This time, it was a brief visit to a small town located some three hundred kilometres from Bhubaneswar. I had come here on urgent business. I had to return that night and did not have much time to spare on leisurely engagements. I stood on the pavement of the market street with a close friend of mine who happened to be distantly related to me, looking perfunctorily at the stationery shop on the other side of the street. There was quite a rush of customers in the shop at that hour.

Suddenly, my eyes caught sight of a man who stood with his back turned toward me. He was dressed in an elegant and expensive outfit. A lady stood near him, facing the counter, selecting from the items displayed before her. Even from the back, the couple looked quite familiar. Since I was a little pressed for time, I asked my companion to wait for me on the roadside and hurried toward the shop, squeezing my way through the crowd. The familiar-looking elderly couple was coming out of the shop as I was about to step inside. We faced each other, and I had a close look at them. What a happy surprise! “Preeti Apa and Naba Bhaina!” The words automatically burst out of me as I joined my palms together to greet them.

Preeti Apa and I had once taught in the same college. Despite the difference in our ages and in the subjects we taught, we were good friends. Her husband, a top-ranking officer in the administrative services, was
also very fond of me, not just because I was close to Preeti Apa but also because, like me, he was a writer. A common interest in literary pursuits had contributed to bringing us all together. The bond of affection that tied me to Preeti Apa and Naba Bhaina was, I felt, stronger than the tie that binds people related by blood.

Both of them were delighted at this unexpected meeting. “What brings someone like you, from the capital city, to a town in a tribal area?”

“It is the sole privilege of administrative officials to enjoy the greenery and the innocent, flawless beauty of the people here, I suppose?” I retorted good-humouredly. “Others can’t have a share in it?”

Naba Bhaina smiled appreciatively. “Quick-witted as always, aren’t you! I know that no one can counter a remark the way you do. Yours is a special style, be it in speech or in writing.”

With a shy smile, I changed the topic and turned to face Preeti Apa.

I always greeted them with similar effusiveness, but at that particular meeting, there was something more. The greeting was blended with a sense of thankfulness that made it even more cordial. I had asked Naba Bhaina for a favour a few months back. I had, however, made the request on behalf of a friend who was more than a younger sister to me. She was the same friend whom I had left waiting on the roadside when I went across to the shop to meet Preeti Apa and her husband. For a man with his clout, the job was child’s play.

It all happened like this.

A few months back, the poor lady, a primary school teacher by profession, was transferred to a school for tribal people in the city in which I live and work. But before she had completed a year here, she received notice that she was going to be transferred to another school, this one located in a remote rural area. Her husband had been posted to another town, but she was living here with her three small children—one daughter of five, another of three, and a son, who was the youngest. The boy suffered from a malady that kept him confined to bed. He was in constant need of nursing and care. My friend was aware that living in this town meant paying more house rent and spending more on routine requirements. It was a big challenge to run the household and to provide the medical aid her son needed with the meagre salary of a schoolteacher. But she was brave and efficient, and a mother above all. The well-being of her
children is a mother’s first priority. No mother would, at any cost, choose to compromise the health and happiness of her children. She knew that in the rural area to which she was being transferred, her son wouldn’t get the medical care that he got here. So, despite all the disadvantages, she preferred to stay here.

The transfer order had left her in a state.

Shortly after she came to know about her transfer to that distant place, I went to the college on some official work and ran into Preeti Apa. She embraced me fondly and, without asking what had brought me there, said, “Do you know, Papa’s wife has given birth to a son!” Her face shone with joy and excitement as she spoke.

Papa, Preeti Apa’s son, had been my student just a few years back. That boy, Papa! Now a father!! I was amazed. With what great speed time gallops on, always carrying fresh riders on its back! And old ones like us are left behind, dismissed from the race of life.

“Try to find time to come and see Papa’s son. He’s a very pretty baby,” Preeti Apa said. Her genuine request made me realize how small my heart was to hold such great love. “Sure,” I replied, smiling happily, “I shall try my best. It all depends upon how much time the job takes today.”

The bell rang. Preeti Apa had a class. She once more reminded me about making a visit to their place. She smiled her usual sweet smile and took leave of me. I stood there for a while looking after her, admiring her modesty. She was the wife of a top-cadre administrative officer. She had everything a woman could ask for. Life had gifted her with the luxury and lavish lifestyle that very few people can even dream of having, but there was not the slightest trace of snobbishness or arrogance in her character. The unalloyed affection she showered on me always made me feel as if I were one of the family.

I was free by early afternoon. I knew that neither Preeti Apa nor her husband would be home at that hour, so I postponed the plan of visiting them until evening. Since I had some free hours on my hands, I decided to meet this young friend of mine, who lived within walking distance of the college. She received me with a welcoming smile, but there was no life in it. I could sense that she was in a disturbed state of mind. Something had drained all the liveliness out of her. When I asked about it, she told me about her transfer to the school in a far-off village. “It is not even a year
since I joined this school. This order came just when I was about to settle here. There are no good doctors in that jungle area. I won’t find medical facilities for my son. How can I take proper care of this boy in a place like that? This transfer is going to cause me serious trouble,” she said with desperation in her voice.

The note of despair upset me terribly. “Another transfer? So soon?” It was as if I were asking myself the question.

“You know how it is, don’t you? You have a job, too. But of course, yours is one of the superior kind. Those like me in lower-paying jobs are destined to live through such ordeals. Particularly the ones who do not have access to the people at the top—they suffer the worst.”

“What does that mean?”

“I mean contact or close association with high officials in the government. I am telling you that this transfer is done only with an intention to make money. Why in the name of God should I be transferred when no substitute is posted here? You know, my father is a schoolteacher, as is my father-in-law. My husband and I are both teachers, too. An ideal teacher’s job is to set a good example. Society will collapse if a teacher commits the dishonest act of bribing somebody. I cannot do that. It is against my principles.”

I knew my friend well. She could be extremely stubborn when it came to principles. I had to work out an effective compromise that would best suit the situation. “Who is the officer dealing with this case?” I asked after a moment. She told me. I was overjoyed when I heard the name. The officer was none other than Naba Bhaina. It was he who would decide her fate.

“Stop worrying,” I reassured her. “Your problem will be taken care of, be sure of that. Tell me who now has the transfer file.”

“Just him,” she replied, her voice rising with hope. “I went with my son to meet the collector and explained my difficulties. The collector asked him to look into the matter, but nothing has happened yet. I’m afraid there is something phony about the whole business. Maybe the collector too is a party to it.” She paused a little, and then asked, “Isn’t he a writer? You, too, are a writer of repute. He may oblige you if you make a request to him. I feel that I have been a victim of grave injustice. Don’t writers in all ages speak out against injustice? Don’t they strive to uphold truth? I don’t think your dignity would be diminished if you were to advocate a
little in my favour, nor would it hinder his pursuit of truth if he makes an effort to help me.”

She is right, I thought, as I listened to her argument. It is a fact that writers, in all ages, have protested against injustice. It was they who established truth and made justice triumph over wrong. Great writers of the past like Tolstoy, Gorky, Premchand, Fakir Mohan, and many others have endeavoured to explore the depth of a human thought and build a well-regulated society, a society founded on noble values. Many of them succeeded in their efforts, too. Aren’t the writers of today the worshippers of truth like those of the past? I asked myself. If writers are the true progeny of such great characters, I reasoned, Naba Bhaina must have that spirit of truth and sympathy in him.

Before I met this young friend of mine that day, I was of two minds about whether to postpone my visit to Preeti Apa’s house to some other time. But the trauma my friend was going through settled the matter. Sharing your sorrows with a sympathetic soul always comes as a great relief. It often helps you discover new solutions to your problem. I decided to give it a try.

“Come with me to Preeti Apa’s house this evening. I shall introduce you to Naba Bhaina,” I suggested. She agreed readily.

Leaving her son in the care of the housemaid, we left for their house at about half past five. On our way, we bought an expensive toy for Preeti Apa’s grandson. The weather was not very cheerful. The slightly cool wind of late November caressed us.

High-profile people have a special procedure for receiving visitors. A dog started to bark uncontrollably as we entered, as if it had smelled a thief. Somehow, we reached the door and pressed the bell. A man opened the door and looked at us questioningly. We gave him our names and he went inside, leaving us standing at the door. He returned after some time and invited us to come in. We followed him to a well-furnished drawing room. Naba Bhaina came into the room, his face lit with a friendly smile, and welcomed me affectionately. With what seemed to be sincere interest, he asked how I was doing and so on. But none of this bonhomie, I observed, was addressed to the young friend who sat near me. Naba Bhaina did not even glance at her, as if it would disgrace his status if he inquired about the well-being of someone he didn’t know.
I felt ill at ease and was unable to decide how to broach the subject. Something inside tugged at me, keeping me from speaking out about the problem that had brought me there. How can I steer my selfish motive through the surging tides of such unblemished love? I asked myself. Preeti Apa was somewhere else in the house.

I introduced my friend to Naba Bhaina. “She is a close friend of mine,” I said. “She teaches here in a school. She has an appeal to set before you.” In the dim glow of that cool twilight of late November, I could easily see the sudden change that came over Naba Bhaina. The smile fell away, and he slipped into the shell of an administrative official. The cold, hard look on his face transformed his personality.

“What kind of a woman are you?” he asked grudgingly. “Didn’t you complain to the collector himself against me? Why have you come to me now?”

The rudeness with which the words were said hit me with an unbelievable force. I felt my feet sliding off the last step of the castle of imagination in which I had been wandering. The terrible impact shook my confidence, my enthusiasm, and the strength of my commitment. The remark insulted my friend and cast a dark shadow over my smile like a thick blanket of black clouds shrouding the golden morning sun. I was no longer interested in meeting Preeti Apa or Papa’s son. Not allowing the urgency of my need to destroy my self-esteem as a writer, I briefly apprised Naba Bhaina of my friend’s case and the genuineness of her difficulties and asked him to look into the matter—favourably, if possible.

As I stood up to leave, Preeti Apa entered, smiling sweetly. She took us into the dining room. We were served delicious snacks and tea. Preeti Apa talked amiably, but I couldn’t respond in kind. At last, it was time to say goodbye. Preeti Apa walked out to the gate to see us off. The driver could have dropped us at our place, she said regretfully, but the car was not there. Before leaving, I asked her to put in a word to Naba Bhaina on my behalf to help my friend.

It had been a long time since I had visited Preeti Apa and her husband on that late November evening—six or seven months, perhaps. I had not had a chance to meet them or talk to them in all these months. Nor was I able to maintain contact with my friend. Like everyone else, I was kept occupied with the task of handling the obstacles placed in the path
of life. Sometime back, someone had told me that her transfer had been cancelled. I was happy for her. The news swept away the bitter memory of that early winter evening and filled my heart with gratitude toward Naba Bhaina. In the end, his sensitive writer’s heart had overcome the egocentricity of a man of power.

I had felt the incomparable love and cordiality they had showered upon me, but it was the genuineness of Naba Bhaina’s writerly sentiments that deeply impressed me. I felt my head automatically lowering before him. The bond that holds writers together is stronger than even the ties of a blood relation, I admitted to myself. I prayed that all writers should be as liberal, open-hearted, and sensitive as Naba Bhaina. Let more and more writers like him make it to the highest levels of administration and transform the state into a utopia. Let them take it to that noble height where love and justice prevail. Since the day I learned about the cancellation of my friend’s transfer order, I had been looking for an opportunity to meet Naba Bhaina and express my sincere thanks. This unexpected meeting multiplied my gratitude severalfold. I gazed at them in adoration, like a devotee gazing at the deity.

“Well, poet,” Naba Bhaina remarked in jest as he always does, “are you alone here or with some sympathetic soulmate?”

“No, no,” I replied, “my friend who accompanied me that day to your house is with me. Over there, on the other side of the road,” I said, pointing to the place where she stood.

“Aye, look who’s here,” I called out to my friend. “Come and meet them.” The deep sense of obligation filling my heart made me sound excited. She was standing there, looking in the opposite direction. Perhaps she couldn’t hear me. She did not turn her face to look at us. I called her again, this time by name. She cast a sideways glance at us but showed no sign of moving. I was deeply embarrassed by her manners. I turned to look at the reaction of Naba Bhaina and Preeti Apa, but by that time, they were already inside the car. I ran up to the car and said, “Many thanks to you, Apa and Bhaina. I don’t know if I can repay in my lifetime the debt I owe you.” The engine had started. A feeble smile appeared on Preeti Apa’s face. Naba Bhaina smiled at me too—a pale, lifeless smile. I knew that the discourteous behaviour of my friend had insulted them. Even I would not have tolerated such standoffishness.
My friend and I made the journey back home in uncomfortable silence. “There is a limit to discourteousness,” I spat out in utter disgust as soon as we reached home. “How could you be so ungrateful? You didn’t even care to join your hands to greet them! Everyone is selfish these days. Who would care to help someone the way he did? He considered your difficulties sympathetically because he is a writer. But what was it that you gave him in return? It really is a shame, the way you behaved.” She listened to my accusations quietly. It was only when I finally stopped that she began explaining things to me. I was taken by surprise when I heard a nonliterary person like her philosophizing about the harsh realities of life.

“What did you want me to pay my respects to—a man who is no less than a thief, a dissembler, a Mafioso, or a cheap broker masquerading as a writer?” she asked scornfully and, without waiting for my reply or reaction, went into the house.

She returned after a while carrying two cups of tea. She held out a cup to me, pulled a chair over, and sat down facing me. “Can you acknowledge everyone who writes a poem or a story as a true writer?” she began. “Anyone with money, power, and a high social status can merely cluster words together and claim to be a man of literature. Literature has become one of those products that are manufactured overnight in a machine, advertised and promoted lavishly, and marketed with a huge profit margin. You know that literary exercise has a twofold gold-plating effect on the personality of a writer. It fetches him both fame and fortune. Who wouldn’t want to be a writer if the take is so high?

“Administrators like your Naba Bhaina produce literature in the machine of power and position. It is another thing whether anyone reads or understands it. But these writers gain a lot. They are not only recognized as reputed writers of the state, but they sometimes achieve national and international acclaim. They are like the ones who worship the deities in temples, chanting unintelligible mantras but without even a grain of true devotion,” she declared with contempt. “They are devoid of the noble sentiments that can change an ordinary man into a writer. These people are imposters who roam around wearing a second self.”

I stared at her, intrigued. “How can you make such accusations? An intelligent person like you must not allow personal antagonism to bias your opinion against a particular sect,” I pleaded.
Her tone was calm but bold as she replied. “How can somebody who is indifferent to the pain of a fellow human being and does not understand the universality of human sorrow be a writer? He who measures human values with the scale of social status and power is not fit to be called a man. How can he be regarded as a writer, when writers are elevated human beings? The administrator who looks with compassion upon another human being’s troubles and does not hesitate to put humanitarian consideration before the policies of administration if the demand is just—he has the ingredients of a true writer in him. Writers like your Naba Bhaina profess themselves to be ardent practitioners of art and literature but wouldn’t lift their pen to write a line to help someone in distress unless their pocket is warmed.”

I could sense that something had hurt her deeply. Such pain and torment often give birth to a writer.

“Since when have you started thinking like a writer?” I asked in a conciliatory tone. “And why do you condemn Naba Bhaina in this manner?”

“I learned that an order directing me immediately to my new station was signed the day after you asked him to consider my case favourably. In utter panic, I called a distant relative of mine and told him about it. He assured me that things would be set right soon. He knew that I would never go back on my ideology and principles. So he didn’t let me know how he did it. But my transfer order was cancelled. I got the news the next morning. I am sure that there must have been some underhanded transaction. Money can really perform miracles, can’t it! I realized that day how selfishness could guide a man down the secret path of sin to his hell.”

After this shocking revelation, I cursed myself for being a writer. Am I, too, wearing a second self? I wondered. Even though she hadn’t said it openly, my friend must have formed a similar opinion of me. I searched for the fading image of the writer that, I once believed, dwelled somewhere inside me.