The Trap

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Shobha stepped out of the kitchen, popped her head around the half-open bedroom door, and looked in. Manu was not in his bed. He was not in the drawing room either. But his moped stood leaning against the wall. Shobha forgot the frying pan on the gas stove and rushed into the drawing room. The door was closed. Thank God. Manu must be in the bathroom then. Shobha rushed back to the kitchen to attend to the frying pan, where something was beginning to burn. She had to finish her cooking, get ready, and reach her office by nine o’clock. Manu would go back to his hostel in two days’ time, and once more, the house would become quiet and empty.

Manu bustled in. “Give me a cup of tea, Ma.” He sat down at the small kitchen table. “Quick, please!”

Shobha threw her son a glance while cooking and asked, “How come you took your bath so early?”

It seemed Manu had no time at all. “A hot cup of tea, Ma! Please!”

“What’s the hurry? Wait a little. I have made alu parathas. Let me fry a few. Have your tea with parathas.”

Manu looked at his mother. She was so busy she did not have the time to look up. He said meekly, “I’ll have my breakfast later, Ma. Let me have just tea now. I’ll be back in ten minutes. Got something urgent to do.”
Shobha turned the *paratha* over and over on the pan, maybe to fry it faster or perhaps to avoid having to say anything.

Manu came up to her. “Come, let me make the tea. Keep the *parathas* covered. I’ll surely return before you leave for the office.”

Shobha knew at such moments that something in Manu’s calm, casual voice made her lose her calm. Blood rushed to her head.

Looking straight into Manu’s eyes, she asked, “Now just where do you have to go? Tell me. Yesterday, on a holiday, you went off God knows where and came back at midnight.”

Manu suppressed a smile while straining the tea. “I was back by ten o’clock, Ma. You were watching TV then, remember?”

Shobha kept her voice low but spoke each word distinctly. “All right, say ten o’clock, then. You come home for just two days. If you don’t like staying at home, why do you come at all? Haven’t you got friends at your hostel?”

Manu sipped his steaming tea. “Why lose your temper for no reason, Ma? Shouldn’t I go out to meet a few old friends?”

Shobha flung the hot *paratha* onto a plate and looked at her son’s face. She saw that he had already left home and was with his friends—no trace of the breakfast or his mother in his face now. She raised her voice as if to make sure he heard her. “So who are these friends of yours, tell me then? Do they care for you? Do they ever come over to your place?”

Manu sat down at the table again. “All right then. I’ll have my breakfast. You cool down now.”

Shobha put a fresh *paratha* on the frying pan. “Friends, friends, friends! Having fun all the time. Why, I never get to see them once you leave!”

Manu couldn’t help a small laugh. “But why should they come here, Ma?”

The next moment, he realized he should never have said such a thing. Shobha exploded. “Of course, why should they come here? It is only you who keeps running after them, to watch a film on their VCR or to have a free meal in a restaurant!”

Manu stopped eating and glared at his mother. “So what? How much pocket money do you give me for films or to eat out?”
Shobha turned around and faced her son, fuming. “What did you say? Will you repeat that? Who is paying for your hostel expenses, for these fashionable clothes you are wearing? Your father?”

Manu left the table. Smoke rose from the burnt *paratha* in the frying pan. Shobha screamed, “Go to your rich father and ask him to buy you a VCR!”

There was no reply from Manu. She walked to the kitchen door and looked into the drawing room. The two-wheeler was still there, leaning against the wall. Manu slammed the bedroom door shut. Shobha shouted after him, “Why take it out on the door?”

She went back into the kitchen and muttered away to herself, “Why spend money and come all the way to spend a few days here? What for? Tell me. I get up before dawn to cook your favourite dishes. I wear myself out at my job to earn money. To cut laundry expenses, I wash and iron your clothes myself. And our lord goes off with his friends to have fun!”

Shobha restrained herself and wiped her tears with the end of her sari. Overwhelmed by a sudden feeling of shame, she realized once again that it was not she who had said all this. Something inside her made her mechanically repeat words she had learnt by rote years ago. She could not say for how long these forgotten words had lain stored up in some recess of her mind. It seemed as if the mind did not take the trouble to find new words when that feeling that was so painfully familiar possessed her. As if an old gramophone record would turn on by itself to play back memories of a long-lost time. It stopped for a moment only when she tripped over some irrelevant words.

“Why is it only me who should be toiling day and night? It is office during the day, cooking and household chores in the evening. I am your maid, right? There for you to use when you please, the way you wish!”

Not only this. The same old replies would hit her ears, as if coming from the same record: “I’ll do as I please, okay? I’ll go where I like. I’ll never come back. Just because you are earning a few rupees, you think you own me?”

It was like a book with the pages all jumbled up.

Shobha put away the frying pan and the dough. Let his breakfast be. She would prepare his lunch before leaving for the office. As it was, it was getting late.
Manu opened a book and tried to focus. He read it aloud, explained it to himself, and took notes. The closed door would not let the wounding words through.

After a long while, Shobha gently opened the door. She stood for a moment holding it. Manu’s face, propped on his palm, was hidden from her view by his left hand. How did it look just now? Was the expression harsh? Shobha grew anxious; deep inside, she felt she was drying up like a damp floor. She felt afraid. Was there a hot breath in her words that hardened Manu’s tender face?

Manu was beginning to look every bit like his father. Whenever he strode into the house in the thin light of dusk, his shoes clicking, Shobha would return to a past that she thought she had left far behind. In those early days, whenever she came upon that tall, fair-complexioned man at the college, or on the maidan, or at a picnic, she would be filled with a strange gratitude for having met him. Even after she made that man her own, became the mother of his child, all her daily vexations, all her memories would melt the moment he walked into the house in the evening, after a day’s absence. His magical presence would pervade her whole being. She would walk up to him, lay her hand on his heart, and tell herself: this man belongs only to me.

But then the dim light of the sixty-watt bulb would intrude, or water would gush out of a broken tap on the unwashed utensils in the kitchen. The man’s face would change, like shifting clouds. He would say, “How long will the cooking take? Let me go out for a stroll. I’ll eat when I come back.”

Shobha knew he would never be back for dinner. The curry would get cold, the neighbouring flats would get quiet, dogs would bark in the street below, drunkards would bawl. Shobha would wait, like the heroine of some old movie, dozing by the window.

If Shobha stopped him, saying, “Why not eat first and then go out? Why must you go out . . . ?”

Then, like a gramophone record spinning round and round, the storm would come. It would lay everything to waste, and, after it subsided, everything would become quiet.

Shobha could no longer recount all she went through in those days. Something would snap inside her, like the locking of a door.
Let it be. That was another time. No more of it.

Shobha went over to Manu. Placing the duplicate keys to the flat on his open notebook, she said, “I am going. If you go out, come back and have your lunch on time. Your examination is close at hand. I was only asking you not to waste your time.”

Manu did not lift his face. He heard the front door close. He now looked at the page he was writing: a few lines from the book had somehow found their way there, without leaving a trace in his mind. He put down his pen. It had been decided that all the friends would meet at Arun’s house. The plan had come to nothing. He glanced at the table clock; maybe there was still time.

He could do what he liked in that little flat on the third floor. There was no one to stop or restrain him now.

In the drawing room, the divan lay in a mess. These days, his mother used it as her bed whenever he was home. She had been so busy cooking all morning that she had not had time to tidy it up. Normally, she couldn’t bear to have the house look untidy. The bedroom was crammed with household articles, with only one bed. Manu would often tell her, “Ma, you sleep in the bedroom. I will sleep on the divan.” But she would not listen. Manu worked at his studies late into the night. The table in the bedroom, the floor, the bed—all would be littered with books within hours of his arrival. Shobha would say, “Why drag all these books from one room to another? You work here. I’ll sleep in the drawing room.”

Manu went into the kitchen. He lifted the lids to find rice, dal, and curry, all laid on the table with care. A burnt paratha in the bin.

He went back to the drawing room and took out a thriller from the bookshelf on the wall. Turning its pages, he wondered, “What makes me come here? I swore never to come home before the summer vacation. So many boys don’t go home during vacations; they would rather go somewhere on an excursion, or for training. But don’t their families miss them? Don’t they want to eat nice, home-cooked food and be fussed over?”

A pattern had established itself over the past three or four years, after he left school and went to college. A letter from Ma would unfailingly arrive within days of his reaching the hostel. She would write, “Home feels so empty now, as if it is haunted. I spend the evenings in friends’ homes and return late. I rarely cook and make do with meals in the office canteen or
in the Marwari hotel. When you come home next, we will put together a nice meal of biriyani and tomato chutney. I have bought a lovely little flower pot. You must get me a good sapling; we’ll plant it.”

The letter would make him feel as if someone’s life had come to a stop for his sake. An awkward heaviness would overcome him. Ma, who was so full of life, so full of joy, seemed to have turned into a block of ice. She lived like a bird with its wings lopped off in that cramped two-room flat. For her, life would return only if he would come back.

The warm house of his childhood came often to Manu’s mind, like a half-remembered dream. It had all vanished so suddenly, dissolved into nothingness overnight, as though a pitiless hand had flung off the blanket from his body on a freezing night. The frail boy had found himself engulfed in the dark bitter cold. The terror had not lasted long, though. Ma had gathered him into her arms, covered him with her sari end, and made him forget the secure comfort of the warm blanket. But it was also she who would shake him so rudely, telling him, “See what I am doing for you? I freeze myself to keep you warm. And you drop off to sleep as though it was nothing!”

When he would visit other households, they often prompted thoughts of his own inadequate home. The emptiness inside himself would make him reach out to them, wanting to be part of the cheerful bustle of their world—hankering to get close to whoever was near, seeking some simple warmth that his mother would never grant him. She would only ceaselessly remind him of his own drab, joyless home and punish him for running away from it.

In the days before he’d left for college, when he had had to stay up all night to prepare for his final school exams, Shobha would come into his room and fondly stroke his hair. “Study well, my son, work hard. Build your life with your own hands, and show them all what you can do.” Manu, for his part, had dreamed of great results, of getting into a famous engineering college. And then a new life away from this stuffy two-room flat! No more of its thousand rules, no more lashings of his mother’s words.

Then he would look around guiltily. The light would be on in the next room, and Shobha would be dozing, a book open before her. He knew she would not listen to him if he told her to go to sleep.
When at last his dream came true and the time came for him to go, he found the pain of leaving his mother and her busy, overburdened world unbearable. Guilt overwhelmed him. When she placed a consecrated flower behind his ear, he broke down and wept like a child.

“I won’t go away leaving you alone, Ma,” he had sobbed.

Shobha had managed a smile somehow and said, “Stupid boy! Look, how he cries! Such a grown-up fellow! Does one talk like this at such an auspicious time?”

In spite of all the newness of his college life in that distant city, he counted the days and came home before the Puja vacation began, combining the stray holidays of 15 August and Janmastami with the weekend to extend his stay. His unexpected arrival did not give Shobha a chance to wear her usual armour and, taking him in her arms, she broke into tears.

Within a day or two, however, the sweet warmth of home turned sour and suffocating. Manu felt desperate to get out into the open. It was not only his spending time with friends that his mother resisted. In that tiny two-room flat, he tripped over her words at every step. Her life was surrounded by a tangled skein that she could never unravel, so all her relationships got twisted and knotted up.

At her office, Shobha was known for hard work. Today, like all other days, she left behind the person within her, and the moment she shut the door and stepped onto the road, all she could feel was pity, even contempt, for that lonely self trapped there. She looked upon all the people swarming around her as mere empty shells with their selves locked up elsewhere.

Today in the office, preparations were afoot to organize a farewell party for a senior officer, Mr. Saxena. Each person was to donate fifty rupees. Shobha bluntly refused: “Why should I give fifty rupees? I never got on with that man.”

Her pencilled eyebrows dancing, Sudha Verma said sweetly, “Why dwell on these things now, madam? Shouldn’t we forget the past at a time like this? After all, Mr. Saxena is leaving us for good.”
Shobha replied curtly, “If the time to forget the past has arrived, why should I pay fifty rupees?”

Sudha stole a sidelong glance at her colleague as if to say, “I told you so, didn’t I?” Now her colleague took it up, like a relay race, pleading, “Please give the matter a little thought, madam. There will be a party. We will all get together. There will be a feast and all of us will have fun. Why won’t you come?”

Shobha fixed her eyes for a moment on that young know-it-all and said with clenched teeth, “I’m not going to come because this is no ordinary party. It is in honour of Saxena.”

She heaved a sigh of relief when the two left her office. Why should she allow them to have it their way? You allow anyone to impose his will on you and he will exploit you. She had learnt by now that unless one had the courage to watch the smile on the other’s face fade, one could never live one’s own share of life.

She admitted to herself that lately fewer and fewer people had time to share with her. But she also knew well by now that people engrossed in their own worlds could spare little feeling for others. Anyway, did anyone really share the sorrows of others? Who didn’t get a sense of relief the moment one uttered a word of sympathy at someone’s distress? And why should she, who was no better than a criminal in the eyes of others for having broken the norms of accepted conduct, expect anybody to stand by her? One would presume she had sacrificed her right to happiness.

Only one person remained now in her world. It was Manu. That is the reason Shobha would relax all the hidebound rules and norms of conduct that she had so painstakingly framed for herself.

Would Manu take his food today? Would he go out to meet his friends against her wishes? Or would he stay back in the flat to study? The poor boy had come home for only a few days. What would he do all day in that cubbyhole of an empty flat?

She felt angry with herself, and guilty as well. Why should poor Manu be served up so much poverty, grief, and loneliness in life, which rightfully belonged to her? Having embarked on a life so full of possibilities, so laden with hope, Manu had been cruelly denied everything he deserved. If only that man had not walked out on her, whatever else might have happened, Manu would surely not have felt so small before his friends.
The pain of seeing her neat little home fall apart and the anguish of betrayal no longer hurt her. The memory of that man was also beginning to fade. Now, he was but another face in the crowd. The two of them had shared a life together for a while, showering all that they had on each other. Then came the fights—scratching and biting like two alley cats. Today, she felt it was all over and done with. Let him have his life, she should live hers.

But what of Manu? At least he could have had a better life. How unfair that with a broken home, he should also live in fear of what people said and in dread of tomorrow.

There were times when taking care of Manu and his future, all by herself, had seemed too much for her. More than once she had even written to that man, knowing all too well that he had started a new life with another woman. Shobha had written, “Whatever happened is past now. We have moved beyond love or enmity. We don’t share our happy or sad moments anymore. But Manu belongs as much to you as to me. Can you disown him? Can you have the heart to deny him his rights and forget your responsibilities?”

She had felt ashamed after sending that letter. Yet she had waited for a reply. None came. Days became weeks, weeks months. She felt belittled, humiliated. Finally, she tried to find solace by telling herself, “In a way, what happened was good. Whatever God does is for the best. Who knows, if he had replied to my letter, re-established a relationship with his son, Manu might have gradually felt drawn toward his father. No, as long as I can, I’ll do all I can for him. And no one except me will have any rights over him.”

But Shobha’s will soon failed her. Once, when she came down with a high fever, she sent Manu, with his satchel, to school with the maidservant so as not to let her pain shock him out of his child’s world. She tossed in bed all alone and talked in a delirium. The maidservant brought her medicine and left milk, bread, and a glass of water by her pillow.

When her fever broke, she sat down to write a letter, her head still heavy from the sickness. She wrote, “Who knows, something may happen to me suddenly. Who will look after Manu if you won’t? I don’t for a moment suggest that you take him home. That is no longer possible. Manu, for his
part, may not like it. All I want from you is your word that you will take care of him until he is able to stand on his own feet."

No reply came. It was as if she were carrying on a conversation with a dumb ghost. She reasoned with herself, “If he really had died and become a ghost by now, wouldn’t I be taking care of Manu? Aren’t there women, much younger than I, who shoulder heavier responsibilities? Because that man is still alive and is able to earn a living, I feel tempted to seek his help. Why can’t I simply forget about his existence?”

Eventually, the tender core of her being, which had survived so long, began to dry up and harden like a summer root. The experience had nothing to do with a feeling of pique born of love; it was simply an awareness of growing desiccated, of dying a slow death.

Friends like Rabi who, in those happier days, used to bustle into the house at any hour of the day, hailing her as sister-in-law and helping themselves to food in the kitchen, now gave her a perfunctory smile when they met and asked casually, “How are you getting on?” Once Shobha ran into Rabi, just outside her office. “You come to my office and go away without meeting me? Are you scared that I might ask you to do some work for me?” she asked him. Rabi said, looking down at his shoes, “No. No. It’s not like that.”

As if she did not want to let him off so lightly, Shobha persisted. “All right then. Let’s go to the canteen and have coffee.”

Rabi cast anxious glances at the passersby and said, “Some other day, sister-in-law, and not coffee at the canteen. I’ll come to your place and have a full meal.”

Friends, old and new, would still come to her house, but it was not quite the same. Some friends had drifted away. Others tried to get closer, but there was always something strained, almost brittle, about that closeness. At her moment of need, none of her friends ever said, “Don’t worry, I am with you.” She would get a sermon instead: “Shobha, you have to be strong and fight the world!”

Those relationships only made her life more complicated, more difficult. In the days before that man left, she could nod at her neighbours on the staircase; she could approach them if she needed change for a hundred-rupee note, or a thermometer. But these days, they behaved as...
if they had never known her. And Manu’s small sad face, she noticed, was beginning to look even more troubled and restless.

In the past, friends like Mrs. Ray used to invite her over whenever she tried out a new recipe. But these days, if Shobha called on her, she would hastily offer her a cup of tea and say, “We have to go to so-and-so’s house.” And if Shobha talked with Mr. Ray, his wife would watch the face of one and then the other.

Human nature, which had once seemed like a rich, verdant expanse, now looked arid and fissured.

Of course, as the years went by, so many things became clearer with distance, like a riddle getting solved. Shobha no longer felt that unbearable anguish. She even brought herself to forgive all her friends and neighbours, to some extent.

In the beginning, she had taken every care not to let his father come near Manu. This was not merely for fear of losing Manu but also to deny that man, if possible, any kind of happiness. For the relationship did not end with the divorce: a blazing thread of jealousy, hate, and anger had bound her to him for a long time. Now Shobha often wondered if that fire had destroyed the bond that linked Manu to his father.

This should never have happened. Something went wrong somewhere. Manu had suffered a lot and lost so much. Was she to blame for this?

When Manu was a child, she had made a point of talking about the good qualities of his father, about happier times they had spent together, so as not to let Manu grow up believing that his father was a devil. The man was a stranger now. Why rake up the ashes of love and hate? Only Manu mattered to her now. Let that man fade out of her life.

But could that really happen? Manu was quickly growing tall, looking like a man. A look-alike of his father. He no longer obeyed her—he had started thinking on his own, acting as he pleased.

One day, Manu opened the newspaper and exclaimed, “Have you seen this photograph, Ma?”

Of course, Shobha had seen it, but she was so flustered, she could not show it to Manu. She did want him to see it and know that he was the son of no ordinary man. Now, seeing Manu’s bright excited face, the familiar seething anger engulfed her. She asked coldly, “Whose photograph?”
Manu gulped and lowered his eyes. “Papa’s,” he said. But his face did not betray any sign of shame or awkwardness, even for the benefit of his mother.

Shobha clenched her teeth and pretended to be busy with her work and not to have heard him. But while serving rice to Manu, her self-control gave way and she remarked acidly, “I see you remember your father very often these days.”

Thoroughly discomfited, Manu tried to explain. “I just asked because I saw the photo. His name is printed below.”

“When did I say you should not? What’s wrong in feeling proud of one’s father?”

Manu went on eating in silence. Shobha repeated what she had said on so many occasions. “I do want you to regard him as your father. I also want him to accept you as his son. Just because he and I now mean nothing to each other, his own blood should not become a stranger to him.”

Manu did not say anything. Shobha continued: “In fact, when you grow up, you should demand that he recognize you as his son. I’ll feel happy if you do so.”

Shobha watched her son’s face. It gave nothing away. What is passing through his mind? Is he hiding something from me? She asked, “Why don’t you eat? You told me that it has been ages since you had potato-postak fries. Listen. There’s something I haven’t told you. I did write to your father several times, for your sake. Years ago, when I came down with typhoid and thought I was going to die, I wrote asking him just to drop me a line assuring me that he’d look after you in the event of my death. He didn’t even bother to reply.”

She noticed how Manu winced, as if he had received a stinging slap. The face that had glowed with excitement a few moments ago now had a stricken look, bent over the plate of food. Why had she said all this? Something wrung her heart.

A feeling of guilt kept troubling her for days afterward. One day, trying to sound casual, she suggested to Manu, “My dear boy, you are grown up now. Shouldn’t you go and see your father in his office on your own? He won’t throw you out if he recognizes you!”
Manu looked at her as if he could not believe his ears. Then he burst out, “What are you saying, Ma? That I go on my own, uninvited? Are you out of your mind?”

“It’s not that, Manu. He is human after all. We lived together as man and wife, set up a home together. You played on his lap, he looked after you in those days. You were so little at the time—you’ll hardly remember anything now. He would take you for a ride on his scooter, rock you on a swing in the park, hold you in his lap. You know, he would feed you ice cream and lick away the drips from your lips. When you were ill with pneumonia . . .”

“Stop it, Ma, please. I don’t want to listen to all this. Don’t people get attached even to pets and fuss over them?”

“Don’t say that, my son. You don’t remember those days, but I do!”

“How is it that he forgot all that? Has he ever bothered about me?”

Shobha wanted to say, “Yes, he did,” but the words would not pass her lips; she swallowed them, turned her face away so as not to get caught. How could she confess that his father had not only inquired about him, but that he had tried all sorts of tricks to take him away from her? How he had begged her to let him hold Manu in his arms for a while! In those days, Manu was no longer a link that held them together; he had turned into a sharp dagger that could be used by one to hurt the other. But these things were best forgotten. Why should Manu know about them? All her suffering, her sacrifice, would come to nothing then.

Manu must grow up and settle down. All her worries would be over then. Her days would be relaxed again. But these very thoughts brought a feeling of emptiness with them, and a sort of fear—her fear and worry that Manu was now growing up to be a man.

On returning home from her office, Shobha heaved a sigh of relief when she saw the moped leaning against the wall. Inside, Manu lay fast asleep, a book lying open beside his pillow. Near him were two empty teacups and a little bowl containing a few peanuts.
Shobha did not want anything to shatter the serene joy of this moment. She tiptoed into the house, changed quietly, and went into the bathroom to wash. On her way home, she had picked up samosas and jalebis from a sweets shop. She arranged them on a plate and brought it to Manu’s room. He still lay asleep—was that a faint smile on his face? Maybe he was somewhere having fun with his friends.

With a deep sigh, she thought to herself, “Don’t I know he can’t be placed under restrictions anymore! Why am I being so foolish? Not just foolish—in Manu’s eyes, I’m no better than a harridan!”

When Manu was home during his last vacation, at one such moment of fulfillment, Shobha had told him, “I’m going to ask you to do something for me. Swear that you’ll do it.”

His attention divided between a magazine and some sweets, Manu had replied from his chair, “Okay, I will.”

Flustered, Shobha said haltingly, “If he ever comes to claim you as his own, please don’t say no to him. It will only do you good, believe me. And I will be able to live in peace.”

Manu raised his eyes for a moment to look at his mother and then just smiled, as if amused. The matter had ended there.

His response had bothered Shobha for days, and it showed through her gestures and words. On some pretext or other, Manu had left for his hostel long before the vacation was over.

Shobha called out, “It’s already dark, and you are sleeping! You’ll fall ill.” Manu opened his eyes, stretched himself, and cheered up when he saw the snacks on the table. Without a word, he stuffed a samosa into his mouth.

Shobha scolded him in mock anger. “Tut, tut, eating before washing your face and hands? Now where are you off to?”

Manu turned around and replied, “You eat, I’ll get the tea.”

Shobha settled into a chair and stretched out her legs on the bed. Breathing in the air from the ceiling fan, she told herself, “I’ll make him go out after he finishes eating. Why should he spend the whole day cooped up inside the house?”

From the kitchen, Manu asked, “Did you take a lunch box today, Ma, or did you manage with dosas from the canteen?”

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Shobha only laughed a little. Manu brought in the tea on a tray and asked, “Have you seen how I have rearranged the drawing room?”

Shobha laughed again.

Manu handed her the teacup and announced, “I’ll pack my things after this. I have to go tomorrow.”

“Where?” Shobha asked, somewhat stunned.

Sipping his tea, Manu said casually, “To the hostel. Where else? Manoj came here today. He said he had called the college and learnt that the strike has been called off.”

Shobha looked hard at his face, which seemed half-buried in the teacup. Then she said in a thick voice, “Fine. Go, if you want to.”

Manu lifted his face and gazed at the front door as if he was measuring its dimensions. Then he said, “I am not going because I want to, Ma. I’ve got to go. My classes begin tomorrow.”

“That’s fine. I said you could go. Who is stopping you?”

Manu slowly shifted his gaze to her face. She seemed to be busy examining the paint on the wall and did not seem interested in interrogating him. Manu said, “I’ll miss my classes if I don’t leave tomorrow. The semester examination is less than a month away. I’ll do badly if I don’t go now.”

Shobha knitted her eyebrows. “All right. There is no need to shout. No one is stopping you.”

“You think I’m leaving home on a false pretext. I know that’s what you think. All right, then. I won’t go tomorrow.”

Shobha picked up the empty cups and said, “What difference does it make whether you are home or not? I have so much work to do, I get no rest at all. You just give me a headache. I have come home after a tiring day at the office. Let me have a rest. You may go wherever you like.”

Manu promptly went out, riding his moped. Shobha closed the front door behind him. Turning back, she noticed that the divan had been rearranged. The new bedcover, which she and Manu had bought at the emporium, now lay spread over it. The picture on the wall, the images in the niche, had all been arranged in a new order; they all looked polished and dusted. Shobha sat down on the divan and pressed her face against her palms, holding her sari end. Fate is playing a mean trick on me, she thought. Again and again that man is trying to scare me from
inside Manu’s looks. He is trying to plant in my future an image of a beautiful past whose ruins I remember.

It was eight o’clock when Manu came back home. Shobha opened the door to let him in; then she went back to her cooking in the kitchen. Manu followed her, humming a tune, and rummaged in the fridge. He took out a few cucumbers and tomatoes and chopped them to make a salad. Then he said, “Manoj promised he’d phone again to get more information. But he was not home when I went to see him. Must have gone somewhere.”

Shobha said nothing. Manu garnished the salad with a green chili and some coriander leaves and covered it with a plate. He wondered what he should do next. He wanted to spend these few hours before his departure free of conflict with his mother. Unable to decide what to do, he went to his study table.

After a while, Shobha came in. Patting his back, she said, “Come, let’s eat.”

Manu got up, looking nervously at her face. She looked so small, and her face was engraved with lines. Her eyes looked swollen and red. She looked at his face, a foot above hers. Hers was not the face of a self-assured mother; it could have been the beseeching face of a child.

Manu wanted to find a way of apologizing to her, but before he could say anything, she entreated him, “Forget what I said, Manu. Please don’t hold it against me.”

To Manu, the woman who took his hand and led him past two small rooms into the kitchen was both a frightened little girl and a middle-aged woman carrying on her frail shoulders the burden of a thousand worries.

While she was serving the food, Manu said apologetically, “I’m sorry, Ma. Believe me, I really went out to meet Manoj.”

Shobha sounded relaxed, “I could not prepare any sweet snacks for you—there was no sugar left. I’ll make you some savoury snacks instead to carry back to your hostel.”

The food got stuck in Manu’s throat. He realized that his apology had been cut off.

“Have your clothes been ironed? Two pairs of trousers are still to be pressed.”

“I’ll do it. Don’t worry.”

“You have eaten nothing, Manu. Have a little rice pudding.”

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“I don’t feel hungry at all.”
“You slept during the day, that’s why. You are leaving tomorrow—you should have gone out to meet your friends.”
Manu scrutinized his mother’s face, trying to figure out whether her words were barbed.
After her work in the kitchen was done, Shobha came and sat in the drawing room, with a steaming cup of coffee. She picked up a magazine from the side table, dropped it, and called out, “Manu, have you gone to bed or are you packing your suitcase?”
“No, Ma. I only brought a bag. I’m doing a bit of reading.”
“You are leaving tomorrow. Come, let’s sit and talk a while.”
Manu replied after a brief pause, “Let me read for an hour, Ma. I haven’t touched a book for the last four days.”
“You will work hard at your studies when you are back at the hostel. Come to me, my darling. Are you still cross with me?”
Manu got up, heaving a sigh. The day he had arrived home, he had promised to himself that he would finish these two chapters. He had not been able to finish even one.
Yawning, he sat down beside her on the sofa and said with a smile, “You are drinking coffee. You’ll soon complain you’re not getting any sleep.”
Shobha had washed her face with soap and tied her hair into a tight bun. Her face looked fresh, like that of a ten-year-old.
She said, “Manu, my dear, I had a talk with Mr. Kachru about you. He has promised to get you a good job if you can secure a first. The job has good prospects.”
Confused, Manu ran his fingers through his hair and said, “Let me first finish my studies, Ma. The course is very demanding.”
“I am sure you will do well, my boy. You have no reason to worry. If you can’t do it, who can? I know you can do anything you want.”
These words sparked a secret resentment in Manu’s heart. How effortlessly, in those few words, had she transferred the burden from her shoulders to his! He looked at her. She sat there hugging her knees as if she was warming herself by a fire on a winter night.
But soon the glow of happiness on her face also spread to Manu’s, without his awareness. He asked, “What job are you talking about?”
Among the many high-rise buildings of that lane, the light from just one flat remained on at that hour of the night. As the lights had gone out one after another, the small rectangles of darkness had grown larger and larger until whole buildings were engulfed by the darkness. Only one square of light lingered on, and so many visions of happiness were forming with in it.

Shobha said, “We can do without a vehicle. First we must buy a flat, don’t you think?”

Manu smiled. He shook his head with mock gravity and asked playfully, “But our plan was to get a VCR first, wasn’t it?”

Shobha said, “Because you’re away, I thought of buying a VCR so that I could pass my time. If you stay with me we should first find a nice flat, on an instalment basis, somewhere.”

Manu added, “Not just somewhere. It has to be in a good neighbourhood. You should have a large wardrobe in your bedroom, and big breezy windows overlooking green trees.”

Shobha broke into laughter. Her shoulders shook as if the laughter was little balls in her throat. The barking of dogs, the watchman’s whistle in the street below, nothing could reach her now.

“And your daughter-in-law will bring all the household articles. What do you say to that?”

“Naughty boy! You’ve started looking so far ahead? But the girl should be good-natured, that’s all I pray God to grant us.”

“What do you mean? You sound as if no good-natured girl will consent to marry me.”

The smile on Shobha’s face suddenly faded. “It’s not that, my dear. I’ve no doubt that the three of us will live together happily. Do you think there would be any girl in the world who could get along with me?”

“How can you imagine a girl not liking you, Ma?”

“You’re bluffing, Manu. Just like your father.”

“Please, Ma. Don’t say anything. Just listen to what I’m saying . . .”

The neglected cactus in the flowerpot on the windowsill had a tiny red blossom that day.

“I’ll go on a pilgrimage after all my worries are over, Manu.”

“Don’t say ‘pilgrimage.’”

“What do you mean?”
“Say that we will take a trip to some place. We’ll travel. Where do you want to go? Badrinath? Kedarnath?”
“That would be excellent.”
“But you would have to walk a lot, in the cold, on snow . . .”
Shobha smiled and said, yawning, “You always talk big, Manu, just like your . . .”
Her eyes became heavy although she tried hard to keep them open. The scenes shifted rapidly. Tall green trees reached toward the sky. Among them, a little girl danced away, her feet barely touching the ground.