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Pushkar Shamsheer

Sri Guruprasad Mainali

Balkrishna Sama

Sivakumar Rai

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## FOUR NEPALI SHORT STORIES

Introduced and Translated by  
Theodore Riccardi, Jr.

### Introduction

Modern Nepali literature has received very little attention from scholars in the West. There have been no studies, and only a few translations. One thinks immediately of Sandra Zeidenstein's translation of Parijat's Sirishko Phul, entitled Blue Mimosa, Greta Rana's White Tiger, a translation of Diamond Shamsher's Seto Bagh, and David Rubin's admirable translations of the poetry of Laksmi Prasad Devkota, entitled Nepali Visions, Nepali Dreams. Beyond these, there is very little. Why this should be so is not very clear, particularly when one thinks of how the study of Nepal has grown in Europe and America over the last thirty years. Part of the explanation I think lies in the general tendency of some literary scholars to revel in the past and the traditional only, to value the classical and the medieval text and to denigrate the modern as somehow less worthy of attention. By not reading and studying their literature we deny ourselves the chance to hear Nepalis engaged in dialogue among themselves.

The four stories translated here are a modest addition to the small corpus of modern Nepali literature now available in English translation. They were chosen from the Nepali Gadya Sangraha, an anthology of Nepali prose compiled by the late Pushkar Samsher Jang Bahadur Rana, he himself a leading critic and writer of Nepali and one of the writers represented here. The stories first appeared in literary reviews and were subsequently selected by Pushkar for inclusion in the anthology. The anthology is widely used and read in Nepal, and its contents are well known to literate and educated people.

I first began to read these stories with T.W. Clark in 1962 when I was a student at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. Clark knew Pushkar well, for Pushkar had spent several years working with him, first in Kathmandu and then in London, assisting with the materials that later became incorporated into Clark's Introduction to Nepali. I unfortunately did not get to meet Pushkar. He died shortly after his return to Kathmandu in 1960. His death was a personal loss to Clark, who spoke of him often with deep affection and respect.

The authors of these stories--Pushkar Shamsher, his younger brother, Balkrishna Sama, Guruprasad Mainali, and Sivakumar Rai--are not well known in the West. They are household names in Nepal, however, and their writings are known to almost every literate educated Nepali. They are among a handful of writers whose work forms the basis of Nepali prose fiction, and Nepali criticism is replete with studies and critical essays on their work. All of them were born and lived their formative years while the Ranas were in power in Nepal and the British in India. Much of their vision was formed under the oppression and isolation that the Ranas imposed in Nepal. Their choice of theme, their point of view was determined by this oppressive atmosphere, and the isolation from much of world literature. All were born in Nepal, except for Sivakumar, who is from Darjeeling.

Pushkar's Paribanda, "Circumstantial Evidence," is a carefully constructed story about Rane, a young Gurung, who is accused and presumably convicted of a crime that he did not commit. Lahure, a lodger in his house with whom he has quarreled over his wife, is murdered at night by an unknown intruder. Rane panics, flees, is captured, and brought before the bicari, the court official who will explain the case in court. The second half of the story is told almost entirely in the words of the bicari. The bicari is well aware of Rane's possible innocence, may even believe in it, but is constrained, as everybody else is, by paribanda, the circumstances that lead to Rane's untenable position, the 'no-exit' that his karma has preordained. It is also a story of karma, which is unavoidable, and human law, that, by necessity, can only follow what karma has preordained. On one level the story is about the inadequacy of the Nepali legal system and how it is powerless in the face of circumstantial evidence.

Naso, "The Ward," relates the story of a poor Brahman, made rich by his first marriage to Subhadra, who is unfortunately barren. He finally resorts to a second marriage to a much younger woman, who soon gives birth to a son. Subhadra, even though she has consented to a co-wife, is deeply troubled, and finally leaves the household to lead a life of penury. She eventually returns to find the household near ruin, the second wife near death. Finally, on her deathbed, the second wife delivers the child over to Subhadra, with the words, "Tapaiko naso," "I entrust him to you." Simple in outline, but emotionally overdrawn at times, the story touches on many themes that have been important in Nepali life: the overwhelming desire and need for male offspring, the plight of the barren woman, the tension between wife and co-wife, the uncertain position of each in a male dominated society, and the value of the wife to the success of the household.

Taltal, "Nicotine Fit," is the saga of an eight year old boy, Gopal, who has become addicted to cigarettes. It has no plot beyond the themes of a disobedient child, a loving mother, and a furious, cruel, but ultimately loving father. That young children smoke in Nepal is known to most of us who have spent anytime in the country, and I myself have seen toddlers trot after used cigarette butts thrown away by their parents. Still, the story, with its exaggerated and improbable imagery, and the violent attacks on the child by the father, force too great a sequence of disbelief. It has moments of humor, but ultimately I think it is an unsuccessful piece.

Dilliko Surmavala, "The Surmawalla of Delhi," the last of the stories, concerns two young boys who play hooky and go to India. It is simple, clearly told, and reflects one of the general themes of the Himalayas: the mistrust that mountain people have for the people of the plains; that mountain honesty, good will, and sincerity is of no use to them in the iniquitous society of the plains of India.

I knew personally only one of the four writers, Balkrishna Sama. I met him shortly after I arrived in Nepal in 1965, almost by accident. Shortly after my arrival in Kathmandu, I was living at the Hotel Panorama in Khica Pokhari. In those days, the Panorama was one of three or four hotels in which one could survive. I mentioned to the owner, Tej Ratna Tuladhar, that I had translated some Nepali short stories, including Taltal. He smiled and said that Balkrishna came to the hotel very often for tea, and that he would introduce me to him on the next occasion. A few days later, I was sitting with Sama, listening to his talk about Nepali literature and politics. I remember him clearly, etched in the golden sunlight of late afternoon a diminutive figure in a black topi and brown congress jacket, parking his bicycle in the hotel courtyard and, with umbrella in hand, walking solemnly into the hotel. He was delicate physically, and I remember his thin hands always fingering matches and cigarettes which he smoked incessantly, and I wondered how much autobiography was contained in the story. On our first meeting, he read the translation, slowly, quietly, with great deliberation. Finally, he looked up and nodded approvingly. It was good, he said, and faithful to the original.

Though I met him many times after that, I never got to know him well. A man of great ambiguities and ambivalences, he was already aware of his exalted position among Nepali writers and perhaps too cognizant of the critical acclaim that he had received to talk in anything but lofty terms divorced from reality. I too felt ambivalent when I met him. I had learned early on the story of how once democracy had come he had changed his name from Balkrishna Jang Bahadur Rana to Balkrishna "Sama," "Sama" being a pen name that means 'same,' 'equal,' to express his adherence to the principles of social equality espoused by the new democracy. Yet, it was he who denounced a young Brahman, Laksmi Nandan Chalise, to the Rana authorities for having written "napumsak ranaharu" ("effeminate Ranas") in a school paper. Chalise eventually died in prison, and Sama went on to become Nepal's most acclaimed writer and one of its most heavily criticized political opportunists. The last time I saw him, his face was staring out at me from a postage stamp that had been printed shortly after his death.

No translator can hope to convey all the beauty and the magic of the original language. This is particularly true of languages that are as far apart linguistically and culturally as English and Nepali. Nor do I think I have succeeded in capturing the different kinds of language employed. Pushkar and Sivakumar write in a colloquial, direct style, using words known as thet in Nepali, that is, "short colloquial," or "typical." It is the kind of Nepali in which people think and speak. Sama is filled with self-conscious rhetoric and exaggerated imagery. Both his and Mainali's language is highly Sanskritized. Despite the Sanskritization, however, Mainali's language is clear, powerful, and his style unmistakable. I remember once turning on Radio Nepal in the middle of a program. It was the reading of a short story, and though I had not read it, I knew immediately that the sonorous prose that I heard had to be that of Mainali.

If I have missed some of the beauty of the language, I have avoided, at least knowingly, changing the meaning or the structure set by the authors. Nothing has been re-written by the translator.

## Circumstantial Evidence

Pushkar Shamsher

Toward evening Rane and his wife, Seti, had gone to visit some close friends. There had been a lot to eat and drink so that when they returned home they did not bother to cook but sat in the garden simply passing the time until nightfall. It was just past their bedtime when they entered the house. Rane had been sullen and out of sorts, and Seti prodded him in an effort to make him speak.

"Back home we call this a dhikicvau. What do you call it?" "I don't know what they call it."

"They say it steals your hair, is that right?"

Picking up a shoe that was near by, Rane lifted it to kill the insect.

"Don't do it! Don't Do it!" cried Seti.

Rane did not listen and killed it with a blow.

"Hare Narayan, may his soul live in heaven! You just won't listen when I talk, will you? You'll pay dearly for this!"

"Whatever I'll have to pay, I'll pay."

"Shh. I hear a noise in the next room. There's someone in there with him, I think."

"He's probably brought a girl in with him just to make me angry."

\* \* \*

The sound of something heavy falling in the next room awakened Rane. A loud noise had already wakened Seti some time before. She had nudged Rane two or three times but had not been able to rouse him. She whispered to him that she heard something. The two sat up listening still half-asleep, but they heard nothing more. A narrow passage separated them from the next room so that it was difficult for them to hear. Rane lit a tuki, took his bhoto off a peg on the wall.

"What is that fool Lahure up to now?" he said, tying the string on his bhoto. He went toward the door. His wife stopped him.

"Isn't it enough that you've quarreled with him once already, Do you want to start another fight? It's all over now, don't go!"

"Oh, let me go. I'm just going to peek through the keyhole. After all, in our own house... Oh, who's that, I wonder?"

"Who? Who's there?"

"Whoever it was I couldn't see him well. Someone sneaked out of Lahure's room and ran away."

"A woman?"

"A man. I saw his topi. I think something's wrong."

The two of them went out into the courtyard and went toward Lahure's room. It was not very dark, but only after they got closer did they see that the door was wide open. Inside it was black as pitch. They listened intently for several moments, but heard nothing, not even the sound of someone sleeping. Rane was sure that Lahure was not there. He rushed back to his own room and returned with the tuki. By the dim light of the tuki he saw a huge pool of blood near the bed. Lahure, his body hacked up and bleeding, was lying on the floor at the head of the bed. There were khukuri wounds on his chin, throat and neck, but his head had not been severed. His eyes stared steadfastly into the void, and his head rolled aimlessly from side to side. Seti remembered now -- she had heard stroke-like noises a couple of times, but at the time it did not occur to her that they might be the blows of a khukuri. Rane picked up a pitcher and gave Lahure some water. A minute later Lahure

gasped and died. Rane had raised his head so that he could swallow more easily. He did not realize, however, that in doing so some splotches of blood had stained his clothes.

"My God! What a sin! I can't look at him! Who could have done it?" cried Seti as she held the lamp. Rane was silent.

After he had made sure that Lahure was dead, Rane got up from the floor and let out a deep sigh.

"Had I known the son of a bitch was going to die, I wouldn't have quarreled with him. Now what do we do?"

"Perhaps I should go next door and ..."

"No, I'll give the head-man the news."

"I can't stay here alone!"

"Go to Bhojraj's house. They're probably not sleeping yet."

Ran Bahadur Gurung -- that was his full name -- went to his room, got his topi and his coat. He was about to take his khukuri, but something came into his head and he left it where it was. He told Seti to close the doors of both rooms and then go. He then started off quickly for the head-man's house.

It was cloudy and there was no moonlight, but still there was enough light on the road to walk by. Rane heard none of the sounds of the night nor did he see the wonderful scene set before him. His full attention was focused on the man who had gone out of Lahure's room, but his effort was futile. He was just barely awake and his eyes were not functioning properly. The yellow spots of the matches and the tuki were dancing in front of his eyes when a man, whom he could not recognize, had suddenly stepped out of the shadows and disappeared.

Rane arrived at the head-man's house. He stood still for a minute. Another thought had occurred to him. Suppose the head-man suspected him of the murder and arrested him! Would the head-man believe that the murderer had escaped? As soon as he learned of the murder, why didn't Rane run shouting after him! Rane was supposedly a big husky fellow -- nothing would have prevented him from catching the murderer. Either he should have been able to identify the man or at least describe him. But the only witnesses that Rane was not the murderer were his wife, and God, who never speaks. Who would listen to Seti? It would be like asking the cat who stole the milk. And the most damaging thing of all -- who could have foreseen it -- that very afternoon, because of Seti, he had fought with Lahure and, in a fit of anger before all those who were trying to pull them apart, had shouted, "I'll kill you if it's the last thing I do -- I've only one life to lose!" They would be sure to remember it and talk about it. God! Why had he not had the sense to go after that man! He might have found him then! Now, it was too late.

Rane turned and took three or four quick steps. He stopped again. Slowly he shook his head in despair. He had not even crossed the foolish age of twenty-five. He had just turned twenty-two. His only way of salvation was to run to India. Seti's face flashed before his eyes -- his throat went dry. But love suddenly counted for little in the face of being captured. Now there was as much difference between his former and present selves as between earth and sky. Before he had thought himself an agent of the law going after the murderer. Now, in the eyes of others, he had become the murderer. Fearful forms surrounded him from all sides. He had been considered "number one" in courage. Now he would jump at the hoot of an owl. He began to run blindly. The further he ran, the deeper he dug his grave.

\* \* \*

The old state arbitrator of the third district of the Bharadari, Padmanidhi Lamichane, was a man with a wonderful knack for sifting the details of a case. He always spoke in a friendly and polite tone with litigants.

"Hey, Lal Bahadur! Bring in the prisoner. Rane, sit down, Babu. Well you're a real good-looking boy, aren't you?"

"Hajur, what's the use of being good-looking? It's good karma that one needs."

"Today your case will be heard by the Talukvala. Do you understand?"

"Yes. And how does it look?" asked Rane numbly.

"You haven't got a chance," said Lamichane, puckering his lips and shaking his head.

"One who takes poison should die from it, hajur, not one who hasn't," said Rane apathetically.

"That's true, but what's to be done? The other day, during your quarrel with Lahure, there were a lot of reliable witnesses who heard you say you wouldn't stop until you killed him. Your wife -- what's her name -- ah! -- Seti, she says the same thing. You say the opposite."

"But ---"

"Don't interrupt yet. Early on the night of the murder, in front of your house-- what's his name -- Kalca Newar, right? was walking home. He heard your wife cry out, 'Don't do it, don't do it' and then he heard 'May he live in heaven!' Seti admitted saying that. But she also said that you were trying to kill an insect. Who's going to believe that? And then you denied that it ever happened."

"I denied it at first because I was afraid, and then after..."

"Listen to me. If you lied to the authorities and you did commit the murder, how can you get out of it by denying it? You've made it easy for them. And then because Lahure attacked Seti, you were very angry with him. No one has said anybody else in the village had any ill-feeling toward Lahure. He seemed rich. He had a bundle of notes and some Indian rupees in his money box. But he wasn't killed for his money. Nothing was stolen. If you had gone straight to the headman and given him the news you might have had a chance. But Rane, you ruined everything by running away. As soon as somebody hears your case, he says, 'If he didn't do it, why did he run away?' I say it, the fellow over there says it. Who wouldn't say it?"

"Unfortunately, hajur, I lost my head. I didn't know I was running. When he was pulling Seti, I couldn't see anymore. I just went for him. I couldn't think, I was so mad. I didn't know whether to run or not, but that was the only mistake I made. They say you panic when you are afraid ..."

"Look, fellow. The thing they call circumstantial evidence is a mysterious thing."

At that moment an angreji baj in his apprenticeship came in and sat down. Lamichane, to impress him, started showing off.

"Circumstantial evidence will make a thief of a saint and a saint of a thief. Now before the hakim baja comes let me teach this apprentice a thing or two. In cases of rape and murder, eye-witnesses -- people who saw what actually happened -- are difficult to find. In cases where we do have witnesses, the majority of them can be bought off easily -- they are like dahiciura. The nature of evidence is changed by the circumstances. Circumstantial evidence is the main thing that the law enforcement officers have to rely on. Circumstantial evidence, Rane, you understand, creates a great impression in the minds of those who hear the case. It can be true or untrue, but there's no point in our considering it untrue. If the circumstances ensnare the accused then an acquittal is very difficult to obtain. Now, let's take your case. Let's say you didn't commit the murder, right? I'm only supposing, don't take me seriously. Among those trying to pull you away from Lahure when you were fighting was someone with criminal intent. It's not impossible that he heard Lahure had brought some money with him. He also heard you say that you wouldn't stop until you killed him. The evil idea came to him to kill Lahure, throw the blame on you, and get away with his money. Now, after you returned from your friend's house and while you were sitting in the garden, he went to Lahure and asked for lodging for the night. He might have even said something like, 'You don't know what might happen to you if you

sleep alone, especially in the house of someone who said that he'll kill you. Better let me sleep here with you.' Lahure was persuaded and let the murderer sleep there. Before you went to bed that night you might have heard them speaking. When the scoundrel, ... no, I forgot something ... but it's all right. Let's remember that your wife's words, 'Don't do it! Don't do it!' referred to an insect. Now the criminal thought you two were asleep, and after he was sure that Lahure was asleep, he got up and killed Lahure. But because he was afraid you might hear and recognize the full stroke of a khukuri, he couldn't kill him outright with one stroke. Therefore, he had to hit him a number of times. After Lahure stopped moving, he didn't think to sever the head. His goal was to open the money box and get away. But while he was trying to fit the key in the box, the dying Lahure fell off the bed. This made a loud noise, the criminal became confused, and when he heard sounds from your room, he panicked. He put the keys under Lahure's pillow and took to his heels and left the money behind. Then you -- a simple Gurung, got blood on your hands and on your patuka while you were giving him a drink of water. You would have washed it off, but you didn't notice it. You thought of going to the headman, but you didn't. You began to think that they would arrest you. Your heart began to beat quickly. You took it into your head to run and took to your heels. You didn't think of the outcome. After you were caught, you jumped to a wrong conclusion, -- God knows why -- you denied first this and then that. If you are innocent, it had to be this way, Rane, but what can you do? You are trapped by the circumstances. Moreover, you ran away and were trapped by your own evasive talk. Afterward, you admitted many things, but all you denied was the murder. Now what's left for you? If you had not run away, perhaps the court of first instance-- The Court of West Number Two -- would have become suspicious and would have undertaken an investigation of those who were present at your quarrel and who knows -- they might have uncovered something. If you bring this up now, they'll become only more suspicious."

Rane had been staring at the arbitrator silently, without emotion. Whatever effect his words had on him could not be discerned from his face. Whether because the arbitrator's words did not sink into his brain and he did not understand, or whether because each syllable had gone right down to the pit of his stomach, the tears that were trying to issue forth from his dry eyes could find no passage. They turned into sweat and came out in beads on his forehead. His lips moved two or three times. Perhaps he was repeating "circumstantial evidence."

"Cholera took everybody," mumbled Rane.

When the arbitrator had finished talking, Rane let out a long sigh. He fidgeted about, staring at the hard floor. There in one of the polished tiles he seemed to see the whole picture of his past life reflected back at him.

"We were a big family," he said, "except for me they all died -- why was I alone left untouched? To fall into this unlucky rotten mess -- this karma."



## The Ward

Sri Guruprasad Mainali

Although Cañcala Sri had visited his house, Deviraman was without children. He did everything. He constructed a gathering place for the villagers; he built a road; he lit votive lamps in Pasupatinath, and the year before he had the Harivamsa Purana read. Still, Subhadra could not conceive. In competition with his contemporaries, Deviraman would win on all counts-- wealth, strength, and wisdom. But as soon as he heard the word, "childless," his pride disintegrated and he was completely humiliated. He was old-fashioned and orthodox, and considered wealth without a son to be worthless.

Moreover, poor Subhadra was also sad. When she saw the women of the neighborhood playing with their children she too desired children. Because of her simple woman's nature, she wore amulets obtained from medicine men, made vows and pledges to the gods, went on pilgrimages to different shrines and worshipped, but if Fate is deaf, what can one do?

The astrologers advised Deviraman to marry again, but he could not remarry without Subhadra's consent. Subhadra was a woman totally devoted to her husband and until now she had never given him cause to worry. She fulfilled his every wish. The thought of the terrible poverty that he had endured before Subhadra became his bride kept dancing before his eyes, and they filled to the brim with tears when he remembered it. She had been his companion in joy and sorrow. The penniless Deviraman had been transformed into a wealthy man by her. How could he now be so ungrateful as to take a co-wife?

## 2

In the month of Phagun, the wind is so cold in the early morning that it almost pierces one's chest. Deviraman sat in the marriage pavilion, his new bride beside him. The priests were chanting Vedic hymns and pouring offerings into the sacrificial fire. Fate had made him a bridegroom again-- this time as a grown man. On such a day as this, he had taken the hand of Subhadra in accordance with the sacred rites. Today he was repeating the very same act without knowing whether or not he (really had) Subhadra's consent. He did not know whether good or evil would result from his decision. In taking an innocent twelve-year old girl for his wife, he was trying to build flimsy castles in the air. Perhaps for this reason, the cynics were saying that it was all a mirage and a false hope.

Whether because of some outer compulsion or inner desire, he went through with the full ceremony.

It was time for the bride to leave for her husband's house. As they place her in the dooly, the men of her family cried. The bride too burst out crying. To Deviraman this was very unpleasant. On the way, the members of his party told vulgar jokes and laughed without restraint, but in Deviraman's mind another troubling thought arose.

"Did Subhadra sincerely mean it when she advised me to do this?" he asked himself. If she did, then why did she turn her head away when she gave her consent? Did she give in because I insisted so much? Alas! How men overcome by desire force consent from others. How shameful! Is this a fitting reward for Subhadra's life-long service? "But what could I do? How am I at fault? According to the Hindu religion the way to heaven is barred to those without male offspring. It wasn't the longing for pleasure. I remarried because it was my duty to my religion."

With this kind of logic he tried to satisfy his troubled mind.

The wedding party neared Deviraman's house. The village neighbors, gathered in his courtyard, looked on with delight. Deviraman looked carefully at each one. When he did not see Subhadra in the crowd, he felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his chest. Deviraman seemed now like a little boy who has forgotten his lessons and is late for his

guru, or like a criminal who tries to hide when he sees someone who recognizes him. He hung back pretending that he wanted to talk to some neighbors. When he finally went inside he found that Subhadra had already greeted the bride and was paying the musicians and the dooly bearers. Deviraman was overjoyed.

"Subhadra is a goddess!" he thought to himself. "Why did I worry unnecessarily? Look, how frightened men are by their own actions!"

Deviraman talked with the guests so long that it was late when he got to his bedroom. A lamp of mustard oil was burning. The new bride was asleep on her bed beside his cot. Deviraman threw himself on the cot. He did not see Subhadra's bedding in its place. Subhadra's bedding had always been beside his cot. Without it there, the room where he had slept for so many years seemed strange to him. A moment later, Subhadra finished her household chores and entered the room. She began to massage his feet. This had been her daily duty and she had never missed even one day.

"Sanu, where is your bed?" asked Deviraman.

"It's in the next room."

"Why did you move it there?"

"Tomorrow is the Ekadasi and I shall bathe in the Gandaki.

"I'll sleep there also"

"No, I think it's better that you sleep here."

Deviraman was tired after his journey and he fell asleep at once. Putting her own quilt on the co-wife, Subhadra went into the next room. In the dim light of a flickering lamp, Nauli the servant girl was stitching leaf-dishes. Nauli had been Deviraman's servant for many years. She was about as old as Subhadra. In 1925, by the mercy of the late blessed Maharaj Chandra Samsheer Jang, she had been freed from serfdom. Because she had been a servant of the family for so many years, Deviraman had accepted no money for her. Although free to go, Nauli had not left the house. She had been Subhadra's friend and companion through all the vicissitudes of her life. God had given Nauli to Subhadra--a pitcher into which she could pour all her troubles. Between them there was an unbreakable bond of affection. While she was sewing the leaves, Nauli said:

"Bajai! Today is probably very unpleasant for you!"

"Why Nauli! Why do you speak that way? What is there to be unhappy about?"

"Even so a co-wife must pain your heart. Today you have had to leave your bed. Tomorrow-- who knows? --maybe you'll have to leave the house."

"If I have to, I will. What enjoyment and wealth is there for me here? I eat only a bellyful and I have to work day and night, and I am treated like a daughter-in-law anyway. Anyone will give me a mouthful if I do the mere work of a cook. But she seems to very simple. She bowed respectfully when she came in."

"She was probably told to, Bajai. Someday you'll say 'Nauli told me so.' It doesn't take much time to make something crooked out of something straight. She'll be leading the old man around by his pigtail in a few days."

"However it is, may God grant her a long tranquil life. May their life be fruitful in every way. If she has children, they will be obliged to participate in my funeral services and after. May I die in their embrace. This is the greatest satisfaction of all, Nauli."

Three or four years passed. One day, sitting in the sun, Subhadra was feeding a little boy some rice. The child Susil, for his part, was trying to catch the pigeons that were feeding in the courtyard. Taking a little bit of rice in her hand Subhadra would coax him saying, "Who will eat this? Who will eat this?" Susil would come running with his mouth open and Subhadra would put the food into his mouth, then the child would run back toward

the pigeons. The mute pigeons played happily with the boy. When Susil would go to catch them, the pigeons would run off a little and stop. Then, when he caught up with them, they would fly off a little way and, settling down, would begin to feed again. Hearing "Who will eat?" from Subhadra, Susil every now and then would come back and eat a few handfuls of rice.

Deviraman sat in a chair watching. The child's play gave him unbounded joy. He felt that his ancestors in Heaven were also watching the play of the little boy who was the hope of the family's future. He had always felt that there was great power in the unbroken line of ancestry. Now, Deviraman, who had been so desirous of offspring, finally got to see this day. But the changing ways of the world are peculiar and sometimes the Supreme Lord makes weepers out of those who smile.

One day Susil was playing near a mound of earth in which a sacred tulsi Plant was growing. From the porch in front of the house Laksmi, on one side, and Subhadra, on the other, stretched out their hands and shouted, "This way, Baby, this way." In an instant, Susil ran to Subhadra and embraced her. Subhadra's heart was filled with a pure love for the child. "My Raja," she said and kissed him.

Laksmi had given birth to Susil, but it was Subhadra who raised him. He never left Subhadra even for an instant. He called her "Mother" and his own mother he called "Dulahi" because everybody in the house called Laksmi, "Dulahi Bajai."

4

It was the month of Magh. The farmers had finished storing the harvest and were anxious to go on a pilgrimage. Deviraman also desired to make the journey. He said to himself, "If I do not make the pilgrimage while I still can walk, when will I make it? Men who have made money become blind, they put their wisdom and good sense into a niche and spend all their time trying to increase their wealth. The property of these boors can be stolen or burned up. My pilgrimages give me joy. If I can do it again, the sins of my descendants will drop away and I shall attain happiness in the next life."

With such thoughts in mind, Deviraman prepared to go on the pilgrimage. His idea was to go alone, but several old men and widows of the village planned to go also. In a flash Deviraman's courtyard was filled with an army of pilgrims with their baggage loaded on their shoulders. When she saw so many village women prepared to go, Laksmi insisted that she accompany him. But Susil grabbed Deviraman's coat and began to cry. Deviraman was unable to refuse him. In the end, he took them with him. In a moment, the swarm of pilgrims, like bees following their queen, started off behind Deviraman. But no one-- not even with one word --asked Subhadra if she wanted to go.

"He should have taken me on the pilgrimage instead of her," said Subhadra quietly to herself. "Whom do I have in this world" No son or daughter. She has plenty of time. She could have gone later. She is a woman who has given birth to a son; he could not refuse. I am helpless-- with nothing to hold onto and nothing to support me. Not one thought of me. Man warms himself only at a burning fire. Men have contempt for whomsoever the gods have deceived. How selfish the world is!" With these thoughts Subhadra remained alone for a long time crying.

From the time that Subhadra was twelve, she had cleaned his doorway (for good luck). This house was the dearest thing of all to her. She had carefully raised the animals from birth. This house, these animals, these trees were all the companions of the childless woman. Subhadra could not endure a moment's separation from them. Subhadra might have or might not have gone on the pilgrimage. Had she only been asked, her tears would have been wiped away. How much good a word can do when said at the right moment. Deviraman, ignorant of the soul's workings, did not know this.

Ill-feeling requires but a small seed. In time, it grows of its own accord into a terrible form. The pilgrimage proved to be such a seed in the life of Subhadra and Laksmi.

After the return from the pilgrimage frequent quarrels arose between the two. Subhadra answered sarcastically to any question Laksmi asked. This went on to the point that spats developed into quarrels whenever they spoke to each other. Deviraman kept quiet and merely listened. What should he do? Should he rebuke Laksmi? She was the mother of his son. But if he rebuked Subhadra he would be violating his religious duty and his conscience. He began to find that the enjoyment of worldly desires was turning sour. Now his power of persuasion was gone. A man's wisdom is useful in advising others, but not himself.

The daily household quarrels completely exhausted Subhadra's tender heart. Like a prisoner in a jail, she began to seek an opportunity to escape.

5

The intermittent hooting of an owl in the pitch black darkness made the night seem even more terrifying. A dog was barking in the next village. Innumerable stars seemed to twinkle and weep when they beheld the miserable lot of mankind on earth. Subhadra came out into the courtyard and looked up. From the immense sky, a shooting star glided swiftly downward and fell, but not being able to fall to earth it fell somewhere between earth and heaven and disappeared. She has seen this only once in her early childhood. She had asked her mother about it then. "These are the many gods of heaven who, because their merit has been used up, fall to earth," she replied.

"It's true," said Subhadra to herself, remembering this. "I too have fallen, like a god who had enjoyed his merit living in the sky for a few days. After they have used it up, they slip and fall from heaven. Through hunger, thirst, pain, and suffering we become pale and weak and fall right down into the earth. We fall-- and those who remain, hungry, thirsty, and suffering, see our terrible form. The gods, because they enjoy merit, do not fall on this sinful earth; they disappear between the sky and earth. This is the only difference between men and gods."

Subhadra held a bundle under her arm. Though the night was dark, she had hidden it under her shawl so that no one would see it. This bundle held all she had now in the world to sustain her. How can such grandiose hopes ever be confined in such a small place. O God! Why do you let men hang on to hope like this? Lord! Instead of hope, if you gave them a little comfort, how close to happiness these poor humans would be.

With tear filled eyes she paused, and offering a final Namaskar to her beloved home, she disappeared into the darkness. No one save the ever vigilant and wise guardians of the world saw her pathetic departure.

6

Around Pasupatinath Temple there wasn't room enough even to put a sesame seed. The crowd was so thick with people scattering sadmi that no one could get through. Suddenly, Nauli, her eyes filling with tears, caught sight of Subhadra near the west gate.

"Oh! You have become so thin," she cried running up to her. Nobody would recognize you. After so short a time I didn't know who you were myself. In a little while I might not recognize you at all. Where are you living?"

"Here at Gaurighat, at my aunt's."

"You left in the middle of the night without any money. We didn't even know. How have you managed for so many days?"

My aunt gets a government pension and the two of us have lived off it. What's the news back home, Nauli?"

"Bajai, what shall I say about what's going on at home, just thinking about it brings tears to my eyes. For the last six months Dulahi Bajai has been ill."

"What is it?" asked Subhadra very anxiously.

"She has a fever. 'Her chest hurts,' she says. She coughs all night. We summoned the military 'doctor' from Gorkha. He said it was something like "thaisi" or "khaksi"-- I can't remember exactly --but it's very bad. She is so thin-- only skin and bone. She has to be carried in and out."

"And how is the little boy?"

"How could he be? He has boils all over his body. It's not possible to rub oil on him. He always thinks of you and asks when his Ama is coming back."

"And who does the cooking?"

"Sometimes your husband cooks himself sometimes he goes to bed after eating only a few bits and pieces. One day I saw him sitting on the verandah, alone, crying, 'That cursed woman has destroyed the home she built herself.' That's what he kept muttering. What should I say, Bajai? The animals have become skin and bone. The fields and gardens are now let out on a half share to others. He's in debt and the jute doesn't bring in a single pice, the servants don't stay more than a couple of days-- everything is in confusion."

Subhadra was deeply grieved by Nauli's words. "This is like cutting the nose of one's husband because of anger at the co-wife," she said to herself. "She was young. It was natural for her to think of good food and wearing nice clothes. I should not have been upset because she was eating well and dressing well. So what if he took her on the pilgrimage? When he returned I should have gone with a another friend. It's true that she spoke sarcastically at times and it was natural for her to be quarrelsome-- it's natural for even a mother and daughter to quarrel when they live together. When I found that we couldn't live in the same house, I should have put up a hut for myself. I have been foolish. What can the neighbors be saying? I gave up all my possessions and am living here on one meal a day. If anything happens to her what will become of the little boy? What must his father be saying? I have been hurt, but it was his mother who hurt me. What did the little boy do wrong? It was difficult for my husband to cook a meal now and then. Now how can he cook every day with things as they are? Subhadra's heart ached with pain, and she said tearfully,

"Nauli, and you too have left them at such a time!"

"Bajai, all my life I have had to live as someone's slave. I asked the Master for twenty days off so that I could offer a four-fold sacrifice.

"With whom did you come?"

"With the wife of Ratmata Bhandari Pandit."

"When will you return?"

"Tomorrow morning. Please Mistress, let's go home together. Without you, the Master will lose everything."

7

As she lay on a filthy bed, Laksmi marked off her remaining hours. Deviraman sat at the head of the bed and from time to time gave her water from a spoon. The little boy Susil sat nearby watching his mother dying.

Laksmi looked at her son's face from time to time and wept. In the weak light of the dim lamp the sick room looked like a crematorium. Just then, opening the door Nauli bowed before Deviraman. Seeing Nauli, his grief abated somewhat.

"When did you arrive from Nepal, Nauli?"

"Master, I have just come. How is Dulahi?"

"Her strength is ebbing and she is about to die."

"Master, if the mistress were here now, everything would be all right. I asked her to return, but she would not come."

"Did you meet her?"

"I met her near Pasupatinath."

"How was she?"

"Pitiful-- very thin with dirty clothes."

"Where is she staying?"

"At Gaurighat with her aunt. She said her aunt receives a pension from the government and that they both manage on it."

"Did she remember us?"

"She asked. I told her everything. She was surprised that I too had left at such a time."

Tears flowed from Deviraman's eyes. He said to himself, "She was the mistress of so much here and now she lives in Nepal with hardly enough to eat. Pitiful-- emaciated, in dirty rags. My God, O Lord, I am a sinner, a thousand curses on my life. Subhadra is my grhalaksmi. Since she went away, we have been surrounded by clouds of misfortune. Even if she has no feeling for us, she ought to think of the boy, but she has driven everyone completely out of her mind. Nauli, now that you have returned, look after the house. I'm going to Nepal in the morning." Deviraman wept bitterly.

At that moment, Subhadra entered the room. Although wretched, gaunt, and in filthy clothes, her face shone with unlimited compassion and tranquility. Seeing his wife's wretched state, Deviraman was crushed. Covering his face with his hands he sobbed. Subhadra prostrated herself before her husband and then sat at the head of Laksmi's bed.

"Oh, Bajai has returned," said Nauli.

Hearing Nauli's voice, Laksmi opened her eyes and saw Subhadra seated at the head of the bed.

"Didi, I have been hanging on to life just to have a glimpse of you," she said in a weak and halting voice.

Subhadra forgot all her grievances when she heard Laksmi's words.

"Dear husband, I have neglected my baby."

Pointing to Subhadra's breast, Laksmi said, "There is a great wound there."

"It's better now, sister," said Subhadra tearfully, "nothing is left there. Not even a mark as big as a sesame seed."

Then Laksmi put Susil's hand in Subhadra's lap and said, "I put him into your safe keeping."

Clasping the boy to her, Subhadra sobbed. This was a time she would remember and weep over for the rest of her life.

Like a dying flame, Laksmi's face brightened for an instant. Then darkness! Laksmi departed this sorrowful hollow world and was gone. They all wept bitterly.

## Nicotine Fit

Balkrishna Sama

Tara came running down the stairs.

"Why, there's nothing here!"

"Look around, idiot!" said Narayan excitedly.

He descended so quickly that the sound of the successive steps merged into one.

"Gopal! Hey Gopal!" shouted Tara, knocking on the door of the room leading off from the landing. It was locked.

"Gopal! Babu!" yelled Narayan Prasad even more loudly.

"Yes?"

Gopal's small voice came through the crack in the door.

"Open the door at once. You naughty boy."

"Don't threaten him. The poor little thing is probably playing."

"Did he throw paper into the fire?"

Gopal puffed quickly on a paper cigarette that he had made himself and threw the butt into the fire. He would have thrown that piece away whether or not his parents had come. When they entered the room they smelled the odor of burning paper even more.

"What a baby," said Narayan, chucking his son's chin, "he was playing so hard he didn't even realize that the paper has fallen into the fire."

"You can call it playing if you want to, but I don't like the way he's been carrying on nowadays. He's eight years old, but when it comes to sense, he hasn't ... What kind of a game is this with the door always closed? I've had enough of it."

Gopal extricated himself from his father's embrace and ran outside.

"Nowadays he won't spend even a minute with us."

"Let him go and play. Remember when we were young."

Gopal, already far away, was heard shouting happily and as shrilly as a peacock.

"Remember when we were young," said Tara nostalgically.

Night fell, the lights were put out, and soon everyone was in bed. Tara was not yet asleep. She closed her eyes and remembered the time she had fever and stole the achar that her grandmother had made. Suddenly she heard a noise. She opened her eyes. A match was burning. She saw a yellow moon rising, as it were, from the mountain formed by two small hands. The tip of a nose was lit up and so was the area under two round cheeks. There was a shadow on the side of the nose, but the face was not hidden -- she knew it was that naughty Gopal. The moon was suddenly hidden in a cloud of smoke and mist. Only a star remained. At one moment, it twinkled brightly, at another it was dim. The cloud grew larger and larger, and she realized that it was a cigarette.

Tara, seeing her son's attempt to act like a man, smiled a little. She was a bit worried about this bad habit, but somewhat pleased that 'yesterday's egg had become a chicken today' and was now flying. Suddenly imagining what would happen if her husband found out, she became a bit frightened, and for no reason at all, began to cry.

Narayan suddenly awoke. He jumped out of bed, lit a lamp and looked toward his son.

"Gopal?"

Gopal snickered, and did not throw the cigarette away.

"You wretch! No good! Who taught you that? Throw it away!"

Gopal held on to it. Narayan leapt at him. Gopal hid the cigarette behind him. His father snatched it from him and threw it into the spittoon. Gopal stretched out his neck and looked into the spittoon. Narayan slapped his cheek hard, pulled his hair, gave him a blow on the seat of his pants and pulled him back. Gopal screamed loudly, rolling about and began to cry. Then Tara saw that it was not a dream but real. She got out of bed. The quarreling lasted through the night.

The next day the mother and her son were seated around a brazier. Gopal wanted to go soaring skyward like a paper kite -- right into a cloud, a cloud of cigarette smoke. Tara began to reel him in slowly so as not to break the string of filial love.

"Tell me, who taught you?"

"I learned myself."

"That can't be, you can't fool me. Tell me."

"I saw father smoking."

"So you smoke because father smokes," said Tara, after a pause. "Father is a big man. After you grow up, who will say anything if you smoke?"

Gopal frowned peevishly.

"When did you start smoking" asked Tara again.

"A long time ago."

"How long is that? When? How did you get them?"

"First I made them from paper, then a few days ago, I took father's --"

"Thief! Did you like them?"

"Yes."

As soon as that "yes" fell into the middle of the lake of Tara's mind, it caused a wave to spread, but when it penetrated to the bottom the surface was calm again.

"Children should not smoke, your insides will rot. So don't smoke, all night?"

With a distant look in his eyes, Gopal nodded. Tara began to take potatoes out of the fire with tongs. Gopal ran outside.

In an inner room, Narayan Prasad was speaking with Harikrishna.

Harikrishna-- "You understand, nothing is as great as learning."

Narayan Prasad -- "I don't know much about it. Look, I'll give you the money and I want you to order all those twenty-four books for Gopal. Whatever it comes to --"

Harikrishna -- "I'll order them tomorrow, all right?"

Narayan Prasad -- "I want to make a man of him."

"Your son is intelligent; nothing's impossible for him. He must be taught our sastras. Even Western scholars are deeply interested in them nowadays."

"That reminds me. For several days I've wanted to ask you -- why do our rsis and munis have the custom of wearing the tika?"

"Aha! The reason for this is clear. Listen. If too much sun falls on the base of the skull, a man could possibly die, right?"

"That's right."

"Therefore, even bald men have thick hair near there. Heat penetrates less through black, right?"

"But old men have white hair --"

"Heat and warmth are necessary to the old."

"Nowadays they cut the hair in the back, don't they?"

"Mind you, nowadays they wear a hat that extends down low in the back."

"True! True! Go on!"

"Now observe. The thread of our intelligence lies where? Right between the eyebrows -- you know that intelligence increases when the brain is cool."

"Right! Right!"

"Good. Now you have the key. Open the way for yourself. The sandal wood mark of Pasupatinath is used to keep cool the nerve of intelligence that runs down the middle of our foreheads. The Vaishnavas wear a black tilak straight to the top. Heat can't penetrate it. We Nepalis cover the tops of our foreheads with a black topi and we wear a black tilak below. Even the English wear black bands on their hats."

"What about the red tilaks then? Are they only for decoration?"



"Dear me. You are too lazy to think a little."

"Sarasvati has revealed herself to you and that is why such thoughts come to you."

"Go into a photographic dark room."

"Ah, yes, there are red lights."

"And now? What do you see? Black is the remedy for heat, red for light. At the same time, they are caste signs."

"Well! How about this ancient civilization of ours!" But when will Gopal begin to learn about it?"

"Our forefathers were not idiots, you know."

Narayan, amazed by what he had been saying, smiled foolishly. Harikrisna was laughing so hard at convincing his friend that his head bobbed up and down like a boat on rough water. Just then, the potatoes were done and Tara called to Gopal. Narayan and Harikrishna went outside.

"Your son is smoking a cigarette butt that I threw out the window," said Narayan to Tara. "How will a boy like that be able to study? He doesn't listen no matter what he is told. Go out and get him. I'm going to beat him."

"What's the use of beating him?" said Harikrisna. "You can't ask others to stop when you continue to do it yourself. You still smoke yourself and you expect him to obey! All children are like that. Nowadays, as soon as the umbilical cord is cut, instead of the breast, they suck on cigarettes."

Gopal continued to puff, blowing rings of smoke upwards.

There was a cool breeze and Tara had closed the glass window even though the sun was shining. She was rubbing oil on her son. Gopal was completely relaxed. Wherever she turned over he let himself go. There were about half a dozen black and blue marks on his back, arms and legs. He was ashamed to cry out but could not help it when Tara touched them.

"This rascal is wearing himself out with this smart aleck behavior of his," Tara said, talking to herself. "He's wearing me out too. He's like this now, but what happiness will I have to look forward to? I wonder what these eyes of mine still have to behold."

It was impossible to say whether he heard his mother's words or not because his ears were red and swollen. He was playing, sometimes dipping a thread which he had torn from the rubbing sheet into the oil pot, sometimes catching the patterns of sunlight that came through the window in the palm of his hand. He paid little attention to her weeping because her tears were mixed with the perspiration on her cheeks.

"When will you grow up? You are always making me cry. Why don't you say anything?"

Gopal glanced quickly towards his mother. Then he reached for a book lying nearby, and leafing through it, he began reading to himself.

"Nobody says you don't study," said Tara pouring oil on his swollen neck. "The teachers in school say that you are a hard worker. We are your enemies now only because of your filthy habit. Father is having you taught at home because you smoke when you are out, and now you're doing the same wicked things at home. How does it look to you? Father says he will thrash you within an inch of your life if he sees you smoking."

Gopal threw the book away.

"That's it? Throw it away! You don't need your book. You don't need your parents. What do I mean to you? Go on acting like this and you'll never see me again. You'll see, when mother dies, you'll remember how good a mother she was. But probably you won't even do that. You'll probably be wondering when she'll die and leave you in peace."

Gopal, who was lying face downward, raised himself on his elbows and resting his head on the right side of his mother's body, turned and looked straight at the wall. In spite of this, she could see from the corner of her eye, a stream of tears pouring down his cheeks over the oil. His cheeks were burning like hot coals and the tears falling on her cool and

tender breast seemed to sizzle like drops of molten silver when they fall on the floor and solidify.

"Such a cry baby to weep over such a small thing."

She patted him on the back, and the outcome was that he began to weep loudly. When she removed her hand, she saw a pink bruise. And she had struck him so gently! She felt as though someone had struck her in the chest with an ax. Fearing her chest would burst in two, she hunched her shoulders and closed her eyes for an instant. Then she stretched out her hand to his chin. He pushed her away with his elbow. Covering her face, Tara began to cry in a loud voice.

"Mother, please, I'm sorry!" said Gopal finally, bringing to an end the battle.

3

Six days later, there was a party at Sahila Baje's house to see Tulu receive the sacred thread. Narayan and his family went. There was dancing in the manner of Krishna and the gopis and lots of food and drink afterwards.

"Gopu, what did you think of the dancing?" asked Narayan Prasad after they had returned home.

"It was very nice."

"Come here."

"I'll come as soon as I remove my coat and things."

"Go after him," said Narayan to his wife when Gopal had run off; "perhaps he's stolen something again and brought it here."

Tara came back a minute later.

"Well, what did you see? Has he stolen something?"

"Please, let him alone. How much can you beat him?"

Really--"

"Well!" said Narayan, giving no other reply. He ran quickly to Gopal's room. Tara followed him. He kicked away Gopal's pillow as if it were a football. Underneath it were a cigarette butt, two whole cigarettes, and some spices. Narayan began to beat him unmercifully, as if he were Hiranyakasipu. He had completely lost his temper and rained blows on him as he had never done before.

"How can you be so cruel! You'll kill him! We were all the same when we were children," said Tara, trying to separate them.

Narayan stopped.

"I can't train your son, can I?" he said. He turned on his wife like Narsimha. "You mean that I'm to have no part in training that precious son of yours. All right, I'll have nothing at all to do with the wretch. You can take him over. Then you won't be able to blame me. What do you think of that, eh? Say something."

Gopal could not even cry at first, though he opened his mouth. Then he began to scream out loud.

As she answered, the blue veins in her neck showed Tara's self-control.

"I was afraid that you would injure him very badly."

"Am I a creature that eats grass? Am I an ass? Is it right for you to say such a thing to me? If he is my son, I can kill him if I wish."

"All right, do as you please."

"Keep on crying, you no-good!"

Narayan went for him again. Gopal was silent. Crumpling the cigarettes and the spices, he threw them away. With one hand he grabbed Gopal by the back of the neck, with the other he took up a book. He sat Gopal down in front of the mosquito net. The boy, like a monkey in a show, shrank within himself and began to tremble. Despite his sobs, he had to recite his lessons till well past half past twelve that night.

In this way for months, night and day, the little boat named Gopal made its way wearily over the ocean of life. In the deluge of his craving, the sun did not shine on his brow during the day, nor did the moon rise at night. He breathed noisily from deep down in his lungs through parched lips. He was very weak and tears like colorless drops of blood kept falling from his eyelashes. His stomach rumbled and his heart beat like a machine gun in his chest. He would be miserable if he did not get a cigarette. But he would be miserable if he got one too, for he was always found out and punished. His eyes were closed like those of an ascetic, meditating on everlasting bliss. He was unaware of the flash of the falling star nor did its heart-rendering pleas reach his ears.

When the race horses of the mother and son, one close upon the others heels, were approaching the flag of consumption held in the doctor's hands, Narayan caught up with them in a burst of speed.

"I'm going to break him of the habit of smoking if it kills me," he said at the end of his patience.

"What's the use of having a son who takes no notice of what his father says? I'll stop him or die in the attempt. I'll tell him to stop smoking -- its only a small thing, but he takes no notice. I'll thrash him within an inch of his life if he doesn't keep that garbage out of his mouth.

"Don't you love him?" asked Tara with a sob as she restrained her husband.

"He's dying, can't you see? There's not much time now, I beg of you, I don't want to see my son die. I'd rather die first. Let me have this little reward for having been your slave all this time."

These words of Tara's struck deep into Narayan and left him shattered.

"I'm leaving," said Narayan, suddenly rising.

"Where are you going?" said Tara catching hold of him.

"He isn't my son, he belongs to you now. I'm renouncing the world!"

Tara knew instinctively when Narayan was joking and when he was serious. She fell at his feet and embracing them, burst out crying. Her grip was so firm that had Narayan used force to pull one of his legs back, half of Tara's chest would have come with it. Anger, pity, love, despair, suffering, hatred and sympathy made Narayan choke up, but from a cage opened so quickly the bird of life does not have time to fly.

"As long as I have you, thousands of sons like him could be born to us. I have only a mother's heart and I'm not clever enough. When one is angry, one says anything that comes to mind. I was wrong. I won't say anything from now on."

She quickly begged forgiveness, and without saying anything, Narayan forgave her.

Gopal looked down at the house servant, Came, as he drew water out of the cistern.

"Instead of enjoying yourself you're making yourself miserable and everybody says 'you're mad' into the bargain for behaving like this," said Came.

"You know, Gopal," said Came, "If the cigarettes were nice, I would say smoke them, but they have no taste, no nourishment, nor do you get any religious merit. Damn it! At your age, what is this? Don't you have any brains at all?"

When he had straightened up for a minute, Came looked at Gopal. Gopal made an effort to laugh and threw a leaf down from one of the flowerpots.

"We don't like to see you get beaten. Do you like to smoke -- or what is it?"

"Right now, I don't feel like smoking, but after a couple of days I want to," said Gopal as he leaned down.

"Aren't you afraid of your father?"

"So what? I like to smoke."

"Don't you love your mother?"

Gopal did not answer. Turning from the place where he had been standing, Came looked Gopal in the face. His eyes were red and moist. Came had not liked Gopal very much until today.

Suddenly it was cloudy. A gust of wind blew, then the sun came out shining all around. Gopal looked up at the sky. A piece of cloud was hiding the sun. It moved a little away from the sun. The blue sky slowly appeared and the cloud vanished. Came looked up also when he saw Gopal staring at the sky. Even the sun seemed to be smoking.

The day was almost gone. Narayan, with Harikrishna, entered Gopal's room silently. The glass window was closed; there was a hole above it where the air passed. Gopal had evidently climbed a chair, broken a part of the window and with his head out, was talking to the servant of the house next door.

"I have this, but no matches."

One could not hear what the servant said.

"How about a picture of Narsimha? Will that do?" asked Gopal.

"....."

"No, he won't find out."

"....."

"In that case shall I get the silver box, huh?"

"....."

"The key must be in his pocket. You'll get it in the evening..."

"....."

"Not here. Outside."

Narayan had taken the spice box from his pocket and was showing it to Harikrishna when Gopal drew his head back into the room.

"You said first you have to stop smoking yourself, but you were wrong. It's more than a month since I have smoked a cigarette. The other day he sent our servant Came out to buy some, so I dismissed him. I locked him up like this. But he is a rogue, you can see."

"What's so smart about this, eh, Gopal?" said Harikrishna.

Narayan did not dare search for cigarettes for shame of perhaps not finding them. He just glanced around and sniffed, but because Harikrishna was present, he did not give Gopal his usual beating. He pulled his ears slowly (I should say he tried to pull them). Gopal immediately raised an uproar, rolled about and began to cry.

"You see," said Narayan, "I can't even touch him gently now."

He gave Gopal a couple of hard kicks. Harikrishna kept him from going on. Gopal began to bite and claw himself and banged his head on the floor. He began to cry, but his voice was weak.

"He won't let me have any cigarettes. May God kill you instead." And he went on whimpering.

Narayan opened the window and cursed the servant soundly. Then he closed the window, left the room and locked the door behind him and Harikrishna. They heard the sound of glass windows breaking inside the room.

"What a demon he has become!" said Harikrishna softly.

In the other room, Tara heard Gopal's screams. She closed her ears.

"Ram! Ram! Ram!" she sobbed.

Gopal had pulled up a piece of the floor under which he had been hiding some cigarettes. It seems that he was buying matches with the money he got from books and various articles that everybody thought were lost. A few days later, Narayan found out. This time he did not beat him, but just took the cigarettes and matches away. Gopal did not take this lying down.

"May worms eat your hand!" he cried.

"To whom did you say that, eh, you wretch?"

"To you," said Gopal very rudely. Until today he would not have been able to speak like that.

Narayan lost his temper completely. He kicked, beat and thrashed him, and Gopal bit in return. At that moment, the sound of a motorcycle was heard outside the windows. Gopal remembered that there was usually a cigarette in the driver's mouth. Even during a crisis such as this he longed for cigarettes. Narayan struck his jaw because the boy had bitten him.

"May you turn into a corpse, may your hand fall off from leprosy. May you die," screamed Gopal.

Narayan struck his face again and again. Gopal fainted.

The confusion reached Tara who was upstairs preparing spices on a grinding stone. No matter how hard she tried, she could not succeed in grinding them properly. Tears fell into them and in disgust, she threw the spices, now too salty, down the drain. There was a sudden silence, but she did not know the reason.

Narayan's heart had become as hard as the Himalayas. His eyes were as cold as ice. Fear itself had gone and sat on the edge of his eyes and peered inside, but frightened by the dark hollow in his heart, fled off.

"Never will this hand touch him again," vowed Narayan, as he tried to revive him.

Gopal came round from his faint.

"In the future, I'll lock you up and punish you in other ways," said Narayan, continuing his oath.

By now, Gopal had completely recovered from his faint. Narayan got up quickly and went out. Disconsolate, cold and lifeless, he did not even for a moment remember the water he should have sprinkled on his son's head. Locking Gopal's door, he went to his bed and stretched out. He looked at the shelf on which were the collection of twenty-four books which had been bought over a period of time. His hand gradually grew warm and his cheeks hot. Where before he breathed an icy Himalayan wind, a great volcano began to erupt. Narayan was like fire itself, Gopal like glowing embers, and Tara like ashes!

It was the day of the horse festival. Gopal could hear his father shouting outside his room.

"That rascal still won't obey. I must keep him locked up here. Let's you and I go to the Tundhikhel to see the parade. How nice it will be! There will be all kinds of fine games this year."

Tara could not refuse. Gopal was deeply hurt. He tried to deceive himself by pretending that he had not really heard his father's tempting words.

Narayan and Tara were standing near the city gate with several onlookers. The show had already begun. Tara's aunt had also come and a little later they met.

"Oh, my dear niece. Gopal -- where is he?"

Tara glanced toward Narayan.

"He's not feeling too well," said Narayan.

"How could you come by yourselves!"

Tara's aunt had brought her small son with her. He came and took hold of Tara's hand. She opened her purse and gave him some candy.

The festival was very gay. There was a great laugh when a man dressed in gaudy clothes tried to hit a pot with a stick, missed and hit his companion instead. The pot was elsewhere. Tara's aunt's son did not understand what it was all about but he laughed and jumped up and down. Sometimes he looked at the dazzling crowd around the khari tree, sometimes at the colorful horses. He described the faraway flags to Tara and said that they were leaves of the bhorla tree. From all sides came peels of laughter one after another, for the crowd enjoyed itself even more when they lost their bets than when they won them.

That which gives the most light is the sun, so they say, but if, like a comet, another sun were to come and merge with ours, the light on the earth would be doubled. If millions of suns appeared, we would be blinded -- if we were not burned to ashes. But Narayan saw nothing. As one singing a song suddenly remembers a part that he has forgotten, he said,

"Come, let's go home."

"Why?"

Tara thought that he wanted to return home unexpectedly so as to catch Gopal again. Narayan got up, began to walk, swimming through the crowd, and led Tara to the other side of the street. The roar of the crowd, like the sound of the ocean, gradually diminished, and they finally reached home. Gopal was singing, unaware of the world. When he saw his father, his face fell. He began to tremble as his father approached.

"Gopu!"

Gopal stared, unable to recognize the sweet familiar tone that his father used in days gone by. Still remembering thorns, sticks, snakes and scorpions, he blinked at him for an instant. Then he saw tears were flowing from his father's eyes. His father held out his hands. In one hand there was a pack of cigarettes. Bewildered, Gopal looked at his mother.

"Father said he will allow you to smoke from now on," said Tara.

Narayan took his son in his arms and began to cry. It had been many days since Gopal was aware of the special fragrance of his father, a curious mixture of roses and cigarette smoke, and he sobbed. Because it was raining, no one remembered how much time had passed.

"Ba, from now on I won't smoke these rotten cigarettes.." said Gopal suddenly stroking his father's cheeks very affectionately. Going to the window he threw away the cigarette packet. Someone in the street saw it, but passed it by, another unknowingly kicked it and went on. Finally a third picked it up, looking all around, opened it, turned it over and furtively put it in his pocket.

After the man disappeared, Gopal, beaming returned from the window.

"Ba, will we get Came back now?"

"Yes, son."

Gopal had cried for such a long time that he had hiccups. Narayan kept him pressed to his bosom all night like a poultice. Tara could not sleep but lay watching father and son. Gopal even in his sleep went on hiccuping half through the night, and Narayan, asleep too, patted him gently on the back. Each time this happened, the Lord Gopal smiled in the temple of her heart and she bathed his image with her tears. She did not remember falling asleep. In her dreams love was swinging to and fro in a swing of flowers, gently dispersing the cloud of that craving, and bright red lights of affection rose and danced before her eyes. Actually it was the sun shining brightly.

## The Surmavala of Delhi

Sivakumar Rai

The Tuphan Express left Habada Station regularly at ten in the morning. As soon as it crossed the signal post, it began to travel like the wind. It darted through Vardhaman, Barakar, Raniganj, and Asansol one after the other like a boy running from class to play hooky. As it picked up speed, the rhythmic noise of its wheels was interrupted from time to time by the shrill sound of its whistle.

On this particular day, there were few passengers-- only about eight or ten Bengalis. They left the train at Vardhaman. Two Madhises climbed in, scrambled up onto a bunk and began to snore like tiger cubs.

Krishnavir and Haribhakta had always wondered whether they or the university would tire of each other first. This time, it seemed, they had tired. They had stolen their mothers' earrings, cleaned out their fathers' money boxes and were running away to see the Red Fort and the Taj Mahal at Agra. They considered themselves, after all, students of history. Krishnavir had already run away to Calcutta on several occasions with the few pice that he had gotten by playing jhinge dau. He thought himself extremely clever. For Haribhakta, however, this was the first glimpse of big trains and wide plains.

Krishnavir and Haribhakta kept staring out the window. Krishnavir was a conceited young man who was proud of his experience.

"Look over there," he blurted out "at the rice! Look here, they're all jute fields. They've put up a fence around that factory garden to keep the sun out. Why do you think they've done it? That is all a jute field. They have to fence jute fields in like that." To the inexperienced Haribhakta all these things were new and he was filled with astonishment to see them all at once.

The train stopped for a moment at Bata station. A man entered their compartment with a small tin box in his hands. He went and sat down on the seat behind them. Neither one indicated any interest in who he was or where he was going, but as soon as the train left the station, he attracted their attention by reciting over and over again, "Tansen Pills, Tansen Pills."

"Tansen Pills, made in the Punjab," he chanted. He took two tiny bottles from the tin box and said, "Put one in your mouth and you'll feel fine and keep in good health. The big bottle is eight annas, the little one four annas. Take some, Babuji, taste them."

Krishnavir popped two small red pills into his mouth and swallowed them. He asked for some for Haribhakta and gave them to him.

Taking out another bottle, the man continued.

"Tiger Balm, Bengal Chemical Tiger Balm. If you have a headache or a cough, use this balm and the pain will disappear in a flash. Pimples, boils-- it's good for all these. Snake or scorpion bite. Rub just a little balm on that spot and the pain will go away at once. The price, only eight annas, every householder should have one."

He took some balm from the bottle and began rubbing the forehead and temples of the travellers. Krishnavir could think of no reason in the world for him to miss such an opportunity. He stuck his head out.

"Haribhakta," he said, "get yourself a rub, too. The medicine feels very cool." Haribhakta refused.

During the trip, several hawkers got on selling flashlights, tooth powder, chocolate, and many other articles and then got off. The train was going at full speed.

"Listen Haribhakta," began Krishnavir, "we must be careful on big trains. It's not like our D.H.R. back home. You keep staring out the window like a dolt, but we must keep an eye on our baggage when people are getting on and off. There are thousands of people--

and one of them might snatch up something and make off with it. We have to watch carefully."

He pointed to the bunk above.

"See that iron chain up there?" he said, "What do you suppose it is? If there is an accident or anything goes wrong, you must pull it and the brakes will work. But if you pull it for no good reason, you will have to pay a fifty rupee fine. So watch that your hand doesn't fall on it while you are asleep up there in the bunk."

The train moved along.

"You shouldn't put your head out like that. Sometimes these windows fall suddenly and strike your head. Lots of times a train comes on the next track with an open door and then there's a terrible accident."

Poor Haribhakta could not even look outside now.

"I'm going to sleep," he said wearily and climbed up onto the bunk.

"All right, sleep" said Krishnavir, but we must take turns sleeping. Someone might walk off with our belongings while we're asleep without our knowing it."

Haribhakta did not sleep a wink. All through the night all kinds of people got on and off. However, Krishnavir slept blissfully on.

Now Delhi was only two or three hours away. The thought of the Red Fort and the Kutb Minar excited them more and more. The train stopped at Tundala Junction.

"Look," said Krishnavir, pointing to the railway timetable, "only two or three more stations to go. Just think -- in two hours we'll be in Birla Mandir, or in Connaught Place, or at India Gate."

Two Muslim boys climbed on, wearing filthy undershirts and clothes. They glanced at Haribhakta and Krishnavir, and mumbling something inaudible to themselves, they went and sat down behind them. Krishnavir took a good look at them and said knowingly to Haribhakta, "These are the sort of people we have to keep an eye on. They look like gundas ...."

The train started off. A third person came into the compartment carrying a leather suitcase. He took a reed and two small bottles from the suitcase and gestured toward them like a sorcerer.

"Friends," he began, "listen carefully. If your eyes tear, if they are blood shot and you can't see well, then put some of this ointment on your sweet eyes. It will make them healthy and beautiful."

"Take this reed," he said, showing it to them, "first, dip it in this bottle to wet it, then take some surma from the other bottle and put it in your precious eyes."

He put some surma in the eyes of the Muslim boys.

"Friends," he said, "put some surma in your dear eyes."

If you are walking along a road and you get dust in your eyes, if you are riding in a train and you get smoke and soot in your eyes, this surma will make your eyes clear and bright-- if any of you gentlemen needs some, please stand up."

This was a much longer lecture than his headmaster ever made so why should Krishnavir not believe it? After all, he was no fool. It was true that he had been kept hanging around in one class for three years, but that was only because he hadn't paid attention to his studies.

"Please give me some," he said getting up.

"Put surma in your precious eyes," said the man, as he smeared surma on Krishnavir's eyes.

Haribhakta kept staring hypnotized.

"Put some surma in your eyes, too," said the vendor, extending the reed.

Haribhakta could not refuse, so he said nothing. He put surma on both his eyes.

The two suddenly fell back, stunned. They saw ten moons and thousands of stars. It



was as if chili powder had been poured into their eyes. Tears streamed down their faces, their noses ran. They both fell forward clasping their hands to their faces.

Fifteen minutes later their eyes were slightly cooler, and everything seemed somewhat clearer. They lifted their heads and looked around. The Tughan Express was racing along at full speed but what an astonishing thing had happened!

The surma seller was gone and with him the Muslim boys. They looked around--there was neither suitcase nor bedding on the bunk. The coats they had left there were gone too, just as when a conjuror makes a coin in his hand disappear by blowing on it and uttering a mantra.

As soon as their eyes cleared, they looked around. Krishnavir sat on his haunches wondering how so many Calcutta thugs were unable to fool him and yet this one Delhi surma seller could throw dust in his eyes.