

## SUHAGINEN\*

AS she stepped into the room, Manorama was taken aback to find Kashi standing in front of the dressing table with her head covered, her lips smothered in lipstick and her face plastered with powder which went ill with her dark complexion. Yet she was gazing at herself with pleasure. Manorama lost her temper immediately.

"Mai", she screamed, "What do you think you are doing?"

Startled, Kashi moved away from the dressing table. For a moment, she stood still, silenced by Manorama's anger, then she began to laugh at her own folly, and said pleadingly: "Forgive me, *Bahanji*, I was tidying up the room and when I came in front of the mirror, I don't know what came over me. Cut the money from my salary."

"Cut the money from your salary?" Manorama was even more outraged. "Her majesty's salary is Rs 15 and she wants 6.50 cut from it for lipstick. Every day you break plates and I say nothing. You steal *ghee*, flour, sugar and I pretend not to notice. All the staff complain that you are a lazy good for nothing. The committee members keep getting after me to throw you out. Still, I put up with you, not wanting you to be on the streets. And this is the return you make me! You wretch!"

Roughly, she pulled the cane chair towards her as if it were the offender, and, sitting down, passed a hand over her brow. Kashi was quiet.

"Nearly 40 years old you are, and still

\* *Married women, considered fortunate because their husbands are alive.*

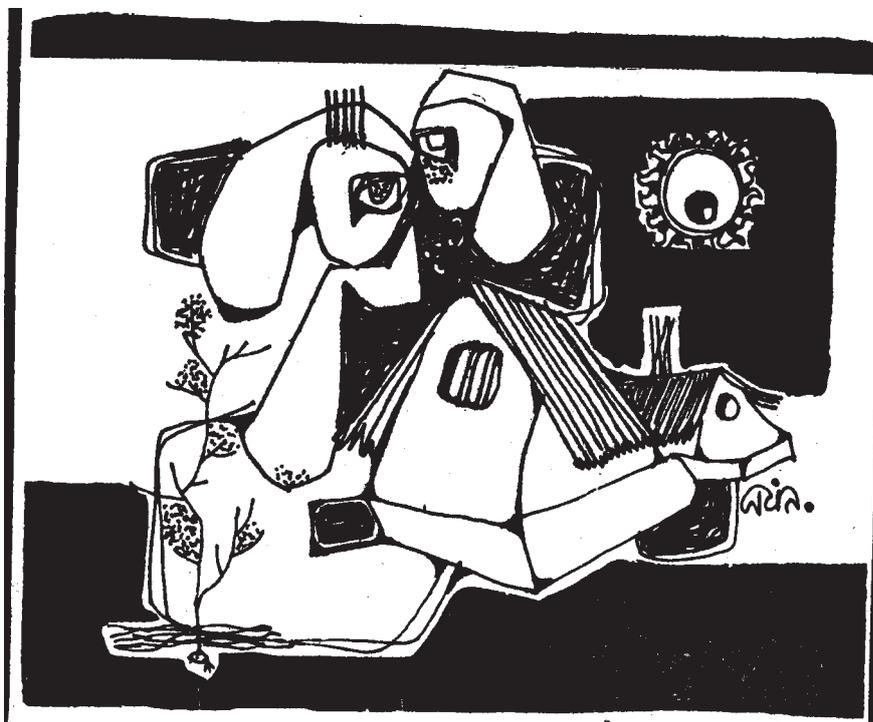
carrying on like a moon-struck adolescent", Manorama muttered again. Then she threw her head back and shut her eyes. The day's annoyances at school had tired her out. She had just been for a long walk around the public library and the military lines. But on the way back, she had felt strangely weighed down. When she was still half a

her enthusiasm had evaporated. Her feet had seemed to resist entering the school compound. But she had forced her self to push open the iron gate. How could the headmistress of the girls' school roam the streets alone at night? Depressed, she had climbed the stairs to her quarter, only to be confronted with this farce.

When she opened her eyes and found Kashi still standing there, she was even more annoyed. As if she had expected Kashi to disappear in the interval of her having closed her eyes and opened them.

"Now what are you standing there for?" she snapped. "Go away."

Kashi did not seem much affected by the scolding. She came and sat down on the floor, "*Bahanji*, I am folding my hands to you, please forgive me." She caught hold of Manorama's feet. Manorama moved her feet away and stood up. "I've



mile away from her quarter, the sun began to set. Some of the tension had drained from her then. The breeze, the leaves stirring on the trees and the scattered clouds had touched her with intoxication. The dim moonlight of late evening gradually grew brighter. She strode briskly along. But when she reached the turning,

told you, go away now, don't bother me", she said and walked towards the window. Kashi stood up too. "Shall I make tea?" she asked, "You must have tired yourself out, walking."

"You go, I don't want tea."

"Then I'll get dinner."

Without replying, Manorama

continued to look the other way.

"*Bahanji*, I beg you, please forgive me."

Manorama said nothing. She merely pressed a hand to her head.

"If you have a headache, let me press your head." Kashi began wiping her hands on her clothes.

"I've told you to go. Why must you keep pestering me?" Manorama screamed at her. Kashi stepped back, as if she had been hit. For a few moments, she stood there, speechless. Then she went out on to the verandah. Once, she turned around as if to say something but then went away without a word. Manorama remained at the window, until the sound of her feet descending the wooden steps died away. Then she lay down on the bed, and pressed her hands to her head.

She felt that the fault was entirely hers. Any other headmistress would have thrown this woman out long ago. The more lenient she was, the more advantage Kashi took of her weakness. How much she put up with from those children, too! All day, they created a racket on the steps to her quarter and messed up the school compound. One day, she had bought them some sweets. Ever since, they fell upon her as soon as they saw her and clamoured for sweets. She had tried so hard to teach them to stay clean. With her own hands, she had stitched underwear for the oldest girl, Kunti. But it made no difference. They continued to be dirty and to make a mess of the place. Last inspection day, they had drawn lines with charcoal on the ground, and the whole compound had had to be cleaned a second time. Often, they stuck out their tongues at guests who came to visit the school. Yet, she put up with everything.

For a while, she kept looking up at the ceiling. Then she got up and went on to the verandah. The sound of her feet on the wooden verandah sent a tremor through her body. She laid a hand on the railing. Moonlight lay spread across the courtyard. The cement lines on the brick floor shone. The desks, stools and blackboards in the school verandah looked like monstrous ghosts peering out of their

lair. The dense pine forest seemed to quiver at the touch of the moonlight. Otherwise, all was silent.

Kashi's quarter was never so quiet at this hour. Usually, her children kept screaming and shouting until 9 or 10 at night. But tonight it seemed as if no one lived in that quarter. The ventilators were covered with cardboard so one could not even tell whether or not a lantern had been lighted inside. Manorama clutched the railing as if it were a person, the only person belonging to her, whom she must keep aware of herself. The wind passing through the clumps of fir came close to her and died away into the distance.

"Kunti!" Manorama called aloud.

The wind carried her voice away too, far away. The rustle of the forest once again came close to her. The door of Kashi's quarter opened and Kunti, shrinking into herself, emerged. Manorama beckoned her with a nod of her head. Kunti looked back at her quarter and then came up, shrinking even more.

"What is your mother doing?" Manorama tried to keep her voice from sounding harsh.

"Nothing." Kunti shook her head.

"She must be doing something." "She is crying."

"Crying—why is she crying?"

Kunti said nothing. Manorama too was quiet, looking downwards. After a pause she asked: "Haven't you had dinner?"

"Father is coming by the night bus. Mother said we will eat together when he comes."

Everything suddenly became clear to Manorama. After three years, Ajudhya was coming. Kashi had already told her that. That was why today, the desire to put powder and lipstick had been awakened in her when she came before the mirror. Perhaps that was the reason the children were so quiet today. Their father was coming—father—whom they had not seen for three years and whom they perhaps did not remember. Or perhaps they did remember him—as a rough, harsh voice and hands that administered blows.

"Go and tell your mother I am calling

her." She patted Kunti's shoulder.

Kunti went down, arms and shoulders drawn inwards. In a little while, Kashi came up. Her eyes were red and she kept wiping her nose with *her palla*.

"Just because I said something to you, you started crying?" Manorama said as soon as she saw her.

"*Bahanji*, the relationship between servant and employer is like that."

"If you do something wrong and I say anything, you immediately start crying", said Manorama, as if mending a broken thing. "Go and wash your face in the bathroom."

But Kashi continued to stand there, wiping her nose and eyes on *her palla*. Manorama began to rub the fingers of one hand on the other. "Is Ajudhya coming today?" she asked. Kashi nodded her head.

"Will he stay some days or will he go away soon?"

"In his letter he says he will go as soon as he has given the tender."

Manorama knew that there were some apple trees on Ajudhya's family land for which a tender was given out every year. The previous year, Kashi had given the tender for Rs 125, and the year before that, for Rs 150. Last year, Ajudhya had written her a very harsh letter. He thought Kashi had taken some extra money from the contractor and kept it for herself. So, this time, Kashi had written to say that he should come and give the tender himself. Five years ago, Ajudhya had left her, and taken another woman with whom he now lived in Pathankot. He ran a small grocery shop there. He did not send Kashi a single *paisa*. "He's coming all the way from Pathankot just to give a tender", said Manorama. "He'll spend half the money on the fare to and fro."

"I thought it would be an excuse for him to come here and meet the children", Kashi's voice was sad. "Also, he will realise that these days, no one is willing to give Rs 150 for these apples."

"What a strange man he is", remarked Manorama, sympathetically. "Even if you did keep some money, what of it? After all, you are rearing his children. Actually, it is

his duty to send you some money every month. Instead, this is the way he talks!”

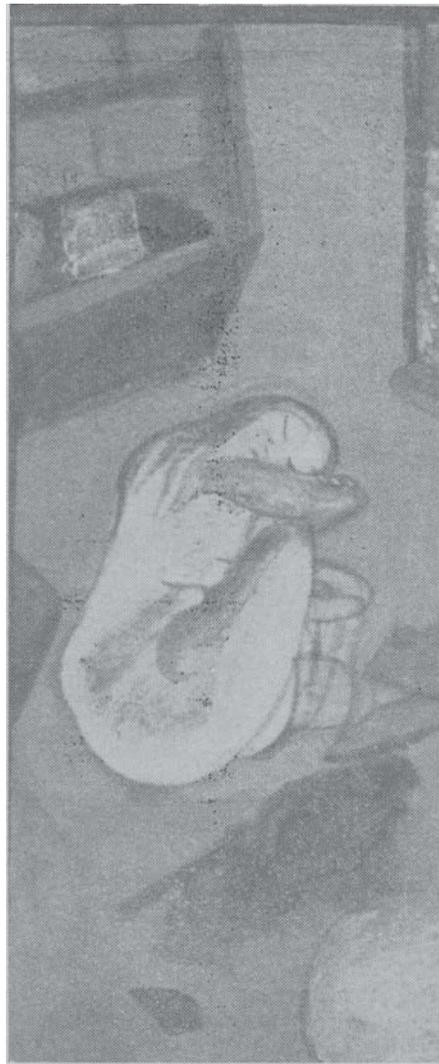
“*Bahanji*, can anyone prevail upon a man?” Kashi’s voice grew even more sad.

“Why don’t you tell him that—” Manorama stopped herself mid sentence. She remembered that a few days ago, when she had received a letter from Sushil, Kashi had started asking her similar questions and she had not liked it. Kashi had asked why *Babuji* made her do a job when he earned so much himself, why they had not yet had any children, and whether she kept her salary for herself or sent something to *Babuji*. She had laughingly evaded Kashi’s questions, but she had felt that a sensitive nerve had been touched by those questions and for several days thereafter she had remained sorrowful.

“Shall I serve dinner?” Kashi asked, trying to normalise her voice.

“No, I’m not hungry yet”, Manorama said, gently, to reassure Kashi that she was no longer angry. “When I feel hungry I’ll take the food myself. You go and finish your own work at home. Ajudhya will be arriving any moment now. The last bus reaches here at 9.”

For some time after Kashi had gone, Manorama continued to stand there, holding the railing. The wind blew more strongly. She began to feel restless. She remembered the days when, soon after their marriage, Sushil and she used to roam about in the mountains. In those days it seemed as if nothing in the world could compare with that romance. If Sushil so much as touched her hand a fever arose in her body. All the rustling of the pine forests seemed to have taken possession of her body. After losing himself in her body, when Sushil would start moving away from her, she would wish to draw him still closer. She would imagine herself carrying a small child within her, and would be filled with joy. Wonder would seize her at the thought that a moving, living being could actually be born from her body. Many times, she had told Sushil that she wanted to experience that wonder in herself. But Sushil was not in favour of this. He did not want a child in the next few years. It would spoil her figure and



also endanger her job. Sushil did not want her to leave her job and be good for nothing but housework. Sushil would soon have to get his sister Ummi married. His two younger brothers were studying in college. So every *paisa* was valuable. He wanted to live very carefully for at least the next five years. She was not able to insist on her own wishes. But whenever Sushil’s hands caressed her, an unknown infant would start clamouring to come into her arms. She would hear its gurgles and feel its tender body. Often, at such moments, Sushil’s face would become for her a child’s face, and she would press him closer to her. She would feel like patting him and singing a lullaby to him.

Many days had passed since she last got a letter from Sushil. She had written and told him that he should not delay his replies because when she did not hear from him, her loneliness became unbearable. For several days, she had been thinking of writing him another letter, but her self respect stopped her. Could not Sushil even find time to write her a few lines?

A sharp gust of wind. The rustling of the pines crossed many valleys and lost itself in the distant sky. Two lines of light crept along the mountain in front of the school. Perhaps the last bus was coming from Pathankot. The thick bars of the gate shone in the moonlight. The wind hit the gate repeatedly as if desirous of breaking the lock. Manorama sighed deeply and went indoors. She felt much more alone than she usually did.

The next evening, when Manorama returned from her walk, she stopped short as she entered the compound. A loud racket could be heard from Kashi’s quarter. Ajudhya was loudly abusing Kashi and beating her up. Kashi was weeping aloud. Manorama tingled with anger. According to the committee rules, no man was allowed to stay the night in the school premises. She had made a special concession by allowing him to stay there. And this was the way he behaved. Manorama did not think of the beating Kashi was getting. She thought only of the disgrace to the school which involved the disgrace of the headmistress.

She strode up the steps to her quarter, her sandals clicking on the wood. She was not sure what she should do. Should she call Kashi and tell her to send Ajudhya away immediately? Or should she call Ajudhya, rebuke him and tell him to leave before morning?

As soon as she set foot on the verandah, she saw Kunti crouching in a corner with downcast eyes. As if each blow her mother received was falling on her too. Manorama failed to understand what she was doing there. “What’s the matter?” she asked, suppressing her anger.

“Mother said I should serve your dinner.” Kunti looked at her with fear in her eyes as if *Bahanji* might catch hold of

her arm and start beating her up.

"You will serve my dinner?" Still fearful, Kunti nodded her head.

"What is this going on in your quarter?" Manorama asked this as if Kunti was partly responsible for whatever was going on.

Kunti's lips fluttered and two drops escaped her eyes.

"Why is he beating your mother?" Manorama asked again.

Kunti wiped her eyes on her shirt and, suppressing her tears, replied: "He took out all the money from mother's trunk. When mother tried to stop him, he started beating her."

"This man is mad." Manorama flared up. "I'll throw him out of here and then he'll come to his senses." Kunti continued to sniffle. "He says mother has been taking extra money from the contractors and has hoarded it up. He has given the tender for Rs 200 this time. Mother had Rs 60 or 70 of her own. He has taken all of it."

Kunti sounded so pitiful that Manorama embraced her, despite her dirty clothes. "Why are you crying?" she said, stroking her back. "I'll get your mother's money back from him. You go on inside."

Manorama took Kunti into the kitchen, washed her face, and then sat down on a stool. When Kunti served her food, she ate it quietly. If Kashi had cooked such food, she would have yelled at her. Each *chapati* had a different shape and they were half raw and half burnt. The lentil grains were separate from the water. But she mechanically swallowed one morsel after another just as she signed papers in her office, or dealt with teachers' complaints. When Kunti put another *chapati* on her plate without asking her, she started. "No, I don't want any more", she said extending her hand as if the *chapati* had not yet reached her plate. Then she listlessly began eating it in small morsels.

The noise outside had died down. After a while, the sound of the gate being opened and shut was heard. She thought that Ajudhya must have gone out. Kunti was putting away the utensils. Manorama said to her: "Tell your mother to lock the

gate on time. It's not to remain open all night." Kunti nodded silently and went on with her work. "And tell her to come here after a while."

Her tone had become dry once more. Kunti looked at her as if she were a difficult lesson in a text book which escaped comprehension despite much effort. Then she nodded and went back to work.

That night, Kashi sat a long while with Manorama. She was not as upset at Ajudhya's having taken her money from her trunk as she was at his not having brought anything for the children even though he was seeing them after three years. She said that her co-wife had cast a spell on Ajudhya. An astrologer had told Kashi that the spell would not lose its hold for seven years. But he had also assured her that one day, her co-wife's children would eat her children's leftovers and wear their cast off clothes. She was living on the hope of that day.

Manorama, though listening to her, was not really listening. Every now and then she would remember that she had not yet heard from Sushil. It was nearly a month since she had last written to him, but there was no reply. A lock of hair escaped and fell across her forehead. Its light touch sent a strange sensation through her body. For a few moments, she forgot that Kashi was sitting in front of her and talking to her. When the lock moved, she felt as if she was touching the soft curls of a child. The memory of those days came to her when Sushil's fingers used to linger endlessly in her hair and his lips used to touch every throbbing part of her body. Why was he taking, so long to write this time? Every day, dozens of letters arrived in the mail. But all of them were addressed to the headmistress. For several days, not one letter had come for Manorama Sachdev. When she was returning after the last vacation, she had told Sushil that she would soon send him warm cloth for a coat. He had asked her to send a shawl for Ummi, too. Was he perhaps annoyed because she had not been able to send either of the two things?

When Kashi got up to go, Manorama was again engulfed by a feeling of

loneliness. The rustling of the pine forest, the moonlight shining on the waters of the Ravi in the distant valley, and her own sleepfilled eyes—there seemed to be an invisible thread binding them all together. As Kashi reached the verandah, she called her back and told her to lock the gate properly before going to sleep and to send Kunti to her. She would sleep near Manorama tonight.

Until midnight, she was unable to sleep. From her window, she could see the shining sky stretched out to a great distance. The slightest gust of wind set the rows of firs and pines swaying, their arms held out in various dance postures. The wind, slipping through the leaves and branches, touched her body, spreading a numbness through it. For a while, she sat on the bed, her head resting on the window sill. When her eyes closed for an instant, the sill would take the form of Sushil's chest. She felt as if the wind was carrying her far, very far away—across the forest and the waters of the Ravi. When she lay down on the bed, a square of moonlight falling through the ventilator lit up Kunti's face. Kunti had never before appeared so beautiful to her. Her thin lips were open like tiny red leaves of the mango tree. Manorama leaned over her to have a closer look at her. Then, suddenly, she kissed her. Still asleep, Kunti quivered.

For a long time, Manorama lay awake, gazing at the ceiling. When she began to doze off, the sound of the gate opening and shutting awakened her. Soon, Ajudhya's voice could be heard once more from Kashi's quarter. He was drunk. A wave of anger arose in Manorama's body. She wrapped herself in the blankets and tried to forget that voice. But, long after she fell asleep, it continued to resound in her ears.

When Ajudhya left two days later, Manorama was much relieved. As long as he was there, she had been afraid lest any moment; she lose control over herself and tell the peon to throw him out of the school compound. That man even looked like a scoundrel. His huge filthy teeth, black lips and eyes glinting like those of a wild beast made one feel that he ought to be sentenced to life imprisonment, merely for

having such a face. The day he left, she felt light-hearted, and managed to get through a lot of office work that she had been postponing. That evening, she got a letter from Sushil.

She didn't open the letter in the office. Telling the steno that she would dictate the rest of the letters the next day, she went to her quarter. Sitting on her bed, she carefully opened the letter with a paper knife—as if afraid of hurting it. The letter had been hastily scribbled on office stationery. Manorama was not pleased by this, yet she read every line avidly. Sushil had written that Ummi was soon to be engaged. The boy had a good job and everyone had approved of the match. If she could, she should send Ummi's shawl soon. Now they should save some money for Ummi's wedding too. In the end, he had told her to take care of her health. The letter concluded with a sweet embrace and many kisses.

Manorama sat for a long while, holding the letter. Reading it, she had felt no pleasure in the sweet embrace or the many kisses. She felt as if she had stooped to drink at a spring and wet sand had met her lips. She put the letter in her drawer and returned to the office.

After dinner that night, she sat down to reply to the letter. But as soon as she took the pen in her hand, her mind went blank. She felt that she had nothing to say. "She wrote one line, and then spent a long time scratching the paper with her nails. After much thought, she finally wrote a few more lines. When she read it over, she felt this letter was not very different from the letters she dictated in the office. The only difference was that she apologised for not having been able to send the shawl and the coat cloth. She said she would soon send both. And she too concluded with a sweet embrace and many kisses.

She lay awake a long time that night, wondering which of her expenses she could cut down so as to save Rs 40 to 50 more a month. Should she stop drinking milk? Should she wash her clothes herself? Should she get rid of Kashi and do the cooking herself? Kashi caused a lot of extra expenditure— she asked for many

things and stole many more. But she knew from previous experience that school work exhausted her so much that she could not manage to cook for herself as well. She would usually end up living on bread and milk or eating some hastily fried stuff.

From the following day, she cut down her food budget. She told Kashi to buy milk only for tea and to use very little *ghee* to cook vegetables. She gave up biscuits and fruit. For some days, she felt quite pleased with her savings plan but after that, she began to notice the effect on her health. Twice, she felt giddy while in class. But she refused to give up. When she got that month's salary, she kept aside Rs 40 for the shawl. The expression on her face was as if Sushil was standing in front of her and she was taunting him: see, this is how money is saved for a shawl and coat cloth. She had also become very irritable and scolded her subordinates on the slightest pretext.

One day, when she looked at herself in the glass before going to school, she felt that she had grown quite pale. That day, while sitting in the office, she developed a severe headache so she came back to her quarter before noon. When she entered the verandah, she saw that Kashi, hearing her approach, had hastily shut the cupboard and moved towards the stove. Manorama went into the kitchen and opened the cupboard.

The *ghee* tin was open and fingerprints were visible in the *ghee*. Manorama looked at Kashi. There were drops of raw *ghee* on her lips and she was surreptitiously wiping her fingers on her *dupatta*. Manorama flew into a rage. Going close to her, she caught hold of her plait.

"You wretch", she screamed. "Do you think I eat dry vegetables so that you can swallow raw *ghee*? Don't you feel ashamed, you low caste creature? Get out of here this minute. I don't want to see your face again." She kicked her on the back. Kashi was about to fall flat but she righted herself by putting her hands on the floor. For a minute, she sat with her eyes closed in pain. Then she caught hold of Manorama's feet. She was not able to say a word.

"I am giving you 24 hours' notice", Manorama said, freeing her feet. "By this time tomorrow, the quarter should be empty. In the morning, the clerk will settle your account. And if you dare set foot in the compound again.." She began to walk away. Kashi came forward and caught her feet again.

"*Bahanji*, I touch your feet, forgive me", she said, with difficulty. Manorama jerked her feet free. One foot knocked the teapot which was lying behind and it broke. The sound startled both of them for a moment. Then Manorama bit her lower lip and stormed out. Going into her room, she put balm on her forehead, lay down and covered her face.

In the evening mail, she got another letter from Sushil. He had repeated the same things. Ummi's engagement had taken place. Last Sunday, they had gone on a picnic with the boy. In one corner, Ummi had written a few lines, asking for her shawl. She had also written that all of them missed Manorama very much. Especially at the picnic, they had missed her very much.

After reading the letter, she went for a long walk. She was feeling extremely irritated but was not sure whether this irritation was directed against Kashi, against herself or against Sushil. She felt as if there were many more pebbles than usual on the road, and that the road itself had become very long. Twice, she sat down to rest on a rock. When she was about a furlong away from home, her slipper broke. With great difficulty, she made her way home. She felt as if she had for ages been dragging herself along the road and that she would have to continue walking thus for an indefinite length of time.

As she reached the gate, the incident of that morning came to her mind. Kashi's quarter was silent once more. For a moment, Manorama felt as if Kashi had vacated the quarter and she was left all alone in that huge compound. A tremor ran through her. She called out to Kunti. Kunti came out of her quarter, holding a lantern.

"Where is your mother?" Manorama

asked.

"Inside", and Kunti glanced inside.

"What is she doing?"

"She is not doing anything. She is just sitting."

Manorama noticed that Kashi's quarter was in bad shape. The door was almost off its hinges. She passed that quarter and saw that door every day, but had never before noticed this.

"A lot of repairs need to be done in this quarter", she said and went in, as if to carry out a survey. Seeing her, Kashi stood up and came close to her. Manorama looked at her but did not say a word. The walls of the quarter were turning black. One of the ventilators was about to fall out of the wall. The cobwebs at the four corners of the ceiling had met in the centre and taken the shape of a large awning. The few things in the room lay scattered about. In one corner, three children were eating from one plate—the same watery lentils and differently shaped dry *rotis* which Kunti had made for her the other day. When they saw her, the children's hands and mouths stopped moving. The youngest boy, about four years old, lay wrapped up in a corner. His eyes followed Manorama around the room.

"What's wrong with Parsu? Is he ill?" Manorama asked, without looking at Kashi and as if addressing the wall. She walked towards the child who began to stare straight ahead of him.

"He's suffering from *sukha*!" Kashi said in a low voice.

Manorama stroked the child's cheeks and head. "Have you shown him to the doctor?" she asked.

"I did", Kashi replied. "He says 10 injections are needed. One injection costs Rs 2." She seemed to choke over the words.

"You didn't get them?" Now Manorama looked at her.

"How could I?" Kashi's eyes dropped. "He took away all the money I had. I rub him with a copper utensil. They say that's a cure." The child had fixed his big eyes on both of them. Manorama stroked his cheek again and went out. Kunti, who was standing in the doorway, moved aside to let her pass.

"This quarter needs whitewashing", Manorama remarked, as she left. "Anyone would fall sick in this atmosphere."

Slowly, she climbed the steps to her quarter. The clicking of her shoes, the lonely verandah, the room. The things she had left scattered around had been arranged neatly. A covered tray of food stood on the centre table. A kettle full of water was on the stove. As she took off her coat and put on her shawl, she heard steps on the verandah. Kashi came up



quietly and stood in the doorway.

"What is it?" Manorama asked, roughly.

"I've come to serve dinner" Kashi said in a low, hesitant tone. "The water is ready for tea. If you like, I'll make tea first."

Manorama looked at her and then averted her eyes. Kashi came in and switched on the stove. The water began to boil.

Manorama sat down with a book. In a little while, Kashi came to her with a cup of tea. Manorama closed the book and took the cup. A dry smile came to Kashi's lips.

"*Bahanji*, if a servant makes a mistake, you should not get so angry", she said.

"Don't hand me that line", Manorama said crossly. "If one is told something once, one remembers it. But people like you are not affected even when they are told something repeatedly. The children live on dry lentils and *roti* and the mother needs to eat raw *ghee*. Who has ever heard of

\*A sickness caused by malnutrition and dehydration.

such a mother?"

Kashi's face fell, as if someone had pierced her deeply. Her eyes filled with tears.

"*Bahanji*, if I didn't have to rear these children, you would not see me alive today", she said. "One unfortunate was born from a hungry stomach and he's got *sukha*. Now, if another comes in the same way, god knows what will befall it."

Manorama felt as if she had suddenly been pushed down from a great height. The hot tea seemed to send a cold shiver through her. For a moment, she was silent, gazing at Kashi.

"You are pregnant again?" she asked as if she could scarcely believe it.

A shyness like that of a newly wed bride mingled with tired despair on Kashi's face. She nodded her head and looked towards the door, with a sigh. For a moment, it seemed to Manorama as if Ajudhya was standing there and smiling. She finished her tea and Kashi took away the cup. Feeling chilly, Manorama wrapped the shawl more closely around herself. Kashi came in again.

"When will you have dinner?" she asked.

Instead of replying, Manorama asked her: "Did the doctor say the child would get well with 10 injections?"

Kashi nodded silently and looked away. "I am giving you Rs 20", Manorama said, getting up from her chair. "Go tomorrow and buy the injections."

She took her purse out of her trunk and put Rs 20 on the table. She wondered why she was feeling so cold and wrapped her arms around herself.

After dinner, she sat on the verandah for a long while. She felt a strange throbbing in her body but she could not make out what it was. It seemed to be connected not with anything external but with her own self and it made her feel an emptiness in herself.

A strong wind was blowing and the pine forest seemed to be beating its head and crying aloud. Hwa-hwa-hwa- gusts of wind besieged her body like waves and her body was helpless before them. She held her shawl tight around herself. The

iron gate was creaking in the wind. When her eyes closed for a moment, she felt as if Ajudhya was standing before her, his black lips parted in a grin, and the iron gate was slowly opening. She awoke with a start and felt her brow. It was cold as ice. She stood up, and the shawl fell off her shoulders. Her sari fluttered in the wind. Her hair flew free and caressed her brow.

“Kunti”, she called in a feeble voice. Her voice sank like a paper boat in the sea of wind.

She called again : “Kunti.” This time, Kashi emerged from her quarter.

“If Kunti is awake, send her to me. She can sleep here tonight.” As she said this, Manorama realised how dependent she was on Kashi and her children and how

necessary their closeness was to her.

“Kunti has gone to sleep but I’ll wake her and send her.” Kashi turned to go in.

“If she’s gone to sleep, let her be. No need to wake her”, Manorama replied and went to her room. She closed the door as if the wind were a man whom she wanted to keep out. She felt very weak within herself. She lay down and covered herself with the quilt. Her eyes slid over the ceiling. She did not want to close her eyes. As if she was afraid that as soon as her eyes closed, Ajudhya’s smiling lips would once more come before her. To distract her thoughts, she began to frame in her mind a letter to Sushil. Should she write that she was afraid to live alone and that she wanted to join him ? And... and would she be able to write

to him all that she felt? Could she explain to Sushil why she felt so empty in herself, and what she wanted from him to fill this void?

She had not brushed away the locks that had fallen on her brow. Their soft touch sank into her consciousness. Soon, she began to feel that a small child was sleeping beside her. Its tiny lips were open like mango leaves and its soft curls were falling over her face. Leaning on her elbow, she gazed down at the child and then bent over as if to kiss it.

*(translated from Hindi by Manushi)*