Again, Nagma looked at the seven-month-old baby in her lap and burst into tears. The infant had been squirming for a long time, hungry, and now was pulling at the dry skin hanging from her breast with its newly sprouted teeth. No milk. But then silence, as if there was some strange delight in nibbling, pulling, sucking at its mother’s flesh—but only momentarily. Then that piercing shriek again.

Inside, a flickering kerosene lamp. In its dirty dim light, a ghostly play of shadows within the small thatched hut. The pots and pans, the earthen vessels hanging from the thatch, the two children, Akhtar and Dulla, leaning against the wall, Sattar sitting with his feet on the chicken coop and head on his knees, and even Nagma herself—all looked like shadows. Using the pillar in the centre as a support, Nagma sat still. Lying next to her outstretched hand was a wicker basket with a few handfuls of puffed rice. Akhtar and Dulla sat quietly, glancing desperately at the rice. They could quickly snatch the basket away. But Nagma had a very sharp tongue and could really scold. In a flash, she would drop the child and pounce on them, raining blows and slaps on their backs and screaming about why there had been a curfew in Cuttack town for the last five days and why Sattar was not going out to pull his rickshaw.
What else could Nagma do! This curfew had turned her to stone. Otherwise, which mother would not give a handful of puffed rice to her children? But the rice puffs were all they had. For five days now, there had been a curfew in the city. It was different for the rich. Their houses were stocked with food. Even when a storm came, they could swing gaily on their high branches like weaver birds. But poor daily wagers, labourers, and rickshaw pullers! At the slightest threat of a storm, like grasshoppers, house sparrows, bats, their worlds were shattered.

At one corner of the house, the chicken coop. Small wooden doors. The hens were calling from inside. Once in a while, flapping their wings, they would move around their enclosure. Yesterday, Nagma had flung in a handful of puffed rice. But what was there today?

Sattar had been resting his feet on the coop and sitting quietly for a long time. He was ignoring the brief remarks that his wife would utter from time to time. He knew that if he took her words to heart, that with his rage and hunger, he would lose his mind and beat his wife to death. What a quarrelsome woman! Is she the only one raising a family? Throughout town, rickshaw pullers were sitting quietly at home. There was no fire in anyone’s kitchen. Everybody’s children were hungry. Who asked you scoundrels to be poor? Go and be born in rich houses. Bloody hell, even if there is a hundred-day curfew, you can have delicious dishes and sweets!

It was better not to talk about the slum. That one could live and survive in such a place was difficult to believe when you saw it. Along the main drain of the municipality in Cuttack was a long line of small huts that all looked alike. About fifty of them. All had dilapidated tin doors, the thatch in disarray. You could see torn baskets, mats, and other odds and ends drying on top. Broken earthen pots and pebbles and, among them, in front of each house—a rickshaw. On some verandas, sewing machines. This neighbourhood had mostly poor people. Some pulled rickshaws, some worked as tailors. Sattar pulled a rickshaw. Before that, he was a pickpocket. Gaffar, Abdul, and then Sania, Panchu, Jagaa from the other street—they all used to pick pockets at the bus stop or in the station. One day, the police caught Sattar and gave him the thrashing of his life, and he gave up picking pockets. Then he worked in a bakery for a few days. Now he had given that up and pulled the rickshaw owned by Mr. Panda, a lawyer.
At the corner of the slum stood Mr. Panda’s house. Three storeys. Next to the tiny houses of the Muslim slum, Mr. Panda’s house looked somewhat incongruous. On occasion, Mr. Panda opened the window of his house and hollered, “Oh Sattar, bring the rickshaw here!” His wife was very nice. On hearing of Sattar’s woes, she had called Nagma and given her work as a maid in the house. From time to time, she would give Nagma puffed rice, flattened rice, dry roti, and old clothes for the children. On the day of the riot, she had called out from her window, “Sattar, be careful, there is a riot in the town.” Then she had called Nagma and given her some roti and rice. The curfew started a few hours later. Everyone shut their doors and waited inside quietly.

Outside, on the road, the police vehicle was on the lookout. Groups of policemen in khaki uniforms were scanning the neighbourhood with guns in hand. Yesterday, Gaffar Mia had been thoroughly thrashed. Since he was a ward member, he had disregarded the curfew and come out on the road. The police had beaten him black and blue.

Nagma suddenly said, “I can hear the mob from around the corner. They must be setting fire to the garage.”

Sattar replied, “Whether it is the garage or our thatch, what can we do? This happens when bad times come. In this town of Cuttack, for hundreds of years, Hindus and Muslims lived like brothers. My grandfather used to sew mattresses. He built this place. Father also did the same thing. But I couldn’t do that kind of work. Under this thatch, I will spend my whole life. Then my son. Then his son. On this side, Panda Babu’s house. Next to it, the teacher Mr. Patnaik’s house. Next, Hamir Mian’s tailor shop. Next, Mukunda Babu’s house. Next . . . Next . . . Hindu . . . Muslim . . . Hindu . . . Muslim. What happened suddenly? Bloody hell, these politicians have eaten up the country!”

Tears filled Nagma’s eyes. She said, “Gaffar is the real scoundrel. And then Razak. Both were inciting others the day before the riot. I heard it. I had gone to the municipality pipe to get some water. Fatima said, ‘These Hindus are not to be trusted. They will drive us out of here. Kill all of us. Gaffar is making hand bombs. Razak got petrol bombs from somewhere. If necessary, he will wipe out the Hindu slum at night.’”

Akhtar and Dulla looked at their mother with pleading eyes. God knows what was going through her mind. She pushed the basket with
the rice puffs toward them and said, “Go ahead, eat it up. Swallow every-
thing. When it is gone, what will you have? Your father has been sitting
at home for five days now. When he was earning, half of it went to his
liquor. Where was the money to save for bad times?”

Sattar went mad. He jumped up from the chicken coop, rushed to
Nagma, and, with his face inches from hers, said, “Let me not hear that
again. I’ll wring your neck. Whose money—yours or your father’s? With
whose money do I drink? It’s my hard-earned money. I’ll do what I want
with it. Who are you to interfere, you bitch?”

Nagma felt furious. But then, Sattar had hardly eaten anything the last
three days. A few drops of rice starch, a dry piece of roti. Nagma knew
that people like Sattar could turn into monsters on a hungry belly. It was
better to keep quiet. She walked out to the veranda and looked out as far
as she could see, all the way to the road. The road twisted and turned and
spread across the entire town. On other days, thousands of people were
on these roads. Children going to school. So many vehicles every day. But
within moments, all was transformed. The entire city was silent—a desert.

She failed to understand. These people lived so close—thatch touching
thatch. They supported one another in times of need. Panda Babu, Raghav
Babu, and, from the other street, Kusunia and Raghav—so much like a
family!

Then why does so much hatred remain hidden inside the human heart?

In a moment, everything had turned topsy-turvy. No one could trust
anyone. The day before the riot, some old people from the Muslim area
had gone from door to door and then moved into the Hindu area. Sattar
had gone along with them. He had promised. He would not allow any
kind of rioting in the street. But the moment the curfew was imposed,
word spread that Mukund Babu had collected an arsenal of knives,
swords, and other sharp instruments, had gathered a group of boys from
the nearby village in his downstairs room. If necessary, he would blow up
the slum. And Nagma had rushed inside, frightened, and shut the door.

Akhtar and Dulla had eaten the rice puffs and had then dug a small hole
in the ground and were playing with marbles in it. Sattar was smoking
a bidi. Nagma looked at him and asked, “Is there no starch water in the
pot? My empty stomach is making my head reel. I can’t imagine how
you manage!”
She forgot the quarrel of the last few minutes and said, “Yesterday, the loudspeaker was announcing that the curfew would be over today. Why, nothing happened!”

“All of them are a bunch of scoundrels, out to cheat the public with lies. Even now, every day one or two houses or shops go up in flames. The police see everything and yet are blind. The culprits go scot-free and the innocent are put in jail. How can the curfew end? Why, today, there was another fight. Someone was stabbed in the belly.”

From the thatch hung pots, pans, and baskets. In them, Nagma had kept some tidbits. When food became scarce, she used whatever was in those nooks. It was the house of a daily wager. A day without work and one had to go on an empty stomach. How could the children understand all this?

Maybe in another two years, Akhtar would start working in a garage and earn his bread.

Nagma started searching in those pots and baskets. But what was there in them? Why did people try to cheat themselves like this? She knew that the rice puffs were the last of the lot. But, then again, that searching among pots . . .

She was suddenly reminded of her mistress, Mrs. Panda. She thought she would go quietly behind the houses. Mrs. Panda was so kind. Maybe she would offer some food. Sattar could never bear hunger.

Behind the houses, it was still quieter, absolutely deserted. Next to their house was Billu Uncle’s house. Nagma held on to the thatch for support and looked at Mr. Panda’s house. Until the day of curfew, the house had worn the look of normalcy. The children were playing on the roof. Her mistress was talking to her from the balcony. But now all the open spaces and the balcony were covered with sheets and blankets. There was no way of knowing what was happening inside. Nagma softly moved nearer. Each of her footsteps was loud to her frightened ears. She finally reached the kitchen window and stood outside it. From inside, the sound of kitchen utensils. Was it the mistress or Bhaskar the cook?

Nagma again looked around carefully. She thought she would put her mouth next to the window and call softly—to Bhaskar or to Sabi, the maid. She peeped inside. No one. She tapped softly.

“Who is it?” she heard Bhaskar’s voice.
“Nagma,” she said. Silence inside. She tapped again. No one responded. She said, “It is me. Tell the mistress I have come. The children have been hungry for days. Anything—a little rice or flour. Somehow, I can manage today. Tomorrow, probably, the curfew will be over.”

Still, no one came.

She rattled the shutter again. And again. And again . . .

Nagma could hear whispers from within. She listened carefully. The mistress was saying, “Poor girl, please, let’s give her some rice.”

But the master said, “No. No use showing mercy to that lot. That scoundrel Sattar is hiding petrol bombs inside his house. He is a friend of Gaffar. Once the curfew is over, I will not let him have the rickshaw anymore.”

Nagma slowly retraced her steps. Standing outside her hut, she thought, Was it really Allah who had created so much hatred and suspicion in human beings?

Sattar was pacing in the house, hands behind his back. Seeing Nagma, he said, “In the prison, I was in a room like this. Tied up. For seven days. Today, I have no handcuffs. But there was food, and I had faith that Mother would definitely get me out of there. Then Mr. Panda, the lawyer, managed to get me out on bail. Somehow, now I have a feeling that this curfew will be endless, and I will never be able to pull my rickshaw again.” Nagma wanted to say something but couldn’t. Mr. Panda would now search for a Hindu rickshaw puller.

Sattar looked at the quiet Nagma again and said, “I am a poor illiterate and cannot speak words of wisdom. But, after reading the Namaaz, I feel as if all the people in the whole world are alike. All children of one God. Only men have created these differences. Tell me, has God stopped the breeze that flows through this great carnage? This same air keeps the Hindu, the Muslim, and the Christian alive. Are you sad because the Mistress didn’t give you a handful of rice? It is not her fault. Because I have a police record, the police still keep an eye on me. How can she believe in me?”

Then Sattar slowly removed the wooden planks that blocked the side of the chicken coop. White and black, grey and brown, hens of all shades ruffled their feathers and spilled out into the hut making clucking noises; on they went to the veranda, digging the earth in search of food. Sattar could feel their rapid movements and their pecking all around him. Raising his hands above his head, roaring with laughter, he said, “Go away.
Nothing to worry about. Roam freely. Peck on the roads, bushes, drains, and garbage dumps—peck away and eat worms and grains, eat your fill. What is the curfew to you? It is made by man for man. Religion is only an excuse here. You have neither religion nor caste nor language that police will shoot at you. Go, shoo, go away. I tell you, go away!"