

The Stairs

Yashoda

An old house in the lane, which is mine. I call it old because it has been the same since my parents first came here. Nothing has been changed. Other houses have been altered a lot. Now you will wonder, how these alterations? That is because those houses have been made *pukka* (with concrete and cement). All houses, save ours. Despite being so old, many people don't know our house.

If you stand in front of our house, and look straight ahead, there are some stairs. The stairs live their life as the day passes, providing myriad changes for people here. At five in the morning, when utensils are lined up (for water) and people – old or young – feel the need to sit, they sit on its first step. After that Sulma's parents come out of their home and sit on the platform which is to the right of the step. Then commences smoke from *bidis*, the sound of stoves. In this is included the refreshing smell of brewing tealeaves. And in that join in interesting stories of the everyday, which make the mood of the morning all the more pleasing.

But it's not as if this is the only plot unfolding here. There are different narratives for different times. In the afternoon, women gather. They position themselves on the stairs, step by step, picking out lice from each other's hair. Invariably two-three more women join them and sit around and whenever someone passes by selling things, they get down to seriously fooling him! And when they succeed, the whole lane echoes with their chatter and carefree laughter.

Once, Bhoori *Bhabi* and I were sitting on the threshold of our door. An old man who makes do by asking people for things, came and sat down on the platform. He started muttering, "Pray to God, or I will ask him to set fire here". He went on muttering this. Bhoori *Bhabi* looked at him and said, "He is in a reverie. He is a believer. Whatever he says,

happens". And that is exactly what happened. That night, there was a fire in the *basti*, and three hundred houses were gutted.

Water

Rabiya

I had heard that many years ago, there were no taps in our colony. Water was a problem for everyone. I didn't know myself, because then I was very young, and so I don't remember. I thought I should speak with people and find out if what I had heard was true. I didn't have time to ask. But I had time at night.

It was ten at night. Everyone was sleeping in their houses. I thought of speaking with my mother. I asked *Ammi*, "*Ammi*, did our colony have no taps some years back? I have even heard there was no provision for water". She said, "You are talking about taps? When I came here, I did not see a single house that was properly made. There were tents that were made by hanging curtain cloth on four sides, and there were houses made of mud. At that time, the colony was not very populated. And there were many trees. The area looked like a forest. But with time, the trees were cut and the population kept increasing and the trees kept decreasing. In place of the trees, people made houses. They didn't even know how much trees benefit us".

I asked *Ammi*, "*Ammi*, if there were no taps in the colony, where did people get water from?" *Ammi* told me, "There were no taps inside the colony. But outside, near Nehru Hill Park, there were two taps. They were close to one another, and they would have water 24 hours of the day". I asked *Ammi*, "*Ammi*, so all the people from the colony managed by going near Nehru Hill Park to fill water?" *Ammi* said, "No. There were only two taps, and they weren't enough for people to get by. No one had enough water to spend freely". I said, "But the water came all 24

hours". She said, "But there used to be fights at the taps about whose turn it was. And it used to be crowded from morning till evening. And it used to be so noisy that even the park's watchman would get troubled. There was a watchmen's room in the park, and he would turn the water supply off from it. Everyone would return, disappointed".

I said to *Ammi*, "*Ammi*, but if the supply could be controlled from that room in the park, anyone could have gone inside and turned it on". She said, "No, anyone could not have just walked in and opened the supply. The room used to be locked. So how could people start the supply?" And she said, "I have even heard that the watchman had told everyone that if they broke the lock, he would file a court case against him. People would be frightened, and return".

I asked, "*Ammi*, tell me, what did people who didn't have a drop of water in the house do?" She said she had heard that everyone managed to fill water.

I started thinking, "Earlier, there was severe water shortage in the colony, and people had to go so far to fill water. These days, when we have to go to the hospital, we take a rickshaw. Then, people would go so far and fill vessels and buckets with water and carry them all the way back". I asked *Ammi* when the colony got taps. *Ammi* said, "A few years after we came here. The tap was behind our house and water would come at five in the morning. It used to remain very crowded. Anyone who had to fill water in the morning would put a broken utensil to form the queue at night. Similarly, people who wanted to fill water in the evening would line up theirs in the morning".

I asked, "*Ammi*, where did you fill water from?" She said, "I used to fill water from within the colony. I would put a big drum in the line and then fill twenty vessels instead".

"*Ammi*, were there many fights at the tap at that time?"

"Yes, many fights would happen. Women would reach out straight for

each other's hair and would make a lot of noise. If the flow of water from the tap would reduce even a little, people would panic. So someone would say, I'll fill, and another would say, no, me first. This would result in a fight. Water would finish during this fight. And everyone threw garbage near the tap and sit in the same filth".

"But *Ammi*, there were taps in many places in the colony. Then why did people come only to this tap?" *Ammi* said, "Those were taps only in name. Not a single drop of water from them. They worked the first few months, but then they stopped".

The Shop Near My House

Naseem Bano

Near our house is Ramdas *Bhai's* shop. He is Hindu, but his wife is Muslim. We have a close relationship with Ramdas *Bhai's* shop. Ramdas *Bhai* runs his shop really well. His business is good. Sometimes there is such a crowd of customers at his shop that he doesn't get the chance to attend to all of them. So Ramdas *Bhai* gets his wife, son or daughter to stand at the shop. If someone from our house would go to his shop, he would give us our things first, before anyone else.

This happened a long time ago. *Baji* had come. We were going through financial troubles. *Bhai jaan* had been in an accident. So we didn't have enough money for household expenses. When *Baji* was about to leave, *Ammi* didn't have money to give her. So *Ammi* went to Ramdas *Bhai's* shop and borrowed a hundred rupees from him and gave them to *Baji*.

Ramdas *Bhai* is very good-natured. He's never irritated with anyone. If they would see me, for instance when I would be going to the Compughar, they would smile at me. If, sitting at home I would be

thinking about my relatives, I would say to *Ammi*, "There is never any fighting in Ramdas *Bhai's* home". For instance, I have seen that when a Hindu man marries a Muslim woman, there are often many fights in the house. But that doesn't happen in Ramdas *Bhai's* house.

Then *Ammi* told me they were married in Delhi. "They performed both the Hindu and the Muslim wedding rituals. And when Ramdas had first come here, he would sell tamarind, spices and things for children in a basket. And he would drink a lot. Now he has stopped drinking, since he has had kids. Now see what a big shop he has. And he never fights with anyone in the colony. He does drink, but very little. He has a heart disease".

Ammi told me a lot of things about Ramdas *Bhai*. And *Ammi* told me that when my brother Sharif had had an accident, we would take loans from his shop to buy food for ourselves. We must have borrowed about one and a half thousand rupees. Then I asked, "*Ammi*, and he never objected?"

"*Ammi*, Ramdas *Bhai's* kids are so fat! If Rani *Baji* measures the younger one, she also has to take the enormous stomach's measurement!" When I said this, everyone started to laugh. Ramdas *Bhai's* wife and kids also keep their house and neighbourhood clean.

We really trust Ramdas *Bhai*, and he trusts us. Before the fire in the *basti*, we had borrowed two hundred and fifty rupees from him. Later, after the fire, when *Ammi* had asked him to tell how much money we owed him, he said he didn't remember. He said, "Give me whatever you remember". So *Ammi* gave him two hundred and fifty.

Ramdas *Bhai* had invited us to the feast of his daughter's wedding. It's not just with us; Ramdas *Bhai* speaks politely with all his customers. For as long as I can remember, there has been nothing that Ramdas *Bhai* has done which would start a squabble with anyone in the *basti*.

The lane in which Ramdas *Bhai* lives is big, not small. Customers can come and stand in it with comfort. While passing by, I don't pay much attention towards the shop. But whenever I look, there is always a crowd at his shop, or children buying things to eat from there.

The Teashop

Neelofar

Near where I live is Aslam *Bhai's* shop. He owns a big grocery shop, and a teashop. The teashop stands against a wall. On either side are two low walls, and across them is placed a broad stone slab. On the slab is a gas stove. And on that, a pan that has turned dark brown from tea being boiled in it over and over again. Two sieves always lie in that pan. Their handles are very long. Near the gas stove are two dirty plastic boxes; one containing sugar, the other tealeaves. The same spoon is used for both. Beneath the stone is a blue coloured water tank. Near it, in a basket, are cups. On the wall, at a height, are many nails. A tray, made from iron wire, for carrying cups and glasses, hangs from one of them.

Next to the shop is a stone bench. Aslam *Bhai* sleeps on it in the summers. During the day, children play on it. If a woman chases the children away and sits there, some more women come and join her and start chatting. In the mornings, the bench serves as a restaurant. People who come to drink tea at Aslam *Bhai's* shop sit on that bench sipping tea. Sitting there, they also buy something to eat. Finished with their tea, they smoke cigarettes or *bidis*. Usually only men drink tea in this way. If it is late at night, sometimes young boys also sit there. In winters, women dress up their children, dab them with powder, wrap them in quilts, and leave them on the bench to sun.

Aslam *Bhai* manages both the shops. He stands in his grocery shop and

asks his three daughters to go get cups and glasses from the factory, or from another place where tea has been supplied. If his daughters disobey him, he beats them. So they run and follow his commands at the first sound from him. Any one of them complains to him about the other if she wants her beaten up: "*Babu*, see Shabana isn't going to get the cups".

Even I don't know where all the tea goes from this shop. When it is sent to the workshops, it goes in the big kettle, and with lots of glasses. If it is sent to someone's house, it is poured into the small kettle. Usually his wife and eldest daughter Bahara prepare tea. But it is delivered by the three younger daughters. When they are not around, suppose if they have gone to school, his wife delivers the tea.

People rent the house whose wall the teashop stands against. One day the owner of the house came. He lives at Turkman Gate and has given this house on rent for Rs. 1000-1200. He came and asked Aslam *Bhai*, "What is the meaning of this illegal occupation of my wall?" Aslam *Bhai* couldn't say anything in response. The owner got the things removed and broke the two supporting walls of the shop. And before leaving, told Aslam *Bhai* not to rebuild them.

Now Aslam *Bhai's* tea stall is in front of the door of his house, where he's put the machine on a stone slab. So movement in and out of the house has become a problem. But those who live on rent in the house with the wall are very happy, because now they can use some of the space outside their house. The woman cooks her vegetables on a stove that she then shifts back inside. They have hung polythene bags containing children's toys – balls and musical instruments – on the same nails. Underneath, on the stone by the wall, are kept their small vessels containing water.

Sometimes tea comes to our house from Aslam *Bhai's* shop. Since the shop was removed from its first place, it looks quite empty there.

Telephone

Mehrunnisa

The telephone is common now. Almost everyone probably has a telephone at home. My *Mami* has a telephone at home, but sometimes it doesn't work. In her house, the telephone instrument keeps changing. Just a few days ago, there was a red instrument. What went wrong with it was that whenever someone would call, the voice from the other end would reach us, but ours wouldn't reach them. The man who fixes telephones came to her house and replaced the instrument with the oldest possible one. Its colour is quite obnoxious. Quite a sight, really.

One day our school organised a picnic for us. I wanted to call my friend to ask her the time at which we had to meet. I asked *Mami* if I could make a call. She said, "Yes, go ahead". I made the call, and must have just said "Hello" when my uncle came in. I told my friend I would call her later and quickly put the phone down. As soon as my uncle came, I went back home. That I was upset showed on my face. My elder sister saw my swollen face and asked me what had happened. I said if we had a phone at home, I'd be able to use it without hesitation. She asked me if uncle had come. I told her, yes, that I had only said "Hello" when he came. And I had to come away. I said to my sister, "*Baji*, get us a phone connection. Ask *Ammi* to get us one". But when she asked *Ammi*, she said, "What relatives do we have who'll call us?"

Sometimes it happens that when I go to my aunt's house, and the phone rings when she is reading her *namaaz*, and I move towards it to pick up the receiver, her daughter comes in and says she'll get it. I move back. She picks up the receiver, and I wait for her to put it back down. Then I ask her, "Why, could I not have picked it up?" And she replies that it was her friend on the phone. Then I ask her how she could possibly have known that from before. There is nothing she can say to that.

The Transformer

Naseem Bano

I am sitting in my house with my back resting against a wall. I run my eye over every object in the house, and in every direction. I can't understand what to write on. I look around again.

Suddenly the light dimmed, so the fan slowed down and it started to get dark in the house. Immediately *Bhai*, who was sitting against the wall, near the transformer, stretched out his hand towards it and increased the voltage, so the light increased and the fan moved faster.

Suddenly the transformer fascinated me, and I looked at it closely, carefully. Right then, I started to remember the day the transformer first came.

It's been six years since the transformer came to our house. It was green in colour. It cost Rs. 2,500. This transformer had been bought with *Chacha's* money. We had a house in Sambal. *Chacha* had come after selling it for Rs. 25,000. From this, some money was spent on my elder sister's marriage, and the transformer was bought with the remaining 2,500. It's the only thing we have to remember *Chacha* by. When the house was *kuccha*, the transformer was kept in the same place as it is today. That is even after the house was made *pukka*, the transformer continued to be kept in the same place as before, so there isn't any chance it will ever be moved from there!

The Drain from the Kitchen

Azra Tabassum

On Sunday night, at half past nine, I was sitting near the water tank,

mixing hot and cold water. The water tank is in the lower part of my house, by the door. My hair was untied. Behind me were three stone shelves on which a lot of things have accumulated. Directly above my head was the bulb, which is switched on only when there is work to be done. It is switched off just as soon as the work is finished. I was sitting there all by myself. Everyone in the house had returned from their work. They were sitting upstairs watching TV. Different sounds of various kinds of music were coming from there. And, intermittently, the sound of my brother and sister arguing.

Where I was sitting, there is another room. But its window was shut. (We have given this room on rent. Seven to eight boys live there. A television set has been brought a few days ago, because of the World Cup fever. Now the TV is on all day long. And at high volume. It is very loud even now. A song from the film *Dil ka Rishta* is playing. The sound of people walking past, over the gutter, is coming from outside – *khut put, khut put*. This gutter next to our house is the kind that whenever someone passes over it, its voice draws people to it. It says, "Look who has walked past, over me.") There was also the sound of songs from television sets outside.

I was looking very carefully at the water while mixing it. A conversation I had had with a friend was running through my head. Looking at the water, I bent my head towards the ground and started washing my hair. Then a voice came in my head, "What do you feel when you see water?"

Another voice, "I feel very happy when I see water." Along with my ears which were listening to these voices, my hands had to wash my hair. Then another strange voice, "Azra, what does feeling happy when you see water mean? Imagine a situation where you are dressed up for an evening, and have to fill water from the hand pump and carry the filled bucket to the house. Would the water in the bucket, spilling as you carried it, make you feel happy?" This was my friend's voice, and it did have a point. After all, while a drink of water is a treat in summers, in winters we don't feel

like drinking water. In the rains if I get too wet, for too long, *Ammi* yells at me and it also itches a lot. My friend's voice had now become a voice from inside me. I was not able to answer the question. I frowned and started rubbing my hair, washing vigorously. I finished washing my hair and stood up.

Wrapping my hair in a muslin towel that had a red check pattern, I started climbing up the stairs. As soon as I reached upstairs, it was as if the sound from the TV downstairs didn't exist at all. Or that it had transformed into the sound of vehicles from outside. The road is directly in front of my house, so the sound of vehicles was very loud at that time. Upstairs, I cast a glance at the television and immediately started looking at the sky above. Then my eyes fell on the drain coming from the kitchen.

I saw that my younger sister Bushara was washing utensils in the kitchen. I thought, why not sit on the stone bench and look at the water flowing in the drain. Supporting my bun of hair with one hand, I jumped from the wall onto the stone bench, and sat on the other side of the bench. I was watching the water from the kitchen flow inside the drain. I couldn't understand what form to give the water. I thought, why do we make drains? So that the drain can transfer water from the house to the gutter without spilling it. And if the drain breaks in-between somewhere, water flows out. This becomes a reason of discomfort for people, and often also becomes the cause of fights. If there are small stones in the drain, water still manages to flow unobstructed. But if there is a big stone, water starts getting blocked there, and then sometimes a lot of effort has to go into cleaning it. Although sometimes, it is no trouble at all.

Water flows in drains. But what flows between us? Despite having different ways of thinking and points of view, we try to roam, and lose ourselves in each other's thoughts. And if we don't find a way, we put our energies to clearing away the big stones that lie in our path...

A Bus Ride

Raju Singh Malyal

I was standing in the middle of the bus, when I saw, near Khanpur depot, three men board – two from the rear door, one from the front door. They started asking everyone for tickets. Everyone quickly produced their tickets to show them. They were ticket checkers. They found some ticket-less travellers and made them get off the bus and ushered them into a van waiting next to the bus. It was a white van, with 'DTC' painted in blue. I showed my ticket. Then they got off, and the bus moved on.

A few stops later, three men got on from the front door. One could tell from their mannerisms that they were pickpockets. The man sitting next to me said in a hushed voice – "They must be pickpockets". Suddenly, there was a noise from the front of the bus. One of the three men had been caught picking a pocket. The bus pulled up, once again not at a bus stop. People got off. They were all beating up the 'pick-pocket'.

What amused me was that the man who was sitting near me had only had the courage to whisper that they were pickpockets. And now he was out there beating up the man. Then the bus moved on.

Roof

An eyewitness account

[Bobby Khan's text]

It was Sunday. One thirty in the afternoon. I was making *roti* on a stove. I finished by two. I went to Shabnam's house to get cold water. There is a chemist's shop in front of Shabnam's house. Next to

it is a barber's shop, and right next to that, two houses. Four to five children were playing on the roof. Among them were two girls, skipping rope. One of the girls fell off the roof, onto a man standing below, and then on to the ground. The man started looking around, confused and hurt.

I was sitting in Shabnam's house, chatting. I thought I heard someone calling out. It wasn't clear whose name was being called, so I got up to check. The man told me a girl had fallen. When I looked at the girl, I thought she was my neighbour, Amreen. So I went up to lift her. She was heavy for me. I sat down next to her. Her mouth was bleeding profusely. I called out loudly, "*Mamu*, Amreen has fallen!" But he did not hear me. Shabnam, when she heard me, came out, running. She rushed to *Mamu's* house.

The girl's face was so filled with blood that I couldn't be sure she was Amreen. *Mamu* picked her up and quickly took her to the doctor. By this time, my clothes were drenched in blood. I was so struck by the incident, that when I stood up I realised I couldn't walk because my legs were shaking.

Meanwhile, the man who Amreen had fallen on, fainted.

[What everyone said]

[Azra Tabassum]

Listening to Bobby, I remembered my sister. This happened last year. Around 15th August, every child wants to stay on the roof [to see the kites flying]. My sister's sister-in-law's name is Shafat. Shafat *Baji* stays in a five-storied building. Her flat is on the fourth floor.

One day, she was cooking in the kitchen. All her kids were playing on the roof. Some were playing, some were flying kites. Her eldest son is twelve and the youngest is three. Three-year-old Naved was also playing on the roof with the kids. Somehow, he fell off the roof. The window was open, and Shafat *Baji* saw something fall. She thought it must

be some cloth. She thought of checking what cloth it could be. When she went and checked, her voice choked within her for a minute. Then she screamed, "My child! My child!"

A man appeared from somewhere and, picking up Naved, rushed him to the hospital. Shafat *Baji* ran down the stairs. She was not in her senses. She stood in front of her husband's shop and with all the strength she could muster, screamed, "Nadim, my child, my Naved". Then everyone rushed to the hospital. On reaching there they got to know Naved had hit many things before landing on the ground. He had been very badly hurt. His skull had burst from behind, and he had died on the spot.

Shafat *Baji* was inconsolable. Now she never lets her children go up on the roof. If they go, she accompanies them.

[Sultana]

When I was going to the girl's house to ask after her, I was nervous. I kept imagining her fall – her scream when she would have been falling was resounding in my ears, and the image of her fall was playing before my eyes like a film. If we don't witness an incident, then the images we conjure up are unclear.

When I reached her house, I softly asked everyone sitting around her, "How is she? What are the doctors saying? Where all has she been hurt?" I saw her face was bandaged. I thought she must have got stitches. I felt a slight pain in my heart for her. She had broken many teeth. I thought, if this had happened to an elder, or at least someone older, it would have been different. This girl is so young. We'll get to know how her face has been affected only after her bandage comes off.

[Suraj Rai]

Surroundings, rhythm, thought.

The rhythm in the text was so fast, that one almost didn't register its force. Something has happened in this text which draws one to it. Its

force on us is just like the one experienced by a scrap of paper or polythene bag that gets blown by a fast moving vehicle passing by. The difference is just one of degree. Because the surroundings are giving rhythm and force to the thought in the text, the thought is bringing in a fog and a heaviness to the surroundings.

[Yashoda]

This happened when I was really young. Something happened which I am reminded of very often. I was playing on the roof with a friend. Suddenly, I slipped and I fell on a healthy, well-built man, and then onto the ground. I lost consciousness. When I came to, I found myself in Emergency ward number 14. The smell of medicines had seeped inside me by then. I was surrounded by my family members and acquaintances. When I regained consciousness, it looked like new life was infused into them. *Ammi* had tears in her eyes. As soon as she saw my eyes were open, she asked me, "How are you my child?"

I pointed towards my mouth to indicate that my jaws were hurting a lot. But the soothing touch of *Ammi's* hand had taken me away from the pain. *Ammi* took me in her arms and said, "Now you have come into consciousness, now everything will be alright". *Abbu* gently caressed my head with his hand, and went out. And two or three neighbours wished me good health and went and sat in the balcony. I lay hugging my mother for hours. And kept looking at her affectionate, love filled eyes.

Even today, when I see *Ammi's* anger-filled eyes, I remember those love-filled eyes that the accident had brought out...

Martial Arts

Kulwinder Kor

That day some guests were coming home to meet my sister, to see her

for arranging her marriage with their son. I left the Compughar early for home. As soon as I reached the bus stop, I heard a clamour: "You just drive the vehicle and drop us at Viraat cinema hall". Some men were using force on an auto-rickshaw (three wheeler) driver to make him take them to Viraat. The driver was refusing. The men beat him up badly, made him sit in the three-wheeler and threateningly put a long knife to his stomach.

I was standing a short distance away from the auto-rickshaw, watching this scene. Many questions arose in my mind. Should I help the driver or not? I am a student of martial arts. I have pledged to always use my skills to protect myself, the weak, and women. I was still going through these questions, when my eyes wandered around and saw people standing further away from me. From among those people, one face was asking me to move away. Just then, an auto-rickshaw in front of me and before I could think any more, I sat in it and left for home.