

## The Loss

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The steam engine emitted out a lot of smoke because of fresh feeding of the coal to the pit by the foreman, as he had to gear up for the gradient. Along with the smoke, very tiny particles of the un-burnt coal were diffused into the air, one of these found its way into the peeping eyes of Sohandeyi. These steam engines are almost extinct nowadays, being replaced by the diesel or the electric locomotives at other places, but for a few tracts like this, one- between Agra and Bayana, they still run on, as if to reassert the area's claim of clasping tightly to the past.

The compartment was packed, those who could not find a seat were sandwiched between the luggage up; comprising largely of huge bamboo baskets containing beetle leaves en-route to the nearby market of Agra. Yet there were others who could not simply make their way in and were now suspended in open air on the top of the train. Not all the passengers were human; there were a few goats, a couple of sheep and a small *Rathi* calf among them. A bicycle with its upper part tied firmly with a jute rope against the window bars hung freely in the air. The compartment was filled with noise, with foul odour: of human sweat and with *bidi* smoke. Sohandeyi looked into the crowd with empty eyes; there was a little commotion, a little hustle-bustle and something was thrown in, she giggled, it was the Ticket- *babu* who had allowed himself to be thrown in perhaps the only way to get himself an entry, but what was amusing was that he was wearing a helmet along with the black coat, others joined in the laughter. The Ticket- *babu* was embarrassed;

“You know these boys... they are pelting stones on the trains and buses, on us, on everything they think belong to the government.” The Ticket- *babu* tried out an explanation. “*Saabjee* the government is to be blamed for this, the Mandal Commission. Isn't it” Uttered, an elderly

looking, drowsy eyed man, in a dull white *kurta* and *dhoti*, with half part of his body on the edge of the wooden seat, and the other half hanging loosely over the floor. “*Saabjee* why blame the commission, these brats will not get anything.... Mandal or... no Mandal. “Another man joined in. The talk would have lasted long but for the approaching station, people started moving to the exit to get down and some to avoid the encounter with the Ticket- *babu*. Sohandeyi was amused by the funny appearance of the Ticket-*babu* and the subsequent conversation, her giggle went away with the departing Ticket-*babu*, yet a smile remained on the countenance. She was happy, much happy inside, fourteen long years she had waited and now the time has come. This was one of the journeys she took, to see the lady doctor in Agra, to ensure that no mistake is committed this time. She looked at Shyambabu squatting on the wooden seat, thoughtful, with a definite concern embossed on his face. This was her Shyam, she remembered the day when he had brought her to the house although she did not remember the year perhaps it was the year when the emergency was imposed upon the country. Then years passed on and she began losing him to somebody whom she never saw neither could she find the name of, although she chose to curse her to her heart’s content, particularly when Shyam did not come back home for the night.

Then came Laali, at this juncture, into her barren life, although begotten by her sister, Laali meant more to her than anybody else - vibrant and cheerful, so full of life, radiating such magnetic grace as would enchant Shyambabu to come back home direct after the work hours. It was through Laali, Sohandeyi thought that life had started to come back to her fold, and it was through her that she had reclaimed her long lost husband. Life was peaceful and worth living now and would have continued to have been so.

Then why did she take the decision when neither age nor her frail body permitted her? It wasn’t accidental either, but somewhere deep down in her subconscious was the submerged desire to be a mother in the ‘real’ sense of the term....

The train again jolted a little and stopped all of a sudden, people out of the doors, holding the supporting bars, to a maximum degree possible to know what had happened. There was no signal, no obstruction at the track, a few of them got down to find out and came back with their

prized discovery that some of the strayed cattle had ventured into an adjoining field owned by the driver, leaving him with no other option but to stop the train and drive the cattle out.

Laali could perceive the changes which had started to come into her little world, there was a distance that had emerged between her and *Amma*. Shyam, though not cold, had grown negligent to her little demands and queries. Though she too was curious and awaited the arrival of the baby, still her little mind inquired;

“Why so much care and anxiety for someone who has not even stepped out into this world?” She had her own plans of sharing her toys and would readily part with those, she thought, she was now a little grown up to play with., her tiny mind would not grasp the events that were happening in rapid succession but she did not like the way she was being pushed into insignificance. And it was precisely for this reason she had called upon Mania, her dear friend to discuss the issue.

Mania and Laali, just the two of them, sat on the bank of the river which flowed about half a mile to the east of the village, circumventing it and also marking its north-eastern boundaries. The river had no name, even in the revenue records it was marked as ‘the river’. It had been a seasonal river, often in spate during the monsoons, but the waters would recede in the autumn, leaving only a few dungeons harrowed to dig in *bajari*, with water. A few years back the river would hold water throughout the winters, but the greed to put that little bit of submerged land to cultivation led to opening of the bunds every year. Every year the river would bring in rich alluvium from the hills on which the herds of the village grazed the whole length of the year. If the river were to complain, it would definitely point out the neglect with which it was treated by the village dwellers. Laali would often go to the river, walk over the banks as if to share her moments of isolation with her. But today she had called upon Mania; maybe because the river never replies or perhaps she fails to understand what the murmur of these shallow waters say when stirred by the breeze. Both the girls sat under the shade of the *peepal* tree putting their small heads together:

“*Amma* is not good to me these days.” “Laali they are all, the same...you know when Bantu came. My mother did the same.”

“Does she love Bantu more?” “I don’t know! He goes to school, I do not. He gets more clothes and sweets and rarely gets a scolding- well if this is love.... then certainly yes.” “For how long will this continue Mania?” Asked the rebel in her, Mania grew thoughtful and answered: “I can’t be sure, may be when we get married our husbands would take care of us, send us to a good school and bring *mithai* daily.” Laali’s eyes grew wide in astonishment but receded again with a concern; “It would only be if we are able to give them a son.”

“So your family wants a son from you.... have you seen your condition...? where is your husband?” Yelled the gynecologist, she had a concern for her earnings but at the same time was not unmindful of the condition of her patient. Sohandeyi pointed towards the door and the two almost caught the eyes of Shyambabu trying to peep in through the chink.

“Call him in.”

The doctor told them that the matter was serious and immediate hospitalization was needed for a week at least. This meant, above all, an additional unforeseen expenditure. There was an urgent need to economize; to curtail certain household expenses, to resort to some borrowings. Therefore, they decided, among other things, that Laali shall not have the school anymore. The pace of events was too fast for Laali to recompose and to adjust to the new order of happenings; her little world was in a state of transition. She had already been battered by the lack of concern of the people, particularly those, who had been at one time so intimate to her. Now at this juncture this tidings was certainly unbearable; the school mattered a lot to her, in fact it was the only place which mattered now. It was the only place where she had responsive ears, where she could have things her own way. She would now shrink to corners, would deliberately keep away from people. Another month passed and things did not improve in the house, they rather got worse for her. She seemed to be possessed by an anxiety nursed by a fear; a fear which she could experience but could not put into words.

It was a very hot and humid day; the dark cluster of clouds had muffled the land below so firmly that the winds were brought to a standstill. It was pitch dark even an hour before the dusk. It was suffocating, and Sohandeyi sitting in the courtyard gasped for air, almost breathless she moved up to the stairs for the roof. The steps were too few and therefore too steep; she would climb very slowly holding against the bristly walls; stopping a while with each mount. One, two, three,

four..... and no more, she came back tumbling, rolling over the four steps she had so carefully climbed. A huge commotion erupted, everybody rushed in but it was too late.

“It was Laali.... she pushed me down....”

murmured Sohandeyi

“It was .....it was Laali...”

She groaned again.

“Nonsense, she has been here in front of me on this cot lying full asleep.”

Yelled Shyambabu, dismissing the allegation altogether. Others too, confirmed, but the immediate need for medical aid and frantic efforts to save the child subsumed the issue.

It is spring, the sky is clear, just a few clouds scattered here and there; the azure color of the dusky sky is matching with the color of Laali's *saree*. And the glitter of the *saree* matches the glitters in her heart. Her eyes drooping, her arms and feet laced with turmeric, she has had hardly any sleep these three days. It is difficult to surmise what kept her awake; the swarming relatives or the teeming anxieties. She is dozing, the eyes closes a while and reopens, ebbing and surging and in between is the tender interlude. The eyes have closed once again; she is half asleep but at the same time conscious that there is nobody else in the room at the moment. The women who had been here all the while moved out for the meal which was being served at the roof-top. She did not mind being left out all alone, rather she had craved for it. Laali's half-conscious mind visualizes a photograph which readily transforms, assumes the shape of a human face with trimmed mustache and a prominent mole emerging out from the bushy growth. The face is stern, but the expression changes. Now it is adorned with a smile. She wants to embrace the face, keeps it close to her bosom.... yet again it is transforming ..... the smile is all gone. It has started assuming a complex expression- of anger, of aversion, of inquisition- all in one.... She is startled... the face is no more that of a man but of a woman.... of...of... Sohandeyi.... she opens her eyes in disgust and there she beholds the sunken eyes of Sohandeyi digging into her. “Laali.... O... Laali ...tell me for heaven's sake...why did you do that.”

“I don't know Amma what you are talking about.... I do not remember anything...”

“But I do.... every bit of it....and shall continue to do so .....but remember I will never...never .... forgive you.... **Never.**”

The words resonate in her ears.... Her eyes wide open...she is looking into the empty space in dread...there is nobody around...absolutely nobody.

