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Ashvamegh is an online international journal of literary and creative writing. Publishing monthly, Ashvamegh has successfully launched its 25th issue in March 2017 (this issue). Submission is open every day of the year. Please visit <http://ashvamegh.net> for more details.

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After September 2014, there was no academic pressure over me. I have completed my masters in English Literature and secured good marks (in fact, the topper in my batch). Some months were just like the freedom after being caged for so long and I just did not bother to study anything, even leisurely! However, when I got back to my library and revisited the books (without any academic goal), the reading was entirely different! I could see and decode what was previously unseen and encoded perennially. Inspired, I read most of the syllabus items again and found out many new dimensions which were resting in different corners during the academic years. The moot point is - yes, certainly, there are different circumstances which condition our reading of literature. The academic reading, from a student's point of view, in most of the cases is certainly shrunk and limited to only the 'directed' spheres. However, once a person has completed the desired educational years, he or she is free to explore the hidden dimensions and of course, the mind of the reader walks in all the directions with a certain liberty. I thought to share my experience with the readers of Ashvamegh and I will warmly welcome your experience which you can communicate to me directly.

The readers in India have recently seen one more of the many festivals that we celebrate in our country - Holi. Holi is just like the golden treasury offering something for everyone out there. I wish them all the belated happy holi!

In this issue, Ashvamegh is hosting pj johnson, the poet laureate of Yukon, Canada, as the featured poet. I thank her for this. I hope, like our previous issues, the readers will like March 2017 issue as well. Don't forget to post your comments on the poems and short stories you like.

With wishes & love,

Alok Mishra

March 15, 2016

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## *Poets selected and the featured Poet*

- pj johnson (Featured Poet)
- Akshat Shukla
- B Ponmalar
- Sanam Sharma
- Sabeet Raza
- Himadri Saikia

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**Introduction to the Poet:**



pj johnson is the Yukon Poet Laureate who was appointed the first official invested poet laureate in Canada back in July 1994. She is a multi-talented woman who has been, over the years, participating in the world of creative arts as a musician/ composer, actress, poet, playwright, photographer, performance artist, and creative mentor. Her original creative works have been performed live and televised at various local and national venues.



**as i walk into the green garden**

and as i walk into the green garden  
that is always dying  
the faces  
of the lost ones  
still blossoming before me  
like so many  
brightly-colored flowers  
that never fade  
forever

my mother –  
her old bones  
asleep on the hill  
overlooking the ranch  
above a crumbling cabin  
that echoes yet  
with story  
keep watch  
keep track

as butter-fat wolf-pups

wrestle with the frosted ends  
of snow-covered moose bones  
and ravenous ravens  
laughing like magpies  
swoop down from stunted jackpines  
to scour the boreal vista  
vying forever for whatever leftovers  
are left

my heart has memorized  
the saddle-straddled coffin  
and a line of sad-faced mourners  
moving slowly forward  
behind a rider-less Red Fox pony  
escorting The Yukon Horse Woman  
home  
carrying her up that mountain  
one last time

where goes the green of summer  
when northwinds come  
to howl away the sun  
what's left of the fatted calf  
that once was life  
that hovers now ghost-like  
upon some foreign horizon  
where do the living  
really go

a sudden burst of wolf wind  
thrashes through the buckbrush  
quieting the neigh of gentle horses  
caressing my friendless ear  
as if in answer  
and the sun rises higher  
than god  
as the sparkling midnight waters  
begin to dance across the lake





**“because I am a sled dog”**

because I am a sled dog  
I have no voice  
I can only speak to you  
with my eyes  
with my bark  
and with the wagging of my tail

if I could talk to you  
I would tell you that I worship you  
and that my only wish  
is to be with you  
to be loved and adored  
and to be wanted for who I am

I would tell you  
I am a living breathing being  
much like you  
that feels love and joy and pain  
and if I could only speak to you in words  
I would tell you all these things

I would tell you I am here  
to do your bidding  
even if that means running a thousand miles  
in a brutal race I didn't choose to run  
even if it means  
I might suffer and die

for you are my world  
my greatest joy  
and I only live to please you  
I would protect you with my life  
if you asked me to  
all I ask in return  
is that you love me back

**howlin' time**

when the haunting howl of grey wolf  
cuts across the arctic air  
and you stand beneath the mountain  
and the frost is in your hair  
and your soul is bent and bleeding  
but there's nothin' you can do  
you're awake and yet you're dreaming  
all there is is god and you  
it's howlin' time

and you are part of everything  
and everything is you  
yet you walk along forgotten  
by a world you never knew  
and your life is like a season  
when the moon has gone insane  
and it shimmers down your shoulder  
comes to life and dies again  
it's howlin' time

it's howlin' time  
it's howlin' time  
when the spirits of the lost ones  
come to walk with you again  
it's howlin' time  
it's howlin' time  
when there's only god and you  
it's howlin' time

so you wander in the willows

and you cut across your pain  
and there's magic in the treetops  
and a raven calls your name  
and your eyes are bright with sonnets  
and you wonder if you're sane  
as the spirits of the lost ones  
come to walk with you again  
it's howlin' time

and you ask about your mother  
and the child that never was  
as a thousand answers leave you  
but the question never does  
and you reach out to your father  
he's a million miles away  
he'll be gone by monday morning  
but by god he heard you pray  
it's howlin' time

and you know that he is dying  
and you know that no one cares  
as you stumble up the mountain  
and the frost is in your hair  
and you hunger for a reason  
and you hunger for a clue  
and you hunger for a season  
but there's only god and you  
it's howlin' time

it's howlin' time  
it's howlin' time  
when the spirits of the lost ones  
come to walk with you again  
it's howlin' time  
it's howlin' time  
when there's only god and you  
it's howlin' time  
when there's only god and you  
it's howlin' time



**set not your face in grief**

set not your face in grief against the wind  
this death is but a word  
that wanders in the night  
planting sorrow in the hearts of men  
cast down the seed

set not your face in grief against the wind  
i am the rose so full of life i cannot die  
celebrate me  
for this death means nothing  
i am beauty in full bloom

set not your face in grief against the wind  
for i am new and perfect  
like the snow that falls around you  
i the silent miracle sift down from heaven  
knowing heaven

set not your face in grief against the wind  
for i am raven, free in spirit  
soaring highly without bound  
i am legend reminding you of life  
reminding you to live





**she walks with a certain pride**

moving slowly along the highway  
each step a labor and leaning heavily  
on a gnarled willow stick  
she walks with a certain pride  
her wispy hair flowing out  
from under a fox-trimmed hood  
that frames her sun-dark face  
in the tedious tailwinds  
of traffic rushing infinitely

her teak-brown gaze  
unwavering  
and destination-fixed  
betrays no air of expectation  
only the steady dark prints  
of moosehide moccasins  
and the rounded tracks  
of her pack-laden Husky  
trail out behind her

panting, the two plow unbroken drifts  
their trail growing distant  
in the lengthening of shadows  
her old eyes bright in bitter winds that whisper  
of a day when Raven stole away the Sun  
of drumsongs. dancing.  
and of legends passed down by elders  
weaving baskets  
over pine-scented campfires

*pj johnson*

*Featured Poet for March 2015*

as a cool December moon  
outlines her smallness  
she pauses to tug at the Husky's harness  
sighing frostily  
and trudges on  
the steady thrust of her  
willow stick  
piercing the snow  
like the rhythm of an ancient drumbeat

she begins to chant a tuneless song  
of burning sweetgrass.  
sinew-threaded moccasins.  
and great warriors  
gone back to the earth  
like old totems  
returned as she  
the circle of her life complete  
will



## *Akshat Shukla*

### **Introduction to the Poet:**

The poet is a research scholar in CSJM University, Kanpur. He is working on ecocritical poetry of Seamus Heaney, an Irish poet. His poems are, typically, philosophical musings about his own life, though he writes poems that are socially relevant too. Most of his poems are in free-verse, as he believes that poetry is a free-flow of thoughts.

### **A Thought:**

Ecstatic dancing  
Of a cyclonic thought  
Deep inside my head,  
Wrecking havoc  
In my consciousness,  
Leading to a state  
Of anarchy.

### **Raw Love:**

*Untext*  
All the verbosity  
Of love stuffed  
Inside celebrated books,  
And consume  
The raw concreteness  
Of love  
As found in nature.

## *B. Ponmalar*

### **Introduction to the Poet:**

B. Ponmalar is a lecturer who has deep flair in teaching creative writing in English. She is a feminist who loves to explore new dimensions of this field. She has written a paper comparing Othello and Gautama Rishi.

### **Akalya's Feminism**

Life blooms

Anytime, anywhere

Is Akalya's pride.

The sinner, the sin and the sinned;

All dissolve in divinity.

The penance is rewarded.

Transforming betrayal to truth.

Gautama curses,

But the seed of love to humanity

Sprouts with no remorse.

The dust of Rama's feet-

Implants faith and honour women.

The new energy is born.

Feminism shines

Holding hands

With Rama and Gautama.

## *Sanam Sharma*

### **Introduction to the Poet:**

Sanam Sharma is a poet based in Melbourne, Australia. She migrated to Australia from India back in 1999. She has published her first volume of poetry entitled Tamed Words in July 2016.

### **Those mourning Grandmas**

It was spooky, and chaotic.  
Often, overwhelming,  
than solemn.  
Death,  
was baleful,  
          and ominous,  
in that sleepy little village  
I grew up in. Courtesy, a bunch of veiled, elderly,  
          howling women,  
who had been entrusted with  
the unkind task,  
of announcing  
          deaths,  
to the rest of the village.

Their haunting gnarls,  
aptly effective  
in gathering  
          flash mobs-  
of mourners, and onlookers, alike.

My granny, too, no exception.  
Stepping out, at the first hint  
of a fatality  
pacing through the uneven,  
dusty, village streets,  
eager, to join the brigade  
of her contemporaries – those  
bawling ladies  
already immersed in theatrical sorrowing.

Once there, granny leapt in too,  
into that high pitched, synchronized,  
sob-fest.  
Shrouded in veils, the platoon of  
grannies mourned the departed  
relentlessly.  
Rehearsed histrionics – thumping chests - rhythmic boohoos – all expended, to  
improvise and enhance performance.

*Sanam Sharma*

The ones who ran out of breath,  
did not give in, instead,  
whimpered on gently  
until they herded back the energy, and  
the howls.

Just as one thought, the  
pandemonium had mellowed  
collapsed a fragile granny, or two.

And so it went on, for a bit more.  
A loud, and lasting farewell.

If cheerleading ever needed an antonym,  
It had to be that bunch of keening grannies in my village.

*Sabeet Raza*

## **Anatomies of Dying Beings**

The gross odour of a dying man  
Is not so gross itself

What is worse  
Is that  
of a rotting one

And  
To rot  
One must die first

Unfortunately, not a lot of us know death  
We assume  
Presume  
And resume

We don't ponder  
We aren't skeptics

We just assume  
What death is

The gross odour does not come  
from a corpse

They are buried long before they rot

It comes from the man  
or the woman,  
or just a wretched being  
That dies alive

One  
Or two  
or as many as you can count  
because so many there are

Who forgot to seize the day  
And to profess his love to that fay

also the ones who let their deadlines pass  
amongst the ones who said "tomorrow!"  
just like

## *Sabeet Raza*

the procrastinators  
the haters  
the envious

analogic to the weaker lion  
who gets ripped and eaten  
sometimes even by prey  
but this time  
By time

The gross odour of a rotting man  
Is not so gross itself  
For he is buried  
before he rots

It is the odour of a man rotting  
while he lives  
sorry, no- he exists  
solely  
without purpose and effort

and even an attempt

whose odour in truly unbearable.

## *Himadri Saikia*

### **Introduction to the Poet:**

Himadri Saikia is an MA in English Literature from the Cotton College State University, Guwahati. She is currently employed in a Polytechnic college in Assam.

### **CHILDHOOD**

The ecstatic years of childhood

Are gone...

With our homework

All half-done...

With pencils broken,

And toffees stolen,

There was no question

Of heart broken.

The common playground,

Those common faces,

The childhood races,

Chasing the butterflies all around.

I ruminate those blissful traces

In my inner soul,

Those euphoric days of buoyancy,

That no longer play its role.

## *Authors selected and their stories*

- The Bad Guy by Dr. Roshini Shetty
- Epiphany of a Dying Man by Don Crawford
- Sharmaji by Parag Chitnis

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*Dr. Roshini Shetty*

**Introduction to the Author:**

Dr Roshini Shetty, MDS, CFO, Certified Laser dentist, Facial Cosmetologist, researcher with awarded patented medical innovations, author of various published Fiction and Non-fiction books, editor and books reviewer.

**THE BAD GUY**

‘Marriage’, a simple word but a complicated life sentence if not executed properly! I always thought Marriage was a necessity but now I realize that Marriage is a Luxury.

This story is regarding the things I learnt and understood during the groom searching saga.

My considered ideal match for me is a guy who is simple, sensitive, and decent with no bad habits and a strict, ‘no previous love affairs’.

I always heard from people that such guys don’t exist in reality. Don’t know whether they spoke the truth or I got cursed by the guys I rejected saying they were second hands (because they had previous love affairs), I never came across my elusive ideal guy!

One day a relative of mine brought a marriage proposal for me, the guy was said to be from a respectable family. All our relatives who knew the guy and his family gave positive opinion about them.

I went to meet him at a restaurant. He was an anaesthetist, was tall and fair complexioned. He looked like a modest and simple guy.

In midst of our talk, I casually asked him whether he was ever in love with any girl in his life, his ‘no’ was such a relief for me. He was handsome, had no bad habits, had no love affairs, I was convinced that I had finally found my, ‘Mr. Perfect’.

After a brief glimpse of heaven, my ‘Mr. Perfect’ showed me hell. He said he had rejected many marriage proposals though he was offered up to two crores as dowry, as he had liked my family background, he had agreed to consider this proposal for mere one crore. I think he expected me to be grateful to him for this concession!

He said, “I wasn’t very keen on marrying a dentist, I don’t consider dentists as doctors, I always wanted a post-graduate medico as my life partner. I’m ready to marry you only because I’m a very obedient son.”

## *Dr. Roshini Shetty*

I thought, “Even I don’t consider anaesthetists as doctors, for me they look like General Surgeons assistants. The parents of this ‘obedient son’ who are ready to sell him for one crore haven’t taught him that, ‘Beggars can’t be choosers’.”

Our conversation only lasted for about fifteen minutes. My understanding and opinion of perfect turned out to be a torture to me. I escaped with a false excuse that I was experiencing a severe headache, it was partially true for if I had stayed with him for some more time I would have indeed developed a severe headache.

Marrying him seemed like adopting a retarded child after paying one crore to his parents. Meeting him made me change my ideologies, I no longer fancy guys who never had a girl-friend in their life, may be like him they are not capable enough of having or maintaining one!

Few months later, my aunt brought in another marriage proposal. The guy was from Moodbidri, his father was a reputed Ayurvedic doctor. The guy (Let’s call him Mr. X!) was a General surgeon.

My parents enquired about this guy and his family, unfortunately none of our relatives spoke any good about them.

It looked like Mr. X had everything one craves for but a closer look and you realize that he has nothing (Strictly according to my relatives!). These relatives of mine were instrumental in closing the topic of Mr. X completely for us.

A few days later, in a casual discussion with a friend, surprisingly topic of Mr. X cropped up. My friend knew Mr. X during his college days as both of them studied in the same college. Our talk on Mr. X went on for a long time with me learning some interesting facts about him.

My friend said, “He is already in a relationship. Don’t expect him to have an arranged marriage; he will marry a girl of his choice and not a girl his dad would choose for him. He has his say and stand in things.”

Nearly a year later, I and mom had been to Moodbidri to visit a friend of mine and to attend my cousin’s engagement party the next day.

After having chatted to our hearts content at my friend’s place, we went out for a walk. Having walked for a while, we wanted to drink something to quench our thirst before heading back.

My friend took us to the nearest building which was a hospital and said we would get something to drink at the basement of that hospital.

Since I was too tired to stand, I was just about to lean on a black Duster car which was parked in front of the hospital, suddenly a security guard came running towards me asking me not to lean on that car as the car belonged to ‘Managing director’ (MD) of the hospital.

I and mom exchanged glances when we came to know that Mr. X was the MD of that hospital!

## *Dr. Roshini Shetty*

We walked in and first drank juice. The hospital was getting renovated; the man who served us juice said that Mr. X who had recently returned from Delhi was getting all the renovation done because he was determined to make the hospital one among the best.

He continued, “Mr. X comes regularly, he maintains strict timings, either he is busy taking classes for students or he is busy in the operation theatre.”

Mr. X came across to us as a very passionate doctor!

“Look there, that person in grey shirt is our MD,” he pointed.

In a jiffy, like an emergency landing in a dream world, we were inside his cabin; the friendly, well-mannered guy stood up looking at my mom. He didn't look like a typical follower of doctor's dress code, clad in blue jeans. He was tall, with sharp features, twinkling eyes behind spectacles and a fit body structure.

**Moral of the story:** What society considers ‘good (Obedient son!)’ is a guy who is ready to do anything for the sake of money and status, he wants to get married to a profession and not a girl. In short this ‘good guy’ only considers marriage a compromise and he expects the same from you. What society considers ‘bad’ is a guy who has his stand in life, is passionate and has his say in things; he is MD of a hospital but is humble enough to stand up when he sees elders, he has his choice and is not the obedient son to sell himself for one crore rupees.

I remembered a lady from an NGO who was advising a child from the slums not to steal again; it seems the child had stolen money from someone. Some days later, I heard, the same child from the slums had stolen food from a street vendor. That day I realised that, this child who did not even have basic amenities like food and clothes was never in a position to understand ethics like not stealing; the advice of that lady from the NGO must have sounded like high philosophy for this child. It is always easier to teach ethics to kids from affluent families rather than kids from poor socioeconomic background. For these poor kids, survival is only possible without ethics.

The plight of the so called ‘good guys’ of our society is similar to these poor kids. They really cannot understand the ethics involved in marriage, because like those poor kids, they cannot afford to live on ethics.

In their aim to get a rich father-in-law and their parents supporting them in their endeavour to get a rich father-in-law, they tend to forget that marriage is a very sacred relationship which can only survive successfully if love exists in it and unlike business, a successful marriage can never stand on pillar of compromise and practical thinking.

The ‘good guy’ may live a decent life with his practical thinking and his habit of compromising and his ardent belief that, “If your father is not rich, it is not your fault but if your father-in-law is not rich, then you are the greatest existing fool!”

## *Dr. Roshini Shetty*

Even though the 'good guy' may live a decent life, the 'bad guy' lives the best life because he follows his heart, there is no need for him to compromise in his life at all, he can afford to live as he wants, he doesn't want the mediocre decent life, he aims and gets the best for himself. This is because he doesn't rely on his father-in-law completely to make a living, instead believes in himself!

During our school days when we didn't live on practical thinking, we were young, we didn't know reality, we didn't care a damn about wealth, looks, caste or profession; crush was on guys who were capable of bringing and retaining that smile on our faces. We were considered immature then. As we grew up, we are known to have become mature. Maturity means calculated moves where we give utmost importance to the 3 B's (Beauty, Brains, and Bank-balance). With this maturity, we try to buy the best, pay One crore, get a handsome doctor with good earning (the 3 B's)! It is like buying an expensive showpiece and keeping it in your showcase, you can show it off to your friends and relatives and feel proud about it but you can't spend your whole life with it.

With immaturity, you find a guy who can bring a smile on your face, can make you laugh and can keep you happy; with him by your side, life seems very short and you want to freeze time. With maturity, you find a guy with whom it is not possible to spend even fifteen minutes at a stretch, life seems boring with no end, with this guy by your side, it is tough to kill time.

A deep thought makes me rather choose immaturity over maturity!

Like the 'bad guy', I want to break the shackles of practical thinking and just want to listen to that hard-working constantly pumping heart of mine because I feel it knows the best!

## *Don Crawford*

### **Introduction to the Author:**

Don Crawford received his Master's Degree from U.C. Berkeley during the heyday of the sixties. During his 40-year clinical experience, he studied human behavior from a variety of positions. During his career years, he dabbled in writing mostly short stories and some essays. He has a book for sale on createspace.com, #4461567, titled The Sage Institute. He is currently retired and continues to write mostly articles for LinkedIn Post about the evolution of the human race.

### **EPIPHANY OF A DYING MAN**

The hour was late afternoon and the sun's rays filtered through the large window in his bedroom. He asked Katie to pull back the shades so he could view the sun one last time. He had accepted the idea that the sun was the source of all life on this planet, like the Egyptian god, Ra. It contained the Life Force that continuously pumped the blood throughout our bodies, and in our lungs providing us oxygen for mobility to work and love and create; that precious oxygen which he was being deprived of because of his disease. *If it were really true that smoking had caused his disease, he had long been committing suicide.* He shivered and discovered that a body dies from the feet up. He asked Katie to put another blanket over his legs. For over an hour, he faded in and out between lucidity and being lost in his memories.

Eventually, everything that is born must die. Nord Sentis was no exception. As he lay dying of lung cancer, his thoughts roamed over the entire sixty-eight years of his life; in his opinion too short a life because he wasn't ready to die. His wife of thirty-five of those short years was the woman of his dreams, but there were days that turned sour like spoiled cream. Katherine was nine years younger and remained in reasonably good health. Their two grown children, a son and a daughter, had long ago departed the family home seeking their own independent existence. For every invitation, they found reasonable excuses not to appear.

Nord Sentis was foreign born, having immigrated to America from Czechoslovakia at age sixteen with his spinster aunt and her adopted daughter, Lavinia. His aunt Gerta, his mother's childless sister, was nearing forty and during the war had adopted Lavinia, who was three years younger than Nord. Gerta had worked for Lavinia's parents and when they were killed, she took the girl in. Nord's and Lavinia's parents had been killed when Germany invaded Czechoslovakia early in WWII. After Czech paratroopers killed Reinhard Heydrich, a high ranking German officer and the architect of the holocaust, Germany sought savage revenge on the Czech Republic and it wasn't until 1945 that American and Russians troops rescued the Czech Republic from Germany.

## *Don Crawford*

After arriving in New York in 1948, his Aunt Gerta secured a live-in job as all around housekeeper, cook and caretaker for an elderly widow of a wealthy publisher of a New York magazine. Mrs. Highbritten was childless and had no other relatives and needed someone she could trust to take care of her and the large mansion. In her husband's will, the wife was to live in the family home with full living expenses until her death; the remainder of his estate was immediately endowed to Columbia University, to be used as tuitions for needy journalism students in the School of Journalism. After the death of the widow, the house was to become a part of his endowment.

Nord struggled learning English but at age nineteen graduated high school and immediately enrolled in the endowment program at the Columbia School of Journalism. He graduated four years later, at age twenty-three. The competition for local jobs dissuaded him to move westward; he also had a strong urge to see more of his adopted country. During his stay at Columbia he had studied and became a naturalized citizen, and got his first much-valued USA passport.

Leaving his aunt and Lavinia and Mrs. Highbritten behind, he left New York alone in his used Volvo. His first stop was Houston, Texas, where he secured a job with the *Houston Journal*. They were glad to get a graduate from Columbia even without any experience. He covered several of the roaring fires in Texas City and a couple of hurricanes off the Gulf Coast. Six years later, he grew restless and resigned.

He had read a lot about the fabulous Las Vegas and decided to visit there on his way to California and the west coast. He wanted to see the sights from Vancouver, British Columbia to San Diego. On his way to Las Vegas, he had stopped overnight in Albuquerque and was taken with its Hispanic culture and architecture. He inquired about a job with the *Albuquerque Journal* and was told after his visits to the west, they had a job waiting for him. They had an old-timer who was retiring in two weeks, so Nord's timing was just perfect. He continued his journey and had to use real will-power not to lose his savings in Las Vegas. Vegas had too much glitter and commercialism to suit his immigrant character, so he quickly moved on, driving through Idaho, and up the coast through Oregon and Washington and north of Bremerton, entered Canada. Then, down through California and circling back through Arizona to New Mexico.

By the end of his extended trip and the expenditure of a big hunk of his savings, he was happy to settle down in Albuquerque. He found a small furnished apartment on Grant two blocks from UNM and settled in. He was now thirty years old. He had satisfied his urge to see America and eager to get to work. For the next thirty-five years he dedicated his life to his journalistic tasks.

## *Don Crawford*

Three years after settling in the Duke City, he met and married Katherine Gallegos. Over the next six years they had two children; a boy and a girl. He felt he had made a full transition from the Czech Republic.

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The year was now 1999, and Nord had been retired for three years. Some of the recent articles in the *Journal*, which he read every day, described the racial cleansing by the Serbs against the Croats, the United States preparing for the coming millennium, and current prices in Albuquerque. The interest rates were at 8.50%. The average house costs over \$130,000 dollars and rents averaged over \$600 a month. Gas prices were \$1.22 cents a gallon and new cars sold for something like \$21,000. The Dow Jones Industrial Average closed at over 11000 for the first time. In Europe, the Euro currency was introduced on January 31<sup>st</sup>, and in Great Britain the minimum wage was set at 3.60 pounds per hour. Devastating earthquakes had killed over 14,000 in Turkey, and Ford Motor Company had acquired Volvo of Sweden. William Clinton was on his second term as President. The Lewinsky scandal was four years behind him, but predictably it wasn't the last of his libido troubles. And, the world population had passed the six billion mark.

Katherine Gallego had worked for several years as a clerk in the University of New Mexico Book Store. Her parents had come from Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, legally, when Katie was seven years old. Along with her two older brothers, they all became naturalized citizens. The family first lived in McAllen, Texas, where they had crossed over from Reynosa. After several years of struggling to find permanent work, the father moved the family to Albuquerque, New Mexico where he found work in construction. After high school graduation, the two sons joined the Marines and after finishing boot camp were sent overseas. After graduating high school, Katie attended the local community college, gaining her AA degree in Office Procedures. That was enough to secure her a good job at UNM. She enjoyed her job and kept working even after meeting and marrying Nord; a frequent customer of the book store.

When Nord first saw Kate, his heart palpitated. Her long black hair and deep, dark scanning eyes returned his glances. There was something different about her, she told him later. Sensing he was not a born American; like herself, there was natural affinity. Nord's chiseled features, with the strong square jaw and raised cheekbones held her attention. And his blue eyes, intense and searching, was an added plus for her. His curly black hair also caught her attention. She had the body of youth, fine features and, in spite of some reserve, had a friendly, outgoing personality he couldn't resist. Every time he came into the store, he bought more books than he had intended; especially when she was attending one of the cash registers, which he always chose to check out.

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At the *Albuquerque Journal* Nord was assigned the role of writing general interest articles of local events. Throughout his adult years he had smoked over two packs a day, even though Katie had strongly advised him to quit knowing how dangerous it could be. No one in her family ever smoked. The aunt who had brought him to American had died some years later, and he'd lost track of Lavinia. From his earlier years, Nord was of an independent bent and was a man who tried to think for himself. He loved books and read extensively and widely.

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From his Strata-lounger, where he tried to relax when not in bed, he called out to Katie, who was in the well appointed kitchen of the family home located on North Fourth Street, "What's for dinner? Since his diagnosis some eight months earlier, he preferred hot soups to heavy meals, which he found hard to digest. Previously to his illness, he had been a meat and potatoes man and enjoyed his steaks medium rare. Now, all that had changed. He was losing his appetite, along with the fat he'd accumulated over the years. Every time he showered and gazed into the mirror he could see his ribs, which made him shudder. He was literally wasting away.

"I'm fixing corn soup for you with toasted slices of garlic French bread; just be patient." The conversations between them had dwindled to the sharing of a few sparse comments, having nothing of an intimate nature to relate. Nord had retired at age sixty-five and his daily routine was to sleep late, drink hot creamed coffee, his drug of choice, throughout the day after eating half a grapefruit, and one of Katie's muffins for breakfast; usually in silence. Then, he read the paper and snoozed when not reliving his memories until lunch was ready. The only thing that interfered with this routine was his daily bouts of coughing. He could dirty up to a dozen handkerchiefs a day.

His doctor told him his cancer had intruded into his airways, and finally he underwent a *pleurodesis* procedure, which helped relieve the coughing. Fortunately, he had good medical insurance in his retirement. He remained in his blue and white striped pajamas all day and night, and rarely ventured outside. In spite of their occasional spats, Katie took good care of him. His doctor had given him some five to six months of life for his incurable cancer, and that was some eight months ago. He was doing everything he knew to fight his illness. He tried to keep his fear of death to himself, feeling it was a private thing and not to be discussed with his devoted wife, which would only result in disrupting her composure. Besides, he found that long silences were a part of growing old. In old age he lived more in his mind than in his belly. The long standing burr between them was his not following her advice and ignoring her oft-repeated suggestions regarding his health and his diet. Her insistence he eat more vegetables and fruits didn't square with his choice of a diet. This subject was a major theme in their arguments, but as his illness progressed, he succumbed to her wishes.

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As far as he could see his pending death had little obvious impact on Katie, who shielded her emotions regarding his pending death. Perhaps, he thought, it was her stoic nature which she had adopted from her family, whose philosophy was to adapt and adjust and accept whatever came their way. When her father died from a construction job accident, she showed scant emotions. It was only when her mother died shortly after the death of her father, apparently from a broken heart, that she displayed some signs of grief. Her parents were both over sixty. He finally concluded she would probably be glad to see him go; he was progressively becoming more and more of a burden to her. And, he doubted it would have much effect on his children, who had been separated from them too long to have any major impact.

After what seemed like an hour to him, Kate called for him to come to table. Her routine while he ate was to linger at the stove or at the sink and to eat after he'd finished, so as not to embarrass him; he could be sloppy. They now slept in separate beds. After the kids had departed the home, she had moved into her daughter's room. When Nord had been diagnosed, Katie quit her job to stay home to care for him. He had always assumed it was because of her upbringing. She was old-fashioned and duty bound. To be loyal and to fulfill the responsibilities she had assumed came first with her. A modern woman, he thought, would probably have placed him in hospice care, and rationalized any feelings of guilt. Sometimes, when he was feeling compassionate, he was glad she would soon be relieved of caring for him. In his silent way, he loved her deeply in spite of her negative words. For months, they had eased into living in their own thoughts. His long silences kept her silent as well. The main concern Nord had, besides his death, was leaving Katie with enough income from his Social Security, his retirement and the savings he had accumulated over the years from work and the pension given him at the *Journal*, to tide her over now that she had quit her job. He knew she had her own accumulated Social Security and would be eligible for some of his too. The family home had been paid for many years ago and he had the pink slips on the two late model cars, a Volvo and a Corolla, one of which she could sell. The pink slips were with his important papers in his desk. Hopefully, she would be well set and freed from any financial worries when he passed out of her life.

For a period of some years, he had sat at that mahogany desk and wrote short stories; a fair number of which had been printed in national magazines. His sense of modesty kept him from bragging to others that he was a pretty fair writer and journalist. One of his articles had won the Pulitzer Prize. The story was an expose of slave labor and human trafficking right here in Albuquerque. The owners of a group of western states' Chinese restaurants had either abducted or used the scam of having young Chinese girls pay to come to the United States, with promises of a better life and the prospect of marrying some handsome well-to-do gentleman. They were then subjected to years of servitude to work off the \$20,000 dollars or so before being released. The owners used threats against relatives back in China they tried to escape. Years later, a local short story writer had written a fiction piece of the events. It was published in a well known

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journal and had the title: *A Chinese Girl Named May*. Nord had been promoted several times over those long years at the *Journal*, and had ended his career as City Editor. His various articles regarding local events had been published without question, and were not only acceptable but had at times thrilled his bosses.

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As the days and nights evaporated, he steadily declined. The time came when his loss of muscular control made his hands shake so bad he had trouble feeding himself. Katie bought him weighted utensils, like Parkinson's use, and on bad days, he used them with both hands. He began to drink his liquids with a straw, and his meals now consisted mostly of a variety of soups Katie spent many hours preparing to enhance their taste. Corn, vegetables without meat, potato, French onion, and creamed celery were his favorites. He had weeks before given up smoking and to reduce his intake of coffee, which was for him, a major sacrifice.

The passage of a few weeks brought Nord to his bed; too weak now to limp around the house. He suffered constant pain and was prescribed morphine in limited amounts; 15 to 30 mg orally, every four to six hours, or as needed, which relieved most of the acute pain. Katie administered his meds according to the prescribed schedule. He had reached a point where he hardly ate or drank anything. He was wasting away and at times he imagined he could smell himself decomposing. Most of his time now was spent in thoughts of the past; a sort of summing up of his life. Early in his career he'd read extensively in a variety of subjects. The Greek Classics were one of his favorites. He'd read Virgil's, *The Aeneid*; Homer's, *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and studied the Classic Mythologies as well as read those classic stories with lasting value. He'd also delved into a study of the famous named Philosophers, like Hippocrates, Aristotle, Plato's, Socrates, Plutarch, Descartes, Leibnitz, Lock, Spencer, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Sartre, Spinoza, and Bertrand Russell, who had been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1950, and the Old and New Testament. After all that reading he decided that philosophers had failed to fulfill their goals of discovering Life and Truth. His personal library contained many of those books considered the most influential ever written.

The ticking of the side table clock had ceased to be his guide. Instead, the moving shadows in the room told him the time. Beams of sunlight, or rain on the window panes told him the day's weather. And, he had discovered something about time he wanted to tell the scientists. He would nod off for what he thought was a few minutes only to discover when he awoke hours had passed. And, he'd read somewhere that dreamers could experience years of time and events only to awaken and discover they'd slept only a few minutes. He concluded that time, a serious subject with modern scientists, was an illusion of our senses, and limited to the waking consciousness; it didn't exist in dream consciousness.

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At one point, he considered he, like Faust, had sold his soul to the materialistic world for knowledge. Yet he, like Faust, agreed that knowledge is useless unless it reveals the meaning of life. He came to the realization he'd neglected his spiritual side, being like most others, too busy making a living and supporting a household to delve deeply into the great spiritual writings with which he'd either heard about or read small excerpts of; like Confucius, the *I Ching*, the *Upanishads*, Gurdjieff, *Dhammapada* and Buddhism, the *Zend Avesta*, *Rig Veda*, the *Kabbalah*, *Lao Tze*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Sutras of Patanjali*, and other readings in Hermetic and Gnostic philosophy. He had made a point of studying the big names in psychology in order to better understand the human condition. William James, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Abe Maslow, Carl Rogers, Karen Horney, Alfred Adler, Erich Fromm, Erik Erikson and Fritz Perls among others. As far as B.F. Skinner was concerned, depicting humans as robots, they could burn his books. But, in the end, he realized that with the possible exceptions of Maslow and Jung, all of these psychologists were more physiologists; more concerned with the materialistic personality than the human psychic in Man. Psychic meant soul, and modern science was still debating the existence of such a thing.

As the days passed, he grew more and more weary and restless. One late afternoon, when he had to urinate, instead of struggling to get up, Katie held a plastic gallon milk bottle to his penis; this became a daily thing until she bought him, at his insistence, a wheeled potty chair which was kept beside his bed. With his loss of weight, she could easily stabilize him to use it. He hated to subject her to his toilet. It was bad enough she had to periodically cut his fingernails and toenails. Fortunately, they no long grew very fast. She used an electric razor for his face and occasionally clipped his hair, which her mother had done for her father most of their marriage.

He had read that Hemingway, when in the bush, sponge bathed with rubbing alcohol, so he encouraged Katie to do the same for him. By scooting him up to the head of the bed, she could wash his hair with a wash rag and then rinse it out. She had already cut his hair to butch length.

His last days were filled with regret and frustration. He suffered not only the continual pain of his cancer, although modified by the morphine, but with an indisputable conclusion his life has been lived in vain; that overall it had been a useless life; a life wasted on nouns and verbs, things and actions of an finite and ephemeral nature; on worldly phenomena and the concepts of modern science. Instead, he should have been focusing on the eternal, everlasting concepts of brotherly love for all humanity, on right human relationships, and compassion for all living forms. Education should focus on developing the soul within each child, and preparing each student to become a "citizen of the world." The soul was the consciousness of the Christ. He recalled J. Krishnamurti's, advocacy of educating each child to think things through, and to view life with an unconditioned mind. A remark by Proust came to mind: "To bring some light to those who live in darkness."

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True, one valued thing was that he had and did love Katherine, but rued being unable to genuinely show her his affection, buried deep within his heart. That was due to his being orphaned at a young age and his deeply veined general distrust of people and the world growing up in an occupied country, which led him to share only superficially with others. What he had observed throughout his life was how all things come and go; civilizations, earthly creatures, the seasons, changes in technology and the forever shifting ideals of humanity. *What are the truth of humanity and the purpose of our existence? Did anyone really know?* Had he followed a spiritual life from the very beginning, could he now die peacefully knowing there was a worthwhile afterlife and that his worldly life had been lived with a genuine spiritual purpose? His conclusion: the only life worth living was a life dedicated to selflessly serving others with no regard for the self, and not lived selfishly for oneself and one's family. Mother Theresa had perhaps the secret to it all. She fully realized this materialistic world is one of endless pain and suffering, sorrow and misery, and death and dying. If we really knew the Truth of Life, would we still fear death? What was he facing? How desperately he wanted a rightful answer to that question.

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That cold December day a week before Christmas, he awoke knowing definitely it would be his last. He'd refused Katie's offer to bring in a priest to administer the last rites. In his younger years he'd been a Catholic, as was Katie, but after being married for so long he had influenced her to forego regular church attendance. She went alone to church now only on special occasions, like Easter and Christmas. In truth, he doubted she still believed in a personified god, which he had renounced years ago. A literal interpretation of the Bible, and the church's authoritarian attitude, had turned him sour against all western religions. He believed in his heart that any truths in the Bible had to be understood as analogy, allegory and symbolism.

When he opened his eyes, Katie was on the edge of the bed near his side; ready with the morphine pill and water with a straw. "I won't be needing that," and hugged her and kissed her cheeks and tried to smile into her still beautiful face. "Don't grieve for me, honey. And, if it be your wish, find another husband." He was breathing laboriously now, with periodic gasps for air. "You're beautiful, and young, to attract many admirers. Don't be alone unnecessarily . . . maybe go back to work." He hesitated to take a breath. "Have a good life, Katie. Forgive me for all the wrongs I committed against you. I do love you, with all my heart." Again, he sighed and gasped for breath. "I am so very grateful, for your loving care . . . during these trying times." He fought back a tear; gasped. "I really don't want to die . . . but it's a good way to escape all this misery;" a shallow breath. "It's the way of life for us humans. My only regret, I'll really miss you . . . love of my life." He coughed. "Be happy, Katie, live the fullest while you can." He squeezed her

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hands softly, having no more strength. "I hate leaving you . . . Christmas coming. Tell the kids I love em" long pause, "and try to read . . . some spiritual literature." And, with a final sigh, he passed into the afterlife; whatever that might be.

## *Parag Chitnis*

### **Introduction to the Author:**

Parag Chitnis is a short story writer and a scriptwriter. He has written short stories for college magazines, and scripts for short films and video sketches. He has worked as co-director and editor for many short films and a college based sitcom. Graduated from IIT Gandhinagar, he is currently working on his own venture in the field of video content generation.

### **Sharmaji**

(Based on 'A cup of Tea' by 'Katherine Mansfield')

The story began with a vessel filled with boiling milk. Two sweaty hands moved to grab a plastic sugar box with a pink coloured lid. The *chaiwala* added sugar in the boiling milk and replaced the pink lid. Then he picked up another plastic box with the same coloured lid. It had tea powder mixed with some *masala*. Who knows what that *masala* was? The *chaiwala* counted as he added the tea powder in the boiling milk spoon by spoon. The aroma of the *masala* filled in the cold evening air. Sharmaji loves this aroma. Any tea-lover will love it. This aroma- like a soup before a meal- creates, if there's something called, *appetite for tea*. The *chaiwala* took a long spoon and started to stir the milk. The aroma became dense as sugar, tea powder, and the *masala* mixed with the boiling milk. Sharmaji couldn't wait any more for his tea. But, what else could he do? He had to wait. The *chaiwala* continued to stir for what seemed like hours to Sharmaji. Just like a child watching his mom cooking his favourite dish, Sharmaji watched the *chaiwala* stirring the tea. The *chaiwala* picked up a cloth to get the vessel down from the stove. He filtered the tea into another vessel. Oh, the aroma! Sharmaji lost himself in that aroma and came back to reality only when the *chaiwala* had brought him his glass filled with hot tea. He missed seeing the *chaiwala* pouring tea in other glasses which he then handed to the people sitting next to Sharmaji. Anyways, Sharmaji was trying to ignore those people.

Pandeyji, who was sitting next to Sharmaji, continued to talk in excitement, and Sharmaji continued to ignore him. What else could Sharmaji do? Sachin had got out on duck today. Sharmaji heard Pandeyji describing the four Dhoni had hit to finish the match. Sharmaji doesn't like Dhoni. He's a Tendulkar fan. He had little interest in knowing how Dhoni saved the match. Only if Sachin had played well, Sharmaji would have described each of his shot- just like Pandeyji was describing Dhoni's- and tell Pandeyji and others that we can't win any game without Sachin. Oh, God! Sharmaji missed those days. It had been a while since Sachin had lost his form and Sharmaji had lost his interest in sitting with his neighbours for the evening tea and gossip. It seemed like yesterday when Sharmaji had spilled hot tea on his hand while describing how Sachin had scored a double century. He remembered a few more of Sachin's good innings and Pandeyji's voice ceased to exist for him.

The glass that Sharmaji was holding was thick and had tea till its top. He lifted the glass carefully to his lips and took a sip. Ahh! Hot *masala* tea in a cold evening like this! Nothing else

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can refresh Sharmaji's mood after such a terrible performance by Sachin. He felt the hot tea flowing down his throat and then sudden hotness in his stomach.

Trying to avoid eyes of his neighbours, Sharmaji turned his face to another side. He saw people enjoying their *masala* tea and talking- probably about the match. Just like him, everyone else was also watching the match in their offices. Some say their bosses join them too for cricket matches. But Sharmaji's boss wasn't one of them. His boss had a typical 'bossy nature'. Always wears a suit and a tie, never satisfied with Sharmaji's or his colleagues' work, occasionally smiles and rarely praises. No doubt Sharmaji hated his boss.

Sharmaji's eyes caught a new face. That was of a boy around ten year old. He wore a dull grey shirt and a half-pants which could not hide the injury on his left knee. No, the shirt wasn't dull grey. It must have been white when bought. Or maybe the boy had picked it up when someone had thrown it away. Who was he?

The boy went towards one of the men and put his hand forward. The man said nothing but signalled the boy to go away. The boy went to another man to beg. Sharmaji hadn't seen this boy earlier. There was some construction work going on nearby. This boy must be some worker's child. He might have wanted to buy some candy or something, and his parents wouldn't have given him money. So he'd come out on the road and beg for it. Sharmaji found this very fascinating. How can someone just go to a stranger and ask for money? Sharmaji even struggles to ask for holidays to his boss whom he knows well. This boy was something new for him.

This boy reminded him of the story Mishraji from his office had told him. Last year, Mishraji had gone to Banaras with his wife and his mother-in-law. Visiting Banaras was Mishraji's mother-in-law's wish. She'd said she could die peacefully after that. They found a young boy- just like this one- on the streets of Banaras who hadn't eaten for two days. Mishraji's mother-in-law felt pity for him. So Mishraji fed the boy well and gave him good clothes. Mishraji had recalled this episode in front of all the office colleagues with pride. Even their boss had praised Mishraji, though only in one line while smoothening his tie. Sharmaji remembered how Gupta madam- a young colleague in his office- had smiled to show her teeth braces as Mishraji told this story. Sharmaji had never told such episode. He never had one to tell.

The boy in front of him was such an episode. Sharmaji finished his tea quickly and went towards the boy. The boy put his hand forward and murmured something, but Sharmaji couldn't understand it.

"What?" He asked.

"I haven't eaten since morning. Please give me some money." The boy said.

"Where're your parents?" Sharmaji asked curiously.

The boy shook his head and said, "Please give me some money. I'm hungry."

"Come with me to my house. I'll give you food." Sharmaji offered him.

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The boy was startled with this offer. Who would expect such an offer when asked only for a few pennies? Sharmaji liked the surprised expression on the boy's face. Why wouldn't he? He was the reason for that surprise.

"Come on!" Sharmaji insisted putting his hand on the boy's back, "You like cream biscuits?"

The boy nodded keeping his eyes fixed on Sharmaji's smiling face. What was he suspecting behind that face? Maybe a trap. Or a kind hearted man? How could the boy decide?

"I've a whole packet of cream biscuits," Sharmaji said as if he was telling that he had 32 inches TV set.

Considering the boy's half smile as yes, Sharmaji started walking towards his house. The boy, somewhat pushed by Sharmaji's hand on his back, walked beside him.

"Come, don't worry!", "I've food for you. Cream biscuits and chocolates too.", "You drink tea? Or Bournvita?", "That apartment. Not very far na?", "Fourth floor. We've elevator. No need to climb up the stairs." Sharmaji played with different words till they reached the house. He didn't want the boy to change his mind. After all, you don't always get a chance to help others and feel proud about that. Sharmaji knows that there're only a few moments for which people remember you. This was one of such moment for him. The moment for which Sharmaji's boss would praise him and Gupta madam would smile showing her teeth braces.

Sharmaji rang the doorbell of his house. Still keeping one hand on the boy's back he waited looking at the wooden door. Then he looked down at the boy. The boy stared back at him. Sharmaji smiled. The boy smiled back.

Sharmaji's wife opened the door.

"Look, who's with me!" Sharmaji said. Sharmaji's wife was surprised to look at the beggar boy.

"What?" She said.

"This is..."

"Raju," The boy said.

"Yes, Raju," Sharmaji continued, "Come inside, Raju."

The boy followed Sharmaji into the house.

"Get some water for us," Sharmaji said to his wife.

Sharmaji's wife was shocked with all this. Sharmaji never brings anyone to home after the evening tea except for a few occasions. Three months back he'd brought Pandeyji with him to show him the new sofa set they'd bought. And six months before that when they'd put on the new carpet on the floor. But this wasn't any of such occasion to have guests. And this wasn't the proper guest for any occasion.

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“Come inside for a moment.” Sharmaji’s wife murmured in Sharmaji’s ear and went inside.

Sharmaji looked at the boy who was looking around the house while scratching near the injury on his left knee. He smiled and asked, “It’s nice na?”

The boy took a second to understand what Sharmaji was asking. He nodded in response without uttering any word. Sharmaji was about to ask him to sit but then stopped and said, “You wait here. I’ll be back in a minute.”

The boy nodded and watched as Sharmaji walked towards the kitchen.

In the kitchen, where the boy couldn’t see from the hall, Sharmaji asked his wife, “What?”

“What?” Sharmaji’s wife replied in an angry tone, “Who’s that boy? And what’s he doing in my house?”

“Oh come on!” Sharmaji tried to convince his wife, “He just asked for money to buy food. I brought him home. Give him something. Maybe a glass of milk and biscuits. That’s all!”

“Who is he?” Sharmaji’s wife tried to keep her voice low.

“Why’s that important?” Sharmaji asked, “Just give him something to eat.”

Sharmaji’s wife exhaled heavily. Her angry eyes were focused on Sharmaji, and her mouth was tight shut. Sharmaji stared back at her and said, “What’s the big deal?”

“No, nothing. Not a big deal.” Sharmaji’s wife said taking out a metal glass from a drawer. She filled it with water, “He can also have dinner with us if you say,” she continued in a sarcastic tone, “I’ll cook for him too. I’m a chef of your house, right? You can bring anyone here, and I’ll cook for them all without any complaints. First, I’ve to cook for your parents and now for this beggar. God knows whom you will bring tomorrow!”

“What does this have to do with my parents?” Sharmaji asked.

She exhaled heavily again, tried to throw away the anger, and wore a smile on her face as she walked out into the hall to hand the water glass over to the boy. Sharmaji didn’t want to talk to his wife further. So he followed her in the hall. Sharmaji’s wife turned, gave a sharp look at Sharmaji and walked back into the kitchen.

It was too early to start the preparation for dinner. So Sharmaji’s wife had nothing to do. Usually, she would sit on the sofa and watch TV, but as Sharmaji and his new guest were in the hall, she came back to the kitchen. She took out a round plate from the drawer. She put some *Chana dal* in it and started to look for pebbles or something non-edible in it.

After some time, Sharmaji came into the kitchen and said, “That boy is gone. I gave him some money to buy biscuits.”

“Good.” Sharmaji’s wife said in frustrated tone without looking up.

Sharmaji has never been able to understand his wife’s mood. She was angry when the boy was there and now when he was gone, she was still angry. Sharmaji had no solution for this. He

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came out in the hall and sat on the sofa picking up the newspaper which he'd read in the morning. He started to speculate tomorrow's newspaper. Surely, it'd be flooded with praises for Dhoni. Everyone would be talking about how Dhoni saved us and all that. He hoped for nobody to criticize Sachin for his poor performance. He put the paper down. There wasn't anything good in that. Then he picked up his mobile phone and dialled a number. He peeped into the kitchen as he heard the bell ringing on the other side of the phone. His wife was still busy with her *Chana dal*.

“Hey, mom. How're you doing?” Sharmaji said on the phone, “Why don't you and dad come and stay with us?”

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