FELLOW TRAVELER \((SAHAJATRI)\)

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Just at the point of suffocation of my breath, as always, I woke up.

If this continues to happen frequently I shall have to suffer from sleeplessness. It does not seem to be a dream. I smell something, then feel like being gradually engulfed in smoke, losing my breath and then I sit up. I tried to recall the particular smell. It is like the mixed stench of smoked fish and dead frogs rotten in a corner. The smell of mortar seems to the mixed together with that stench.

I looked through the dent in the wall – outside there is daylight. Opening the door I noticed the ants beginning to go in a procession by the door. Some ants are coming from the opposite end – stops midway – whispers something in another’s ear-and resume its journey.

When I sat observing the ways of the ants - mother came to me and said - Dhan, pluck one Papaya before it gets dark.

The ants have been carrying one dead cockroach. To-day the ants will have a feast. We also carried away our mother fourteen days ago. The fire on the crematorium burnt mother. But the fire could not touch her breast, it simply glowed red like burning coal. People had a feast of fish and mutton. I smelt everywhere the burning body of my mother. The lean dog lying in our courtyard could not eat anything.

Like that character of a famous writer - I am now able to say, my mother is dead. No sense of felling good or bad has been working here. I looked at the lifeless trunk of my mother. It appeared as if the felled tree has been dried at the scorching rays of the sun. The body of my mother is only skin and bone. I tried to understand
her fatigue and numbness by rubbing two hands with my hands. How the loving fingers putting rice to tender lips have now been benumbed. Mother has become an event. Peeping through time at the interval of light and darkness this event also has started to acquire a momentum. Like the paper boats kept floating in rain water the base of these incidents also go away. As the flow stumbling on the carpet grass by the pavement or on uneven land shattered feelings stop for a while. And here ends the existence of my mother.

It has not appeared to me that my mother dies only now. She started dying since a long period of time. She became helpless at the death of my father. Though he was the teacher of a Primary school he managed somehow to look after the household and sent me to study outside. Abandoning my study I came back home. I could not save my father even after selling all our land except the house to Dharani Mahajan. My mother shuddered when I put into her hands some money that I earned from several tuitions. Even then she had been alive. The process of dying started when Bapu started coming home at the dead of night. Leaning on the pole of our veranda mother keep waiting – to listen to some particular sounds – sound of a Bike stopping by our gate, the sound of opening the bamboo bars – of the gate, the sound of heavy boots. Then, the sound of ablutions, of washing the dishes, sound of angry outbursts and many others. Later these sounds became less frequent. The sound of the motor bike was no longer heard at our gate. The process of my mother's demise like the dying of the branches of the guava tree from one side had started then. Sometimes later, from the time of seeing the lifeless body of Mina hanging from a rope mother had forgotten to talk. Even when the post mortem report announcing the four month's pregnancy of Mina came, no single sound came out of her mouth.
When Mina had been mixing freely with Dipak I tried to make her understand, "It is not proper to roam around till late at night. People make adverse comments" — mother supported me.

"Dipak would marry me. And the people are not looking after us" — she said with considerable fury. That Dipak who assured her that they will get married did not come even to glance at her dead body. He regularly supplied her with — dresses and cosmetics. Her insatiable greed sent her to premature death. Are these the fate of men or just coincidence - difficult to say. As Mina reflected 'my life is my own' — this did not remain a fact for us. Her life, to some extent was our life also. Living aside the emotional constraints the sneers and jeers of people about her united us with her. To see or realize that she did not survive. The junior people consider the anxiety and expression of love of the seniors regarding them to be a burden. However unfortunate, this has been handed down from generation to generation.

Dipak is Bapu's mate. Worker of the same organisation. Being unable to clear the hurdle of High School Leaving Certificate Examination after several attempts Bapu had joined the organization. Mother enquired of him desperately — "What do you do in the organization?"

"We have taken a resolve to liberate our state" — A sense of pride was heard clearly in his voice.

"How would you liberate this independent state" — mother could not understand.

"Fools like you won't understand those things" — he ridiculed her. He did not wait there to look at the darkened face of mother. He could not have made her understand — We are independent only in name, we don't have socio-economic
independence. The foreigners exploited us earlier, now, one section of the Indians have been doing the same. Perhaps he has no clear insight of the motive and the agenda of their own organization. He might have been a worker of the third rank. So he has no headache regarding the purpose and the time of action. He goes on errands. In early days there was a group of workers in the open theatres to arrange the furniture on the stage, pick up the sword and the cap lying on the stage etc. They had no connection with the motives, dialogue and the appeal of the characters. Bapu and his companions were also that kind of workers. Wearing a mask of well-wishes of the country and the people, being engaged in murder, extortion and abduction, Bapu and his mates have been transformed into a generation apathetic to labour. The rest of the people are witnessing it. Like me, other people also feel the stench of backed fish and dead frogs, but keep moving stuffing their nose with scented handkerchief. Though we have been habituated like the ants to the process of moving, we do not know where we are moving on. Bombs explode – limbs are torn apart – red meats are thrown over the pavements. Procession of men go by that road pretending as if they have not seen anything. Four years have elapsed since Bapu came home last. I never look at the slabs of flesh scattered on the road in the fear if I trace somewhere the chopped hand of Bapu. I vividly remember the shape of Bapu’s fingers. He scratched my back with those fingers. At first I used to scratch his back counting one to hundred then he starts counting one two and then starts counting fifty one after forty. I presume not to notice it. He feels elated considering me to be a dunce. I never shook his conviction. I liked his dazzling lifestyle.

Mother said to me just before her death – “If Bapu does not come even after twelve years then perform his last rites.” Why did mother think that he would not
come? I learnt from his mates—the people who made him to commit the murder—relieved him of his life to wipe out all traces of that incident. But I could not understand why mother thought like that. Perhaps her compassion gave her insight. Getting that news a thought disturbed me repeatedly—the crimson flesh of his sturdy body taller than six feet perhaps occupied a considerable portion of space.

Why did Bapu suffer like this? I have asked myself this question so many times. Did the mistake occur in bringing him up? No, not that. Some people just go on living. Poverty makes someone enduring and someone impatient. The main thing of Bapu's life was affluent and sophisticated lifestyle. Without costly shoes and smooth heavy garments life had no meaning at all. Mina smelt Dipak's love in dresses and cosmetics. These are the various forms of people's nature and cravings. This itself creates a *chakrabelhu* (whirlwind) making people lose their sense of direction.

I sometimes asked Bapu to appear in the examination. At first he said—let me see. One day he said—"Studying hard you are a bit of a scholar. But what have you achieved? I was taken aback at first, but then I tried to understand—right, what have I been able to do? I have been working at a school where I have to buy slate pencil for the students with my money earned through tuition. I am not able to provide even some pulses and potatoes regularly to my mothers who has lost appetite always taking food with green herbs and papaya plucked from the backyard. As such I do not have any moral right to ask Bapu to study.

Life cannot be measured with the scale of right and wrong, honesty and dishonesty. Shall I be able to be like Bapu? Why am I not able to do physical labour than suffer from hunger? Life does not move on according to the concept of right and wrong. From the time Bapu's body has been turned to a lifeless heap of flesh I am able to think in this manner. Bapu could not save his life even when he had such
a passion for living. The animals, the ants and the people—all are going on running according to their choice. "Have to go"—that is the only aim. Though they do not know where they are going—the procession of people are moving forward. We have now fascination the smell of explosives and of flesh and blood. Sometimes bombs explode in the name of community, sometimes in the name of stone idols—some people lie scattered with cucumber, ladies finger and ridge gourds—the others feel relieved. Using parts of speech like class nouns and proper nouns along with cherished words like love and self they blur the vision of their companions, their accumulated ideas lie strewn on the pavement.

So, sometimes I detach myself from the queue of people. Man is one small atom in the perennial process of life. "Move on"—in this eternal system men's responsibility and accountability are never so much accounted for. Heaps of flesh and blood, smell of mortar, light from the pyre, helpless poverty, white moonlight—these are the outcome of our mental state. So, men have built up the habit of going on living a normal life. So, the procession has been able to move forward through the explosives. Both life and death are indifferent towards this state.

The sound of a car coming to a halt at the gate of Dharani Mahajan was heard. Rita, the youngest daughter has alighted from the car with her newly wed groom. Her face looks quite fresh with the brightness of dresses and jewelleries. How could her face appear so fresh even at such a time. The stench of smoked fish and rotten life all around. My mother dreamt about Rita even at broad daylight. "Dhanda teachers so well"—Rita was full of praise for me. So, mother was dreaming like the man who dreamt with a pitcher full of grounded rice. These likings and praises are like enjoying some admirable scene through the windows of a moving train. It has momentary value, if you have to wait for two hours for some reason it'll be monotonous.
The row of ants is no longer here. They might resume their journey by another route. Observing minutely I saw a tiny ant is running helter skelter. Might it be in search of its companions. He might have lost his way. Staying like that for sometime I put before it my index finger. Climbing up he moved impatiently over my hands. Picking up one of the books from the row of books on my table I left it on the book. Moving a little longer he became quiet.

By this time I have an uneasy feeling starting inside my stomach. My stomach aches with hunger. Like the freshness of Rita’s face having no consideration of time factor my stomach has no sense of time. Mina’s body in the hanging position, the heap of flesh from Bapu’s body, mother’s chest like the burning coal, the stench of smoked fish and rotten animal -- even in the midst of these things such abnormal behaviours on the part of my stomach is really irritating. The sun has been gradually reclining on the western direction. Lighting a fire with the dried coconut leaves I put the cauldron over it. No respite from this stomach. I opened the paper bag -- lentils.

Dhan, bring in a papaya before it is getting dark -- I touched my mother’s nails darkened and decayed by constant plucking of leafy herbs like Matikaduri and tengesi.

Putting the pulses bought once in a fortnight on a bowl mother said, You will relish smashed potato and pulses with -- hot rice. Come soon, or it will be cold.

I looked at my mother. She is no more. The leaves of the coconut are burning and the fire is coming out of the hearth. Gulping a pitcherful of water I reclined on my bed. Oh! the ant! Instantly I sat up. He has been sleeping on the book. I touched it. Showing the sign of life he went back to sleep like the baby lying on its mother’s lap. Just under its body is written — “Grandmother’s Tales”.