

The Shroud (Kafan) – Munshi Premchand

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1

The father and son were sitting right in front of the entrance to the shack beside a fire that had long gone out. Inside, Budhia, the son's young wife, was writhing in labour pains. Her heart-rending cries made both the father and son hold their hearts. It was a desolate, wintry night and the whole village was enveloped in darkness.

'She won't last, it seems', said Ghisu. 'She has been tossing and turning the whole day. Go in and see what's wrong.'

'Why doesn't she just die if she has to? What's there to see?' Madho whined piteously.

'You are so cruel. You spent a whole year with her happily, and now you're turning your face away from her.'

'I can't bear to see her writhing in pain, flailing her hands and legs.'

Ghisu and Madho were Chamars by caste, and were treated with contempt by the whole village. For every day that Ghisu worked, he shirked his duty for three days. But the real shirker was Madho, who sat and puffed at the chillum for an hour after each hour of work that he put in. That was why no one hired them. They wouldn't seek work if they had even a fistful of grain at home. Only when they'd missed a couple of meals did Ghisu climb a tree to gather some dry branches, which Madho carried to the market to sell. As long as that money lasted, they simply roamed about. Once they were faced with starvation again, they would gather dry wood or seek some other work.

There was no dearth of work in the village. The peasants who lived there could have given them all kinds of jobs, but they called them only when they were desperate and had no option but to employ both to get the work done, work that could otherwise have been accomplished by one person. Had the father-son duo been sadhus, they wouldn't have been required to practise self-restraint to attain contentment. It was second nature to them.

A strange life they led! They had nothing in the house except for a couple of clay utensils. They covered their nakedness in tattered rags. Even though they were free from the temptations of life, they were burdened with debt. They listened to people's insults and abuses with perfect

equanimity. They were so destitute that people lent them things without any hope of getting them back. They would enter other people's fields, steal potatoes and peas, and roast them to fill their stomachs. Or they would uproot a few sugar cane stalks and suck the juice through the night.

Ghisu had been living this spartan life for sixty years, and now Madho, like a truly obedient son, was following in his father's footsteps. Rather, he outdid his father in this regard. At that hour as well, sitting by the fire, they were roasting potatoes that they had stolen from somebody's field.

Ghisu's wife had died a long time ago. Madho had married only the previous year. This woman had brought some order to the family. She ground wheat or chopped grass and somehow managed to get together a seer of flour to feed these two shameless rascals. Since she had arrived, they had become lazier and more laid-back than before. They had even started giving themselves airs. If someone wanted to hire them, they wouldn't show any interest, and then demand double the wages. This woman had been tossing and turning in mortal labour pain since morning, but the father and son seemed to be waiting for her to die so that they could have a good night's sleep.

As he peeled the potatoes, Ghisu said, 'Just go in and see what's wrong. She must be possessed by an evil spirit. The exorcist will demand no less than a rupee if you send for him. Where will we get the money from?'

Worried that if he went in, Ghisu might polish off most of the potatoes, Madho replied, 'I'm afraid to go in.'

'Afraid of what? I'm right here.'

'Why don't you go in and see?'

'When my wife died, I didn't budge from her side for three days . . . She'll feel shy, won't she? I have never looked at her face, how can I look at her bare body today? She wouldn't know how to react. If she sees me, she'll go stiff with embarrassment.'

'I wonder what we will do if the child comes. Dry ginger, jaggery, oil—we have nothing in the house.'

'Everything will come. If God gives a child, those who don't give a paisa now will give something on their own. I had nine sons. There was never anything in the house, but things worked out fine each time.'

It was not surprising to come across such a way of thinking in a society where the condition of those who toiled day and night was not much

better than the condition of these two, and where those who took advantage of the weaknesses of the peasants were much better off than the peasants themselves.

Ghisu, it seems, was shrewder than ordinary peasants, and rather than joining their thoughtless herd, he had enlisted himself in the group of the sly and crafty ones. However, he didn't have the ability to use the mores of the crafty to his advantage, and that is why the others in his group had gone on to become leaders and headmen in the village whereas everyone pointed accusing fingers at him. Still, he had one consolation: no matter how wretched his condition, he, unlike other peasants, was able to evade their back-breaking labour and no one could take advantage of his dumb simplicity.

The duo peeled the potatoes and hastily popped them into their mouths. Starving since the previous day, they didn't have the patience to let them cool. The outer part of the potatoes didn't feel too hot, but as they dug their teeth in, the hot insides scalded their tongues, palate and throat. The safest thing to do at that moment was to gulp down the burning ember hurriedly and consign it to a place where it would cool down soon enough. So they kept gobbling the potatoes frantically even as tears streamed down their faces from the effort.

Ghisu was reminded of the Thakur's marriage, which he had attended twenty years ago. He remembered that extraordinary feast to this day. He said, 'I can never forget it. Never have I been to another feast like that, where I could have such a bellyful. The bride's family fed everyone, big and small, puris fried in pure ghee. And there was curd, three kinds of dry saag, one spicy curry, chutney, sweets and many other things. I can't tell you how I relished it! There was no one to stop you. You could demand anything you wanted and eat as much as you liked. People gorged so much that there was no space for even a drop of water in their stomachs. But the servers kept on dishing out piping hot, fragrant kachoris. They didn't listen to you even if you said no or raised your hand to restrain them. And when people finished eating and rinsed their mouths, they were served paan as well. But I had no desire left for paan as I could barely stand! I somehow managed to reach home and stretched out on my blanket . . . the Thakur was large-hearted indeed!'

Madho listened to the description of the sumptuous list of delicacies with relish, and said, 'I wish someone would feed us like that now.'

'Who'll feed you now? Those times were different. Nowadays everyone is saving money. Stingy in marriages and weddings, stingy in rites and

rituals. What are they going to do with all the money they grab from poor people, I ask you. They are not tight-fisted when it is a question of grabbing, they are so only when it comes to giving.'

'You must've stuffed yourself with at least twenty puris?'

'More than twenty. I was a hefty fellow. You aren't even half the size I was.'

They finished the potatoes and drank some water. Then they covered themselves with their dhotis, tucked their knees up against their chests and went off to sleep right there beside the ashes of the fire, like two huge, coiled-up pythons.

Budhia was still writhing in pain.

2

The next morning, Madho went inside the shack to find his wife's body stiff and cold. Flies were buzzing over her face. She was covered with dust and her two stony eyes were staring vacantly upwards. The child in her womb had died.

Madho rushed out to Ghisu and both began to howl and beat their chests. Hearing their laments, the neighbours came running in panic and muttered time-worn consolations.

But there was not much time for mourning. They had to arrange for the firewood and the shroud. Money was as scarce in the house as meat in an eagle's nest.

The father and son went wailing to the zamindar of the village. He hated the very sight of them and had thrashed them a couple of times with his own hands for stealing and for not showing up for work after they had promised to. He said, 'What's the matter, Ghisua? What are you howling for? One doesn't see your face nowadays. It seems like you don't want to live in this village.'

Ghisu prostrated himself before the zamindar and said tearfully, 'Sarkar, we're in deep trouble. Madho's wife died last night. She suffered the whole day. We sat by her late into the night. Gave her all the medicines—the best we could. But she gave us the slip. We have no one left now to prepare a roti for us. Master, we're ruined. My family is destroyed. Now who will see to her last rites except you? We spent whatever little we had on her treatment. She can be given her last rites only if you have mercy. We have no one else to turn to.'

Though the zamindar was kind, he knew that his kindness would be wasted on these fellows. For a moment he felt that he'd shoo them away and tell them to their faces that the corpse could rot for all he cared. They didn't come when they were sent for, did they? Only because they had found themselves in a tight spot today had they shown up to flatter him. Rascals! But this was not the occasion for anger or revenge. He reluctantly flung two rupees at them, but didn't utter a word of sympathy. He didn't even deign to look at them. It was as though he was getting a load off his head.

When the zamindar himself had given them two rupees, how could lesser mortals like the village banias, shopkeepers or moneylenders avoid making some contribution to the good cause? Ghisu made much of the zamindar's name, and some contributed two annas and some four. Within an hour, Ghisu managed to collect a sum of five rupees, which was adequate. Some gave grains, others gave firewood. Thus reassured, Ghisu and Madho set out for the market at noon to buy the shroud, while others got busy splitting bamboos for the bier.

The kindly village women came to take a look at the corpse, bemoaned the helpless fate of the dead woman, and left.

3

As they reached the market, Ghisu said, 'We've got enough firewood for the pyre, what do you say?'

'Yes, there's enough wood. We need only the shroud now.'

'Let's get a cheap one.'

'Of course. It will be night when the corpse is carried to the pyre, no one will look at the shroud.'

'What an unjust custom! She, who didn't have even tattered rags to cover her body while she was alive, must now have a new shroud.'

'And it burns to ashes with the corpse.'

'So it does. Now, if we'd had these five rupees earlier, we could've bought her some medicines.'

Each was trying to gauge what the other was thinking. They kept wandering around in the market until it was evening. And either intentionally or by coincidence, they found themselves in front of a liquor shop. They entered together and stood hesitantly for a while. Then Ghisu bought a bottle of liquor and some titbits and, sitting in the veranda, both began to drink. Soon, they were drunk.

‘What good would it have done if we’d bought the shroud? It’d only be burnt to ashes,’ said Ghisu.

Madho looked up at the heavens as though he was reassuring the angels of his innocence, and said, ‘This is the way of the world. They give thousands of rupees to the Brahmins. Who knows whether it brings them rewards in the next life?’

‘Rich people have money to burn, let them. What do we have?’

‘But what’ll we tell people? They’ll ask where the shroud is.’

Ghisu grinned. ‘We’ll say the money slipped out from my waistband. We looked everywhere, but couldn’t find it.’

Madho giggled. He was excited by his father’s unexpected ingenuity, and said, ‘She was a good soul. Even in death, she saw to it that we were fed well.’

By this time, they had finished off more than half the bottle. Ghisu ordered two seers of puri, along with mutton curry, liver pieces and fish fry from the shop opposite the shack. Madho ran to collect it all in two bowls. The sumptuous fare cost them one and a half rupees. They now had very little money left.

The two of them sat there in all splendour and helped themselves to the puris with the gusto of a lion feeding on its prey in the jungle. No one could hold them to account and there was no fear of humiliation. They were past the stage of such sensitivities. Ghisu said philosophically, ‘She made us so happy, she’ll definitely get rewarded for it in heaven.’

Madho lowered his head respectfully to indicate his agreement. ‘Sure. Bhagwan, you are all-knowing. Take her to paradise. We pray for her from the depth of our hearts. We have never had such a hearty meal in our whole life.’

After a few moments, Madho had some doubts.

‘Dada, aren’t we all bound for the same place, sooner or later?’

Ghisu didn’t deign to reply to such a childish query. He looked at Madho reproachfully.

‘What answer will you give her there if she asks why we didn’t give her a shroud?’ Madho asked.

‘Don’t talk rubbish!’

‘She’s going to ask—you can be sure of that.’

'How do you know that she won't have a shroud? Do you take me to be a donkey? I haven't lived in this world for sixty years for nothing. She will have a shroud, and a much better one than we could have given her.'

Madho was unconvinced. He asked, 'Who'll provide it? You have blown up all the money.'

Ghisu was really angry now. 'I'm saying she'll have her shroud. Why don't you believe me?'

'Why don't you say who'll provide it?'

'The same people who gave us the money. They won't hand over the money to us any more. If they do, we'll have another feast here. And they'll pay for the shroud again.'

As the darkness deepened and the stars shone brighter, the atmosphere in the liquor shop became livelier. If one sang, another reeled, someone else clung to his friend's neck while yet another held a glass to his companion's lips. There was intoxication in the air. The revelry became more boisterous. Some got drunk after just one swig. Many came here only to taste the joy of forgetfulness. More than the liquor, it was the ambience that made them happy. The sorrows of life had brought them here, and for a while they would forget whether they were dead or alive or something in-between.

The father and son were still taking swigs from the bottle merrily. All eyes were glued to them. How fortunate they were to have a whole bottle all to themselves!

Having finished the meal, Madho picked up the leftover puris and gave them to a beggar who was staring hungrily at them. For the first time in his life, he was experiencing the pride and pleasure of drinking and being on a high.

'Take it,' said Ghisu, 'eat to your heart's content and give us your blessings. She who has earned it is dead. With your blessings, she is sure to go to heaven. Bless her from every pore of your body. The money was hard-earned.'

Madho looked up at the sky and said, 'She'll go to heaven, Dada, and be a queen there.'

Ghisu stood up and said ecstatically, 'Yes, she'll go to heaven. She hurt no one, harmed no one. In death, she fulfilled the greatest wish of our life. If she doesn't go to heaven, who will? These fat bloodsuckers of the poor

who go for darshan of the Ganga to wash their sins and offer prayers in temples?’

This exuberance soon wore off. Fluctuation in mood is an integral feature of the drunken state. Sadness and remorse took over.

‘Dada, how the poor thing suffered in life, and now she’s dead and gone!’ Madho covered his eyes with his hands and burst into tears.

Ghisu consoled him. ‘Don’t cry, my son. Be happy that she has been released from the web of maya, from all fetters. She was very lucky she could snap all ties so soon.’

And then they both broke into a song: Deceiver, why do you cast such enchanting glances, oh deceiver . . . ?

The entire shack was drowning in a drunken stupor and the two went on singing. Then they began to dance—they leaped and jumped, staggered and tumbled, made faces and gestures, and finally crashed to the ground.