

Afternoon

'Seeing you she must have felt very good. Didn't she?

'Oh yes she felt very good. She became quite ecstatic and just didn't know what she was doing. First she clutched my hands, then Sarubapa's hands. She got confused whether to give the tool or the chair for us to sit.'

'It's understandable. How could she ever imagine that you would turn up after so many years? And what about Ramesh?

'Oh, I couldn't meet Ramesh. Just missed him.'

'I see.'

'Sarubapa had said that we would get a city bus near the Sikh Mandir. Waiting for the city bus made me late. And the buses were so crowded that I just couldn't board. So I had to come on a rickshaw. Just minutes before we reached, Ramesh left for office. Felt very bad that I missed him.'

'Ramesh could have met you. Couldn't he?'

'As I had to come back early in the morning we could not meet him. Maybe Ramesh came back quite late in the night. Sometimes he does come late; moreover had he knew before hand of our visit, he would have definitely met me. Wish I could have met him.'

'He too had felt bad for being unable to meet you. You remembered them only in the nick of time. Had not Saru Aita gone to Chandmari leaving you all alone, it would have been difficult to visit her later. Difficult to visit.'

'Sister, did he really felt bad?'

'Perhaps he did. It's very difficult to hazard a guess. Maybe he didn't want to meet you and so he didn't turns up and avoided you. He seldom expresses himself and these days he often remains silent. He would have found very awkward in answering your never ending queries. These days he doesn't enjoy going out and only keeps himself busy with the office work... Last time he just stayed for a while when he went to meet Majoni. I don't know what had happened to him.'

'Really!

'Oh yes'

'That's right sister. Even she had said it .She said that even had she given grains to the crows, she would have failed to figure out my morning visit. Maybe she feeds the crows quite often. Lakhimi would have enjoyed it. When ever she is called to help to clean the husk from the rice she keeps the grains the way it was.'

'Lakhimi! Who is Lakhimi?'

'Oh I haven't told you about Lakhimi. Well she is the youngest one of Keshab Peskar who is the backdoor neighbour of Rameswar. Don't you remember that she had once visited us during the Pujas?'

'Oh right, the one who had kept crying?'

'No, no longer. She might have cried earlier. But not now anymore. She is now studying in the second standard and is full of pranks'

'So you went to Peskar's house'

'No it was in Rameswar's house. For me when I just got down from the rickshaw, it was quite a sight. Lakhimi with her school bag came out running at a breakneck speed towards their gate. A number of girls who were on their way to school yelled at Lakhimi saying that she was being late. I was quite amazed when I saw her as I always thought that she was still very young.'

'Sure you would be'

'Oh she can run quite fast, with her hair tied with a red ribbon, she looked very pretty. She doesn't even allow her mother to even touch her new ribbon. She

won't use the ribbon unless her aunt ties it. She was getting late for school, while her aunt was trying to tie the ribbon. The sound of the school bell ringing, the girls shouting that she was getting late, the Peskar yelling near the boundary fence that why she was not yet ready made the atmosphere very confusing.'

'Quite confusing'

'Yes, it was. She got stunned when she saw me and Sarubapa. Suckling her thumb she looked at us and then ran back into the house. So you are not coming, her friends said and got ready to go. Lakhimi stopped on her tracks and wanted to say something to her friends, but she couldn't utter a word. Her mouth was full and her face resembled the Glaxo baby. With her hands she signaled them to wait, but they went away. She ran inside towards her aunt.'

'Of course to tell her that there are guests'

'No. Gulping down the food which was in her mouth, she said -look you didn't allow me to arrange the rice to feed the crows because I would be late to school, now look there are guests.'

'Oh my God! She can talk this way'

'She talks only when she is able to. As otherwise her mouth is always full with one thing or the other. She loves food. But I think she loves her aunt as she always gives her tasty snacks and that may be the reason why they are so attached. But Mrs. Peskar gets very annoyed. She is a small girl and doesn't know when to eat. I thought that Mrs Peskar fails to figure it out why does she behave like this. Right sister?'

'Right. She must have asked about Mithu?'

'Not only Mithu. They also asked about you and Sanmaina .It didn't occur that I should have taken a photograph along.'

'Oh yes please send a photograph. Don't forget.'

'She didn't know what she was doing. Out of joy she smeared talcum powder on Sarubapu's face, and then applied oil on his head. Then she got busy in the kitchen to prepare lunch for us.'

'Did she do the entire work all alone or did she have anyone to help her out.'

'It surprising that with her state of health she does the entire household chores all alone. Right from cooking to keeping the cow shed clean, Spending the afternoon there I noticed that she keeps her house very tidy.'

'Is her health keeping fine?'

'Otherwise she is keeping okay, but has become frail. Last September she suffered from para typhoid. Now she has recovered. However the problem of cough is still there. But in spite of it she keeps herself busy in the household chores. She keeps dusting the same thing over and over and keeps arranging and rearranging the same items.'

'Oh yes if she doesn't keep herself engaged in work, what would she do?'

'She is all alone in the house after Ramesh goes to the office at nine. Sometimes Mrs. Peskar gives a visit and at times some of the neighbour's drops in...'

'I fail to think what I would have done had I been in her place'

'Right sister. Finishing the meal both us then sat on the compound and she had too had finished all her work. It struck in my mind. When we came we saw some boys playing cricket in an open space nearby. Sarubapa said that he was going there. I told him come back by 5 pm. To take us back, Saru Aita's car would come from Chandmari between 5 to 6 pm. And then both of us sat on stools in the compound.'

'Yes'

'Soon we started taking tit bits of many a topic. In front of us was the sieve in which husk rice was present. When I talked about Lakhimi, she pointed out the way Lakhimi feeds the crows.'

'Oh I know. We too at times use to do it in our home. Sometimes one in the centre and then one each in the east, west, north and south of it. And the direction, from which the crows eat, signifies the direction from which guests arrive right?'

'Yes. Lakhimi had asked what happens if the crows eat from the centre?'

'What was her reply?'

'What would she say? She said the centre signifies the house itself. The four sides denote the four directions. Nothing happens if the crows eat from the centre. It may mean the residents of the house are returning. I couldn't resist myself and asked if guests often visit her house.'

'Do they? Let it be, so that she may open her mind to some one...'

'As if she would open up and talk about her feelings. And the type of guests. She doesn't speak out much, not even to me. But I tried to open her up. But even then she did not divulge much. I just kept guessing the answers and tried to deduce some of it myself. Maybe she had talked because I was alone with her on a lonely mid-afternoon.'

'Why, why, what are you talking about?'

'I mean that the sun was shining bright, there was no noise, even the leaves of the coconut trees were silent, she was alone with me with silence all around, and from the cane wall whatever we got to see was the bright sun light and a small pan shop which was closed, a dog sleeping with its tail curled up. No one was there. No sound from the coconut trees. No clouds in the sky just imagine the ambience.'

'I simply can't visualize it, but I can make it out. Please carry on'

'And up above in the cloudless sky a few kites were flying, high above. The kites seemed very small. Maybe all in the Pesker's house and in the neighborhood along with the pan shop owner are on a siesta'

'Is Ramesh's locality so quite?'

'At that moment it was. Before it was more silent. Then there was only occasional traffic on the road. There was no electricity, now houses have come up on the vacant plots, one grocery shop, one lawyer, several Bihari launders in a house made from discarded kerosene oil tins, from Ramesh's house you can see the clothes kept for drying, and...

'Enough, enough. Tell me what more did she tell?'

'She didn't say much. I asked her in a lighter vein-'Tell me which guest will visit from the eastern side?'

'Oh, did the crow eat from the eastern side.'

'No, the crows had stopped cawing and had disappeared. One crow was cawing to the point of irritation from the wall, and she chased it off shouting that it came again to spell out an ominous portent. Shoo, shoo.'

'Yes, after that, what happens from the east?'

'From the east, Majoni's mother-in-law may pay a visit from Nagaon.'

'Oh no, she'

'Usually, Majoni's mother-in-law, on the very next day itself goes to Barpeta... Do you know what she says? She is quite talkative, may be it's a part of her nature. She tries her best to drive home the point, that it is only she who considers her to be lucky, though she couldn't become a mother. She blames it on the wish of the almighty and the law of karma. The old lady talks lot about the law of karma.'

'The old lady is really something.'

'She silently keeps listening. The old lady blames her for the childless house and she makes her ire over the issue very obvious.'

'Forget about the old lady, we don't want to listen about her. Tell us who would visit from the west?'

'From the west, at times Suren Thakur, gives a sudden visit. I mean Suren Thakur, the forester. Rupali always accompanies him'.

'Rupali accompanies him! But why?
'He comes only because of Rupali. Well you must know that she comes to give her songs to the radio station.'
'Oh yes. They have a son right?'
'Yes he is now three years old. They are yet to select a name for him. They lovingly call him as Maina.'
'What a name'
'No it not sister. Rupali has now put on weight and her son is very cute. Suren Thakur is just like the way he was. That peculiar gait, very loud, and his boisterous laughter. And Rupali like before has a smile on her face.'
'She must enjoy their visit. After all the spell of silence gets broken....'
'Definitely. She enjoys. Rupali's visit attracts other visitors to the house as well. And when they depart, she feels bad. It is not jealousy, but a feeling like...
'I get you. What does Rupali say?
'What about her? No, no way. With the cacophony, there is no environment to discuss about her. They are busy talking about music. Did you hear her song in the listener's request programme in the radio yesterday?'
'Oh you don't seem to listen the radio. She had sung that song before in the radio. That day I recalled the song. and I enjoy listening the way she talks. *'In the mid-afternoon my mind goes roaming, why in my mind comes the dry wind...'*
'Oh this song, I have heard it. *'When did yesterday disappear I failed to make it out- I knew, what you are trying to explain-* Rupali is really beautiful...'
'Yes, yes.'
'And she in comparison to Rupali...'
'Oh sister is it right to say that way. If she hears about it...'
'I was just telling about the qualities of Rupali, her lovely voice...
'You know sister, I shouldn't have been saying about it to you, and I didn't feel it right to do so. I feel so guilty that such thoughts cross my mind. While we were talking about Rupali, that crow with the harsh caw flew across the compound. I remembered an essay written on crow. Crow is a very useful bird, it clears all the garbage and keeps, surroundings clean, but crows are not good looking, you don't feel happy seeing a crow or hearing its voice. Why did the almighty create the crow, everybody scorns it, would it be ever able to give happiness to anyone? Oh from the north, sometimes Akshay comes over. Now he lives in Byrnihat and is a contractor. He comes here while he is on his way to his home. He always keeps grumbling and has an annoyed look. Though she doesn't express, she understands the agony of Akshay, she had ruined her brother's life. Ramesh could have found a good looking girl, endowed with the best qualities as his life partner, now he has been compelled to endure her...'
'Do they say it to Ramesh?'
'No, no one says it so openly. I am talking about Akshay's mind, everyone knows about it. A ruined girl, who have made her uncle, aunt's home hell, now...'
'Okay, now let's stop talking about Akshay. From north, now one will be enough; will listen more about it tomorrow. Now tell me from south...'
'Kansha uncle from Rangiya. From south it is Kansha uncle. It sounds so funny.'
'Does Kansha uncle crack jokes?'
'Oh it seems that you haven't understood. Listen carefully. Suren Thakur with his wit can make you laugh. Kansha uncle talks about good things. Hearing him she doesn't think that she is being rebuked, ridiculed, or is being sympathized. He tells her to give up fasting, and to throw away the amulets. The doctors have said there is still hope of her being a mother, they are trying to identify the problem, and they do get such cases. He advises her not to keep worrying, and God willing one day she

will be a mother and her family would be complete.' Don't be so upset have faith in the almighty. You have my best wishes...'

'My goodness. May be he comes due to aunt's gallbladder problem.'

'Yes he takes her to Dibrugarh. Parama gives him company. He is aging and uses a walking stick.'

'Even aunt has suffered quite a lot'.

'Yes aunt had suffered a lot. Sufferings seem to dog the good people.'

'And now who else'.

'Yes sister, a good number of people do visit...Talking in this manner, at one point of time, silence again prevailed. For how long can you carry on with the same topic? The shadows were getting longer. The kites were still flying high above. The sky was bright as ever.'

'What was she doing?'

'We took our stools near the heap of stalked firewood as by now the sun rays was falling on our faces. Watching the white bed sheets kept for drying by the launder, she didn't utter a single word.'

'You too didn't ask her anything?'

'No I too kept silent. I heard intently the sound of the roar of a motorcycle on the road. The cow kept braying off and on. The shadows on the compound and near the kitchen -tumbler, the betel nut tray, water tap, pitcher, chair, marigold flower, and the *sewali* tree kept being longer. Through the cane wall I could see that the pan shop was still closed, the sun was shining brightly on the road and the dog was sleeping with its tail curled up, only three Hindi speaking persons walked along the road with axe in their hands. They too walked away silently and their steps too made no sound. Then I saw two mynah birds criss-crossing the compound.'

'What did you do then?'

'I did nothing. I too kept gazing at the sparkling white bed sheets, which stunned my eyes. I looked the other way. Would you believe what I saw?' She was looking intently at the husk rice on the compound. She looked quite amazed. The crow was eating rice spread out in the centre'

'Why. What happens if it is eaten?'

'Initially even she couldn't figure it out. Suddenly she looks towards me with and smiled. Then she put her head on my lap and hugged me tight. I thought she must suffering from pain. May be her head must be aching, as for so long she was gazing at the white bed sheets. I asked her what was the matter, why was she behaving like this! Initially she didn't utter a word, but hugged me more tightly. After a while she loosened her grip and without removing her head from my lap she said,' Sister something is moving inside me....'