiated a soft glow as they looked together lovingly at their first-born-a daughter, their very own. They cooed and uttered endearing nonsensical monosyllables to amuse the baby and the whole house, with its high ceiling and long corridors reverberated.

There were reasons for my parents to get worried. I was born prematurely in the eighth month. Patience is one thing with which I have never credited myself. It has not come in spite of my grey hair. No doubt, I was impatient even then to wait for the full term.

There was nobody in the house except my mother and her little cousin brother who was just a kid and had arrived recently from the village to read in a nearby school. When the labour started, both the sister and her little brother clung to each other and cried; my mother in pain and the small boy out of sheer panic.

When my mother's crying became persistent, my father, out of desperation, went and fetched Kamini Ma, a midwife, whom one of his neighbours had recommended earlier. Throughout the night, my mother panted and groaned in the southern most room of their newly constructed house and my father, as is his habit even today in the midst of any unforeseen calamity, paced down the long corridor muttering silent prayers. And Kamini Ma dozed off in one shady corner of the room mumbling through her sleep that the time had not yet come. There was no kerosene at home due to war time scarcity and the little oil lamp that was burning, flickered and remained a mute witness to the drama that preluded my birth.

I was a sickly and premature baby. The eyelashes and eyebrows had not developed when I was born; neither was there any hair on my head which was as smooth as an egg-shell. One of the neighbours who visited my mother next day, whispered into her ear in confidence, "Don't worry. A baby born in the eighth month usually does not survive. But if at all it survives, nothing can be more auspicious than that. The baby would prove to be very lucky in later years. Had it been a son, he would certainly have become a king. Nevertheless, the daughter would be no less than a queen."

My teen-aged mother, with her simplicity and innocence, believed her words. She had a girl instead of a boy and had no regrets for that. But the conviction that her daughter would be as fortunate as a queen became deep-seated in her. Even now, when I tease her about my mediocre abilities, she ignores my words with the mere wave of her hand and comments that I had all the potentialities of greatness, they simply didn't get a chance to flourish. I had the talents, but never utilised them.

It is useless to argue with my mother regarding this. Her convictions, once formed, remain as stubborn as steel.



THE COIN

In my school, most of the children in class two were older than me and came from a nearby village- Sagadia sahi. I somehow could not mix with them freely and kept myself aloof.

But there was one girl who became very friendly with me after a few days and tried her best to put me at ease. One day, during the recess, she was eating spiced peanuts when I went and stood near her. Petty vendors sold dalmut and peanuts sitting by the side of the lane in front of the school.

"Would you like to eat peanut" ? my friend asked. I certainly wanted to, but had no money and told her so.

"Doesn't matter, I have got a two paisa coin, and you can take it". She showed me the coin. I was taught that taking money from somebody else was against accepted norms and hesitated.

"Come on, take it", the girl offered me the coin. "No, I shall not. How do I pay it back to you ? My mother won't give me any money", I replied.

"Nonsense; who is asking you to pay it back ? After all I am your friend. Am I not ? My money is as good as yours." Her logic carried weight and the temptation of the peanut was too much to resist. I accepted the coin.

But next day the first thing she asked me after seeing me in the school was to give back the money. I was surprised. Didn't she say that I need not pay her back ?

"You liar; of course you borrowed the money from me with a promise to return it next day. Give me one anna, quick." She started shouting in front of my friends much to my embarrassment. A rupee at that time consisted of sixtyfour paisa and one anna was equal to four paise. And I was perplexed. I took only a two paisa coin from her and now she was demanding double the amount.

"It was not one anna, only a two-paisa coin," I tried to argue timidly.

"Don't try to be extra smart, you puny little creature! You borrowed one anna and now give it back to me", she said without having the slightest sympathy for me and I felt like crying.

I was afraid of asking my mother for a coin. But the girl went on nagging me day after day leaving me no other choice. So one day before leaving for the school, I stood in front of my mother holding my slate under my arm. My eldest cousin Kanakalata was expecting her first child and was staying with us. Both she and my mother were chatting and noticing me standing silently, my mother asked me.

"What happened ? Aren't you going to school ?"

"I shall go, but I want one anna", I told gathering all my courage.

"What for do you want one anna ? Don't you know that children are not supposed to handle money ? You want to eat all sorts of rubbish from the market. Don't you ?" my cousin interfered in the middle.

"I don't want to eat anything. I have to pay it back to a girl", I told and that made matters worse.

"What do you mean by saying that you have to pay it back? Why did you borrow one anna in the first place" ? My cousin looked angry.

"I didn't borrow; she gave me the two paisa coin herself" ? I replied.

"Did you say two paisa ? Then why are you asking for one anna" ? Kanakalata looked visibly confused and it took me some time to make her and my mother understand the whole complex situation. To my surprise, my mother didn't get angry. She and my cousin both laughed together and my mother asked me to bring my friend to our house so that she could herself pay her back the money. I left for school with the load of guilt off from my mind.

The same day, I brought my friend to our house after the school hours. I made her stand in the front verandah and went into my mother's room, who, after hearing from me that the girl had come, started opening her suitcase to take out the coin. But my cousin, who was resting on the bed, got up and started shouting at the top of her voice.

"So she has come! Bring her in and I shall teach her the lesson of her life time. The wicked little brat; thinks she is too clever to extract one anna from you by lending only two paisa."

I felt embarrassed lest my friend would hear my cousin scolding her like that; but Kanakalata would not stop. By the time I collected the coin from my mother and came out, the girl had vanished from the verandah. I went to the street but she was not there also. She must have run for her life. Obviously she had heard all that my cousin had said. I decided to give her back the money the next day and came back to find my cousin and my mother laughing uproariously.

"See; how I scared your friend with my acting. She would never trouble you again in the school", my cousin assured me smilingly. Nevertheless, I felt sorry for my friend.

Next day, I took the coin to the school. But the girl hid herself from me. She sat in the farthest corner of the class room and avoided exchanging glances with me.

During the recess, I tried to converse with her, but she would not talk to me. I did not have the courage to offer her the money for I was afraid that she would abuse me for my cousin's misbehaviour.

I carried the coin with me to the school for a few days. but neither she asked for it nor could I give it to her.

I still owe her the two paisa coin.



PHOTOSYNTHESIS

I just couldn't relate it the first time. And then he repeated the word- photo-synthesis. He pronounced it correctly which was unusual for his age. I was wondering what he meant by that when his father took the telephone from him and asked me smilingly.

"Did you hear it Mama" ?

"Yes, I heard it. Didn't he say photosynthesis" ? I asked

"Yes, and I asked him to tell you that he knows about it."

"But why did you tell him about photosynthesis" ?

"Because he always wants to hear stories before he goes to bed".

"But then why did you teach him about photosynthesis of all the things" ?

"Come on Mama, you should be the last person to ask me that", his father laughed and replied and then I remembered.

When Bobby was small, like all small children he used to pester me for stories. And he refused to eat unless I told him a story. Everytime was story time for him.

My stock of folktales was limited and got exhausted soon. So I procured a book from the library - the English translation of the Mahabharat by Kamala Subramanyam, and read it to him. It was a store-house of wonderful stories and he enjoyed them. The stories of Ekalavya, Abhimanyu and Karna moved him to tears and often I had to comfort and console him, by explaining that these were mere imaginary tales and not the real ones. But the stories of the Mahabharat also ended after a couple of months and I switched over to the novel "TO KILL A MOCKING BIRD" which happened to be my favourite book also. There was

ofcourse reason for me to choose this book. It viewed the serious problem of racial discrimination through the eyes of a seven year old girl. And the little boy sitting on my lap could empathize with her feelings effortlessly. But then we finished the book within a few days and I was again in for trouble.

But I soon found out that his inquistive mind, like that of any other child, could absorb knowledge like a blotting paper and I could pass on bits of information, the little that I knew, to him easily. Only it had to be diluted and presented in a story form.

So I told him about poet Wordsworth and the wonderful little poem that he wrote after seeing the dancing yellow daffodils by the side of a lake. And I told him that the sun, in fact, was static and it was the earth that went round it. I told him how clouds were formed and why a ripe fruit fell downward. He found all these stories enchanting and enjoyed them thoroughly. But the story of photosynthesis fascinated him most.

One day, while watering the plants in the garden, I had casually asked him, "Do you know that the leaf is the kitchen of the tree?" My question left him puzzled and he looked at me with wonder in his eyes.

"Where do I cook our food ?" I asked him.

"In the kitchen", he knew it.

"Like you, the tree also needs food to grow up. And the leaf, with the help of the green coloured chlorophyl, makes this food for the tree. It requires sunlight and carbon dioxide from the air to make this food, like I use vegetable and salt to prepare a dish." He found the story interesting and laughed. "Remember, this process is called photosynthesis." I reminded him.

"Hallo, Mama, hallo, are you listening ?" The voice from the otherside of the telephone broke my reverie.

"Yes, I am", I replied.

"Then why are you silent ?"

"I remembered your childhood. And I think my job in this world is over; because you have passed on the story of photosynthesis to your son.

He laughed. "How can you say that Mama ? You have still quite a lot of work to do and your job is not over yet. You have to tell stories to my son like you told me long long ago. You know very well, I don't have time for that.

And then suddenly I felt a surge of hopes and aspirations in my heart. There was a purpose now in my life which was missing after Bobby grew up, flew away and made his nest. "Yes, my job is not yet over. My stories have become outdated. I must start learning new stories now so that I could tell them to Soham when he visits me next," I whispered to myself and smiled.

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THE CHANGE

A mere look from her used to send a shiver through my spine. She had great personality. She talked less, worked from morning till evening and was an excellent cook. Naturally I, a girl fresh from the college who didn't know how to season lentils even, did not come upto her expectation.

She was a stickler of discipline and her concept about married life was clear. The husband was to earn money and the wife was to manage the house. Their spheres were totally different and as such, there was just no scope of any kind of tension between the two. According to her, love was a word found only in the dictionary. "What does it mean anyway ?", she had asked me once. She was practical to the core.

And she never thought high of educated girls. Narayana, a friend of my husband, once had come to our house and had told her that he had a marriage proposal with a girl who happened to be a graduate. "Don't commit the mistake of marrying an educated girl. They are good for nothing. Marry one who will cook well, look after you and can manage the house", she had advised.

She didn't like women coming out of the house. She believed that their domain was inside the four walls. When I went there for the first time, my kid brother, hardly twelve years old, had accompanied me. Before leaving for home nextday, he hugged me and wept bitterly. I, a new bride, wept along with him also and went out to the front verandah to see him off. And she got annoyed with me afterwards for this.

She herself didn't go out much. There was no outing, no recreation and no friend circle for her. In fact, she had hardly any time left for this after managing the house and her five young children. She was happy that way. She didn't believe in equality of men and women. Nor did she bother much about women's emancipation.

That was thirty four years ago. She had grown old and feeble in the mean time and I feel a lot of compassion for her when I observe her now. Because I have seen her during her heyday. The tigress has become tame and docile like a pet kitten. She has changed drastically.

Somehow her children came up well in life and her theory about the role of women in a family or a society was never challenged. But now that her grand children are growing up, she has come to realise that education of the mother is of primary importance and the ageold system of separate roles for the husband and wife is no longer feasible.

The person who once disliked if I came out of my veil, now asks me to go out and talk to visitors, especially non-Oriyas with whom one has to converse in English. The person who once chided me for not knowing cooking, now doesn't bother about my cooking prowess at all. Infact, during family get-togethers, she collects all her grand-children in the evening and tells me, "You don't have to cook. Better sit and teach the children". And she goes on supplying me with endless cups of tea and potato chops while I remain busy with my nephews and nieces till late night.

Last time when I visited her, one day all the family members went out for dinner. I didn't go and neither did she. She was left alone with me for pretty long time and she started chatting with me. She got nostalgic and remembered her childhood days. She talked about the Bengali books that she had read and the Sanskrit hymns that her father had taught her when she was a kid. She even recited a few of the shlokas written by Chanakya that she still remembered.

"It was a wasteful life. I wish I had read a little more like you", she commented sadly.

Who says - mothers-in-law don't change ?

□□□

A VERY SPECIAL PERSON

His was not the image of the romantic hero that I had in my adolescent mind. He wore neither a pink turban nor did he come riding a galloping white horse. He came walking on foot along with his father and looked rather prosaic in an olive green cotton bush shirt. He did not wear a watch even. I had not been able to resist the temptation of looking through the grill of the window and had a glimpse of him when he entered through our gate and walked beneath the champak tree that grew luxuriantly in front of our house.

We had waited for him the previous day. He had sent information that he would be visiting us in the evening. My parents had felt restless and had peeped through the window several times expecting his arrival. But he had not turned up.

Next morning when I woke up, my father was not at home. "Where is Bapa" ? I asked my mother and she replied that he had gone to Cuttack hotel to find the whereabouts of the boy and his father. My father returned shortly afterwards. "What happened ? Did you meet them" ? my mother asked.

"Yes, yes, they would be coming right now. It seems yesterday they went to Puri to see a girl and couldn't come back in time. The girl's parents compelled them to have dinner there," my father replied.

And I got angry with my father for going to the hotel. It was most unmannerly on the part of the youngman to keep my parents waiting the previous night.

"The boy was profusely apologetic for that. I am yet to see such fine manners in any one", my father told me. But I sulked nevertheless. And the guests arrived within five minutes or so. His father, a frail looking gentleman, enquired about my study and my college. The young man had small talks with my father and he talked mostly in English. He was out of Orissa for pretty

long time and was not very fluent in Oriya. And then my sixteen year old brother came and pulled his legs. "All policemen are basically thieves", he teased him. He didn't get angry, but seemed rather amused. He refused the snacks offered to him and had only one or two sips from the 'tea cup.

And he left for his home next day with a promise to come again after a fortnight to take me along with him. My father gave him a ring as well as his blessings and went to the station to see him off.

My father came back from the station late at night and was having his dinner when my mother came and sat near him. "It was all settled in such a hurry. I wonder how the boy would turn out to be", she told worriedly.

"He is a wonderful boy. We could not have expected anyone better. And I know my daughter would be happy", my father replied.

"How do you say that ?" my mother enquired.

"Because he assured me about it", my father said casually.

"Assured you ?" my mother sounded surprised.

"Before boarding the train he told me, "Sir, I would request you not to worry about your daughter. I may not be able to give her a car or a bungalow, but I promise to love her and care for her", my father replied in his usual matter-of-fact way.

"The boy is really simple and child-like", my mother commented with a smile. And I overheard the entire conversation standing stealthily behind the door.

I keep teasing him now. "You have given me a car and a bungalow which were not a part of the deal. But where is that love that you had promised before my father ?"

He does not say anything, just looks at me and smiles.

I think love is looking at each other and smiling, especially after thirty four years of marriage.



TO PRABHA WITH LOVE

I saw her for the first time in Delhi. And the three hours that I spent with her, were perhaps the best time of my life. A slim and petite girl, she was the eldest daughter-in-law of a joint family and she performed her duty ably and silently. She was not very vocal; she was not supposed to be. But her body language was eloquent enough to express her emotions. She was simple, without any make-up and she wore a crumpled cotton saree. But there was something in that face that hypnotised me. I had never seen such a girl in my life. I fell in love with her. So also my fifteen year old son and my twentyfive year old brother, who had accompanied me.

All of us came back home and we brought her memory along with us. She reigned over the family conversation for quite sometime. Whenever we sat together, we discussed about her. Then I came back to Bhubaneswar and it was a chance affair that I came in contact with her again. I had given a ring to a newspaper office for some work and she had attended the telephone. I learnt her name and asked her, "Are you the same girl whom I had seen in Delhi years ago?"

"Yes", she replied and smiled and the smile sounded like tinkling of bells. "Strange that you remember me after all these years", she told me amusedly.

"You mesmerised me at that time and I always cherished the dream of seeing you again sometime, somewhere", I replied. And my words made her emotional. Her voice sounded choked and she said, "I am grateful."

"You don't have to be grateful at all. You have great potential and you happen to be a wonderful person also."

"No one ever told me that earlier", she told hesitantly.

"Because nobody loves and appreciates you as much as I do", I told her before I put the telephone in the cradle.

There after, somehow I assumed the role of an elder sister and she started addressing me as 'nani'. She was a working housewife and had little time for gossip. And I didn't want to disturb her in the office. So I wrote her a letter and she rang me up after receiving it. "Nani, I have preserved your letter. It is like a memento for me. It brought nostalgic memories of my past. and you write such lovely letters"! she told me beamingly.

"Oh, in that case I shall daily write letters to you", I told her jokingly and she laughed.

Though both of us have been staying in the same city for pretty long time, we have not been able to meet uptill now. But it does not matter, really; we feel perfectly tuned to each other on mental level.

The other day I saw one of her photographs in a magazine. She was wearing glasses and looked a little plump. "Where is that pretty little girl whom I saw in Delhi" ?, I asked her and learnt about her problems. She was sick for sometime and the doctors had administered a medicine that had adverse effect afterwards. She was upset. "Don't you worry. Your face still retains the innocence and vulnerability of a child", I told her.

She talked to me the other day. "Nani; you write such lovely features about different persons that you have come across in your life. Can't you write one for me" ? I laughed and told her that she certainly deserved one. She was a great actress and I was really sorry that I had not been able to write about her so far.

So here it is -a tribute to Prabha, the heroine of the award winning Oriya film 'Mayamiriga' that I had seen in Delhi during a film festival long long ago along with my son and my brother.

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THE FOOTSTEPS

Mr. Anwar Hussain occupied the adjacent room in the officer's mess. He had not been allotted a quarter. So also my husband. I had gone to Assam immediately after my marriage.

Mr. Hussain was a Dy. S.P. in Assam police. He was dark and hefty and was the father of five grown up children. His two sons studied in Guwahati and the three daughters stayed with him. The two elder girls were of my age - nearly twenty or so and looked like twins, one slightly darker than the other. They were pretty and buxom and every evening, both the sisters dressed impeccably and went out for a stroll. Anytime they went for a walk, Mr. Bhattacharjee, the young bachelor Dy. S.P., who was occupying another room in the mess, came out and exchanged pleasantries with them.

The third daughter of Mr. Hussain was a kid- plump and chubby, and she wore pleated frocks that made her look like a doll. Mrs. Hussain was a matronly figure, wore gold rimmed spectacles and dressed herself in mekhla chaddar, the typical Assamese dress.

I was new and didn't know Assamese. So I couldn't talk much with Mrs. Hussain except an occasional 'hallo' anytime I met her. She talked to me once or twice in broken Hindi and told me that she was getting bored there and was missing Guwahati. She was a doting mother and missed her sons.

One day, both my husband and myself were having dinner when all of a sudden the eldest girl of Mr. Hussain rushed into our room. She was crying and was panic-stricken. From her incoherent words, I could gather that her father was beating her mother ruthlessly and she wanted my husband to go and save the situation. My husband comforted her and sent her back.

"Why don't you go" ?, I asked my husband.

"Don't worry. This is a quarrel between husband and wife. By tomorrow morning everything would be allright. My interference would only make them feel embarrassed", my husband replied.

But I worried never-the-less. Throughout the night. I tossed and turned and dreamt of Mr. Hussain strangulating his obese and beautiful wife. But my husband seemed to know better. Because next morning, I saw both Mr. and Mrs. Hussain having a stroll in the garden in front of the mess and they looked perfectly happy and contented. I was only a month old bride and obviously didn't know much about the intricacies of married life.

And then I fell ill. I lost my appetite, started suffering from migraine and became allergic to the food cooked by Jeevlal, our orderly. I lost weight rapidly and became weak. And oneday it so happened that while on an evening stroll with my husband, I felt completely drained out, sat on a stone lying on the side of the road, and cried.

Nextday, my husband took me to the small police hospital that was nearby. "She doesn't eat anything and she is weak", my husband explained to the doctor. The doctor, a dark, skinny oldman pressed my stomach, examined my tongue and prescribed a tonic. "She is suffering from aenemia. This tonic would make her feel hungry.", he told. I came back home, drank two teaspoonful of the horrible-smelling liquid and vomited. And my husband finished the tonic in two days drinking it after breakfast, lunch and dinner.

And my condition deteriorated. I felt lost and lonely being far away from home, remembered my mother and cried. Mrs. Hussain marked me a number of times from a distance. But I was feeling miserable and did not have the mood to talk to her.

Then one evening I was crying and my husband was comforting me when someone knocked at the door.

"Yes"; my husband asked.

"Sir, I am Hussain. My wife has sent me to talk to you about something. Can you please come out for a minute" ? Mr. Hussain replied and my husband went out.

They talked in whispers for a few minutes and then Mr. Hussain left. I heard his parting advice to my husband-"Please don't worry sir; because of your anxiety only, my wife sent me to explain things to you".

And then my husband entered into the room and burst into laughter. I looked at him and sulked. Here I was suffering like this and he was laughing for no apparent reason what-so-ever.

"What is the matter ?" I asked him.

"Oh, what fools we really are ! That is the problem of not having an elderly person in the family", my husband told me.

"But what is it ? What did Mr. Hussain say ? Did Mrs. Hussain suggest any medicine"? I asked.

"There is no necessity of any medicine. Mrs. Hussain says these are the normal symptoms and it will pass after a month or so. She is the mother of five children and she knows best", my husband replied and I understood.

I smiled and wiped my tears. And we sat together hand in hand- a young boy and a girl, far away from our homeland and in a small township of Assam, listening to the approaching footsteps of two little feet at a distance. An angel was coming into our lives.



THE VOICE

I have not seen him till today. I have only heard his voice. And I heard it for the first time almost a year ago.

It was a lazy afternoon and I had dozed off a little when the telephone rang. I lifted it and the voice of a youngman enquired politely about my identity. I told my name and he said, rather diffidently, "Madam; my name is Mihir and I read your article today in the newspaper. I just could not resist my temptation of calling you and letting you know that I liked it very much."

"But where from did you get my telephone number" ? I asked him.

"I went to the newspaper office to find out your address", he replied courteously and I was surprised. That a person would take so much of trouble and waste so much of his time and energy just because he liked a piece of my writing was beyond my imagination.

Thereafter, every week, the day my feature was published, the telephone would invariably ring in the afternoon and I would hear the young and enthusiastic voice from the other side. It became a regular routine. Everytime he rang up, he would first congratulate me and then would proceed to give a critical analysis of my writing mentioning in particular a sentence or a phrase that touched him most.

Gradually, it became a subconscious habit with me to wait for his phonecall the day one of my article was published. He gave me the feedback of the response of all my readers spread here and there.

After sometime, he perhaps realised that the telephone call did not give him enough time and scope for a detailed discussion on the topic concerned. And he started sending me notes at

regular intervals. And along with his letter, he would always send cuttings of all my publications to confirm that he had actually read each and every one of them.

He is blatantly partial towards my writings. He likes each one of them. But I have found that he has a special liking for the features that are emotional in content and deal with my family members. In one of his letters, he wrote that he could correlate his feelings with the feelings and emotions expressed in such pieces.

Because my features were published sometimes on random days of the week, I have taken great pains with the publication requesting them to publish my articles only on wednesdays. They have kindly agreed to this. But of course they have wondered and have asked me often, "Why on Wednesday" ? I have not been able to explain it to them. The reason that someone, somewhere waits for them eagerly every wednesday and misses them if they are published on any other day, might seem trivial and meaningless to others.

The other day he rang me up in the morning. He was talking to me after reading one of my stories that I wrote about my father in a magazine.

"Madam; I read your article in Saurabh. It is simply wonderful and how lovingly you write about your father ! I gave it to Meena and she liked it also", he said enthusiastically.

"And who is Meena ? I asked him.

"She is my wife. And madam, I shall tell you a secret", he told me after a pause.

"I would be happy to share it", I replied.

"Do you know ? Both Meena and myself have started praying for a daughter like you", he said shyly and his words left me spellbound.

I do not know if he will ever read this feature, but I would like to tell him that it would be a privilege on my part to be born as his daughter in future.



JACKFRUIT AND SUGARCANE

My material grandfather had two jackfruit trees and the jackfruits ripened in summer. My grandma took out its big luscious segments and rubbed them against a fine sieve made up of thin bambo strips. The juice, collected below the sieve, looked golden yellow in colour and tasted sweeter than honey. I added milk and beaten rice to the juice and ate it as a snack. My grandmother never threw the jackfruit seeds but stored them after washing them clean and used them as vegetable. She cooked these seeds along with drumstick and aubergines adding thick mustard sauce and the curry tasted delicious.

One type of cucumber, known as 'phuti kakudi' in Oriya, was brought from the fields during summer season. The cucumbers, when ripe, turned yellow and fat bursting the skin at places. I peeled the skin and ate the white sweetish flesh bite by bite. It melted in the mouth and quenched the thirst.

Summer brought not only the aroma of mangoes and jack fruits to Harirajpur, but the heady sweetish smell of thick treacle syrup also. It was the molasses making season too.

My grandpa cultivated sugarcane in huge quantities and used to make molasses with the help of skilled labourers. When the sugarcanes matured properly, they were uprooted and stacked near the plantation field and a pressing machine, operated by bullocks, was hired and installed there. The sugarcane juice, after being extracted, was made to boil in huge iron cauldrons. The impurities - dust, dirt particles and tiny fragments of dried leaves, floated to the top along with the froth and this was taken out again and again with the help of huge iron ladles. After continuous heating, the water content of the juice evaporated and it turned into liquid yellow treacle. When this liquid reached the right consistency, it was allowed to cool and was poured into huge earthen pitchers. The mouths of the pitchers were sealed with straw and clay. A few of them were kept for

consumption at home. Some were sent to relatives as gifts and the rest were sold to merchants for cash money.

The molasses making continued for a fortnight and daily morning, I went to the site along with my uncle. I liked the commotion there. The labourers remained busy in unloading the stacks of canes from the bullock carts that brought them from the fields, others trimmed the cane removing the root and dried leaves with the help of sharp-edged sickles. Some extracted the juice and the rest of them cooked the juice inside the temporary shade constructed for this purpose. I consumed tumblers of sugarcane juice and watched the cooking process with interest. The continuous series of air bubbles appearing on the surface of the thick golden liquid, just before it reached the final stage, fascinated me much. The bubbles rose from the bottom of the cauldron, ended in a small globule at the top and then burst with a soft thud. The continuous 'blip-blop' sound of their bursting created a music of its own.

Sometimes, my uncle carried a little milk and a few cardamom seeds with him from home. He mixed it with a spoonful of warm molasses and poured it into a cute funnel that he made by folding a thick wild leaf plucking it from the nearby bush. After half an hour or so, the cream-like liquid solidified and on opening the funnel, a cone-shaped yellow-coloured toffee came out. I ate it munching the cardamom seeds with my molars whenever I found one. The treacle, just before reaching the right consistency, formed a thin layer of froth on its surface. They called it 'phulaguda' in Oriya because it was as light as the petals of a flower. Occasionally my uncle took out a little of this fluffy froth, cooled it on a leaf and I licked it smacking my lips. It tasted light and spongy. In the evening, when I came back home, each limb of my body smelt of cooked molasses and the sweetish aromatic smell permeated into the whole house through my body, my dress and my breath.

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THE MUSIC SESSION

The bus route connecting the nearby villages to Cuttack ran right through the middle of my maternal grandfather's garden. My grandpa's small and picturesque rest house faced this bus-route. The house was constructed on a high plinth and the stone steps leading to the house were lined with bushy jasmine shrubs that flowered profusely. It was next to the huge embankment of river Mahanadi, had a barn on one side and the thatched cottage of the 'sadhu' on the other. The 'sadhu' used to evoke a feeling of awe and wonder in my little childish mind and most of the times, I sat in our verandah and watched his activities with fascination.

The 'sadhu' was a youngman, tall and thin in stature and his prominent cheek-bones gave his face a hollow and sunken look. He wore a long ochre-coloured robe that reached upto his ankles and his long dark beard suited him. His courtyard looked neat and beautiful being bordered with a hedge of pink-petalled flowers that blossomed throughout the year. He had come to the village as a wandering mendicant before a year or so to teach God's message; but had stayed there permanently on being requested by the villagers. The villagers had constructed a small house for him near the embankment of the river under the huge deodar tree that hung like a canopy above his hut.

Every evening, the villagers - young and old, assembled at his place for the ganja cum singing session. The preparation of the ganja was monopolised by the 'sadhu' himself and he took real pains in preparing the stuff. He took out a lump of ganja from his cloth bag that hung from the nail on the wall, put the lump on his left palm and went on pressing and squeezing it

hard with the thumb of his right hand till the fibres attained the correct texture. Then he stuffed it tight into the nuzzle of the huge chillum. The first puff was always meant for him. He made it a prolonged one, kept the smoke inside the lungs for a minute and then exhaled the thick fume through his nostrils that came out in a steady flow. Then he handed over the chillum to the villagers and it circulated among them. After sometime, the congested room was filled with the suffocative pungent smoke. By this time, the mood of the villagers also turned mellow and jubilant and then the singing and chanting session started.

The 'sadhu' himself sat with the harmonium and others accompanied him with drums and cymbals. My uncle always played the tabla. The villagers sang the songs in chorus.

The arteries in their throat stood taut and turgid under the strain of singing and the echo of their music reverberated through the whole village - the grazing pastures, the paddy fields, the bamboo groves and the riverbed.

The songs were mostly hymns and prayers addressed to different Gods and Goddesses. A few declared the superiority of the soul over the body. The bhajans of the tribal poet 'Bhima Bhoi' propagating the glories of 'Alekha' - the formless one, were very popular also.

Now when I look back, I realise that the singing and merry-making acted as a purge and catharsis to the villager's long hours of toil and labour in the fields throughout the day. It gave them a feeling of oneness and brought out their communion with nature or the supreme power. They were simple, uncomplicated folks with simple uncomplicated feelings.

I was a regular visitor to these musical soirees and sat among the children in one corner. But my uncle didn't allow me to sit for more than an hour and sent me back home for my early dinner. I came back home following the narrow trodden path

crossing the barn, the huge cassia tree, the rows of castor plants, the solitary palm tree near the hay stack and the cluster of banana plants - one by one. My aunty gave me diner, usually hot rice and fish curry and a bowl of roasted moong dal, made thicker by adding slices of pumpkin to it, and I ate my food with satisfaction.

It was my habit to wash my hands in the courtyard and I enjoyed the nocturnal scenery. I saw the glow worms - hundreds of them, emitting phosphorent light and I saw the haystack at a distance looking like a ghost. Occasionally, I would hear the slithering sound of a snake under the bittergourd creeper. The gentle breeze coming from the river bed would often loosen a dried palm frond and it would fall down making a queer unusual sound and then the entire night would be covered with an eerie silence broken only by the songs and drumbeats coming from the distance. Feeling drowsy and numb with the heavy food, I would come and sleep with my grandmother spreading a thick coarse mat on the cool cowdung-smearred floor.



BEYOND THE RAINBOW

He taught me many things. Like-you don't have to tell lies to children. You can as well tell them the truth and they would understand.

Last year during his visit from the States, one day we were having our breakfast together. There were some bananas in the fruit bowl. He ate one and told me that he had eaten two eggs. "Why ? I haven't served eggs today", I looked puzzled. "Don't you remember ? When I was small you once told me that one banana was equal to two eggs ? And after that every time I ate a banana, I would come and dance before you yelling at the top of my voice - I have eaten two eggs, two eggs."

I remembered and we laughed together. And then he smiled and said, "You didn't have to tell me a lie Mama. You could have told me that bananas are nutritious and I would have believed it like I believed that one banana was equal to two eggs". He told it casually and then forgot all about it. But it made me think. Yes, why couldn't I tell him the truth and tell it straightaway? He would have understood. I had committed a mistake and I only hoped that he did not commit the same mistake while rearing up his baby son.

He taught me many more things in my life. But the most important thing that he taught me was how to go to a land beyond the rainbow. He guided me there holding my fingers tenderly and it was the experience of a life time.

He was reading in class four. Oneday he had got a collection of poems from his school library. In the evening, when I went near his study table, he told me, "I will show you something nice Mama". He took out the book. pointed at a poem and asked me to read it. "May be, this is one of the best poems in the world", he told with all seriousness. I looked at his chubby little face and laughed. His world was only eight years old.

And I read the poem. It was a small composition - barely three stanzas or so, where the poet had invited the readers to accompany him in his trip to a land that lay beyond the rainbow, to a country where all colours ceased to exist.

Till then, I had read poems, where the poets, with the flight of their imagination, had wanted to go to places that were vibrant with colours, places which were full of flowers, butterflies, sunset hues and rainbow. And here was a poet who desired to go to a place which was devoid of any colour whatsoever. It would certainly be a dull place, I wondered. He understood my confusion and told me "Okay Mama, I will give you a clue. See, the poet starts each stanza addressing the reader as his brother. Does he not exhibit love and fellow feeling towards all the people around the world ?

"Yes; but then in which way did it explain the poem ?" I wondered again. And he got impatient and gave me the second clue. "Well; here is then another hint for you. The writer happens to be a Negro", he told me and suddenly the meaning of the poem became clear to me. The poet was obviously a victim of racial feelings - the tension between the Black and the White and that was why he wanted to reside in a place where the concept of colour- wheatish, pink, brown or yellow, was just not there. It was a place where all sorts of people lived together as equals and with perfect harmony, no matter what the colours of their skins were.

It was certainly a wonderful poem. It taught love and compassion. It also taught that the colour of human blood all around the world could never be anything else except red.

"Is it not great Mama" ? He waited for my reply and looked at me with his big bright eyes. I said 'yes' and suddenly my eyes became moist. They were tears of joy and tears of gratitude for the Lord. Because my eight year old son had taught me how to go to a land beyond the rainbow which I had not been able to do till then, in spite of my twentyeight years.



THE KIRTAN SINGER

My maternal grandfather's younger brother-Girdhari grandpa, also lived with him in the same house, though in another wing. My great grandfather, during his life time, had divided the landed property between the two sons and the brothers, along with their families, lived happily in the same house in perfect harmony and fellowfeeling. It was, in fact, a big joint family which drew its strength from affection, warmth and cordiality. Girdhari grandpa's only daughter Bimba was already married and his son, my favourite Satya uncle, stayed in our Cuttack house and studied there.

Unlike his elder brother, Girdhari grandpa was fashionable and wore a pair of 'noli' - solid golden clasps, in his ears. His earrings were rather heavy and as they tended to cut trough the earlobes with their weight, they had to be supported by golden chains that went round his ears. He was fastidious about his 'pan' and always carried a 'batua', a small cloth bag with separate inner compartments that contained betel leaf, arecanut, spiced tobacco, and cardamoms. His technique of cutting an arecanut with the help of the nut-cracker was a real feat. He cut them in wafer-thin slices and I often cut my finger while trying to imitate him. Ultimately, he refused to give me his nut-cracker any more. Girdhari grandpa loved me as much as my own grandfather. And I adored him, because he was approachable and his smile was one in a million.

But Girdhari grandpa had a rare trait which I did not know for pretty long time and discovered it by a chance happening during the Holi festival. In my mother's village, Holi was celebrated with a lot of exuberance and funfare. A few days

before the Holi festival, the villagers carried the idol of Lord Krishna under a small canopy of coloured cloth and visited each and every house of the village. The Deity was worshipped by each house-owner with the offering of roasted grams coated with molasses and whole green mangoes. In the villages nobody took raw mango till this offering was over.

On the day of Holi, children and grown-up men smeared each other's face with 'abir'- a red powder, and later led a procession in the main road carrying festoons of coloured paper and tinsel in their hands. Small groups of villagers, interspersed throughout the procession, sang songs and young men and children mimed and danced wearing masks and funny costumes. They all gathered in the open field at the end of the village where the fair was held and the singing and merrymaking continued throughout the day. It was a carnival of colour and gaiety.

On the day of Holi I went to see the fair accompanied by Linga uncle, my grandfather's permanent field labourer. I purchased a 'khandaghoda', a toy horse made up of pink coloured sugar candy and ate it limb by limb. While roaming about, I found a huge gathering in the middle of the field. In my curiosity, I peeped through the eager spectators, but was too small to make a pathway to the arena. So Linga uncle lifted me to his shoulder and I was surprised at the sight that I saw.

I found that group singing was going on there, but the main-role was played by Girdhari grandpa. The singers sat on the ground forming a small parabola, carried drums and cymbals with them and my younger grandfather stood in the middle. He was dancing and singing songs and the people sitting around him, repeated his lines in chorus. I could make out that the songs were not pure Oriya but sounded more like Bengali. I had heard Bengali from jhunu, my friend at Cuttack.

Girdhari grandfather's dhoti and short-sleeved white jacket had patches of red colour in them. Somebody had smeared the red powder on his head and that made his white hair look pinkish. He carried a neatly folded 'chaddar' on his shoulder and the glittering zari border on his 'chaddar' along with his golden earrings, gave a touch of royal splendour to his otherwise ordinary appearance.

The tiny bits of mica, mixed with the 'abir' twinkled in his hair and he sang with full devotion being completely oblivious of his surrounding. And the spectators listened to him in wrapt silence.

"I didn't know that younger grandpa could sing that well", I told Linga uncle.

"Didn't you know that he is the best kirtan singer in this area? In fact, he is considered to be a 'guru', a revered teacher in this field. The singers sitting here are all his disciples", Linga uncle replied and that was a revelation for me.

"But how did he learn it at the first place?" I asked inquisitively. "Oh ! you perhaps don't know; he was the pampered brother of your grandfather. When he was young, your grandpa kept a music teacher to teach him kirtan and then he really got involved in it. His rich sonorous voice as well as his style of singing earned him quite a few laurels as well," Linga uncle replied.

"But I have never seen him singing", I told again.

"He has grown old and has given up singing. It is only on such rare occasions that he sings", Linga uncle explained.

Girdhari grandfather has expired long ago. But even today, anytime I hear a kirtan-be it in a film, a temple or in real life, his memory haunts me. I can vividly see him standing there in the middle of a cheering crowd and singing songs of Radha and Krishna with full-throated ease much to the appreciation of the on-lookers and music lovers.



THE MEETING

The girl stayed back in the village after the wedding, and her husband returned to his place of posting after his leave expired. He had arranged an Anglo Indian lady to teach English to his wife and had sincerely wanted his young wife to accompany him to the town. But his parents would not allow that. Nor could he talk about it straight to his parents. He was both shy and obedient.

But he told it to the girl's father when he visited him after a couple of months. The old man had gone to the town on some errand and had paid a courtsey call to his son-in-law. "I wish you had brought your daughter along with you. I have arranged an English teacher for her", he told him a bit hesitantly looking straight towards the ground.

The oldman got excited. He visited his daughter along with a 'sabari' and expressed his desire before her in-laws to take her to the town. "Your son is having problems with his food", he said diplomatically to the boy's parents.

The boy's parents ofcourse had their own sense of dignity and prestige. "She is our daughter-in-law and it is our responsibility to send her to her husband", they replied and infact brought her along with them to the town soon afterwards.

After a couple of days of her arrival, the young husband asked her to come to his study nextday early in the morning. So next morning the girl took her bath, wore a new saree, and went to her husband's room. The youngman looked happy. He offered her a chair and asked her to be comfortable. And then he told her, "Look; these are my books and this is my cupboard. Daily morning you must come, dust the books and keep them in order.

I don't touch my books unless I take my bath. So you must come only after you complete your morning ablution."

The young girl felt humiliated and wept silently. This was the least that she had expected from her husband. She had a vague feeling that her husband had asked for a private meeting in order to talk and chat with her which was not possible in front of his parents.

She still bears the grudge against her husband about this. And I have tried to explain to her a number of times that there was nothing unusual in her husband's request. A newly married girl hardly knows anything about her husband's previous life style. As such, it is natural for a husband to tell his bride about his age-old habits. A person, who is a gourmet, informs his wife about his favourite food items; and a person, who is finicky about his dress, requests his wife to see that his shirt is pressed daily. Similarly, a person whose only recreation is reading, would obviously tell his wife to look after his books.

But my logic has, all along, fallen flat before her. "I know. You are blatantly partial towards your father and you always support him no matter what ever he does," she tells me angrily turning red on her face.



THE SOURCE OF STRENGTH

My husband carried him in his arms and sang lullabies to him night after night. He, in a gesture of utter trust and dependance, used to put his tiny face in the crook of his father's neck and slept peacefully. Then he grew up a little and started walking about. But whenever he felt frightened or insecure, he ran to his father and clutched him tightly around the knees.

And then he grew up and one fine morning we discovered that we could no longer share his thoughts and emotions and he no more ran to his father for security and comfort. There was an invisible barricade between the two.

When he was a baby, my husband walked tiptoe and talked in whispers anytime he slept. He did the same thing now. When he was a school going kid, my husband remained awake till mid night and went to bed only after he slept. He did the same thing now. But there was a difference. His son got angry with him for his actions.

Once during his visit from the hostel, my husband was fixing the mosquito net for him when he snatched it away from his hand and told him tersely not to bother about it. And my husband sulked and sat glum on his bed. Then he went to him and explained smilingly, "I am the most able-bodied person in the house. So any work, big or small, should be done by me and not by you. By the way, you two have been wonderful parents and have done enough for me. Now the time has come when you must sit and relax."

But his explanation did not give any solace to my husband. I could feel that he still saw his son as a baby and missed the closeness to him- both emotionally and physically.

He visited us from the States last year along with his baby son. The baby was too small, but he brought him. He had created something wonderful and was impatient to show it to his parents.

And then the baby fell ill. The sudden change of climate and environment did not suit him. For days together, we kept running to the doctor, spent many a sleepless nights and prayed.

And then oneday, the baby's temperature went rather high. We ran to the hospital and after we came back from the medical checkup, he, a doting parent, broke down completely and ran to his father- God only knows after how many years. He put his handsome face on the crook of his fathers neck like he did as a baby, clutched him tight in both his arms, and sobbed.

I looked at both of them and my mind jumped thirty years of time. For a moment, my husband, inspite of his age, looked like a towering youngman and my son clinging to his chest helplessly, looked like a baby- the baby of yester-years, searching for strength and solace from his father.



MY FOURTH BROTHER

I still remember the day when he first came to our house; a thin and fair lad with hair that stood straight and upright on his head like the quills of a percupine. He had small deep-set eyes under bushy eyebrows and a lovely set of teeth-white and small. He wore a short, coarse dhoti that came upto his knees and he covered himself with a cheap netlike towel. He had a ready smile to all our queries. "What is your name"? we had asked him in chorus. "Basu", he had answered shyly.

His elder brother Bhagaban was our cook. But he got a better job in the fishery department and my parents advised him to go for it. And he brought his kid brother from the village to work for us.

He was too small to cook, so he ran errands for us and did odd jobs at home. But he was alert and intelligent and picked up work soon. He also picked up elementary English knowledge by sitting with us while we studied.

We do not know exactly when and how he got integrated into the family. Now it seems as if he has been there in the house right from the beginning- like one of the brick pillars, permanent and supporting. In course of time, he has earned a definite place in the hierarchy of the house-that of a friend, philosopher and guide. And nothing moves in the house without him- literally nothing.

He has been with us for almost half a century now and along with us, has gone through the ups and downs of the family during all these years. He has laughed with us and he has cried with us. An honest and truthful man to the core, he has never betrayed us, not even once in his life time. He is a miracle.

For years, he has cooked and fed us and has looked after us with love and devotion. Ours is a big family and it has expanded quite a bit after all of us got married. He knows each one's requirements and caters to them without grumbling. There have been a number of functions in the house - weddings and thread ceremonies etc. and he has managed them all almost single handed - right from purchasing of provisions to keeping accounts. And now that our children are getting married, he comes and manages them as well.

He worked tirelessly during my wedding and came and took charge of my kitchen when my son got married. My daughter-in-law addressed him as 'mamu' and touched his feet. He felt awkward. But then I reminded him how he stood outside the labour room for hours together when my son was born and how many times a day he ran to the hospital carrying food for me in the scorching heat of summer. He smiled and then immediately afterwards started getting annoyed with my daughter-in-law when she entered into the kitchen to give him a helping hand. "You little girl; don't you dare to come to the kitchen as long as I am here. You just sit quiet", he reprimanded her with affection.

Last year my son came down from America along with his wife and baby son. Basu was to go to his village that day to see his family. But he cancelled the trip and came down to Bhubaneswar to see the baby. He remembered my son's childhood days, carried my grandson on his shoulder and danced and my son clicked a photograph.

Even now all of us - the brothers and sisters, before going to Cuttack, first ascertain if Basu is there and generally we avoid going if we learn that he has gone to the village. Because in his absence, we know, there will not be anybody to attend to our immediate needs. He is getting old and tired, but anytime I go home, he not only feeds me lovingly, but also cooks something

hurriedly and gives me packed dinner before I leave. "I know you are too lazy to go and cook. Better carry this for yourself and 'bhaina', he would tell me jokingly.

They say a man is lucky if his children are near him during his old age; but circumstances are such that we hardly can spend a day or so with our old and ageing parents. But then we don't feel the worry and anxiety to that extent because Basu is there to look after them. He feeds them and nurses them back to health whenever they are sick. Occasionally he would give me a ring- "Bapa and Ma don't listen to me. They have become sullen like kids and they refuse to take medicine. You better come and manage your parents". "What for are you there" ?, I tell him and rest peacefully.

I saw him as a small boy. I see him today as an old man with grey hair, a tooth missing in the lower jaw, eyes sunken and cheek bones a little higher than what they were earlier. But his heart has remained the same- unadulterated pure gold.

In a moment of emotional outburst, once my mother had told him, "A person requires four people to carry him during his last journey. I had three sons. And perhaps that is the reason why God sent you to me."

We got annoyed with our mother for talking like that. But we knew that regarding the later part of her statement she was correct. Basu has been and still is more than a son to my parents.

As for myself, I consider him as my fourth brother.



THE IDENTITY

The other day, I sent a poem to the editor of a newspaper. The poem was meant for my son. And the editor informed me that he was unable to publish it. I told him that if the poem was not good, he certainly had the right to reject it. "I am sorry, you perhaps misunderstood me. The poem is certainly good, but the problem is that there is a reference to your daughter-in-law in it. "What harm has my daughter-in-law done to you ? She is a wonderful girl", I told him jokingly and then the editor came out with the behind the scene story.

The previous month, one of my feature was published in his newspaper and he had received several phone calls from the readers enquiring about my identity. Since I did not write "Srimati" before my name they were confused and had enquired if I was married or unmarried and whether I was a gentleman or a lady. "I have avoided giving them a direct answer. If I publish this poem, the entire mystery surrounding you would be shattered", the editor told me laughingly and in fact he didn't publish the poem. Instead, he requested me for another prose feature.

This confusion regarding my identity is not an isolated case. After my poems get published, I usually receive a number of letters from my readers. And the letters, basically fall into two categories. The first group takes me as a male and addresses me as such and the second group takes me as a female but as a dreamy eyed teenager and writes ecstatic love letters that are packed with emotion.

The other day, after reading one of my poems, one engineer from a remote district of Orissa sent me a congratulatory note and he addressed me as Mr. Mishra in his letter. I dropped him a post card - a thank you note, and signed my name purposefully as Mrs. Mishra. But this fact totally escaped his notice and he

has sent me another letter in the mean time, only addressing me as 'Mishra saheb' this time. I wonder what a shock it would be for the young engineer if he ever meets me in future.

The second variety of letters are more interesting. I don't know why the readers take it for granted that one has to be a mooney-eyed teenager in order to write a love lyric and a grown up person has no right to do so. A young man, after reading a couple of my romantic poems, has sent me a gift -a poem, thinking me as a young adolescent girl. It is of course a wonderful piece of poetry and I wish I could write one like that.

Another youngman has recently sent me a song as a reply to one of my lyrics that was published in a weekly the other day. Along with it, he has sent me a letter also. Surprisingly he has sent me two letters, the first one in Oriya and the second one in English though the contents of both of them are the same. Perhaps he thought that his emotions towards the imaginary young poetess was not properly conveyed in Oriya and hence he gave a revised version in English.

Most interesting, however, is the love letter that a boy has written from western Orissa after reading my poem in a popular Oriya magazine. Somehow he has gathered from the tone of the poem that I have been betrayed in love; and he admits that he has fallen in love with me head over heels after going through my writings. He has given me all the details about himself and his family and has asked me to let him know in which school or college I am reading. The spirit of love has permeated him so much that there are scores of 'I love you' written in every nook and corner of the letter so that the fact does not escape my notice.

Perhaps a reply to him giving him my full identity is due. But then I have realised that it is the pure and unadulterated feeling of a wonderful emotion that has prompted him to write that letter. He is actually not in love with me, a grey haired grandmother, but with the image of a young and beautiful girl that has been evoked by the poem in his mind. And I have no business to break his trance.

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MY FIRST TEACHER

He came punctually at three O'clock every afternoon wearing a dirty ash-coloured shirt of coarse cotton, as thick as a gunny bag, and an equally dirty dhoti which had turned completely brown by absorbing dirt within the pores month after month. His round horn-rimmed spectacles rested on the tip of his long crooked nose and his eyes looked yellow and sunken behind them. One of his front two teeth in the upper jaw was missing and the other one was loosely dangling from the gum with a thin muscle fibre. His dark wrinkled face looked old and emaciated and he was continuously in a state of stupor which my mother attributed to a small dose of opium.

The moment he came, myself and my cousin unrolled the mat in our front entrance room and sat down dutifully after taking out our slates, few sticks of long thin pencils made up of white-coloured earth and the elementary vernacular book. He read us stories from the book, made us write small simple sentences on the slate and taught us to count numbers.

I can never remember him getting annoyed or angry with me for my failure to pick up the lessons. He was patience personified. If I did not know the spelling of a difficult word, he put me in his lap and made me write it by holding my hand and guiding it. His smiling face, endless patience and genuine affection made learning a pleasure. It made me never being afraid of study which occasionally happens with very small children.

My cousin, inspite of being two years older than me, was a little slow in learning compared to me. So although she was the prettier child between the two, I became more favourite with my teacher.

My cousin's hair was very curly and stuck to her head forming tight little curls and ringlets. My hair was straight and the moment I bent down upon the slate to write something, it would invariably fall on my face covering the eyes and I remained perpetually busy pushing it behind the ears. Ultimately, my teacher one day asked my mother to make little pigtailed on my head instead of letting my hair loose and she dutifully obeyed. That was the day when I got my first pigtail. The hair no more obstructed my vision and my study progressed satisfactorily there-after.

I do not remember exactly when and how I learnt my alphabets. My mother tells me that I picked up reading and writing casually without any difficulty and learning came to me as naturally as breathing. Ofcourse all mothers talk like that. But I am sure that it was simply the love and concern of my teacher which made it possible for me.

In exchange of only ten repees a month, he taught me to read and write. He was a poor man, but he made me rich. Holding my hand tenderly, he helped me to cross the first hurdle of a marathon race that has been continuing till now. It was only with his support that I learnt to take the first tottering steps in the long corridor of knowledge.

He was my first teacher. I have not given him anything in return. I do not even remember his name.



HALF SON HALF BROTHER

Mr. Mohanty, our neighbour, had referred him to us. "One Mr. Menon, who has recently come from Hyderabad would be meeting you shortly", he had said over telephone.

And the next day he came. I opened the door and a handsome youngman told me, almost in a whisper, "I am Menon", and then gave a shy and lovable smile. The smile lingered on his face, spread to the pupils of his eyes and it made him look cute like a baby. he was clean shaven, tall, and of fair complexion with a thick mass of curly, jet black hair on his head. And there was something in that face, a rare glow of innocence, honesty, goodness and purity that cast a spell on me. One just could not be business- like and talk finance with a man like that.

And he came and stayed in our ground floor along with his family. And the more we saw him, the more we wondered. He was in a high post, earned a good pay packet and was allotted an air conditioned car for official use. But he had no airs about him and could often walk down the road carrying a suitcase in his hand without slightest amount of discomfort or embarrassment. Once while coming back from tour, his car broke down on the outskirts of Bhubaneswar. It was midnight and he walked down all the way and reached home by climbing over the gate. We had locked the gate and he didn't want to wake us up and disturb us.

I remember, one summer his family went to Kerala. Daily evening he used to walk down to an ordinary restaurant near our house and had his food. This was nothing great. But for a man who travelled half of the month in aeroplanes and was habituated to the luxuries of fivestar hotels, this seemed a bit unusual. Sometimes, while coming back after dinner, he would carry a plate of 'dahibada' and would come upstairs to offer it to

me. "They are a bit sour; but I thought you might as well like them", he would say with his usual shy smile.

He had no vice. He neither drank nor did he smoke. And he was cent percent a family man. Whenever he came back from tour, he just sat at home listening to music, his wife sitting beside him and singing and his two lovely children chattering to him incessantly.

And he was a great stickler of rules. He would be back from official tour at midnight and would be ready next day by eight O'clock in the morning to go to his office. Sunday was the only exception. But then he remained busy on that day also. He repaired the broken electrical gadgets, stitched curtains for the windows and cooked 'rasam' that he invariably sent for us. During holidays, he washed his car and then stealthily washed ours also, in order to save us from botheration.

He came to Bhubaneswar last year on some official business and visited us. He had a book- "Chicken Soup for the Soul", with him that he gave me to read. It was an excellent book and I asked him how to obtain it. "I got it from Calcutta airport. While going back to Patna I shall get the book for you at Dum Dum and send it to you", he promised and the book reached us within a week.

I found out the price of the book from the cover and sent him a draft. The draft came back by return post. He could not take money from a family member. "Exactly like Gopi," my husband commented.

When he had left for Patna on transfer, my husband had told him, "you could have been a wonderful son; but you happen to be slightly older. So you remain half brother and half son to us." He still remains the same.

He was our tenant for two years.



THE SOLITARY MANGO

The Mango tree started flowering last summer. The tree came up to my waist only; but it flowered. In course of time we found four or five tiny mangoes of the size of peppercorns hanging from the boughs. But all of them withered and fell down and only one fruit survived, a polished and perfectly round shaped mango, resembling a green coloured plastic ball.

It became a daily routine for my husband to go and inspect it. He had got the sapling before a few years from his home. We have a mango tree there whose fruit tastes like nectar. The sapling was an offspring of that tree.

When we came to Bhubaneswar, our house stood like a solitary ghost in a dusty barren field. The red dust blew hard on the window panes and the surrounding area looked drab and grey. It had taken enough trouble for my husband to plant fruit trees in our back garden. He, like a man possessed dug holes every where and planted all varieties of fruit trees that were available in the nursery. No other tree had yielded fruit. But the dwarf mango tree was compassionate enough to take pity on my husband and bore fruits rather early.

And along with it came the problem. I don't know how the colony children came to know about the mango tree. Might be, they saw it last year when they climbed over the boundary wall and stole flowers from the garden. This year we had increased the height of the boundary wall in order to stop the entry of children. More over, ours was the only house in the entire area that had a few fruit trees and hence had a terrible fascination for the children.

Every afternoon three or four kids from the colony would invariably stand outside our gate and shout, "Uncle, uncle, can we come in and take our ball ?"

"What ball ? How did it come to my garden ?" my husband would ask.

"Well; we were playing cricket in the back lane and the ball entered into your garden. Somebody hit a sixer."

"Yes; you can come in, but wait till I go." My husband would go out and stand in front of the mango tree guarding the solitary fruit. And the children would pretend searching the imaginary ball here and there, looking stealthily towards the mango and would go away ultimately without finding any ball whatsoever.

This happened almost every day and there was a tug of war of patience between my husband and the kids. The kids never gave up and hoped that some day, sometime, my husband might not come out and 'plup' they would pick the mango, hide it in the pocket and run.

Then my son arrived on a holiday from the States. He marked us for couple of days and then confronted both of us. "Mama, didn't you write a poem the other day that sometimes you feel like being a child and want he steal mangoes from the neighbour's garden?"

"Yes, I wrote and the poem was rather appreciated highly by the readers.

"And Papa, how can you be so insensitive? This is unlike my father who used to love children very much and used to tell me all the time that a child must grow up in his own way. Surely there has been a great change in you and now I find you guarding a tiny mango like this, which I am sure, you are not going to eat even.

His words made us ponder. Yes; certainly we have grown old. And along with the arteries of our body perhaps our minds have become hardened also. We have become oblivious to the pleasures of childhood.

That day, when the children came searching for the imaginary cricket ball in the garden, for the first time, my husband did not go out. Of course after half an hour, when he went to water the plants, the mango was missing.



THE HIGHLANDERS

It was just a small district of Assam, remote and hilly and not well connected with the rest of the country. A narrow circuitous road ran among the mountains and joined Aizawl, the district headquarter, with Silchar, a town in Assam. That was its only link with India. It was declared a union territory in nineteen hundred and seventy two and we went there immediately afterwards.

The entire place was situated on a range of hills and even a kilometre of plain land was nowhere to be seen. The houses were built on terraces cut on the slopes of hills and looked like paintings from a distance. In the rainy season, huge chunks of cloud floated and entered into the house through the doors and windows making the vision misty.

Most of the houses were made up of wood and bamboo. And they stood on 'machans', the frontside touching the road for exit and entry and the back side being supported by tall bamboos that were dug deep into the earth. The fowls and the pigs stayed under the 'machan' and the people stayed inside the house. It was mostly a case of one or two rooms. But the people residing in those small rooms had big hearts. Their doors were always open for a passerby. No body bothered about the identity of a visitor. He simply had to belong to the tribe and he was assured of food and shelter anytime of the day.

Theft was unknown and people never locked their houses. People of the community were pitched in on the face of any calamity and they extended help to each other. It was a wonderful experience to see a land without beggars. It was equally wonderful to hear a language which did not have a word of abuse or slang. The maximum abuse one could heap on another person was to say that he looked like a monkey. Certainly a matter of disappointment for the common man of my state, or for that matter any other state, who is conversant with the choicest abuses of his mother-tongue. Next to Kerala, it had be

highest percentage of literacy in India. Each and every hillock had a church and a school on it.

The mountains had become a part of their being and they climbed up and down the hills with the grace and ease of a squirrel. And in the narrow serpentine lanes, dirty and beautiful children played hockey, a sport in which they excelled, through out the day. The people had yellow skin, flat noses, high cheek bones and slanting eyes and they resembled the Burmese in appearance. They were gregarious and fun-loving in nature. It was a common sight to see young boys and girls playing the guitar and dancing to the tune of latest English music.

It was a place where the concept of division of society into lower and higher echelons was just not there. The labourer and the millionaire shook hands with each other, sat in the same sofa and ate from the same container. To us, the people from the plains, it looked unusual. But by the time we left the place we had imbibed their spirit. We extended our hands to all and sundry after we came to Delhi which often resulted in a guffaw.

Water was a rare commodity, the only source being the hilly streams that ran through the deep gorges in between the mountains. Often people had to climb down five kilometres or so in the hills to get a glass of drinking water. It rained most of the times and people collected rain water and used it through out the years. The roofs of the houses were made up of galvanised sheets and had a fitting called 'Toyden', a semi-circular pipe running all the way just below the roof and it collected the rain water and stored it in reservoirs.

We were habituated to the use of a lot of water and at first could not adjust to this scarcity. But by the time we left, we had appreciated and learnt their frugality regarding their consumption of the life-saving fluid. Infact, even now, my husband looses his cool if he sees somebody wasting water by letting a tap open, which is a common practice in Bhubaneswar. Here people think that it is a supply by government on payment of a paltry sum, whereas people there think that it is a rare gift of God and hence is precious.

It was a unique experience - our three years stay in Mizoram.

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A PAIR OF GEMS

He came and knocked at the door on a winter day - a tall and fair person, his complexion having a tint of gold in it. He seemed tired and exhausted and his white shirt and dhoti were soiled and appeared yellowish. But his look and demeanour were dignified.

"What do you want ? I asked him.

"I am a poor brahmin and earn my living by giving 'prabachan'. I narrate stories from the Puranas before devoted public and they give me money and shelter."

"That I understand; but what can I do for you ?" I asked him again.

"I am coming from a long distance and I don't know anybody here. I am hungry. Can you please give me some food ?" he asked me with humility in his voice.

And I gave him the food. We had already finished our lunch. So I hurriedly made a few 'chapatis' and fried some potatoes. There were 'dal' and sweet dish in the freeze. He refused to come inside the house and ate his food sitting under the guava tree in the courtyard.

He thanked me and was about to leave. But then he came back and called me. "You have given me food. In return I must give you something. So I will narrate two stories before you. It won't take much time."

"You are most welcome", I told him and standing there just outside my door, he told me these two stories.

The first one runs like this.

One day king Karna was getting ready for his bath. He held a golden bowl of perfumed oil in his left hand. He dipped the

fingers of his right hand into the oil and was applying it to his hair when a brahmin came and asked him for alms. So Karna, the 'Danavira', gave him the golden bowl immediately.

The Brahmin looked surprised and asked Karna, "Oh king! All offerings, as per the scripture, are done with the right hand. Then why did you, the great giver, offer me the bowl with your left hand ? This is one thing that puzzles me". Karna smiled and replied, " I was holding the bowl in my left hand when I decided to give it to you. It would have taken me some time to bring it to my right hand. During this very short period, there could have been a change in my mind. Who knows ? I could have decided to give you my ring instead. So in order to avoid that temptation, the moment I decided to offer the bowl, I gave it to you straightaway.

The brahmin summed up story with the words that when you are to give something to somebody, you must give it immediately, for the delay might result in a change of mind. And then he switched over to the second story.

One day, an old villager came to king Yudhisthira's court with an appeal. Since it was evening and the court was rising for the day, the king asked him to come next day. There was a huge drum outside the palace which was sounded only in case of major victories by the king. Bhimsen, who was present in the court, went out and started beating it with all his might. The king called him and asked him, " What was the victory that prompted you to beat that drum ? There has been non so far as I know."

And Bhimsen replied 'Oh king ! There has been a great victory by you just now. You have conquered 'Mahakala', the time. Otherwise you could not have asked the poor man to come to you tomorrow.

It might so happen that by tomorrow the old man might die, you might lose your kingdom or the case might turn infructuous. One does not know what will happen next moment. Yet you thought that time is totally under your control and all the factors of today will remain the same till tomorrow. This I think, is a unique and great victory by you and hence I sounded the drum.

The king understood. He called back the poor villager and listened to his case then and there. The brahmin explained to me that a thought or an action is relevant at a particular point of time and it can not wait for a future date. If one is to act, it has to be now and now only because the future is unknown and hence uncertain.

This incident happened long long ago in Delhi. But I remember the brahmin. I gave him only food, but in return, he gave me a pair of gems, precious and rare, that are worth preserving.



A TRIP TO DELHI

I was coming back to Delhi after a short visit to my parents and met him in the railway station at Cuttack. He wore a crumpled suit and smiled pleasantly displaying two sets of betel juice-stained teeth. He had not changed much except that the intervening years had left their indelible impression on his face. We recognised each other.

He taught us history in class five. At that time, he was a skinny little man barely in his twenties with a thick mass of curly hair around his round big head. He informed me that he had left the school long ago, had acquired a degree in library science and was working in a library at present. He was also coming to Delhi to attend the World Book Fair.

History sir was coming in first class at government expense. I and my brother-in-law, who was coming to Delhi for a short visit, travelled second class. We boarded the train at night; but in early hours of the morning, when the train stopped at a small sleepy station, we found History sir hurriedly entering into our bogie. He had discarded his ill-fitting suit and had donned a blue silk lungi and a white cotton shirt which, obviously, he had found more manageable. And he was absolutely terrified as if he had seen a ghost. He looked pale and talked incoherently. His co-passenger in the first class coupe, a bulky moustached army officer, had been drinking rum for most part of the previous night. History sir, a timid and mild man, who never saw a bottle in his life, was absolutely nervous and panicky.

He refused to go back to the first class compartment. He sat almost the whole day with us chewing 'pan' and gossiping with us. Perhaps he found the jovial and informal company of my

brother-in-law, an engineer, warmer and more congenial than that of the drunken army officer. During his conversation, he confided to me that this was his first trip to Delhi and he felt extremely nervous about the big city. I promised to look after him.

"The problem is that your husband doesn't know me", he said with a little bit of apprehension. But I knew my husband and smiled.

My husband had come to Delhi station to receive me. I introduced him to History sir and sir felt a little uneasy and uncomfortable before him. "You might be my student, but he is after all a senior officer", he whispered to me.

But when my husband, in his usual gentle way talked to him and carried his bed - holder as no coolie was available, History sir literally became speechless and wide eyed - both with wonder and gratitude. This did not tally with his idea of a senior police officer. We brought him in our car and my husband arranged for his accommodation..

While going back, he refused to go by first class. "But government is paying you first class fare", I reminded him.

"Never mind, I shall demand only second class fare", He replied shyly. He was afraid that he might again meet another drunken sardarji in the first class compartment. And we booked a second class ticket for him in Utkal express.

I thought that perhaps the chapter of History sir was over in our life. But I received a letter from him again after a month and half. He had given a few thousand rupees from government account to a book shop in Delhi placing orders for books for his library. The dealer had neither sent the books nor was bothering to reply to his reminders and he was in trouble. He requested, with some trepidation, if my husband could help him in this regard.

My husband sent an officer to the book-shop to enquire about the matter and the visit of the police did it. The dealer was apologetic and sent the books immediately.

I later learnt that History sir, after coming back from Delhi had gone and visited my parents at Cuttack carrying a packet of sweets in his hand. And he had showered high praises on my husband. I am grateful to him for his kind words. In any case, I do not think we had done anything exceptionally great for him. It was only a question of common courtsey and etiquette that had prompted us to lookafter him.

There had been many instances when people from Orissa, friends and relatives, had come to Delhi and my husband had helped each and every one of them in his inimitable way, sometimes even going out of his way to please them. Not all of them remembered it.

History sir had commented before my parents that he was yet to see a nicer and better person than my husband. I would like to repeat the same words about him before I end this piece. In my life, I am yet to see a better and nicer person than History sir also.



A TRUTHFUL MAN

My father is truthfulness personified. For him, truth is absolute and leaves no scope for compromise. In fact, often he takes truthfulness to such an extreme, that people think him to be rather angular.

Long long ago, when he was a young lecturer, his nephew, a kid, went to the Dussera fair and inadvertently picked up a small plastic comb from a feriwala without paying for it. Next day my father learnt about it and went on searching for the vendor with the comb in his hand. He wanted to pay him the price and the entire market complex found his action amusing. Obviously they had failed to fathom his thought process.

Never-thless, most of the people, who had come in contact with him, knew that he couldn't tell a lie even if he tried. Because once, I remember, he had gone to the market to purchase a bottle of horlicks. He took it from the provision store and went to the bookshop. He purchased a book, left the horlicks bottle there and came home. While he was nearing home, he found out that the horlicks bottle was missing. He thought that perhaps the shopkeeper had forgotten to give it to him and he went there. The shopkeeper, who knew my father's truthful nature, gave him another bottle immediately without a second thought. And my father came home. In the meantime the bookshop owner saw the horlicks bottle on the counter and sent it to our house through his attendant. Now my father was worried that he had given false information to the provision store and went there again to return the horlicks bottle.

This truthfulness has landed him in trouble at times also. When I was in school, an important person of the political field had once approached my father for help. He had given the roll

number of his relative, who was appearing in M.A. examination to my father, and the intention was clear. In return, my father was promised help in his career. My father had assured him in his inimitable style that the marking would be absolutely fair and in fact it was. Naturally, he earned the displeasure of the person concerned.

If this aspect of his character has sometimes landed him in difficulty it has stood him in good stead sometimes as well.

Once he went to Calcutta in connection with some work. While returning by Puri express, his pocket was picked and he lost the ticket as well as all the money that he had.

When the T.T.C. came to check the tickets, my father told him that his purse had been picked and along with it, his money as well as the ticket were gone. He also added that the railway officer was at liberty to take action as per rule. As luck would have it, the T.T.C. concerned happened to be an Oriya and an old student of my father. He was certain that whatever my father said must be true; because he knew from his student days about the principle of truthfulness of his teacher. He fed him and looked after him all throughout his journey.

My father did his law after completing M.A. But he never joined the bar and opted for the teaching profession instead. My mother often chides him, "unnecessarily your father spent money after you teaching you law at Patna. You would not have been able to earn even ten rupees a month as a lawyer". My father is not only a stickler of truth, but also does not talk much unless it is necessary and it is a well known fact that absolute truthfulness and lack of verbosity are anathema to legal profession.

However, my mother usually makes this statement whenever she is angry with my father. But while she tells this, I invariably find a glow on her face - the glow of being the wife of a truthful man. Not very many wives get that in life.



FOR MY BROTHER

My brother is famous in our family for his practical sense of humour. Whenever I feel bored, I go home to be with him. He opens the door, says something and I start laughing. And I laugh throughout the day till my stomach aches and I come back in the evening revived and receiving my full quota of laughter for the whole month.

It is just not possible in this short piece to give details of the incidents that highlight his sense of humour. They would form a booklet if narrated. So I have chosen two incidents only-one when he was a kid and another one when he was doing his graduation.

When we were small, Krishna, a compounder serving in a local hospital, used to visit us often. He was from our village and was well-known to the family.

Krishna was a middle aged man, with hollow cheeks and an oblong face. The most interesting feature of his face was the elongated chin whose end protruded half an inch with an upward slant thus creating a narrow groove in between his lower lip and the chin. It was the habit of Krishna to rest the second finger of his right hand in this groove while talking. Since the chin tilted a little upward, the finger won't slip.

Anytime he came to our house, he would immediately ask our cook for a glass of water and then would go and relax on the charpoy in the verandah putting his finger on his chin in his usual manner. My brother, who was just a kid would go and sit in front of him assuming the same pose as that of Krishna and we would laugh. Poor Krishna, without knowing the reason of our mirth, would also laugh along with us asking us again

and again what the joke was all about. And my little brother, would be sitting there right in front of him in that awkward pose having an absolute neutral expression all the while.

The second incident of his practical joke is more interesting. Since my father was in teaching line, most of the publishers and writers used to send him complimentary copies of their books and in course of years, we had accumulated a lot of Oriya books at home. One day, it was early morning when somebody pressed the calling bell and my mother went to open the door. A young boy was standing there with a huge bag, as big as a gunny bag, in his hand. "Who are you, and why have you come ?", my mother asked.

"I am Bipin's friend and I have come to collect the books", he replied.

"What books ?" my mother was puzzled.

"I am a student of Oriya honours class and Bipin told me that he would give me books as many as I want", the boy replied and my mother lost her temper. She had gone to open the door straight from her sleep and the boy had come in a wrong moment. Seeing my mother in such an angry mood, the poor boy got absolutely panicky and ran away with the bag in his hand.

When my brother woke up, we narrated the incident before him. He admitted that he had told the boy to come and collect a few books from our house - not a gunny bag full of course.

"What will you do ? Mother scolded him like that and he will certainly bring up the subject when he meets you in the college", we told our brother worriedly.

"Let us see", he replied casually without being bothered much about it.

In the afternoon, we waited eagerly for him to come back from the college. "What happened ?" all of us asked him simultaneously when he returned home.

"Oh, nothing, nothing, The boy didn't tell me anything whatsoever. He was rather sorry for me."

"Sorry for you ? What for ?" my mother asked him.

"Not for me actually, but for the entire family. He thinks that our condition is pitiable enough with a mad mother like that."

"Mad mother ?" we were puzzled.

"Yes; he was just starting the topic and I had to make up a story to avoid the issue. So I told him that my mother was mad".

"Really ? You are certainly telling a lie". We didn't believe him.

"Ofcourse I told him. I had no other way left. I told him that he was rather lucky to get away only with a few angry words. Usually she attacked strangers with a knife." He told and my mother enjoyed the story and giggled like a school girl.

We forgot about the incident soon after this. But then oneday myself and my mother were standing near our gate when we saw a young boy walking down the street that ran infront of our house. Perhaps he was coming this way on some errand. But the moment he saw my mother, his face turned pale as if he had seen a ghost and he turned back and ran in the opposite direction. My mother started laughing.

"Who is that boy ? And why did he behave like that ?" I asked my mother.

"He is the boy who came for the books", my mother told me controlling her laughter.

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THE MISSION SCHOOL

For the first time in my life, I came in contact with Christianity at Bolangir. The high school was far off and I was admitted to the nearby Mission school which was run by European missionaries. The school taught upto class seven only. The missionaries had converted most of the tribals as well as the local poor people and the school basically catered to the education of their children. The Mission had a huge campus adjacent to the school building. The campus was well maintained and with its shrubbery, neat subways and bungalow pattern houses, looked picturesque and out of place.

The school was Christian to the core. Daily morning, before the school started, we assembled under the big banyan tree in front of the school and sang Christian hymns in chorus. After attending the school for a couple of months, I learnt most of the songs by heart. The church was near by and the school conducted Bible classes regularly. We had to appear in a Bible paper for our examination also. I purchased an Oriya Bible and found it interesting. I also found Jesus kind and compassionate. But I remember once during the Bible class, the teacher had commented something derogatory about the Hindus and this had affected me quite adversely at that time. Because in my childish mind, I never distinguished between a Hindu or a Christian friend, Little did I know at that time that the fanaticism in religious feeling, which had prompted the teacher to speak in that way, would oneday result in total chaos, turmoil and misery to thousands of people in my own country.

Studywise, the school was good. The headmaster, a handsome middle-aged man, taught us mathematics and

grammar. He was an intermediate and had the highest qualification among the staff. All other teachers were undermatriculates. They religiously sat for the school-final examination year after year and kept failing year after year also. But surprisingly, they taught well in the class. Perhaps repeating the same lesson for years together made it easier for them to teach.

In the school, Saturday was a half holiday. After the school hours, either we played games under the supervision of a lady teacher or cleaned the boundary of the church by pulling out the weeds from the ground. For the girls, there was a compulsory embroidery class once a week for which we used to go to the house of a European missionary - Miss Johnson. Her house, which was just behind the school was spotlessly clean and the floor gleamed in day light. We sat on the verandah and Miss Johnson taught us how to make floral patterns by using cross stitch. She was a spinster and was extremely attached to her cat. The cat was rather ferocious looking with a thick coat of grey fur which had patches of yellow here and there. Miss Johnson had made a special cushioned chair for her cat. But the animal hardly ever sat on it. She preferred the lap of Miss Johnson instead and sat there most of the times purring with contentment. Miss Johnson was a nice lady. She was old and plump and had yellow rotten teeth. She wore pin pointed shoes that made her fat hips jutting out a little while walking and she wore a pair of gold rimmed spectacles behind which her blue eyes looked enormous. She had picked up quite a number of Oriya words and spoke them with a funny nasal accent.

Of all my friends in the Mission school, I remember only Manaharini, an elderly girl with charcoal black complexion, because it was she who once created a lot of problem for me in the school.

It was during the final examination of class six and Manaharini's seat was just in front of me. She did not know the sums in the mathematics paper and gestured me for help. I did not know how to refuse her. She dropped her question paper which I picked up from the ground, did a few sums on the reverse side and dropped it again for Manaharini to collect. The plan worked perfectly. But one junior girl, Pramila, saw this and reported the matter to Jonathan sir, the invigilator. Jonathan sir reprimanded Manaharini severely and went to report the matter to the Headmaster. And I felt nervous.

Since I was doing well in the class, the Headmaster was very fond of me and now I was afraid of earning his displeasure. So after the school hours, I went and met him. He was looking really angry. "You must realise that you are also equally guilty", he told me tersely.

"But Manaharini was crying....", I replied timidly and then all of a sudden I myself started crying. The Headmaster patted me on my shoulder. "Come on, Don't cry and go home now. Just remember never to do this again", he told me affectionately and I understood that I had been forgiven.

In my entire student career, except this particular instance, I have neither supplied copy to anyone nor have I copied myself even once. Now-a-days when I read in the news paper about mass copying in the examination halls, I just wonder as to how the students do it. It certainly requires real guts and I am a born coward.



ANOTHER PLACE

It was another place, hilly, hot and rugged, and totally different from Cuttack. We were born and brought up in Cuttack inhaling that dust filled air, and smelling the stench of the big municipality drain that ran behind our house and the city had become a part and parcel of our being. So Bolangir looked, smelt and felt different. My father was transferred to this place when I was in class six and we stayed there only for a year.

At that time, it was a small sleepy town, open, clean and free of pollution. We occupied a house near the college and the house had spacious rooms, open corridors and a rectangular court-yard bound on all sides by tall walls. There was a custard apple tree and a jamun tree in front, and some unknown shrubs with oily leaves and white flowers grew near the steps. The tall hibiscus plant stood like a ghost in one corner of the courtyard covered with a thick foliage of dark cerated leaves and it bloomed throughout the year. The purple coloured five petalled flowers, along with their long stamens and pistils, drooped downwards and the granular red earth down below had patches of yellow here and there where the pollen dust fell day after day.

A small road, lined with neem trees, ran in front of our house and it led to the hill-stream. The tribal girls from nereby villages walked past our house in small groups throughout the summer and carried water from the stream in huge terracota pitchers balancing them gracefully on their heads. I used to go down to the stream along with them occasionally. The small fountain gurgled merrily like a well-fed baby and its crystal clear water, only ankle deep, flowed past small rocks and boulders in whose crevices tiny silver-coloured fishes danced like mermaids and made intricate abstract patterns.

A long range of hills ran only a couple of miles away from our house. In the summer, the dry forest caught fire and the long line of fire stretched from one hill range to another. At night, it looked as if the mountain was wearing a bright wreath of marigold flowers on its crown. The king's palace, 'Sailasree', stood on one of these hill ranges and it looked like a toy house painted crimson and white, from the distance. The king Sri R.N. SinghDeo, later had become the Chief Minister of Orissa. During our stay there, his son got married and there was great festivity in the entire township. The palace was left open for the public and I went to see it along with our tribal maidservant Tulsi. We walked past sprawling hall-rooms, lush and well trimmed garden and a cute overbridge built over the lilycovered pool. At one place, a few saree-clad girls were playing and Tulsi commented that one of them was the king's daughter. I did not know if she was correct in her statement. But my idea of a princess was confined to fairytales and romances and I was disillusioned to see an ordinary pretty girl instead of a bejewelled maiden made up of pink coloured butter.

Bolangir taught us a new dialect- Sambalpuri. We heard it every day from the local people - from the vegetable vendor who brought oversize cabbages and cauliflowers from the nearby farm, from the old woman who brought dressed mutton wrapping it in tender arvi leaves and from the little girl who brought curd in a big earthen pot that she balanced on her head with elan. We enjoyed talking to this girl. She had a saree, but for some unknown reason, she would never wear it, and would wrap it around her torso much in the fashion of a shawl leaving down below her waistline completely bare. "You have a nice saree. Why don't you wear it properly?", my mother would nag her daily. She would smile and promise to wear it next day. And the next day she would come again dressed in her usual way

and we would laugh. During our stay there, we never saw her draping the saree in proper fashion.

My most intimate friend at Bolangir was Madhvi. Her house was nearby and we used to meet almost daily in the afternoon. They had an open stretch of grassy land in front of their house where a dried trunk of a palm tree lay from time immemorial. Both of us sat on that wooden couch and gossiped throughout the evening while Madhavi stitched her new frock deftly with her hand.

Much later in my life, I had the pleasant experience of meeting Madhvi again in an unusual place. It was in Jorhat, a town in Assam where my husband was posted for sometime.

It was evening time and we were sitting in the balcony when a dark hefty gentleman with a pair of well-cared-for moustaches came in followed by a thin bespectacled lady.

"I am Rajan Singh from Airforce and she is my wife.", the gentleman introduced himself in Oriya and we were both surprised and happy to hear our mother tongue in a far off place.

"My scooter broke down in front of your house", Mr. Singh informed us. "I know that you are from Orissa and I have come to request you if I can keep my scooter in your premises for the night", Mr. Singh added rather hesitantly. My husband assured him that there was absolutely no problem at all and he could keep his scooter in our house as long as he pleased.

I asked Mr. and Mrs. Singh to sit down and relax; and over cups of tea and plateful of snacks, we talked about our state, our home towns and our families. And in course of our conversation, I discovered that Mrs. Singh was non other than my dear friend Madhvi with whom, long long ago, I spent the sunlit afternoons sitting on the tree trunk and chatting, till the setting sun, like a frolicsome child, jumped down the horizon.



A LOVE STORY

Our handsome and white-haired Headmaster had a strict sense of moral conduct. He taught us English grammar and half of his period was devoted to a lectur-cum-sermonisation regarding what the character of a girl should be. He thought that character was perhaps something like a magic potion that was carefully preserved in a delicate glass container. A mere look by a male and the glass case broke. He was sure that falling in love was a straight route to purgatory and naive as we were, we believed him.

Under the hawklike eyes of such a Headmaster, we shuddered to utter the word 'love', even by mistake. Of course the boys in our class were all puny little kids who wore halfpants and spoke in feminine voices and we never bothered to look at them.

But exceptions were there. We had a classmate Hena, who fell in love with a teacher and that brought a little excitement to our otherwise uneventful life.

Hena was a dark and plump girl with thick tresses of black hair and she wore a lot of clips in her hair to keep it in shape. And she also wore matching bangles that went with the colour of her sarees. There was no regulation of school uniform at that time. She had a god gifted voice and was very fond of film songs. She would listen to radio Ceylon just once and pick up the wordings as well as the tunes immediately. During the recess, we would ask her to sing film songs for us and she would sing one after another effortlessly.

Hena always bagged the first prize in the music competition that was held during Ganesh puja and Saraswati puja in our school every year.

One of our teachers, Sridhar sir, a dark and short bachelor with a little gap near his canine, was very popular among us.

Sridhar sir backbrushed his hair and was always impeccably dressed in spotless white. And we envied him for his pearl-like handwriting. Hena fell in love with him. He used to give her private tuition.

I do not know how the affair became public in the school. Sridhar sir might have talked about it among his young colleagues and the news ultimately reached the Headmaster. Oneday, the Headmaster entered furiously into our classroom, made Hena stand up on the bench and reprimanded her for her loose moral conduct in the presence of all the students. The poor girl felt extremely embarrassed and cried a lot. After the Headmaster left, we pinched each other and discussed the topic in whispers. The rumour assumed a huge proportion in the school and ultimately Hena stopped coming to the school. After a few days, we heard that Hena had secretly married Sridhar sir and had eloped with him. The students gossiped for sometime and then the matter cooled down.

I met Hena again after a number of years when I was in college. Hena's parents had shiefted to a house near our colony and one afternoon Hena's younger sister came to our house and asked me to visit their place. Hena had come and she wanted to see me.

Meeting Hena was a pleasant surprise. She had changed drastically. Her hair had become thin and the extra clips were no more needed to keep it in place. She wore a sleeveless blouse that had several patches here and there. Obviously, she was not well off. But she smiled a lot and looked happy.

I learnt from her that Sridhar sir was working somewhere in Bombay. After all these years, her parents had forgiven the errant child and her younger brother had gone to Bombay and had fetched her. Her daughter, a dark frolicsome child was playing nearby and she had her baby son - a chubby, cute looking boy on her lap.

"Do you still sing ?" I asked her. She pointed at her two lovely children and told me, with a glow on her face, "I created music".



THE MOTHER

She had seven children; and my husband was the eighth one.

Mr. Bhuyan was a Dy. S.P. in the Special Branch when my husband joined his posting in Guwahati. Mr. Bhuyan was due for retirement and was a handsome and soft spoken person. He was a chain smoker and one always found him rolling a peculiar funnel shaped cigarrette using loose flakes of tobacco that he got from a local shop in lumps.

Mr. Bhuyan had found my husband, a young bachelor from Orissa, rather lonely and homesick and had asked him several times to visit his house. My husband didn't bother much about it. And then one day Mr. Bhuyan forcibly took him along with him to meet his family members. And after that, it became a daily routine for my husband to visit his place in the evening. He spent his spare time there playing with the children and gossiping with Mrs. Bhuyan whom he addressed as 'Ma'. My husband didn't know the local language and 'Ma' did not know any other language except Assamese. But love transcended the language barrier and my husband soon became a family member, a son. So long as he stayed Guwahati every night he went to Mr. Bhuyan's place for dinner. If by any chance he was late, the food was kept there on the dining table with 'Ma' sitting near it and waiting till late night for the arrival of her eldest son.

When I went there after my marriage 'Ma' was very much there at the airport to receive me. A short, fair and plump lady with a perfect moon shaped face, she lovingly took me in her arms and slipped a ring in my middle finger- a beautiful golden ring studded with red and white stones. For her I was the daughter-in-law or the 'Boari' as they say in Assamese.

So long as we stayed in Assam, her home was like that of our own. Anytime we went to Guwahati we stayed with her.

We shared her bed. her house, her food and her love. Never did it occur to us, even for a minute, that she was from another state and we were not her children.

I remember, when I went there with my baby son, my husband was undergoing a training at Guwahati and we stayed with her for a month or so. It was the year 1965 and the war between India and Pakistan broke out. There was complete black-out in the city and curfew in the evenings; and the Indian Air Force fighter planes zoomed across the pitch dark sky through out the night. For me, a girl from Orissa, it was absolutely panicky. 'Ma', alongwith her children, sat with me night after night and consoled me, "Don't cry. I am there with you."

After a few years, we came to Delhi and the contact with the Bhuyan family became less and less with the passage of time and also because of the distance involved, Then after many years, suddenly one day I got a telephone call from a gentleman. "I am Dulu", he said in English. I didn't know any body called Dulu in Delhi and told him so. "I am Mr. Bhuyan's son", he told me haltingly and then I remembered. We brought him home. I saw him as a young boy reading B.A. in Cotton College. Now he was a middle aged man with a receding hairline and a visible punch. It was a pleasure to see him and I learnt from him that all his brothers and sisters were married and were doing fine.

"How is Bhuyan-saheb and how is 'Ma' ?" I asked him.

"Both of them have expired", Dulu told me morosely.

The news, for me, was both shocking and painful. I remembered the love and affection that she showered on me - a girl from another state, who was in no way connected with her. A kaleidoscopic view of my days with 'Ma'- she carrying my baby son lovingly in her arms, cooking a special dish for me during my pregnancy and roaming about in the market and purchasing crockery and cutlery for me when I started my new home, flashed before my mind. My eyes moistened. And exactly at that moment I heard her voice and the same sentence that she had told me long long ago during Indo-Pak war, "Don't cry. I am there with you."



A HUMAN GESTURE

The date was thirteenth January nineteen hundred seventy five. It was on this unfortunate day when the Mizo National Front hostiles entered into the police headquarters at Aizawl and killed the three top officers of Mizoram police - Mr. Arya, Mr. Sewa and Mr. Panchpagesan. Mr. Arya had joined Mizoram before three months and Mr. Sewa before a fortnight only. Mr. Panchpagesan, who had come from Delhi on transfer, had taken over charge the previous day. My husband was very much present in the room but exactly at that point of time had gone to the adjacent room searching for a file and hence escaped death.

The hostiles had driven straight into the police campus. They went into the room of Mr. Arya which was just at the entrance point and after killing the officers with their revolvers, escaped in a jeep. It all happened within a few minutes only. There was tight security arrangement all around. But the hostiles were in police uniform and nobody suspected foul play when they entered.

The incident was first of its kind in India. There was total panic throughout the union territory and the entire administration collapsed. The non-Mizo officers did not dare to come out of their houses and remained hidden for days together. The fear of death was palpably visible on each one's face and it was but natural under those circumstances.

My husband was the only police officer who had survived and was considered the next main target. He was continuously guarded by security personnels. The hefty C.R.P. havildar, who

sat with him in the vehicle along with his stengun, used to console me-"Don't worry madam. I shall be the first person to die before anything happens to sahib." "But I don't want anything happening to you either", I used to tell him nervously.

And then one fine morning, this man came to me. My husband had left for office and I was standing alone in the verandah. And he approached me with robot-like footsteps. I had seen him from a distance a number of times. Down below the hillock where we stayed, there was a small police hospital and the man happened to be the nursing orderly there.

He was tall for a Mizo and his smooth yellow skin stretched taut on his high and prominent cheekbones. Mizos are as such stoical and expression-less people. But this man was more so. His look was intense and was solely focussed on me. He proceeded towards me in a mechanical way, step by step, and stopped in front of me hardly a few inches away, from where I could feel his warm breath on my face. And I got frightened. His stance and demeanour told me only one story- that he was going to kill me and surely he had a revolver in his pocket. Such murders were rampant in Mizoram. My mind went blank and I closed my eyes.

Suddenly I felt the warmth of human flesh against my fingers. I opened my eyes. The man was holding both my hands tenderly in his moist yellow palms. And he told me incoherently and in between sobs, "Madam, I am grateful to Jesus for saving the life of Mr. Mishra; and I have come only to tell you this."

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A BROTHER ARRIVES

It was decided that my mother would go to her parents for the delivery of her second child. My father was feeling apprehensive that she might not get enough care and attention at Cuttack as no elderly person was present there. Moreover, there was the added problem of managing me, still a toddler, during her confinement.

My brother was born on the wedding night of my uncle, my mother's elder brother. My uncle was the only son and his wedding was celebrated with much funfare and gaiety. There was a sumptuous feast for the entire village and the bride, being from a very rich family, came in a palanquin followed by a caravan of bullock carts that carried her dowry. Shortly afterwards my mother gave birth to her second child, a son.

"It is a boy, but dark and thin", cried the village midwife attending my mother.

"Look again and be sure that it is a boy. I don't care if his head is turned backward", shouted back my grandmother from the doorstep. The midwife looked again and was sure and everybody, including the new bride, laughed. The merrymaking gathered double pace.

The midwife took out a polished sea shell, a common instrument used in the villages to sever the umbilical cord. But my mother wouldn't allow her to use it. She, after staying in the town, had developed strict sense of hygiene and abhorred this common practice of using a sea-shell with its not-so-sharp edge.

She had carried a new shaving blade along with her from Cuttack. She had sterilised it by boiling it in hot water when

the labour began and kept it near her. She compelled the midwife to use that blade.

The midwife was aghast at such an innovation which was unheard of in the village. "I have been using this shell all throughout my life and nobody has ever grumbled.", she expressed her displeasure still exhibiting the pink shell in her hand.

"And I wonder how many babies you have bled to death by doing that", retorted my mother in disgust.

Ultimately, the midwife obeyed my mother's command. The baby was cleaned and put on a tiny bed in one corner of the mudfloor and the midwife lighted a fire in another corner by burning a huge log of wood. This was a common practice religiously followed in almost all the villages and was meant to give extra warmth to the mother and the baby. The small thatched room, without any window or ventilator filled in with smoke; the baby squirmed and my mother suffocated.

Shortly afterwards, when the baby cried and moved his limbs, my mother noticed that though his arms moved freely, there was slight awkwardness in the movement of his legs. She tried to stretch them straight but the knee-joints seemed stiff. She instantaneously connected this to a minor accident that she had met with during her pregnancy at Cuttack.

We had two guava trees in our garden that yielded delicious aromatic fruits. But the monkeys would always come and finish them when they were half ripe. Once, when the monkeys attacked the trees, my mother went out with a piece of stick to threaten and drive them away. Most of them were cowards and feeling scared, ran away. But an old monkey, the bravest and the seniormost of the whole lot, took an attacking stance baring his teeth in a grimace.

My mother got panicky and ran back. But in the process, she collided against the tall boundary wall and fell down hurting her stomach. It was nothing serious and she forgot about the whole episode soon after. But now she was sure that she had hurt her baby during that unfortunate incident.

But her mind worked feverishly and she immediately decided her course of action. She asked my grandmother to give her two pieces of polished bamboo strips which were readily available in the village. She pulled the baby's legs gently, put the sticks in straight line along with the limbs and fixed them securely with the help of bandages that she tore from her old sarees. She opened the bandage once a while to facilitate proper blood circulation in the legs and tied them again. The legs straightened and moved freely after a couple of days.

And then the new bride, barely fourteen and fair as a lily, came to see her nephew. "She is the incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi. She stepped into the house and a grandson is born", proclaimed the neighbours and my grandmother felt proud.

It is ofcourse another story that the Goddess herself remained childless, became a widow at the age of twenty four and died a lonely and miserable death after a prolonged illness of throat cancer.



STRANGER THAN FICTION

Alok was from Orissa and was a trainee Dy. S.P. in Delhi police. He was short and dark and had a square face with prominent jaw-bones. He never looked up while talking and had a perpetual woe-begotten expression as if he had lost everything in a rubbery the previous night.

It was a wintry morning when he came to our house for the first time. He sat silently for a few minutes and then told my husband, still looking at the ground, "Sir, I don't have anybody here and I have come to you to seek help on some personal matter. Hope you excuse me for the trouble."

"Come on, don't be formal. Tell me what it is", my husband replied and the story that he narrated was really interesting.

He was in love with a girl, Anita, who happened to be his classmate in Delhi university. He wanted to marry her but her father vehemently opposed the match because Alok didn't belong to his caste and was a non-brahmin. He had fixed Anita's marriage with a boy of his choice, a brahmin sales-tax officer from U.P. But Anita was adamant to marry Alok, had run away from home last night, and was staying with him at present. He wanted my husband's help and guidance about this.

"Since both of you are majors, love each other and the girl has left her home for your sake, you have hardly any choice left now. Better go and get married as soon as possible. In case of any problem I am there", my husband told him. Alok went to the Jagannath temple at Delhi the same day and married Anita.

Both of them came to our house next morning. They told us that Anita's father was searching for them frantically and they

had spent the previous night hiding at a friend's place. Both of them were visibly perturbed and my husband took over the responsibility of talking to Anita's parents and settling the issue.

He talked to Anita's parents over telephone and they came down to our house immediately. They were angry and upset. "Alok is a good boy and I know him personally. Moreover, they are already married. I would request you to please accept them and give them your blessings.", my husband pleaded. Ultimately the old man cooled down and to make a long story short, he arranged for another wedding ceremony at his residence and accepted the bride-groom lovingly.

Anita, along with her husband, visited us again after a few days. A bubbly, plump and fair girl, she talked incessantly and I liked her and wondered at her guts.

Alok qualified in the Civil Services Examination same year. He left Delhi immediately afterwards and we had no news of him for quite some time. Later, I had learnt from a common friend that both of them were doing fine and were leading a blissful life.

The story should have ended here with this bright note, but for an unusual incident that happened long afterwards after I came to Bhubaneswar. The incident left me bewildered and proved the age old saying that man is perhaps the most ungrateful creature in the whole world.

One day, my husband and myself were sitting in the drawing room when a roly poly, bald headed gentleman entered into the room. The person who accompanied him introduced him by his designation and informed that he had recently been posted to Orissa. They had heard from somebody that we were selling the vacant plot at the backside of our house and the gentleman had come to purchase it.

"You are mistaken. That is the only vacant space left with me and I want to plant trees there. People keep coming to purchase it but I am not interested in selling", my husband replied.

"Sir has no dearth of money. He will pay any amount you say", the chamcha accompanying him assured us smilingly displaying his thirty two betel juice stained teeth. The gentleman sat primly on the chair and nodded.

But my husband gave the same reply once again and the gentleman stood up. When he was leaving, suddenly my husband told him, "It seems as if I have seen you somewhere."

The gentleman stood in front of our door for a half a minute or so and after a pregnant pause whispered, "I am Alok"; and then went away hurriedly like a stranger.

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SHANTI BHAVAN

The house belonged to our neighbour, but she preferred staying with her parents and gave the house on rent. College students, who could not avail seats in the hostel, made a mess there. It was adjacent to our house and only a barbed wire fencing separated the mess from our garden.

It was a dilapidated old building, longish in design, much in the fashion of army barracks. It had a pool and a mango tree on the side and a large vacant space in the front where cacti grew in abundance interspersed with wild thorny bushes and dhatura plants. Somebody, sometime, had painted the words 'Shanti Bhavan' on the front wall of the building in bold capital letters. But the letters had lost their sharpness and contour being weather beaten year after year.

Since it was next to our house, we grew up along with the mess. Every year, at the beginning of the session, there would be new faces and within a couple of months, by continuously seeing them day after day, we would get accustomed to them.

We were five or six teenaged girls in our colony and we spent our afternoons standing and gossiping on the canal bank by the side of the mainroad. And the boys added a little colour to our otherwise uneventful life. In the evening, whenever a boy from the mess went past us on some errand, he would invariably throw a furtive glance towards us and we would pinch each other and put a bait as to which of us he was looking at.

We knew each and every boy by face. But one of them happened to be the centre of our conversation most of the times. It was simply because he was the most handsome of the

whole lot. He was extremely fair, had a thick mass of hair which somehow had a tint of bottlegreen colour in it and he whistled anytime he walked past us. But the boy, inspite of his good look had an ugly scar in the neck and we nick-named him "the cut throat."

We were all very interested to know his name. But we were taught that talking to a boy was a sin and we just could not afford to be sinful. However, we knew his name eventually.

My youngest brother, almost five years old, used to go to the mess occasionally. The boys called him and chatted with him. Perhaps they found it entertaining to talk to a small child. One day, my brother came back from the mess with a magazine in his hand. I read the title- Illustrated Weekly, which I had not seen till then and the front cover of the magazine carried the name of the owner-Lalit Naik.

"Who gave you this book" ? my mother asked my little brother.

"It is that fair boy with the ugly throat. I wanted to see pictures and he gave this to me", my brother replied.

"Did he really give it to you ? Go and return the journal immediately in case you have picked it up from his table.", my mother reprimanded.

"No, no, he surely gave it to me. He is a nice boy. He gives me lollipops and he bites me also."

"Bites you ? What for ? The fellow must be out of his wits to bite a small child like that." My mother was aghast at the news. My little brother looked palpably disturbed. "No, no, he is a good boy. He loves me, that is why he bites me- here." He showed his fair plump cheek and we laughed.

My brother was an extremely lovable kid. The boy must have given him a peck on the cheek sometimes out of sheer

affection. My brother, being too small, had a limited vocabulary and hence had used the word 'bite' in place of 'kiss'.

But this episode had, at that time, brought back to my memory another incident at Shanti Bhavan that had occurred when I was slightly older than my brother. The boys in the mess called me and my friends often to their compound and gossiped with us even then.

And there was this particular boy, fat and bulky, who developed great friendship with me. He was huge for his age, had a massive head full of thick curly hair and his round face looked big with his close cropped beard.

Although he knew my name, I did not know his and one day asked him about it.

"There is a film running in the nearby Hind cinema. Do you know?" he asked me smilingly. I could not understand what his name had to do with the film. Nevertheless, I told him the name- Samson and Delilah. I had overheard it from somebody.

"Have you seen the film?" the youngman asked me again. "How can I ? It is an English film and I don't know English.", I replied.

"You must see it. The hero Samson is a bigman- like me and he is very very strong also- like me.", he commented while displaying his strong arm muscles. But I was not interested in the film and just wanted to know his name and I told him so.

"Well; you can call me Samson", he said in a mock serious tone. Both of us understood that it was a joke and we laughed together. And there after he became Samson to me.

One day, while talking to me in their front verandah, Samson drew my attention towards the shy and slim saree clad girl walking along the nearby lane. "Do you know her?" he asked me.

"Of course I know her. She is Ranididi, my friend's sister. She is returning from the college. Should I call her?", I enquired. 'No, no, don't call her. Next time you meet your Ranididi, just tell her that I was enquiring about her. That's all", Samson told me and I promised to do so. But I peacefully forgot all about it and after a couple of days, when Samson asked me if I had talked to Ranididi, I had to tell him a lie. "I went to her house. But she had a splitting headache and she was sleeping."

Samson looked visibly worried. He searched his drawer, brought out two tablets and gave them to me. "Give these pills to Ranididi and tell her that anytime she gets a headache, she should take one of these pills. They are really good and I take them whenever I suffer from a migraine.", he told me while handing over the medicine. I took the medicine from him and was coming home when he called me back again. "Don't forget to tell your Ranididi that I have given the medicine.", he reminded me and I promised to do accordingly.

But then slim and petit Ranididi got married soon and Samson stopped enquiring about her.

After nearly forty years, I met Ranididi here at Bhubaneswar the other day. While talking to her, the earnest face of Samson flitted across my mind. I wish Samson could see Ranididi now: just for a moment. The size of his dreamgirl has become like that of a Sumo wrestler.



A LOVING TRIBUTE

My most intimate friend during my childhood was Jhunu, a dark, slim Bengali girl who spoke Oriya fluently. Her house was adjacent to our house and we grew up together, though I looked at her with a little awe because they had a car.

Jhunu was alright as a friend, but she suffered from a sense of superiority which she showed off often and I didn't like it. She was only a few months older than me but behaved as if she was much senior to me in age as well as wisdom. But then a chance incident deflated her ego a little and she changed afterwards.

It was summer-time and as usual, we were playing on the bank of the canal. There was a bit of landslide near the bathing ghat and the repair work was going on. The labourers had put a barricade of bamboo poles near the bank. Jhunu climbed on the barricade, put her two feet apart on two sturdy bamboos and started showing us some gymnastic trick when suddenly, losing her balance, she fell down and landed on the canal bed. The canal was almost dry with very little water in it and not much harm was done to her. But a sharp bamboo strip brushed against her earlobe and fresh red blood trickled drop by drop from the scratch.

Jhunu, for once, forgot her dignity and started wailing loudly making a real comic face. I seized the opportunity to prove my worth.

I not only helped her to get out of the water, but also led her by hand to her house comforting her that it was just a minor injury and there was nothing to worry about. I handed her over to her mother in a gallant way narrating the accident in detail and came back comforting Jhunu once again. From next day, Jhunu shed off the cloak of her supercilious nature and started treating me as her equal and that too with affection.

Jhunu's mother dressed her stylishly. Every afternoon Jhunu would come wearing a parrot-green frock that had puffed sleeves and hexagonal honeycomb designs embroidered in the front. The thin layer of powder smeared on her face and neck smelt so sweet that I would always stand near her on some pretext or other in order to inhale that fragrance.

I didn't bother much about the embroidered frock; because I knew that my mother didn't know how to make honey comb designs. But I failed to understand why couldn't she get me a tin of better smelling powder instead of cuticura, her favourite brand, to which she stuck religiously right after my birth. But I didn't have the courage to tell her so. On the other hand, I had too much of self-respect even at that time to borrow a little powder from Jhunu.

Then suddenly came a day when my long cherished dream got fulfilled. My father brought for me a packet of coloured chinks and they came in lovely shades of pink, yellow and blue. I showed them proudly to Jhunu knowing fully well that all her chinks were white. She asked me hesitantly if I could give her a few of these coloured sticks and I readily agreed.

"Oh; take any amount you like. But in return you must give me a little of the powder that you use on your face".

Jhunu was eager to oblige me. She ran home, dusted some powder on a piece of paper, wrapped it and brought the tiny packet to me. I gave her the chinks that she wanted.

I didn't tell my mother about this lest she would spank me for asking things from others. I hid the packet secretly and several times a day when nobody looked, took it out and sniffed it dialating my nostrils. I didn't have a heart to use it, because then, I was afraid, it would be over. Ultimately the tiny packet got lost. But I didn't mind the loss. By that time, I had inhaled all the fragrance and had reached a saturated point.

Post script-The story should have ended here along with the episode of the powder. But I have to annex this postscript because Jhunu is no more. This story is a tearful and loving tribute to my dear friend with whom I shared many fragrant moments of my childhood and adolescence.

□□□

MY GRANDFATHER

My grandfather had two houses. The old mud plastered house was his ancestral property. But he built the new rest house himself. It was a neat little house made up of brick and cement and had a courtyard and granary at the back. The front verandah was wide and had a concrete bench with a backrest where one could sit and relax.

My grandfather alone remained in the rest house. He came to the old house for his noon and evening meals, but preferred his breakfast to be carried to him to his solitary abode. He usually took puffed rice for his tiffin, but preferred it in the powdered form. Perhaps his cancerous throat found the powder easy to swallow.

Daily morning, my mother prepared the puffed rice powder by grinding the crisp grains with the grinding stone and we three, myself, my cousin sister and my brother were entrusted with the duty of carrying it to our grandfather. And we accepted the job with pleasure. Because of the strict purdah system, neither my mother nor my aunt could come out to the main road of the village. In any case, they neither faced nor talked to my grandfather.

We carried the foodstuff in a huge bellmetal bowl and handed it over to our grandfather. But we never left the place and watched, with interest, his ritual of transforming it into a thick doughlike paste. My grandfather took out a small black-coloured earthen pitcher from his cupboard and poured almost a palmful of pure ghee into the powder. He put a lump of refined jaggery into it too. Then the required quantity of water was added and all the ingredients were mixed thoroughly. We

never talked to our grandfather during this period, but simply stood silently in a row in front of him with our salivary glands working profusely all the while.

My grandfather understood this. He took a handful of the brown coloured paste from the bowl, made three little balls out of it and distributed them among us giving one sweetball to each of his grand child. The moment we got the foodstuff, we ran and rushed back to the old house.

We ate the sweet-balls standing inside the cowshed that formed the main entrance to the old house. We consumed the savoury snack little by little taking enough time to relish its sweetness. The aroma of pure ghee pervaded the whole cowshed submerging the stench of dung and urine and made the bullocks turn their heads and look at us with their dark limpid eyes. We entered into the house only after licking our fingers clean. We didn't want our mother to know this. She would get angry for having taken a share of our grandfather's food.

And then my grandfather died. It was a prolonged sickness. He was suffering from cancer since last so many years. My father had taken him to Cuttack a number of times to get him treated; but he missed his village and wouldn't stay there. His condition had deteriorated since last one week and that night all the family members decided to stay with him in the new house leaving the old-house incharge of two faithful servants. In the evening, my father's youngest sister, Kuntala, carried my baby brother in her arms and showed him to my grandfather asking him if he recognised his grandson. He couldn't talk, but gestured that he missed the father of the little boy, his son, who was far away from him in London and tears rolled down from his eyes. He died the same night.

My grandfather's funeral was performed with elaborate rituals befitting the status of rich man. On the tenth day, we

took a dip in the pond, wore new clothes and offered holy water along with kusa grass and sesame seeds for his soul to rest in peace. A huge feast was arranged and hundreds of brahmins from the nearby villages were entertained. The guests left after taking cash gift, dakshina, which my father's elder brother distributed.

And my grandmother broke her glass bangles. She wore a plain white saree without border and took out the long necklace of guineas, her huge decorative nose ring and the solid golden clasps from her earlobes. She wept and wiped the coinsized vermilion mark from her narrow, wrinkled forehead and that left a white circular patch on her skin. The red dot had stayed there continuously for years, right from the day she came as a bride, and as a result had depigmented the area underneath. We couldn't forget our grandfather. He remained alive in the form of that round white patch on my grandmother's forehead and anytime we looked at her face, we remembered him.



A WONDERFUL MOTHER

My mother's happiness over the birth of a son was shortlived; because I fell ill immediately afterwards. I contacted some infection and started suffering from green diarrhoea, an ailment considered fatal at that time, because the babies usually died of dehydration.

My mother was staying at her father's place and no proper medical facilities were available in the village. Even my grandmother's home made remedies proved futile. The diarrhoea persisted and everybody became worried.

In the villages of Orissa, when a woman went to her parent's house, as per the convention, either the husband or the in-laws had to send a message to her father to send her back. Without such an invitation, the girl would not return, because that would suggest that her parents were incapable of supporting her. This was a mere formality, but was strictly adhered to, especially during the immediate years following the marriage.

My paternal grand parents stayed in the remote village and thought that it was the responsibility of my father to do the needful. My father, being a townsman, didn't know about the custom, and also partly because of his inadvertent forgetfulness, didn't bother to send the necessary message. As a result, even if my condition deteriorated day-by-day, my grandfather would not allow my mother to come back to Cuttack.

"What would people say?" he announced loudly, "That the great Mahadev Panda couldn't give his daughter two morsels of rice and drove her away even if she was uninvited ?" It became a question of prestige for him. But one day my condition became very serious and my mother wailed and quarrelled with her father.

"If you are that interested in keeping me with you, go to the court tomorrow and transfer half of your property in my

name; or else send me back to my husband; because it is he who would ultimately bear the burden of my children. If my daughter dies, will you take the responsibility ?" She sounded bitter and my grandfather agreed to bring her back to Cuttack, not because he was afraid of losing half of his fertile land, but because my condition made him nervous too. Both father and daughter started for the town the same day in the afternoon.

Cuttack, during summer, was connected by bus directly with my mother's village through a fair-weather-road in the river Kathjodi. But when the bus carrying my mother and my grandfather reached the river side, it was discovered that the fair-weather-road was damaged and no vehicle was allowed to ply through it. The repair work was going on, but nobody knew how much time it would take. Cuttack was just on the other side of the river and was faintly visible.

The few passengers, who came from the nearby villages, got down and sat under the shades of trees. But my mother had no patience to wait any longer. Night was approaching fast and to wait indefinitely in the dark with two small children, one a new-born baby and the other one a very sick child, seemed out of question. So my mother and my grandfather decided to cross the river on foot. There was no other choice.

My grandfather carried my baby brother in one hand. With the other, he held the bundle that contained the clothes and other knick-knacks. My mother, wrapped me with rags and carried me in both her arms cautiously lest she would break my fragile bones with too tight a pressure. And they descended down to the riverbed.

The powder-like sand felt hot and scorching as their barefeet sank deep into it. It had soaked the sunshine throughout the day and walking was painful. There were pools and streamlets of water in between, ankle deep and a little more, and my mother went and stood there often dipping her aching and soring feet in the water in an attempt to cool and soothe them.

She was determined to reach her home at any cost and it must be her sheer strength of willpower rather than the strength of her body that pulled her through. By the time they climbed the huge stone embankment and reached Cuttack, it was dark. The flickering oil lamps on little wooden pillars on both sides of the narrow road shone timidly. But the ray of hope in my mother's heart regarding my survival became brighter.

My father, of course, was equally perturbed after seeing my condition and took me to the paediatrician next morning. But the medicines proved futile and one more week passed without any visible improvement.

One day, when my mother was sitting and weeping in our front verandah, and old Muslim woman, who worked as a maid servant in the colony, saw her. She enquired about the problem and my mother gave her the details of my sickness.

"Dear mother ! It seems that you have exhausted all possible resources to cure this child. Would you mind trying a medicine, that I would suggest ? If the Almighty wants, your child may as well survive." The woman consoled my mother and prescribed a home-made remedy. The bark of a particular tree, which grew in the nearby field, had to be ground and the juice, mixed with an equal amount of curd, had to be administered to me for three consecutive days.

That was the last ray of hope for my mother and she readily followed the prescription. Whether it was really the drug that worked or it was a mere fluke nobody knew. But my diarrhoea stopped. It was more than a miracle. I was cured and my parents felt relieved. I was still weak, but it was only a question of time for my lost strength to be regained.

That maid-servant has died long ago. But even now, after so many years, I have often seen my mother joining her hands and praying to the Almighty to bless the soul of that old lady, for it was she who had saved her dear daughter's life once upon a time.



AN INTERESTING CONVERSATION

"Hey you, the girl from the town; would you please come here?" asked the two women while polishing their silver armlets with handful of fine silvery sand. I knew them. They were the zamindar's daughters-in-law and were my aunty's friends.

There were other women also in the bathing ghat, either taking bath or filling their gleaming brass pitchers with water. The errant children, naked except the thin silver chains around their waists, were splashing water and swimming. The river was dry and the narrow stream of water, jigjag and serpentine, was almost half a kilometre away from the bank. It was summer season.

I swam and approached the two women. "How is it that you have come to the river alone?" they asked still remaining busy with their polishing.

"Oh; I always come alone. My grandma allows me that. In any case, there is not much water in the river. It is only knee deep", I replied.

"How do you like our village?" one of them, the dark and short one with the golden tiara asked.

"It is lovely, especially the river.", I answered after taking a dip.

"How is it that your mother has not got you married uptill now?" the elder one with rows of earrings in both her earlobes asked me and the suddenness of the question left me a little baffled.

During my stay in my mother's village, I had learnt that almost all the girls of my age were already married and Rama aunty, my maternal uncle's wife, had told me that they would

leave for their husband's house when they grew up. The fact that I had still remained a spinster seemed to be the source of headache of all the women in the neighbourhood and they would often come and confront my grandma regarding this.

"How is it that Surekha has not got her daughter married uptill now ? This is just not done in a brahmin family." They would ask again and again and my grandma would reply rather meekly with a sense of guilt, "It is different with the towns folk. Moreover, the little girl's father is in Lanka". She knew the story of Ramayan and any distant place across the sea was the island of Lanka for her.

But till today, nobody had asked the question of my marriage directly to me and it took me quite sometime to answer the question put forward by the two village women.

"Girls get married only when they become big. I have lost my first milk tooth the other day and am only seven.", I told them and showed them the tiny gap in my lower jaw to prove my point.

"But the girls much younger than you have been married in our village", both the women said simultaneously. The twinkling in their eyes and the faint lines of smile around their lips told me that they enjoyed their conversation with me. But this time, they had told the truth and I didn't know how to reiterate. And then I suddenly remembered the lady in white.

She was my father's colleague and used to visit our house often in the town. She was dark, wore spotless white sarees and was amicable by nature. After finishing her official business with my father, she would sometimes sit with my mother and exchange pleasantries with her. She never wore bangles, a custom strictly followed by married women in Orissa and once I had asked my mother about this. "She is not married", my mother had replied casually.

The two village women were waiting eagerly for my reply and I had found something, that I thought, would put a full stop to the conversation. "In the town, some girls don't get married at all. I have seen hundreds of them", I exaggerated the number to make my statement emphatic.

"Do these girls have children?" the elder one asked while rubbing her face with the end of her wet saree, taking special care to protect the huge nose ring. It was obvious that she won't allow me to win in the argument. I could faintly feel that she was playing some pranks with me and also was finding my answers utterly delightful. But I could not understand what she was upto.

Her last question again left me in a void. "Do the unmarried girls have children?", I asked myself but the answer was not known to me. I thought hard and then discovered that all women, my mother, her friends, our neighbours, the women in the town as well as the village- almost all had children. Only little kids like me didn't have babies and I reached the simple conclusion that when the girls grew up, they automatically gave birth to children. So I gave my final reply with confidence.

"Yes, yes, the unmarried girls have children as well. All girls become mothers when they grow up and I know that."

"Really?", both the women raised their eyebrows in mock surprise, winked at each other and started laughing. Their laughter made me conscious and I realised that somewhere during our conversation I had made a mistake, but what it was I just could not know.

So after coming home, I went straight to my aunt. She was brushing her hair. I complimented her for the hundredth time for her lovely long tresses and asked her, "Aunty, can I ask you a question?"

"Of course dear," she replied while tying a knot at the nape of her lovely slender neck.

"Why did Kanhu's mother and Sasi's mother laugh ? They winked at each other also. I met them in the river.", I elaborated the point before my aunty.

"Did they? You must have told them something funny", she thought and replied.

"No, I didn't tell anything of that sort. I only told them that all girls automatically become mothers when they grow up. They don't have to get married for that", I explained.

My aunty remained silent for a minute and I thought she was taking time to find out the reason that made the two women wink at each other and laugh. But then suddenly she remembered that she had cooked something special for me and entered into the kitchen in a hurry to bring it.

She came out holding a tiny aluminium bowl on which she had baked an egg for me cooking it slowly over flickering cowdung fire. I took the bowl from her, started eating the egg and forgot about our earlier conversation.



A DIFFERENT TASTE

Things like Five star, Pepsicola and Uncle chips were not there during my childhood. Lemonade, stored in darkgreen bottles and lozenges with the flavours of mint and orange were the only things available to us.

But there was a long procession of vendors and feriwalas in our colony throughout the year and they came with different foodstuff at different times of the day. During the summer, came the icecreamwala pushing a yellow wooden box on four wheels. The box was stacked with stick iccreams, pink coloured ice slabs with a stick protruding out of it. We held the stick in our hands and licked it, the red coloured water dripping and wetting us upto the elbow. After we sucked it for sometime, the colour and sweetness would vanish and all that would be left would be a small piece of whitish iceslab that we broke with our teeth and ate.

In the month of june and july, came the barafwala with a pushcart which had numerous bottles of coloured syrup arranged in neat little rows at the top. He had a siren fitted in his cart. The moment we heard the shrilling note of the siren, we woke up from our afternoon siesta and ran outside. He grated the ice on a bowl made up of thick wide leaves and poured the coloured syrups on top of the ice granules which made it look like a slice of rainbow. He gave us tiny palmleaf spoons and we scooped and ate the cool stuff with delight.

Summer was also the season for the tender palm seeds or the 'talasaja'. A man brought them regularly. We poked the soft seeds with our fingers and drank the water. And then we peeled them and ate the translucent flesh.

The best of the whole lot was the dalmutwala. He called his stuff 'barmaja'. He had a flair for poetry and had composed a song consisting of small lined couplets that described the uniqueness of his item. He had a nice voice and he sang the song loudly every time he came. He gave us the dalmut in an elongated funnel that he made deftly with a piece of old newspaper and he cheated us invariably. Because the lower portion of the funnel, being too narrow, always remained empty.

There was again this young vendor who sold patato chops, vadas and stuff like that. He carried a small bamboo pole on his shoulder with two slings of equal length hanging on both sides of the pole. There were aluminium pots of different sizes kept inside the slings in ascending order from top to bottom. And he carried the different varieties of snacks inside the pots.

But our most favourite person was the dahivadawala. He was a young boy, smiling and talkative, and he came in a cycle. In the carrier, he had a huge pot of 'aludum', oily, spicy and flavoured with coriander leaves. And in the front rod of his cycle, he carried a pot of dahivada. The vadas were small and the curd was watery. But he sprinkled the vadas lavishly with roasted cumin powder and we liked it that way.

And there were a number of hawkers who sold other items of foodstuff as well. There was a fellow who brought fluffy pink coloured balls made up of fine candy fibre. It seemed as if it was a ball of cottonwool, only pink in colour. One boy brought lollipops made up of sugar candy and another fellow brought small round laddus made up of sesame seed and jaggery.

The papadwala brought papads as big as lotus leaves. In the afternoon, came another boy carrying a glass case on his head, which contained coconut cookies and small yellow coloured cakes that left the taste of baking soda in the mouth.

The sunpapdiwala came with a box of loose sunpapdi on his head and carried a folded triangular stand under his arm on which he kept his box when we called him. There was also this man who brought a sticky goeey mass resembling the dough of wheat flour. He pulled a little of the dough, made tiny toys with the pliable stuff and sold it to us. And there was the emaciated looking oldman who came only on sundays. His right leg was amputated and he walked with the help of a crutch. In the left hand, he carried a huge bowl of 'pedas'. They were simply delicious.

During the winter, a man brought lovely oranges, sweet and juicy and he always called them 'Sylhet oranges'. And in the rainy season, came the jamunwala with fat and glazed jamuns. He sprinkled a little rocksalt on them anytime we purchased the stuff. And there was this oldman who brought sour berries marinated in salt water. The salt made them tender and we liked their tang.

Now a days I see a variety of food stuff in the market which were not there during my childhood. And a large gamut of advertisements is there to attract children towards them. I also see that the enjoyment of children and teenagers has become price-oriented. The higher the price of the food, they think the better is the enjoyment. But the pleasure that we derived by eating two paisa worth of grated ice laced with sugar syrup, was perhaps more than that of eating a costly icecream of present times. Because enjoyment, I personally believe, is a state of mind and is not always directly proportional to the amount of money spent.



THE SULKING BABY

Dissatisfaction and discontentment have been an integral part of my character right from my childhood days. When I was almost two, I had a little coloured bowl made up of thin bamboo strips in which I carried my dried snacks and munched them in between meals. Any time my mother put some peanuts or roasted grams into the bowl, my first reaction was always that of disapproval. I would peep into the bowl and the contents would always seem less to me no matter how much she gave. I would immediately upturn and throw the bowl spilling the contents all over the floor, and would lie down on the ground to register my protest. It would take enough of coaxing and cajoling on the part of my parents to amicably settle the issue.

Oneday, after my mother gave me some nuts, I threw them in my usual fashion, sulked and started rolling on the ground. My parents were occupied with some other work and forgot to come and coax me. I waited for a few minutes and since nobody came forward to pacify me, became afraid that the nuts were perhaps lost for ever. I got up, picked them up one by one from the floor, put them in the bowl and started munching them. My parents learnt their lesson.

After this incident, they hardly ever came forward to pamper me. My pattern of protest of course did not change. But my parents changed. During my tantrums, they would simply feign ignorance of the whole thing and would purposefully remain busy in some not-so-important work watching me all throughout from the corner of their eyes. I would sulk for sometime and noticing that nobody bothered about me, would rise from the ground, collect the small pieces of snacks from the floor and would eat them holding the bowl close to my stomach.

This particular trait in my character has not changed after all these years. Only the pattern of sulking has changed. Not because I do not have the propensity to roll on the ground and beat my limbs in protest but because I have realised, that in such a position, I would now create a ridiculous and formidable sight.

Even today, anytime my husband purchases a saree for me, my immediate reaction is that of disapproval. I would examine the border which would seem absolutely plain and ordinary, the colour would appear drab and dull and I would reject it forthwith. "If you don't like it, we will present it to somebody", my husband would say suppressing his anger and trying hard to sound casual in an attempt to evade the ensuing quarrel.

Then I would suddenly become conscious and would re-examine the saree with revived interest. The border, with its intricate temple like design, would look marvellous and the shade, with the tint of primrose yellow, would appear cool and pleasant. I would wear it and my husband would smile and comment, "You are grown up now, but have not forgotten your childhood habits". Needless to say that my childhood tantrums of disapproval at everything in the first instance, has been narrated before him by my parents.

This, by the way, brings to my memory an incident that happened a few years back. I was in Delhi and was visiting my parents. When I came home, my younger sister also happened to be there. One evening, we both the sisters disagreed upon something and an argument ensued which resulted in a quarrel. My sister is much younger than me and I have carried her in my arms. Naturally I should not have quarrelled with her for anything whatsoever. But then my husband says that I am the

most pampered and the most intolerant person among all my siblings.

During our quarrel, my father was sitting near us in the verandah partaking his evening snacks. When I got very angry, I turned towards him and said "Bapa, why don't you say something ? You just can't go on munching your snacks silently like that."

"What do I say ? It is in between you two", he replied.

"Well, you can at least tell her that she is wrong and I am right", I told turning red on my face. My father smiled. "When you get angry like that, I remember your childhood days. If anything was not upto your liking, you threw it on the ground and sulked. You look exactly like that to me now; no change at all after all these years", he told me in his usual soothing tone.

I got up and went into the bedroom. One just could not get emotional and shed tears in public at the age of fifty.



CHOCOLATE AND CABBAGE LEAF

My father came back from London when I was in class four. He came by train from Bombay and my mother along with some relatives, went to the station to receive him. He came in a horse driven cart from the station. Cuttack had only handpulled rickshaws and horsecarts at that time.

He reached in the evening and looked very much a European in his three piece blue striped suit. He looked a little plump and fairer and spoke in a nasal voice. He, after his wash, sat on the armchair and asked my mother about my grandfather's death who had expired during his absence. My mother gave him the details and he wept. We felt funny seeing him sobbing like a woman, ran to the corner of the verandah and giggled.

And then he took out the chocolates that he had brought for us- slabs and slabs of them, and they came in various shapes, sizes and flavours. Some had fragmented nuts in them, others had cream inside and some had a single crackling pistachio in the middle. Some smelt of oranges and some smelt of milk. We went on eating the chocolates till we got tired of them. We held them tight inside our fists till they became soggy and paste-like and then we threw them. The whole house smelt of chocolate.

Our father had not changed at all; he was the same affectionate person. He talked to us in his usual soothing tone and we asked him innumerable questions about London.

"The sahebs are very fair, aren't they?" we asked him again and again. "Yes, they are fairer than us. Especially I found the little children very cute there. Anytime I saw them, I remembered all of you", he smiled and replied.

"By staying with the sahebs, you have become fairer also", we said in chorus and my father explained that the climate was colder there and that had made the pigments of his skin less dark.

"Is it very cold there ? Is it colder than Cuttack" ?

"Yes it is, especially during winter. I had to wear an overcoat when I went out in the evening.

"And where is the overcoat" ? We wanted to see it.

"I gave it to a friend- Mihir Sen, before I came. It would have been useless here", my father replied. We didn't know who was Mihir Sen and ignored him completely.

"Is there no sunshine in London?" we enquired. "Not in the way as it is here. Most of the days it is cloudy and there is a drizzle. People rejoice when there is sunshine. It is a pleasure to see parents and children walking in the park in the sunny afternoons", my father said.

"Are there poor people there ? Are there beggars" ? There was a continuous stream of beggars to our house throughout the day and we got tired of giving alms- a small bowl of rice, to each one of them. And we were interested to know if our father gave alms there too.

"I have never seen beggars there. Only once, when I was having my evening walk, a person came and asked me for some monetary help. I had some change in my pocket and I gave it to him", my father replied and we were disappointed.

"Only one beggar you saw ? What was he wearing" ?

"He wore a suit, but it was shabby and tattered", my father told us and we were impressed. A beggar wearing a suit ! The beggars who came to our house wore pieces of loin clothes only.

But our high impression of London for its fair angelic people and well-dressed beggars soon changed into a poor one.

While eating our dinner at night, we asked our father "Bapa, did you eat rice there?"

"No, I didn't. Rice is not the staple food there. The climate is not suitable for paddy cultivation", he replied and that astonished us.

"Then what did you eat?" we asked in surprise. We knew he was a vegetarian.

"I ate so many things- bread and butter, juice, cheese, potato, fruits, milk and salad. Their food is more nutritious. They don't put chilli and spices in their vegetables as your mother does here". My father had a dig at my mother and she frowned.

The items of food that my father mentioned were known to us except one- salad, and we asked him what it was.

"It is only a mixture of raw vegetables- carrots, tomatoes, cabbage leaves and things of that sort."

My mother had never given us any raw vegetable except cucumber till then and eating cabbage leaves seemed horrible and barbaric to us. We had seen bulls and cows munching cabbage leaves in the nearby vegetable market.

"Cabbage leaves ? My God ! How can they eat cabbage leaves ? I would simply vomit if I eat them", I commented in between my morsels.

"No, it is only the tender leaves that they eat. They shred it finely and make it tasty with seasoning. It tastes nice", my father explained, but we didn't believe him. And the Londoners lost all respect from us for eating cabbage leaves.

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THE ESSAY

My mother felt sorry for coming to the village after my father's departure for London. Her sorrow, in a sense, was justified. Because our village had no school and I was roaming about aimlessly along with my two friends—the girlish looking moonfaced Raghu, who for some mysterious reason remained perpetually naked and the dark and handsome Mantu, our priest's son whose lovely thick eyelashes seemed to be always smeared with mascara and I had fallen an easy prey to their irresistible charm.

Our neighbouring village, Baraput, of course had a school where they taught upto class three. No brahmin girl of our village used to go to school at that time. So my mother called Mandakini, a girl belonging to some other community and requested her to take me along with her to the school. I agreed reluctantly to her proposal.

Next day, Mandakini, on her way to the school, picked me up and took me along with her. She made me sit near her in class two and introduced me to the teacher who felt honoured that the zamindar's grand daughter was in his class and told me so. I felt uncomfortable because at Cuttack, I was an anonymous student— just one among so many, with no special status ever attached to me.

However, I do not remember much about this school except one single incident, because it was this incident that made my first day in the school the last day also.

The children became a little chaotic and the teacher in order to keep them busy asked them to write an essay. The topic was "autobiography of a pair of spectacles". I do not know why this

wayward topic caught his fancy, perhaps because he himself wore a pair of cracked horn rimmed spectacles himself.

But the essay put me into trouble. However hard I tried, I couldn't imagine even one single line about the concerned topic. I knew how to write the autobiography of a cow and had to somehow connect the pair of spectacles with the cow. So I wrote "I am not a cow and hence I do not have four feet" and then the following sentences came easily.

When the period was over, the teacher collected all the slates and started reading them aloud one by one. When he took my slate, I felt ashamed and hid myself behind Mandakini. But he finished the reading, gave a nod of approval and commented that it was the best written essay in the whole class. "What a beautiful essay and what lovely handwriting !", he exclaimed again and again and that made my condition even worse. In my small childish mind, I knew that although he was correct about the handwriting, his assessment of the essay was wrong and he was being blatantly partial towards me because of my grandfather's position in the village. I looked at the faces of other children and gathered the impression that they, though remained silent, understood this partiality and that made me feel even more embarrassed. In my opinion, the essay of Mandakini with the opening line- I am a pair of spectacles and I sit snug on the long and prominent nose of my teacher, should have been adjudged the best. But nobody asked for my comment.

And I stopped going to the school next day and remained stubborn in my decision. My mother ultimately lost interest also. Firstly the school was far away, on the other side of the village pond and one had to cross the small stream and the mango grove in order to reach there and she didn't want me to go all the way alone. Secondly, she preferred to keep a private tutor so that my younger brother could also sit with me

and learn his alphabets. That would be like killing two birds with a single stone.

So Lambodar, a thin, sickly lad of fifteen or so was appointed as the private tutor. The boy belonged to our village and had passed class three and daily morning we two, myself and my brother, sat with him in the small anti-room next to the bullockshed and he taught us. Lambodar didn't look like a teacher and we hardly ever bothered about him. In spite of his repeated requestes, we refused to call him "mastre", the Oriya synonym of 'sir' and we gave him the nickname "Lamba" instead.

There were no books and Lambodar made me write small essays on my slate and taught me simple numericals and tables. It was a mere repetition of what I had already learnt at Cuttack. But it gave my mother some mental satisfaction that my education was being looked after.

However, my brother, who was only four, developed terrible fright for study and the moment Lambodar came, he went and hid himself behind my grandmother. My grandmother promptly gave him a broom asking him to sweep her room of worship and she herself sat on the doorstep guarding him lest my mother would drag him to the teacher. She simply failed to understand the utility of study. My mother, though got annoyed, couldn't tell anything face to face to her mother-in-law and succeeded only occassionally in dragging my brother out of the pooja room. My brother couldn't learn the alphabets, but turned out to be an expert in sweeping the floor in no time.



THE MANGO SEASON

My maternal grandfather had a mango grove. When the mangoes ripened in the summer, my uncle visited the grove along with the hired labourers to pluck the mangoes and I usually accompanied him in such trips. The labourers climbed the trees and plucked the mangoes with their hands if the fruits grew on nearby branches. The ones that hung from the distant boughs were plucked with the help of tall bamboo poles. The poles were fitted with small nets at one of their ends. The labourers slipped each and every mango deftly into the net, loosened them from the stalk by twisting the pole and the fruits lay collected inside the rope netting. The net was emptied from time to time.

The plucking operation, being manual, was time-consuming and continued for days together. My uncle remained busy in his supervision and I spent the time in selecting the most succulent mangoes from the heap on the ground and sucked them one after another. Occasionally, I wandered about in the meandering footpaths inside the grove, searching for exotic plants and anthills.

After the mangoes reached home, the busy schedule of my grandma started. She procured bagful of dry sand from the river through the servants, spread it in thick layers in the rooms and closed verandahs and arranged the mangoes in neat little rows in the sand bed after washing them clean. The sand helped the half ripe mangoes to turn perfectly mellow within a few days and then my feasting season started. My lips and chin remained perpetually smeared with mango juice and it continued to be so till the last mango was finished.

The mangoes had lovely names as well and they earned their names from the peculiarities of their shapes and colours. The one with the protruding nose was called 'nakoī' and 'kalia' resembled a full grown banana in shape. 'Sinduri' when ripe, turned vermilion red in colour and 'ambili' had the tang of sourness in it. The little one, with watery thin juice, was called 'gurudi' and the big one with thick yellow juice resembling that of a jackfruit was called 'panasua'. 'Kanchasuadi' tasted sweet even if taken raw.

There is a small incident associated with mangoes that I still remember because it taught me a lesson till then unknown to me.

During the plucking time, usually my uncle took a break of one hour or so at noon and both of us came home for lunch. But it was the last day of the plucking and my uncle didn't want to leave the grove. He wanted to finish the job that very day and was afraid that the labourers would gossip and delay the work if he remained absent. So he asked me to go home alone for my food.

I came through the mainroad which was also the bus route connecting the nearby villages with Cuttack. The road was lined with tall deodars on both sides, ran absolutely straight and seemed to merge with the horizon. Suddenly, I did not know why, I was caught with the fancy of walking with my eyes closed. The road was straight without any sharp bends and that gave me the confidence of walking blindfold.

But I had walked only a few paces when I felt a sharp pain on my forehead and opening my eyes, found that I had bumped against the massive trunk of a deodar. I had shifted my position from the middle of the road and had gone completely diagonal. The pain was acute and made me oblivious of everything for a few seconds. When I regained my sense and touched my

forehead, the bulbous swelling about the size of a plum was already there. I was happy that the stretch of the road was empty and no passerby saw me.

I came back home and told my grandma a lie- that on my way, I had tripped against a stone and had fallen down. I was afraid that if I told the truth, she in turn, would inform my uncle about it and he would be angry with me for my mischievousness. Bumping against a stone seemed a pardonable offence. It could happen to anybody.

When my uncle returned in the evening with the cartload of mangoes, I was sitting on my grandmother's lap and she was applying some herbal paste to the swelling on my head. My uncle, nevertheless, scolded me for my carelessness. But then everybody remained busy with the mangoes and I was forgotten for quite sometime.

That was the first time in my life when I learnt that it was impossible to walk in a straight line with eyes closed. Of course now that I am grown up, I find people, with their eyes wide open, not being able to walk in straight lines either.



THE STORY OF LIGHT

My father had acquired two new ideas from London. The first one was his obsession for bobbed hair. My mother used to spend hours after me oiling and brushing my hair. She washed my hair twice a week and made neat little plaits out of them tying them with different shades of coloured ribbons and she purchased yards and yards of ribbons for me. In fact, my mother enjoyed the ritual of messing up with my hair. It was the fulfilment of her long cherished dream. Because once she told me that when I was a baby, half of her time was spent in daydreaming that her tiny daughter had grown up to a sweet little kid with luxuriant tresses of hair and she was weaving fat and long pigtailed out of them. My father disliked these paraphernalia "Most of the western women have short hair. That saves them from unnecessary botheration", he would comment again and again. But my mother turned a deaf ear to these comments.

The second thing about which my father was obsessed was about carrying a bag or a small attachee with us anytime we went out of the house. When my mother went for shopping, she tied the money in one corner of her saree and we carried our books to the school holding them casually in our hands. Both the things were not appreciated by my father. He had no idea about lady's handbag and could not purchase one for my mother. But for us, he purchased cute little tin suitcases to carry our books to the schools.

He himself carried his books and other knickknacks in a suitcase to the college. People were not habituated to this practice at that time and found it funny and unusual, but he did not care. He disliked leather bags because it was made out of animal hide. And these fashionable rexin bags that are very common now-a-days had not come to the market at that time.

In our school, none of our friends carried suitcases and we felt embarrassed to use them. Instead, we played with them till they became dented and their paint peeled off and my father religiously substituted them with new ones. God only knows how many suitcases, one after another, my father purchased for us during our school career. We never used them and they, being tiny ones, were useless for any other purpose. They lay scattered here and there—under the beds, above the cupboards and on the kitchen shelves, and our house looked more or less like a junkyard of old rusted suitcases.

However, the issue of suitcase was relegated to the background for some time because something very very exciting and wonderful happened to us during this period, Electricity came to Cuttack and eventually to our colony. This made us bid farewell to oil lamps and soot-stained lanterns for good. For a fortnight or so, Brundaban, the electrician, bore holes through the walls and we, the children, stood near his stool and looked at the criss-cross pattern of the wires with wonder. Children, who are born with electricity can never imagine our thrill and excitement. The night electric connection was given to our house, we switched on all the lights in both storeys of the house, in the courtyard, in the garden and even in the bathroom which was a little away from the main wing and we danced merrily. Our eyes, habituated the dim light of the lantern became dazzled. We ran out to the main road. The big powerful bulbs on both sides of the road threw their yellowish glow on us casting elongated phantomlike shadows down below and we felt ecstatic.

And the wooden poles with their rectangular glass cases meant for sheltering the oil lamps were uprooted from our lane by the municipality. The dirtily clad oilman, who came every evening with a ladder, climbed to the top of the dwarf poles and lighted the flickering lamps after filling them with oil, came no more and we missed him.



THE PERFORMING ART

My grandmother had made a promise before Lord Satyanarayan to perform a pooja if her son returned from London safe and sound. My father had come back before a year but the pooja couldn't be held because my father's presence was necessary for it. So my father availed a few day's leave and all of us went to the village for a short visit.

The pooja was arranged in a grand scale by my grandmother. A 'pala', a form of folk performing art associated with Lord Satyanarayan, was also held. It was my first experience of observing a 'pala' and I enjoyed it much at that impressionable age, sitting hypnotised all throughout the night.

On the day of the pooja, my mother took her bath and prepared 'sirini', an offering for Lord Satyanarayan, which was a must for such an occasion. It was a delicious concoction of sweetened milk and mashed banana seasoned with peppercorn and flavoured with a pinch of camphor. In the afternoon, an applique work shamiana was fixed in front of our house with the help of wooden pillars from where the petromax lights hung casting their bluish fluorescent light all around.

The chief palasinger 'Haribandhu' was our next door neighbour. He was a handsome young man, tall and slim, and had an aquiline nose that suited his slightly elongated face. His shoulder length wavy hair made him look distinctive.

The pala started a little before midnight and went on till morning. Haribandhu, before starting his performance offered obeisance to Lord Satyanarayan and then sang and danced all throughout the night without taking respite even for a single minute. He sang songs from classical Oriya literature in his

rich sonorous voice, often pausing and explaining the difficult lines for the sake of the audience. A tiny pair of cymbals, fastened together with a thread and entwined inbetween his fingers, tingled when he moved his hand. And with the other hand he held a 'chamara', a floppy and hairy brush-like thing with a handle that he waved occasionally with elan. He looked marvellous with his solid golden earring, silver armlet, sequined jacket and long pleated skirt that reached upto his ankles.

The other singers stood in a group behind him and repeated the lines in chorus after him. The villagers commented that the right hand singer Naba, the young farmer, lent a very good support to the main singer. But I personally liked Rama, Haribandhu's younger brother, who was merely a lad in his early teens. He stood behind everybody and gave impressive leaps in between along with the beats of the drum that he carried in his shoulder. His printed skirt swirled in a circle when he went round and round and I felt upset at the onlookers who did not seem to appreciate his feats at all.

The pala started at midnight and continued till dawn. The villagers, barebodies and bronzed, with stubs of coarse beard on their chins, squatted spellbound all around. The village women hugged each other and sat on the doorsteps drawing their veils over their faces. The stones in their nose-studs often caught a ray from the petromax lamp and sparkled in the dark. I remained awake throughout the night and the thing that fascinated me most was Haribandhu's own innovation of rhymed couplets that were interspersed throughout his recitation. Be it a request to a sleepy villager to remain awake or be it a request to my mother to send a plateful of pan for him—everything was told in the form of a song and Haribandhu composed them extempore.

I spent my entire life outside Orissa and came back here only after my husband's retirement. And I had the chance of watching a 'pala' again in the television. I was surprised to see the changes, both in the costume as well as the style of presentation. The long pleated skirts were replaced by dhotis and the singers wore 'kurtas' in place of short jackets. The ornaments like earrings, armlets and silver chains around the waist were all missing. The singers no more took swirls like Rama did once upon a time. Nor did the right hand singer played his mrudang with that gay abandon bending down or kneeling on the ground as Naba did when I was small. Pala had undergone a metamorphosis and had become stylised. And the spirit, the colour, the verve and vitality were missing. More so, the ambience that went along with it.

Or might be, I no longer saw it with the dreamy eyes of a little girl. At my age, that passion for fantasy and virtual reality is totally gone. I have lost the child's fairytale world of wonder and I think it is a great loss to me.



MY GRANDMOTHER

I do not remember much about my paternal grandmother. But somehow her memory, so far as I am concerned, has always been associated with fire. I spent one winter with her when I was very small and I remember her habit of making a bonfire every morning during the winter months. She was old and couldn't tolerate the cold. She brought a huge basketful of twigs and dried leaves to the courtyard and lighted a fire everyday. And she sat near the fire the entire morning till it was time to go for her bath. Getting large amount of dried leaves was no problem. The tribal women collected them from the nearby forest and sold them to us.

We enjoyed sitting with her near the fire munching solid pieces of cottage cheese that my mother purchased from the wives of the cowherds who came daily from a nearby village carrying huge earthen pots of milk products on their heads. Their tattooed arms, right from the wrist upto the elbow, were covered with heavy bracelets of solid brass and we looked at them and wondered as to how could they carry all that weight on their body effortlessly.

And there was another instance of fire again that is associated with my grandmother also. It was dusk and I remember coming back from the pool along with my grandmother after our evening bath when suddenly I saw a huge cloud of smoke and soot rising in the sky from the direction of the village and it grew in size every minute. My grandmother commented that some thatched houses of the village had caught fire and we ran through the paddy fields as best as we could hoping all the while that it was not our house.

On reaching home, we found that our house was safe, but the whole front wing on the other side of the main road was ablaze. The leaping flames licked the sky with their fearsome hungry tongues and the inflammable bamboos burst making noises like powerful crackers. The whole village was assembled on the site of the fire and tried hard to control the fire by pouring water and throwing freshly cut moisture-filled green banana trunks into the fire. But the most pathetic sight was that of Prema, our doll like friend. She was not only crying loudly, but also was running naked hither and thither often stopping near the cement altar in front of her house that carried the sacred basil plant. She prayed and banged her head repeatedly against the altar. Her house had not caught fire, but she was extremely frightened. We were too shocked to utter even a word and clung to our mother who stood at the doorstep peering at the fire through the small opening of her veil and muttering prayers. Ultimately the fire was extinguished, but for quite sometime the sight of the fire, even in the kitchen, made me nervous and panicstricken.

My grandmother was a timid, god-fearing and simple woman. Her innocence and naivety can be gauged from the fact that although she was the wife of a very rich man, she didn't even know how to count money. We liked everything about her except the fact that she was finicky about certain things which, somehow, we could not comprehend. She followed the age old customs of the village religiously and her sense of cleanliness defied all norms of social sciences and commonsense. As per her belief, it was the easiest thing to get polluted. One got polluted for going to the market, roaming about in the wasteland, visiting the toilet, stepping into the garbage dump and for touching a person who belonged to a lower caste. Being citybred, we were unfamiliar to these customs and were careless enough

to get polluted a number of times throughout the day. The purification process was simple- we had to wash our clothes and take a bath. About the bath, we didn't mind but the washing of clothes posed a big problem. My mother was not allowed to clean them because by touching them, she would also be contaminated. Of course Raghu, our six-year old chubby faced friend had found out an easy solution to this problem. He remained perpetually naked. But myself and my cousin Kanchan just abhorred his habit and we rather preferred washing our clothes many times a day.



A TRAGIC STORY

My maternal grandfather had a small farm-house, a two roomed cottage of brick and cement that faced the mainroad and this house had a special attraction for me. I used to spend the entire morning sitting on its narrow corridor and watching the pedestrians. I saw petty merchants going with cartloads of cabbage and cauliflower to the nearby market, the emaciated old brahmin returning from the river after his early bath taking extra care to avoid contact with low caste people, the bearded singing minstrel with his huge begging bowl of scooped out pumpkin and the young farmer, who looked gorgeous the other day in his bright, sequined costume as the chief opera singer, walking down wearing a tattered loin cloth. I sat and watched the people with interest till 'Pali', the blind girl came and asked me to lead her to the river for her morning bath.

The river had a huge banyan tree on her bank. The tree, supported by numerous proproots, looked like a large parasol and the pigeons made their nests in the cosy nooks, in between the branches. And the roots, curved and python like, stretched themselves as far as the river bed.

There was a jackfruit tree near it. Somebody, sometime, had hacked a thick slice of wood from the tree and the cut never healed. There was a continuous dripping of thick red juice, resembling partially coagulated blood, from the tree-trunk. The village women, before going for bath, picked up two or three jackfruit leaves that had fallen down from the tree. They chewed it to a pulp and brushed their teeth with the soft mass.

There was also a solitary palm tree exactly on the bank of

the river. It had grown old and bore no fruit. But my mother had told me that during her childhood, it yielded fruits in abundance throughout the year. The ripe fruits fell down from the tree and the village women, whosoever happened to be present there at that time, picked up the fruits and took them home. They extracted the sweet juice, mixed rice flour with it and made cakes. One day an old lady, while returning after her bath, stood under the tree, raised her hand in a gesture of anger and cursed the tree for never favouring her with a fruit. Exactly at that particular instant, a ripe palm fell down on her hand. The fruit, because of the force and momentum, broke the wrist bone of the poor woman and she recouped after a prolonged sickness. Anytime I saw the tree, I remembered that episode.

Near this palm tree, there was a dilapidated old Shiva temple. The village women, after their morning bath, prostrated themselves before the Deity before returning home. One morning, when I went for my bath along with my aunty, I saw great commotion going on in the bathing ghat. A man, almost semiconscious, sat in front of the Shiva temple and the villagers were continuously pouring water on his head carrying it from the river in huge brass pitchers. Linga uncle, my grandfather's servant, stood near the man helping him to sit erect as he tended to fall down. An old lady and a young woman were banging their heads on the stone-wall of the Shiva temple and were weeping pathetically. My aunty told me that the man had been struck by a cobra and the two women were his mother and wife respectively.

"But why are they making him sit near the temple ? And why are they pouring water on his head ?" I asked my aunty; because I knew that snake venom was dangerous and would kill a person.

"Serpents are carried by Lord Shiva around his neck and are known to be his favourite pets. The villagers believe that the blessings of this particular God might save the man from death and that is why they have brought him to the temple. They also think that the water would counter act the effect of poison", my aunty replied.

"But they should take him to a hospital", I commented feeling not very happy with the belief of the villagers. "It is not your Cuttack. There are no hospitals nearby", my aunty replied sadly.

We took our bath and came back. In the late afternoon, when I went for my evening bath, I found the man dead. His body was lying in front of the temple and was covered with a dirty rag. One villager was sitting near him and the rest had gone back to the village to arrange for his funeral.

The pathetic sight of the two women banging their heads against the wall of the temple in the morning came back to my memory again and again and I felt a strange sort of pain in my innocent little heart. It cramped, bled and suffered for them in its own childish way.

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MY AUNT'S ROOM

When I was at Harirajpur, my mother's village, I usually slept with my grand mother. But the bed-room of my aunty had special charm and attraction for me, though she never asked me to sleep with her. Her cot was big and wide with decorative wooden frames on both sides. It had small barricades of nearly six inches height on the right and left sides so that a person could never fall down even if he took a careless turn. She burnt joss sticks in front of the coloured photograph of Lord Krishna that she kept in one corner of her room and the whole room smelt of incense and sweet-smelling flowers that she wore in her hair. The pillows were round and high and the mat felt smooth. The attraction to sleep on that bed was too much to resist.

So one night I took up the issue with my grandmother. "I want to sleep with aunty to night", I declared with defiance. "Why ? What happened ? You have been sleeping daily with me.", my grandma looked surprised.

"No, I won't sleep with you any more. Your pillow is dirty and the mat is torn." I became adamant.

"Don't you know aunty has already gone to sleep ? You go to her tomorrow.", my grandma told me. But I was not a fool to be cheated so easily.

"How can she go to bed ? Uncle has not come for his dinner yet", I argued and stood up in protest. My grandma started pulling me towards her.

"I shall make lovely pancakes for you tomorrow. Come on, sleep now.", she told in an effort to coax me, but I hated her

for forcibly detaining me like that and as a last resort started crying.

In the meantime, my aunty heard my cry and came out of her room enquiring what was the matter.

I ran towards her, hugged her tight around her waist and pronounced "I want to sleep with you to night".

My grandma got up from her bed with difficulty because of her polio-stricken leg and tried to separate me from my aunty. In addition to the pancakes, she promised to cook khichdi- a delicious preparation of rice, roasted gram, sugar and coconut slices, for me. But I protested vehemently and the volume and pitch of my wailing increased.

"It is alright mother, let her sleep with me", my aunty replied ultimately and carried me to her room. Her pillow was too high for me and I was afraid that I might get a stiff neck in the morning. But it smelt of sandalwood and hair oil and I fell asleep soon.

I got up late in the morning. My aunty was already awake and was not in the room. I saw another small charpoy lying by the side of the huge cot. Obviously, it had been carried from the verandah at night and somebody was sleeping soundly on it. His face was not visible as he covered himself from head to toe with a sheet and I became afraid. "Aunty come and see: there is somebody else in the room." I ran and told my aunty who was lighting the fire in the kitchen.

"It is your uncle dear. He came home late. You didn't know because you were fast asleep.", my aunty replied casually from the smoke- filled kitchen.

I didn't know that my maternal uncle slept in that room. Every night, by the time he came, I usually fell asleep and when I awoke in the morning, I saw him going to the river for his early bath. It was obvious that I had occupied his place in

the huge cot and he had to carry the collapsible little charpoy for himself the previous night. Perhaps my grandmother didn't want me to displace him from his bed and perhaps that was the reason for which she was not allowing me to sleep with my aunty.

The whole thing seemed mysterious to me and I had a vague uneasy feeling, though rationally, I couldn't explain it. But after that night, I never cried to sleep in my aunty's room.



A JOURNEY BY CYCLE

Immediately after my grandfather's death, the burglary took place in our house. Kilograms of gold and silver ornaments, stacks of currency notes, basketful of silver coins of different denominations, all that my grandfather had accumulated during his lifetime, were stolen. My grandfather had kept all his gold and money in a huge *sindhuk*, a decorative wooden safe, in the corner room of the old house. The room was kept locked. The dacoity took place at night. In the morning, when my grandmother opened the room, she discovered the theft.

I still remember that unfortunate day. I woke up in the morning and found my mother and grandmother weeping. The women from the neighbourhood were consoling them and the entire village had assembled in front of our house. Both my cousin and myself entered into the room. The safe was lying open and the whole room was ransacked. Few coins of smaller denomination were scattered here and there on the floor.

"That is the hole through which the thieves entered", my cousin told me pointing towards the roof and I saw a big gap in the thatched ceiling through which a part of the clean blue sky was visible.

Obviously the burglars knew all about the house and the location of the safe. My mother and uncle suspected one of the neighbours, but there was no proof against him. The police station was far away and the police reached after one day. But the thieves couldn't be traced and we lost virtually everything, every single penny that we had. All that was left was only the immovable landed property.

The theft left everybody morose and broken-hearted. The cohesion and harmony that was in the house when my grandfather was alive was also no more there. My grandmother, in her newly acquired widowhood, lost all interest in household affairs and spent time merely counting the beads of her rosary throughout the day. My aunt, my father's elder brother's wife, was childless and had no stake either in the family or in home. More over, she became an opium addict which my mother did not like and there was continuous tension between the two. The only result of this was that we, the children, got neglected. My aunt had my uncle with her for support, but my father being abroad, my mother was totally helpless and had nobody to fall back upon.

So when Narasimha uncle, my mother's elder brother paid a courtesy call to my mother and expressed his desire to take me along with him to his village, my mother agreed instantaneously. The main reason for which she volunteered to send me was that there was a primary school in my maternal uncle's village and he promised to put me in the school and look after my education. The one year that I had stayed in our village was totally wasted and I was going to be seven soon. My uncle had no children and as such, my mother felt assured that being the only kid there, I would be pampered and looked after well.

So next morning, my mother got me ready for the journey. She wiped my face clean and wove two little pigtails on my head. I had no ribbon. The ones that I carried from Cuttack were either torn or lost and they were not available in the village. So my mother wove my plaits with "pataphuli" - a thick thread ending on both sides with little bows of coarse red cloth. This was commonly used among the village girls to tie their hair. I did not like them and sulked, but my mother was helpless.

She had no cash money to purchase fancy thing for us from the nearby market.

I still remember the day when I left with Narasimha uncle for his village Harirajpur. My mother wept because she had never stayed without me. But I was thrilled about visiting a new place. My uncle put the small bundle of my frocks in the carrier of his bicycle and made me sit on the front rod. I gripped the handle tight, crossed my little legs resting them on the mudguard and we started riding through the paddy fields under the open sky. The air blew hard on my face making my braids fly in the opposite direction. Sitting on the rod in one position for hours together hurt me. But I looked around, enjoyed the scenery and soon forgot about the discomfort.

We passed through long stretches of parrot green fields, bamboo groves, big ponds full of lotus buds and swamps where the fishermen caught fishes with their basket like bamboo traps. A patch of cloud appeared suddenly and drenched us a little with a few drops of rain and I enjoyed it. After crossing a long asymmetrical row of palm trees and a grey barren hill with a small temple at the top, we reached the main-road and cycled along the huge earthen embankment of the river Mahanadi. The villages, partly visible through the peepul and mango trees, passed one by one, and my uncle told me their names- Patpur, Bedapur, Khamaranga, Sisua, Chakapada and they sounded interesting. Often a villager, who knew my uncle, asked him about me and my uncle, without stopping his bicycle, answered. "She is my little niece, Surekha's daughter. Has come to stay with us."

The villager nodded and walked on.



THE VILLAGE SCENE

The mainhouse in our village was a big one. It had two courtyards, a granary, a separate wing for my grandma and a garden. Throughout the day, we played either in the courtyard or in the garden. The garden had a special charm for us.

It had two plum trees popularly known as 'barkoli' in Oriya. The bigger tree bore fruits that turned maroon coloured and mellow when ripe, but tasted sour. We plucked the plums with a bamboo pole and ate them with salt. The smaller one was only as thick as our arm in girth, but tall. And the fruits, even if ripe, remained green and hard, and tasted very sweet. We simply shook this tree with our hands and the matured berries fell down on the ground.

There was a well in the garden and the young brides from nearby houses came and drew water from it. The well had no boundary wall and was on level with the ground. My mother had once fallen down into it, though without any major harm, and we never went near it. When we got bored, we went into the cowshed that was at the farthest end of the garden and played with the lily white and fawn-coloured calves. They ran fast with their knotted nimble feet lifting up their snake-like tails and we giggled and chased them. Our chase would end only when 'Chhota', the cowherd in charge of the cows, got exasperated and drove us out of the shade.

We used to walk down miles in a small trodden path in-between paddy fields to take our morning and afternoon bath. There was a pond at the end of our village, but the water was dirty and creamy in consistency because the buffaloes, while taking their bath, defecated inside. My mother never allowed

us to take our bath there. Instead, she would take us along with her to either of the two pools- the mango pool or the banana pool- although they were farther from the village in distance. The pools earned their names because one had a huge mango tree on the bank and the other was encircled with banana trees all around. We preferred the mango pool, because a shallow hilly stream ran adjacent to it and the double-peaked mountain- the 'uncle and the nephew', looked clearer and nearer from that site. After taking bath, we ran ahead of our mother making it a point to touch each and every small mimosa plant that grew on both the sides of the meandering path. We touched them and observed, with delight, their thin lacy leaves closing and drooping like a sensitive shy bride.

There was the temple of Lord Gopinath, the most revered Deity of the village in a little lane slightly away from our house. When the thick-bluish curls of smoke, a result of lighting of fire in individual kitchens in preparation of the evening meal rose above the thatched roofs, we knew that it was the time for prayer and proceeded to the temple. The priest lighted oil lamps, burnt lumps of camphor on a shining brass saucer and chanted Sanskrit hymns tinkling a little bell rhythmically in one of his hands. The smell of camphor, mingling with the mild fragrance of the 'malati' flowers that blossomed in the temple courtyard, created an ethereal feeling.

During the festivals, usually a theatre was enacted in the temple premises. The year we stayed in the village, it was decided to stage the 'Mahabharat' and our friend Mantu the priest's son, was offered the role of Sahadev. Mantu was slightly elder to us and was a loud-mouthed boy. But he had a pair of dark limpid eyes and we adored him.

The drama was to start at midnight and was to go on till dawn. My mother won't allow us to go to the temple that late,

but we cried and she agreed ultimately. Mantu had asked us to go and see his performance and we didn't want to disappoint him. The kings, princes and the four elder Pandavas wore wide-bordered sarees in royal fashion that were collected from the trousseau of the young brides of the village. After all the important characters were dressed, it was found that no saree was left for the youngest brother of the Pandavas and Mantu appeared on the stage wearing a pair of black shorts with a crumpled off- white shirt tucked inside. Nevertheless, he stood bold and upright on the stage at the end of the row next to Nakula and delivered his two-lined dialogue faultlessly and we felt proud of him.



THE RIVER

Harirajpur, my mothers village and the river Mahanadi were synonymous with each other. The village ran parallel to the river. Only an earthen embankment separated the two.

My mother says that during her childhood, they would just cross over the barn at the backside of their house and the river was there- serene, sparkling and beautiful. It ran adjacent to their house. During the month of 'sravana', the river overflowed the bank and the entire village was submerged in water. The houses were constructed on a very high plinth. Yet occasionally, the flood water entered into the courtyards. The entire surrounding remained under water for days together and the village looked like a tiny island. People moved from one place to another in small country boats. Children made buoys out of hollow banana trunks and played in the water. They loved it. It was only when the embankment was constructed that the scenario changed.

The village and the river were inseparable, and the culture of the place was absolutely river oriented. There were wells in the village. But the villagers used water from the river for drinking purpose. They said it tasted sweet and helped in digestion. They took bath in the river twice a day and the girls who went to their in-law's place after marriage, missed the river more than they missed their parents. They felt their complexion getting darker without a river bath. They came back, took a dip in the cool sparkling water of the Mahanadi and felt rejuvenated. The river ghat served as a social gathering also. Veiled women, while polishing their silver bracelets and anklets with handful of fine silvery sand, exchanged pleasantries and talked about their spouses and children.

No farmer ever used manure in his field in the village. During the monsoon, the river widened considerably submerging

the fields on its bank and when the water receded, it left a two inch layer of dark thick sediment on the soil that made the land fertile.

The river ghat was also a market place. Huge boats carrying earthen vessels came through the river and the women purchased them for daily use. Aluminium vessels were unknown and the cooking in cent percent cases was done in earthen pots and pans.

The villagers collected pebbles- any amount they liked, from the dried river bed in summer, mixed it with mud and plastered their courtyards and floors with this mixture. The multicoloured pebbles, visible partially at places through the clay, created beautiful mosaic patterns.

The river supplied the main food to the villagers- fishes. They came in various shapes, sizes and colours. The elongated rod like ones like 'todi' and 'cherua', tiny worm like shrimps, and 'kau' and 'magura' that remained alive in water for days together. The fisherwomen cut open the bigger fishes, cleaned them and dried them in the sun after marinating them in salt water. The villagers purchased pieces of those dried fish and stored them in hollow bamboo cylinders. They roasted them on burning cowdung amber and ate them with rice soaked in water. The dried fish, along with green chillies, went well with the partially fermented rice that had a cool and soporific effect.

The river always attracted me and I took several dips in it throughout the day. During the summer it became dry and I enjoyed my bath in the sparkling, crystal clear water. But during the monsoon, it looked ferocious and the muddy water, full of froth and dirt, gushed forth in huge angry torrents. One of the cousin sister of my grandfather was drowned in this river during my stay there. And the river claimed one or two lives from the village almost every year. But this, in no way, diminished the affection of the villagers for the river.

Perhaps this is the way of love; one tends to forgive and forget the lapses quite easily.



TO BAPA, WITH LOVE

I was a problematic, moody and selfish baby right from the beginning; perfectly queen like, if not in looks, at least in temperament. I cried perpetually and my parents wondered as to how the two tiny lungs of such a small creature could utter such piercing siren like sound. The remedy, of course, was simple. Somebody had just to carry me in his arms and I would be as quiet as a pet kitten.

However, to make me extra comfortable, my mother made a softer bed. An oval cane swing was hung from the ceiling in the open verandah to give it enough space for rocking and I was made to sleep inside. That also didn't help much. Either my father or my mother had to carry me in the crook of their arms round the clock. The moment they put me down, I cried.

My father still attributes this to my supreme intelligence. Otherwise how could such a small baby distinguish instantaneously between the parent's lap and the cement floor? I have, of course, my own reasoning for this. Being a premature baby, I left my mother's womb too early and perhaps missed it. The moment she held me tight to her bosom, I felt snug and secured sucking her body warmth to my optimum satisfaction. On a lonesome bed, I missed it and felt insecured.

My father recapitulated these scenes before me long afterwards. After my son was born at Cuttack, one night he simply wouldn't sleep and would go on crying unless I put him on my shoulder and pace up and down the long corridor. This went on throughout the night and my father teased me with mock pleasure- "So now you understand how much trouble you have given us night after night".

My mother was young and lacked the patience of handling a perpetually crying baby. She was exhausted after the day's work also and wanted to rest a little at night. So the night vigil became a daily routine for my father. During the day, he taught in the college and at night he looked after me.

Daily evening, my mother would massage me with warm mustard oil boiled in a small bowl with a few pods of garlic and a few grains of black cumin thrown into it. This was meant to give extra warmth to my thin little body. After the massage, she would wipe me clean with a piece of wet linen and would dab my body liberally with cuticura powder, a brand very popular at that time. She would draw thicklines of homemade mascara around my eyes and would put a big black dot on my forehead to ward off the evil eye. After this elaborate evening ritual, she would feed me and hand me over to my father.

My father had his favourite method of making me sleep. He would lean against the wall, join both his legs together and would stretch them in front of him on the floor. The cleavage in between his strong calfmuscles had enough room to shelter a tiny creature like me. Then he would move his joined legs from one side to another thus rocking me to and fro and would simultaneously sing songs in his rich sonorous voice. His lullabies had the required soporific effect and I fell asleep soon.

When my father felt sleepy, he stretched straight on his bed still carrying me in between his legs. The songs would stop but the rocking became a part of his subconscious habit and it went on throughout the night. It was uncomfortable for him but he dared not put me on the ground lest I get up again and throw a midnight tantrum.

Of all the songs that my father sang, two are still fresh in my memory. Not because he sang them for me but for the fact that he repeated them year after year not only for his own children, but also for his numerous grand children. One is a

musical piece written by the famous Oriya poet Gangadhar Meher describing the advent of dawn in the hermitage of Valmiki where Sita is given shelter after she is banished by Rama and the other one is a lullaby, written in the form of an address to the crow, by the village poet Nandakishore Bal. Much later, he would make my son sleep in the same fashion by singing these songs and by the time my son was two years old, he could recite them like a parrot.

The otherday I went home to see my father. He was seriously sick and couldn't recognise me. Obviously, his thought process had become cloudy and disoriented. Once a hefty and muscular man, he had become absolutely weak and emaciated. He lay huddled in a foetus like position looking almost fragile and vulnerable. I went and sat near him and my eyes were drawn to his legs, shrunken and shrivelled now. I wondered how many times, night after night, they have rocked me to sleep when I was a baby. I felt like crying and I whispered, "Bapa, all these years I just forgot to tell you something. Let me tell it right now before it is too late; you have been a wonderful father and I love you."



MY MOTHER'S MUMMY

Her name was 'Sara' and she had a creamlike complexion that justified her name. Her hair felt soft and silken to the touch. When I was small, it was my pastime to play with her long tresses. Both her arms, from finger tips to elbows were covered with geometrical patterns of tattoo marks and they looked greenish on her fair milky-white skin. One of her legs was defective as she was stricken with polio during her childhood.

Her husband didn't bother much about her. He gave her four lovely children, three daughters and a son, a secured home and thought that he had done his duty. She came from a poor family, was completely illiterate and looked at her husband with awe and respect.

And she had a fiery temper, which genetically she had passed on to all her children. She was famous in the village for her straight talk. She always spoke the truth and did not bother much for public opinion.

She was an excellent cook. She would cook such ordinary things like drumstick and jackfruit seeds adding a little mustard paste to it and it would taste delicious. And she was an workaholic. She knew no rest and worked throughout the day. It was her habit to collect the fresh cowdung daily morning from the bullock shed and put them under the sun in round little lumps. The dried cowdung was used as fuel. Rice mill or hollar machine was unheard of in those days and the entire consumption of rice for the whole year was prepared by her at home. She would boil the paddy partially in huge earthen vessels and dry them under the sun. The dried paddy would

again be husked with the help of a 'dhinki', a wooden pounding contrivance and she would store the rice in tall cane containers. And she made lovely mango pickles that her husband liked to eat along with his morning meal.

She was frail, but she survived her husband and also her son who died a premature death at the age of thirty. She was a proud lady. When she grew old and fell ill, one day a quarrelsome neighbour chided her that she would die a miserable death with nobody at her bed side. She had lost her son and there won't be anybody to give her the last drop of gangajal, the holy water of the 'Ganges' when she would die.

She was the last one to take this remark lying down. "I have got a son at Cuttack", she told her neighbour and came to our house all alone riding a bus from the village inspite of her high temperature. My father nursed her, carried her on his shoulder when she died and performed the last rites. Her pride remained in tact.

She wore a lot of ornaments when she was young. Ater her husband died, she took out all of them except two solid golden clasps, one tola each, that she had in her earlobes. She wore them when she came as a bride and she died with them. Before she breathed her last, she had told my mother-"These two are for my eldest grand daughter. Give them to Kanan as a memento when I am no more."

My mother made two beautiful bangles out of those earrings and gave them to me as a wedding gift. They are highly decorative and except for a few days after my marriage I have not worn them. Anytime I see them, I remember my grandmother. Her memory is etched out in those bangles.

I have kept those two bangles for 'Manu', my grand daughter. And I am sure that she would not wear them either; and in all probability, would dutifully present them to her grandchild in future.

□□□

MY FIRST STUDENT

It was evening and my father was sitting on a cot in front of our house when he asked me to bring my harmonium and sing a song. I obliged him eagerly. It was his first trip to the village after returning from London and all of us had accompanied him.

There were only a couple of villagers sitting near my father when I started singing. But by the time I finished my first song, the whole front road was swarming with them. The quiet nocturnal breeze carried my voice to the farthest end of the village and the farmers, rich and poor, came out of their houses in lines like steady streams of red ants. They sat on the dusty ground and enjoyed my songs gaping at me in wonder. I sang almost all the songs that I had learnt, barely six or seven in number.

"That will do for tonight", my father told me and the villagers dispersed one by one. But when I got up to come home for dinner, I found one farmer still sitting there. He was lean and fair with sunken cheeks and a hooked nose. His face was partially silhouetted and only his profile was visible through the reddish light of the soot-stained lantern. He wore a two stranded necklace made up of dried basil twigs that made him look somewhat religious.

Next day in the morning, when I was playing in the verandah, I saw him emerging from his house which was only a few yards away from ours. I think he was waiting for this opportunity to meet me. He came and sat with me in the verandah. "What is your name?" he asked me giving me an extremely shy smile and the smile made him look adorable.

"Kanan; and what is yours?" I asked him.

"Nirmalya", he replied and the name sounded unusual and wonderful to me." It is a lovely name", I told him and he blushed.

Slowly my informal behaviour dispelled his uneasiness and he started chatting with me. He asked me innumerable questions about my music lesson, about the town, and about my school. And all my answers seemed to fascinate him very much. Finding such an impressionable listener, I went on talking enthusiastically also.

"What do you study in the school" ? Nirmalya asked me after sometime. "Oh, we study so many thing- Oriya, arithmetic, geography..." I was going to prolong my list by adding science and history to it, but Nirmalya interrupted.

"Geography ? What is geography" ? Oriya he knew; arithmetic he could understand. But geography was beyond his comprehension. "In geography, we learn aout the earth, the earth that you and I live in", I explained.

"And what do you learn about the earth" ? Nirmalya asked again with the inquisitiveness of a child. "We read so many things. For example, we read that the earth moves around its axis.... ." I was going to tell him that this was what caused day and night, but he interrupted me again. "Oh no, how can the earth move ? If it moves, won't we lose our balance and fall down ?" Nirmalya seemed puzzled. I was sure in my knowledge that the earth moved around its own axis, but I didn't know how to explain it to Nirmalya. But then I did not know how and why a strange comparison came to my mind and I felt confident.

"Well, you must have driven a bullock cart", I asked Nirmalya and he nodded. He had done it many times. "When the cart moves, the wheels also move. Don't they?" I asked again. "Of course the wheels move around the axle. Otherwise how would the cart move" ? Nirmalya laughed and answered. "Suppose you leave a tiny red ant in the spoke of a moving wheel. Will the ant walk about freely or fall down" ? I asked him again. Nirmalya thought for a few seconds. "No, the ant won't fall down. It would move about", he said after serious consideration.

"See, you yourself admit that. Similarly, compared to the earth, we are exceedingly tiny creatures, much smaller than the red ant. So even if the earth moves, we don't feel it and we don't fall down", I told Nirmalya smilingly. I had won my point and Nirmalya was convinced. He sat spellbound for a few minutes uttering exclamatory remarks about my wisdom and left for his home.

From that day onwards, Nirmalya would come almost daily and would sit with me anytime he was free. He would sit hunchbacked on the ground clutching both his knees tightly with his crossed arms and would ask me questions about my study and within a week I told him all that I had learnt in the school. I told him about the story of Gautam Budha and I told him about the functions of Red Cross. I told him the names of the nine planets and I also explained to him as to how the seasons changed. I was in class five then and my own knowledge was less than rudimentary and it seems laughable now that I tried to impart that knowledge to Nirmalya. But he drank deep of whatever I said and was always eager to know more.

I didn't have the opportunity of seeing Nirmalya again after that and there was just no reason for me to remember him. But I did remember him once much later in my life.

I was teaching geography to my little son. "The earth goes round its axis once in twentyfour hours", I told him and he asked me the same question that Nirmalya had asked me once. Of course by this time, I knew about the gravitational pull of the earth and and told my son about it. And it was exactly at that point of time that the picture of Nirmalya came to my mind. The emaciated looking farmer, innocent and illiterate, with the sacred necklace of dried basil twigs around his thin bony neck, sitting hunch-backed on the ground and listening to the chattering of a little girl, flashed back in my memory.

I am yet to see such tremendous thirst for knowledge in any one else.



THE BRIDE

She stood shyly with downcast eyes- a slim and fair complexioned girl, hardly twelve years old or so. The side parting of her slightly wavy hair suited her eggshaped face. Her hair looked dark and shiny due to liberal application of oil and she had a small bun at the nape of her neck which was decorated with tiny silver flowers.

The zamidar, tall, dark and with a pigtail that ended in a knot, was looking at her and she felt uncomfortable and fidgety. She moved a little and the glass bangles in her hand jingled. The sound made the zamindar conscious. He nodded his head and the girl's father took her aside.

The zamidar liked the girl. There were a number of proposals for Babu, his middle son, including the one from the town. The girl was a lawyer's daughter and was reading in a college. The zamidar had, at one point, decided to proceed with the negotiation. But his wife was against it. She was a devoted wife, simple and non-interfering. But in this particular case, she was adamant. "Can an educated girl from the town come and adjust with us in the village ?" she had asked her husband meekly and the zamidar had agreed that she had a point there.

So ultimately he had settled for this proposal. He had learnt from the middleman that the girl had attendend the village school, the chatsali, for a few years and knew how to read and write. She had a sweet voice and sang the compositions of Upendra Bhanja and Mohan Sundar Devgoswami infront of the village women in the evening. The father of the girl was a truthful and honest man and was noble enough to be his relative.

He remembered his son, fair, handsome and saint like. Last time when he had come home, he had brought the gold medal that he was awarded for standing first in the class. The zamidar held it in his palm and his eyes were filled with tears of happiness and pride. He, like his son, was a man of few words. But his moist eyes told the story of his heart and his son understood.

"Sir, please do come and wash your hand. Your lunch is ready", the girl's father called him and the zamidar woke up from his reverie. The meal, aromatic hot rice along with a varieties of curries, was served in style. The girl's father had learnt about the favourite food items of his honoured guest from the personal attendant who had accompanied him and had taken special care to serve them- thick golden coloured moongdal seasoned with spices, well-set curd-creamy and yellowish in colour, and fat slices of bringal, fried brown in home made ghee.

The zamidar liked the food. But he could not finish it. He was halfway through his meal when a girl, hardly twelve or so, crossed the courtyard and he had a glimpse of her. The girl was dark and pockmarked. And the zamidar got confused. He no doubt had seen this girl a little earlier. Then how come that he could not detect the defects that were quite apparent now. Obviously he was careless and had looked at the girl in a casual manner. He had grown old and his poor eyesight had certainly deceived him. He should have been more careful. He felt upset, could not finish his food and got up. And the girl's father became worried thinking that perhaps the food was not delicious enough.

The zamidar had a little rest and his man servant got the bullock cart ready to take him back to his village. But the old man showed no symptom of getting up from his seat. He wanted to see the girl again but felt embarrassed to say so. He

knew that it would be unmannerly on his part. But then it was the question of the wedding of his wonderful son and he just could not take the risk. Ultimately he overcame his dilemma and asked the girl's father hesitantly", "If you do not mind sir, can I please see the girl again" ? The girl's father of course did not mind and obliged him immediately.

This time the zamidar did not take any chance. He came out of the room to the verandah where the little girl was standing and saw her from a close quarter. No, he was correct in his judgement. The girl was fair and her face was without any blemish whatsoever. Her young face, with the tiny golden nose stud, looked nervous and the zamidar felt a sudden surge of filial affection for the little girl standing in front of him. "Then who was that girl who walked over the courtyard when I was having my meal ?" he asked the girl's father. "Sir, she is Genduphula, my cousin's daughter. She is of my daughter's age and stays in my house". The girl's father replied and the mystery behind the half eaten food of the zamidar became clear to him.

The zamidar now took leave and proceeded towards the bullockcart. "The wedding is fixed. I shall intimate you about the auspicious date after consulting the family astrologer.", he told the girl's father before leaving.

And the little girl ran to her mother, hugged her and cried. Because marriage meant leaving her parents and her village for good and the thought itself was painful for her.

That little girl, by the way, happens to be my mother.



WHERE IS SHE NOW ?

I still remember my first day in the highschool clearly. After the morning prayer was over, I stood silently in one corner of the field. The students had all dispersed to their respective classrooms and I didn't know the location of my class. Then I spotted a dark girl with thick bobbed hair and a short blue frock coming towards me.

"Are you in class four ?" she asked me.

"Yes, I am. But I do not know where my classroom is", I replied. "Come, we shall go to the class together. My sister reads in class six and she has shown me the classroom", the girl told me assuringly and smiled. And I saw two dimples, like those of mine, appearing simultaneously on both sides of her dark plump cheeks and instantaneously I felt an affinity towards her.

"What is your name" ? I asked her while proceeding towards the classroom.

"Geetika", she told me and I found the name lovely. Geeti was my first acquaintance in the school and remained a close friend of mine during the entire period of my student career. She is a doctor now here in Bhubaneswar.

There was another unusual friendship with a girl immediately afterwards, which I have not been able to forget till now. After a couple of days of joining the school, our class teacher gave us the book list. He called out the names of the books and their respective authors and we took them down in our note-book. The author of our arithmetic book was Mr. Rahmat Ali. When the teacher pronounced it, It sounded like "Rama Teli" to me and I wrote it down accordingly.

Our classroom was in the farthest corner of the school building and there was a well adjacent to it. The drinking water was kept in a drum in front of the teacher's common room, but the senior girls preferred the freshly drawn cool water from the well. During the recess, the senior girls came in small groups, drew water from the well and after drinking water, they came and gossiped with us. Perhaps they found the fresh kids interesting as well as amusing.

The day the booklist was out, they came to our class as usual. "Our booklist is out", one of my friends told them enthusiastically.

"Good, and let us hear what are the books?" one tall girl, wearing a white saree asked us. Her face was dark and round and the curly hair cascading her moonshaped face made her look charming.

I remembered the books and their authors and repeated them hurriedly one by one. But when I told her about the author of our arithmetic book, she looked a bit surprised.

"What is it?" she asked me knitting her brows and I repeated the name again. She, along with her friends, then burst out laughing and I felt embarrassed. Later, I learnt the author's correct name from my classmates. 'Teli' in Oriya meant a person who sold oil and it was never my intention to transform a renowned mathematician into a dealer of mustard oil. I had simply not been able to catch the correct pronunciation of his name. Nevertheless, my mistake somehow made me feel guilty. Later, when I read in the college, Mr. Rahmat Ali's son, a dark, soft-spoken youngman taught us mathematics and any time I saw him I remembered my class four incident.

However, from that particular day, the dark girl developed a strange liking for me. It became almost a routine for her to come to our class daily during the recess to talk to me. Within a few days, she had collected all the important data about me—the number of my brothers and sisters, the names and occupation

of my parents, the location of our house and even our food habits. But her enthusiasm about me never seemed to ebb.

After a month or so when she came during the recess, she looked sad. She told me that her father had been transferred to some other place and she would not be coming to school any more. She also told me that she would miss the school, her friends and especially me. She didn't come to school next day and the recess seemed longer to me.

After a few months, we were having our geography class when the school peon entered into the classroom and told the teacher that I was wanted by someone outside. The teacher allowed me to go out and meet the visitor. I followed the peon wondering who it could be, but then spotted the dark girl standing in the shade of the old jackfruit tree that grew in one side of the school playground. She greeted me with a bright smile.

"Have you come back to Cuttack?" I enquired.

"No, no, my parents came here for some business and I accompanied them", she told me.

"Then why have you come to the school?" I asked her.

"Of course I have come to see you. For what else should I come here?" the girl replied. She enquired about my study and my home, patted my cheeks and left. But she left me puzzled. That she had come all the way just to meet me seemed strange and unbelievable to me.

I wonder where she is now. Is her round moonshaped face smooth and beautiful as it used to be ? Is her dark mass of hair still that wavy and attractive ? Perhaps not. I was much younger than her and two prominent wrinkles have appeared on both sides of my lips. There are streaks of grey in my hair too. She must have become old also. I am not sure if she remembers me. But I do remember her. As I write this article, the memory of the girl waiting for me under the old jackfruit tree in that sun-lit afternoon flashes in my mind and the picture is as clear as a recently taken photograph.



THE CANAL

The canal ran in front of our house and we, all the brothers and sisters, grew up along with it. This canal, Taladanda, was connected with the river Mahanadi and served as a waterway inside the state. Huge wooden boats carrying bales of straw and stacks of timber passed through the canal and the boatmen steered the boats with the help of oars and tall knotted bamboos. Occasionally, there would be a small thatched roof on one side of the boat and we would see the boatman cooking his meal there in an earthen stove. The life style of these people living for days-together in water, sailing for an unknown destination and eating a meal under the open sky seemed extremely thrilling and fascinating to my little romantic mind and I felt jealous of them.

Once a while, a steamer passed through the canal and we felt highly excited about it. The moment we heard the hissing sound of the steamer engine, we rushed out of the house, descended down the steps of the canal and stood in ankle-deep water. The motorboat, moving very rapidly, cut through the current with high speed and caused little tidal waves in series. The waves came and soaked us upto the knee often wetting the hems of our frocks and we giggled merrily.

My father's college was just across the canal and he found it convenient to cross it by a boat rather than walking quite a bit of distance upstream and crossing it by the overbridge. He had his tiny personal boat, painted black with tar as an antitermite measure. Daily morning, our cook, who also acted as the boatman, ferried my father across the canal. And in the afternoon, he would again take the boat to the other side to bring my father back.

The boat was kept tied with a sturdy rope to a bamboo pole in the bathing ghat in front of our house and playing with the boat was one of our pastimes. Occasionally, some errant child would unfasten the knot of the rope and the boat would float down along with the current. Sometimes it would be stuck to the thick layers of weed that grew abundantly at places in the canal. At other times, one of the shopkeepers in the marketplace downstream would see it floating and would tie it for us. But one day, the boat got lost. My father, by this time, was completely fed up with the whole process and did not purchase another one. That put an end to our evening sport of sitting inside the boat and splashing water at each other.

During the summer, the canal dried completely leaving little pools of water here and there, where the frogs bred hidden amidst the thick thread like weeds. During these days, we spent the whole afternoon in the canal bed, making domeshaped houses with the fine wet sand. Our sand cottages were lavishly decorated with moss, grass and pebbles and the boundary walls were invariably high befitting that a castle.

Sometime, for a change, we would dig pits on the sandbed of the canal. Water, clean and crystal like, would trickle down and fill up the pits. There would be lovely little pools within minutes. Our greatest pleasure was to collect palmful of tadpoles from the stagnant water near the bank and fill our hand-made little pools with them. The pools would be filled soon with swarming tadpoles, hundreds of them, and watching them swim awkwardly in an intricate criss-cross pattern with their fat oversized heads and long protruding tails would give us immense pleasure. We would come home in the evening tired but jubilant and our bodies covered from head to toe with fine grains of sand.

My mother would clean us and give us early dinner making us squat in the semi-dark corridor, faintly lit by a sootstained lantern. She would tell us the story of the couple- Tipa and Tipi- who were poor yet courageous. A wave of cool breeze would make the leaves of the neem tree rustle and the nocturnal air would be heavy with the sharp sweetish smell of the kamini flowers that blossomed in our courtyard and I would soon fall asleep. By the time my father carried me to my bed, I would be dreaming one of my constantly recurring dreams- plucking yellow-petalled flowers in a wild everstretching meadow or falling down from the back of an elephant. The latter would always make me frightened and I would squeeze myself against my cousin with whom I slept at night.



THE FAIR

My maternal uncle was extremely fastidious in his food habits. He was short tempered by nature and got furious if the food was not upto the mark. I remember, one day he brought mutton and Rama aunty cooked it. But when uncle sat down to eat, he found the look and colour of the curry not very appetising. He lost his temper and scolded aunty shouting at the top of his voice. Aunty did not utter a single word; she simply sat at the doorstep and wept silently. I was eating with my uncle and got terribly frightened by his anger. I remained tense throughout the day. "Surely he will beat her up", I went on thinking and felt pity for my fair and beautiful aunt.

But in the evening, when I entered into her room. I found my uncle sitting with her. Perhaps there was a joke and they were smiling together. My uncle looked fresh after his evening bath and his wide fair forehead was smeared with sandalwood paste as usual. My aunty wore a garland of jasmine in her hair and the fragrance had permeated throughout the room. Her face looked ethereal in the lamp light. After I entered, my uncle left and I asked my aunty, "Is he no more angry with you ?"

"About whom are you asking ?" questioned my aunt.

"Of course I am asking about uncle. He was so much annoyed with you in the morning. I thought he would not love you any more", I expressed my fear.

"Of course he loves me dear. The trouble is that he gets angry very quickly, but he cools down immediately also. Didn't you see he was smiling ?" she told me. That was true and I felt relieved. When I was coming out of the room, my aunty called me, "Your uncle is going to a fair tomorrow and he wants

you to accompany him. Better you take early dinner and sleep", she suggested and I agreed.

my uncle had a bicycle and he usually took me to all the fairs and festivals- Ramlila, Krishnalila, car festival and all other village fairs, whenever there was one. Of all such visits, my trip to this particular makarsankranti fair still stands fresh in my memory.

The place was far off and it took us quite sometime to reach the site by cycle. We visited the nearby Shiva temple after washing our hands and feet in the pond in front of it.

It was the usual village fair with hundreds of villagers, smelling of tobacco, perspiration and cheap hair oil, pushing each other in all directions. There were long rows of stationery shops that sold trinkets to the village girls and the sweetmeat shops stood crowded, both with people as well as flies. I got the smell of mutton curry coming out from a thatched shed and reminded my uncle that I was feeling terribly hungry. He smiled and led me inside. It was a rectangular room covered with thick bamboo matting on all sides with the hearth in one corner. We sat on the floor along with other villagers and ate steaming rice and mutton curry that was served on green banana leaves. The gravy was hot and spicy and it burnt my tongue. But it tasted much better than the curry that my aunty had cooked.

I remember this fair till today because of one particular sight that had surprised my little mind then. There was a hot spring near the site of the fair. The little stagnant pool was covered with a thin film of steam; and tiny air bubbles rose from the bottom and burst on the surface one after another. There was a pungent smell all around which my uncle attributed to sulphur. But it was not the hot spring but the scene that I saw afterwards that astonished me.

There were a few man-made tunnels through which the

warm water of the fountain flowed, got cooled and remained stored in small reservoirs- swallow pits dug on the ground, and I saw many village women walking through the knee-deep water and bringing out handfuls of clay from the bottom of the reservoirs. They examined it, threw it and brought another handful and the process went on.

My uncle explained that they were all childless women who had taken the opportunity of coming to the hot spring on this auspicious day and were searching for the 'prasad'-the divine gift.

"But what sort of 'prasad' will they get from the mud ?" I asked inquisitively.

"It might be anything- a tiny fish, a snail or an arecanut that somebody has thrown into the water after his worship in the temple", my uncle replied.

"But what will they do with it?" I enquired.

"Oh, They will swallow it whole. They believe that it would bless them with a child", my uncle replied hurriedly and started talking to his friend whom he had met in the fair.

I looked and found the women still remaining busy in churning the slush. Their faces were half-covered with their veils. But the expression of sorrow and remorse was deep in their partially visible eyes and it made me sad. The fair lost interest for me and I wanted to come back.



A WONDERFUL FATHER

The Headmaster caned me twice and caned me hard and exactly from that moment, I started hating my father for being a learned man. "What business he had to be learned and teach in the college", I thought. "Why couldn't he be a shopkeeper or a barber like the fathers of some of my classmates" ?

I was six and was in class two. The lower primary school that I attended was a thatched dilapidated building with a hedge of overgrown cacti that served as the boundary wall. Our classroom smelt damp and except the blackboard and a broken chair, meant for the teacher, was devoid of any other furniture. We squatted on the floor and kept our slates and pencils in front of us on the ground.

Our class teacher was a middle aged mild man with a face resembling that of a squirrel. He wore shabby clothes and had a tight necklace of tiny white beads, not bigger than mustard seeds, around his neck. His name was 'Buddhimanta' which literally meant "the wise one" and to me, he seemed to be the wisest of all teachers. He never got angry and never punished the students.

Everything was going fine with the school till the Headmaster, Jagannath sir, who usually taught class three children, one day decided to take one of our classes. He was an old man with neatly combed milky white hair that stuck like a plaster to his head and his round face with a pair of round thick glasses made him look perfectly owlsh. He was known for his temper and carried a yellow supple cane always with him.

Immediately after Jagannath sir came, he wrote down a sum on the blackboard and asked the children to solve it. It was only an addition, but a large one consisting of numerous five digit numbers. After ten minutes or so, Jagannath sir started checking the answers of each child one by one beginning from the first row. He put a tick mark on the slates of the students whose calculation was correct but students whose answers were wrong were made to stand up and were caned.

My turn came soon. Jagannath sir looked at my slate and the subtle change of expression on his face confirmed my premonition that my answer was wrong.

"Daughter of such a learned man and you don't even know how to add", Jagannath sir burst out in anger and I felt a hollowness at the pit of my stomach. It was my bad luck that he knew my father well.

"I say stand up and stretch your palms", Jagannath sir shouted again and I obeyed him with tears in my eye.

He caned me hard and caned me twice although all other children were caned once only. Perhaps he thought that the foolish child of a learned father deserved more severe punishment.

For the rest of the day, I made a sad face and wept silently. That my answer was incorrect was nothing to worry about, but being beaten in front of other children was rather humiliating.

Next day, I refused to go to school feigning some sickness and the imaginary sickness continued for a couple of days. But surprisingly my mother did not reprimand me for this. Ultimately one day I went and told her that the school was no good and I was not interested in going to this school.

"Don't go if you don't feel like", she replied. "In any case, we are going to the village next month", she added after a little pause. This was news for me.

"Why are we going to the village ?", I asked.

"Because your father is going to London. During his absence, who will look after us here ? At least in the village your grand parents are there."

"And where is London?" I felt curious about the place.

"Oh ! It is a distant land across the seven seas", my mother replied absent-mindedly and left me on some errand.

I felt a sudden surge of love for my father. What a wonderful father he was-leaving for a distant land across the seven seas just at the right moment. I would no more get the beating from Jagannath sir.

The same evening; when my father was walking in the open terrace of our first floor carrying my baby brother in his arms, I climbed the stiff high steps of the staircase and went to him. I showed him a patch of cloud resembling the trunk of an elephant and asked him abruptly.

"Bapa, do you know dancing ? Will you dance for me?"

My father seemed a little puzzled and looked at me for a second or so, perhaps to fathom my thought process. Then he smiled and told me in his usual soothing tone.

"Of course I would do anything for your dear, but the trouble is that I don't know dancing".

"But surely you can jump, can't you?" I was adamant.

"I can jump, but that is not dancing", replied my father.

"Never mind; you just do the jumping for me. Please, Bapa, please", I pleaded and just to amuse me, he jumped. He took two little leaps hardly a few inches above the ground still carrying my baby brother in his arms.

The bunch of keys tied to his sacred thread jingled.

I laughed and my father laughed with me.

□□□

THE CHATTER BOX

My mother says, I was a complete chatterbox by the time I was two years old. But then my mother, like all mothers, exaggerates a bit whenever she talks about her children. But in this particular case, my father, who is well known for his sober and matter of fact statements confirms this. But both of them narrate two separate episodes to prove their point.

The incident that my mother remembers is this.

I was almost two. My main pastime, was to climb up two or three steps of the staircase that led to the first floor, sit there and play. Near the third step, there was a small alcove where a bottle of coconut oil was always kept. The lid of the bottle was made up of cork. My father, after his morning massage, which he religiously took before taking a bath, perhaps forgot to replace the lid on the bottle one day and it was lying nearby. The cork was soaked with coconut oil and invited ants. I found that lid and in my inquisitiveness, which is a universal phenomenon in case of small children, put it in my mouth. The ants stung me and I cried. Immediately my parents rushed forward; my father from his study and my mother from the kitchen. My father separated the few ants from my hands and chin and got annoyed with my mother for being careless with me. My mother flared up at my naughtiness and raised her hand to spank me. I stopped crying, looked pleadingly at her face and prayed for mercy apologising in clear fluent Oriya. "Mother, please excuse me. I shall never do this again. Henceforward you would be working in the kitchen and I shall be playing by myself without creating any nuisance whatsoever".

My parents remained speechless for a few seconds and gasped at me in wonder because they found my sentences too smart for my age. Needless to say that my mother forgot her anger and took me in her arms.

My father however remembers another amusing incident which he is never tired of repeating.

There was a sweetmeat vendor in our locality who came to our house once a week carrying a huge cane basket on his head that contained different varieties of foodstuff- beaten rice, puffed rice, peanuts cooked with molasses, roasted grams coated with spices and small round balls made up of sesame seeds and jaggery.

My mother usually gave him an one anna coin and purchased puffed rice which she often used as a snack. I saw this many times and somehow associated money with purchase of foodstuff. Next time when the vendor came, I ran to my father and asked him for money. At that time a rupee consisted of sixtyfour paisa and a single paisa coin was somewhat like a flattened copper ring in appearance, much in the fashion of a doughnut with a big hole in the middle. My father gave me one such coin.

I ran to the vendor, offered him the coin, and placing my small cane bowl before him asked him to give me samples of all the items that he had. The man laughed and tried his best to explain that a single paisa was too little for the purpose. But I would not listen and would pester him again and again. His logic seemed unsound to my little mind. What did he mean by refusing to oblige me ? Had I not given him the money ?

My father recalls that the dialogue between the vendor and his two year old daughter was quite entertaining and he enjoyed it much sitting amusedly on his arm-chair. The vendor also got into a mischievous mood and the argument between the two went on for quite sometime. Ultimately the man gave me a little of all the varieties of foodstuff that he had; partly because he didn't have a heart to refuse a tiny tot like me and partly because he was impressed much with my wit and perseverance. He refused to take extra payment from my father.

In this context, the other aspect of my childhood prattle that my parents remember is my ingenuity in coining new words that suited my fancy and they usually cite the story of the cornflakes in this regard.

My father, for his breakfast, used to have cornflakes along with milk and I somehow developed a taste for these flakes. But I preferred them plain, without milk, and coined a new name for it- bakuli khaja, which my parents found funny, but appropriate for the flaky and crunchy foodstuff. This somehow gave them the feeling that I had an inborn flair for language.

When after my marriage, I left Orissa and stopped writing, the persons who got maximum pain were my parents. The other day, my sister carried a newspaper where one of my articles was published and showed it to my father informing him that I had started writing again. He could not read the article because of poor eye-sight, but he held it lovingly, caressed it and sobbed. "She used to write so well. She had a lot of promise", he whispered in a quivering tone.

When my sister narrated the incident before me, I also sobbed. Nobody else in my life, till date, has shown that much love and concern for my writing. But then nobody else is like my father also.



THE VILLAGE SCHOOL

My maternal uncle had brought me to his village with a promise to look after my education. But that had assumed secondary importance once I reached there. Of course my grandfather had got me admitted to the lower primary school of the neighbouring village, because his friend 'Ramchandra' happened to be the Headmaster there.

Ramchandra was an affectionate middle-aged man with two strange peculiarities that surprised me most. He had a big gaping hole in one of his earlobes, just near the entrance of the auditory canal, through which a thick straw could pass easily and I always wondered as to how he got it there. Secondly, he could effortlessly fold and cross his hands at his backside, the right hand fingers touching the elbow of his left hand and viceversa and he always walked in that uncomfortable posture.

The school was a thatched construction with mudplastered floor and the children squatted on the ground. It had a huge sloping chilli garden at the back, The chillies were tiny and paddy-like in appearance. When they ripened, we plucked them for the teacher. There were some banana plants and hibiscus bushes in the front and a number of jackfruit trees grew around the fence. These trees bore numerous jackfruits throughout the year. But they didn't survive for long and fell down from the trunk when hardly a few weeks old. They rotted on the ground. We picked and ate their tender rotten flesh. They tasted bland, but we liked the smell.

My grandfather had got me admitted to class three when I was only seven and I was the youngest student in the class. There was no other girl student with us and all others were boys. They wore short, soiled dhotis that covered them upto the knees and they came to the school bare-bodied.

Most of the days I missed the school and if at all I went, it was not because of my interest in study, but because of the attraction of the sweetmeats that my grandfather had arranged for me on each school going day. If I didn't go to school, I missed them.

Since the school was in the next village, I had to walk quite a bit of distance. Almost half way to my school, there was a small market and the sweetmeat maker 'Jambu' had his shop there. As per the order of my grandpa, Jambu gave me two laddus any day I went to the school. My grandpa paid him on monthly basis. In the beginning, I was a little afraid of Jambu because occasionally, he became possessed with a spirit and danced on the main road of the village holding two supple canes in his hand and forecasting the future for the villagers. The villagers, at that time, fell at his feet and worshipped him. Jambu used to fall unconscious after dancing for an hour or so. But I soon found out that during normal times, he was an affectionate, amicable person and I lost my fear for him soon.

I didn't learn much in the school. After my father left for London my study had suffered badly as nobody in the village had taken any interest in it. I sat in one corner of the classroom absentmindedly, completely oblivious of what was happening in the class. The only thing I did was to break one slate after another and my grandfather, without grumbling, went on substituting them. Gagan, the stationery shop owner, grew rich by selling slates to me.

I had only one book, an Oriya vernacular meant for class three that my grandfather had purchased for me. I found it interesting and finished it in one single sitting. The first story was about a clever, crafty goat. When the tiger came to eat him, he made a ludicrous posture by leaning over a broken wall, spoke in a gruff voice and frightened the beast away.

The only other reading I had during this time were the library books that I borrowed from the small village library. Our neighbour's son 'Bansi', who was reading matric in a

nearby school, was the secretary. He loved me and lent me the books that I wanted. I think my fascination for books and reading habit started during this period. In addition to this, my aunty taught me Hindi alphabets from her little picture book and I found them easy to learn. They had much similarity with Oriya alphabets, the only difference being that the upper part of the Oriya alphabets were semicircular whereas one had to put a line there in case of Hindi. I learnt to read and write Hindi in to time.

At the end of the year, the final examination was conducted in the school. That memory is faint in my mind. But I remember that there were neither question papers nor any answer books. The teacher asked us to do sums and write answers on our slates. Half of the things I did not know nor did I bother much about it. Examination had no significance, no connotation for me.

After the examination, the two best boys of our class, Prafulla and kruttibasa, came out and asked me how I had fared. I was not interested in the discussion and ignored their questions. The river Mahanadi, visible from the side of the school, looked serene and enchanting bathed with the golden rays of the setting sun and I stood and enjoyed the view.

Long afterwards, when I was reading in the college, I had the chance of having contact with both these boys. Prafulla wrote me a letter and Kruttibasa met me.

By that time, many things had changed. I was reading in the college at Cuttack and was doing well in my studies. I had earned a litle name as a young Oriya writer as well.

Prafulla wrote me that he had learnt about my nice academic career from my aunty at Harirajpur. It was she who had given him my address also. He read my poems from the leading newspapers of Orissa and wondered as to how I composed them. As for himself, although he was a good student in lower classes, his performance in the school final examination had remained mediocre. Nevertheless, he was happy about my achievements and it was this happiness that had prompted him

to write the letter. He still remembered me as a dreamy eyed kid, sitting silently in one corner of the class room wearing a bow of red ribbon in her short and dishevelled hair. He was not sure if I remembered him.

I remembered him very well—a tall, lanky and cheerful lad with curly hair and an everlasting smile around his lips. I met Kruttibasa soon afterwards. My aunty was coming to Cuttack from Harirajpur and Kruttibasa accompanied her as he had some business in the town. My aunty brought him to our house. Kruttibasa was no longer the thin dark kid whom I had seen in the village. His face still remained triangular with the jaw bones joining at an acute angle near the chin. But he had grown up tremendously.

I did not know what to talk to this young man and my aunty, in her eagerness to facilitate the conversation, commented rather tactlessly.

"Do you know Kruttibasa ? My niece is a poetess and is rather good at studies. She has been availing the merit scholarship for the last two years".

I felt embarrassed because I had learnt a little earlier from my aunty that Kruttibasa had passed matriculation in third division and could not pursue his study after that because of lack of money. My aunty should not have talked like that.

But the harm was already done. Kruttibasa's jaw bones tightened a little and he commented, rather tersely, looking straight into my eyes, "Don't you ever forget your class three days in the village. You were just good for nothing where as I was one of the best boys in the class."

His words hurt me and I was going to tell him something harsh. But then I looked at him, the dirtily clad poor village boy. He had no future, no money and he felt humiliated and small before me. All that he had was his ego- that once upon a time he was a better student than me. I did not want to deprive him of that ego.

I smiled and told him that I had not forgotten those days.



EARLIEST MEMORIES

My earliest memory that I have of my mother relates to an incident when I would be hardly four years old.

It was a sunny afternoon. There was a long barrack-like hall whose ceiling was made up of huge asbestos sheets. In front of the building, there were three or four shrubs that were thickly loaded with tiny white flowers and they reminded me of a star studded sky. There were a few wooden benches near the shrubs where some people were sitting and chatting leisurely.

My eldest cousin, Kanakalata, led me by my fingers and I entered into the building with uncertain steps. There were rows of beds on both sides of the hall and on each bed, rested a woman with a baby sleeping nearby. Most of the beds were surrounded by visitors. We crossed many such beds and then suddenly I saw my mother at the end of the hall. She was wearing a plain white saree and her young face, with the side parting of her slightly wavy hair, looked exhausted but happy. She had the veil on her head and the border of the saree gave her face a framed look.

She was sitting on the bed and got up when she saw us. I ran and hugged her around the knees. She caressed my bobbed hair with her hand and showed me the toy like baby who was sleeping peacefully on one side of the bed. 'She is your little sister. Isn't she cute' ? my mother asked me.

I went nearer in order to have a closer look of the baby. "She has got lovely hair on her head. The doctors and the nurses comment that they never saw such luxurious growth of hair earlier in any other new born baby", my mother informed us smilingly .

I touched the dense dark mass of hair on the baby's head that felt smooth and soft like silk. I poked her pink round cheeks timidly with my finger and found her extremely endearing. That little sister of mine is now a Reader in psychology in a government college. Those who know her and are reading this story would certainly accuse me of telling a blatant lie. Because she has lost all her lovely tresses and her head is practically hairless now.

But about the scene, my mother corroborates every single bit of it. She says fifty years ago, the gynaecological ward of S.C.B. medical college, Cuttack was exactly like that and there were numerous flowering plants, popularly known as 'tarata' in front of the hospital building.

However, my oldest memory of my father is about an incident when I would be slightly older, almost five or so. It was also a bright sunlit afternoon and I was sitting on our verandah dangling my legs and facing the courtyard in the west. The golden sunshine fell on the tender banana leaves, still uncurling themselves, and their soft green colour, mingling with the yellow sunshine, created an unusual hue. The sky was perfectly clear with tiny patches of cloud that floated like wads of cotton wool and the tall tamarind tree, with those thin lacy leaves, drew a beautiful mural against the clear blue sky.

I had already learnt my alphabets and my father had bought a picture book of Oriya nursery rhymes for me that contained small, musical poems printed in black, bold letters. I still remember two of these poems- one about a little girl swinging merrily under a tree and the other one about a queer little man who had such funny habits like feeling cold in summer and hot in winter. Every thing in his life was otherway round. Hence, although his name was 'Padandas', he spelt it backward and told everybody that his name was 'Sadanadap'. My mother remembers these two poems along with me also.

That particular afternoon, I was trying to memorise the poems by singing them aloud. Suddenly I realised that I had got them by heart and I felt thrilled. I remembered my father and wanted him to hear the songs. I ran to the kitchen. My father was sitting on a low wooden board commonly known as 'pidha' in Oriya and was having his afternoon meal-wheat pancakes smeared with ghee, fried potato fingers and a sweet dish made up of semolina, milk and sugar. My mother was sitting beside him.

I told my father that I had memorised the song and sang it before him in a full-throated voice. When I finished, he nodded his head in approval, then looked at my mother and both of them smiled. I just could not understand as to why should they smile at each other instead of smiling at me.

I understood that much later in my life. When my four year old son sang his first nursery rhyme dancing and waving his chubby little hands in front of my husband and myself, we two also looked at each other and smiled, It was a silent gesture of thanking each other as well as the Almighty for the gift of such a wonderful child.



MY MOTHER'S FATHER

He was a puny little man, diminutive in size and with close cropped hair that made him look like wearing a tight grey baret twenty four hours. He was thin, had a small round face and his eyes looked like round black beads. He, though not very rich, was well off. The fertile land on the bank of river Mahanadi gave him good yield. Apart from paddy, he cultivated jute, lentils, mustard and sugarcane and sold the surplus crop for cash money. He was intelligent. He knew how to read and write and was good in arithmetic. In course of time, he had acquired sufficient working knowledge about dams, bridges and embankments and had established himself as a small time contractor in that area. He had a round shaped white-coloured stone, much in the fashion of a chalk, tucked inside the folds of his dhoti near his waist. And any time he was free, he would take out that piece of chalk and would do calculation on the mud plastered floor. "That is about the construction work he has undertaken", my grandma would tell me.

My father built his house at Cuttack immediately after his marriage and it was my maternal grandfather who came down from the village, stayed there and supervised the entire work. He made the house big and spacious with high ceiling and long corridors. But he committed one mistake. He dug up the well first because without water the work could not go on. Later, when he made the plan, the well became a part of the verandah and there was just no way to avoid it. Ours is perhaps the only house in the entire world where a well is situated right inside the house. Of course my grandfather made it accident proof by constructing a high boundary wall around it. It looked odd, nevertheless.

My grandpa was a virtuous man. He neither smoked nor chewed pan which were the common habits of the villagers and he led an extremely disciplined life. He ate his food before sunset and would not touch even a drop of water after that. He was a follower of the 'mahima' cult propagated by the tribal poet 'Bhima Bhoi'. He did not worship any idol, nor did he go to any temple. He believed God to be all pervading and formless. Daily evening, he stood in his barn under the open sky and prostrated himself before his formless, omnipresent God.

He was very proud of my father, his middle son-in-law. Every evening, he would sit in front of his house among a group of villagers and would boast, "Take this village as the centre and draw a circle of twenty eight miles radius around it. Within this area do you ever find such a learned man like my son-in-law?" he would ask again and again and the villagers would think hard, murmur and nod their heads in approval. For some mysterious reason best known to my grandfather, his village had to be always the centre of the circle and the radius had to be always twenty eight miles-no more no less.

He had three daughters, but he was a little partial towards my mother. I remember; once my mother gave him a blanket. During the winter, he would wrap himself up with the blanket and would purposefully sit in the front verandah in spite of the chilly weather. "How are you Mahadev bhai?" a villager passing on the main road would ask him. "An old man like me is supposed to suffer much during this season. But because of the blanket that my daughter has given, I do not feel the chill this winter", he would say proudly displaying the blanket. The poor barebodied villager would come, examine the colour and texture of the blanket from a close quarter and my grandfather would give him a proud and benevolent smile.

My grandfather had one vice, if that can be termed as a vice at all. He was fond of exaggeration. If he saw three people standing in a corner, he would say that he saw a crowd and if his son-in-law earned a thousand, he would describe him to be as rich as a king. He was a great orator and told his version convincingly. But he was a timid, simple and honest man and the villagers liked and respected him.

He was a loving father. When his only son died a premature death, he simply could not take the shock and collapsed. He did not recoup after that and died within a few months. Before his death, he gifted his three daughters separate shares from his landed property. His two other daughters sold their portions for cash money. My mother, who was extremely attached to her father, just could not do that. Perhaps the process was painful for her. Infact she left going to her village after her father's death. She even does not know who is enjoying her property now.



MY YOUNGEST AUNT

My one year stay in Harirajpur, my mother's village, was a prolonged holiday, joyous as well as memorable. I was only seven and was pampered, perhaps a little excessively, by my maternal grand parents. Narasimha uncle, my mother's elder brother, had the reputation of being an angry youngman and everybody in the house was afraid of his mercurial temper. But his feelings were unbelievably tender so far as I was concerned. Rama aunty, his fair and lovely wife, was equally loving and sweet. The only discordant note in the house was 'Kokila', my mother's teen-aged sister.

Being the youngest child, she was completely spoilt by my grandmother and had turned into a cantankerous quarrelsome girl. She disliked my presence openly. Because she found that after my arrival, I started enjoying the status of "prima donna" in the house and she was displaced to the second position. She hated it. On slightest provocation, she quarrelled with me and beat me up mercilessly. I remember the day when she was scraping a cocoanut and I had asked her to give me a share. But she had turned furious and had struck my head hard with the cocoanut shell. My grand father had seen this and had scolded her. To atone for the sin of the daughter, he had made me sleep with him that night.

Kokila aunty was married when she was a kid, but I learnt from my grandma that now she had grown up and hence would leave for her husband's house soon. Arrangements were made accordingly. Every market day, my grandfather went to the nearby township and purchased utensils, clothes, bedding, furniture, sweetmeats and other knickknacks that would go as dowry with his daughter. The list was complete with a heavy

wooden box made out of planks of a seasoned jackfruit tree and a huge bath tub carved out of a single solid stone. The auspicious day for her departure was fixed by the astrologer and then the ritual of weeping started.

In the village, prior to her departure for the husband's house, it was customary for a girl to weep and lament loudly. She must parade her sorrow before the villagers continuously for a month or so. Otherwise it would show her immodesty and would prove that she was eager to go to her husband. The weeping must be done in a sing-song fashion and the louder a girl sings, the better is the appreciation from the audience.

There were specific songs, written in folk pattern, that were meant for this occasion. The girls did not learn them. They were simply passed on to them from one generation to another. Often the girls made extempore additions to the old songs by creating appropriate innovative lines and thus, the songs kept on changing.

Kokila aunty earned quite a good name for her singing. The songs, one by one, were addressed to different persons of the household and narrated how she would miss each one of them and how miserable she would feel in an alien atmosphere. Kokila aunty once addressed me in one of her songs pronouncing my name repeatedly after each line and they commented that it was a masterpiece. On one occasion an old lady, the aunt of our neighbour, heard her voice from the bathing ghat and came running to our house in order to get a better audio-visual impression of the song. But by the time she reached, kokila aunty had forgotten her wailing and had started playing cards along with her friends and the old lady was disappointed.

Kokila aunty left for her husband's village sitting in a 'sabari'. The young and robust cowherds of the village were hired for this purpose and they carried the sabari effortlessly on their shoulders that had turned thick with the constant

pressure of the load. They ran rhythmically stepping in unison and singing small lined songs in order to dispel the drudgery and monotony. Their songs mingled with the weeping of Kokila aunty creating a cacophony of sound and for the first time, I felt sorry for my teenaged aunt.

She came back after a fortnight and to my surprise I found her completely changed. She looked happy and her nature had become amicable. She smothered me with love and after a few days when she started for her home, she wanted me to accompany her in her journey and I readily agreed.

This time, she left in a bullock-cart and I sat with her inside the cart. Linga uncle, the permanent servant of my grand father who was more like a family member, drove the cart. My uncle, as per the convention, went with his sister, but he preferred to walk beside the bullock-cart.

Kokila aunty wailed loudly this time also. But the moment the bullock-cart crossed the boundary of the village, she became quiet and started smiling. She pulled me towards her, pointed her finger to the roadside and told me, "Look, that is our mango grove and these are our jackfruit trees. They yield delicious ripe jack fruits". I became astonished at her sudden change of mood and had the vague feeling that she was weeping before the villagers for the sake of decorum only and she was, in fact, eager to go to her husband.

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MY DANCE TEACHER

It was our habit during our childhood to pray daily. In the evening, when my mother lighted the oil lamp near the sacred basil plant, we, all the brothers and sisters, washed our hands and feet, sat on the steps of the verandah and prayed in chorus. The first song was always the 'Ramdhun' and this was followed by two or three Oriya bhajans. Often our father sang with us while my mother, chewing her pan, sat at a distance and enjoyed our singing. It was during one of these prayer sessions that my parents discovered my singing capability and decided to keep a music teacher for me.

Our neighbour's daughter was taking music and dancing lessons from a private tutor and my mother arranged the same teacher for my music lessons. Now looking back, I realise that the teacher was just an ordinary musician with neither real knowledge nor depth about his art. But to me, he seemed like a real 'guru' at that time. My mother purchased a harmonium and a set of ghungroos for me and my training started.

The music teacher was an innocuous young man and had a complexion that was as black as charcoal. Never-the-less, he had a good physique and his white embroidered kurta, along with his long, wavy hair, contributed to his artistic look considerably.

I practised the elementary steps of dancing under his guidance and he taught me only one dancing number- a combination of footsteps in a series much in the Odissi pattern. He made me practise the seven basic swaras of music and taught me a few Oriya songs as well. I picked up the songs easily and learnt to play the harmonium along with them.

Strangely, the songs have been completely forgotten by me. But the small composition of dance that I learnt once, is still fresh in my memory.

Long ago, when my son was in class four, I once told my husband and my son about my dancing lessons and they compelled me to repeat the steps before them. It was a late summer night and as per our habit, we were sitting and gossiping in the bedroom after finishing our dinner. The mood was light and jubilant and out of sheer fun, I danced before them. After my performance, both father and son clapped, applauded profusely and requested me to repeat the number. But somehow from the mischievous twinkling of their eyes and the secret exchange of glances between the two, I became suspicious about their intention.

Obviously they were enjoying at my cost. I sulked and it took them quite sometime to cajole me back to my normal mood. Till today, they have been the only audience of my unique dance recital.

I do not remember the details of my dancing lessons except the happenings of one particular day. That afternoon, the teacher gave me respite from my dancing and singing. "I have got a dance recital tomorrow and I shall have to do the practice now. You can sit in the corner and watch me. It would be beneficial for you", he told me and I nodded.

He took out his loose fitting kurta and started his practice immediately. It was a hunter's dance and was supposed to be a vigorous one. The teacher practised the steps again and again with an effort to attain perfection and gave long leaps in the air while chasing the imaginary leopard.

My mother never came to see my dancing lessons. But Rama aunty, my mother's bhabi, had come down from the village on that particular day and both my mother and my aunt

decided to come and see my dancing. The moment they entered into the room, the teacher stopped and informed them about his scheduled programme that was to be held next day. My mother asked him if they could sit and watch him practising and he agreed with pleasure.

I think the presence of my young mother and still younger and more beautiful aunt perhaps gave him the impetus and incentive to exhibit the fineness of his performance. Because suddenly his leaps became higher and the expression in his face became fiercer with his eyes bulging out of their sockets. The floor trembled under his solid, giant-like footsteps and his long hair rose and fell on the nape of his neck rhythmically. I found his performance extremely challenging and looked at my mother's face anticipating the same expression of appreciation.

But her reaction was totally different. Both her and my aunt's face had become blood-red as a result of their suppressed laughter and the moment the teacher turned his back towards them, they laughed stuffing the corners of their sarees into their mouths so that the sound of their laughter would not reach the youngman's ears.

My teacher stopped dancing only when beads of perspiration appeared on his forehead. He looked at my mother for approbation and she praised him highly. I could understand that she was telling a lie just to please the youngman. But my teacher, in his excitement, failed to detect it. He believed her and gave a sheepish smile meaning 'Oh, it is nothing. In fact I am capable of giving a much better performance'.

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THE STORY TELLER

Most of the teachers who taught us in class four were kind and unpretentious. But we adored our class teacher Uday sir. He was a middle aged man, almost fifty or so and was dark, and thin with a mass of unkempt hair on his head. He usually wore a dhoti and a half shirt which were hand washed and were neither starched nor pressed. He had the habit of stuffing a huge pan in his mouth that created a permanent bulge on one side of his cheek and he smiled a lot displaying all his beteljuice stained teeth. He was a gem of a man, both jolly and affectionate.

He knew each and every child's name and background and he was patience personified. I do not remember him getting angry with us even once for the commotion we created in the classroom. He loved us and we reciprocated the love.

He taught us Oriya literature and language and taught us well. Occasionally, if we didn't feel like studying, he told us stories. But his stock of stories was exhausted after a few weeks and one day he asked if any one among us knew a story and would like to narrate it in the class. I raised my hand.

I had learnt an amusing story from my mother. It was about eighteen foolish brothers and it described their eccentric adventures one by one in a series, much in the fashion of Don Quixote. My classmates found the story funny and hilarious and applauded loudly when I finished it. The appreciation of the teacher was no less and from that day onwards, he often asked me to narrate the story before the class after he finished his lessons. God only knows how many times I repeated the story in one year but, my friends as well as Uday sir never got tired of it. It was my story telling that earned me a few grace marks in the half-yearly examination also.

"She certainly deserves more marks than whatever she has got. She is a great storyteller.", Uday sir had declared prophetically in the class while checking the M.I.L. paper and the entire class had said 'yes' in chorus.

It was a pity that this affectionate, cheerful man lost his mental balance after a few years. He was declared insane and was dismissed from the school. But he was attached to the school and often came and roamed about in the playground. He was not violent. Only his thought process had become disoriented. But because of an unpleasant incident, the Headmaster once got annoyed with him and he stopped from coming to the school after this.

It was during the visit of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru to Cuttack. His convoy was to pass in front of our school and all of us stood in rows on both sides of the main road to greet him. I, along with my other friends, held thick garlands of jasmins to offer them to our beloved Prime Minister and we waited excitedly to have a glimpse of him. The whole market place was crowded with eager spectators who carried festoons, flags and hoardings in their hands in order to greet the great national leader. At that time the strict security measure, as is prevalent now, was not there.

And then the motorcade arrived. The Prime Minister, pink as a rose, stood smilingly in an open jeep and the jeep slowed down seeing the children waiting with garlands. Sri Harekrishna Mahatab, who was the-then Chief Minister of Orissa accompanied him. The Prime Minister accepted the garlands and threw them smilingly at us in his usual affectionate gesture.

Somehow, Uday sir happened to be present there at that time. He entered into the crowd, started chanting sanskrit hymns and tried to stretch his hand towards the convoy in a gesture of benediction. But the motorcade left immediately and

he stood disappointed. Moreover there was a huge crowd and in the pulling and pushing, it was impossible for him to come anywhere near the open jeep.

He was a harmless man and his action was harmless. But our Headmaster, perhaps justifiably, took extreme umbrage to this and reprimanded Uday sir severely in front of the public that had gathered there. But the man concerned simply failed to comprehend the situation. He pleaded again and again that he meant no harm at all to his beloved leader and simply wanted to bless him for a peaceful and long life. He made a pitiable sight standing there and trying to justify his case before everybody. Though in my small way, I could feel that his action perhaps was not proper, yet I had a deep sense of sorrow for him at the turn of the event.

This story is more than four decades old. The main character of this story is no more. If there is any spot called heaven, he must have been the first person to get an entry to that place. I am sure, he must be enjoying himself there telling stories to little noisesome kids as he used to do here long long ago. Are his stories exhausted ? In that case, I am sure, he must be remembering me and my story about the eighteen foolish brothers that I told him years ago.

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THE FLOWER THIEF

I had come back to my home state after spending a number of years outside Orissa and it was my first day in Bhubaneswar. I woke up early and inhaled the cool and fragrant air. There was chirping of birds in the branches of the luxuriantly grown neem tree. I caught sight of a few sparrows, fat and brown, and another beautiful black bird with a long and protruding fan-like tail, yellow in colour and in total contrast with its body.

All of a sudden, I found the branches of the flowering shrubs near my boundary wall moving. The shrubs were dense and had outgrown in height the short boundary wall. I peeped through the window and found a few gentlemen climbing on the stone wall and plucking flowers from the plants. I asked them about their identity, but they ignored my question and remained busy with their job. They left after almost half an hour plucking all the flowers from the garden. This was absolutely a new experience for me. I had stayed in three other states- Assam, Mizoram and Delhi and nowhere did I find anything like this before. In Delhi, there are lovely flower gardens in the crossroads and by the side of the streets. Never have I seen a single person plucking a flower from the side of the footpath even.

However, after I stayed here for a couple of months, I became quite acquainted with the tradition of the flower thieves. Every morning, I see a number of persons-most of them educated elderly citizens, wandering about the roads and lanes of the city with the honest intention of stealing flowers from other's gardens. They have got absolute knowledge of the floral topography of the area and are fully armed. In one hand, they

have a bag to collect the stolen goods and in the other hand they carry a thin but strong iron rod whose end has been bent in the fashion of an angling hook. This is to facilitate the pulling of branches from the neighbour's trees. Needless to say that their dress and appearance are shabby and dishevelled. They come straight from the bed. Competition is tough and if they do not reach early, there is every probability that the loot will be collected by somebody else. The stealing job is not an easy task either. It requires great concentration, expertise, guts as well as a flexible body. I have seen a gentleman adopting a very awkward posture trying his best to reach out to the hibiscus plant in my garden.

In my house, there is a malati creeper entwined in the grill of the front boundary wall. When it blooms, it is a feast for the eye. The white star-like flowers encased in the foliage of bottlegreen hue give the impression of the body of a gorgeous Banarasi saree. But we saw this festival of flowers only for a couple of days when it just started blooming. After that, we have never seen the flowers. By the time we wake up, they have vanished.

Right from childhood, I have been taught that lifting something from somebody else's house without permission is theft and is a sinful act. I personally believe that if you offer a gift to the Almighty that has been stolen, He will never accept it. Moreover, I have not been able to understand as to why such religious minded people do not plant a flowering tree in their own garden. A shrub of 'tarata', 'mandara' or 'ashoka' takes very little space and it keeps flowering throughout the year. It is simply a matter of putting a small branch in the soil during rainy season. Rest is done by mother earth and there would be flowers after a couple of years.

There are many places in Bhubaneswar- like Rajarani temple,

Mausima temple and Kedargouri temple, where hundreds of flowering plants have been planted. In the evening, they are loaded profusely with half open buds. But by morning the flowers are gone, as if by magic.

When I first came to Bhubaneswar, I thought that the days of government quarters were over and now that I had my own house, I would have a lovely flower garden. I thought that the plants and flowers would create a beautiful backdrop to the red granular earth of the capital and would pour a lot of oxygen into the air. I would see swarms of bees, butterflies and dragonflies coming and drinking nectar from them. Their species which are in danger of extinction because of absence of flowers all around, would atleast survive. All these still remain a dream. And this is because of the new breed of thieves in the capital—the flower thieves.

The only benefit that we have got by planting flower trees in our garden is that my husband's blood pressure has gone up considerably high due to continuous tension in the morning with the flower thieves. In addition to this, we have been declared as lowly people by the community also. The other day, one flower thief, on being questioned by my husband reiterated "Are you a brahmin or a 'mlechha' ? How dare you tell me not to take flowers knowing fully well that this is meant for God."

Till now, I thought that the theft of flowers was essentially the domain of males. But this last bastion of male dominance has also fallen. Yesterday I saw a lady flower-thief for the first time. She was draped in a silk saree and was stealing flowers from our front house. And it certainly made me proud.



THE MARRIAGE PROPOSAL

My marriage was fixed when I was in class five and it was done at the insistence of my paternal grandmother. My cousin Kanchan who was slightly elder to me was already married and here I was, a grown up girl almost nine years old, without a prospective bridegroom arranged for me. This was simply unheard of in a brahmin family and had sufficient reason to irritate my grandmother. She was sure that her seven generations would straight go to hell because of this sinful act of my parents.

Exactly at this crucial moment, the proposal came. The boy's father was a richman with extensive landed property in the village. But he served in Cuttack and resided there visiting his village off and on in order to look after the cultivation. His son, a boy couple of years older than me, stayed with him in the city and read in a school. The gentleman belonged to the village of Kamala aunty, my mother's elder sister and it was she who had started the negotiation.

My grandmother was excited. She came down from the village and went to see the boy along with my mother. Marriage meant nothing more than festivity to me and when my mother came back, I asked her, "How is the boy" ?

She laughed at my question. "He is a nice kid, not very handsome though. He stood shyly with downcast eyes when we called him and he has his nose pierced", my mother replied.

A shy boy was alright. I did not like quarrelsome kids. But a husband with a pierced nose was not upto my liking. "Why is his nose pierced ? He is not a girl," I asked my mother.

"Parents, in the villages, often pierce the earlobe or nose of a child the moment he is born. They believe that if the baby is disfigured, Lord of death won't come near him and thus he would be blessed with a long-life", my mother explained to me. But the superstition of the villagers offered me no consolation.

"They have got a stonehouse in the village and they are as rich as kings. The boy is reading in a school and obviously would go for higher education. It would be a folly to say 'no' to such a proposal", my grandmother commented sensing the indifference of my father. She also informed that the boy's father would come to see me next week.

Next week, when I returned home in the evening after my games and was going to enter into my father's study, my mother pulled me away. She took me upstairs, wiped my face clean and combed my hair. She made me wear my new printed frock and brought me down stairs. "The boy's father has come to see you", she whispered with all seriousness.

My father called me to his study after a few minutes. I ran and stood behind him clutching the backrest of his wooden chair tightly with both of my hands. A middle aged, obese gentleman was sitting near him on another chair. He wore a dhoti and a full shirt and his face, because of layers of fat in the neck, displayed a double chin. His eyes looked narrow and were half hidden due to his plump cheek muscles. His face was perfectly round and moonlike and looked somewhat oily. But he was grinning and seemed sweet-tempered, harmless and amicable to me.

"She is my daughter", my father introduced me to the gentleman and asked me to do 'namaste' which I obeyed.

"In which class is she studying?" the gentleman asked. "She is in class five. She is good in studies and has started learning English from this year", My father replied.

"Very good, very good", the gentleman nodded his head in approval and asked, "Can she reply to my question if I ask them in English" ?

"Well, you can try", my father said and I felt nervous.

"What is your name" ? the gentleman asked me. This was an easy question for me and I gave the reply immediately.

"How many hands have you ?" the gentleman asked the second question and I found this one easy too.

"What is your father's name?" was the third question of the gentleman and I told my father's name without waiting for a split second. But the reaction of the gentleman to my answer to the third question left me baffled.

"Wrong, wrong, here you have committed the mistake", he thumped his fist on the table and laughed. I thought hard, but could not remember any other name of my father. I knew my parent's names right from the day I was able to talk. Somebody had taught me and I would repeat the names again and again before visitors. "Don't you know that your father is a doctorate from London ? You should have added the word 'Doctor' before his name", the gentleman told me and seemed obviously pleased with his wit. I was going to contradict him that 'Doctor' was merely a degree and was not a part of my father's name. But I remained silent for fear of offending him.

The interview was over after this and the pleasant expression on the face of the gentleman indicated that I had come out of it in flying colours. I knew my name and I knew that I had two hands. I committed a little mistake in telling the name of my father, but that mistake was pardonable. What else was required of a daughter-in-law ?

The gentleman asked me to go to him and I approached his chair. He took out a small ivory coloured plastic box from his pocket and offered it to me. I looked at my father for his

approval and he nodded. I accepted the tiny casket from him and ran out of the room.

My mother opened the box in the verandah and took out a pair of golden earrings from it. The earring was in the shape of a swan and it dangled in a chain from a hook. My mother slipped the earrings through my earlobes. The swans, sitting on multipetalled lotus flowers dangled and touched my plump round cheeks. I felt ticklish.

But my marriage with the shy boy with a pierced nose was never solemnised. The reasons were very many. The negotiation lost its importance along with the death of my grand-mother which followed shortly afterwards. It was she who was more interested in the marriage. Times changed and so also the social values. Child marriages became a question of the past. I started doing well in my studies and my parents wanted me to join college and go for higher education. As for myself, I never saw the boy and was completely indifferent to him. I am sure the boy must have felt the same way about me. Moreover, it was perhaps expected that being from the girl's side, my parents would go out of their way to pursue the matter and would keep contact with the boy's family which they never did. Ultimately the matter lost the importance and the boy married somebody else. And the person, whom I married much later in my life, is perhaps a bit shy but has a beautiful straight nose without a single pinprick it.



THE TEMPLES

There was a Shiva temple in my maternal grandfather's village-that of Lord Akhandeswar. My grandma used to visit this temple often and I remember accompanying her once in her trip.

The temple was a little away from the village and was surrounded by miles and miles of paddy fields all around. The story ran that long ago, a farmer, while ploughing his field, felt the sharp edge of his plough striking against something. He looked below and found blood gushing forth in torrents. He dug up the earth and found a Shivalinga. The plough had chiselled off the upper portion of the Deity and the piece of stone was bleeding. The news spread among the villagers and they built a small temple exactly at this site. The mark of the plough was still visible in the upper portion of the Shivalinga.

When I went with my grandma, the harvesting season was over and the temple stood forlorn surrounded by long stretches of barren land on all sides. The only vegetation was a big 'bakul' tree in front of the temple that some devotee had planted sometime. The Shivalinga was installed much below the ground level and one had to climb down a number of steps to reach it. The interior was pitch dark, even during day time.

My grandma remained busy with her pooja inside and I collected the 'bakul' flowers in my frock. There was a thin carpet of the sweet smelling, brown coloured flowers under the tree. These flowers had a unique characteristic. They remained fresh and fragrant for a number of days and my aunty loved them. I wanted to carry the flowers for her.

And then suddenly I saw this man lying on the ground a little away from the temple. He had his face turned downwards and he remained immobile. Exactly at that moment my grandma came out from the temple and I ran towards her.

"Grandma, is that man dead ?" I asked.

"No dear; he belongs to our village and is simply prostrating and praying before the Lord for a son", my grandmother replied.

"How long will he be like that" ? I asked again. Such a sight was new to me.

"He will not get up till Lord Shiva appears in his dream and gives him his blessing", my grandma explained and we left the temple.

But my grandmother's words remained in my mind and I asked her about the man after a few days. She told me that the man had received the blessing and had come back home.

After three years, my grandfather died and I visited the village again. My grandmother at tht time showed me a woman carrying a boy in her arms and told me that the child happened to be the son of the man whom we had seen in the temple. I still do not know if the child was really the fruit of the Lord's blessing or his birth was a mere coincidence with his father's penance.

There was also another Shiva temple in the nereby village Patpur, which was rather more famous and it was a must for all the women of my grandfather's village to visit it during Shivaratri festival.

Kamala aunty, my mother's eldest sister had come down from her in-law's village to Harirajpur during my stay there. She didn't have a daughter and she loved me dearly..Long ago, when I was seriously sick and was suffering from green diarrhoea in my grandpa's house, Kamala aunty happened to be present there also. In one of her anxious moments, she had promised to Lord Shiva secretly that she would keep fast on

Shivratri day and burn an oil lamp in His temple. The Lord had to save the life of her precious niece in return.

The Lord had saved the life of her precious niece and she was now seven-years old. But Kamala aunty had not been able to fulfill her promise, because my presence was also necessary for the occasion. Now since both of us were together, she decided to visit the temple at Patpur.

There were also other women from the village who wanted to go to the temple for worship and all of us started together in the afternoon. The main road leading to Patpur was long and circuitous and we preferred to follow the short-cut and straight route that ran through the paddy fields.

The women, dressed in their best attire- the crumpled moth-eaten sarees of their wedding days, walked in a row in the narrow dusty path. The tiny stones inside their hollow silver anklets jingled and I ran ahead of them dancing and jumping all through out.

We reached the temple in the evening and found it crowded all around by hundreds of devotees. After the big lamp on the top of the temple was lighted, the women sitting all around the temple in small groups, lighted their earthen lamps. Kamala aunty put the wick in her lamp after filling it up with ghee that she carried from home. As per the custom, the lamp had to be lighted by placing it on my body. Kamala Aunty stretched her legs and made me sleep on them with my face pointing upwards. She lifted my frock, put the lamp on my bare navel and lighted it. It made me feel warm on the skin. But she removed the lamp immediately to the ground and I got up.

I found hundreds of lamps flickering all throughout the narrow stone passage around the temple and the devotees sat near them patiently and silently. They had come there walking miles and were apparently tired. But they looked happy- happy

at the thought that they had been able to fulfil their promises that they made once upon a time for the well-being of their dear ones. The soft yellow light emitted by the lamps made their faces look tender and divine.

I kept awake for sometime, but then fell asleep resting my head on Kamala aunty's lap. She told me that she would remain awake all throughout the night and would keep the lamp burning by pouring more ghee into it till the auspicious lamp on the temple was put out. When I woke up, it was already morning. All the women gathered together and we returned through the same narrow dusty road that we had followed the previous day. The dew drops on the leaflets of grass shone like diamond chips in the bright silvery sunshine. My aunty wanted to carry me; but I preferred running and I ran ahead of her destroying as many diamond chips as I could with my bare little feet.



MY EARLY WRITINGS

The first poem that I wrote was for the thread ceremony of my brother when I was only twelve. It was then the custom in Orissa to write poems for such auspicious occasions. We had all gone to our village for the ceremony and my mother had asked me casually, "Can't you write a poem for your brother?" I had never thought of writing a poem prior to that. But my mother's words gave me the impetus to try my hand at composing one. And I sat in the semidark corner of a thatched room with a pencil and a piece of paper in my hand. To my utter disbelief, the poem was ready within a few minutes. I felt thrilled and showed it to my father. He corrected it at places and taught me about 'upadha', the proper way of rhyming a couplet. "I wish you wrote it at Cuttack; then I could have printed it", he told me. Nevertheless, I sat down and made copies of the poem as many as I could and my father distributed them among the literate persons of the village when they came for the feast.

Thereafter, writing a poem became a fun for me. I wrote poems about the bee, the rainbow, the spring and things like that. They were simple and utterly childish, but I presume a little girl is supposed to write simple and utterly childish poems. My poem was published for the first time in a newspaper when I was in class eight. It was in 'meenabazar', the children's section of the 'Prajatantra'. I can never forget the thrill and excitement that I had when I saw my name in print for the first time. When I was in class eleven, my father collected all my poems and published a book. This book is not available now. My mother had kept one in her trunk all these years. It was like a treasure for her. Last time I went home, I stole it.

During my highschool and college days, I wrote regularly. Writing was an addiction. The poems came easily and naturally to me without any effort and I wrote them on chits of paper, on the covers of my books and in my rough note in between physics and mathematics numericals. And I often gave them a little innovative touch by borrowing ideas from geography, geometry and grammar.

"Oh sailor; you are leaving this little harbour now. Because the bigger and more glamorous seaports attract you. You may proceed in your journey, but I am sure one day you will come back to this place, because the earth is round.

"The definition of our relationship is very simple- a circle. One is the centre and the other one is the circumference that goes round it.

"You silly worldly people! You get surprised to see that I do not conform to the rules set by you. Don't you know that in grammar there are always exceptions - Nipatanasiddhas, for any rule whatsoever".

The copies of the first two poems were lying with me till now. I changed a few words here and there and sent them to a newspaper recently and they got published.

During my college days, when I was in first year, it was usual for my classmates, the boys, to write a silly and jocular jingle on the blackboard the day one of my poems was published in the newspaper. I remember once when I entered in the classroom, I found rows of earthen lamps drawn beautifully with chalk and the two lines- 'Your longing is over, Here comes your lover', written below. The same morning, one of my sonnet was published in the 'Samaj. "It is past midnight, and with my little oil lamp burning, I wait for your footsteps" - were the last two lines of the poem and obviously some of the boys had read it.

There was also another interesting episode associated with my writing which I remember till date as it had a touch of mystery attached to it. It was also during the first year of my college. After one of my poems was published in the college magazine, oneday I found a thick envelope in my name lying on the table in the girl's commonroom. I was surprised to see it and immediately took it to be a love letter from somebody. I was afraid that my friends might see it. So I took it to the toilet and read it there. It was infact a love letter, but with a difference. It was written in the form of a poem, ran to four pages and was a reply to the romantic poem that I had written for the college magazine. It was obvious that the person who wrote that letter never composed a poem earlier in his life and probably this was his maiden attempt. He did not have the basic knowledge of syllables, metre or rhyming. Nevertheless, he had tried hard to express his feelings and it was the feeling that mattered at that age. I read it and my cheeks glowed and my eyes burnt. I did not have the courage to show it to my friends because they would never have believed that I did not know the writer. We had chemistry practical class immediately after wards. I kept the letter inside my practical note book and in between preparation of chlorine gas, I read it again secretly.

Till today, I don't know who wrote that letter. I wish I knew.



ROLL NUMBER NINE

It all happened in perfect Hindi film style and started from a quarrel.

It was the English poetry class, the first period of the first day of our college and the lecturer has asked if any one in the class knew how to define poetry. All of us had kept quiet. And then suddenly this boy, fair and handsome and with a pair of bright blue eyes, stood up. "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings of heart", he said a bit hesitantly. "Good, do you know who said that?" the teacher asked. But the boy remained silent and we were informed that this was the definition given by Wordsworth, the famous romantic poet.

And all of us, after this incident, became familiar with the face of the blue eyed boy. Eventually, we learnt his roll number when the attendance was taken. It was number nine.

I had a distant cousin who was also my classmate. He stayed in the hostel and used to visit us occasionally. Once when he came to our house, during our course of conversation, I asked him casually about roll number nine.

"Strange; he keeps talking about you and now you have started enquiring about him also", my cousin said smilingly.

"What does he talk about me?" I was surprised and asked.

"He says that during matriculation examination, he allowed you to copy from his note. It was the mathematics paper and you had cried." I was flabber-gasted. "Is he from Cuttack?" I asked.

"No, he is from a village".

"Then how did he help me ? My centre was in collegiate school and his centre must have been somewhere else in the village", I said.

"You are absolutely correct. But he keeps on bragging like that before everybody", my cousin replied.

"Okay, tell him to meet me in the college. I want to clarify this from him", I told my cousin and then forgot about the whole episode.

After a couple of days, I was loitering in the college corridor when this boy came and stood in front of me. "I heard that you wanted to talk to me", he said giving a smile much in the fashion of a toothpaste advertisement.

"Not at all, why should I?" I replied.

"But that was what Pramod told me", he said and then I remembered. Pramod was the name of my cousin.

"You seem to be the greatest liar of the world. I have never seen you in my life and yet you spread the rumour that you supplied me copy during school final examination. For your information, I have secured cent percent marks in mathematics ", I told him and I was terribly angry.

But my anger had no impact on him. "I am afraid there has been some misunderstanding. Actually I helped a girl who looked exactly like you and that was what I had said. Pramod perhaps could not follow it properly." He explained and I knew that he was making up a story. "Don't you ever dare to utter my name anywhere after this and now please get lost", I told him and he left without giving a reply.

After a few days, I met my cousin again and the first thing I told him was that I had given roll number nine a piece of my mind.

"Is that so ? But he gave me a different version", Pramod replied.

"What did he say" ?

"He said that you cried before him and were very upset about that examination issue", my cousin replied and I just

didn't know what to say after that. And now I really felt like crying.

"Come on, forget about it. Boys talk like that about girls and I think you know that", my cousin tried to console me.

However, the entire thing was incomprehensible to me. And the next day I tried to spot roll number nine in the class. He was sitting in the nearest bench and when I looked at him, I found him looking at me also and the moment he caught my sight he gave a shy and beautiful smile and turned his face away. I was surprised and after a few minutes I looked at him again out of curiosity and noticed the same thing happening this time also. And it went on like this during each and every period and on each and every single day of the week. It was a strange and novel experience for me and created a flutter in my little adolescent heart.

And eventually this boy left the college and joined some technical institute outside Orissa. I continued in the same college for a couple of years, got married and fell in love with my husband.

We spent our entire lifetime outside Orissa and came back to Bhubaneswar only after my husband's retirement. I had the pleasure of meeting one of my classmates here after a few days of our arrival. Both of us got nostalgic and started talking about our college days. And it was this particular friend who told me that roll number nine was also here, in this very city.

And next day I got his number from the telephone directory and rang him up. He most certainly recognised me when I told him my name. He was no more that shy and nervous boy whom I knew in the college. He talked and went on talking incessantly for almost five minutes without giving me a chance to speak a few words even and the only thing he talked about was his money and his wealth. I was totally disillusioned. I remembered

the smiling blue-eyed boy who, long long ago, used to exchange secret furtive glances with a young girl inside a crowded classroom. And I also knew that I am not going to talk to him again. He was just not my type.

After I put down the receiver on the cradle, my son, who was here on a vacation from U.S.A. asked me "Mama, who was it ?" "Oh! It was your mother's boy friend of yester years", my husband commented smilingly. Obviously he had heard the story of roll number nine from me.

"Really!" My son smiled and joked." But I heard you talking about cars and buildings. I surely took it to be a business deal. One does not talk to one's boyfriend like that".

"He boasted about his palatial house and imported car. I just could not take it. So I had to tell him that I do have a three storeyed building as well and I possess a brand new car and that too fully airconditined", I told my son.

And then my son started laughing and he laughed till tears filled his eyes, and he stopped only when his baby son, whom he was carrying on his shoulder, became panicky and started wailing.

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THE OTHER FACE OF LOVE

I had met Narinder in Delhi university, I was doing my M.Litt. in comparative literature and Narinder was doing his M.A. We were introduced to each other through a common friend.

Narinder was in his early twenties and was much younger than me. He was mild for a 'sardarji' and inspite of his beard and turban, looked vulnerable like a baby.

Oneday, when I was coming back home from the university, Narinder called me and exchanged pleasantries. He left after five minutes or so and I had a feeling that he wanted to say something else but didn't.

My suspicion proved true when next day Narinder met me in the department again and requested me, with some trepidation, for an introduction to my husband. He wanted help on some personal matter and I brought him home.

The story that Narinder narrated before my husband was both interesting and pathetic. He was in love with a girl, Sohni, and wanted to marry her. But her parents were against it. They had restrained her from meeting Narinder and had fixed her marriage somewhere else. Since both Narinder and Sohni were majors and could marry according to law, he wanted my husband's advice and help in this regard.

My husband entrusted the job to his three Deputy Superintendents of Police- Sri Chhabra, Sri Prakash and Sri Mukhi, and requested them to look into the affair. All these three officers were pretty old, but were young at heart and had shown interest in such cases earlier.

They heard the story from Narinder and questioned him in detail about the case. Narinder was eager to tell his story to someone and finding three avid and sympathetic listeners, put forth his tale of woe before them in an incoherent manner and in between sobs. "Did your parents agree to the proposal?" Mr. Prakash asked Narinder. "I have lost my father; but my mother liked Sohni. I once took her home", Narinder replied.

But the problem arose when Sohni's parents learnt about the affair. Sohni's elder brother, a hefty six feet tall sardarji had already threatened Narinder to kill him and throw his limbs in the streets of Karolbagh and Narinder was mortally frightened. In the meantime. Sohni had sent him a letter through one of her friends asking him to find out a way to bring her out of the house just for a few minutes. Then she would runaway with him and marry him.

"Do you have that letter with you" ? Mr. Chhabra asked
"Yes", Narinder replied.

"Read it", all the three officers ordered simultaneously.

Narinder took out a much folded, crumpled letter from his pocket and started reading it with a voice choked with emotion. And the three old men relaxed on the sofa and enjoyed the contents, often asking him to repeat the lines that were most romantic in style.

However, all the three officers took the story of the youngman to heart and next day took him to 'Kalkaji' police station under whose jurisdiction Sohni's home was located, and Sohni, along with her father, came to the police station after being called by the station house officer. But the drama, after reaching the climax, took totally a different turn.

"Do you want to marry this boy" ? the S.H.O. asked Sohni pointing a finger at Narinder.

"No, I shall marry wherever my parents decide", Sohni replied with a straight face and she was as cool as a cucumber.

Narinder was totally flabbergasted at the turn of events and requested a private meeting with Sohni which was also arranged in another room. But there also Sohni stuck to her earlier statement.

There was nothing more to do after this; and Narinder came back from the police station along with the three officers completely disoriented.

After this, I kept on meeting Narinder in the university. He felt embarrassed and used to avoid me. But after a couple of months, I called him once and talked to him. I learnt from him that Sohni was already married and I could feel that Narinder was absolutely broken hearted. I told him, "Narinder, one has to make compromises in life. Nature avoids vacuum. Empty spaces do get filled up automatically. Time is a great healer and I am sure everything would be alright for you".

Perhaps my words soothed Narinder. Perhaps he found someone who understood his pain. Because after almost two months, for the first time Narinder looked straight into my eye and replied, "Perhaps....."

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MY FIRST SCHOOL

I was getting a little naughty and my mother wanted me to join school. There was a lower primary school near our colony and my private tutor took me and got me admitted there. My mother wanted me to join class one. But I cried and joined class two instead, because 'Kuni', my most intimate friend, was reading in class two.

And the next day I started for the school along with Kuni following the narrow trodden path on the bank of the canal and after crossing the sweeper's colony, the Shiva temple, the banyan tree with its clumsy roots that looked like sleepy pythons and the rows of stinking service latrines of the municipality, we reached the school. My mother had made a neat little bow of red ribbon in my hair and had made me wear my best frock, a printed one with a round collar and a little triangular tie hanging from the neck-button.

I have a photograph of mine with this particular frock with me. I look both funny and cute with my plump cheeks and my short bobbed hair that covers half of my fore head. I have stolen this photograph from my mother's collection and have pasted it in my album so that my grandson can have an idea in future as to how his grandma looked when she was a kid. My mother, if at all discovers this theft, will surely be furious.

However, it was on the very first day of my school when an elderly girl, Parvati, developed an unusual friendship with me.

Parvati was the tallest girl in our class and came from the nearby village. She had a dusky complexion that reminded me

of the deep water of the canal. She wore a thin bordered white saree and her golden nose stud made her look elderly. Her one foot was twisted from birth and she limped.

She always pinched my cheeks and addressed me as 'Mani' which I just couldn't understand.

"My name is not Mani, but Kanan" I would often say. But she simply smiled and ignored my sentence. After a few days, she stopped coming to school and I missed her. Then one afternoon while coming back from the school I saw her. She was going home after taking her bath in the canal. The moment she saw me, she came forward.

"Hey Mani, how is your study going on?" she asked sounding pleasant.

"My name is not Mani, but Kanan", I reminded her and she gave her usual smile.

"Why are you not coming to the school?" I asked.

"How can I ? I am getting married soon. Everything is fixed. The boy....." She wanted to continue the conversation. But I was not interested in marriages and changed the subject.

"Why don't you come to our house ? It is that big building with the champak tree in front. Come and we will play together.", I said and she pinched my cheek.

"No Mani, not today. I shall try to come to your house some other time", she replied.

"My name is not Mani, but Kanan", I reminded her again and left.

What does the word Mani mean?", I asked my mother after reaching home. She was puzzled with my question which was sudden and out of context and I made it simpler for her.

"I met a girl of our class now on my way home. She has left the school because she is getting married and she always addresses me as 'Mani'."

My mother laughed and explained that 'Mani' literally means a gem and is a term of endearment. It is used occasionally to address little girls as a gesture of affection. Then she continued, "Didn't you say that the girl is getting married ? Must be from the village and much elder to you. Perhaps she loves you very much."

This was news for me. I had never realised that Parvati had so much affection for me. I felt sorry thinking that I had not been nice to her. She wanted to discuss about her wedding and I didn't allow her to do so and changed the topic instead. Had I known earlier that she loved me that much, I would have listened to her more attentively. And I felt repentant.



THE DIMPLED BABY

When I was a couple of months old, my maternal grandfather came down to Cuttack and wanted to take my mother along with him to his village for a short visit. His reasoning was sound. My mother was young and inexperienced. At least in the village my grandmother was there to look after me, and I, without slightest doubt, needed special care and attention. My father gave his consent and my mother was sent off for her parental village.

I became the darling of everybody in my grand-father's family. Special care was taken of my daily massage and my grandmother employed 'Lingama', a haunch-backed old lady for this particular task. My daily massage became an elaborate ritual under the direct supervision of Lingama.

In the villages, turmeric is cultivated in the field, dried under the sun and is stored to be used throughout the year. Few of these dried turmeric sticks would be soaked every morning in plenty of water to make them soft and tender. In the evening, Lingama would grind these sticks to a thick creamy paste. This would be mixed with plenty of castor oil and would be kept outside under the dew to give it extra coolness.

The castor oil was home made too. My grandfather had a number of castor plants in his garden that yielded castor fruits in abundance. Once a year, when the castor pods ripened, they would be plucked and the smooth black seeds would be collected. And these seeds would be soaked in water for a night. In the morning, my grandmother would roast them and pound them coarsely. This sticky mass would be boiled along with plenty of water in an earthen vessel over slow charcoal fire.

Gradually, the water would evaporate and a thick layer of castor oil would collect on top. The residue would settle down below. My grandmother would drain the thick yellow liquid, resembling pure golden honey, carefully and store it in enormous earthen jars to be consumed at home throughout the year.

The rubbing of this oil on my body along with the turmeric was an elaborate ritual. In the early hours of morning, Lingama would put me on her outstretched legs and smear a thick layer of turmeric paste all over my body. She would leave me like that for half an hour or so for the juice to be soaked in and the paste, after loosing the moisture, would become semidried. Then she would rub my body vigorously till the skin glowed with a golden tint. The oil made rubbing easier. She would be equally smeared with turmeric by the time the massage was over, and so also the family members who carried me throughout the day. But nobody seemed to mind this.

This vigorous exercise whetted my appetite and I could consume a big bowl of milk, that had turned creamy and pinkish being cooked slowly over cowdung fire, easily. The regular exercise as well as the improved digestion had the therapeutic effect. Gradually my emaciated body filled in with layers of puppy fat and the wrinkled skin became smooth and taut. The hard exercise metamorphosed the soft cartilages into real bones and the extra calcium in the milk made them stronger. The turmeric improved my complexion. I turned into a healthy baby, plump, moonfaced and pug-nosed. And the neighbours appreciated me by clicking their tongues and making sibilant sounds of exclamation.

My mother has told me an episode repeatedly over the years to prove how healthy and chubby I was. Once she carried me in the crook of her waist, a common practice of carrying infants in Orissa, when a neighbour came to visit her. I was

heavy for my age and my mother was only a teenager, thin and slim. She carried me on the left side and because of this extra weight had to bend a little towards the right for the sake of gravity. Obviously this attracted the neighbours attention and she muttered "My God; what a fat child! It must be a real problem to lift her from the ground and carry her like this."

In Orissa commenting openly, that too before the parents, about the plumpness of a child is considered bad manners. My mother never forgave the neighbour for this comment and refused to talk to her anymore. For a fortnight or so, she remained tense under the constant fear that this vile comment would surely affect the general health and well-being of her daughter.



IRONY OF FATE

Both Tusar and Kamal happened to be my classmates in the college and they were in love with each other. Both of them were diametrically opposite to each other in their looks and backgrounds. Kamal was from the city and Tusar was from a village. Tusar was handsome and Kamal was rather plain-looking. There were a number of beautiful girls in our class. But somehow Tusar fell in love with Kamal. Perhaps this was what was called 'love'. It was a question of chemistry of minds and nobody knew how the chemical reaction took place.

The love story was enacted forty years ago when society looked down upon teenage romance and was not prepared to accept it. Falling in love was considered a sin. However, the romance of Tusar and Kamal was rather an innocuous affair and was confined only to throwing furtive sidelong glances at each other in the classroom or having an occasional conversation in the college corridor. But I had learnt from Kamal that Tusar had asked her to wait for him. He surely wanted to marry her. They belonged to different castes but Tusar was ready to face the opposition from his family.

But like all teenage romances, this story had also the predictable end. Tusar, in course of time, joined a technical institute at Bombay and Kamal got married to a boy that her parents chose for her. Her husband was posted outside Orissa and I eventually lost touch with her.

But I met Tusar here after I came back to Bhubaneswar after my husband's retirement. Tusar had his own business and was doing rather well. We occasionally talked over telephone.

He seemed happy and contented. And he was extremely attached to his son, about whom he talked most of the times.

I had never thought that I would ever write a story about Tusar. But yesterday I talked to him over telephone and it was only after my conversation with him that I decided to write this feature. Because while talking to me, Tusar had cried a lot like a baby and he was inconsolable. I asked him the reason and he told me in between sobs that his son had married a girl from a different caste and he was sore about it.

"Come on, this is no reason for you to get that perturbed. Accept the girl with open arms. She deserves your love.", I told him.

"You don't know; this is the greatest blow I have ever received in my life. How could he do that ? I have driven him out of my house", he told me and went on weeping.

And exactly at that point of time, I remembered Kamal and her love lorn days in the college. The days when Tusar himself wanted to marry a girl outside his caste and was willing to fight against all odds from the society. And surprisingly now, after an interval of forty years, he had discarded his own son for doing the same thing.

For the first time in my life, I understood the meaning of the term-irony of fate.



THE JOURNEY

We packed up and left for the village after my father went abroad. I was six, the brother next to me was four, my sister was two and my baby brother was only a few months old. Debendra uncle, my father's younger brother took leave from his office for a couple of days and accompanied us. My parental village was a remote one without any direct train or bus service. We were to travel half-way by train and the rest half was to be covered by bullock-cart.

When we got down from the train, the bullockcart was there to receive us. My grandfather had sent two of his servants along with it. One was Saratha, whom we knew earlier as he had come to our home with my grandfather once. He was a puny little man with round bead-like eyes and had the continual habit of keeping a lump of raw tobacco at the base of his lower jaw and spitting yellow coloured, pungent smelling saliva every five minutes or so. Saratha was the oldest servant of my grandfather and had assumed, in course of years, the role of friend, philisopher and guide for the family. The other servant was a young boy whom we didn't know.

We, the children, never rode a bullock cart earlier and felt excited about it. We sat crumpled inside the domeshaped covering and looked out enjoying the passing scenery and landscape. Everything seemed fascinating. The bullock cart passed through small picturesque villages surrounded by mango groves, muddy pools and oddshaped paddy fields. We saw naked pot-bellied children playing in the dust by the side of the road, bare-bodied farmers working in the fields with sickles in their hands and shy village brides carrying water from the well covering their faces with long drawn veils. All of them

stopped for a second when our bullock-cart passed and they looked at us, the citybred people, with wonder. Occasionally, we found ripe wild berries growing on thorny bushes by the side of the narrow road and Saratha stopped the cart and plucked them for us. The berries, though full of innumerable tiny seeds, tasted sweet. The bullocks occasionally felt lethargic and slowed down their pace. Saratha tickled them behind their tails with his long wooden stick and made a queer sound by clicking his tongue against his palate and then they ran.

The rocking inside the cart induced slumber and I fell asleep. After sometime when I awoke, I found the entire evening sky, stretching endlessly upto the horizon, tinted with bright orange hue, the colour of the setting sun. There was hushed up silence all around and our bullock-cart stood still. We looked out and found that the wheels of the cart had sunk dangerously into knee-deep mud. The more the bullocks tried to pull it, the more they churned this creamlike slush and the wheels sank deeper and deeper by cutting grooves in the same place.

No road, worth-the-name, led to our village. We had simply followed a narrow trodden path in-between paddy fields through which the villagers walked while making a journey from one village to another. It had rained before a couple of days and the waterlogged road had become slushy and muddy. By mistake, Saratha had driven the cart to a particular spot where the mud was deeper. Our village was almost one kilometre away. So it was decided that Saratha would guard the cart there and the rest of us would walk down to the village. After reaching home, we would send some more servants to pull the cart out.

My mother and uncle got down first. It was difficult, but they managed somehow and the young servant who was walking

behind the bullock cart gave them a helping hand. Then one by one we were lifted out of the cart. The meagre luggage that we had brought, remained inside the cart and we proceeded towards the village.

The little children were carried by my uncle and the manservant. My mother carried my baby brother and I preferred to walk.

After walking a few paces, we found a small hilly stream. It was strewn with exquisite little pebbles here and there and was almost dry. The manservant suggested that since this stream ran adjacent to our garden, we could easily reach home merely by following it in the direction of upstream. The route would be short-cut also. We found his suggestion wise.

By the time we reached home, it was dark. The mudplastered house smelt of ripe paddy and cowdung and seemed alien to us along with the inhabitants. We had seen only our grandfather who used to visit us often. But my grandmother, my father's elder brother and his wife were all new to us. Our aunty, a tall fair lady with a tiny tattoo mark on her chin that lent a little feminine charm to her otherwise masculine features, gave us dinner-hot steaming rice, milk and bringal curry, and we ate our food sitting near the hearth, still full of burning ambers after the cooking of the evening meal. And we fell asleep shortly afterwards.



THE MATHEMATICS TEACHER

Prahlad sir was middle aged, dark and obese and had tufts of hair coming out of his ears. He had a moon like face, chubby and round, like that of Churchill and he wore thick, roundshaped spectacles. His obesity made him lethargic. He walked slowly and talked slowly and he often felt breathless. And he had a peculiarity; he was sensitive about his ears. If anyone talked loudly near his ear, he lost his temper. We had a classmate 'Kusum' who, out of mischief, often did that.

He taught us mathematics. He was a veteran in his subject. His body was lethargic but his brain worked feverishly, more so if there was a difficult problem of mathematics to be solved. Many a times, while he was teaching us, mathematics teachers from other sections would rush in and ask him in whispers to solve a problem that their students had asked.

And he was fond of me. He must have taught hundreds of students in his life time and obviously much better students than me. Only he can tell why he loved me that much and why he earned the displeasure of the entire class by blatantly expressing it.

Our matriculation examination was nearing. We had finished the course and were having the revision. The moment Prahlad sir came to the class, he would call me from my usual seat, make me sit in the front bench near his chair and write down a few sums in my rough note asking me to solve them. Then he would attend to the difficulties of other students. Most of the sums I knew and some I did not. The ones that I didn't know he would explain patiently and the ones that I knew would never satisfy him. 'You have done it in a round about and

clumsy way. There is a trick and it can be solved in two lines only.", he would tell me and in fact would really solve it in two or three lines.

This partiality of Prahalad sir towards me became an eyesore at one point and students resented it publicly. One day Jhunu, my closest friend stood up and confronted him. "It seems as if she is the only student who matters for you. You tend to forget that there are others in the class also". This made him a little embarrassed, but in no way changed his fondness for me.

I lost contact with Prahalad sir after I left school. Within a few years, I got married and left my home state also. And then suddenly, after a lapse of almost twenty years I received a letter from Prahalad sir when I was in Delhi. It was a pleasant surprise.

Prahalad sir had taken enough trouble to procure my address.

One of my classmates, Ramakant, was a teacher in an engineering college and Prahalad sir had obtained my address from him. Ramakant had got it from my brother, who happened to be his student.

Prahalad sir wrote that I was always in his memory and he just couldn't forget me. He still remembered me as a dreamy-eyed fifteen-year-old girl who wrote poems and got prizes in interschool elocution competitions. He asked me to inform him about my family members and wondered if I remembered him.

I wrote back to him immediately. I told him that I was no more a teenager whose picture he still carried in his memory. There were streaks of grey in my hair and my son had crossed fifteen in the meantime. "You happen to be the most revered teacher of my entire student career and I remain indebted to you for your love and concern". I wrote to him and I really meant it.

During the Board examination of my son, I used to teach him mathematics-trigonometry, mensuration, algebra and geometry and I could solve the problems in minutes. And my son used to wonder about it.

"Mama, you must be really intelligent to remember the sums so clearly after all these years", he had commented once. "It has got nothing to do with my intelligence. I owe it to my maths teacher", I had replied.

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THE ADMISSION

There were only a few months left for my father to return from London and my mother came back to Cuttack. Before she came, she had asked her father to get my class three certificate from the village school. She hoped that with the help of that certificate, I would have no difficulty in getting a seat in class four in some school in the town.

But Ramachandra, the headmaster, was a bit hesitant. "She didn't appear in all the tests. In fact she hardly ever attended any class during the year", he said falteringly to my grandfather.

And that made my grandfather panicky. He took his job of my guardianship, entrusted to him by his daughter, seriously and naturally didn't want my mother to know that I had played truant for the entire year. "Brother Rama, you know how short-tempered my daughter is. If I do not produce the certificate, she would surely beat this child and shred her to pieces. Please do something, I promise you a pitcher of my best quality molasses", my grandfather pleaded apologetically. Till today, I do not know whether it was the headmaster's pity to save me from my mother's wrath or it was the pitcher of molasses that prompted him to give the class three certificate.

It was the admission season and my mother wanted to put me in class four in a nearby school. She sent me to the school along with my private tutor and the certificate. But the school didn't bother about any certificate whatsoever. It didn't bother whether a child had ever gone to school earlier or had passed any class examinations at all. It conducted an entrance test and admitted students on merit.

There was hardly a month left for the examination and my private tutor started coaching me at home in right earnest. But

being only eight, I didn't understand the significance of tests and took my preparation casually. On the day of the test, I went to the school along with my friend Kuni carrying a wooden pen and a bottle of ink in my hand. For the first time in my life, I saw printed question papers and got thrilled.

We were given two hours time and were asked to answer two papers- arithmetic and vernacular Oriya within this time limit. In the arithmetic paper, I didn't know a couple of sums and in the vernacular paper although I knew everything I couldn't comprehend that we were supposed to answer all the questions and hence left some of them inadvertently. After the test, I came home along with Kuni. Kuni's eldest brother had got married and she had invited me to go her house to see the new bride. I came home to obtain my mother's permission.

But the moment I entered into the house, my mother asked me how I had fared in the examination. She looked tense and my jubilant mood vanished immediately. Unfortunately our neighbor's daughter-in-law was sitting in our house at that time. She had passed class eight and had the highest qualification among the womenfolk of the colony. She took the question paper from me and to my utter horror and consternation went on asking the sums one by one. I hated her for doing this. But there was no way to avoid it either. Ultimately it was found out that a few of my sums were wrong. Kuni, on the other hand, had them all correct.

I shall never forget, throughout my life, the spanking that I got that day from my mother. She beat me up mercilessly repeating again and again that I was sure to fail in the examination. It must be a mere coincidence that my private tutor, the old man, also appeared exactly at that time. He had come to enquire about my test. The moment my mother saw him, she started accusing him at the top of her voice.

Now after all these years, when I look back, I realise that it was not so much of her anger, but her sense of frustration that drove her to act so harshly. For the last two years, she was alone, penniless and over burdened with the responsibility of four little children. She had left the village and had come back to cuttack now, but in the wilderness of the city, she found herself isolated, lonely and insecure. There was nobody to share her burden or to give her a word of comfort.

Perhaps my mother repented for her action because immediately afterwards, she changed my frock, powdered my face and allowed me to go to Kuni's house to play. I left with a sullen face, but the commotion in Kuni's house and the beautiful face of the new bride made me forget my sorrow soon.

On a hot day, a week or so after this incident, we were all resting with our mother in the bedroom when somebody knocked frantically on the front door. My mother went to open it and I followed her.

It was my old private tutor with a wide grin on his face. He had walked breathlessly under the scorching summer sun and his face looked flushed. He, in a sudden burst of excitement, informed us that he was coming straight from the school where the list of succesful candidates for admission to class four was out and my name very much there.

My mother smiled, made him sit on a chair and offered him a glass of cool water to drink. My teacher could sense my mother's mellow mood and complained timidly.

"Mother, that day you beat this child up. Even scolded me for no reason at all. You should have waited till the result was out."

My mother was already feeling guilty and she asked him to forgive her for her bad manners

My teacher smiled sweetly and forgave her.

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THE WONDERLAND

My childhood was a happy one and the whole world seemed like a wonderland with its fascinating sights and sounds. I, along with my friends, spent considerable time chasing dragonflies who drank nectar from the wild pink flowers that blossomed in abundance around our house. We tied their transparent waferlike wings with threads and made them fly till the day when one of my friends told me that giving such troubles to the dragon flies ultimately resulted in the death of the mother. I became afraid of loosing my mother and no more pursued the game. In stead, we played on the canal bank by plucking tiny 'gaisa' flowers and making ring shaped garlands out of them. Huge wooden boats, carrying bales of straw, and large piles of earthen jars filled with molasses passed through the canal and the life style of the boatmen living for days together in water, sailing for an unknown destination and eating a meal under the open sky seemed extremely thrilling and fascinating to my little romantic mind.

When it rained, it formed small puddles in the narrow earthen road that ran in front of our house. After the rain stopped, we stepped into the puddles and splashed the saffron coloured water on each other. The rain also brought the rainbows. They appeared together in the sky, one above the other and the smaller one was always brighter in hue. They made the entire eastern horizon, beyond the tall deodars of the college avenue, resplendent with colour. We believed them to be the bows of rain god Indra who resided in heaven. We also believed that the rain was nothing but strong jets of water that Airabat, Indra's pet elephant, spurted out playfully through his powerful massive trunk.

The exquisite little worms, dainty, bead-like and velvetyred in colour, also came out during the rainy season and we, because of their gaudy appàrel, called them 'sahhababohu' or 'bride of the merchant'. They always appeared in groups near the bushes that grew under the jamun tree lying on the fence of our neighbour. The canopy like boughs of the jamun tree hung low covering a part of our garden and the damp alluvial earth under it was littered with juicy, over-ripe jamuns that fell down from the branches and burst partially because of the impact with the ground. We spent the entire noon under the jamun tree picking the savoury berries from the ground and we gobbled them till our lips and tongues became dark violet in colour.

And the rainy season brought the hailstorm along with it. The hailstones fell, sometimes flaky and sometimes pebble-like, in hundreds and thousands and covered the entire terrace and the courtyard. We got drenched in the rain and collected the icy pelletes as much as we could and put them in our mouths. The enjoyment was ethereal. Because ice was not available either for love or for money. There was no electricity at Cuttack and nobody heard of a thing called a *freeze*. There was one Bhima ice factory near Ravenshaw college which was a landmark at that time. Once a year, on the day of 'panasankranti', my mother procured a huge chunk of ice from the factory and made sherbet for us. And putting a piece of ice inside the mouth and relishing it was possible only during the rainy season.

And the monsoon season was associated with a typical snack-puffed rice, crisp and warm, that we got from Naranma, a haunchbacked widow, who stayed in a hut near our colony. She was a veteran in making this foodstuff. In the

rainy season, we preferred eating puffed rice smeared with raw mustard oil and mixed with roasted peanut seeds. My mother's elder sister cultivated peanuts and sent us sackful of them every year. My mother roasted them on sand and the puffed rice was supplied by Naranma. Most of the days, myself and my cousin, took a four anna coin and went to the house of the old lady to purchase puffed rice that looked as white and big as jasmine petals.

The lady always gave us a few roasted grams coated with chilli and cuminseed powder as a bonus for being a regular customer. We gripped the grams tight inside our closed fists and munched them on our way back home. Sometimes my brother, who was still a toddler, cried to come with us. But we never took him along, lest he would demand a share from our spiced and precious foodstuff.



THE COURAGE

Tina works in a small shop in the dingy corner of a bylane at Bapujinagar and she does the typing for me. I had tried two or three other typists before her, but they had proved to be useless. And then by chance, one day I met Tina. She is extremely competent and the credit of the neatly typed manuscripts that reach the newspaper office week after week solely goes to her. She is a wonderful girl and during last one year or so has developed a rapport with me.

She is short and plump and displays a pugnose and a dimpled chin. And she is perpetually in a state of fear so far as her boss is concerned. The youngman has got a mania of finding faults with her and abuses her all the time for no apparent reason at all. But she hardly ever reiterates; just stands silently and weeps. "Why cant you talk to him straight ? He has no right to misbehave with you like that", I often tell her. But her reaction has been nil in this regard.

But then oneday this incident happened. It was lunch time. The boss and the attendant had gone home for food and we were typing a feature when a youngman, dark, thin and average looking, entered in to the shop. He asked Tina to come out for a minute. He had some private talk with her.

"She is my aunty and you can as well talk infront of her", Tina stopped typing and replied indifferently.

"The boy hesitated for a minute and then whispered, "Would you kindly consider the proposal again?"

"Never; and you very well know that. Once upon a time I loved you and was ready to marry you..... "

"Didn't I love you too?", the boy interrupted her in the middle.

"No, you didn't. I fought with my father and took you to our house. And when my father asked you if you really wanted to marry me, you backed out like a coward. You said you wanted time. You made me look like a fool in front of my parents.

"But I was not earning enough..... " the boy replied.

"Didn't I tell you that I will work and supplement your income ? I was willing to take all the risk for your sake. And I was confident that I will make a succes of our life. But you turned out to be a spineless fellow", Tina replied and she had fire in her eyes. This was a new aspect of her character that was unknown to me till then. "Is this your last word ? Can't you realise that I still love you?", the boy pleaded.

"Yes, this is my last word. And don't talk about love before me any more. You do not know the meaning of that word even", Tina told him with a final nod and dismissed him. And then she resumed the typing and she was as cool as a cucumber.

After half an hour or so, when I left the shop, I embraced her. "Do excuse me", I told her, "I have always commented that you are the most timid girl that I have ever seen in my life. Actually, the truth is something else. You are the most courageous girl I have ever seen in my life".

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A chance encounter in a train, an evening with a grandchild, a conversation with a friend or the illness of a dear one—these are the things, ephemeral as they may be, that life is lived by. These are the stories that give meaning and pleasure to our existence on this planet.

The stories in this book celebrate the minutiae of living in this world—the ordinary, everyday incidents that we so often ignore in the mad rush of existence. In turns funny and sad, humorous and nostalgic, heartwarming and poignant, these pieces offer a kaleidoscopic yet nuanced view of the author's life and experience. Though grounded in one individual's life, they celebrate the universal, the beauty and the grace that encompass the lives of all of us.

Kanan Mishra, as a writer, is familiar to most readers in Orissa. The stories, narrated in this book, come from a series of columns that she wrote for the 'Sun Times' and the 'Eastern Times' during 1997 and 1998. She is a housewife and lives with her husband at Bhubaneswar.

She has spent most of her life in Assam, Mizoram and Delhi—places that feature in her writing. She is fond of books, solitude and her grandchildren.