Misery Knows No Bounds

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Translated by Gopa Nayak

The sorrow of existence—
Living, suffering, enduring.
Why?
Let me burn in the fire of sacrifice.
Let the world live.
Misery knows no bounds.

The pen would not have fallen if Sonali had not snatched it from me. My mother had repeatedly warned me not to take the pen to school, but it was so pretty that I wanted to show it to my friends. Every day, I played with the pen for a little while and put it back in the cupboard with great care. One of my aunts had brought it from abroad and presented it to me.

My mother said that the pen was indeed very expensive. There was a small clock at one end. I brought the pen to school to show it to Premalata. She thought I had been lying about it. She said that such a pen did not exist in this world. That’s why I brought it to show her. I took her to a corner of the school field and showed her the pen. I did not go out to play during recess, as I was worried somebody might steal it.
Premalata had promised not to share the secret with anyone, but she told Sonali about the pen.

Sonali asked me for the pen after school was over. At first, I did not give it to her. I thought to myself—I will take the school bus and go home. But the bus was late. My mother had warned me not to walk home from school, because there was a wine shop on the road. Drunkards walk along the road. It is very desolate. No one will know if you are kidnapped. The main problem is the dilapidated bridge across the canal. The canal is never in use. It is full of weeds and mud. Even though my mother had asked me not to take that road, I sometimes went there with my friends.

The school bus took a roundabout route that takes almost an hour to reach our stop after dropping everyone else off. Almost every day, I arrived home after dusk. But I should have listened to my mother’s advice. I made a mistake by walking home. Sonali snatched the pen and it fell into the canal. I could see the pen. If it had not been visible, I would just have gone home crying. I would not have been stuck in the mud of the canal. Both Sonali and I slowly descended under the bridge to get the pen. We tried to get the pen with a stick, but we failed. I could not leave, because I could see it. As soon as I stepped into the canal my foot was pulled under. The other foot followed suit. I could not get out of the mud. Slowly, my feet sank in, and I was scared that I would be drowned in the mud. I looked at Sonali. Sonali told me to go a bit further and get the pen.

“My feet are stuck in the mud. I can’t get out. Pull me.” I stretched my arms toward Sonali. She was afraid she would be drowned, so she stepped back. She told me to wait. She assured me that she would call for help. She climbed up the bank of the canal. I could not see her any longer. I kept on standing in the canal amid the weeds.

Nothing ever goes smoothly for me. This has been true since before my birth. My mother used to say that I was conceived at the wrong time. She did not want a child then. The day she knew she was expecting, she was very upset. She did not abort me, because she was scared of committing a sin. Even before my birth, an astrologer predicted, from the lines on her palm, that she would have a daughter. My mother was very sad at that moment. Astrologers often lie, she thought, and forgot the whole incident.

Apparently the prediction of the astrologer came true; even during my birth, something unusual happened. My mother’s water broke
prematurely, and people found her crying bitterly, lying on the ground. She was carried to the hospital. “Both mother and child would have lost their lives if there had been even a slight delay,” the doctor had proclaimed. While we were at the hospital, our house was broken into. My mother, while still at the hospital, pronounced that girls were not lucky: “Our house has been broken into with the birth of this girl.” The thief was stupid, or maybe he thought that my mother’s gold earrings were fake. He did not take them. He stole fifteen rupees from the drawer, which my mother had set aside for the deity. My mother was very scared when I started vomiting black things in the hospital. They inserted a pipe into my stomach and took out all kinds of rubbish. After that I got an infection and diarrhea. I was given saline after two days of life in this world. I was always ill with one thing or another.

I did not want to be fed by my mother. I never responded even though my mother tried her best. I used to suck the milk given from a bottle and go to sleep. Are you wondering why I am remembering all this? In my last test at school, my teacher asked me to write the autobiography of a dustbin. I understood what “dustbin” meant, but I could not fathom what an autobiography was. I wrote a few lines after much effort. I had seen that nobody puts waste in the dustbin, so I wrote: “The dustbin says, use me, use me, but nobody uses it.”

My mother was delighted to hear this line, but she said, “You’ve made a mistake. An autobiography means your life history. That means you should have imagined yourself as a dustbin and written your story.”

“Very difficult, isn’t it?” I asked.

My mother retorted, “What’s difficult about it? We used to write the autobiography of an old bullock or an autobiography of a farmer.”

“It would have been better to write my own life history.”

My mother just laughed and commented, “Have you lived long enough to write your history?”

Sonali has not brought anyone yet. I have been standing in the mud. The mosquitoes keep on biting me. I stand knee-deep in the mud. I go down deeper with every movement. I am so scared that I don’t even try to drive away the mosquitoes. I don’t know why they named me “Titli,” which means butterfly—I can’t fly from flower to flower in the flutter of an eyelid. I am always rebuked at home because I am not lively and
flamboyant like a butterfly. Everyone shouts at me for being lazy, dumb, and lethargic. When I was a baby, I used to go to sleep as soon as the milk in the bottle was finished. I would get up when it was feeding time again. I would never wake up just from being tossed or turned. No one heard me cry in the hospital. Unlike other babies, I never cried and waved my arms and legs. My aunt used to call me Radhigadhi—dumb Radhi. She calls me by the same name even today. My elder brother teases me as the sister of Kumbhakarna, the demon who slept through half a year. I love sleeping. I really do. But nobody likes my sleeping habit. I doze off to sleep while watching TV. I get beaten because I doze even while studying. My mother reminds me, “Sleep is an enemy.” That’s why my brain does not grow. Sleep has closed all the doors and windows of my brain. That’s why I am a very poor student. To date, anyone who has tried to teach me has lost his patience in a few days and has begun to hit me or shout at me.

Sometimes, I feel I was born only to be beaten and scolded. The only reason behind these beatings is my studies. I can’t remember anything I study, though I can remember many things from childhood. My parents always fight over my studies. My dad shouts at my mother if she beats me while teaching me. And when my dad teaches me math, I can never remember the multiplication tables. My dad loses his temper and squeezes my neck in his hands and repeats over and over, “How much is nine times seven? I’ll kill you if you can’t say.” My mother runs out from the kitchen, yelling, “Tell him, tell him, nine times seven is sixty-three.” Then my dad gets cross with my mother: “She is dumb because of you. You don’t have any patience.” Then he punches me on the back and leaves. “Why should you study when you don’t even know the multiplication tables? You are a curse on us.”

“How can you say such things about your own daughter?” mutters my mother, rushing out from the kitchen. I feel angry with myself for being responsible for the rift between my parents. My mother always gives in to my father’s loud voice and piercing eyes. My mother cries bitterly. At such times, I feel like kissing her.

Even though I can’t remember my studies, I do remember many things from my childhood. Once, when I was a child, I could not write the letter M. My mother was so upset that she picked me up and threw me down forcefully. I could not see anything for a while. Even then, the window
of my intellect did not open. Many tutors have come and gone since my childhood. Whenever a new tutor comes, my mother serves him tea in the drawing room and tells him everything about me, just like a doctor is told everything about the patient. “My daughter can’t remember her studies. When she was young she used to suffer fits and had a fever. She had to be medicated to make her sleep. Maybe that’s why she is a little slow. Of course, since she turned five, she has never suffered at all. She has a good brain for math. Her problem is she just can’t memorize. Her IQ is a little low. I am tired of trying. Now, see if you can do anything.”

The new tutor would say, “If she can do math, then everything will fall into place. There are different techniques to teaching. Don’t worry.” This made me feel as though I was a very sick person. I feel like my grandfather, who was taken from one doctor to another, from one nursing home to another, when he was sick. Something happened to my grandfather, and most parts of his brain did not get any blood circulation. Everyone at home said it was a stroke. Has my brain, too, become dry like a desert? In Africa, there are so many deserts; one is the Kalahari and the other is the Sahara. I get beaten because I always forget which one is in the north and which one is in the south.

Some children in my school are worse than me, but still, I am the only one who gets scolded and beaten by Mahapatra Madam. Nobody likes me at school. Like my grandfather taken from one nursing home to another, I have also been put into many schools. I remember my first school, where I had a fat lady teacher who used to hold my hand and help me write page after page. I could not write anything if she let go of my hand. She used to scream at me, “I’ll tie you to that mango tree and the monkeys will bite you.” There really were monkeys in the mango tree. I used to be very scared of the monkeys. I closed my eyes when I saw them baring their teeth.

My mother sometimes feels very miserable and says, “Everything is my fault. I sent her to school when she was only two and a half years old so that I could go to work.”

“You did make a mistake by sending me to school at the age of two and a half,” I retort.

She gets angry with me. “What could I do? How could I leave you alone with the servant? Wouldn’t you have cried without me? You know
sometimes I found you’d peed or pooped your panties by the time I got back. That’s why I sent you to school. I thought you would play with other children. You would not miss me. That teacher spoilt your future. I told her not to teach you. You would just go to school and come back. I categorically told her that,” she says.

I didn’t know if she had done the right thing or not. I can’t answer smartly like my brother, nor can I stay angry at my mother for more than two minutes. My mother says that she taught my brother all twenty-six letters of the English alphabet by writing on the floor of our courtyard with a broken filter candle. She put him on a swing and taught him rhymes. She told him the legends of Dhruv, Prahlad, and Shravan Kumar while feeding him. Such things were not possible with me. During that time, her job was filled with tension. She would be told off for coming to work late, and again if she tried to leave early. That’s why she could not give me proper attention. My mother says that I can’t catch up with my studies, even after all the tutoring, because my foundation is weak.

When she hits me, I ask her, “What’s the point in hitting me now when you didn’t take care of my studies earlier?”

She gets very angry. She argues, “Most parents don’t teach their children. Did our parents ever teach us? My dad did not even know which class I was in. He did not know whether I was enrolled as Padmalaya or Aparajita in school. He had sent my uncle to enroll me in the school. My uncle could not remember my year of birth or my name. He got me admitted to the school under the name Yashoda and put down an approximate age. That’s why I am one year older than my real age in all the records. We grew up with that. We educated ourselves and have become something in life. Even your classmate Annapurna’s father is a driver. Does her father ever teach her? She is at the top of her class. Vaijayanti’s father is a security guard. How come she’s so good at her studies? One can only succeed if one puts in the effort.”

Thinking about these comments about my friends, I remember something. All my friends have old-fashioned names like Annapurna, Vaijayantimala, Premalata, and Rupkumari. Some of the boys in my class have names such as Hiralal, Jagannath, Prashant, Manoranjan, and Baburam. My brother teases me about this and says that I study in a poor school. I told my mother about this. My mother shouted at my brother:
“There is no such thing as a rich or poor school. That’s why you put on a uniform.” I insisted on going to a big school. My brother teases me that none of my friends’ dads are rich. I told my mother to put me in his school. My mother said, “How can you go there? You are not good at your studies.”

My brother and I were admitted to one of the best schools in the town. My brother was selected through an interview, but for me, my mother had to persuade the principal. After a few years, my brother went to an even better school, and I had to go the worst school in town. I never studied anything in my old school. When I was new to the school, my class teacher had me sit on the first bench because of my mother’s connections, but soon I was not worthy of it. I did not feel like doing any reading or writing tasks. I never paid attention to anything. My mother used to find out from my friends about my homework and get it done for me.

Slowly, I went from bad to worse in my studies, just like I am sliding down into the mud now. Pallomi, Arpita, Ankita befriended me. I failed in all subjects except one or two. My principal insulted my mother. My mother says, “Education is a big thing in life. There is no meaning to life without education. There is no light in the life of an uneducated person.”

Our maid Kiran is not educated, but still she is very happy. She does not have to remember the spelling of “distance” or “disturbance.” I don’t know why, but whenever I come across the spelling of a word, I get confused. I read “duration” as “donation.” I read “superstition” as “separation.” I can’t make out the difference between “constitution” and “constituent.” Whenever I see a book, I feel very tired, as if I have to walk a long road. I can’t read beyond a paragraph.

All my tutors have been unique. Once, an unemployed engineering student came to tutor me. He used to come every day for an hour. He never stayed a minute longer, as he had several tutoring jobs. As soon as he came, he asked me for a thick notebook. He would ask others what was taught in class and then write the answers to all the questions in my notebook. I just sat there while he wrote the answers. “Memorize them,” he would order, and then leave. I could not memorize anything. When the time for the unit tests approached, he would ask me questions. I could never answer them. He punished me by making me stand like a chair. He used to put a pencil between my fingers and hit me. He had long nails on
his left hand. My nose and ears often bled when he pinched me. I could never cry in his presence.

My mother could not have known anything because she was always in the kitchen. Afterwards, when she saw my wounds, she would feel very sad and put ointment on them. She would tell me that she would ask the tutor not to come. But the next day when the tutor came, she would smile and ask him, “Sir, please don’t hit her. Yesterday, she had wounds on her nose and ears.” Neither I nor my mother was happy with the tutor. My mother used to say it was better to buy books than have this tutor. He never bothered to teach anything.

The tutor was gone. My mother promised to teach me herself and left everything and started teaching me. She got all my homework done regularly. But I was scared to show it to my teacher. There had been nothing in my notebook for months. My mother was ashamed to go to the school in case the teachers might complain. At the same time, she cried over her fate. With tears in her eyes, she used to tell the story of my birth. “The doctors said that neither mother nor child would survive, but see, both of us survived. You suffer so much. You are always beaten and shouted at. I suffer thinking about you.” I wipe her tears and assure her that I will put more effort into my studies.

This time, the principal at our school threw down my report card and asked my parents to come and see him. He showed my report card to my mother and asked, “How can I promote her? You can’t just send your children to school. You must look after them at home.” I don’t know why, but my mother never uttered a single word. She did not even mention that her son was in a higher class in the same school and always took the top position.

“I have not neglected her.” She just stood there, her head lowered, not saying a word. It seemed as if she would burst into tears at the slightest touch. I was amazed at her patience. The principal kept on shouting at her as if she was one of his students. I felt like pushing him off his chair. She did not utter a single word on the way home. She did not say anything while we had our supper. When she went to have a rest, she said, “Why did you come into this world? If you had to come, why weren’t you born into a rich household?” I did not say anything; I did not know what to say.
I was sent to a different school. The pressure of studies in this school was lighter—that’s why they put me here. The Class 1 syllabus for English was taught in Class 5. But still, I could not manage. I don’t like to study. My brother used to go on excursions to Bombay and Madras. He participated in science exhibitions. He used to go trekking to hill stations with his school. But in our school, we did not even go on a picnic. Our teachers always complained about the principal, and the principal kept on firing the teachers. At least two or three teachers got replaced in a year. Hiralal urinated in the school well. Baburam broke his leg by climbing on the roof of the school. Annapurna’s hair was infected with lice, and she laughed at me because my mother wears Western-style dresses. I did not want to study in this school. I knew these children. That’s why I never brought the pen to school. But I had to bring it because of Premalata.

“Where did Sonali vanish to? Has she gone back home?” One of my uncles was passing over the bridge. I called out, “Uncle!” but he could not hear me. The mud has come up to my thighs. But what can I do? Will I die from drowning in the mud? Sonali is not a nice girl. I feel like crying. My mother must be standing at the gate of our house, waiting for me. She does not know that I am being drowned in the mud. When she scolds me, she always says, “Why don’t you die?” But I know if I die, she will cry. She may cry for a while now, but she will be free of the burden of me. She won’t cry every day. But will I really die? No, I won’t. Because when my mother got my horoscope read, the astrologer predicted that I would not be good in my studies, but that my fate was not all bad. “This girl has danger to her life from fire,” the astrologer said. My mother cried bitterly that day. “I know her in-laws will burn her. Why don’t you understand? These days, young brides are being burnt for dowry. On top of that, you are not good at your studies. I brought you up with so much care. Someone will burn you.” She kept on weeping.

That’s why I will not die from drowning. Someone will surely come and rescue me. I will survive. If I die now, then how can I burn to death? No, I will not die now. Even if I am submerged up to my face, they will pull me out by my hair. But Sonali should be coming back. I could hear someone walking on the bridge. I kept on waiting. After a while, a cow passed by. Someone will surely come; someone will come before nightfall. My mother will be worried. She will send someone. They will unlock
the school doors and search for me. They will look for me at my friends’ places. They will look for me on the roads. But will anyone look under the bridge? Who knows? No, no, they will notice me, because I am supposed to burn to death. I will not die from drowning in the mud.