

Happiness

"STOP—oh, do stop a minute", cried Sona. "Why ?"

"Didi, listen—do you hear something?"

"Did someone call out to me ?"

"No, the breeze passing through these clusters of *saru* trees sounded like the flute."

"Where are the clusters of *saru*?"

"Here, to our left."

"Oh, so these are *saru* trees. We've passed by here so often, but I didn't know what trees they were."

She was still annoyed. What clothes she was wearing ! And she didn't even have a bag with her. How smart people look when they return from abroad. How many things they bring with them. She doesn't look as if she has brought anything at all. How many friends and relatives she had told : "My sister has been abroad for eight years. She is coming home soon." All of them had said: "Do bring her over to our place." But she was wearing the same clothes that she used here. Totally devoid of glamour. What had she been doing, all these years?

They reached the house. An attractive bungalow in a large tree filled compound. Sona climbed the steps and sat down with a thud. "I am so happy, *didi*." Her face was alight with joy.

Amita looked at her with a trace of bitterness. She had not put on any weight in eight years. She was as thin as ever. No need for her to diet. She felt somewhat upset. Sona had not even commented on the attractiveness of the bungalow.

She made an effort to push away such

thoughts. Her only, her younger, sister had just returned from abroad after eight years. She ought not to have such thoughts about her.

"Come inside", she said to Sona. "It's nice inside—we've just renovated the whole place."

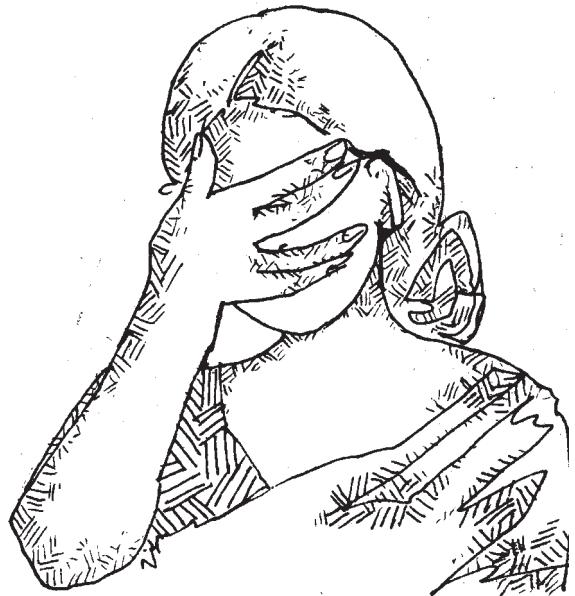
"Really? Wonderful. But let me look at all this, first. Let me revive my memories of it all—this sky, this mud, this sunshine. Those are *barahmasi* flowers, aren't they? And there is the blue sky, peeping between the small leaves of the *gulmohur*. How lovely it all looks." Her eyes grew moist with pleasure.

"Oh *didi*, look, is not that small bird on the *gulmohur* tree a *darjira* ? It's been years since I saw one, but the name came back to me."

"Where is it ?" Amita became keenly aware that her eyes were weak and she had not worn her glasses.

"There, on the left, the one that is calling 'urur'. It has a white belly and keeps raising its tail. It's very small. Can you see it ?"

Making a great effort, she managed to see something indistinctly. But Amita could not make out what kind of bird it was. "Perhaps. I don't know much about the *darjira*." And then she said, more insistently : "Get up now and come in. The



cook must have made coffee as soon as he heard the car drive in. I had given him instructions."

"Come on." Sona sprang up. Unimpaired youth glowed in her limbs. Suddenly, a small white fluffy pup wandered up and bumped against Sona's legs. Sona picked it up. Looking into its button like innocent eyes, she said : "How sweet."

"It's a pomeranian", Amita said. "We bought it when it was eight days old, for Rs 150."

"This is a diamond set, and this an emerald. These two are of pearls..." After lunch, Amita was showing her younger sister all her jewels. "And this one is pure gold—17 tolas." The jewels, in their open cases, glimmered in the slanting rays of the afternoon sun.

"They're very beautiful", said Sona. Amita looked searchingly at her. There was nothing but admiration in Sona's expression. Amita felt a sudden generosity towards her : "If you like any of them, you can take it", she said.

"What ?" Sona sounded so surprised that Amita was somewhat taken aback.

"Nothing. I said—if you want any of these jewels, tell me..." Amita said, uncertainly.

"I !" Sona was still surprised. "But *didi*,

I don't need any of them. No really, I don't want any."

Amita's enthusiasm dried up. A horn was heard outside. That was Ajit. Just as Amita had suddenly felt generous, so she suddenly felt startled now. Standing up with a jerk, she said : "Ajit has come, it



seems. He doesn't usually come at this time, but he has come specially because you are here." And she stood at the window, supporting herself by its frame.

"There is no happiness greater for a wife than her husband's wholehearted love."

"Ajit loves you very much, doesn't he, *didi* ?"

"Yes", Amita replied, with pride. "He's just had all these made for me. Recently, his business prospered and he said to me: 'Choose some jewels for yourself,' She paused. "A man's love—a husband's love is a very great thing." She looked round the room. "I selected all this furniture. Ajit consults me in every matter. Did you see this bookcase ? Its design...".

"Oh yes, I was about to ask you. Where did you get this book on Emerson ? I've been looking for it for a long while. Santayana's essay is the best in it, isn't it ? How well it analyses the fullness of Emerson's life ! Did you like that essay ?"

Amita suddenly felt extremely annoyed. Controlling herself with difficulty, she said : "Ajit has come specially for you. Now go and meet him, at least."

"Oh yes." Sona laughed and ran out. Amita felt as if there was a fog somewhere, despite the after-noon sunlight.

The following evening, Ajit and Amita gave a party to celebrate Sona's arrival and the election of a friend of theirs to parliament.

The guests arrived, one by one. Amita introduced Sona to all of them. She had insisted that Sona wear Amita's yellow silk sari and she had put yellow flowers in Sona's hair. Sona looked beautiful. Most of the women at the party were un gainly and unattractive. Amita was proud that her sister looked slim and attractive in their midst.

The party began. Sona appeared to be waiting for someone. After a long time, she asked Amita : "Didi, hasn't Vasanti come ? She was your special friend, wasn't she ? All these people look like very new friends."

Amita said : "Vasanti ? Oh, I haven't met her for quite a while. She still lives in that alley. I never go that side of town these days."

Sona did not reply. The room swayed to the rhythm of talk, jokes, laughter, perfume, music, heady drink.

In a few minutes, Mr Dutta arrived. Ajit's great friend, an in-dustrialist and member of parlia-ment. Amita was anxious to introduce Sona. Mr Dutta too had a younger brother who was fond of books. If an alliance could be arranged for Sona, she would enter a wealthy, prosperous family.

She looked for Sona. But Sona was nowhere to be seen. Surprised, she went to the kitchen and was told by the servants that she had gone out into the garden.

Annoyed, Amita went out. Far away, she could see Sona sitting on the lawn—in the beautiful silk sari. She felt extremely irritated. The girl had not an iota of good sense. "Sona", she called.

Sona turned round and shouted : "Didi, what has happened to the pup ?"

"Why, what's happened ?"

"I don't know. I came out to get a breath of fresh air and I saw him lying here, panting and foaming at the mouth. Someone must have fed him something. I

sprinkled some water on his face but he seems to have difficulty breathing. Look, does he look as if he will survive ?"

Amita bent down. The puppy looked at her with pained eyes and then stopped breathing. Sona stroked it gently. Amita stood there, taken aback. Then she said : "I'll call the gardener. He'll take care of it. Come on in now. I want to introduce you to Mr Dutta. Mr Dutta is an MP."

Sona fixed her large eyes on Amita. How strange, this playful girl's eyes were like those pained eyes seen a moment before—innocent, agonised and so sensitive as to startle one.

She said, softly : "Didi, shall I tell you something ? When I was abroad I lived with a girl from Mysore, called Krishna. She once told me something. They have a custom that when someone dies, whether a human being or an animal or bird, people express their love or respect by giving a portion of their merit to the dead..."

Amita had almost lost patience. Sharply, she said : "Sona, is this, the time to talk of all this ? The guests inside are

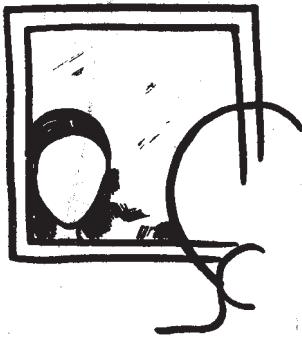


looking for us..."

Still looking at her sister with pain filled eyes, Sona said softly : "How suddenly things come to an end..."

Exasperated, Amita walked away and

went inside. As she walked, She suddenly felt as if darkness was gathering around her. Everything can suddenly come to an end. The beautiful bungalow standing before her seemed to sway from side to side. This building could fall down—if the business declined, all this could fall with a crash to the ground. Anything could happen. If one's husband wanted another woman, if one's son decided to become a hippy — everything — which was hers and not hers — everything began to move to its end — a moment came when she was divested of all her wealth, was poor, fearful, absolutely alone, helpless. Sona had nothing yet she talked of things that could be accomplished by oneself. Trembling with fear, Amita ran into the



room where the party was going on. The party was over. After the guests left, Ajit opened an attractive box. In it was an expensive gift from Amita for Sona. With it was a good wishes card. Amita was lying, exhausted, in the next room, but Ajit was in high spirits. He handed the box to Sona,

picked up his pen and said : "Well, what shall I write in the card ?"

The pain that had been gathering in Sona's eyes all evening had grown thicker. She was silent.

Ajit opened the pen, put a book under the card and asked again : "Tell me, what shall I write in the card ?"

Sona glanced at the room in which Amita lay and said in a barely audible voice: "Write — may I not find the happiness which my sister has."

"What?" Ajit's voice was shrill. Bitterly, Sona repeated : "Just that I may not have the happiness which my sister has."

(translated from Gujarati into Hindi by Ramnaresh Soni in "Bhartiya Sahitya" and from Hindi to English by Manushi)