

The First Rains

by
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SARITA turned onto the road which led to the shop. Then there was a thud in her breast as she saw his figure, framed by the two poles which supported the shop's thatched roof. And the blare of the loudspeaker, the roar of the bus, the creaking of the bullock carts - all the sounds of the road dropped to a hum in her ears.

Her mind was telling her to turn and run while there was time. But her eyes, like those of a puppet on a string, remained on the casual hand he was sliding inside his pocket. She saw a five rupee note flicked onto the counter, a

packet of Charminar was handed back, and the next moment he was slipping it into his pocket in a way which showed, it showed the whole village, that he was different.

And she? She was like any other girl in this wretched place where they were all so poor. They were too poor even to look at people like him. The shame of it overcame her whenever she saw him, it overcame her even when she thought of him, which was all the time. A nervy hand, the hand of one who has only come to buy a quarter kilo of *dal*, clutched the two rupee note inside her *choli*. If the

note was torn the shopkeeper would shout at her again. She stood at the corner of the road, not knowing what to do.

Then he looked up, and at once she saw that he was struck by shame too. Through her own humiliation, she could see it. For him too, it was a shock; he too had to hastily set his lips and banish something which threatened to appear there. They passed one another as if the other did not exist.

While going home, she had to keep her head bent. She was fighting the little smile which kept poking itself out on her

lips. If anyone saw her they would think her mad. The dark soft dust of the road caressed her bare feet. She wished she could keep hurrying on without ever reaching.

When she reached home, her small brother Anil was playing *gilli-danda* by himself in front of the hut. He saw his sister arrive and as usual his face lit up as if a miracle had happened. He threw down his stick and charged straight at her. Sometimes she wondered what she would do if he ever stopped rushing at her like that. She lifted his spindly little body. Anil was seven but it was perfectly easy to pick him up.

"Tai, you know what? Today, teacher hit Chandu on the head with a slate. And Chandu did soo-soo right in front of everybody!"

"My! See, what happens when you don't do your studies properly." She kissed his head. "Look what I brought you from the sweetman. Eat it quickly and don't show Baba,"

That night she could hardly sleep. The unhelpful darkness brought her only pictures of him, following each other crazily in the half-sleep and the half-dark. She woke feeling sick. As she bent down to roll up her sleeping mat her eyes seemed to rush back into her head. Then there was no kerosene for the stove; she had to find her three blackened bricks and make a fire outside the hut.

She only managed to make the tea because she knew that without it Anil would have to go to school on an empty stomach. She gave it to him in the biggest steel tumbler and made him drink it sitting on her lap. Then she oiled his hair till it shone, took down his school shirt from a nail and carefully put it on, and gave him the striped cloth bag which contained his slate. At last she stroked his head once more and Anil was off. He always looked absurd when he left for school, the long flat slate bag banging violently against his knees like one of his own thin limbs. Sarita, weak as she was feeling, felt the tears sting her eyes

as she watched his small back and long bag going down the road. I am mad, she told herself.

Her father was sitting crosslegged on his wooden chair and waiting for his tea. As she handed him his tumbler she kept her head carefully bent. If he saw that she was unwell he would say at once: "You are ill. Perhaps you have fever. But what can poor people do? You have to go and earn your bread. We are like animals, we have to go and work for them even if we are dying." He was always pleased with her when she gave him an opportunity to say something of this sort.

It was he of course who had rushed her into a job. When the factory was coming up, when the staff colony was built, he had remembered crafty as always - that they would be looking for servants, and he had hurried her there at once. Other families were still putting together chits from here and there, primary school certificates, and in lucky cases a recommendation in English, to get their sons into the factory. But Sarita and her father were rushing across the fields, and before the morning was over she had a good job. She had the cleaning, washing, utensils, everything-not in one of the tiny flats with grill windows which belonged to clerks, but in a big squat bungalow among other bungalows, the house of an officer. Later she would learn that it was called Class I - a Class I officer, a Class I house. And when he - the officer - asked if she would do the cooking as well, her father was transformed.

"See!" he said that evening, crosslegged in triumph on his wooden chair. "An officer in such a factory. Belonging to the highest caste. God alone knows how much you pay to get such a job. And he himself tells a low caste to cook his food." Quivering with excitement, he glared at his daughter. "That is the greatness of the upper castes. They can do as they wish."

Yet if the young officer had made it clear that she was not to step into his

kitchen, her father might have said again that it showed the greatness of his caste. "Are they like us, that we can touch their food?" he might have said, even more excited. "Has not god made them different?"

Usually her father's talk made Sarita want to lie down and just go to sleep. Caste, caste, caste, poor, poor, poor. He has a worm inside his head, her mother used to say. And after the officer spoke to him so politely Baba had become a talking machine plain and simple.

Now she hastened away from him into the hut. She placed their small steel edged mirror on the floor and bent carefully over her shadowy reflection. Inside the hut it was dark. All the huts were dark, this had slowly dawned on her after she started working in the bungalow. Now they had an electric bulb hanging from the ceiling, but would he ever let her use it, the old skinflint? An unerring hand placed a *bindi* exactly in the middle of her forehead.

And the time had come to go. This act of going to his house in the morning was the one towards which her whole life seemed to move, like a particular spot on a wheel which becomes visible at slow rhythmic intervals. She always set off a little late, as if to make sure the time had really come. Uncertainly she picked up her milk can and walked out of the yard.

At the home of Narayan, the milkman, waiting for the can to be filled up, she felt she could hardly stand. Narayan's wife Krishnatai was taking her time over measuring the milk. She always behaved as if their buffaloes produced liquid gold. And since Sarita had started going out to work she took longer than ever. Today, for instance, she went deliberately inside the hut to bring out a smaller measure. When she came out Sarita could hold back no longer.

"Krishnatai", she muttered, I'll be late for work."

Now Krishnatai was not one to let such a remark pass. She put down the measuring cup, straightened up, and put

both her hands on her hips.

“So”, she said. “It has come to this, eh?”

Sarita closed her eyes and let her head sway.

“Just because you earn money. Going to that place all by yourself. You know what everyone says?”

Sarita’s eyes were swirling round and round inside her head.

“Only your father could do such a thing.” But Sarita’s silence was depriving Krishnatai of her opportunity, and she had to continue in a manner befitting her dignity and position.

“If only god had spared your mother”, she sighed, shaking her head. God was a great friend of Krishnatai’s. “What’ does a man know about bringing *up* girls?”

At last Sarita was able to leave, the weak tears stinging her eyes again. But when she began to cross the fields, the fresh air made her feel a little better. The factory was about three miles from the village, but the staff colony was only a short walk across the fields. At this time of year the fields were covered with dry stubble. Among the stubble and the date palms, the yellow shapes of the colony’s houses showed severely square. They looked as if they had been placed there by accident, and could be lifted away whole. For Sarita, the colony and all that went with it was the centre of the universe. It had become so even before she saw him, on the golden day of the inauguration.

Like all the other girls she had finished her housework quickly, so as to go and watch. She had dressed Anil in his school shirt for the occasion and, holding hands, they had hurried the three miles to the factory site to watch the function. There was already a row of people from the village standing mute and determined around the site. From time to time the organisers looked at them with dislike and told them to move further

back. Part of the site was covered with a *mandap* and there were rows of metal chairs, partly under the tent and partly outside it. Buntings were strung everywhere. Somebody was testing the mike, so that every now and then a deep voice resounded. “Hullo, hullo”, it said excitedly. Large metal tubs of cold drinks clanked as they were dragged to a corner. “They will be opened after the minister comes”, one of her friends whispered to her. The village headman and the rest of



the *panchayat* had been invited and they arrived in long white shirts and new *dhotis*, nearly as early as the spectators themselves. They had nothing to do, but even so they stood at a distance from the row of villagers. Occasionally they even joined the organisers in shouting at the villagers to move back - but, upstarts as they were, they could hardly get a couple of people to shift.

All of them waited and waited. The sun was high in the sky by the time the first car was seen, crawling along in the dust like a beetle. An excited babble broke

out among the watchers.

One by one they rolled up, identical cars bulging with identical men from Bombay. Doors banged in the dust. There were some women too. Sarita thought they looked like film stars. They sat in rows on the metal chairs, and waited for the minister. Participants and spectators were all wiping their sweat in the same jaded way before his car - long and different - was seen. The minister emerged, he was garlanded, he was duly settled, and the speeches began.

The speeches were no shorter than usual and the audience from Bombay was clearly gloomy at having to listen. The speakers seemed to realise this, although they refused to stop, and they even looked anxiously for the attention of the hitherto despised villagers. In the beginning, Anil and half a dozen other little boys sat completely still and listened to every word. But long before the speeches were over they had surreptitiously started playing marbles, and the other villagers were melting away in little disheartened groups.

But at the end of it all the children were rewarded. Because when the speeches were over and the guests had been given their refreshments, paper plates containing half eaten snacks were flung away into the fields, and the children raced towards them as if at the pressing of a switch. A scramble of arms and legs ensued. Anil dived between the fighting legs as if his life depended on it. Then he raced back to Sarita, eyes shining, two lumps of *barfi* disintegrating in his clenched fists.

“Tai! Quickly!” Slightly shame-faced, Sarita had a piece.

And after that day, she felt a little better about life. Till then she had always felt that she and all the others in the village were just stuck away somewhere outside the real world, outside the world of Bombay and cars and cinemas where all the rest of the world was able to live.

Now she felt that they were not completely outside the world, they had a little corner at the edge of it. Miraculous things happened; the housing colony came up; every single house had TV, it was said; there was a convoy of fast, exciting jeeps that swung into the colony with a rush. And now she herself was a part of the colony.

Here she was. The large iron gate loomed in front of her. As usual the watchman was getting off his stool with ostentatious slowness, never once taking his beady eyes off her. He was from UP, that watchman, and full of contempt for the Marathi speaking southerners he had come among. He ogled her ceaselessly but made a great show of being inconvenienced when he had to open the gate for her and then unlock the house of the saheb. In the beginning he even stood around while she was working, looking as suspicious as if he were the saheb himself. And he thoroughly enjoyed checking her milk can or her bazaar bag as she left. Sarita, who was a girl of spirit, let him see that she laughed at him for it. "Look carefully", she told him once. "You'll find the saheb's TV inside"

It was already hot. As they reached the house the watchman kicked at a cur curled on the verandah. But the dog growled and bared its fangs so he did not kick again. Sarita took the opportunity to giggle. And so the watchman unlocked the door very sternly and went away, leaving her mercifully alone.

How she loved this first aloneness inside his house. The silence seemed to hum around her. It said to her, touch everything, look everywhere, do what you want. She always went lingeringly into the bedroom first, before beginning her work. And with a certain disbelief she would look and see just where the pillow was today, just where the book - his English book - had been thrown, just where the tumbler and bottle of water had been placed after he drank last. She

would gently pick up the clothes abandoned on his bed and hang them up on a nail on the wall. If there were coins or rupee notes inside the pockets she always took them out with care. Then she placed the money on the table where he would see it first thing, lying untouched in front of him, speaking of all that is godfearing and good.

Now she moved to the kitchen and, more briskly, set the milk to boil. Fetch the broom, give it a couple of smart knocks on the floor, start to sweep. Her limbs began to move as if of their own accord. A couple of rapid swishes and the dust was outside the door. She even swept and swabbed behind the fridge, in case he ever looked there. And every morning she used to dip her duster in water and wipe the beautiful yellow laminate of his dining table, although that was no part of her duties.

Today there was a box of *barfi* lying half open on the table. Someone must have visited him in the evening, perhaps someone from Bombay. They may have sat at the table together. Whenever she could put together something new about his life she felt a peculiar pain, as if new blood were oozing into her limbs. Still, the sweets looked very good. She hastily slid two into her mouth and bent at once over her broom, just in case that watchman was looking from somewhere.

And now she was cutting the onions. Whenever she began the cooking she felt a rising excitement and fear. It was like a test which she had to pass afresh every day. She always knew as if to a millimetre just how she wanted her dishes to turn out, and worked away at them like a crab which laboriously tunnels its way to a certain spot. And here she could cook a different vegetable every day, pour in the *ghee* as if it came in bucketfuls, make the *dal* as thick as she wanted. Sometimes she longed to take a little bit home for Anil but she had never, before god she could say it, done so.

Sarita knew she was a good cook. Unkind people even joked that her father

hadn't got her married because she looked after him so well. He would have all the expense of her marriage, they said, and then the trouble of finding himself another wife. Sarita didn't like them laughing at her father, but she liked to hear the women saying that she cooked better than any of her married sisters.

It had happened in the kitchen, that day. When she thought of it, Sarita felt something like fear. She was sitting by the grinding stone, abandoned, her legs stretched out and her *ghaghra* pulled up to her knees. As far as she knew her saheb was at the factory as usual. But at once the door opened and there he was, pulling open the door of the fridge. As usual, as with all the sahebs, he didn't really see her. She hurriedly gathered her legs together and pulled her *ghaglwa* over her ankles. The movement caught his eye, he turned - her knot of hair had come loose and her *choli* had fallen forward - and, for the first time, he seemed to see her. The moment stretched by itself and at last he uncertainly took a bottle from the fridge and left. After that day Sarita could never remain in the kitchen without glancing at the door every few minutes. Then there was last night at the shop.

Smiling, she covered the stainless steel bowl containing the vegetable curry. On top of it she placed the bowl containing the *dal*. And her hand remained unmoving on the bowl. Could it ever happen that...? Her friend Chandra had told her that in Bombay all the sahebs made love to their servants. Chandra was fat and bold and considered a great expert on such matters as Bombay and love. "And if you don't do what they say... finished!" said Chandra, rolling her eyes with all the horror at her command. But her words had set Sarita's heart racing; and it was racing now. Carefully she wrapped the *chapatis* in their cloth napkin tightly, safely, as if she were wrapping up a baby. Soft little white *chapatis*, shining with *ghee*. Finally she wiped the counter and gazed with

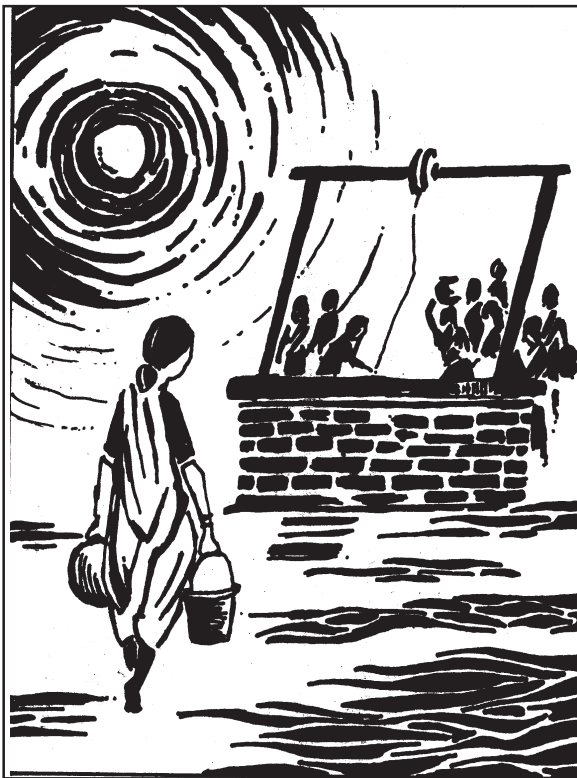
pleasure at the spotless kitchen. Then she picked up her milk can, closed the kitchen door, and let herself out of the house.

Outside, it was sweltering. The watchman was on his stool, arms contemptuously folded. He could see that she had finished - were they all blind where he came from? - but he would sit there and wait for her to go right up to him and tell him to lock the house. Now he was getting up to open the gate for one of the jeeps. The jeep, driven by a very dandified driver, swung into the colony and ground to a heroic halt as if in a scene from a film. She had once seen her saheb jumping out from just such a jeep, and casually handing his briefcase to the driver. The driver had then walked five yards behind him all the way to the house, carrying the case. Seeing it had given her an indescribable feeling.

Now she found herself waiting there to see who arrived in the jeep. It was the fat south Indian officer who lived three bungalows away. So the colony suddenly looked empty and dead. She began to trudge homeward. The ground was hot and the stubble hurt her bare feet. (She was getting too used to *chap-pals*, she thought.) She would have to go home, pick up her water pots, and go to the well. At this time of year the well was nearly dry and waiting there meant fighting, fighting, fighting.

So it was. The women herded themselves around the well like buffaloes. Sarita, clutching her water pots, was thrust from side to side in a cauldron of knees, shoulders, breasts. She cried out at them all, as she did every day, as they all did. Babu's wife and Narayan's daughter-in-law were outside the herd, shrieking at each other like fighting cocks. She closed her eyes, abandoning everything. The little rusty bucket, which only came up half full, went up and down as slowly as fate itself.

Finally her turn came, and she filled her pots at the creaking pulley, while the others crowded about her, surreptitiously pushing, as if inching up to the pulley would make their turn come sooner. At last she arranged one pot on her hip, another on her head, and forced her way out of the crowd. The blistering heat and all the fighting she had been through made her wish again that she could just lie down in the shade and sleep. At home, getting another two rupees out of Baba. Telling him a hundred



times that it really was for kerosene. Walking back to the shop. Today there was no one else there. Returning, pumping the stove alight. The stove was throbbing like her head. As rapidly as possible she went through her very different second round of cooking-coarse rice, watery *dal*. By the time her father sat down to eat, her head was splitting and she could hardly serve him. As usual, he ate as if at a wedding feast where every mouthful has to be savoured for half an hour. When at last he stood up she reached out limply and pulled the

thali and bowls towards her without getting off the floor. She piled them together, dragged herself outside and put them in the washing *chowk*. Then she unrolled her sleeping-mat and fell onto it without having her own meal.

The summer was gathering to a boil. Every day there was less water in the well, and finally there was hardly enough to see your face in. Instead you saw great lumps of shining black rock. Even the village pond had only a puddle of water left in the centre. The little boys who drove their buffaloes in there to bathe could no longer play on the grass while the animals waded patiently in the water. They had to wade in with them, cup their hands and throw sparse-handfuls of muddy liquid over the dusty black backs. When Sarita walked across the fields, she had to be careful of the huge cracks in the dry earth. It was as if the earth were drawing its last desperate breaths before the monsoon.

One hot morning, Sarita was in the bungalow, wiping the dining table, when the door opened with a click. For an instant she was frightened - but it was him. He came in with a set, tense look, as if he knew what to expect and was prepared to fight it. Sarita was paralysed. She stood twisting her cloth at the edge of the table. Why had he come? She glanced up and saw his hand, with its strong masculine wrist, pushing a thick lock of hair off his forehead. He was standing uncertainly by the door. Sarita sensed that something was wrong and wished he had not come. At this moment he no longer seemed an important saheb. She was feeling, in some obscure way, more powerful than him, and no poor person ever likes to feel that.

He cleared his throat. "Have you finished the work?" a little hoarse. "Yes saheb, I've finished it." He said, embarrassed: "You cook very well." Then he gave a little nod of dismissal

and went rapidly into the bedroom as if he had an important appointment there.

For a long time Sarita wondered what she should do. Twice or thrice she went to the bedroom door and then retreated. Finally, she finished wiping the table, checked the kitchen, and let herself out. That night she did not sleep at all.

The next morning she was light headed from lack of sleep and everything felt unreal. She had barely started her work in the bungalow when the door clicked again. She waited calmly, as you do in a dream when you know exactly which absurdity is going to occur next. He came in, quick and nervous, pushing his hair back. As soon as he saw her he stood staring. His look became a question and then a plea. Sarita would have smiled if only it had all been real. He moved a little, looked around for help - then, desperately, he came straight to her.

He led her straight into the bedroom, without speaking. Sarita was feeling frightened, and slightly repelled by the sweetish smell of the aftershave from his face, but underneath it all she felt a triumph such as she had never felt before. He pulled her onto the bed with hands which shook slightly. She had never before been on this kind of bed and she lay stiffly on its unaccustomed softness, praying that she would do nothing wrong.

It was over quite soon and he turned over with a little gesture which told her she could go. Actually, it all reminded her of the time she had had to have an injection at the Alibag hospital. How terrified she had been, and yet it was over like a mosquito bite. Quickly she slid off the bed, feeling weak and helpless as if her body didn't belong to her any more. She folded his clothes and placed his *chappals* neatly together by the side of the bed. Then she sat down outside the door to wait.

After about half an hour she heard him moving inside the room and spoke nervously.

"Saheb."

"Yes."

"Should I make tea?"

"No. You can go. And look here, come later tomorrow. Twelve o'clock."

"Yes, saheb."

And she left the house to a changed world. Even as she walked in the door, the cool bare floor felt different under her feet. Outside, the sweltering heat gave her a kind of pleasure. The watchman was no enemy, and the dust and the stubble were her friends as never before. She could hardly wait to get home and clasp Anil tightly.

For Anil of course it was a day like any other. When she reached home he was running around the yard pushing an old bicycle tyre with a stick. When he saw his sister he blew an imaginary horn. "Side! Side!" he shouted, rushing past her.

The next afternoon came almost too soon, before she was ready for it. She finished her work in the bungalow and waited nervously in the kitchen. Had she gone mad? It seemed to her most likely that she would never see him again. But he arrived, and the dream began once more. She kept expecting that something would go wrong but it didn't. Afterwards, when she was trying to slide away without disturbing him, he even caught her wrist and said: "Won't you talk to me a little?" just as if she were a woman of his household.

And she soon learnt that while she was on the bed with him, she was not his servant. Here she was beside him and she was deliberately going to wake him. He was sleeping with his arm over his face, half turned from her. She leaned over him and moved her lips over his shoulder, neck, chest, not knowing whether she wanted him to wake or not. He stirred, smiled, and then made a gesture of mock annoyance. She hid her face against his chest, feeling a rush of joy so pure that it frightened her. She had no right to feel this, to be this! What had happened?

"Can't even wait a few minutes?" he

said, reaching for his cigarettes. He made the familiar exciting gesture of flicking a match alight. Her heart turned over. The other hand came up and lightly covered her face.

"But your lunchtime must be over", she said, picking out one finger and moving it against her cheek. "See, I think only of your own good." Oh, what was all this? Was she really lying on a bed with him, was she really teasing him like this?

"Something wrong?"

"Are the girls in Bombay all pretty?"

"Of course they are. Like angels. You're not pretty at all, didn't you know?"

"Go to them then." She was going to burst with happiness.

"Ah, but I have to save you from the watchman. If I go he'll eat you up!"

And he never told her to go back to her work, she always went of her own accord. She had even started serving him his lunch before she left. She used to sit patiently outside the door while he ate. Probably, she thought with pride, she could even take some of the food herself and he would say nothing.

And being with him and being away from him was all one. Her whole life was illuminated by a glow like that of the cinema. As she walked home every afternoon she even enjoyed the heat, it seemed to pick her skin alive. When the sun first touched her face it was as if a fine cloth were being flung over her forehead and cheeks. Waiting at the well, she allowed herself to be pushed to and fro by the thrusting women as if she were being rocked. And she hugged her secret joyfully when, for instance, Chandra offered her some piece of information about what the sahebs did, as if she, Chandra, knew all about it. "They have machines in their houses on which you can see any picture you want", Chandra might whisper. Sarita would smile mysteriously, knowing that she had touched just such a machine, and half hoping Chandra would notice her smile.

And the monsoon arrived. It arrived like a king as usual. On the evening it was due, the smell of rain suddenly filled the air, and dead leaves began to hurry along the ground.

At once the brainfever bird was shrieking, its cries rising to a frantic crescendo. The trees looked pale green and fresh. Behind them the sky had turned a deep purple, the colour which it took on only once a year. Anil and Santa were in the yard. One large drop... two... three... and the battle began! They raced into the hut, full of joy and mock fear. Sarita lifted Anil to the window. "Now you will see the lightning", she said, happy for him. Anil loved nothing so much as trying to grab the lightning before it vanished.

They stood there together as the skies crashed and swayed. All night the drops drummed on the roof and the smell of rain filled the dark little hut. After a few hours the hut began to leak and they all had to get up and place cooking utensils under the leaks, and move their sleepingmats to dry parts of the floor. When Sarita was walking to work the next morning, the smell of the earth, the washed stones, even the tiny new green shoots, everything said, "First rains."

As she reached the bungalow another storm began. The bungalow was dark and the electric light had been left on. She wondered if he would come home today at all. But she was barely halfway through her work when the door was flung open and he stumbled in, breathless, pushing his hand through his damp hair.

"Don't stand there looking at my face, girl. Go and make me some tea." He too was transformed by the rain.

And such was her mood, such was the magic of the rainfilled darkness, that she made some for herself too. Not of course in the patterned crockery which was kept for himself and his visitors, but in a steel tumbler. She put in lots of ginger and cardamom and made tea "like you get in the Taj Hotel", she said gaily.

Feeling a little nervous because of the tumbler. And she was about to drink when she remembered that he might, at some time, drink from the same tumbler. Would that be...? Would he lose...? She glanced at him but he was absorbed in fiddling with the transistor. And after all he had told her once: "This caste business is all rubbish." He had said it contemptuously and grandly. She had never heard anything like it before. She now continued looking intently at him, the glass in her hand. He looked up, smiled, picked up the glass and made her drink from it. A wave of dizziness swept over her as he tilted her head back.

Anil to the bungalow. This was a longstanding promise to Anil - that when the saheb went to Bombay she would take him to see everything inside the bungalow. So it was that one morning Anil came with her. He had on his school shirt, his hair was plastered down with oil, and he was about to burst with pride and joy. When the watchman saw them together he obviously wanted to make some kind of comment but could think of nothing good enough. Instead he glared at Sarita, his lips twitching. Anil was tugging at her hand, afraid that he would be sent home. So they left the watchman behind and went on defiantly,



After that, it was natural that she should sometimes make tea for them both without being asked. She even came close to using the patterned cup for herself. Once or twice she reached for it, irresistibly, but drew back just in time. A few days later he went away to Bombay for a few days, but she still couldn't use it. She had never told him a lie, and to secretly drink from the household cups while he was away seemed like a betrayal of his trust in her.

But while he was away she brought

hand in hand, toward their treat.

Inside the bungalow Anil ran from room to room, switching on the lamp, switching on the TV, not knowing what to linger over. When he saw the fridge he held his breath and opened the door with both hands. And at once there was a ripe mango in front of him. Sarita, watching him, couldn't resist. "Take it," she said. "The saheb told me specially to give it to you." But Anil looked mulish and began backing towards the wall, his thin hands clasped behind his back.

Sarita took the mango and threw it gently at him. It fell to the floor. Anil's eyes shifted, and a little pout appeared on his lips which showed that he was willing to be coaxed. Sarita bent over to pick up the mango and pelted him again, but she suddenly felt dizzy as on the day of the runs. She put her head in her hands and leaned against the wall. She gestured towards the mango and Anil, subdued, picked it up and took it outside to eat.

On the way home Sarita was still not feeling well. These waves of dizziness were different from anything she had felt before. She hadn't even been eating raw mango. She reached home and fell onto her sleeping mat in relief.

The wave came over her again the next morning when she bent over to wring out the washing. And once again when she leaned over the stove to stir the spices. Had she eaten something which caused heat in the body? It felt just like the first day of her...

And a thought struck her which banged shut her mind and body, like a box. No, no. She had no idea what to do with the spices. They sizzled away and she didn't know what to do. No, no. The ladle fell from her hand and she sat down heavily on the floor. No. The day of the *puja*. She had it then and was afraid it would stain her *sari*. And not since then. That was a long time, she thought in terror. She had only been pleased to be spared the washing of the endless strips of cloth which had to be used. No, no.

The spices began to burn on the stove and she stared at them, unbelieving. She would do something. It would be all right. You could fall off a tree. Uncertainly, she touched her stomach. It was exactly the same as always.

How could she do the cooking? It seemed to her a huge task which no one could possibly do. Boiling the rice. Kneading the dough. Cleaning the utensils. With limp hands she poured the cooked *dal* into the pan. Some of it spilled

onto the floor and she stared at the puddle on the floor, a huge obstacle which left her blank. She would find out. There were medicines. She would wait.

BUT in half an hour she was leaving the yard. Her father, crosslegged on his chair, looked at her in surprise and suspicion. It was nearing the time when she had to serve him his meal.

"I'm going to Chandra", Sarita said rapidly. "She... she has to give me two rupees."

She ran out of the yard like a fool. As she stumbled over the stony path, her hair coming undone, she drew suspicious looks from the one or two villagers who were alone on the road at this hot hour. She reached Chandra's house and felt a sharp relief when she saw her framed in the tiny window. Chandra was absorbed in playing with one of the children of the household, a boy of about three.

"Now, a monkey has taken it away", Chandra said coyly, and hid something behind her back. The child squealed and leapt at her. Sarita felt a horrible stab as she watched this normal, peaceful scene.

"Chandra", she whispered urgently. Chandra looked up and peered against the light. "Sarita, you?" "Come outside", Sarita whispered. Chandra's expression of surprise was like a reproach. And now the child was preventing Chandra from coming. "No. Atya, no. Finish the game. No!" And he clasped her legs. Sarita wanted to hit him.

She waited outside for an age. The tiny leaves growing between the bricks of the wall were burnt into her brain by the time Chandra came. Fat, sloppy, her hair oiled and needing to be washed.

"Come here", Sarita said urgently. She stumbled away behind the hut to the banyan tree where the bullocks were tethered. "Come behind the tree." Chandra's fat'blank *chapati* like face showed only astonishment. Sarita felt like an outcast.

"My... my older sister wants to know something. She's getting a child and she

doesn't want it. You can stop it, can't you? What is the medicine? You can buy it, can't you?"

Chandra's doughlike face gazed stupidly. "But why ask me?"

Sarita felt another stab. "She... told me to find out. She can't tell her husband. He would burn her alive. They don't have a son yet."

"She doesn't want a son?"

"She... she's funny", Sarita said wildly. "She wants only girls."

Now Chandra was looking at her in a funny way.

"What is the name of the medicine?" Sarita repeated.

"How do I know?" Chandra snapped. Sarita stared at her in terror.

Chandra began to look her up and down, her loose hair, trembling hands and frightened breathing.

"Eh..." she said slowly. "This long story about your sister... is it her, or is it you?"

And Sarita put her head in her hands and wept. She leaned against the banyan while the sobs thudded out of her. Chandra, incredulous and delighted, solemnly stroked her back.

When Sarita's shoulders stopped shaking Chandra said: "You're a real one, you! Who is the shameless man?"

Silence. Sarita's face was still hidden in her arms.

"Who is it?" Chandra was trying not to sound too interested.

Finally, nearly inaudible, Sarita whispered, "The saheb where I work."

If she had looked up she would have seen a flash of astounded envy in Chandra's eyes. Chandra stared at her friend's back, as if not sure that this was still the same Sarita.

The red swollen face looked up. "Can you fall from a tree? Very high?"

"Eh, yes. And you would be nicely killed too. Why don't you go to the midwife? She just pokes an iron rod inside and it's finished."

"How do you know?"

"Laxmi's youngest sister-in-law's

cousin told me. Along time back.”

There was a silence.

“The midwife will shame me in front of the whole village.” And Sarita began to sob again.

This was so true that Chandra said nothing. They both knew what “being shamed” meant. Again she waited and dutifully stroked Sarita’s back.

“What will your father do if he finds out?”

“He will burn me alive.”

“Listen”, Chandra said. “Tell the saheb. He will help you.”

Sarita looked up, startled. “Help me? To do it?”

“Of course”, Chandra said uncertainly. “He just has to take you to Bombay. There are hundreds of doctors there. They take a lot of money, that’s all.”

Sarita’s face showed something like hope for the first time. “He’ll be angry”, she said waveringly.

“Does he get angry otherwise? Beat you or anything?”

“He doesn’t beat at all.” Sarita said with momentary pride. It was possible Chandra had never heard of such a man before. And how could she explain that her heart would die, her life would not be worth living, if he became angry?

“Then of course he won’t get angry”, Chandra said. Now she seemed in charge again, ‘which she

usually was. “Just go to him. Tell him to take you to a doctor. It will cost money, that’s all. These sahebs have so much money they have to hide it in trunks under the bed.”

They waited together, feeling embarrassed but close, like sisters, or sisters-in-law who are friends. Chandra kept glancing at Sarita half enviously and half curiously, but she asked her nothing more. Sarita’s face was rapidly acquiring the desperation of hope. Finally, Chandra’s mother called her from the house and Chandra had to go unwillingly away.

As Sarita walked home the expression of hope on her face became more and more tense. As she had waited for Chandra to come out of the hut, so she had already begun waiting for him. He would help her. Chandra had said so. “Of course”, she had said.

When she reached home she saw her father standing in the yard, his face black with anger. As soon as he saw her he flung up an arm and began to shout.



“There she is ! Going any time and coming any time! Is this how a decent girl behaves.”

He began to whine, raising both hands to the sky. “Today I had to get my own food - my own ! Like a man who has no woman in his house!”

Anil, white faced, was watching from the hut. He knew that when Baba was angry he took Tai inside the house and locked the door and thrashed her while she howled inside and Anil howled outside. Sarita, too, normally feared nothing more than her father’s beatings. But today she

went stupidly past him to her sleeping mat, leaving her father staring. He would help her. She would wait.

She squatted by the sleeping mat and put her head in her hands. Her legs felt like water. He would help. Hadn’t he made her drink the tea, tilting her head back with his own hands? Didn’t he always start by caressing her just where...? She would drink some water. He was coming. She would wait.

She waited. For the next three days she could neither think, nor eat, nor sleep, nor play with Anil. She could only wait. She waited in the hut, in the yard, on her sleeping mat, while dressing Anil, while serving her father. And sometimes the thought that she might have a baby seemed so absurd that she felt suddenly ecstatic, while cleaning the rice or wringing out the washing.

The day of his return came. She was feeling as she had felt on the day of the injection, It was as if she already knew what would happen. When she reached the colony gate, she leaned against it and put her head in her hands, regardless of the watchman. After this there would be no rest.

He was in the bedroom, throwing his clothes out of a suitcase, whistling. She waited at the door for him to see her. At last she spoke. “Saheb.”

“Oh, you’ve come. Everything all right?”

He flung some of the clothes into the bathroom. “Saheb.”

He looked up. “Saheb, one thing has happened.”

His face instantly showed the impatience which all sahebs showed when they heard something like this. Sarita, trembling, pulled the edge of her sari over her mouth.

“Saheb... I found out...” “Yes? What

is it?" "Saheb, I found out..." "What?"

"Saheb, I am carrying a child." It was over. What first leapt into his eyes was fear. He looked instinctively round the room, as if to make sure no one had heard.

"How long?" he said angrily. "I... I... don't know, saheb. Many days." Sarita was weeping into her *sari*.

"Don't know? Can't you even count?"

There was silence except for Sarita's weeping.

His eyes still showed anger and fear, but his hands moved with authority, the hands of an officer. Decisively, he took out his wallet and pulled out two hundred rupee notes. "Here. Have something done."

Sarita stared at him, uncomprehending. And the fear in his eyes turned to terror. "Well? What are you waiting for? Isn't there some such woman in the village?" The notes twitched hysterically in the air.

"She will shame me", Sarita whispered.

He drew a deep breath, as if his anger did now allow speech.

"Then I can't do anything. Shame you! Is this shame of yours more important than anything? Then what can you expect?" But he was unable to put the money back in his wallet. He put it on the bed and gestured to it.

"Saheb", Sarita said desperately. "I beg you. Take me to Bombay. I will repay the money. I swear I will repay it. I beg you, saheb." She threw herself on the floor and clutched his feet. The feet moved hastily away. She raised her head wildly and found him staring at her as if he had never seen her before.

"Have you gone mad?" His eyes were terrible. "How would it look if I started parading you around Bombay? Have you no sense?"

The silence was terrifying.

"That's the trouble with you people. Treat you decently and you start acting like *maharajas*."

Under the truth of this accusation Sarita's face crumpled. How could she start asking for forgiveness? For a

second time she tried to touch his feet but they moved violently away. He threw the notes at her and he was out of the room, leaving her huddled on the floor.

Sarita never knew how she got home. She only knew that as she walked, the noonday light was dark.

Her stomach seemed to protrude in front of her, huge and dark, visible to the whole village. Then she was in the hut, lying on the floor without a sleeping mat. Darkness pressed on her from all sides; sometimes it pressed her into unconsciousness - dark patches filled up her mind. From a great way off, in the dark, she heard Anil trying to rouse her. She thought she saw her father offering the saheb two rupees to take her to Bombay. "It only costs money", he was saying.

She woke in terror and sank back slowly as she realised that it had not really happened. She could not move. Dimly, she knew that she would have to move later - move, or crawl, or roll - towards escape. It was the only escape she knew, the way which everyone used when life could no longer be lived.

As the day wore on the dark became the darkness of the monsoon. The smell of new rain entered the hut. The smell had some terrible memory attached to it but she was too weak to remember what.

When she roused herself again it was the darkness of night. Everything was quiet. Her father's sleeping form, huge and dark, lay by the door. If she didn't go now, she would have to survive another day, all the way from morning to night.

She began to crawl off the mat. After many minutes she reached the wall of the hut. Holding onto the wall she managed to straighten up and then let herself sway outside the door. She clutched the outside wall and then, still holding the wall, began to move towards the road. Everything pressed her down and she longed to be able to lie on the road, to crawl along, not to have to stay away from the ground keeping her body upright. From time to time she bent double and allowed her legs to slither as

they would, not fighting her weakness. She had sometimes felt like this in bed with him, when she was weak with joy. When there were only ten yards to go she fell to the ground and lay there. Then she remembered that she had to get up again. Bending, slithering, swaying, she reached the well. The rough rounded stone was still warm and the moonlight winked up from the well, which was plump and dark with monsoon water. And instead of hoisting herself up to sit on the edge, she half-fell against the low wall, lay very still, dragged her legs up and rolled over in relief.

The next evening, a crowd of men was standing outside the hut. They stood in a fierce silence, as if they were bursting with the depth of the silence they wanted to express. Or they spoke in extremely low, deep voices which nonetheless had a deep ring of joy. By their voices and expressions they were trying to show how they felt like brothers, how humbly they feared god, how they wished to lead good lives. These are the feelings which a funeral brings. To show these feelings, no one spoke of the reason why Sarita had died.

Sarita's father was sitting on his wooden chair, surrounded by the older men. In a thin voice which repeatedly broke, he was reciting a list of names and figures. It was as if he had a duty to perform, however tired he was.

"And Laxman, Laxmangaveme thirty five. Before I asked", he said, gesturing helplessly towards the sky. He lifted the edge of his shirt to his eyes with a trembling hand.

Inside the hut, a crowd of wailing women surrounded the bloated object on the floor. It was covered with a white sheet, and a thin string of marigolds lay across it. Three or four women, little sobbing bundles, huddled next to it. And nobody could control Anil. He was pounding at the corpse in terror, shouting "Tai! Tai!" But at last Krishnatai stepped in to deal with the situation, and the howling child was taken away. □

All illustrations accompanying this story are by Rustam Vania