

**TIMELESS LOVE.NEW FORM.**  
**(PREET PURANI.REET NIRALI)**

**SINDHI NOVEL**  
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## MOTI

My friendship with Vishnu goes back to our childhood, but that friendship was not that deep as it was long. After passing his Matriculate, Vishnu went abroad, whereas I could not appear for my exams because I developed Typhoid at the last minute. When he returned from his tour, I was still studying for my First Year. That year another friend of mine, Ghansha, left college and went into farming, and that is why I frequented Vishnu. But from the day of the auspicious festival of *Uttaran-Makar Sankranti* (Summer Solstice) our friendship suddenly grew deeper. We began moving around together daily. On holidays we even ate together and after that we often got busy in playing cards or Ludo game.

On the day of the festival too we both were busy playing Ludo, when Vishnu's cousin Sarla came in and began watching the game. Sarla was known to me before but it was the first time I saw her after Vishnu's return from abroad. In one glance I could notice how beautiful and tall she had

grown in these two years. Within a minute the mischievous one said, "Okay, I'm leaving." But Vishnu would not let her go so easily. The poor thing made many excuses like, she had to study. Her exams were near etc. But Vishnu caught her by her plait and made her sit in front of the game, saying, "Where are you going? Why did you come? Now that you have come join the game."

I faked seriousness on my face and told him, "Let her go Vishnu. Don't you know how hard girls have to study? If she fails, she'll blame you."

Sarla looked at my fake serious face, shook her head, saying, "Is that so? In that case I shall definitely play one game with you."

Starting a new game, Vishnu said, "Moti, this cousin of ours is going to join college the next year."

"Really?" Saying this I looked at Sarla and she looked away. How strange! How much she has changed. The child who had an answer to everything has now begun to feel shy?

Vishnu's mother was sitting on a swing, sorting some grains. Suddenly she stood up. She removed a set of clothes from the cupboard, saying, "Oh my God. I had forgotten that there is a condolence meeting in maternal uncle's house..." Saying this she went into a room in the small courtyard to change her clothes.

In a melodious voice Sarla said, "Tomorrow morning there is Pitre Pooja in honour of Grandfather in our house. Mom has told me to inform you to come early."

After the door closed there was such a silence in the room that one could hear the sparrows from the corner of the balcony. In the dim light of the closed room, Sarla, in a black dress, was shining like a lamp. For a long time, I kept watching her fair neck through the round gaps in the black silk dress.

Vishnu rolled the dice and asked, "Tomorrow is Pitre Pooja. So, will there be curry-chawal Siri?"

"Yes yes. There will be curry-chawal, Malpoha, Boondi, Moong...everything for you. You are the biggest Brahmin."

"Of course, you fool. I contain grandfather's spirit. Only when I eat, then it will reach grandfather."

I said, "Vishnu, your cousin still believes in Pitres and Brahmins?" I don't know why I was so hesitant that instead of talking directly to Sarla, I spoke indirectly to Vishnu. Neither Sarla nor Vishnu answered me. Instead, Ammi, who had changed and come into the room, answered, "If there were no Pitres and Brahmins our poor ancestors would starve in the other world."

"Ammi, so think that our ancestors feed on the food we send from here?"

Though Ammi was in a hurry to leave, she replied firmly, "Ofcourse. How could it be not be reaching them? Do you think these rituals have been made meaninglessly?"

I said, "Ammi there was a meaning to it, but only for those times, when the society was divided into four sections. In those days the rituals for Pitres and Brahmins were made to fulfil the Brahmins' daily needs by the other three sections of society- Khattris, Vaishyas and Shudras and the Brahmins could devote all their time and energies towards the country's art and culture and towards the education of people. But today times have changed. There is no system of Varna Ashram in the society today. Then why get stuck to old customs and rituals?"

Ammi was not ready to understand such an argument, so she went towards the door saying, "Well, educate the idiot and God gets stuck!"

But Sarla was staring at me. I asked, "I'm right Sarla Isn't it?"

"You're right." she said, blushing.

The game continued and gradually the hesitancy reduced. A coin from Sarla's side had entered the goal and I cancelled it from the other side and I excitedly announced, "Hey, the one who loses today shall treat us to a movie!"

Holding her ears Sarla said, "No, Baba, I cannot do that."

Vishnu turned red and said, "Very good. The game has not yet ended and you have already decided that you are going to lose?"

I said teasingly, "That is what I say girls have an inferiority complex. I have lost two coins and she has lost only one. Even then she feels that she will lose the game."

Sarla handed me a third coin, saying, "Now take care of this third one. The poor thing may die. Be careful and play or you might end up paying a price for it."

"As if I am afraid of paying for the movie. Come on. Here goes the dice. Another sixer. A third one..."

"Keep on rolling the dice and hitting sixers, it won't work. My double coin has blocked your way."

"Oh My God!" I exclaimed.

She was looking at me. I too was looking at her. In a moment her expression disappeared and a mischievousness appeared on her face, as if she was saying, "Oh you give up so soon?"

I burst out into a shy laughter and continued playing the game.

But I can never ever forget that moment on the auspicious day on which Sarla had blocked my coin and I had tolerated that stubbornness in a large-hearted manner!

I can remember something else about that naughty girl.

One winter evening I wore a navy-blue full suit and went to Vishnu and told him, "Today we shall go to watch *Dushman* movie."

As Vishnu was getting ready my eyes kept gazing at the door. It is often believed that only girls are fond of showing off their new dresses but if you ask me even we boys are equally keen on showing off our clothes to the girls. Even today when I remember how keenly I was waiting to show off my suit to Sarla makes me laugh.

There were just a few minutes left for us to leave for the movie. My patience was wearing off. Vishnu was putting a drop of perfume on his handkerchief and that giggly girl came in with a plate of sweet dish. Suppressing her laughter and putting her hands behind she asked mischievously, "Oh, today you are ready for a special occasion?"

In a moment Vishnu went behind her and put his fingers into the sweet dish.

Sarla turned around instantly and stopped his hand saying, "No dear. Today both you friends have to eat at the same time." She then put a sweet in my hand and said, "Eat. One, two, three. Eat."

As I took a bite, she burst out laughing. I spit out the sweet and Vishnu hit Sarla on her back. But as he went going on hitting her, she was laughing even louder and then even I too could not control my own laughter.

Suddenly Sarla stopped laughing and said, "Vishna, there is somebody at the door." And she ran out of the house.

Ammi, wearing her spectacles, was sitting on the cot, reading her Holy book. During all this she had stopped reading, covering her mouth with the pallu of her dupatta and was laughing away. After Sarla left she said, "Just look at the way she ran. The naughty girl!"

That night after returning from the movies, I went and sat on the terrace. A cool breeze was making me shiver. There was a broken mud house a little distance away from my house. Often, on a full Moon night I would feel sad looking at that house. But I don't what had happened that day, I felt happy looking at that desolate place. Suddenly I felt like singing a song. But due a fear of dad I had never sung any time. So, I felt ashamed listening to myself sing.

I feel that when there is a strong emotion arising within oneself, then instead of hiding it one feels like expressing it. And when it is necessary to be expressed but also necessary to be hidden from others, at that time art usual comes to the rescue of human beings.

On realising my inability to sing, I decided to learn playing the violin.

Next day, while playing Ludo, casually I said, "Vishna, I've decided to learn the violin."

Blinking her eyes Sarla said, "Okay! But it is believed that only when there is some pain in the heart that one can sing or play any instrument effectively. So, what pain do you have? Let me also hear."

Vishna said, "You crazy girl, everyone has some pain..."

"Wrong." Sarla interrupted and said, "I don't have any pain at all. In fact, I feel that there is happiness all around me. I feel like laughing all the time. I would love to listen to songs that are full of dance, melody, laughter. Ha, ha ha. Look, all of you are laughing, isn't it?"

Everybody began laughing because of this cheerful girl.

Vishnu's mother who was lying on the cot and sighing in a blanket, also started laughing.

After a moment Vishna said in a serious tone, "But sorrow and happiness are born in the same place. Those who laugh a lot also cry a lot."

I slapped his back and said, "I knew that you would again bring out some kind of Philosophy."

"No Moti, this is a fact."

Vishnu's mother had tears in her eyes from laughing too much. She said, "My child you are still innocent. May you always remain this way, but a woman's life is very difficult. It has very few rare moments of happiness, otherwise many painful stories..."

Sarla's laughter had filled my being with joy so these sad stories did not appeal to me. Frowning, I said, "No Ammi, no. Sarla is a modern, educated girl. She wouldn't allow herself to become unhappy."

Saying this as I rolled the dice, Sarla gave out a shriek. She said, "That's number five! That kills Vishnu's main coin!"

But since Vishnu's mother had tears in her eyes the game could not proceed even after much efforts. It seemed as if the topic of joy and sorrow that had come up in the room had killed the excitement of the game. The turmoil in each one's mind was clearly visible on their faces. Sarla got up and sat next to her aunt. Vishnu began getting ready to go out. I listlessly kept playing with the dice.

Gently pressing her aunt's head Sarla said, "Aunty, in your times the mothers-in law were very cruel isn't it? That is why you feel that every girl in the world goes through pain."

"No, my child. It is not the fault of the mothers-in-law. It is all destiny. Why otherwise would three daughters be born one after another? Vishnu's father stopped liking me after the birth of each daughter and I was treated like a servant by my mother-in-law. With the blessings of my Guru Vishna was born after my husband died. May he flourish and prosper. I have seen too much pain. My poor daughters died one after another."

"Then aunty, why didn't you give uncle a boy in the first place itself?"

I laughed within myself seeing Sarla's innocence. But the atmosphere was such that I did not say anything.

I thought to myself that if aunty was a guilty in producing daughters then uncle too was equally guilty.

After this incident I was unable to go to Vishnu's house as guests had arrived at my place. Though Vishna had come to my house a couple of times, it was not possible to play Ludo game there. And if at all we did play a game, it wasn't that exciting as in Vishnu's place. After many days when I went to his place, Vishna said in a sad tone, "What a friend you are! Just look at the Ludo game, the poor thing has gathered dust. Sarla is busy with her exams, you are occupied with your guests, Amma is busy with her prayers, and I am the one who is useless and doing nothing. It was better abroad. At least I was busy in business."

Hearing that even Sarla had not visited him somehow made me feel happy within and I said, "Okay, let us go and fetch Sarla. Now on we shall not leave you alone even for a day."

Vishnu's mother said, "Sarla's exams got over yesterday. Even I am expecting her since morning. I wonder why she has not come?"

I persuaded Vishnu and took him to Sarla's house. A group of girls were hopping on a rope in the compound itself. She was carrying a small child and jumping. She was distracted looking at us and lost the game. The girls shouted at her to swing the rope. But she said, "I did not come to join you in the play but I had come to spoil your game." Looking at us she laughed and she ran away into her house. We too went inside. Seeing her rich house, I was impressed. A carpet was spread on the floor. There was a marble table on one side and on the other her mother was sitting on an embroidered swing. Sarla's father Shokiram, with a fair and reddish face, was smoking a *beedi* while lying on a pillow. He had large moustaches and was half bald. He looked like a worldly person. He gestured us towards himself and made us sit on the cot. He inquired from Vishnu about his foreign trip. In the mean while I kept watching Sarla. She looked very light hearted since her exams were over. She took the child into another room and kept swirling him and then ran outside. In a moment she came into the room carrying a lamb, saying, "Ammi, look at the beautiful lamb that the milkman has brought. She started caressing the lamb and again ran outside. Her voice along with clapping,



playing and singing could be heard from the compound. In the next moment she was again inside. This time she brought in a small little girl, holding her by the finger, saying, "Ammi, Dadi's servant has left Kamlu here." The little girl caught Sarla tightly by her legs. Sarla said, "Oh okay, you don't want to go to Ammi? You are quite smart. Come on I'll help you to gargle." Saying this she started helping the child to gargle.

Vishna asked her, "Why don't you come to our place nowadays?"

"I have just finished my exams only yesterday."

At that moment there were sounds of ankle-bells (Ghungroo) from the neighbour's house and she carried Kamlu in her lap, saying, "Come on I'll show a dance."

We couldn't say anything to this fidgety girl, and we came away. At home we both began playing. But till evening we were not enjoying the game. We then stopped. As Ammi was reading her Holy book a burkha-clad Muslim girl walked into the room. Ammi was so shocked that her book fell from her hand. The girl said in frightened voice, "Mother please keep the door closed."

Ammi asked her in a strong voice, "But who are you?"

"I have come from Peshawar. I cannot find my brother Gul Mohamad in the crowd. What do I do? I have lost my way There are people after me. Close the door..."

Ammi then relaxed. She asked her in a worried tone, "But my dear which lane are you searching? Atleast show your face."

Raising her burkha, the girl innocently answered, "I cannot remember the name of the lane itself."

Oh my God! The girl was extremely beautiful like the Moon! Rosy cheeks and lips, dark eyes, and a burkha on her forehead. She was indeed a beauty! Realising that we two were watching her she pulled down the burkha on her face. Vishnu went and closed the door.

Ammi said, "What calamity has befallen on this tender, flower-like child!"

But how could we both help this flower-like child?

Ammi, already tender-hearted became even more worried. She said, "Where can a girl go in the middle of the night?"

We both kept staring at the beauty inside the burkha. There was a silence for a few moments.

Suddenly, Vishnu looked at her feet and winked at me. I did not understand anything but Vishnu began shouting, "Oh My God! Oh my God." And holding his feet with both his hands, sitting on the floor he started shouting, "A scorpion has bit me. A scorpion has bit me."

His mother rushed towards him and held his feet. The Muslim girl pulled a string and gave to Ammi, saying, "Mother, tie this to his foot. The poison will not spread."

Vishnu made a mocking face and repeated, "Ammi tie this on his foot so the poison will not spread. You were crying a little while ago '*People are after me*'. Come on now, run away. You girl, you have come to make a fool of us!"

Sarla hit Vishnu hard and said, "You scoundrel. You spoilt my entire game."

Don't ask about my condition. I had cramps in my stomach from laughing. Ammi at first was shocked. Then she laughed and said, "Is this the festival of Holi or something else? You girl, you have troubled us so much. But you have done great make-up on your face. And above it all, you disguised as a Muslim lady and you were unrecognisable."

"Now feed her sweets (Geeyar) as the poor girl has worked so hard," Saying this Vishnu brought out a plate of sweets from the cupboard and gave to his mother. Sarla, me and Ammi were eating sweets while Vishnu went towards the compound. Suddenly, Sarla got up with a jerk. She said, "Aunty, I just remembered something." She then ran towards the back door which was generally closed. She opened that door and ran away swiftly. When Vishnu returned, he was sad to see Sarla not there. He was surprised and with his hands behind his back, he kept looking for her here and there. As I pulled his hand, he suddenly splashed colour on me. I now understood why Sarla had run out so suddenly. She must have seen Vishnu filling the colour water in the syringe, through the mirror on the opposite wall. Vishnu threw the syringe saying, "The naughty girl won."

I normally was not fond of playing with water colours but I splashed Vishnu that day; he must be remembering even today.

Through all this fun, play and happiness I didn't realise that *Sattay* (auspicious 7<sup>th</sup> day of Lunar fortnight) had arrived in monsoon. When I

reached his house, Vishnu was packing his bag and his mother had prepared pickle, Lolas (Sweet) and porridge and placed in front of him. While we both were eating, Ammi was crying. Vishnu said, "If you cry, I shall not eat."

Ammi wiped her tears saying, "Son, this *Sattay* you are here. Next *Sattay* you will be very far away."

I told her, "Ammi, you are quite strange. Why don't you see that last *Sattay* he was away and this *Sattay* he is in front of you, eating Lolas. Why can't you see the happiness of the present moment?"

Today I realise that most of the people in the world do not value the present happiness to be of any importance,

The next day, Sarla's father and me went to drop Vishnu to the station. When I reached home my heart felt heavy. While saying good-bye, Vishnu saw my sad face and told me, "I don't feel like leaving my country but it's a question of my survival. Friend, don't lose heart, you will feel better once your college begins."

But I had to wait fifteen days for college to reopen. In a letter to Vishnu I wrote, "Friend, without you there is no play, no Sarla and no colour."

Truly, without Vishnu the days had turned dull and nights were sad. I began earnestly learning to play the violin. I would go to the terrace in the solitude of the night and play a melody. My heart's desires would travel far off with the waves of the violin's music, meet the horizon and come back, telling me in my ears '*I don't know where it is.*'

In such a heart -shrinking and silent atmosphere I don't know what the twinkling stars in the sky were telling each other and I would feel as if the sad melodies from my violin were lost in some wilderness and the entire sky was shyly laughing. I would lie down silently, listening to those echoes of my scattered melodies for a long time.

The colleges reopened. My eyes would automatically stop at every new face. When I saw a familiar face from above, I came down. There were groups of girls and boys but I couldn't spot that familiar face. I went around the whole college but to no avail. Feeling hopeless, I took my friend Hotu and went and sat in the park close to the college. Suddenly there was a sound of girls giggling and laughing in the air.

**“Oh, there she is!” I exclaimed thoughtlessly and then caught hold of Hotu and came towards the group of girls. I felt a strange courage that day! Otherwise I could never imagine going towards a group of girls like this, that too girls who were laughing away so recklessly! It was a feat not less than going into bee-hive. From far off Sarla greeted me in a sweet tone, saying, “Moti?”**

**“So, you have joined college.” I said.**

**“I’m not so lucky.” Saying this, she bit her lip as if she wanted to take back her sentence.**

**“Dad doesn’t like co-education, so I have just come today to see around.”**

**Hotu pressed my hand so hard that it was painful but I tolerated that patiently. People think that only girls feel shy but actually on that day I felt so shy myself that if someone had even cut my flesh I would have not cried out. I told Sarla, “Why don’t you make your dad understand that there are many benefits of girls and boys studying together?”**

**“I have told him everything but he too is not less educated.”**

**“Should I come and explain to him?” I offered spontaneously.**

**“That you shall have to ask him yourself.”**

**Sarla was used to giving straight answers. All the girls started laughing. I started sweating. Her friends moved forward, holding hands and they asked her, “Are you coming Sari?”**

**She left after giving me a sweet heartfelt smile.**

**“Siri...Siri...Siri...” My God, that word was echoing in my mind. The loneliness that I had experienced during my vacation evenings had simply disappeared with this one word. Hotu could not hear the melody that was playing in my mind. He said, “Yaar, God save us from girls’ jokes!”**

**“You mean Sarla was joking?”**

**“Of course. She is my sister Tilli’s friend. I know everything about her. Her father cannot afford her college fees and she says that he is against co-education!”**

I remembered her entire house. A big marble table, a beautiful flower vase, cupboard with pictures and mirrors. Everything was sparkling in her house. Such rich people cannot afford college fees?"

At that time, I did not believe anything what Hotu said. I said, "Hotu, I don't like your toxic talks."

"Will you believe if I get you to talk to Tilli?"

I realised the way in which Sarla had said 'I am not so lucky' and bit her lip, I felt there was something to this. That is why I said, "No, there is no need to talk to Tilli."

"Who is she to you? Hotu asked with a meaningful smile.

Seeing me feeling shy he said, "You are moneyed people. Why don't you pay her fees?"

"Me.? I felt a jolt.

I wondered in what relation could I pay her fees. As a lover? No. No. How can I even dare to think such a thing?

But the next day I saw that she was filling her college form. I was very excited. I even forgot to inquire with what difficulty she had arranged the money. I was very happy to see her transformation from a school girl to a college girl. She had given up Kurta-Salwars and had started wearing frocks. She looked a few years younger than before. Her walk too was more carefree now. She seemed to have brought the colours back into my life. The clouds kept hovering in the sky. When all other students were busy attending lectures in the college, we both would be sitting under a tree, in a park, reading poetry. One day, Sarla suddenly closed the book and said, "I don't like poetry."

"Then what do you like?" I asked.

"You talk to me" She lowered her head.

"Is Tilli your friend?" I asked for the sake of saying something.

"We were together in school. So, we are not best of friends but we know each other quite well."

"Does she tell you anything about Daulu?"

**“Does Hotu tell you anything about Leela?”**

**“As Tilli loves Daulu, Hotu loves Leela.”**

**“No dear no. It is a bit too much to love a stupid girl like Leela.”**

**“I feel Leela will change after marriage.”**

**“But why would Hotu want to marry Leela? He frequently calls her ASPRO.”**

**Sarla was shocked. Caressing the grass, as if talking to herself, she said, “Why do boys do like this? Hotu goes around so much with Leela. She has become famous. The poor girl will be neither here nor there.”**

**“You crazy girl. Such immature girls don’t know anything about love.”**

**She began chewing a blade of grass. A gentle breeze was playing in her hair.**

**I moved to closer to her. I said, “Siri, Love doesn’t mean marriage. One gets so much from love that there is no need for marriage.”**

**She lifted her beautiful eyes towards me as if saying, “Really? No need for marriage?”**

**But she lowered her eyes and said, “In your presence I cannot judge anything.”**

**For a few moments we both sat quietly. I picked up the poetry book and started reading a poem-**

***Hearts full of love are always thirsty.***

***Drink from the cup of thirst to quench thirst.***

***In love, thirst quenches thirst.***

**The college bell was heard, announcing the end of the lecture and we came to alertness. But actually, it was not easy to come back to senses. I was so lost in a dream world that I did not know which world I was in. Sarla’s eyes were even more lost in a dream world.**

**Sometimes I wonder that inspite of so much intimacy why did she not come close to me. Why does she not get lost so that I can hold her hands and kiss her lips? Some girls, even though they don’t object, yet they create so much protection around them.**

It was a winter night again. A festival fire was lit. *Uttaran-* Makar Sankranti arrived again. There was so much difference between last winter and this winter. The seeds that were sown in the last winter had borne flowers now. Though Siri was in her own class, but her image kept appearing in my eyes. It appeared as if I was never free of her company. One day I told her, "Siri from your eyes it looks as if you have studied all night."

"Last year of course I had sat up all night during my Matriculate exams..."

"What exams are you staying awake for this year?"

She laughed, bit her lips and went away.

In winter the college compound is full of colourful dresses like the winter flowers. Sarla's pink sweater and red skirt was the most beautiful of all the dresses. Often in that dress she would be sitting with her friends and fooling on the green lawns or sitting quietly by the corner, alone, looking into a book. Or, who knows, she was perhaps waiting for me, because, often at that time, I would go and have a word with her. Such moments are so short! And rare too. Once, during such a beautiful moment, she told me. "Moti, today I read a poem."

"What was it about?"

"It was about togetherness and separation...I was wondering about happiness in attraction...does it grow or diminish in a relationship?"

A bright window opened in my mind and I said. "No wonder Shah had said,

*'I am searching...searching...*

*I cannot find...*

*May I never find.'*

In that way one can derive many meanings from such great sayings. And then there are also sayings which are contradictory to each other. Now listen to what the poet says in this poem,

*'Those who have never met*

*What do they know of separation?'*

The wait begins only after meeting and yearning gives an incompleteness and longing to life."

**“No, completeness and peace should be the goal of life.” saying this, she blushed and felt shy. She covered her face and walked away fast.**

**I don’t know what happened to me. I felt like running after her and catching her but I stood still.**

**After a while I noticed that she was coming from the other side of the bushes. Sitting next to me, she spread out some flowers from her handkerchief. I went down on my knees. I was a bit tickled by Sarla’s mischief but I did not understand anything. Smelling one flower I asked, “Why have you spread these flowers?”**

**“I like them.”**

**I loved this child-like gesture of hers.**

**Then she folded her pink handkerchief in such a way that it looked like a rose flower and then she spread the flowers around that, saying, “They look nice, isn’t it?”**

**I took off the rose flower from her hair and placed it in place of the handkerchief and smelt the handkerchief. I could feel the touch of her fair and soft hands from that handkerchief. Feeling intoxicated I said, “The small flowers around the rose look like Stars around the Moon.”**

**She spoilt the game and sulking she said, “The Stars and Moon don’t meet ever. They keep playing at a distance.”**

**“There is a sweetness in life due this distance.”**

**“I am saying that the Moon and Stars should meet. When they meet there will be so much light on the Earth that there will be no need for lights.”**

**“Then who will care for the beauty of the Galaxy?”**

**“Light is better than beauty. Beauty anyway diminishes after dawn.”**

**“The wise have said that *A thing of beauty is a joy forever* and beauty is just to watch, not to touch.”**

**“Then should I go and put the flowers back on the branches, since their beauty will be spoilt by our smelling?”**

**“Hey, wait, you sulking one.”**

**But she went off. At that very moment the recess bell went off and groups of boys and girls came into the compound. Walking with her friends, she**



dropped the flowers into a pot and went away. Looking at it from a distance I felt as if Sarla had actually stuck back the flowers on the branches. But from a closer distance I saw that the poor flowers were broken and strewn about in the pot.

Sometimes, small things create huge walls between two people. The matter is forgotten but that wall falls with difficulty. It actually takes a moment to drop that wall but that moment comes with great difficulty. Only the one who has experienced the yearnings of love knows the pain of longing to talk to his beloved for a few months.

Another strange incident occurred in those days. One day on returning from college, I noticed all the family members looking at me with a meaningful gaze. Vindhri is just four years younger to me but that day she was like a small child. Giving me my plate, she ran away laughing so much as if someone was tickling her. I got irritated and asked, "What is it Vindhri?"

She was teasing me from behind the pots, sticking out her tongue. I ran after her to get her to speak the truth. But as I was running after her, Baba's booming voice was heard, "Whose food is getting cold here?"

I came at once and sat down to eat. Perhaps even a lion's roar cannot match Baba's hoarse voice. From the very beginning Baba's roaring sound has created a death-like silence in the house. On that day, as I was eating, Vindhri came with her doll. She sat on the floor and began playing and singing with the doll, *'A sister-in-law shall come into my brother's house.'*

*'A sister-in-law shall come into my brother's house...'*

I also threw a morsel of rice that went and hit her cheek and it was now my turn to laugh. Wiping her cheek Vindhri said, "Just watch, I'm going to throw such morsels on Sirumal's daughter."

"Oh, why is this Sirumal's daughter the butt of your anger today?"

Vindhri kept smiling and hiding something from me. I couldn't understand, so I said, "Wait, let me finish eating, then I'll deal with you, or come out with the truth."

The neighbourhood lady, Chiman's mother, was relaxing on a cot, smoking a chillum. She said, "You scoundrel, your father has fixed your engagement to Sirumal's daughter."

The morsel of food was stuck in my throat. Leaving the plate, I got up, went to my mother and asked her, "What rubbish is this Vindhri talking regarding Sirumal's daughter?"

Mom, had covered her head with her dupatta to protect herself from flies, sat up, saying, "My child, the grain always faces the grinding stone. Some day a bride had to come home isn't it?"

"But was there no other girl in the world besides Sirumal's daughter?"

"What is wrong with Sirumal's daughter? I think you haven't even seen her since she has grown up. She is the only daughter. She has just one brother. Sirumal is so wealthy, he will give her everything..."

"I am not going to get married before completing my B.A." Saying this I walked out hurriedly from my mother's room. But the matter did not end there. There were small quarrels at home for eight days. There was no way to speak anything near Baba, but through my mother I tried to explain to him several times. Mother too got angry one day and she said, "Why are you so disturbed? Do you like someone from your college? Tell me frankly."

Impatiently I answered, "Even if there was somebody from college would you allow me to breathe freely?"

My mother came closer and asked me intimately, "Tell me the truth. Have you promised someone?"

I grew a little nervous but said, "I haven't promised, but..."

My mother heaved a sigh of relief and said, "Then what is the problem? Such girl-friends are dime a dozen."

Mother was actually right. There were many girl-friends but even then, I don't know why, I experienced a pain within me. The fact that I had not committed gave me a feeling of freedom but there was certainly a burden on my heart. Alas! I wish I had understood the meaning of commitment at that time. Making a girl miss her lectures, reading out poems to her by looking into her eyes and making her intoxicated...Is there anything more to a commitment than this? I met Siri a couple of times in college but somehow, I couldn't tell her anything. Above this, the vacation began. At times I felt so restless that I was eager to tell Siri everything. I missed Vishnu at these times. One day I took courage and went to meet Vishnu's mother but I only returned disturbed. There was Siri's laughter echoing on Vishnu's walls and

her carefree innocent images of her life were visible all over. When I returned home mother kept nagging, “My son, Lord Ram made such sacrifices to keep his father’s promise. Can’t you do the same for your father?”

There were a few arguments in my heart too, “What’s a love without sacrifice. What is wrong in sacrificing my love to obey my father?”

But now I realise that there was a fear hidden behind that false sacrifice. Did I have the courage to face Baba’s anger?

The marriage date was fixed. The vacation too was over. There was still a week for the marriage. I met Sarla on the very first day of college when she met me with so much fondness that seeing her eyes full of love my mind went through great turmoil. A voice from all four directions told me, ‘Siri loves you Moti!’

‘So what? It is not necessary to fulfil love only through marriage,’

Another voice said.’ Then why am I feeling guilty towards Siri?’

‘That’s your illusion. Are you sure that Siri wants to marry you only? Many other boys may be crazy about her beauty.’

I moved away from Siri, avoiding her gaze. Strange questions went around my mind. For a couple of days, I couldn’t meet Siri freely. I felt suffocated. I wrote a sentence ‘Will you meet me in the park?’ on a piece of paper, put it in a book and gave to Siri. She opened the book, saw the chit and nodded in affirmation through her eyes.

As soon as I met her in the park I blurted out, “Siri, I’m getting married in a few days...”

She sat silent for a while and then started plucking the grass and throwing it away. For a long time, looking at me and waiting for an answer, she took a deep breath and said carelessly, “So?”

“So, what do you have to say?”

“What should I say?” she looked at me surprised.

I don’t know why I felt so nervous and I put my head down.

She said in a low tone, “It is your marriage and you can say yes or no. What can I do?”

**I kept silent.**

**After a while, with a faint smile she asked, "Have you seen the girl? Is she beautiful?"**

**That we men are crazy about outer beauty the women know very well. But for me the question of beautiful or not did not matter. I said, "Girls are girls."**

**She bit her lips and said, "This a good understanding. Girls are girls."**

**Expressing my helplessness, I said, "My parents are not even ready to wait for my B.A exams to get over."**

**In a strong voice Siri repeated, "Yes, girls are girls." She lowered her head, put the corner of her collar and kept munching it. I still remember the corner of that collar. By the time she had raised her head proudly the corner of that collar was totally torn off. Alas! I wish I had some understanding of a woman's heart at that time.**

**She stood up, gave me stern glance and began leaving. I called out, "Siri!"**

**She pressed her knuckles, turning a bit, gave a faint laughter, she went off slowly. I did not know that one can laugh even when one is not happy! At that time, I felt her laughter to be upsetting, perhaps because I had thought that she would cry and howl and plead with me and then I would make her understand that love is not always about marriage. Then she would tell me through her tears," Moti, you are mine. You may get married to somebody else but no one can get you out of my mind and life. I will offer you flowers of my tears all my life." But what happened! She heard me, laughed and went off proudly for her lectures.**

**Can anyone hit so hard without even raising a hand? My entire being was trembling from some unknown anger. I came home and saw the pile of my wedding cards, "The marriage is on Sunday. There just four days left. Only four days!"**

**Thinking about this, my mind became silent for a while. I liked this auspicious date. Two days passed by and the house was full of relatives and guests, but I could not get Siri out of my mind even for a moment. This was rather strange! She was with me all the time, while bathing, eating, talking. Fed up of too much thinking I took a courageous step.**

I went to Siri's house. Though I had so many jobs left at home, I continued conversing with her parents on so many trivial topics. Today Siri was hesitant to talk to me. Her face was pale and her mind was confused. My condition too was similar. The words, "The wedding is on Sunday, please come" could not come out of me till the end. Making excuses of showing me her new books, she led me into her room, "Aren't you going to invite me to your wedding the day after tomorrow?" she asked.

I kept looking at her face. She was sweating all over but she kept smiling. I said, "Who told you that I am getting married the day after tomorrow?"

She began laughing loudly, "Wow, if you were planning to get married secretly then why did you give an invitation to aunty? Yes, mom I'm coming." saying this she suddenly ran out of the room. The pictures, certificates and paintings of nature on the walls began moving.

When she returned, she was still smiling. Oh, why are you hiding your pain behind your smile?

"Sarla you have to attend the wedding." I said

"What if I don't come?"

"I shall not get married if you don't come!" I don't know how I could joke so courageously.

"You won't get married?" and she began to search for something in my face and in that moment her smile lost its genuineness.

"I'll come. Surely, I'll come" she said and her lips quivered. Her chin crumpled. "There is so much work left at home." Saying this, she turned her back and quickly left the room. I couldn't wait longer. I was feeling too insulted and it was piercing my heart. Returning home, I immersed myself in the guests and the wedding preparations. I forgot my misery amongst the song and dance and double meaning jokes.

The wedding took place.

The shy Jamuna, even though a little dusky was attractive looking. Perhaps every girl looks attractive on her wedding night.

The ladies of the house took the bride and went and lit the lamps. There was noise of the song and dance. For a long time in the night I kept waiting for my new bride. For a while I visualised Sarla's swollen red eyes but Jamuna's

beautiful overshadowed that. For a few days there was a strange intoxication in the body but as soon the newness wore out, my feet led me to Sarla's house. But the happy-go-lucky and laughing Sarla had disappeared and in her place stood a silent, expressionless statue of stone. All her topics of talking had vanished. Though her parents spoke for some time I felt as if a door had closed on me. "I need a book from you" saying this I brought her into her room.

When alone I asked her, "Why are you quiet Siri?"

She gave a faint laugh and said, "There is nothing to say." She lowered her head and said, "Take whichever book you need from the cupboard."

"I don't need any book." I said.

"Then what was this excuse for?" She raised her head and looked so sharply at me that I became speechless. What was this gaze? Had I turned into a stranger within a week?

I said, "Siri, I am the same Moti."

She looked at me from head to toe as if she did not believe my words. Giving a forced smile she asked, "For how long?"

"Why Siri, can't we stay together like the Stars and Moon in the sky?"

"Huh." giving a small taunting exclamation she went away.

Chhee -Chhee. Such an insult! I left from there, promising never to return there.

After several months I got the news that Sarla's engagement was to take place. But Instead of my heart becoming lighter it became heavier.

I don't know what selfishness was hidden inside me. There was a secret feeling within me that she should remain unmarried all her life in my memory.

### SARLA

It is a strange fact that an emotion first arises in the heart but one becomes aware of it only later. It would be so nice if it was not so. The mind should

show the way and the heart should follow that way. This way a person can be saved from many dangers. But the trouble is that the emotions, like the flow of water, keep moving in one direction, and when there is an obstacle in the way, only then one becomes aware that, Oh God! Then this whole flow has to be brought back towards one's own self, otherwise a pond is created in which the happiness of many people, especially the self, will drown.

But where was the time to think all this? Everything happened so suddenly. Moti was not even aware that each word of his was creating a mountain of obstacles in the flow of my heart!

*"I'm getting married in a few days"* These words easily said by Moti in the park brought a feeling of doom's day for me. Like any other marriage, Moti too was getting married but listening to this news my heart started beating fast. I found difficulty in breathing. Perhaps while drowning too a person must be not feeling such a suffocation!

"So, what do you have to say?" Moti had asked me.

I felt as a demon God had taken the flowers offered by a devotee in his hands and was asking him, "Should I throw these flowers in the gutter?"

How I wish he had the heart of a woman! Perhaps then he would have understood what havoc these words of his had created in my heart. My heart kept asking, "What did you say Moti! I spent each day of the vacations remembering you like the beads of a *Mala*. Then suddenly why did you cut short the melody that was playing in my heart?"

But to hide one's feelings is also a part of human nature. Why should I show my inner suffocation? So, I had said, "What should I say Moti?"

Oh God! Why did this helplessness appear in my words? I tried to make myself stronger but how strong can one make oneself when for him '*Girls are girls*'?

Oh God! Why was there only one Null for Damayanti? Only one Sita for Ram? Only one Sohoni for Mehwar? And for me? Why is there only one Moti for me? Boys are boys! But my tears were a sign of my total defeat! I simply gave a laugh! What more could I have done? To nurse my wounds, I went off to the classroom. But I couldn't pay attention to the professor's lecture. The next day too I simply kept yawning in the class. I just couldn't understand anything. Only Moti's words kept ringing in my mind. There were many faces

in the entire college but only one face was missing. Like a crazy person I kept taking rounds of park, going around the parapets but my mind did not get any rest.

The Koyal (Cuckoo) started singing in the trees early in the morning. My mind grew upset. Light clouds began gathering in the sky. I was frightened. I searched every corner of the college the entire day but could not find Moti. On returning from college I dropped by at aunt's place. The place where, unknowingly, I had lost my heart, I got some solace for my state from the same place. But what I heard there made me totally helpless. Holding my head with my hand, I slouched on the swing. What had suddenly happened? An ocean of tears flowed from my eyes, through my fingers, onto my lap. There were just two days left. After that my Moti would belong to some one else! It was clearly written on the wedding card lying on the swing. Would he really get married? My Moti would get married!! Alas! Why don't I die before that? Moti have you become deaf? My heart is calling out to you each moment. Don't my lamentations reach you? Mother Earth, don't you have any place for me...

I so scared thinking all sorts of things. Aunty left her cooking and started consoling me but it was not easy to repair the dam which was broken at that time. Aunty too started crying. The poor thing's heart was broken. We both were not even aware for how long we kept sitting there in that state. Finally, I made an excuse of a stomach ache and left to go home. But every corner of the house contained Moti's dreams. At three in the afternoon the creator of these dreams entered the house. My tears dried up and my hopes were rekindled. An inner voice whispered, "You mad woman, your lover has come home. Get up and welcome him"

"Go away, I'll not talk to him."

"You crazy girl, he will tell you '*I was mistaken Siri. You are the queen of my dreams.*'"

Swimming between the dreams of hope and hopelessness I kept talking to Moti a little bit. But what was this! The whole hour he kept talking of this and that and now he had even got up to leave! I told him, "I have brought all Vishnu's books. Would you like to see them?" and led him into my room.



Controlling my heart beats, I asked him, "Moti, won't you even invite me for your wedding?" I hoped that he would say, "How can I get married without my bride?" But instead he asked, "Who told you?"

Making myself stronger I said, "If you wished to get married secretly, then why did you leave the card in aunt's house?"

He said, "I won't get married if you don't come."

I looked at him with the light of hope in my eyes, but his words were fake.

I couldn't find the kind of invitation that is in the eyes of a groom for his bride. I simply said, "I'll come. Surely I shall come" And he left.

My lamp of hope was extinguished and there darkness all around. I thought that he had come to light my dim lamp, but what was all this? Only the ocean of my flowing tears was trying to drown that lamp. I had never ever thought of anybody else besides Moti. While playing with Vishna I don't know how he made a place for himself in my heart. He had started liking everything about me. His gaze had kept on touching me every moment. He loved my gait and my gaze. Couldn't I see it all? Then, after all this, if I considered him to be the king of my dreams, was it my fault? No, he is mine. He can never belong to someone else. My Moti cannot get married to anybody else. How is that possible? Yes...yes...at that time there will storms and all the paraphernalia of the wedding will fly off. The sticks will fall...God knows what all will happen...

I spent the entire wedding night resting my head on the window sill and thinking about all this.

But nothing like that happened! I'm saying the truth, nothing really happened! My eyes kept crying and they were swollen, But the clock kept reminding me that the earth, sky, storm, lightning, nobody came to help me. I cannot express how that difficult night...longer than a year...disappeared into the morning light! And I was still alive even after that!!

I thought that I did not have a right to live. A woman rejected by her lover is a burden on the earth. No. I shall not live any longer. Home, college, books, clothes, even the morning cool breeze...everything felt unreal. Everything appeared as a shattered dream... then what was the need to live?

I sat before the mirror and pressed my throat hard with both my hands. My eyes turned bloody. My lips were burning due to the warmth of the blood. I

got scared looking at my dangerous image in the mirror. My grip loosened because of the immense pain.

That day I realised something, but in a hazy way, that life wants happiness, beauty and sweetness.

In spite of that I kept inflicting pain on myself by ever new means. If I walked barefoot in the hot sun, my feet could not tolerate the burning beyond a point. If I took bath in boiling water, in a few minutes my hands refused. I was sick living a struggle between life and death.

With an excuse of illness, I was bed-ridden. There was no sign of sickness except my red-swollen eyes. I would hide my tears from people. When my friends visited me and inquired about my illness, I would look at their ignorance with my big red eyes. They would laugh and say, "Perhaps it is the pain of separation, it is true love, but how would you let out the steam?"

I would quickly answer, "There is nothing like that."

My mind would say, "You liar!"

One such day Moti appeared. His face was looked broader than before. His lower lip was blood red. He said, "Siri, I am the same old Moti."

This face of man is so hateful! I thought to myself, "I had loved you with all my heart Moti.! Have I changed?"

He said, "Siri, can't we stay together like the Stars and the Moon?"

I felt a needle-like pain piercing inside me. I thought to myself, "Moti you can't mock me more than this. You can commit a thousand crimes keeping your lover aside and she will take all your crimes on herself. The world will not tell you a word but staying around you, I would become a blackened coin. The world will put me in the row of hardened criminals in spite of knowing my innocence. My parents who have given me such a loving heart, would be burdened by this guilt. How I wish someone had read the love lines on my palms and cautioned me not to row my boat in the direction of the whirlwind because my boat would go round and round and disappear into oblivion."

But how could I tell Moti all this? Crowded with these thoughts I went off into the next room. When I returned, I saw that he had left. I did not feel sad. Perhaps I didn't need him anymore.

But the wound was so deep that I thought of death all the time. I even told my parents that I shall not live long. Ammi began praying for blessings, saying, "God please don't harm my innocent child." Dad in fact grew worried and he brought in a doctor in the evening. I was totally shocked. This doctor appeared absolutely the opposite of my lifeless body and broken heart. He was full of life and zest. He checked my pulse and my lungs. I told him, "Doctor please leave me alone in my state. I do not wish to live any longer. I shall die..."

The doctor did not take any notice of what I said. He looked into my eyes with a strange, happy smile. But I had lost everything and I could not reciprocate his smile.

Doctor told Ammi, "There's nothing really wrong with her." He kept talking casually to her for a while and then told her of an incident, "Aunty, a girl was brought to the hospital today. She was entangled in a relationship with a boy who had cheated her. The foolish girl consumed poison. The stupid girl was sacrificing her precious life for a cheat. When the poison was hitting her nerves, she couldn't even breathe and that time she kept shouting, "My life is leaving, but I don't know why at this moment I have developed a love for living. Doctor please save me."

Ammi asked him, "Was she saved?"

Doctor smiled sadly and said, "Aunty her condition was so bad that we could not save her. Look, just block your nose for a moment and after that suffocation, the freedom that you sense in breathing is really joyful. Okay I shall send you the medicine."

The doctor left. I actually blocked my nose and realised that I was very uncomfortable and when I released it, I realised how happy I was breathing freely. The doctor came on the next day too. The same lively face! A happy walk. He was around forty-five to fifty but he had still maintained his playfulness which I have already lost at such a young age. He sat down and began talking to me. I asked him, "Was there another case today of suicide?"

"You young girl, you seem interested in death. Today a twenty-two-year old young man was brought in. He had drowned but he had a desire to live. When I flushed out the water from his body and he recovered, the idiot tells me, "Doctor you did not do any good by saving an unemployed person!" I told him that if he wants to die, he can do so for a good cause. No point in

dying as a dog on the streets. He then came to his senses and told me, that the experience of dying is very bitter. He also told me that previously he had desired to live a good life but now he only wanted to just live. He had a zest for life and he had wanted to enjoy every bit of it but when everything failed, he went to die in the lap of the ocean!”

I would listen attentively to the doctor. The desire to live came back within me as strongly as the desire to die. For a few days the doctor visited daily but I still did not feel like leaving the bed. One day dad asked him, “Doctor, what illness is this that is not cured even with medicines?”

I became alert. Dad asked me, “My dear, are you taking your medicines daily?”

The doctor, standing behind dad, gestured me to say ‘yes’. But actually, I had hardly taken my medicines a few times. Hesitantly I answered, “Yes”

But dad understood something else, and said, “I think she throws away the medicine. From today, she will take her medicines in front of me daily.”

The doctor was smart and he said, “Actually the medicine has benefited her and she can go to college if she desires so.”

I couldn’t understand what was there in the doctor’s talks that I actually felt better the next day and I even went to college. On my return I saw that the doctor was already waiting for me, and he said, “Somebody has forced some drama tickets on me. Since I won’t be able to go, you can go and watch it with your dad.”

I was confused. A doctor takes so much interest in his patient and the patient simply lays on the bed...How ungrateful it is! Apart from medicines he also narrated so many interesting incidents which I actually enjoyed. In spite of that I said, “What is the point of watching a drama? I don’t even have a desire to live.”

“That is actually a nice thought. The one who doesn’t have any desire to live can do great things. Do you know why it is believed that an artist should be hurt?”

“So that he can create pain in his creation.”

“It is possible, but I believe that after being hurt one’s desire to live diminishes and then to become complete in his art he gets involved wholeheartedly in his work.”

I liked his argument but laughing outwardly I said, "Uh huh."

"Do girls ever accept defeat! Okay, Namaste. Go for the drama surely." Saying this he started leaving but I was surprised at the happiness with which he said *Namaste*. He then walked into Dad's room as if he had achieved a victory. After a few minutes dad called me in his room and asked, "Siri, you are okay now?"

I laughed and said, "No, I'm not well..." and I went back into my room.

I don't know after how long I had laughed today and thinking of that I again laughed. I felt as if I had been sleeping all this while. A sleep state, full of unhappy dreams and now, coming out of that state I felt comfortable and easy.

After seeing the song and dance in the drama, on returning back, my heart was filled with a little excitement. I felt as if my life was like a musical instrument on which a forgotten song had played on it! But alas! My envious heart. It said, "You don't have any right to be happy. The happiness of your life is over. Do you want to enjoy again and taint the loyalty of a woman? If he forgets and you too do the same, then where is the truth in love? True love can melt even stones. Nothing can stop that. Even Sohoni's true love helped her to stay afloat even on a defective clay pot. Will your love not bring any impact?" But there was another devil's voice in my heart saying, "If your love had to have any impact it would have been on that day when you had cried your heart out. Who says that Sohoni swam through? She was actually destroyed."

"But to be destroyed is a sign of true love." I kept repeating this to myself, with my eyes closed.

But the doctor tried and was successful in turning this fact into a lie. Today, once again, I have risen on the melody of musical instruments. The person inside me, who can laugh, cry, sing and dance, has not died yet. Am I fooling myself?

Many days passed by in such strange thinking. I kept going to college, reading books and following my daily routine in life. Everything was back to normal as before. Nothing changed, but yes, at times I would experience a vacuum in my heart and I couldn't handle myself. I would then go to a place in solitude and lay down. There I would remember my bygone days. I would remember

**Moti's attractive face, some interesting anecdote, our permanent separation and strange images of joy and sorrow. At times I would also remember the doctor's face, but along with that bespectacled, face, clean and shiny forehead, there wasn't any feeling of joy or sadness. It was simply an image of purity. He came for a short time and went away.**

**Even today I wonder why such a pure soul came into my life? Perhaps...perhaps...to save me from drowning in the ocean of depression...!**

**Even after the doctor left, I continued sitting on the bank of the waters. But I was in such state in which neither could I drown nor swim. I had experienced drowning very recently and on the other hand I could not find any boat to swim across.**

**Suddenly there was a big storm. The Partition created such terrible conditions that we had to migrate from Sindh to Bombay. Amidst all the struggle and changes in the daily life, the condition of my heart remained the same. At times I would laugh at myself. Alas! There was so much commotion, but my heart was so calm as if nothing had happened. Many a times young men appeared, knocking at my heart, saying, "Oh you beautiful idol. Come, we can teach you to swim across and enjoy life." But this beautiful idol was only an idol! The door did not open. Their calls had no impact! Yes, the only voice that had any impact was Baba's voice, "Siri, groceries are over. If we did not have your responsibility on us, we could have survived some days more."**

**There was movement now in the idol's eyes, as if saying, "I understand this. You may unburden yourself of me like a sack of grains."**

**How I wish Baba had said, "You have completed two years of college, why don't you grow some grains yourself so that we too can get a share of that!"**

**But this man, tied to tradition, really wished to throw me out on a sack of grain. It was not his fault because the men who were ready to accept me would do so on condition that my father gives them life-time grains in some form or the other. Shamsunder was the only one who did not expect anything. Actually, he had a big expectation from me, that of mothering his four children. He wished that I ignore his grey hair and his advanced age. He hoped that I should compromise on his broad body and peaceful face. But I had not even become a lover yet, then how could I become a mother? What should I tell my parents? I began crying and my mother's heart melted.**

I told her, "Ammi, I shall start working in some office." Disregarding all tradition, she permitted me to do so.

The excitement I felt doing a job was the same that one gets in moving forward, against the tide. It wasn't difficult running the house with dad's pension and my small salary.

While learning new techniques at work, a freshness appeared in my life, meeting new faces in the office. But once again, my mind used to also become sad at times. My parents would often argue, with my mother accusing my father, "You should be ashamed of living off on a daughter's earnings."

My dad would retort back, "It is you sinner who is living off your daughter's earnings. I am living off my own pension."

She would hit her head saying, "Had you married me to put my burden on this little girl...?"

Alas. I would be ashamed of such useless arguments. I was tired of such petty quarrels. My mother would fall sick of her unfulfilled desires. I would be totally exhausted looking after household chores as well as office work. I had maintained formal relationships with my office colleagues. I had closed all doors of my heart on myself. I had turned my mind into a hard stone. But now I couldn't tolerate all this. I was frightened, but more than that I was angry. I had the right to be free of this imprisonment but it seemed as if some one had forcibly taken away that right from me. Who was it, I could not understand. I had become very irritable. I believe that every woman becomes irritable at such times and she requires immense love to get out of it. In my case I was expected to swallow all that irritation; my nerves were on edge and my body was struggling with it...At such a time when a new clerk came and kept a pile of files on my table, I threw the files on the floor and said, "Is lunch time also for slavery?"

Narain kept looking at me, I was shaking in anger. I wished that somebody fights me and I should swallow him like a lioness. But Narain was smiling. He bent down, picked up the files and again looked at me. There was no sign of anger on his face at all. Dusting off the files he said, "Never mind. You don't seem alright today." And he went away. I went to the lunch room, keeping my hand on my cheek, I began wondering, "What has happened to me? I am angry with everyone. Why am I getting angry at home when mom and dad

are fighting? Nobody had any issues with me. My parents are not even my age. It is not necessary to have someone of one's own age at home... But why has my heart become so restless like this?"

But I had no answers, only questions.

I started eating slowly from my tiffin. I ate only half a roti and left the other half back in the tiffin. As I called out to the waiter for tea, one more voice was heard, and as I turned, I saw that Narain too had finished eating and was calling the waiter. As the waiter approached me, Narain ordered for two teas and looked at me. I thought to myself that he is a new clerk and he had so much daring. But I did not feel like insulting him again. Normally I would have not accepted tea offered by someone but I did not refuse Narain. We both began having tea. Narain said gently, "In the entire office nobody is so informal and close like you."

I had not shown any intimacy, so I frowned and asked, "What do you mean?"

"If you had not regarded me as your family member, you would have not been so angry at me. There is a strange bonding in this office..."

I was quiet. After a moment he said, "There are certain things that happen over which a human being has no control. Generally, old memories and old rituals are responsible for that. Unnecessarily thinking about them makes one sad, so why not share one's sorrows and lighten the mind?"

Not only did my anger melt but my heart was overwhelmed. I would have burst out crying had Sheela not come in suddenly and asked, "How do you know Narain?"

Just as I was about to answer her, Narain said, "We have been introduced just today. This morning, the bus conductor did not give me change, so she paid my fare. I'm repaying her by paying for her tea."

I knew that Narain was Sheela's maternal cousin. The fidgety lady did not stop even a minute and went off to chat with other girls. I felt amused at Narain's story and I softly said, "You are quite clever. Which bus did I pay your fare...?"

After lunch, when I sat back on my table to go through the files, I felt that I was a different girl. I don't know why my heart had become lighter. But I lost sleep that night. As I looked out far into the night, I noticed that it was a very



deep and dark night. "What was the intention behind such a forced intimacy?"

I too was not less foolish to ask him softly, 'You are clever, which bus did I pay your fare?' making him feel shy. He had given suppressed smile and asked me, "You did not like it?" After that he kept talking about books and movies. He looked interested in giving me books which, according to him, were necessary for me to read.

I know, I know...This is a way to come closer to me. The fellow doesn't even know that a woman falls in love only once in her life. If he moves forward in this, he will be heartbroken..."

I gave myself all arguments to harden my heart and went to sleep but I could not sleep well. In spite of that I did not wake up tired in the morning. On the contrary I was feeling fresh.

That day I reached office earlier than usual. No one had yet come in our branch. In the next section too, just Sheela and Narain were having tea. There very few people in other branches too. The office had been just freshly cleaned. The dust had not yet settled in the atmosphere. Files, registers, tables, chairs, everything was as if asleep in their respective places. Sheela called out, "Siri, come and join us for tea."

I went and sat on their table and said, "Sheela, today the office looks like a sleeping Gpd and these few people appear as dreams of that God."

Sheela gave out a sweet laugh and Narain just smiled. But I don't understand why some people's smile is so attractive. Narain's smile seemed turn the sleepy sadness of the office into the light of the morning. Narain and Sheela continued with their conversation, Narain said, "I agree that a person learns a lot from his own experience, but to discern between truth and falsity is not found in everybody and one finds happiness in teaching others what one finds right and then others too move forward."

"But one must also see the motivation in others to move forward. Take Sarla for example, she is always sad. She's always busy in herself and never shares her thoughts with anyone." Sheela said,

I was confused to have been pulled into their talks. Giving me a serious look, Narain said, "Every human being is interested in living a good life. Who likes a life like still -water? Though I don't anything much about Sarla's conditions,

**I can say with authority that if she is shown a way to live a conscious life, she will never keep quite.”**

**I was touched by so much trust in me and I felt shy but at the same time I felt happy too.**

**Many employees had now come to the office, we finished our tea and got down to work. Although I did not reply Narain and Sheela, but inwardly I spoke a lot. In the afternoon as Narain, Sheela and me were having lunch, I noticed that everyone entering was greeting Narain. I was surprised because generally nobody bothers with a new clerk, but in his case so many people had come to know him in such few days. He too was meeting everyone politely. I asked, “Were you acquainted with the whole office before?”**

**“We workers belong to the same brotherhood. Then how can we not know each other?” Narain replied**

**I thought to myself, “Then why have I kept myself away from others?”**

**I started getting interested in Narain’s talks. Nowadays I started coming early to office and sharing thoughts with Sheela and Narain.**

**Narain’s talks would echo in my mind’s vast emptiness in the night, like, *“Many changes that happen in life make the old things and rituals useless and damaging. But many foolish people simply get stuck to them and that is why so many miserable conditions are born in society. Those who are intelligent and courageous move forward, taking along the oppressed. This results in clashes between the old and new world. The intelligent and courageous one who sides the truth in this conflict is the one who actually lives life in the real sense.”***

**I was amazed and wondered that outside the world of my heart, there was such a vast world of thoughts and ideas and inspite of that I was busy thinking about my small and petty hurts!**

**Gradually, I let go the habit of isolating myself from others in the office. Narain showed me an image of a conscious life and I came out of my self-made prison. As if I was waiting to move forward and just as Narain showed me the way, I got excited. I felt as if the weather too had become peaceful and the fragrance had returned to the leaves and flowers. I now felt even my parents’ arguments as funny jokes. I started laughing instead of getting irritated. I began working instead of nurturing sad dreams. My office male**

and female colleagues rushed into my life just like the stormy winds carries everything with it. We set up a library in one colleague's house and everyone took advantage of that. The excited and colourful life of books surrounded all of us. We started discussing many stories and novels amongst ourselves and lunch time became a very entertaining time for us.

Narain did not look any special outwardly, but I was well aware of the importance he had in this project. Often books would be ordered on his recommendation. The kind of respect and love he had for all we fellow travellers had impressed many. Even in discussions he rarely went out of his control. He always appeared sober and at the same time full of excitement. Above all, if someone ever pointed out his mistake with a reason, he would immediately accept that. Generally, nobody in the world accepts his mistake, so I liked this unique quality in Narain. As it is, I found his opinions carried weight. We too started learning things like 'Opinions and Appreciations'.

Every few days we would go out for picnics where too there would be great discussions. This movement of Teaching and Learning was being enjoyed by everybody. A new life came unto us. A life free of superstitions, a life of self-reliance and a life that believed in hard-work! But being at the higher or lower levels of progress obviously led to conflicts, and anger too but they were rather interesting!

I remember one day when we were all sitting together and I said, "If a handful of people had great thoughts then there would be much movement in the country."

Sheela said, "Sarla's thoughts are still vague and optimistic. She doesn't know that this is the era of joint effort in which everyone has to work together to build a new kind of life."

I got a little angry. But looking at the frown on my face, Narain began clearing my way. He said, "It seems clear from Sheela's talks that her view is absolutely clear. She will show the way and Sarla will spread a light on that way."

Thakur mocked, saying, "Then you will be a charioteer and will go on singing,

*Go on my horse*

*Go on my horse."*

Gulab was sitting in deep thought, looked at Thakur, smiled seriously and said, "Here there is a talk on joint effort and you are mocking. Unless it becomes a serious discussion, we will regard your thoughts only as a joke."

I was so happy in such a rich atmosphere that I felt overwhelmed. I did not even know that thoughts contain so much depth and my colleagues have such large hearts that they can take each other's talks in a rational way. But it was strange that living such an interesting life in which as my thoughts began getting higher and clearer, my mind on one hand was growing excited and on the other hand was growing dull. At times everything looked lifeless and juiceless. When I spoke to Sheela about excitement and dullness, she began laughing, saying, "When the dreamer will descend from the sky to the reality of the earth, only then will her mind attain peace."

She also spoke about this to Narain. I objected to this but Narain politely told me, "Sarala, we will look at each other's weaknesses and lacks intimately and then we will suggest ways to improve those. Then why do you object?"

I sat dumbfounded. He said, "You don't consider life as something serious yet. I am afraid that the ring of excitement which you have entered and also pulled others into it to some extent, may burst out like a soda bottle and be finished."

I became sad. Narain understood my condition and said, "Sarala, unless we who dream of a new life, make serious efforts to change those into reality, our lives be like twigs on the water that float here and there with each passing wave. There is no point in that. But when we make our life a part of that fight for rights, the fight which is as ancient as man, then automatically the dullness from life will disappear."

I somehow felt Narain's talk as big as some scripture. Going home I began discussing with dad too about 'Fight for Rights'. He said, "This fight in man is a fight between good and bad in humans. It is mentioned in the Bhagwad Gita also. I said, "This fight is about man's fight with the conditions all around him."

In this way I had begun moving up in life and the sweetness had returned. In such times thoughts about Moti did not leave any marks on my heart, like the morning Moon. My mind was filled with immense joy. During this time one day, on returning from office, when Sheela, Narain and me had gone to the sea side for a stroll, something happened which makes me embarrassed

today...I was walking behind all my friends. Seeing everyone busy, I went far off in a light hearted manner. I put my feet in the sea water and then going a little distance, sat on the sand. A big wide sky over me, the ocean waves caressing my feet, the Sun setting and spreading a redness...all this brought a strange state in my mind. I lay down on the sand. Suddenly, Narain came and asked, "Why did you come here, leaving all of us behind? What are you doing in this sand?"

I sat up and said, "I'm watching the waves dancing..." I actually started watching the waves and Narain stood watching me.

"Why are you standing? Sit down."

I don't know how I said these words. How did I become so informal? But before I could even think, Narain sat besides me and asked, "Siri, do you know what I thought when I saw you the first time?"

"What did you think?"

"I thought that you live in a dream. Even today I feel that your feet are above the ground, in some dream world."

"Oh ho..." I shook my head in disagreement but inwardly I felt shy at the sweetness of these words.

"I used to feel that you did not want to get out of that dream While speaking, the shadow of that dream would cast a sadness on your face and you would not be able to speak more than a few words. And Sheela was the opposite of you. Always flowing, glowing... talking to everybody...her flowing sari. Plucking leaves and flowers while passing by...what a strange and lively walk..."

"Inspite of that why did you forcibly try to be friendly to me?"

"Why did I do that?" laughing and nodding his head, he kept drawing circles in the sand, as if he did not have words for his answer. Ultimately, he said, "Because I used to like you very much..."

He looked at me slyly. I got up, "Come, let's join the others."

Actually, his sly look made me feel that the safe fort which I had built within my heart was shaken at the foundation and the walls broke and fell on the ground. I felt a kind of an earthquake and stood up.

Narain looked at me with smiling eyes and moving the hair from my face he said, "Sit down Siri, it's useless to run away now."

***Siri! Siri?*** The right to call me Siri belonged only to Moti. Who was he! But the fact that he called me 'Siri' sounded very sweet to my being...How could I ignore that truth.

Seeing me still standing, Narain stood up. At that moment our friends also reached us. I was so shy that I did not speak a single word with them. I reached home quite late. As I entered, I saw that somebody was sitting on Baba's cot and I froze at the door itself. Who was he? Oh my God! Moti!

### **MOTI**

**"Jamuna, you are dumb."** I said and sat upright on the easy chair.

She continued folding the clothes.

**"Do you know the meaning of 'dumb'?"**

Jamuna shook her head in a 'no'.

**"Then why don't you ask?"**

Jamuna kept folding the clothes. The pile of clothes looked like a heap because of not being wrapped tight and clean. When she put two more clothes the heap fell on the bed.

**"This fallen heap of clothes is indicating the meaning of 'dumb'. Understood?"**

Jamuna raised her frightened eyes.

**"What is the need of staring me like a fool. Why don't you ask what you don't understand?"**

She again started putting the clothes in a pile, one over the other.

**"Are you listening to what I am barking?"**

Leaving the clothes aside, Jamuna started looking at me. Not being able to face my gaze, she lowered her eyes and said, **"It must be something bad."**

**"You like the fact that you are dumb.?"**

She frowned and went to put the clothes in the cupboard. I got up from the chair and said, "Go to hell." I then went off into my room. I thought to myself that actually it is me who is in hell because within a few months I was fed up with Jamuna and my mind started wandering again. I began returning home late in the nights, Jamuna would be fast asleep. Lying down beside her, I would toss in restlessness and imagine, 'I wish it was Sarla in Jamuna's place'.

But the trouble was that Sarla didn't come in place of Jamuna; on the contrary, Sarla herself disappeared from her own self. The lively Sarla had changed and she had become like a lifeless idol that was carrying on a mere act. Moreover, she was hardly seen these days. Occasionally when she would be seen in the college, she would turn her face and walk away. She stopped taking part in any of the college events as if she had stopped her mind from every pleasure and had imprisoned herself. I felt that at least she should come to some college functions because I was sure that once she sees how well I perform on stage, then she would not ignore me and walk away.

In the middle of the night when I would imagine her beautiful eyes, she would then ask me with sad eyes, "Who am I to you...?"

"Siri, you are my beloved, my sweetheart. What better status should I give you?"

"This status belongs to Jamuna."

"Jamuna? Jamuna is just my wife. She doesn't have the heart of a lover! You come. I shall love you, hiding you from the society."

"Huh..."

"Oh God! How bitter is this mocking word! Do you know that this one word is worse than the bite of a scorpion?"

But where was this girl from my imagination? She was not the Sarla who would talk and listen. Here I had to look at the miserable face of Jamuna the whole day. I would spend the entire day outside and come home late at night to save myself from her. Often Jamuna would be lying down on the cot in the darkness. I would make a faint sound at the window and she would come silently and open the door to me so that Baba did not come to know. One night she was sitting in the cot, well dressed. Coming closer, I told her bitterly, "Wow, is there some wedding today?"

**She got up and came and sat at my feet.**

**In spite of a good dress and being decked up in gold, she lacked any style. I made a bitter face and asked, "What is the use of sitting there?"**

**She got up and continued standing.**

**I led her by her hand towards the cot and told her, "Don't do such stupid things again, understood?"**

**The next day she went off to her parents' house because she was pregnant and my mother was weak to look after her.**

**I was away from Jamuna for many months. Dramas continued being staged in college. We had formed a group of those boys and girls, who had lost interest in studies. I had grown emotionally weak and along with my growing popularity on stage the pain in my heart had also deepened. Why was a talented artist like me tied to this insensitive Jamuna? I felt pity on myself thinking of all this.**

**Self-pity is very bad because it starts eating into all nerves like a chronic disease. My body kept on becoming weaker. My friends believed that I had become a forlorn lover (Majnu). Disappointed, I would think, "At least Majnu was united with Laila even after death. But I had lost everything in this world while living"**

**Baba's liveliness and roar had disappeared after my marriage and so my mother got Vindhri married in her maternal place. Jamuna was simply sent a single letter. Nobody had ever imagined that she would come alone, all the way from her parents' home. So, when she reached home with a six-month-old daughter, we were all surprised. Mother and Vindhri even taunted her a bit but she was quiet as if she was prepared to face all the insults.**

**Several relatives were invited for Vindhri's wedding like they were at my marriage. There was noise and celebration in the house. Young girls began singing to the beat of the dholaks. There were cheap jokes, tickling each other and laughter on every small thing. There were strange movements of young beautiful bodies, glowing faces and lovely hands all the while. But amidst all this merriment when their eyes fell on me, they would suddenly turn into pity and the same happened when they saw Jamuna's quiet and pained face. But it was beyond my tolerance level to see that Jamuna's plight**



was more pitiable than mine. My mother took me aside and told me, “Son, today please sit for the ceremony (Pooja) with your wife.”

I told her, “Excuse me. I shall refuse to go with that miserable creature even to heaven.”

Suddenly, I felt a slap on my shoulder. “You rascal, why did you sit with her on your wedding then?”

I turned and saw Baba who was still in his bath towel. He was trembling with anger. For the first time I too replied back without hesitation, “It was all to please you. You have destroyed my life.”

“Then young man, you take revenge from me. What harm has the poor cow done to you?”

“I am not telling her anything.”

“Oh, you rascal. You say that you haven’t told her anything? Am I blind? I have seen your behaviour since a year and half. You have ruined my reputation in the whole city. You devil...Oh Moti’s mother...Ah...Ah...Ah” saying this Baba fell with a thud on the ground. There was a commotion in the whole house. Baba’s hands and feet were massaged with oil. A doctor was called but Baba did not gain consciousness. From that day when he collapsed, he did not get up from bed, healthy. Somehow Vindhri’s marriage passed off. Exactly eight days later, Baba too left the world. Mother and Vindhri cried bitterly but Jamuna kept staring with her large eyes as if she was in great shock. After this I spent more and more time outside this unlucky house. Even the few hours of the night that I returned home, Kishori, Jamuna’s daughter, would create a ruckus in the house. I would roar at Jamuna and ask her, “Why can’t you make her quiet?”

Jamuna would then carry the little one and keep pacing up and down in the room quietly. If I ever woke up in the middle of night, I saw her walking the child in the same way. “The idiot can’t even look after a child” Saying this I would turn my back and go off to sleep again. I would hold a pillow in my arm, visualising a prostitute from the neighbourhood. I had gone around in every corner of that neighbourhood in search of happiness. At times I would feel physically fresh but my mind was usually confused. I would sometime lose myself in alcohol but I did not have a capacity like *Devadas* to drink unlimited, and neither was there any *Chandramukhi* waiting for me. But I

kept on searching for happiness. Today, I realise that there was a deep desire for good life and happiness in Jamuna; otherwise why would she come and sleep at my feet on a winter night, forgetting all the past insults.

My body was electrified by her touch but of what use is a good actor who cannot act in actual life? And what is the use of acting if there is no display of sorrow? I got up with a jerk and said, “Why have you come and slept here? The pain that you are giving me, is it not enough?”

She continued lying down and said, “God is not willing to take me.”

I was not prepared to give any thought to this simple answer given by Jamuna. I quickly said, “Why are you expecting God to do this job for you? If you had any self-respect you would never come here to attack me like this.”

She looked at Kishori sleeping on the cot and like a puppet, she went and slept beside her.

In this way, we spent our youthful nights in the same room, keeping a big wall of anger between us.

At such a time, life took a new turn. We travelled miles away, crossing countries, to Jaipur, to save the honour of this one person for whom I never had an ounce of respect.

We were not worried as long as we had some money. One can fill water from a flowing river, but getting out water from still water is a cause of worry. So, I kept on doing some odd jobs. I had purchased a rickshaw and given it on hire, but within a couple of months the driver met with a serious accident and the rickshaw was in pieces. I bought sacks of coal to sell in winter. I had stored them on the terrace, but one night they were stolen.

Gradually, the red structures of Jaipur brought blood in my eyes. The cold winter winds pierced me and the hot summer winds were burning me. And above all this, Jamuna’s presence was very bothersome. My friend Hotu wrote to me from Bombay, saying that the changing situations in the country have made the people mentally very restless.”

After a year, he wrote in another letter, “Your Sarla’s relatives are living in poverty. She is working in an office and has not yet found a husband.”

*‘She has not found a husband’* I did not like anyone using such shallow words for Siri. I erased those words with a wet finger, tore the letter into pieces and

threw them away. Jamuna bent down, collected all the pieces and took them away. While she was bent, I saw a patch of grey hair and my heart started burning. Inwardly, I started abusing Sirumal and his entire family who had fraudently got me married to a woman many years older to me. What excitement can an older woman have within her. As soon as I thought of this, I got some relief but there was still no way out of this.

I wish I had understood at that time that the pain of living a widow's life while her husband was still alive might have burnt a fire within Jamuna so much and no wonder then that her colour had grown dark and her hair had become grey. That is why Jamuna looked older to me in age.

But if I had even a thought about the fire within her, I would have simply wished she gets engulfed in that fire completely so that my path was clear!

But why do I say? At that time, I wasn't Moti. I was simply a stone. Above that, my unemployment came like a thorn to cut into my stone heart. This thorn is rather strange, it doesn't pierce at one place, but in every nerve. The most ordinary things of life like, tea, cigarettes, snacks etc were otherwise are not difficult to get, but their desire during times of unemployment would mock at me, peeping from pockets and shirts. The heart felt sad at everything. It would shrink if a rich friend came before me and the family members aroused a hatred in me. God forbid if someone has to fall sick at such times! His humanness simply vanishes. My mother's illness was a living example of that. I would lose my temper at such trivial things that she would cry. She was already saddened by the Partition and now these difficult days were damaging her even more. Even Jamuna's day and night care-taking couldn't save her.

What was left for me in the house now? I thought to myself that since there is no hope here, I should go to my friend in Bombay. Maybe something works out there.

I seriously began preparing to go to Hotu. I had no money for the fare and I decided to travel ticketless. But Jamuna brought out her jewellery and handed it to me.

I lost my temper and said, "Are you showing off your parents' wealth? Are you trying to give me the jewellery presented by them and buying me off?"

**She took out Kishori's two bracelets and her own four bangles, saying, "These are given by your mother. They are your own property. Take them."**

**I grabbed them. There was nothing much left in the box, except a few buttons and a couple of rings. I asked her, "Is this all you got from your parents?"**

**Shedding tears and lowering her head she said, "Amma had mortgaged all the other ornaments."**

**I still remember that night when Jamuna was sound asleep. There was a Moonlight on her face. This large-hearted woman did not impose her rights on me inspite of giving me all that she owned. She did not expect or desire even a loving glance!**

**That morning, whilst I was getting ready to leave the house, Jamuna held a frightened Kishori by the finger and stood at the door, giving the same cold and scared look. I was leaving her after many years. The silent tears falling from her eyes disappeared into Kishori's hair. Very hesitantly she uttered only two words, "Write a letter."**

**For the first time in life Jamuna had asked me for something and that too a piece of paper!**

### **JAMUNA**

**Yes. I am dumb, I don't have any capacity to attract men. Actually, I had regarded this power to be impure and had left it. I had never wanted to attract any other man besides my husband. Does one need efforts to attract one's own husband? Husband and wife are two incomplete beings who become complete after uniting with each other. This attraction for completion is enough. I don't need to put in any extra effort.**

**From childhood itself I have been simple and ordinary. I got whatever I wished through straight means. I was doted upon. I never used any unfair means to get anything and now that I have lost my husband's love, I don't know the ways to get that back. Husband's love is not something to be asked for.**

Somebody said, "Husbands are always attracted to beauty." Can anyone call a slim waist, slender fingers as ugly. Those who consider this as ugly, can they even create a more beautiful single finger?

But the mirror before me does not hide a cut on my lower lip even for a moment. The joy of seeing my beauty would vanish as soon as my gaze reached my lower lip.

Is it my fault? If my husband had even some bigger defect in him, I would have happily overlooked that. What does this mean? It means that any defect can be forgotten and ignored by immense love in the heart.

It is not just a matter of natural defects but I am also considered dumb and it is seen as my fault. But why did this happen? I was not like this before marriage. Neither was I like this immediately after marriage. Then suddenly what happened? He thought of me as an old footwear. When I realised that some other woman resides in his heart, I lost all my excitement in my body. Those gazes that I had saved for my husband diminished and became devoid of love. But what can a helpless woman like me do? Alas, nobody should experience such helplessness ever!

Soon after marriage he took me to a party that too on the insistence of Ammi. At first, he refused saying, "What will this ignorant woman do there amongst college boys and girls?"

His words crushed my joy of going out with him but I could not refuse Ammi. On reaching there he become busy with greeting all women, "Hi...hello...", but how could I openly greet and shake hands with unknown men? I was brought up within four walls of home as a cultured and respected daughter. As I was standing there, confused, a young college girl came up and said, "I suppose you will not enjoy our company."

Just as I was about to reply, "Why will I not enjoy, we are all people ..." I noticed that my husband was suppressing his laughter with his handkerchief and instigating the girl with his eyes, as if gesturing her, "Ask her.... ask her..." The ground beneath my feet shook and I started seething in anger. I glared at the girl with a stern face. She left abruptly and ran off towards the card table. Perhaps fashionable girls don't have a heart. I never felt any closeness with any of the girls. Watching their shallow and trivial nature I lost all my belief that educated girls are indeed special.

As we finished eating, I began feeling a heaviness. Everyone else was busy in joking, playing cards etc. I put my head down on a large table and took a nap. But since I was afraid of being made fun of, I woke up quickly. My eyes were still closed when I heard, “She is still in the morning hour. Snoring...”

A female voice was heard, “Moti, what’s the news of Sarla?”

“Oh, nowadays she doesn’t even care for him.” A male voice was heard.

“Now shut up you all...here is a trio...bring out three annas each.” This sounded my husband’s voice.

With my close eyes I felt my body going through a turbulence. Somehow, I got up and sat. While the game was on, a girl name Meera was acting quite stylish. I was burning in my heart watching my husband’s gaze stuck on her. I was thinking - Is woman an enemy of another woman? But how can one say that? If someone doesn’t like home-made food then why should we blame the restaurants?

In the evening when we were ready to leave and were at the door, my husband told me, “Wait here, I’m coming” and he went back inside. I was feeling awkward standing out so I went back inside. I was just at the door and what I saw made my head go swirling. Meera was standing there and my husband was standing with his back to the door. Meera’s hand was being pulled by my husband. Both were confused between yes and no. Finally, she said, “I’ll surely come.” I became cold and I froze. When my husband came very close to me, he asked, “Why did you come in like a thief?”

Oh God! How was I a thief? Why doesn’t the earth burst open? But I did not utter a word to my husband. I was not used to saying anything. I don’t know how I reached home in an unsteady manner. My husband handed me to his mother saying, “Here, take charge of your beloved daughter-in-law. She came to the party to snore.”

My mother-in-law smiled and said, “She’s pregnant. She must have felt heavy.”

But seeing the anger on my husband’s face I couldn’t even smile.

Sometimes I feel like shouting and proclaiming to the world, “Don’t think that we frightened beings have no emotions. We have emotions too but we don’t have the guts to shout and express. We are not used to displaying our

feelings. Who knows, our fear too is the result of you strong people's mockery, laughter and hatred."

The next day Meera came to our house. Whatever little effort I had made to attract my husband had left me. I couldn't find interest in anything. At times I wouldn't use soap while bathing. I wouldn't eat anything as I had no taste. I felt as something had died within me. But I had kept myself alive for the unborn life within me.

To bring this unborn child into this world I had to go to my parents' home. There was no one to look after me here. If the husband was supportive of me, the others would be nice to me. But in this case my mother-in-law and sister-in-law were also not my own. I did not mention anything to my family. In spite of that everyone sensed that I was under some strain which was burdening me. Yet, everyone was busy in their own lives. Why should anyone bother for me? When my own better half himself did not care for me, then why should anybody else think about me?

When I gave birth to Kishori, my mother beat her chest and exclaimed, "Why has a girl been born?"

Her sister (my maternal aunt) told her, "Why are you so upset? The first daughter is like a son. May God bless her husband; she shall give birth to sons too."

My mother said in a hesitant voice, "Let us wait and watch whether she goes to her in-laws' house. I have seen many such incidents. My hair has grown grey seeing the ways of this world."

I felt totally broken in mind and body. That night, holding the little girl to my chest, I vowed that I shall educate this little daughter more than her father. I shall not get her married. What is there in a marriage?

In the morning when my sister-in-law came towards me with a glass of milk, my brother shouted out to her, "First get my clothes out. You have the whole day to look after her."

"I have to look after her too." Sister-in-law replied. "Mother is busy cleaning her teeth since morning. Wonder what has happened to her. Ask her what is the use of her worrying now? If we have to carry this burden, we shall do so. We will not run away from it."

She kept the milk near me and went off, leaving me in very strange condition. I felt a suffocation in my mind, just like clouds gathering in the sky. I gave out an uncontrollable sob, "I am a stranger in this house; a burden."

For a woman, marriage is like a gamble. If the dice is in her favour then she gets respect in both the houses. If not, then she loses all her rights even in her own childhood home. I alone know how I spent the six full months in that house. I was a pain in the eyes of my brother. My sister-in-law was anyway an outsider. Even then I couldn't solve the puzzle as to why was my brother so nasty with me? If my Kishori snatched a toy from his children, he would jump up and immediately take it away from her. I could never have the courage to get anything that Kishori wanted, from my brother's children. Oh God, I often slapped that six-month old Kishori. She would howl. My mother would cajole Kishori with some small toy or so and yell at my sister-in-law. But after Baba, who would even listen to her? My sister-in-law would instigate her husband and he would point towards me, saying, "This Jamuna is the cause of all the problems. The husband had brought toys which the daughter did not get and now she is punishing that little girl." He would sarcastically.

My mother would wail and shout and release all her anger but I was aware that expressing my anger would create a fire and I could see any water around me to extinguish that fire. I would suppress my voice with a cloth in my mouth and sit in a corner and keep sobbing. My dreams would mock at me, "Ha ha...You will love Kishori? You will make her smart? You oppressor."

I would hide my suffocation and hold Kishori to my bosom.

Amongst this storm in the house, there was only one man who would sit through, motionless. It was Leelo, my sister-in-law's brother. He had stayed with us since his childhood. Whilst living with us he had also got Small Pox in which he had lost one eye too. In childhood I would often tease him, One-eyed Leelo.

On one stormy night, there was a gutsy wind and all the doors and windows were banging. My mother had gone for a condolence meeting and my brother and sister-in-law were sleeping in their room. I was feeling very restless. As the stormy winds were getting stronger, my heart beat too went racing. I got so fed up that I burst out crying. Suddenly I realised that someone was wiping my tears. I threw myself in his lap and burst out crying.



But as I raised my head, I was shocked and fell backwards. "Jamni, don't be frightened...You remember as a child you teased me as a one-eyed Leelo...?"

With a heavy heart- beat I said, "But that Jamuna is dead."

"The world may be blind but my eyes can see your pain and suffering Jamni!"

"Leelo, don't show me sympathy. Go away. You don't know how unlucky I am." I burst into tears.

"I am simply saying that why are you destroying yourself for a husband who doesn't care for you?"

"Leelo, don't say that. He is a man. He is pure. So, what if he doesn't bother about me? It is my duty to remember him with every nerve in my body and purify my impure garb of womanhood."

"Jamuna, He, the one who decides between good and evil does not differentiate between man and woman."

"How do I believe that? I must be reaping the result of some sin I may have committed. Otherwise why would I be devoid of my husband's support?"

"There is no question of any sin here. Moti got married to you only for money. Then, how could love grow between him who is so educated and you who are illiterate?"

"But what is my fault in this? They could have educated me if they wanted so.'

"It is not only the fault of educators. What can one do if the society is such? Look at me. I too have remained semi-literate like you." Leelo kept his hand on my head. I jerked and went aside. My heart beat was racing and tears were flowing down my eyes like an ocean. "Go way Leelo!" Frightened, I requested him and Leelo quietly went away like a child who was slapped.

There was a storm outside the entire night and inside me my eyes were shedding tears like rainfall. Pressing my knuckles all the time, I thought to myself, "What had happened to me today? Why did I put my head in Leelo's lap and cry? Where was my maturity?"

My old values kept nagging me and breaking me.

Leelo was always at home but I never noticed him. Now, a strange situation had arisen. I felt as if the whole world was an ocean of hatred in which there

was just one pillar of love. But I had lost all right to hold on to that pillar of love in order to save myself from these waves of the ocean of hatred. Then how could I go close to him?

I was in such a dilemma that when a brief letter arrived from my in-laws saying that it was Vindhri's wedding and I should be there. I rushed and started packing my bag. My mother began crying, "My dear daughter, how will you go unless somebody comes to pick you?"

My sister-in-law burst out, "If you had to show your in-laws that your parents' house is good-for-nothing, why did you even come here in the first place?"

But no one knew the condition of my mind. Whilst leaving the house I realised that the doors of this place will remain closed for me forever.

I did not get any welcome at my in-laws' place. I kept a relationship with a neighbouring house where one of their daughters was a teacher. I made an excuse of learning embroidery and started learning to read and write. But bad luck!

One day the teacher's grandmother came over to our place. She told my husband, "You have a nice, intelligent wife who stitches, embroiders and is also putting efforts to read and write."

My husband turned his face and sarcastically murmured, "In old age she has developed an interest in studying."

I was chopping vegetables at that time, and hearing these words, I cut my finger. I washed my finger under the tap and saw my reflection in the mirror. Oh God! So many grey hair!

That day, when I went to study, I couldn't stop my tears from flowing. I tore the book into pieces and threw it out of the window. A stubborn streak formed within me. I thought, "What is the point to trying to please some one who is never going to be pleased?"

I went to Chandra not only to study but also to learn stitching and embroidery. It was good that I learned that. We had hardly any easy and good life since migrating from Sindh. My mother-in-law died and my husband suffered losses in business. That stitching and embroidery came to my rescue during those difficult times, otherwise I don't what would have happened to my innocent Kishori. I could even provide a decent meal to my husband. One

day, he told me in a nice way, "If I had some money, I could go to Bombay. It is big city and I surely will find some way to earn some little money."

I was overjoyed. Perhaps my prince is happy. I lovingly brought out all the ornaments left with me. But when I realised that he was ready to accept my ornament but not me, I laughingly thought, "Wow. How smart!"

But when I actually realised his smartness, I was shocked. He went off to Bombay without even a good bye. Soon after he left, a letter arrived from one of his friends. He had written, "I had already written to you that Sarla stays near my house, then why are you asking me if I will arrange for you to meet her or not? Meetings will surely happen, but take my advice and go straight to her house."

There were many other things mentioned in the letter which gave me a chest pain while reading. My chest felt so heavy as if there were tons of weight on it. My heart beat became very rapid. My frequently damaged heart too was now beating so fast, showing off its importance.

Suddenly I thought of a way. Sarla's address was mentioned in Hotu's letter and I thought of writing a letter to her. It is not a question of just me, but involved Kishori too. Maybe Sarla would understand a mother's plight, but she is not yet a mother...But my inner voice said, there is maternal emotions in every woman. But how can a wife plead her husband's lover! Is there anything more painful than this? But as I said, there is a maternal instinct hidden in every woman. So, for Kishori's sake I was ready to face all pains and shocks. I wrote to Sarla. Her reply was far beyond my expectations. So far, I had thought that a woman is the cause of another woman's pain, but now I don't think so. As it is every wife is envious of her husband's lover. But because of this letter, I began to love Sarla. She wrote, "After you're your marriage, I have never ever considered Moti as mine even for a moment. But after your letter I have developed one more relationship with you. Jamuna, do you want to know what relationship is it? Now you are my sister. When I see my brother-in-law, I will plead him and send him back to you my sister." She had written many more heart-warming things in the letter, but in all this, just one sweet word- SISTER, had given me a sense of satisfaction. After Leelo, she was the only person who had given me unconditional love...

Alas...talking about all this I am coughing so much...

## SARLA

I was shocked to see Moti sitting in my house- “Just today I had allowed Narain to take the place of Moti which he had left empty and here he has appeared!” But I did not allow any weakness to enter my heart. I simply greeted him “Namaste” as if he was a stranger.

Moti was talking to my father and I went inside to help my mother in some work. But somehow, I started feeling some kind of a suffocation. Perhaps I even knew the reason. While doing the household chores, at every step I felt as if Moti’s eyes were following me. When the red bangles on my arms were making a sound, Moti was watching them. When a lover’s gaze keeps moving like this life is filled with a strange satisfaction, and the feet begin dancing. I simply shut out all these emotions with one answer, “He is Jamuna’s husband and not your beloved, Sarla.” I kept walking with strong steps. I felt confused in my heart. I told my mother that I was going to visit Ratna in the neighbourhood. While leaving, I threw a glance at Moti and I felt like laughing. His face looked like an insulted child.

I deliberately returned home late, thinking that Moti may have left. But what I saw on returning was shocking. Moti was sitting comfortably, lazing around on the cot in white clothes. It didn’t seem as if he was going back. I wondered, “Has he come to stay here? Why? With what authority has he come?” I was even more surprised that my dad had allowed a stranger to live in our house.

After dinner, my mother said, “My dear, make his bedding on the steel cot next to your dad’s cot.”

My confusion burst out and I said, “Ammi, is Moti going to stay here?”

My father answered, “Moti is Vishna’s friend, so he is like a son too...You know the hotels in this city...he will look around a few days and then buy his own place. He is planning to settle here permanently.”

I put my head down and started making the bedding but I couldn’t understand why Baba was being so large hearted. With so many thoughts going on in my mind, I put on the table lamp and began reading.

When Moti stepped out for a few minutes, Ammi, a little irritated came and told Baba, "I won't listen to anything. Get him to leave tomorrow. There must be a groom for my Siri too, somewhere...I don't want to listen to the world talking, allowing a stranger living in my house."

"You crazy woman, you are concerned about the world. Our girl has grown so much. What has your world given you? How can I reject this God-sent groom? What will you do with your daughter...?"

Ammi was very confused and said, "Even I have been praying to God to send a groom for my daughter, but somehow I am confused."

"You are confused in everything. His wife has died and he has no child. He is also against dowry..."

At that moment Moti arrived and they both kept quiet. There was a strange silence in the house in which everyone appeared quiet on the outside but inwardly each one was talking. I was with my back to everyone, with an open book. I couldn't read at all. The incidents from my life kept passing through the pages of the open book. Gradually, I went into a dream state. Dressed in a saffron sari, and a Thali with pooja flowers in my hand, I am following a God. When he turned, I saw that it was Moti. I touched his feet and offered rose flowers at his feet. And at that very moment a diamond studded Goddess appeared and started pulling Moti by the hand. Moti kicked the flowers and went away. I put a finger on my chin and with tears flowing down my eyes I kept watching the Thali with flower offerings, on the floor. Slowly, somebody came down from the tree. He wiped my tears with the flowers and started assembling the strewn flowers back on the plate. He took my hands lovingly and touched his eyes. I asked, "Why?"

He answered, "I like you."

I said, "Oh. Then I shall offer these flowers at your feet. But the incense sticks and the lamps are blown off."

He helped me get up by holding my hand and said, "Leave the Pooja alone. I am not your God. I am your fellow traveller my friend. Come, let us go out of this forest."

Then I saw that every tree that Narain and me crossed, flowers showered on us from them...!

I closed the book and stood up. Moti was sleeping on the bed across. I made a decision and went and slept on the floor mat with Ammi. She was still awake. She embraced me so lovingly as if I was going to be separated from her today. There were tears in my eyes. Baba got a small pension but I suppose that I, the provider, was a burden on them!

In the morning, as I was getting ready for office, Moti asked me, "What time will you return?"

"It may be six in the evening. Today maybe even later."

"Why?"

"I have some work." Moti was quiet.

I had made a decision in the night and to implement that, I kept searching for an opportunity the whole day in the office. It was a very difficult task. Since ancient times it has been a man who proposes, "Will you be my life partner?" to a woman and she simply lowers her gaze and expresses her excitement only through a small smile; expressing her acceptance. Today, leaving aside that ancient custom, I had to ask Narain, "Will you be my life partner?"

But when I actually met Narain alone, I could ask him, "Will you come home with me this evening Narain?" He nodded his head in affirmation several times and also said, "Surely, I'll come." Then, with soft smiling eyes, looked at me and made me feel shy.

When I took Narain home in the evening, I noticed that Moti's face lost all colour. I told Baba, "This is Narain about whom I have been talking to you."

Baba got up and greeted him warmly. Narain shook hands with Moti on his own and he greeted Ammi with, "Namaste' in such a way that she kept looking at him for a long time.

Baba told Moti, "Moti, this man's thoughts are very unique. Sarla has often told me about him."

Moti gave a faint smile and looked towards Narain, saying, "Is it?"

I immediately sensed the jerk that was contained in that '*Is it?*'. Looking at Narain, Baba continued, "But I don't understand this thinking about you youngsters that people will be happy only when their ordinary needs will be fulfilled. Son, the mind is so corrupt that there is no end to its needs. Needs

are endless. I suggest that you teach them ancient wisdom (Shastras) and then automatically their lives will be happy.”

“But here,80% people don’t know reading and writing. How can they learn about ancient wisdom or anything else?

“Your opinion is absolutely correct. I feel that education is even more necessary than food.”

I said, “Baba, nowadays there are no Gurus and Brahmins who will teach for free, and everyone cannot afford large fees.”

“This is the responsibility of the government to provide free education for all. It is after all our own government.”

There was a happy smile on Narain’s face. He said, “We also are saying just that, education, employment, shelter and medical treatment should be provided by the government.”

Shaking his head Baba said, “Here you are mistaken. If everyone gets free employment etc, there will be no poverty and no hunger and then people will stop believing in God.”

“You are suggesting that we should put people through sharp -edged sword of hunger and unemployment in order to make them believe in God?”

“Yes, my son, there is no way out without remembering of God. What else can a human being do? Leave each one as he has been created by Nature.”

“It is only believed that man is dependent on nature, but man has never been dependent on Nature. If it was so then people would have not built houses to protect themselves from storms, nor made warm clothes to be protected from winter.” Narain replied. Baba got irritated. He said, “You are confused unnecessarily. It was only because of knowledge provided by Nature that man could build houses and make clothes...”

I laughed and said, “Okay Baba, consider it that even now it is Nature that has put into man’s mind to not trouble God for small things, to depend on oneself, to turn this earth from hell to heaven.”

Somehow Baba was not convinced about anything, and shaking his head he said, “There is never going to be happiness on this earth.”

But very calmly Narain replied, "Whether happiness has come on earth or not is being proved by life today. Man has always been making efforts to find happiness and he has also been quite successful at that."

Ammi brought the tea and we started having it. There was conversation about Narain's job for some time. Mockingly Moti said, "The conditions of people doing jobs in the big cities is quite bad. Poor fellows, how can they look after their parents and wives in a mere hundred or so rupees."

Narain just looked at Moti and remained silent. I said in a very soft tone, "Nowadays even wives are earning."

Moti's face turned absolutely pale. Narain stood up. I saw him to the door, humming a song, went to my room, picked up a book and began reading.

As soon as Narain left, Baba was at the window, wondering about something. But Moti had not taken off his gaze from me even for a single moment. I actually started pitying him. To comfort him a bit I said, "Moti, you must be getting bored sitting at home all the time."

He answered, "What do you think?"

"Had you ever given me a straight answer before that you will do so now?" I said it but I didn't like what I said. I knew that I had taken one step of sympathy towards and result was obvious in a moment, which was always the case. A woman shows some sympathy and the man gives it a different meaning and says, "Look, now I'm going to settle here in your house."

Moti got up from the cot and came and sat on the chair next to me. There was a book of poems on the table. I told him, "Moti, since you like poems, would you like to read this book?"

He took a deep breath and in a dramatic style said, "When there is live poetry before someone, why will he read poetry from the book?"

I handed the book to him and was going to help Ammi in cooking when Moti called me softly, "Sarla."

I turned and asked him, "You want to say something Moti?"

He smiled and said, "Why, now do I have to take permission from you to say something to you?"

My eyes popped out and I kept staring at his face.

He lowered his head and said, "Why are you asking me if I am getting bored sitting at home? Why then did you leave me alone?"



I waited for some time and said, "Moti, tomorrow is a holiday and we office colleagues are going for an excursion. You should also come. You will enjoy."

Saying this I quickly went off to help mom.

The next morning, as I got up and had started making preparations for the excursion, my friend Ratna came home with a frightened look in her eyes. Looking here and there, she said hesitantly, "Ruki's husband's marriage has been fixed with Nirmala. They will go to Ajmer the day after tomorrow to get married."

I abruptly stopped rolling out the puris. Ammi stopped drying her hair mid-way to listen to Ratna. When I told her what Ratna said, she started brushing her hair hard, saying in an agitated voice, "The rascals have become careless. There is nobody to stop them."

Ratna said, "As Ruki has got to know this, she has been crying and laughing together. I told her that since she is laughing so much, perhaps it is her own fault. On that She laughed even louder and told me, "So what? If the knife falls on the fruit, the fruit is cut. And if the fruit falls on the knife, even then it is cut."

Baba said, "If Ruki is crying and laughing together she will either go mad or will kill herself by consuming poison."

A kind of lightning struck my body and I said, "Why should she consume poison? Instead, why can't she get married again and show him?"

Baba said, "Did you hear Moti, new ways of thinking of the new generation?"

"But Baba, if there is no love between husband and wife, and if the husband marries again, the woman should not feel disappointed." Moti said.

I was furious and I said, "How very selfish...!"

"Stranger's life. Stranger's matters. How does it matter to you? Why are you so furious?" Ammi caught me by the arm.

I was very angry and I told Moti, "Why shouldn't the wife too get married again? Marriage is a relationship that is created between two human beings together. When one partner leaves, and the other is expected to remain back, chained and left to die in suffocation, is not any justification."

**Moti also answered angrily, “So, let the wives also go and remarry. Who is stopping them?”**

**I got up from the stool and facing Moti I said, “How nice it would be if you get married to a girl like Ruki.”**

**Moti did not utter a single word. But it seemed as if I had tied a rope around his neck. His eyes turned red and the nerves around his temples were visible. For the first time I saw a self-hatred in his eyes.**

**Baba said with a bitter face, “You are a child. A girl who is married once is considered used, like a food plate.”**

**“And what about a man who is married once?” Hearing this Moti started shaking and shivering and he tried to control that, but inspite of that he was unable to do so and his lips started trembling.**

**All this while Ratna, was sitting quietly, now got up to leave. Taking a deep breath, she said, “It is a strange matter. First one makes a woman helpless and then compels her to end her life struggling with that helplessness. Okay Sarla, please come tomorrow, after office, for the Ladies Wing meeting.”**

**Ratna went off but she left an image of Ruki in my eyes. Ruki had joined our office just six months back. She had an innocent and shy face which had been withered by sorrow and pain. She had just gathered herself only recently and she had started reading so much that it looked as if she is growing higher and deeper. Gradually, she had also started participating in discussions. But I was so sad to realise that she was always waiting with certainty that her husband would surely come to take her back. She would say, “I am absolutely innocent and when he will realise that I have been blamed only because I am simple then he will surely come. I too have not loved him any less. No man can reject such a deep love.”**

**But today, her trust must be shattered like glass pieces, hearing about her husband’s marriage!**

**“Oh, why don’t you get ready. Your mother has cooked everything. Get ready and take Moti too with you for the excursion.” Baba’s voice brought me out of these thoughts.**

**I was aware what was the reason behind Baba’s such large-heartedness. Inspite of this, I looked at him with questioning eyes. He said, “An educated daughter is like a son, we have to look after the guest also, isn’t it?”**

I remained sitting quietly. Getting fed up Ammi said, "This girl doesn't remember herself at all. Now that Ruki's husband is getting married, the blow is felt in our house."

I was very saddened by Ammi's such words. I said, "Ammi, all such cases are increasing by the day simply because a woman is not empathetic to another woman. Besides, I am a member of the Ladies Wing in which we discuss these problems and take some suitable action..."

Suppressing his laughter Baba said, "Are you listening Moti, Sarla has taken the responsibility of every woman's happiness. Now, an ant wants to carry a mountain on her back!"

"Baba, listen, this is not a laughing matter. If women come together to help each other, then much can be achieved."

I left for the excursion with Moti.

Excepting me, all my other friends had reached Juhu beach. Seeing Ruki amongst all the happy faces, my heart was sad. Embracing her I said, "Don't you feel sad Ruki."

She just looked at me. There was so much brightness in her eyes, almost a light in them! I had always perceived Ruki as a sweet and humble girl although she would always appear sad. But after yesterdays' shock, she had neither consumed poison nor had she gone mad; on the contrary she appeared quite conscious. Ruki had dipped into the ocean of sadness and come out as fresh and clear as one who dips in the Ganga and becomes pure. With a smile on her lips she said, "I am not being sad. After all, how much can one run after somebody. As long as there was hope, I had a fear of hopelessness. But yesterday's incident has crushed all my hopes. Now, I am neither happy nor unhappy. But yes, there is one disappointment, that atleast he could have come once and told me, "Domestic life, rituals and have bored me. Tell me how should we sail our life- boat through the waters so that our lives are spent peacefully."

"In reality, if your husband was capable of considering you an equal partner then why would he have left you in your parents' home for so many years? Those men who are actually capable, live a harmonious life even with an illiterate and domesticated wife." Narain said seriously.

"This is an extreme view." I don't know why Moti said this and everyone started looking at him. For a moment he too became nervous but gathering

himself he said, "If the wife is intellectually weaker than the husband, then it is just impossible to live a harmonious life with her."

Narain put his hand on Moti's shoulder and said, "Friend, where are the opportunities in our society for a woman's intellectual growth? It is the social system itself which is responsible for a woman's lack of intellectual growth where every individual does not get easy opportunities for growth. So, it is advisable that these mis-matched couples should try to get as much happiness from each other as possible and the social system needs to be changed for achieving more happiness."

'But, by then the husband's youth will have passed off.' Seeing Moti's selfishness, I felt ashamed of my guest. Till now, Gulab was sitting in deep thought. Listening to Moti's words, he calmly said, "If a man, especially the one who has intellectual capability, and who is a part of society, himself doesn't get the fruits of his efforts but if the future generations reaps the benefits, it is not wasted efforts..."

Moti failed at giving any answer. He just nodded his head saying, "Hmm" and started gazing at the sand far off.

For some time, there was a silence. Ruki was lost in some thought, resting her head on my shoulder.

Sheela said, "I am of the opinion that if a husband doesn't want to understand his wife and discards her, then the wife too should get married to another capable man and start a new life."

Ruki helplessly said, "Such women are labelled very loudly by our society, as unfaithful, fallen from grace and of shallow character."

"My heart is seething with anger on such shouts of the society." I held Ruki's hand and told her, "Ruki, the social beliefs and relationships are changing with times. During old times those women who opposed the system of *Sati* were considered a blot on the whole womankind. But today, every woman is an opposer of the Sati tradition. In this way a time will come when every woman will consider running after an unfaithful husband as madness."

Narain said, "You are right Sarla. We have left behind those times when a woman had no identity of her own, besides that of her husband. Now the values of life are changing. A woman is considered to have an identity of her own, one who has love for her work, one who is concerned about her

physical and spiritual progress. She is also a brick in the structure of the nation..."

"Yes, yes..." Pointing to Krishna, "She is also a brick in the structure of the nation.!" said Thakur.

Actually, Krishna had joined our office barely three to four months back. She was not interested in serious subjects. Even for the excursion she had come with full make-up of Kajal, powder and rouge. She was furious at this taunt from Thakur and though she did not say a word to Thakur, she gave him such a dirty look as if she was throwing burning coals at him. Then, lowering her head she went and sat down. Thakur went close to her and said, "Sorry Krishna, I was mistaken about you. One who gets furious at such small irregularities will one day surely notice so many irregularities around her."

I noticed that at that time Krishna had tears in her eyes but a gentle smile on her lips. The seriousness disappeared from the atmosphere. Everyone then got busy with light hearted chatting and roaming around.

It was evening when Moti said, "Saral, come, lets go for a walk." I looked at Narain and Moti between trembling lips, "Okay, Narain too can come."

But Narain was not the one to come.

I had to go with Moti. We went away quite far and sat down on the sand dune to take a break. Before us was the massive ocean spread out in vastness, almost touching the sky and disappearing, and behind us was the sandy beach and tall coconut trees.

For a long time, Moti tried to say something. Finally, in a sweet voice he said, "Siri, do you remember our college days? Bunking lectures, we would sit on the parapet of the lawns and watch the sky's reflection dancing in the water.?"

I said, "What is the use of reviving dead memories?"

"Why are you calling those memories dead which I have kept alive within me? How can I forget them?"

The wind had messed up my hair and as I was trying to sort my hair, Moti said something strange. "Siri, I think you should settle down in your own life."

I said, with my head lowered, "I'll do so."

But these words from me excited Moti. He moved very close and sat next to me. I picked up sand and kept throwing it around. He asked softly, "When?"

"Whenever he is ready."

As I said these words I felt as if I had crossed a big milestone. "But who is he?" Moti asked with the veins on his temples looking prominent.

I did not feel like answering him. I kept playing with the sand.

Moti asked in harsh voice, "Is he the one whose orders you follow?"

"Not 'order', his 'advice'..."

"Advice? Whose?"

My shyness sealed my lips. But as I looked up I saw that Moti's eyes were red, his forehead was perspiring and his entire body was trembling. I felt a strange confusion and hesitation and kept biting my nails.

Suddenly, bursting out in anger, Moti said, "Do you follow Narain's advice in everything?"

In spite of being surrounded by a circle of fear I calmly answered, "Yes."

"Then why did your dad say that your future is still uncertain?"

"Making a commitment is not just a word Moti! For people like us, a relationship is based on love and trust and there is nothing more necessary than that. All rituals and registrations become pale in front of the bond of love and trust."

"Don't be crazy. He has to look after his parents too. How will he take care of you?"

"I shall earn myself. Actually, in a marriage a good heart and good thoughts are of more importance Moti."

The tight nerves of his forehead and temples now relaxed as if the reins of a horse were loosened. He sat down with his head lowered for a while, like a gambler who had lost everything. I said, "You yourself had asked me why can't we not stay like the Stars and Moon?"

**Moti blocked his ears with both his hands. There was a complete silence after that as if the breeze too had stopped. Even the ocean waves looked lazy.**

**There was strange adamanance in my mind which would break at any moment and I would burst out crying. Fearing that, I got up on my feet. Looking at me waiting for him Moti said, “You go, I’ll come on my own.” I did not have the courage to look at him. Taking very quick steps I walked ahead and after a while I turn around. Moti was walking slowly on the sand, coming towards us.**

**I came and quickly met all my friends. As I approached Narain, I had tears in my eyes. Narain took my hand in his and asked, “Why? Is there any problem Siri?’**

**It was the first time that Narain had ever held my hand and I was really in trouble. At that moment I felt that even the great Wall of China would not have given me any support. As I reached home, I saw that Ammi and Baba were sitting in a worried condition. Seeing me, both shouted out the same question, “Where is Moti?”**

**I was surprised to see the worry in the eyes of getting their bread-winner married. “What did you tell him that he did not even stop for a minute? I called him so many times but he flew out like a storm.?”**

**I did not give them any answer. After such a long day, the night also grew very lengthy. I couldn’t sleep thinking about all the events of the entire day. I woke up in the morning hearing the argument between Ammi and Baba. They both seemed very angry. I was lazily getting ready for office when Ammi came and said in a rough tone, “Whose letter is this? Your Dad says it is from Jaipur. Which new friend have you in Jaipur now?”**

**“Jaipur?” I got up and read the letter and after that my head began swirling. Oh God! I had to see the darkness of the whole world on that day perhaps! I controlled myself and sat down on a chair. Baba asked me, “What is it?”**

**I simply handed over the letter to him. Reading the letter Baba too was shocked, but happily he told Ammi, “Do you know Moti who ran away yesterday? His wife is alive. She herself has written this letter to Sarla.”**

**Ammi also was shocked and came and sat on Baba’s cot. After much thought, she said, “I was actually very confused in my mind.”**

**“Oh, and he has a daughter too!”**

**The burden that I had seen on Ammi and Baba’s faces since last night had now disappeared. They both now began talking light-heartedly. But looking at the darkness hidden within man’s heart had given me so much trouble. What do I say!**

### **MOTI**

**“Can we not live like the Stars and the Moon?” These were my words but they mocked me in my face when were uttered by Sarla. I felt as if the waves of the ocean were laughing at me. I don’t how I reached home, broken like a falling Star from the sky. When I reached home, I asked my heart, “Whose house is it?” and my entire body became restless. I packed my bag and left the house. I heard so many calls from behind. Shokiram even came out to the door, holding his back with his hand, saying, “You look unwell Moti! Don’t go out. But, my dear, why have you taken your bag...”**

**“Oh Moti, where have you left Sarla? Why don’t you eat and then go?”**

**“Don’t go my dear, don’t go.”**

**But nobody could stop the boat that had been totally shattered. In all these calls I could hear only one call, “Please lighten the burden off our aged shoulders.” But how could a boat carry any burden when it was itself damaged by storms and was heading towards destruction? The entire surroundings were enveloped by darkness but I was moving ahead. Unaware...Without any direction!**

**The helplessness that comes from a purposeless life was slowly coming over me like a dark cloud. I kept walking ahead in the darkness. In this vast world with countless streets and innumerable houses, there was not a single place for me! There was not even three feet of earth that I could consider my own. There was a strange turbulence within my heart, something inside me was breaking into pieces. At every step I felt as if a small boat was bobbing up and down on countless waves of the ocean, and black clouds, like ghosts, kept approaching me from the horizon. Perhaps, any moment there would be**



a catastrophe and in the darkness this small boat would lose its way and get stuck in a whirlpool.

I continued walking forward with wide eyes which were throwing out fire. I tried to keep my eyes open with all my might but I did not realise when my eyes closed. My pain increased after that. When my eyes closed, my restlessness spread in my entire body and created great turmoil, just like the flow of the water which goes in all other directions when its flow is blocked. I don't know what happened after that. Once in a while when my eyes did open, I could only see a crowd of people. The sharp light was hurting me and everything was going around in circles with great speed. I don't know after how long the earth and sky were visible. I then sat up but my head was reeling and I lay down again. But whose house is this? How did I get here? I couldn't understand anything. Suddenly there was a smoke seen from the other side of the partition in the room, there was some sound like a small explosion, followed by the sound a stove being lit. In the dim light of a lantern, a male figure came on this side and throwing a match-box, murmured, "I don't know what good she finds in her parents' house?" I raised my hand a bit, the man jumped and came and embraced me. He lovingly caressed my forehead, cheeks and arms like a mother and said, "Moti, I am Ghanshyam...Ghanshyam...How are you feeling now? You are fine isn't it?"

Ghanshyam's love burnt a lamp in my dark world, just like a man who is woken up from a slumber in a moving train.

Ghanshyam and me grew up together. There was a common wall between our two homes and we shared the same terrace where we would fly kites. But after my Matriculation, I went to college and Ghanshyam went to his father's farm in the village. An old love was suddenly rekindled looking at Ghanshyam. Even after so many years there was no distance between us. Ghanshyam told me, "Friend, what have you done to yourself? Thank God Hotu, my neighbour's address was in your pocket, that he brought you here. It is good whatever happened. I found my good old friend. Anyway, I was so lonely since Jasoti has gone away to her parents' home."

"Jasoti! Who is Jasoti?"

"Oh, your sister-in-law, who else."

"Then why have you allowed her to go to her parents' house?" I asked.

**“My dear, you are really small-hearted. You haven’t even met her and you are saying this. She is a picture of love. She leaves crying from her, but she is also much loved in her parents’ home. They also deserve her company. In any case, everyone needs a change. I get too tired repairing broken car parts the whole day. My life feels very dry and one dimensional until I don’t see Jasoti and Rajan’s face on returning home. That way Jasoti too must be getting fed up of the same routine and same cooking every day”**

**“Ghanshyam, I can see that you love Jasoti so much that nothing about her disturbs you.”**

**“Telling you the truth Moti, especially when she goes away to her parents’ house, she appears to me as a person without any fault.”**

**“Is Jasoti also aware about how much you love her?”**

**“Now you are making a fool of me. You are married too and don’t you know that a wife somehow gets to know about her husband’s love for her.”**

**I took deep breath and grew silent. Ghanshyam was awake for quite some time and was perhaps missing Jasoti.**

**My heart just cried out. How I wish I too had a loving wife and we both would be living in a garden of love instead of my heart fluttering about here and there.**

**My restless nerves had become peaceful with two days of sleep and Ghanshyam’s love. One night he actually came and embraced me, saying in a wounded voice,” Moti, even the Stars in the sky are not so separated from each other as we Sindhis are from each other. If a star desires to speak to another star, it would do so by simply twinkling from far off, but we Sindhis have become lost in separation.”**

**Such talks of Ghanshyam would touch some truth inside in my heart. After a few days Jasoti too returned. The image had developed of Jasoti from Ghanshyam’s loving talks was far from what I saw in reality. She was absolutely a simple lady in a salwar-kurta. She was average in features and average, darkish skin...she appeared to me as Jamuna’s sister in many ways. But, in contrast to Jamuna, she had peaceful and contented eyes. Slowly I noticed that her loving care which she was showering on Rajan, Ghanshyam and neighbours started showering on me too. If she saw me sitting worried,**

she would say, "You should have brought your wife along too. I miss her so much."

I would ask her, "Have you ever seen my wife?"

"No"

"Then how do you miss her?"

"You are my husband's friend, so you are dear to us. How can we not miss wives of those who are dear to us?"

I would laugh loudly at such native wisdom sense.

I was now quite healthy but I still did not step out of the house often. Ghanshyam would get up in the morning and leave for the car-workshop. It was little Rajan in the house who would keep playing with me and seeing his mischief I often wondered how did I get so close to this tiny little fellow. I would tell Raju, "You are so mischievous that you have scratches on your arms and legs."

He would answer, "When you were small did nothing happen to you when you played?"

I had to answer to that.

His mother would tell him, "Raju, don't eat outside food. Have only home-made things."

He would tell her, "The grains and vegetables too come from the bazar, isn't it?"

I would ask Jasoti, "How has Raju become so smart? He is so sharp."

She would happily answer, "His father loves him so much, I dote on him and above that you are all the while carrying him on your shoulders...Then how will he not become mischievous?"

I would pick Rajan and kiss him and a unique sense of bliss would throw out all the restlessness from my life.

But slowly clouds began hovering over this happy life. Ghanshyam's behaviour become a little strange. When the head of a family is upset then everything in the house appears like a stranger, just like a wife finds everything useless if her husband is upset. I began feeling sad again. Jasoti sensed my condition and she would send Raju to me every time on some

pretext or the other. But now I didn't feel like playing with Raju too. I could not find any answer as to why Ghanshyam was angry with me. One day Jasoti told me, "If you are not able to leave this house and you are not able to withstand Ghanshyam's anger, then why don't you try and stay as a family member in this house?"

I was shocked, "Who says that I am not ready to stay as a family member here? I am so comfortable in your presence as if I am sitting in my sister Vindhri's house."

"What kind of a brother are you? You have never even given me any present so far? You can see how I am running on a tight budget. You are also aware of my husband's earnings." Saying this she went off towards the kitchen. Wiping her tears with her dupatta.

For a long time, I kept thinking about this simple and easy way of saying something.

When Ghanshyam returned in the night I told him, "I shall accompany you tomorrow to the city where I can try and do some odd jobs and earn some money to survive."

Ghanshyam's eyes grew bright and he lovingly said, "Very good."

That one sentence reduced much of the distance between us. But to put that "*Very Good*" into practice, much struggle had to be undergone.

I went job-hunting for many days and disappointment after disappointment weakened my body. My heart was already wounded and now the worry of getting a job shrunk it even more. At times, the thought of even ordinary things brought tears to my eyes.

Even then, I was grateful to have got a job at the Docks, of stamping numbers on the boxes that were unloaded from the ships.

On the morning of going to work, I was shocked to see my face in the mirror. My fruit-like cheeks, of which I was so proud, had now shrunk inside. My nerves were visible on my face. My eyes clearly belonged to someone who had recovered from a long illness. My sad face had turned into a frightened one. All the nerves on my hands and arms had become very visible. All this while worries had eaten into my body and now, I had put this body through hard labour. That thought filled my body with an energy.

The new job was not so difficult but I took few days to get adjusted to it. I was filled with joy to see the earnings of my hard work in my hands, at the end of the month. A few years back, such an amount was not sufficient even to make a suit for myself. But today this small amount was the result of a full month's carefree life. I went and gave the money to Jasoti. She took Rajan in her arms and moving around she said, "Look, your uncle has brought so much money. Now your aunt will come and so will a small Rajni like you..."

After that, Rajan would never leave my side. He started asking so many questions about Rajni (Kishori) that while answering him Kishori actually appeared in my eyes. But in contrast to Rajan, she appeared frightened, unhappy and quiet. A hazy picture behind her gradually went coming clearer. It was a picture of a frustrated and bitter woman whose each nerve on the face, was flowing with anger. Seeing me in deep thought Rajan ran away. But Kishori and Jamuna occupied my thoughts for a long time that night. I said, "Why are looking like this?"

"But I was not like this on the wedding night."

Before me stood Jamuna, a shy bride, dressed in pink clothes. I asked, "Why is my Kishori looking so withered?"

Giving me a sad look, she said, "Won't the children of a woman deprived of her husband's love look withered and dull?"

She was right and the other day Jasoti too was saying the same thing about Rajan being mischievous because he is loved by father, doted by mother and I also carry him all day...

Along with this such a terrible feeling came over me that I got fed up of myself. I put my hand over my eyes and forced myself to sleep to get rid of the picture of Jamuna carrying Kishori, but she was residing within my eyelids.

I felt a pain in the depths of my heart and became uneasy and thought, "How happy Ghanshyam and Jasoti are together. Is there not even a single such day of happiness in my life?"

My inner voice pinched me and asked, "Have you ever overlooked Jamuna's short-comings like Ghanshyam does?"

Overlook Jamuna's shortcoming! What am I thinking today? Feeling uncomfortable, I sat up but my thoughts would not leave me. How I wish I

too had a loving home! I imagined Jamuna sitting at the doorstep of a temple, burnt -out and withered, saying, "I have been sitting for so many years at your temple, waiting for your grace..."

To get out of my thoughts I got up and filled a glass of water to drink. Somehow, quietening my mind, I went off to sleep. When I went to work in the morning, I noticed there was a big commotion. One of the officers had insulted the labourers and they were furious. The labourers were saying, "Aren't we human beings like you? We too have self-respect."

The officer who had insulted them, said, "You can never become like us even in the next life."

The union secretary said, "If we get opportunities like you, we too can get educated and become more capable than you. It is circumstances that make human beings."

That day we couldn't work and I returned home early. Jasoti was sitting on the parapet, talking and joking with the neighbours. Looking at her laughing face I remembered, "Circumstances make human beings."

Perhaps if Jamuna had better circumstances, she too would have been lively like Jasoti.

I started playing with Raju but some confusion was on in my mind and I did not enjoy playing with the kid. I went off to sleep. The cool winter breeze was making me shiver. Somebody came and put a blanket on me. Slowly I felt warm and along with this I also felt a longing for the warm corner of my home. Memories of my past began troubling me. Suddenly a voice reached my ears. Jasoti came and said, "Brother, are you awake? See who has come." I sat up. Sarla pulled up a chair and came and sat next to me. We both were quiet. I couldn't look up and I simply kept staring at the label on the blanket. Jasoti stood by the table, waiting to hear something but neither of us could speak. Jasoti went to the compound to clean the rice.

"Why did you hide about Jamuna from me?"

I gave a jerk. When there is a sin that is deeply hidden in the heart then one begins to feel as if the whole world is talking about it when one hears it being mentioned by someone else. For a few seconds I was aghast. I said softly, "I had to speak these lies to get someone lovable."

Sarla became grim and shaking her shoulders she said, "I did not know that you are of this sort."

Finished! My heart was wounded. I may be fallen in the eyes of the world but I was not prepared to fall from grace, in this way, before Sarla. We both were quiet for a few minutes. My eyes were watering. Sarla said in a simple manner, "Getting married to one girl and having another in the heart may sound interesting in stories, but in real life it is the source of destruction. A true lover's heart is so vast that he feels the pain of others as own pain. And how could you not recognise Jamuna's pain even though she was so close to you?"

After waiting for a second, she took a deep breath and said, "Moti, Love is only one aspect of life even though many stories and poems are written on that. But should we forget the unwritten story of the relationship between a husband and wife which contains maximum happiness and which is lived by majority of the people? Cannot this short life be lived only on many other aspects, besides love?"

Till the time Siri was talking these things I felt myself being transported into some other world. At last she said, "Narain and me are going to take our first step into our new life on coming Sunday. I shall be very happy to see you and Jamuna happy in your lives before that. I consider Jamuna as my own sister. Even today, when I got to know about you from Hotu, I felt a deep longing for Jamuna and so I immediately came here."

The room had become dark now; Raju came running and in his childish manner said, "Tomorrow we are going to Poona for a wedding."

Sarla patted Rajan's cheek saying, "What a cute child he is" and got up to leave.

Jasoti brought in a lit lantern. Sarla told her good bye and left. I kept sitting, lost in my thoughts.

It was only when Jasoti came and asked, "Brother, are you okay? Come and have dinner." that I realised how long I had been sitting lost in my thoughts.

I couldn't sleep the entire night. In the morning Jasoti and Raju left for Poona.

Three days had passed by but it felt as I had just met Sarla. There was a turbulence in my mind but there was one more reason responsible for that.

That day, as I came home in the evening, I saw that Ghanshyam was making an omelette in the kitchen. I began clearing up the clutter in the house in order to help him out. While dusting the side-unit, I dropped a red bangle on the ground. It broke into two. At that moment Ghanshyam had just come out and placed two omelettes and bread on the table. As I was going to throw away the broken bangle pieces, Ghanshyam held my hand and said, "Let them be here till Jasoti returns." He put the two pieces on the unit. I was surprised and simply looked at him. Ghanshyam shyly said, "Come and eat now. You did enough of cleaning of the house."

The loving smile on his face filled me with surprise. "So much love for the wife!"

This small event brought about a very large circle of light in my heart. By the time it was morning I felt as if all of Jamuna's faults had been forgiven and also my heart was filled with a strange bliss.

The next day I money-ordered some cash to Jamuna. I believe that there is no true happiness in the world, but I can say that I felt such a true happiness that evening which only those people must have felt who have dared to give before receiving. For the first time in life I felt that there is so much joy in giving. Alas! I should have known this truth before!

There was still some darkness in the corner of my heart that I couldn't write even a few words in a letter to Jamuna. But the ladder of giving is such that once you take the first step, the other steps follow. I did not write a letter, but Jamuna got a letter written and sent it to me. The handwriting was that of her sister-in-law, and she wrote, "Jamuna is so very happy hearing from you. If you came here, all her sorrows will be over. Kishori looks at others' fathers and goes far away searching for her own dad." These three sentences shook me up.

Without any delay, I left for Jaipur. My past life began moving before me along with the speed of the train. Jamuna had entered my life filled with a spring in mind and body and ultimately she had handed me all the left over ornaments and without any complaints, excepting, "*Write me a letter,*" had left my life.

Her farewell words were echoing in my ears. I felt as if the speed of the train had lessened. When I asked the fellow passenger about the slow speed, he



winked at his companion and said mischievously, "Perhaps he is going home to his wife."

Yes, of course, I was going home to my wife. Wife! Today I suddenly found that word so sweet. Longing for the house in Jaipur, as I was entering Katla Mohalla, many neighbouring women came and stood at their doors. Ashamed of myself, I lowered my head and somehow climbed the stairs to my house. Kishori was in the courtyard, playing with the mud. Looking at me, she ran and hit behind her maternal aunt Sita. Sita told her, "Kishori, this is our dad."

She ran and caught hold of her mother. As I looked at Jamuna the earth beneath my feet shook. The flesh from her body had thinned out. The artificial bangles hung on her thin arms and she was just a skeleton of bones. I touched her forehead and said, "Jamuna" She looked at me without any expression. By evening her body had gathered some energy but the expression of hopelessness was apparent in her eyes.

Sita gave food to Kishori and me, took her belongings and left for her home, saying, "I'll come back in the morning."

All this while Kishori was looking at me with a terrorised gaze. Rajan was so close to Ghanshyam and my Rajni is so far from me. Kishori quietly went off to sleep and I went and sat besides Jamuna. I asked her, "How are you Jamuna?"

"Now I will die." A straight answer, like always. Even after saying such a thing, there was no expression in her eyes.

"No. Now how will you die?" I said.

"Really!?" There was suddenly a brightness in her eyes. I held her in my arms. She put her head on my chest and sat up again after a minute. She was breathing heavily. She slowly she took off my arms from around her. Once again, I embraced her.

"Don't embrace so tight."

Caressing her head, I said, "Just watch. Now you will be completely fine."

Even in the dim light of the lantern the smile on Jamuna's face was clear. But her eyes started shedding tears. I said, "Jamuna don't cry. Say whatever is in your heart."

**“To whom?”**

**“Me, crazy woman. Whom else?”**

**Jamuna put her weak arms around me and started sobbing bitterly.**

**Oh God. There was so much pain hidden in this skeleton of a body!**

**I told her, “Jamuna, I shall now love you with all my heart.”**

**She moved her arms and started sobbing bitterly and then raised her eyes and looking at the sincerity of my words and seeing her worn-out body she burst out crying again, as if saying, “This body is no longer capable of love!”**

**For a long time, she grew silent after crying a lot in my lap. Then, she hesitantly said, “Every evening I would go to the terrace and sit there. It was very breezy. The curtains on the mud-house opposite slowly went on being taken off. I used to think that in the same way each disappointed day would take away pieces of flesh from my chest. When the cough would echo inside my worn-out chest, I would feel the whole world as senseless and dull and I felt no interest in living anymore.”**

**I touched Jamuna’s chest with my hand. Her chest actually felt like pulled-down curtains from the wall of that building. I said, “Jamuna, you will surely get better.” And for along time I kept caressing her head. Slowly she fell asleep and I came and stood out in the verandah. There was a heart-rending silence in the atmosphere. The surrounding mud houses, under the Moon light, created a sense of lack in my being. A little away from the house I could see only an old wall that was standing only on sticks and there were some doors and windows in the middle. Even the shelves were missing from those structures. Tears flowed from my eyes.**

**Sita had put my bedding on a cot, a little away from Jamuna. I lay down for some time. I woke up a couple of times during the night on Jamuna’s coughing. The silent chest that had hidden all desires had now started speaking in a strange way and in the deep silence of the night that appeared very dangerous indeed!**

**At dawn when I woke up, Sita was sitting beside Jamuna and wiping her eyes. Seeing me, she went out and I went and sat next to Jamuna. She looked at me strangely, as if I was a stranger. Pointing at me she asked, “You have come?”**

**“Yes Jamuna, I have come.”**

**“I am leaving now.” After a moment she said, “I won’t ask for anything.”**

**“Don’t say that Jamuna. I have come to give you everything. I shall take you to Bombay...”**

**Jamuna’s eyes went towards Kishori sleeping a little distance away. “Yes, I shall take her too.”**

**Jamuna’s eyes now shrunk and there was a helpless smile on her face. She started looking at the ceiling. Suddenly she looked at me and asked, “Even Sarla will be there in Bombay?”**

**“Yes, Even Sarla will be there and her husband Narain be there too. Ghanshyam will be there. His wife Jasoti will also be there. There will be many loving couples who work with me at the docks. They are those people who learned to love and have a happy life. And I lost my life running after love...Oh you are crying Jamuna! Crazy woman...Now...”**

**Suddenly Jamuna vomited.**

**“Is it you mom? Yes, I am coming...I have vomited blood...be careful, your clothes may get dirty.”**

**Suddenly she stared at me questioningly.**

**“No Mom, I’m not coming...I’ve dreamt that he will surely come back...He will make me his queen...Then even the Moonlight will laugh...”**

**Tired, she threw her head on one side.**

**Shocked, I was thinking, “Jamuna also had dreams! She also loved the Moon light! Oh God, I was so proud in those days that only I could keep such sensitive emotions. Only I had dreams! Those dreams which were being shattered by this unintelligent and dumb Jamuna! My pride has now been shattered into bits...!**

**Sita came in and put Jamuna’s head on the pillow. She kept staring at Sita’s face as if she was a stranger to her. Sita exclaimed, “Oh God! Now her eyes have stopped recognising also!” She ran and brought Kishori, “At least recognise her my dear Jamuna. Kishori, fold your hands to mummy my dear.”**

**“What is this Jamuna? You have vomited blood!” I cleaned her face and made her lie on the bed. After two minutes Sita came and started reading the Holy book (Sukhmani) and put the holy water in her mouth.**

**“You may give me nectar Sita, but didn’t the doctor say that I should eat everything. So, bring some good food Sita! Now I shall get well soon.”**  
Sita was standing, leaning against the wall. Listening to Jamuna’s words, she covered her eyes with her dupatta and went out sobbing. Jamuna was looking towards the compound and licking her dry lips with her tongue. I put a spoonful of water in her mouth, but she continued staring at the compound. Slowly she said, **“There will be Moon light on this wall in the night. The Stars will shine in the sky...All will be alone...Lost like me...Kishori...Can you hear the train whistling...Your dad must be coming by this train...”**

**She heard the whistle of the train and then lost in her state she said, “Don’t sleep Kishori...Okay, go to sleep.... He won’t come...”**

**My heart was breaking inside. Oh, there was someone yearning this much for me! But is this all going to end in a few moments?**

**“Yes mom, Okay I am coming along...He will...Kishori...will take...wait...train...is...coming...”**

**Sita handed Kishori to me. I hugged the little life to my chest and told myself, “My sweet Rajani, I shall never separate you from me ever again.”**

**The sleepy Kishori, closing her frightened eyes, embraced me tightly.**

**The whole day Jamuna’s lifeless eyes kept moving about. Before the Moon came out, the life also went out from them. The eyes filled with life lost life before time. Sita burst out wailing. The Holy book (Sukhmani) was still in her hands. Kishori was shouting loudly but who knows what storms were brewing within my heart!**