

A gush of pungent juices surged forth, and it seemed to the woman on the sofa, who was asleep till a moment ago, that her viscera had exploded and spewed up small pieces of intestine, marinated in bile and coated with a froth of saliva. No longer did her formless, withered body need a change of position or hour to pass from one state of consciousness to another; she could lie awake and sit fast asleep, unaffected by diurnal variations. Teeth that were mostly in the process of rapid decay masticated the regurgitated food particles that had turned into pungent nuggets after an acid wash. Her wrinkled hand stroked the grey wisps of hair under her chin in deep contemplation. The question foremost in her mind was, how long would the wait for dinner be that night? Darkness had gathered outside the window long ago and the lights in the street had come on, casting the shadows of all who passed by on the scrubbed windowpane. It had been a dull evening; not many had passed that way and those who had, had not spoken much. On days such as this, of no activity and little conversation on the street, her mind came to be possessed with thoughts of food, and her brain conjured images of all the forbidden sweets she had not seen in years and now longed for more than ever before. Her mind went back to the question of dinner and made quick calculations to guess the lateness of the hour.

Telling the time from sound cues was a skill that she had honed with the passing years and her growing visual impairment: TV was one such aid that her agile mind put to use often – and accurately. Her sister-in-law was in the habit of winding up the kitchen work before settling her weight in front of the television. If all was on time, dinner was served, in TV parlance, before the serial slot. In case of a delay, which happened

SHORT STORY

Bua

○ Rashma Naveen



often, the wait was extended by a minimum of two hours or more depending on the soaps her sister-in-law wanted to watch. If only it were a 'nine o' clock dinner' today!

The oozing juices now gave way to gas, easing her stomach muscles and relieving her of abdominal distension. For a second time, she lifted her buttocks and merrily squeezed out some more gas and, in the same breath, thanked the gods for having provided human beings with alternative outlets. As girls, she and her sister would laugh till their stomachs hurt when their unsuspecting grandmother let out farts that smelt of rotten potatoes and could be heard from the neighbours' verandah all through the night and into the day. So, each time she squeezed

her stomach, she thought of her grandmother and said to herself, "It's all in the family."

The sinking sofa sank further and stank from the unrelenting onslaught of gas and body fluids. When her visibility had been better and her gait stable, she had been allowed, during the day, to occupy the furniture in the living room. But, ever since her eldest nephew's wife had refurnished the living room, a new law had been enforced forbidding her presence in an area meant to impress visitors. It was rumoured that the new sofa had cost a hefty sum and that the centre table was to be regarded by all as an *objet d' art*. Her failing eyesight did not, however, miss the ornately carved base that supported the glass top, on which stood a crystal bowl that

reflected light from the chandelier above, and at night her weary, almost blind eyes could clearly discern the luminous reflection of glass on glass. The colossal showcase, with an inhabited aquarium in the center, was lit as well, and the reflections of fish and crystal curios in the mirrors embedded at the back reminded her of the Taj Mahal with its mirrors and gems.

The sinking sofa in the farthest corner of her sister-in-law's bedroom had served as her bed for sixteen years and had been shifted as and when more people and furniture had to be accommodated. The finely carved sofa dated to the early forties when their father, a humble man with little means, had sighted it in the *burra bazaar* of Agra. He had found it difficult to resist the fine teak wood, with its Mughal period floral carving and intricately woven tapestry, and so the sofa came home. Their mother had scowled in disapproval at his extravagance, refusing to touch an ill-affordable fancy and preventing the children from going near it. Only when the fine upholstery had lost its sheen, and the guests had sat on it at least a hundred times, was it let open to the public. After three decades, destiny had brought her back to the sofa of her childhood. And now, for all purposes, the sofa was her only physical space in the world; it was her *karma sthala* where she performed all the activities of her day, from praying to combing her hair, to changing her clothes to eating, sleeping and daydreaming. The sofa had become accustomed to her form, and her body had taken the shape of the sofa; or so it seemed to her.

There were no complaints and grudges; she had taken enough beating, in a long widowhood of over two decades, to realise the worth of a roof over head and a sofa beneath. There was a time when life had seemed more pliable, or so she had believed in her youth, and, as is the

case with all young people, she too had fought over petty matters and had yearned for the trivial. It had been a long and trying journey from Pakistan to Agra to Delhi to Agra again and back to Delhi; a journey from a childhood lost in the Partition to a marriage that failed to produce children, to a husband who failed to provide for her after a life cut short by disease and penury, to siblings who failed her in times of distress. Over the years, her once loving siblings had drifted into the world of their own families, leaving her alone with the memories of a dead husband and a dog who had been dead even longer. Twenty years ago their loss had seemed unbearable, but now she knew there was a fate worse than being left alone – that of living on the crumbs of those who feed you unwillingly.

No house had wanted to part with a corner and no sibling wanted any claim on their affections, reducing her to the state of a derelict and unwanted heap of flesh. She had been taken into her elder brother's house on their aunt's intervention, and the sofa had been allotted to her as a mark of admittance into the family of three

young boys and their parents. Life slipped by and she learnt to take humiliation in stride, to live without staking any claim to matter, space or time. She stayed out of others' way, bathing, eating and defecating when the family was done with the space needed for these and other activities. But it had not come to her naturally, she had had to fight her sense of self, vanquish her pride and learn meekness. Much of the anger she had felt towards her brother was gone now, and bitterness had given way to a stoic acceptance of fate; to fight fate was foolish and to not believe in it a fallacy. Her brother had provided her with a roof, and to ask anything of him beyond that was to expect too much goodness of a man who had but little room for anyone beyond the microcosm of his family. So she lived on, chatting with her weary soul, for there was no one to lend her an ear, doing only what was required of her, paying little attention to all that was said and never retaliating, even by way of meek protest. Abuses and threats had broken her spirit. She had not taken recourse to death only because of her belief that death was God's handiwork with which no man





may interfere. The threat of being turned into the cold of the streets had not seemed as ugly and real as it did now after last month's attack when, in a fit of unprovoked rage, her domineering niece-in-law had attempted to choke her with crumpled newspapers. Persecution at the hands of the niece-in-law had the tacit approval of the eldest and the youngest nephews who were mute spectators to the episode, and was conveniently ignored by her own brother in the name of domestic peace. The harrowing attack had exposed to the hapless woman the friability of her faith in God and men. "One is as vile as the other," she would tell her soul at such times, and her heart shriveled further with each onslaught.

All that philosophical cant about 'the purpose of life' she found facile and foolish. People had to live because they were born; they were not born because they wanted to live. They lived in the belief that they were significant in the scheme of things and that their work was of great consequence to this earth and to mankind. They lived ignorant of the truth and smug in their false glory, never accepting that everything one did was as inconsequential as what one failed to do. If someone were to seek a reason for her existence, he would have seen little logic in continuing that life, whose yesterday blurred into today and whose tomorrow looked no different. She had trained her mind to stay clear of such

oppressive meditations, and to not think beyond the dinner *thali*. Earth was a chaotic place and to make sense of it one needed extreme faith or total nihilism; no work or love or rationalising could make sense out of a thing as senseless as life. The incessant, gory dance of life after death and death before life went on regardless of human actions; one worked and achieved to amuse oneself, to occupy life with activity, to keep the restive mind in check – perhaps to keep life itself alive. She had learnt to live a day at a time and to hope for nothing beyond the immediate, not even for death. She awaited it dispassionately, with no love for either life or death; death would come of its own accord, like the dinner *thali*.

Gases were beginning to rise again; it was the usual cycle of burps and farts. She wondered what was cooking for dinner, though she would get to eat it only tomorrow, when the young people of the house had had their fill of tonight's dish. Tonight she would eat the food that had been cooked yesterday or the day before, and her only wish was that it be served soon, for the moody niece-in-law was due to return anytime now. She feared the young woman's wrath and kept to her assigned territory and limits, speaking only in whispers when the elder *bahu* was home, lest she break the rule of speaking in a measured volume and pitch. The eldest *bahu* was pursuing a Ph.D. and the youngest unmarried nephew was swotting hard to clear an entrance exam of some sort, making it binding on their cohabitants to promote an environment congenial to these lofty career pursuits. The rules and prohibitions were all very well, she told herself, so long as she was fed and allowed to wait for death in peace. As if summarising her disconnected thoughts to an interlocutor, she muttered to herself,

"But for now I am hungry, we'll resume this talk of death and other matters after dinner."



"Wife, *bua* – rush, *bua's* fallen – hey quick, what's taking you so long, she's on the floor."

"Wait, man – I can't fly about the house – trouble on trouble, I say – now how did she fall, she was sitting fine when I left – a fine knack she has for falling, last year it was the arm, now I don't know what all is broken," said the wife who was breathless after a few yards' sprint from the kitchen to the bedroom. She looked at the perplexed man who was still seated on the other corner of the bed, looking, from a safe distance, at his sister, who had crashed to the ground. Deriving direction and courage from his wife's formidable presence, he rushed to the scene of the action and awaited instructions. The oversized woman looked intently at the trouble lying prostrate on the floor, and ran over the sequence of necessary actions in her mind, before rattling instructions to her husband.

"Hey, come over here and give me a hand – have to turn her over before anything else. I say, isn't she heavy?" The old man assumed his bewildered expression once again and lent a gingerly hand, looking less at the object being worked on and more at the TV screen. When *bua* was turned over, his wife performed her minutely thought-out sequence, and he looked as if he ought to have been anywhere but there. *Bua* was duly shaken, called by name, treated to a generous splash of water, and then her nostrils were teased a wee bit with, first, a newspaper and then a foul-smelling shoe.

"Listen, let's call the youngest, he will know better," the old man suggested to his wife who seemed on the verge of giving up. Touched to the quick, she pounced back on *bua* with more enthusiasm, taking her

pulse, pounding her chest and settling the matter of doctor, son and unnecessary expense in one breath.

“What will the poor chap do, he gets only one day off and that too is taken up by studies, let him be. I know enough medicine to treat your sister. The pulse is shifting – look, hold it, eh you don’t take the pulse like that, here feel the vein.”

The husband shrank back at the mention of the pulse and called out to their youngest son who had shut himself in his room to practice mock tests for his entrance exam. Presently, a young balding figure wearing a bewildered expression, similar to that of the older man, emerged from the adjacent room.

“Son, trouble – look *bua*’s on the floor – your mother says the pulse is racing, or, no, it’s shifting; come over here, you’ll get a better look,” the old man stepped aside with alacrity, passing the pulse over to the next generation. The weary young man held the limp wrist at an awkward angle and strained hard to do justice to the onerous task he was called upon to do. His brain felt clogged with mathematical questions and the pulse seemed like an unsolvable sum in an exam. His mother saw the vacuum in his mind spill over onto his boyish face, and her heart went out to her youngest child, who looked ill at ease with the problem he was posed.

“What’s up, son, you look worn out; leave this – sit for a while; in a minute I will make you some *sherbet*. Let me first sort this out – here give it to me,” she stretched her hand out for the pulse. The older man jumped anxiously to his son’s side and brushed his hand over his large forehead.

“You do look unwell child – come, sit down; listen, you make him something to drink first, I will call the doctor – son don’t stand, you may fall.”

“No – I’m alright, don’t fuss *ma* – dad is right – we should call the

doctor – looks like *bua*’s fainted or something, it’s best to call the doctor, how long will *didi* be?”

“What does *didi* know about *bua* – here give me a hand and lift her head, let me examine her – besides the doctor will take ages.” Another round of intensive examination, a closer look at the unflinching eyeballs covered with a film of cataract and the silence of the lungs in the still chest brought enlightenment to the self-proclaimed doctor.

“Listen, come over here – look isn’t she stiff, do you see now – I say, she’s gone, man. Here, look, her hand is clenched – I say, she’s dead, no doubt about it.” The old man bent over in acute discomfiture to look at what he loathed most of all; his senses were averse to all anomalies in the human body and death he found particularly revolting.

“You think so – check the pulse again and all that, these things are difficult to tell, maybe she’s unconscious. Did she have her dinner – remember what happened to that fellow who lived upstairs; I think her sugar’s fallen.”

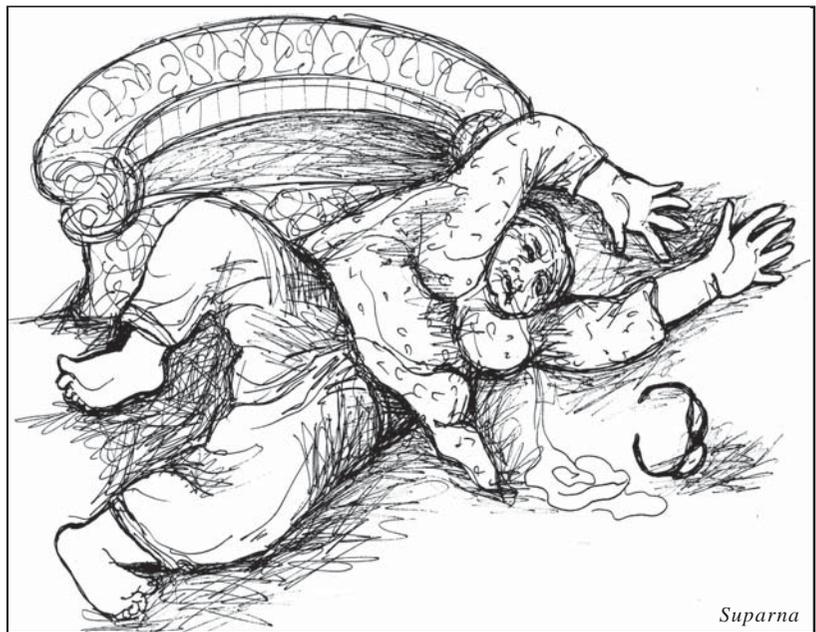
“Take my word for it, the doctor will only use some medical name,

that’s all – she’s as dead as a stone, here, look, the life’s passed out with her vomit, she’s gone, no doubt about that.”

The nonplussed man looked down at the mass of flesh lying limp and lifeless, awaiting its denouement. Still undecided about his lines, he looked in the younger man’s direction for prompting, but the uncertainty floating on the other’s dispassionate and bored features gave him little encouragement. Then he cast a quick, furtive glance at his wife who was seated by what looked like his dead sister.

“Anyhow we can’t burn her like that – call the doctor, son, and, listen, also try your brother’s mobile.”

The young man ran for his life; his mind felt numb from the overbearing pall that hung about the room and the call for activity came as a welcome respite from the gloomy surroundings. To his mind *bua*’s status of existence was an unsolved problem, and so he dialed earnestly for a solution; but when he got no response from the clinic, he was disheartened and wished his *didi* were there to solve it. Reading the look of disappointment in her son’s





features, his mother rushed to his side, and, much-relieved, the young man promptly disappeared into his books. His father followed close on his heels, lest he be left behind with the dead. He shut the door softly behind him and, as the door grated on its hinge, felt at safe distance from the sister whom he now believed to be dead.

Having assigned the task of fetching a doctor to her second son, the amply endowed woman got on with the unfinished work in the kitchen. The brother of the dead woman paced in the living room, feeling displaced and uneasy; quiet and inactivity seemed oppressive to his mind, and he tried not to address the question of his own longevity. This was first of his siblings, and also, rightly, the eldest one to die, and it was his turn next, if one were to follow the chronology of birth. That was distressing because he was younger by not more than a year. Before he realised it, he had made a dreadful mistake – the door he had shut stood ajar before him and beyond it was spread a revoltingly still body, with a face that belonged neither to his sister nor to him. Hastily he withdrew from the scene.

“Have you prepared some *sherbet* for the child yet – I think he has taken it badly, give him something first – is that his *thali*?” He talked so that he could hear his own voice and believe that he was still in the world of mortals.

“Oh no, this is *bua*'s – I was about to serve her when you called – *karma*, I say. You're right, the fellow's not

seen such a sight before, should I make you a drink as well – you look washed out yourself. Why don't you sit outside, it's hot in here, no respite from the heat this summer, we're into October already – what are you thinking – it's all for the best, they say – she was incapacitated, more or less, and I'm not young anymore – can barely manage the house. I'm grateful to God she went without much fuss; had she taken to bed I'd have had it – good for her, I say. Nobody sees my state, though – isn't that our car – oh, there comes madam – that's a lot of shopping; when I buy things it's extravagance and madam can do what she wants; my sons are henpecked fools. Go, open the door and tell them about *bua* – it's her doing, I tell you, and next she's going to try her black magic on me – there, they've pressed the bell – go take it before the youngest goes running to his *didi*.”

But the youngest had already flown from his nest and the living room was once again filled with human sounds. The old man cleared his throat to call the attention of the excitable occupants to himself and, when the desired effect had been produced, he briskly walked into the room of the dead.

“Here son, come look at what has become of *bua* – you too, *bahu*, come have a look,” and he lead the party to the spot. He walked looking straight ahead, his eyes fixed on the sofa behind the corpse, and, on reaching the dead woman, he stepped aside, inviting his eldest son and daughter-in-law to give their opinion.

“You go ahead, I can't make all this out,” said the first-born, handing the baton to his all-knowing wife. A face as round as the full moon beamed a smile at the corpse, and then, to do justice to the task assigned her, she sat on her haunches, screwed up her eyes and, staying way clear of the corpse, she looked for signs of life. At last she sighed in exasperation.

“I think they have a point, dear, though of course only a doctor can give the final verdict, but you ask me personally – I'm convinced,” she spoke with her chin turned up towards her husband

“Now didn't your mummy say that too – ask the little one here, this is not the first time, she's seen many a dead body before. And as for the doctor, he should be here soon, your mummy has organised it.” The father addressed the family at large.

While the family was passing a verdict on *bua*'s state of existence, the one with the authority to declare her dead arrived with the middle son and his English-speaking wife. She brushed past the gathered family, rattling the medical history of the dead aunt to the doctor who shook his head vigorously to keep up with the tempo of the talk. In a matter of minutes the stethoscope corroborated the collective diagnosis of the family and the cause of death was assigned the label of coronary thrombosis. The new arrivals departed under the pretext of dropping the doctor they had brought along, and the doctor, in the heat of an engaging conversation with the charming relatives of the deceased, almost forgot his customary sorries to what looked like a not-too-bereaved family. The door was closed on the corpse once more and the family stood in silence for a moment, feeling awkward and cramped in the lavish living room.

“I guess we will have to call up people and also do something about the body.” The clever daughter-in-law took the lead in the matter of the funeral.

“*Ma*, what if the body starts to putrefy – oughtn't we to place it on a slab of ice or something,” added the youngest son, whose mind worked better in the presence of his confident sister-in-law.

Quick to claim her hold over her slipping dominion, the mother-in-law

gainsaid her interlocutors. “Never mind the body, it will hold till the morrow, bodies don’t decay that fast, your *nanaji* lay for not a minute less than twenty four hours; besides, October is a good time for the dead – I’ve made dinner, you serve yourself, and as to calling up people, let’s first finalise the cremation time and all that, what’s there to tell on the



phone otherwise – let me sit down first.”

The daughter-in-law smirked, darted a quick glance at her husband – a glance that implied, “There goes your mother,” and then briskly walked into the kitchen. The doting brother-in-law followed, ostensibly to help her with dishing out the food and meaning to make up for his mother’s rebuff.

“Whose *thali* is this,” she called out from the kitchen to the woman who, having reclaimed lost ground, had now taken her seat by the telephone.

“Leave it alone – we’ll feed it to the cows tomorrow.”

“Why for the cows, *ma*?” the eldest son said in an offended voice.

“Your mother had served it for *bua* – but, you know, death doesn’t wait for anything,” said the old man, adding a dash of philosophy to quell the burgeoning strife between the women. The trick worked well; soon the family was in the throes of funeral plans. Dinner was eaten over a serious confabulation and, for the moment, authority rested with the eldest of the household.

“Dad, let’s not complicate things – we’ll take her to the grounds closest to home – you know, costs and all that – let’s not forget financials at any point and, *ma*, please don’t get into too many rituals; these *pandits* are out to fleece us – we’ll go strictly by the budget. I reckon the entire thing would cost us around ten – what do you say, dad,” – the eldest son broached the sensitive topic with trepidation, and, at the mention of finances, his wife promptly passed him a calculator and the notebook where expenses were entered. The daughter-in-law had maintained the family accounts for over three years now, and, of late, she had succeeded in taking over the control of the household expenditure from her mother-in-law. After a long wait and the devious plotting of five years, backed by a painstaking keeping of accounts and followed by cogent arguments that proved the mother-in-law an inefficient financial manager, she had succeeded in her plans. Authority changed hands as soon as money slipped out of one woman’s grip to the other’s, and, now, under no circumstance was she willing to compromise her position.

The insinuation was not lost on the father. “Ask your mother, son, she knows better than any of us; besides, there are certain rituals which cannot be bypassed, your mother has ample experience in these matters of the dead – one has to be careful you know, these matters are tricky, no slip is admissible in these things.”

“Don’t mind, Daddy *ji*, but you always misinterpret –

of course this is not our portfolio, but I also understand that in our religion there is a provision for alternatives, and, funeral or no funeral, the income stays the same. But, of course, with due respect to you and Mummy *ji*, we will only differ when it’s unavoidable.”

The old man looked sideways at the impassive face of his son and then darted a quick glance at his wife, who had straightened on the sofa and whose face was, by now, livid with rage. An altercation between the women in public would cause him to lose face, and the younger woman, who was in no mood to relent, knew it only too well. Also, he had little influence on his son, who, in turn, was sympathetic to his wife. When in service he had been infamous for his diplomatic shrewdness and this now was the hour to put his skills to the test. He turned one idea after another over in his mind and worked out a strategy to appease the warring factions.

“Er – I – well, I was thinking that, son, you should light the pyre. I’m tired of this circus anyway, ask your mother how many funerals I’ve had to lead, it’s time you took over;



besides, being the eldest son, you will have to perform our last rites too, mine and your mother's." The words produced the desired effect and, for a moment, no one spoke. The sons were touched and the younger woman planned her moment of glory. It was not lost on her that her husband had been crowned the heir of the family by the head in his lifetime, and, more than the coronation, the disappointment this pronouncement would cause the English-speaking *bahu* gave her great pleasure.

"Son, I've been wanting to bring it up for a while and today destiny has sprung this situation on us – it's time you took over in social matters. I would like it that way, I'm tired of attending weddings and funerals, we ought to retire now and – would that be too much of a burden, *bahu*?" He abruptly turned to the smug daughter-in-law, who was taken by surprise and called to respond without weighing her words.

"Er – I'm not the one to decide, but personally I agree with you Daddy *ji*, we cannot avoid our social responsibilities for too long. That the eldest son take over from his parents is the instruction of the scriptures, one ought not to go against it, I think. Of course it's up to him." Once again she thought of the younger daughter-in-law and smiled to herself.

"It is decided, then, and, yes, we will go to the grounds nearby, you're

right about the cost there, about the rest, I don't know – ask your mother."

In a single move the old man had bought peace without compromising his wife's authority. He was a consummate diplomat, who knew how to please the one without offending the other. The old woman understood little of the political manipulations that had transpired; she was again at centre-stage, and that was all that she cared for.

"But where's the white outfit, he can't be strutting around in flashy clothes! How many times have I told these boys to buy pajamas, but all they care for is shorts. Now how am I to arrange it overnight?" It was an earnest concern and an impediment to the proceedings, thought the *charge d'affaire*, and, from old habit, she discussed the problem at length, though the solution had already crystallised in her mind. To provide a solution without impressing the gravity of the problem on her hearers meant losing credit for foresightedness; so she elaborated on the importance of being prepared for all eventualities and quoted her own example and how, over time, she had learnt the merit of planning.

"Not to worry Mummy *ji*, I know this tailor who can stitch and deliver a dress in under an hour. I will see him early tomorrow morning, for I know where he lives, there will be no problem at all." The daughter-in-law smiled more than was necessary and made eyes at her husband who seemed preoccupied and rueful and also failed to understand his wife's excited state. The fact that her husband had missed the point only added to her excitement, and she waited eagerly for a private word with him.

"That is all very well, I know one such tailor myself, but the problem

is that none of you ever see the situation in its totality; you think there will be time to chase a damn pajama – there will be guests to look after, the body has to be made ready, and there are a thousand and one things to be bought – now you know why I stock rations, anyhow I don't run the household anymore, you can do what you want to." The old woman could not bear to lose a chance to voice her displeasure over the cutting of the expenses. Then, in a reconciliatory tone she added, "Anyhow, I must do my duty, I will pull out a white piece tomorrow first thing in the morning, you go to the tailor's – I'll see to the work here. And, I must add, we'll have to send for Mamta tomorrow, I can do only so much at my age, all of you will be out of the house and I'll have to take calls and cook and attend to guests and whatnot – I'll do what I can, the rest is up to you – all." The 'all' lagged a little behind the 'you', and it irked the eldest son because it made the insinuation even more obvious.

"That is shameful, *ma*, it's insulting – how can you even suggest it. We didn't throw her out to go begging for help in her hour of need. The slightest bit of trouble and you are willing to compromise on us. *Ma*, please, relax, I'm sure we can work out a better solution." When angry, he spoke fast, without pausing to breathe, and his nostrils puffed with emotion. The dilated nose was an indication to the family to accede to his wish. The old man looked at his wife in exasperation, and batted his eyelids that were weary from keeping awake too long and from focusing on all that was being said and implied by the occupants of the room. He longed for his glass of whisky; he wished his wife had not been so swayed by the occasion as to have forgotten his needs. The woman who had

caused the household ruffle was a maid his wife had taken into service, and whom the martinet daughter-in-law had dismissed a few months ago on charges of insolence in the presence of her betters. To mention her on this occasion was improper and provocative and had been caused by his wife's gross miscalculation of the limits of her authority. At times he wished his wife were either not so dumb-witted or less outspoken.

Domestic peace was restored once more and this time by an unexpected party. The quick-thinking daughter-in-law had foreseen that the following days would make heavy demands on her time; she also found menial chores despicably unworthy of her time, energy and attention. She had clearly charted out in her mind the role of the pleasant, attentive hostess she was to take on in the days to come. She knew the older woman was not exaggerating

about the enormous work at hand and that she was no further from truth than when she spoke of her own incapacities. She smiled again and, in all sweetness, addressed her offended husband.

"Dear, I think Mummy *ji* has a point here; look, we need help, there's no doubt about that, and to get in a new person would be very imprudent. Don't you see, we'll all be too busy to keep an eye on the helps – what do you say, I think we have no other option; besides;

Mamta works in perfect sync with Mummy *ji*. Listen, dear, let's not be stubborn; we need her and we'll have to forget her misbehaviour. It's only for a day, *na*, let it be." She winked at her grumpy husband, who did not quite understand the import of the gesture, but he could tell that she was up to something. He also reflected that he had raised the objection to the maid for her sake; it had been a preemptive move to avoid confrontation. Seeing her eager approval of the old woman's plan, he relented – and the family sighed in relief. As happens with most winks, eyes it was not



intended for sighted the wink as well; the father-in-law understood the signal better than the confidant. He turned it over in his mind and decided it to be a harmless, selfish manoeuvre; it would have no bearing on domestic affairs. By now, his eyes were heavy with sleep and he could scarcely keep them open; but his garrulous wife went interminably on with expostulations on the benefits of making arrangements in advance, of hiring a reliable maid, of keeping a pair of

white pajamas handy and of owning a well-stocked kitchen. The conversation grew tiresome and monotonous, and the most irrelevant of things were addressed at length, while urgent concerns fell by the wayside.

"These things can be tackled tomorrow; first book the cremation slot and finalise the list of things needed for the rites – and call up that pundit before he goes to bed, don't let's keep going in circles now. If the pundit has a programme fixed for tomorrow, we'll have to organise another joker in the morning," he addressed his wife with a hint of impatience in his voice.

"Yes, *Ma*, let's just fix the cremation time and inform *chachaji* and *choti bua*, I don't think others would like to be disturbed at this hour. And just fix the pundit; if he has something else on the agenda, ask him to cancel it – prevail on him, *ma*, insist and be firm." The eldest son took up a

tone of authority and urgency.

"You're right about that son, fix whatever you can, we'll have lots to do tomorrow. Do as he says," said the old man to his wife. "In fact, I'll make the calls myself early tomorrow morning – I'm too tired to call anyone at this moment. Keep that for tomorrow." The sound of the weariness in the father's voice raised an alarm and, for a minute, the youngest son forgot his exam, "Why, Daddy, where will you sleep – your room is..." His voice trailed



off, stopping short of recalling the self-evident. It had not occurred to the family that the old couple had been displaced from their room, for that night, by the dead. The father was disconcerted at the reminder and wished his son had not mentioned it at this hour, because it brought the ugly corpse back to him and was bound to interfere with his sleep. His wife thought of an alternative sleeping arrangement and made suggestions that were hurled aside by her eldest son, who was now riding the wave of authority. He found her ideas unintelligent and hypocritically self-effacing; they were all designs meant to shame him and his wife, he thought. He had come to perceive his mother as the perpetrator of all quarrels; it was always her petty schemes that caused consternation and anguish to his wife. He had seen his wife metamorphose from a carefree, happy girl to an anxious, querulous woman; their romance had lasted but a year. He loathed his mother for the damage she had caused his romantic life. He felt rather silly bringing mushy cards and making sentimental display of feeling to his wife who had lost the girlish eagerness with which to receive tokens of love. He sneaked a glance at her beaming face that had lost its appealing gauntness; there were no lines yet, but the face now had the severe look of a pedagogue. Not all had changed for the worse he noticed; to her credit,

her figure was not at fault – she walked, jogged, did yogic exercises and meditated in an obsessive manner. But the mouth he had kissed so passionately had lost its moistness and colour, it looked bearable only under lipstick. At times he thought it curled savagely into a malicious smile and that smile he found vulgar. She caught his eyes on her face and the mouth formed into a smile that was both sweet and mischievous. She spoke in what her father-in-law thought a saccharine voice, “Don’t you worry, I will borrow a cot from the Sharmas, you two shift the furniture to our bedroom and we can spread a cot in the hall for tonight; in any case we would have had to clear it in the morning. Mummy *ji*, you can all sleep inside and the little one can sleep here,” and she smiled at her brother-in-law, whose mouth relaxed into a grin of embarrassment, and he shifted his feet awkwardly.

“But mind the pantry, you two, and be careful with the glass table.” She found it difficult to contain her happiness and walked out briskly to laugh freely and tell the neighbours what had transpired on that fateful evening.

The room reverberated with activity and each took on some responsibility or other. The scheme that had taken two hours to hatch was carried out in less than half an hour. The pundit was fixed, the cremation slot booked, relatives were informed and the furniture was shifted in a planned, linear manner. Then, because the cot had not arrived, the family dispersed to work singly. The mother checked the provisions, the eldest son sat down to make a rough estimate, his younger brother feverishly returned to his mock test and the father strolled in the hall. At length the cot appeared with the happy borrower;

without any further talk, the beds were laid out and each took his pre-designated position, not before having reminded the rest of all the chores to be attended to next morning. One by one the lights of all the rooms went out and the house merged into the darkness of the night.



The neighbourhood was one big mass of black on that starry night, but for one window that twinkled in the darkness. It was the light in *bua's* room that had been left on to keep the spirits at bay. So, in her last night, *bua* had the room to herself and her body was not cramped on the narrow sofa. She lay sprawled on the floor and there was sufficient space for her to turn over if she wished to. Also, if she had felt the need to void her bladder, she would not have had to fumble in the darkness or trip over some slipper tossed aside in her way. It was the first time in sixteen years that she had had it so comfortable and quiet. “It is a pleasant night,” reflected the soul. It was beginning to get used to its bodiless state and could now reflect without any feeling. Death had caught *bua* unawares and had not seemed any closer than it had on any other evening, nor had she felt any terror or pain; it had been a smooth transition – smoother than life. Only the excitement that followed had deprived it of the quiet that a soul needs to ponder over its past. “What a vulgar way to treat a soul – ugh, such a frenzied family, always looking for excitement. Anyway there’s still some time before the drama begins – hmm, let me just sit for a while on this sofa and meditate on the life that’s passed.”

The author is a Delhi-based freelance screenplay writer. □