

THE LETTER

Aditya Johri

When the postman delivered a letter for Chandan that afternoon, my parents were surprised. This was the first letter Chandan, who lived in the servant's quarters at the back of our house, had received since he'd moved in. With postal mail being the only means of long-distance communication in 1980s India, the absence of any letters was highly unusual.

My father asked my mother, "Can he even read?"

"I think so but I'm not sure," she replied. "If not, he'll figure it out. Ask a friend."

My father's question was not unfounded. Literacy was low among farm laborers like Chandan who had migrated to Gandhinagar, the small university town in Northern India where my father taught plant physiology. The laborers

worked on the farms owned by the university and often found free accommodation in the servant quarters of faculty and staff housing in return for taking care of the attached gardens and fields.

He handed the letter to me, “Take this to Chandan but come right back. Don’t start playing in the fields with him. You’ve to finish your homework. You’ve a test coming up.”

I said sure and ran out back to find Chandan. My eight-year-old-self adored him.

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A year earlier, the occupants of our servant’s quarters departed suddenly to take up jobs at a paper mill that had opened in a neighboring town. After their three-year stay, their sudden exit was unexpected but it was hard to dissuade them from leaving. They found the promise of higher wages too appealing. The state of our garden, which they tended, started to deteriorate soon after and my parents made it known in the neighborhood that they were looking for suitable replacements.

One evening, a few weeks later, Chandan showed up. He was accompanied by our neighbor’s servant, Manohar. My father and I were on the front porch. He was teaching me how to clean the spark plugs on our Vespa.

“I heard that you are looking for someone to take care of your garden and fields,” Chandan said. “I can do that. I’ve just arrived from the village and all I need is a place to stay.”

In front of us was a tall, strong young man in his twenties, neat and clean in appearance, with a harsh but sincere face and a well-kept moustache. He was dressed in white shirt and khaki trousers.

My father looked at Manohar and asked, “What do you think?”

“He is from my village. He is very hard working and honest,” Manohar replied.

My father nodded. He did not think much of Manohar but he also knew though that there was no other way to get a reference especially if Chandan was new to town. My father’s gaze wandered over the dilapidated flower bed and vegetable patch to the overgrown grass in the small field that came with our subsidized government house. He was desperate.

“OK,” he said to Chandan. “You can move in. But let me warn you, only for one month at first. If it works out you can stay longer. I don’t need any trouble.”

“Yes sir,” Chandan said, “You’ll have no trouble from me.”

His earnest face broke into a weak smile when he looked at me.

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When my father informed my mother of his decision, she was not happy, “What did you do? You gave the place to a man we know nothing about—a man with no family that we know of.”

“But Manohar vouched for him,” my father responded. “They are from the same village.” It went without saying that they knew each in the village because they were of the same caste. In the villages, castes didn’t intermingle.

My mother shook her head and said, “I’m glad I only have one son who is almost old enough to take care of himself and I don’t have to worry about his safety.”

My mother realized her apprehensions were misguided even before the probationary one-month period ended. Our impeccably maintained flower beds and thriving vegetable garden were the envy of the neighborhood. I overheard her acknowledging to her friends that Chandan was the best help we ever had.

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When I reached Chandan’s room with the letter, the door was latched from outside. I found him on the other side of the house tilling the land with a hoe, getting the soil ready for planting wheat. He was wearing his usual work

clothes—khaki trousers rolled up almost to his knees and a white undershirt, now drenched with sweat. He would have taken off the half-sleeve white shirt, one of the three he owned, folded it carefully, and left it back at his room.

“Bhaiya, a letter for you,” I said as I held out the letter. I addressed Chandan as *bhaiya*, a term of endearment and respect used for elder brothers.

Chandan froze mid-action, the hoe up in the air. He stared at me. “A letter, for me?”

I nodded, and added cheerfully, “Maybe it’s from your family.”

I had often asked him about his family but all he ever said was, “They are in the village”—a generic reference to the rural eastern part of the country where most farm laborers came from. I found it odd that Chandan never visited his family, even during the festival season. It was not uncommon for the laborers to live away from their families for years to save and send more money back, but it was a tradition to go back once a year. I always imagined Chandan didn’t have any family or had lost his family in a tragic accident.

He put the hoe down and took the letter from me. He inspected the light blue Inland Letter Card, a single piece of stamped paper with space for the message on one side and addresses on the other, without opening it. The sender’s information section on the back was empty. The address was written

in Hindi and had his name, my father's last name, and our town. The six-digit pin code was in a different handwriting than the address, as if someone had added it later. It was common to send and receive letters with some information missing, especially when the destination was a small town; the postmen knew everyone.

I was waiting for Chandan to open the later, anxious to learn more, when he said, "I'll wash my hands and open it later."

He put the letter down at the edge of the field and got back to his work. Sensing my disappointment, he said, "Do you want to help me with the planting?" Chandan knew I enjoyed working the field with him; it was often my substitute for play. He did the hard work and I assisted as and when he instructed me. I nodded and picked up the bag of seeds even though I knew I was told to head back immediately.

Chandan created rows while I planted the seeds every three inches, just as I had learned from him. We continued for a while, but I could sense he was restless. We would usually be occupied for hours but today he stopped only a half hour in. "You should go inside," he said. "It's really hot today."

I left the field, but after turning the corner, I hid behind the trunk of a mango tree and watched him. He picked up the letter and went towards his

room. He placed the letter on the large green colored steel trunk that contained all his possessions, came out, washed his hands, and then sat down on the steps to his room. He looked away in the distance and kept staring. I left, feeling guilty at spying on him.

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As dusk settled, my mother asked me to take some leftovers for Chandan. She often sent food for him as she knew he was single and had to do all his own cooking. Chandan cooked daily and usually prepared enough food at dinner so that he would have leftovers for breakfast and lunch, except rotis which he made fresh each morning and evening. When I arrived, Chandan had already started to cook. There was a big pot of lentils boiling on his wood-fired stove of bricks and mud. He had redone the existing stove when he'd moved in, so that it now had two openings, like a dual burner stove.

“Bhaiya, are you making lentils again? Don't you know how to cook anything else?”

Chandan laughed. “Of course, I do. But these are easy to make.”

“Well, it's good then that I brought you some vegetables,” I said, handing him the food. As I did, I took a quick peek inside his room. The letter was not on the trunk.

I sat on the steps to his room and watched him cook. As the lentils boiled, he poured some mustard oil in a small pan and started heating it. He added some onion, garlic, and green chilies, and when they started sputtering, some turmeric. Every other day, he would stop at the market and buy these supplies. I once asked him why he didn't buy more of the mustard oil at once and he'd said, "It goes bad. Also, it is very expensive." When I told my mother about this conversation, she admonished me for prying too much into Chandan's personal life. She took me into the kitchen and showed me the price on the packet of oil we bought for our cooking. "See this? Even we can only afford to buy a small packet each month and I've to use it judiciously."

I was waiting for Chandan to add the spice mix he had prepared into the lentils. I loved the sizzling sound it made, but that was when I heard my mother calling me for dinner. As I started to leave, Chandan asked me to wait. For a second, I thought he would open the trunk and bring out the letter and read it to me. He went inside the hut and brought a small dog made of jute. Chandan was skilled at making objects from jute; he told me he had learned it from his grandmother. He reused our jute grain bags to make these toys. One of my prized possessions was a puppet he had made for me that looked like my favorite comic character *Chacha Chowdhury*, an old man with a large turban

and a big moustache, whose mind was supposed to work faster than a computer. To make his doll-like figures, he filled the jute with raw cotton from the buds of the Semal tree in our front yard.

The dog he had placed in my hands had a black snout, a big button, just like my dog Fluffy, who had died a few months back. Chandan knew that I really missed him. “This will forever remind you of Fluffy and also,” he added, “of me.” I was jubilated at the gift and couldn’t control my smile. I thanked Chandan and ran inside to show my latest acquisition to my parents. That night, I slept with the jute dog on the side table next to my bed.

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The next day, Sunday, I woke up excited. On Sundays, I got to spend more time in the fields. I headed to the field after breakfast but was surprised when I didn’t see Chandan. He was usually up early and liked to finish sowing while there was still some moisture on the ground so that he wouldn’t have to water the new seeds too much afterwards. I went to his room and found the door was latched from the outside but not locked. I looked around the house—he wasn’t anywhere.

When I told my father that I couldn’t find Chandan, he came out to the quarters with me and knocked on the door. Nobody answered. He opened the

door and went inside. I followed him. We looked around and the room looked as it usually did—neat and clean. Everything was in its place. My father noticed that Chandan's bicycle was missing, "He must have gone to the market. He'll be back soon. Why don't you go and finish your homework until he comes?"

When my father told my mother that Chandan was not in his room or in the fields, she immediately connected his absence to the letter. "It has to be that. Maybe he has gone to ask someone to read it or write a reply. It must be urgent—he looked pale when he saw the letter."

It was not uncommon for my mother to come with explanations that bordered on the fantastical. My father chose not to remind her that she had not seen Chandan open the letter, nor had she seen him at all after he received the letter—he didn't want to spoil his Sunday by getting into an argument. Instead, he sat on the veranda to enjoy the Sunday paper. I sat on the floor next to him finishing up my homework. He preferred to monitor my work and help me if needed. From our vantage point, we could see everyone who passed our street. As he was transitioning from the politics section to sports, my father spotted Manohar. Usually, he didn't let anything disturb him until he was done reading the sports section, but today he called Manohar over.

Manohar crossed the road and walked across the driveway to the veranda. He was walking slowly, with a limp. He joined his palm to greet us but continued standing outside.

“Have you seen Chandan?” my father asked.

“No, *sahib*, I haven’t seen him today.”

“So, you saw him yesterday?”

“No, no, I meant I haven’t seen him for a while. Why, is something the matter?”

“No. I wanted to talk to him but couldn’t find him anywhere. Tell him to come see me if you run into him.” He waved Manohar off.

My father had always been suspicious of Manohar, who had a regular habit of consuming copious amounts of locally-brewed alcohol and was known to partake in recreational drugs, which grew in abundance in the area. My father didn’t usually hold these habits against the laborers, as their means of entertainment were limited. Yet, with Manohar he was watchful, knowing that Manohar had tried to entice Chandan to the vices. Chandan, however, had steadfastly refused to be lured. My father had once seen the two arguing—a drunk Manohar shouting and swaying, Chandan imploring him to go home. I had

heard him narrating the incident to my mother while petitioning her to not let me spend so much time with Chandan. She didn't say a word to me.

When Chandan didn't return by lunch, I started to get worried. I would go out and check his living quarters frequently. Later the evening, after I had made a dozen trips to check for Chandan's return, my mother suggested that we notify the police. My father was strictly against this idea.

"Are you crazy? He has only been gone a few hours. There is no need to panic. And if we go to the police they will ask us for his details and we know nothing about him. What if he gets in more trouble because of us?"

"Why don't you ask Manohar?" my mother advised.

"I already did. He said he didn't know anything but something didn't sound right in the way he said it. He was acting bizarre and was elusive. He was also walking all funny, probably landed in a ditch while drunk. I don't trust that Manohar."

Night fell and still there was no sign of Chandan. I refused to go to bed, so my father and I went to check Chandan's room again. It had all the signs of someone who wanted to travel light without raising any suspicions. Everything was in its place. This time my father opened the trunks. It only held a few of Chandan's clothes.

“Let’s see if we can find that letter,” he said. “Maybe there was a family tragedy and he had to rush home.”

“Why wouldn’t he tell us?”

“I don’t know.”

We looked around but didn’t find the letter. My father was now certain that the letter had triggered his departure. On my mother’s insistence, my father went and spoke with Manohar again. He maintained that he had no information about Chandan, but he would go out and look for him and let us know if he found anything.

Suddenly, the gift Chandan gave to me made more sense. It was a parting gift.

§

After Chandan’s disappearance—that is how everyone referred to it by then— rumors started to surface. Perhaps he had killed his family and run away, or he had joined a band of bandits, or he was wanted by the police for assault. One day a neighbor said to my mother, “You are so lucky that evil man didn’t harm you.” The words saddened me. “Wait till Chandan comes back,” I wanted to shout. “He’ll prove everybody wrong.”

But Chandan didn't return. For the first few weeks after he went I would ask my mother about him as soon as I returned from school. We left everything as it is in Chandan's room in anticipation that he will be back or send some message. With each passing day though the gardens and the fields started to overgrow and when the monsoon season came things became untenable. New people moved into the servants' quarters—a family, this time. My mother had made the arrangements. One of the children was my age and I finally had someone to play with occasionally but I didn't interact much with them. I got busy with friends and school. Chandan's disappearance started to fade from memory.

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Almost three years after Chandan went missing, I had just turned eleven, police arrived at our doorstep. Two out-of-town cops accompanied by a local policeman. I was standing next to my father when the senior inspector, who had traveled from a different state, showed us a photograph, and asked us if we recognized the person. It was Chandan.

They already knew that Chandan had worked for us and were not surprised when my father confirmed that, indeed, Chandan had lived in our servants' quarters. They wanted to see the room and examine his possessions. We

showed them the space but by then we had already given away anything he owned. His trunk was used by the new occupants to store their clothes.

“How did you find him?” the senior inspector asked my father.

“Another worker recommended him.”

“Who?”

My father hesitated and said, “I can’t remember exactly and I don’t think he lives around here anymore.”

At this point, the local cop stepped in, “Must be that drunkard Manohar, I saw them together a few times.”

The inspector said, “Ok. Let’s find Manohar,” and they left.

“What was that about?” my mother asked my father. She hadn’t come out when the police were there, but instead had been watching from behind the curtain in the living room.

“Nothing, they are looking for Chandan.”

“How can you say it’s nothing? The police looked concerned.”

“Yes, it must be serious, else they wouldn’t have come all this way.”

There was a look of worry on my parents’ face and I was puzzled.

I hadn't thought of Chandan for a long time. I had made friends my age now and busied myself with music and sports. I had no connection left to the fields and the gardens, but there was something about the time spent with Chandan that was etched in my mind. All the interactions I remembered with him were positive, good things; it was, from that perspective, a unique relationship. I knew his status was below me—he lived in the servant quarter—and so it was expected that he would be nice to me. Yet, I felt there was something more than that to our relationship. He took care of me like I was a much younger brother – helping me repair my bicycle, bringing me fruits not just from our trees but an orchard that he drove past on his way to work, letting me plant seeds even when he could've done it himself faster and better, telling my mother an herbal remedy when I fell sick. He genuinely cared for me. The more I thought of him, the more I missed him. The lack of closure I felt around his departure, which I had pushed somewhere inside me, resurfaced. I was worried for him too – why would the police be looking for him?

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I was distracted at school the next school day and while riding back after classes as we turned a corner I almost ran my bicycle into Ajay, “What’s wrong with you? Didn’t get enough sleep?” he shouted.

“No, it’s about Chandan.”

“Who?”

“Someone who lived in our servant’s quarters a while back. I am not sure if we were even friends then.”

We continued biking for some time before Ajay exclaimed, “Was it the man who gave you that toy dog—you never let that thing out of sight for months.”

It was true—for some time after Chandan vanished, I had taken to carrying the jute Fluffy everywhere. My parents eventually had to resort to hiding it from me to break that habit. It took a few months for me to become disinterested in the toy, and then finally to outgrow it. Until Ajay reminded me, I had forgotten about the jute Fluffy.

“Yes, him. We got some news about him yesterday. I’m not sure what’s going on. Anyway, I’ll tell you more when I do.” I changed the conversation. I didn’t want to reveal to him the visit from the police.

When I got home, I immediately looked for the dog and found the toy, all squished, stashed inside a small cupboard. The wooden structure that gave the dog its shape was wobbly. The threads had started to come apart at the main seam giving way to gaps in places. My mother had warned me that insects

would come for the toy, and indeed there were holes. The raw cotton from the cotton-tree had let go of its seeds which had accumulated at the corners. I shook the dog to get the seeds out but they were stuck. I slowly undid the thread and reached inside to pull them out. My hand touched what felt like paper and when I pulled it out, rolled up on a small stick was a blue letter – the letter Chandan had received the day he left.

I opened the letter but didn't recognize the writing; it was neither Hindi nor English, the two languages I knew. The words were densely packed. All available space was fully utilized, including the sides of the letter.

Finding the letter left me confused. Why would Chandan leave it inside the dog, knowing fully well that I was unlikely to discover it anytime soon. Even if I did, I wouldn't be able to read it. I slept uneasily that night, as if I had become part of some conspiracy. At the same time, I was concerned that I might have not done my part in helping Chandan. What if I was meant to find the letter earlier, soon after he left? I did not tell my parents about the letter, worried that they might inform the police. The only person I could think of who might be able to unravel all this was Manohar. If nothing else, I was hopeful he would be able to read the letter, or at least know someone who could.

Next evening, rather than going to the playground I went in search of Manohar. He didn't live on our street anymore and had moved to the edge of the town. The university had built low-income single- and double-room housing for farm laborers so to entice them to move out of the illegal, dangerous shanties they had built around the edge of the town. These new quarters were allotted by lottery and Manohar had got lucky and ended up with a single room dwelling.

When I got to his room, it was latched from the outside. There was no lock on it. Some kids were playing in the street, outside the house next door. They stopped their game when they saw me outside Manohar's door and one of them shouted: "The police took him yesterday and he isn't back. He was drunk, so they beat him up." At this, the others started to laugh. I wasn't surprised that the cops would physically harm him—the poor usually got that treatment from the police—but I doubted it was just because he was drunk.

I went back the next day and the day after, but Manohar hadn't returned. A week later, when I was passing through the area on my way to pick up flour from the local flour mill, I stopped by on the off chance he might be back. I found his door closed but not latched from outside. I knocked but there was no response. I knocked louder and the kids from the house next door came out

and told me he was in there, all I had to do was keep knocking. After a while, I heard a voice from the inside ask, “Who’s there?”

When I told him, he said, “I’m coming, give me a minute.” It took him a while to reach the door and open it. His face was bruised and swollen. He stood at the door unsteadily, holding on to the doorframe. He said *namaste* but had a hard time speaking.

“What happened,” I asked, as a courtesy more than anything else. I could easily guess that his injuries were a result of his arrest by the police.

“Nothing. Just some roughhousing by the cops. It’s nothing.”

“They came to our house looking for Chandan,” I said. “We didn’t tell them you introduced Chandan to us. The local police did.”

He nodded, as if he knew, and believed me. “They asked me about him too. I couldn’t tell them anything. I don’t know where Chandan is. I just know where he came from.”

“Why were the cops looking for him?”

I had by then walked past him and sat down on a stool, the only piece of furniture in the room besides the bed. Manohar was still standing near the door. He made a move as if to sit on the floor—he didn’t want to sit on the bed in front of me, out of respect given the difference in our social status—but I

insisted that he should lie down. He moved slowly towards the bed and sat down, resting his body against the wall.

“I don’t know why they are looking for him now,” he said and became quiet.

He wasn’t willing to say more.

I remained seated, letting the silence hang in the air. I had decided to be patient and stay until I found out as much as I could about Chandan.

Since the day I had found the letter I had started carrying it in my pocket when I left the house. I was worried my parents might find him but also hopeful that I might run into Manohar. I did not tell him about the letter yet. Some part of me didn’t trust him fully.

After a few minutes he said, “His relationship with the cops, it’s a long story.”

I nodded and leaned back to make myself more comfortable. When he noticed that I had no intention to leave, he took a deep breath, sipped some water from a steel tumbler that was on the ledge of the window next to his bed, and continued.

“Chandan and I grew up together. He lived next door with his family. We started working in the fields as kids. We were lower caste tenant farmers and

farming was all we had. The land we tilled belonged to an upper caste landlord. After toiling for the entire year, we would lose most of our hard-earned money in repayments. We were indebted to the hilt.”

I was intimately familiar with this narrative but only as a viewer, a member of the audience, who had watched countless Bollywood movies with this narrative—the tyranny of the rich landlord and the tragic life of the poor farmer. Sometimes there was revenge, sometimes there was the solace of the daughter of the rich man marrying the poor farmer, mostly though, there was tragedy. Today, for the first time, I was listening to someone who had lived it.

“Chandan isn’t his real name. His parents named him Mahesh, the destroyer, after Lord Shiva. When Mahesh and I were about fifteen or sixteen, we had a bumper crop after years of drought. We got a good price for it at the market. We came back with a bigger wad of cash than I had ever seen. I still remember it vividly. We were going to celebrate with a feast, our reward for the hard work, and our families had gathered at Mahesh’s place. When we got back, the landlord’s son was waiting for us to take his share of the earnings.”

“You see,” Manohar continued, “The Mahesh you knew was very different than who he used to be. When he was young, he got angry often. When the landlord’s son asked for the cash, I gave it to him. He gave some back as our

share. Mahesh refused. He was strong for his age, even then, and when the landlord's son, who was intoxicated, tried to grab the cash out of his hands, Mahesh retaliated. He pushed him back and he fell on Mahesh's father's feet. The landlord's son was shocked—he just got up and left.”

At this point Manohar paused and took another sip of water. He had trouble even lifting the glass. He wasn't looking at me but at the ground. He raised his head to look at me for a second and then started to stare out the window in the front at the neighbors' kids playing outside. I could sense his reluctance, he was trying to gauge what to tell me, how much.

“Don't worry, I won't tell anyone,” I said.

“That night the landlord's son came back with his thugs. Mahesh's family was expecting this and had convinced him to leave. When he heard them, he left through the backdoor. I met him under the *peepul* tree at the end of the field with some food and clothes. His family thought they will be able to bring him back by apologizing and giving the landlord all their earnings but Mahesh had made up his mind to leave the village for good. He didn't tell anyone of his plans, except me. In the distance, we could hear his parents' shrieks. The goons beat them up to find where Mahesh went and then torched their hut. As he saw the flames rise, Mahesh almost went back to fight, but I stopped

him. It was no use. They would've killed him. Later, the landlord's son filed a false police case against Mahesh for assault. That turned him into a fugitive on the run."

Suddenly, a lot of things started to make sense to me – why Manohar brought Chandan to our place, why Chandan never went home, Chandan's overall, detached, demeanor with other adults, and also his skills at managing the garden and the fields.

"The landlord continued harassing his family and also mine. But we had nowhere to go, so we stayed on. But after a few years I couldn't take it anymore so I left the village and came here, where I knew some other people from our village."

"Did he ever write to you?" I asked.

"No, I didn't even know he was coming here until he showed up at my place. I hadn't seen or heard from him in years. I had no idea he knew where I lived; my parents told him. He used to communicate with his parents through them. When he came here, I could see he was unsettled, restless, almost traumatized. He didn't tell me what had happened in the preceding decade, what he had gone through. He made me promise not to tell my parents he was here. He didn't want anyone in our village to know."

I pulled the letter from my pocket. If Manohar was surprised, he didn't let on.

"Do you know about this letter?"

He nodded, "Yes. I haven't seen it before, but he told me about it before he left."

He took the letter from me. He looked at the address label and then opened it.

"What does the letter say?" I asked. "He left because of the letter."

"It's not what's in the letter," Manohar said, and then paused. "Maybe, that too, but he left because the letter came addressed to him in the first place. He could tell from the seal on the stamp that it was posted from our village."

I wanted to ask Manohar how anyone would know that Chandan had changed his name but I kept quiet. I didn't want to interrupt his flow.

"Mahesh assumed that at least the postmaster would know where he lived and would tell the landlord. It had given him away and it was a matter of time that they came for him."

"Can you read it?"

He shook his head.

“I can barely read Hindi. The letter is in Bengali. I recognize the letters. I’ve seen them before. It makes sense. Mahesh was good with languages; he must have learned it.”

It didn’t make sense to me. Chandan had acted as if he was barely literate. I told Manohar as much.

“That’s not true. He was one of the better students in the village. He had no trouble reading or writing.”

“If they knew where Chandan was because of the letter, why did it take the police two years to come for him?”

“They came soon after; but only the landlord’s men,” he said and pulled up his shirt. There were bruises everywhere, from the beating I assumed, but he pointed to some marks.

“The night after Chandan left, I came out for a smoke before going to bed. I was mobbed. In the dark I couldn’t make out who it was until someone stuck a match, I recognized the landlord’s thugs. They had kept a watch on his place, your house, but when they didn’t see him there they came for me to confirm if he still lived there. First I hesitated, but then I told them where he had lived, he had already left by then. They didn’t believe me when I said I had no idea

where he had gone. They lighted a cigarette and burned me. They thought that would make me talk. But I really don't know where he went."

There was a knock on the door. I got up and opened it. One of the neighborhood kids I had seen playing outside was standing there with two small tumblers of tea in his hand.

"Mother sent these," he said.

I looked at Manohar, who motioned for me to take them.

"Tell her thanks," he said to the kid.

I put one at Manohar's side.

"I'll have to wait for it to cool before I can drink it. Please go ahead."

I sat back down and sipped on the tea.

"Since I got back two days ago, they have been very helpful," Manohar said, pointing with his head towards his neighbors, "Otherwise it would be very hard for me. Parshuram, their father, even substituted for me in the fields a few times when I was away, or I would have lost my job."

I had seen that solidarity before. Theirs was a communal life and it had to be so. Someone had to fetch the water, get the wood; they had help each other during planting and when it was time to cut or thrash the crop. It took a lot to keep everyday life going.

There was a pause in our conversation as we drank the tea. Manohar still had the letter in his hand and was looking at the front and the back alternatively. It was hard to tell if he really couldn't read it or if he didn't want to tell me what it said. The more time I spent talking to him, the less sure I became that he was the rustic drunkard he appeared to be.

He put the letter down.

“Before leaving, Mahesh told me who sent this letter. He was quite conflicted about it. It is from a girl he met when he joined the Naxals after leaving the village. She was one of the educated college girls who had joined the movement.”

I only vaguely knew what he was talking about. In the late 1960s and early 1970s Marxism had found a stronghold in many parts of India as a means to oppose caste-based persecution. There was a protracted, often armed, protest sympathetic to the communist ideology. The movement had started in Naxalbari, West Bengal, a rural outpost but quickly spread to the cities and neighboring states. Those involved in the movement were referred to as the Naxals after the town where it all began. The Indian government did not take kindly to those involved and had suppressed the movement violently, weakening it significantly over the years but it had survived and even thrived in pockets.

“They fell in love, working side-by-side in the campaign, but Mahesh said he constantly worried for her—she was an idealist, not street-smart. One day, when Mahesh was away, there was an attack on their camp, their hiding place deep inside the forests, and he returned to find everything decimated. He searched for her but never found her. He assumed she had died. She meant a lot to him. In the movement they all took new names and she was the one who gave him the name Chandan, sandalwood, something divine. Something that the gods, even Mahesh, Shiva, put on his forehead. Mahesh was sick of being under someone’s feet. The letter told him she was still alive and he had to find her.”

How did he know these details, I wondered. Were they in the letter or did Chandan tell him?

“She made it out alive with the help of sympathetic locals from among the tribal members in nearby villages. She went to our village to look for Mahesh. She must have known how dangerous that would be, she must have been desperate. Mahesh’s parents had left the village by then, they couldn’t take the abuse by the landlord, but my mother felt sorry for her and told her he was here.”

Before I could ask, he said, “What can I say, I made a mistake, a moment of weakness. My mother asked me about Mahesh when his parents were leaving the village. They were very worried. They hadn’t heard from him for a while. I felt it was the right thing to do, to let them know he was fine, that he was with me.”

“But the letter is addressed to Chandan. How would the postmaster know it was for Mahesh?”

“It’s a small village. Everyone knew who the girl was looking for. Or could figure out.”

There was a long pause. Manohar looked drained. I still had so many questions, but I knew it was hard for him to speak. As I got up to leave, I took a close look around. My eyes had settled by then and I could see better in the dimly lit room – the only source of light was the solitary window, partially covered by curtains, next to the bed. There wasn’t much to look at, the room was no different than Chandan’s. It was sparsely furnished, there were some odds and ends. The cooking stove, I assumed, was outside in the shared backyard.

As I reached the door, I saw, under the overhanging bedsheet that partially covered my view, some books and papers. It looked as if he had hurriedly put them away when I came.

“I wish I could’ve done something for him,” I said, opening the door.

“But you did. He adored you, almost idolized you. He once told me, the only time he had a drink with me, that living at your place had made him realize that he could build a new life, a different life. A happier one. Maybe one where he could rise above his caste. It’s the small things, you see, that nurture hatred but also have the power to melt it away. Meeting someone you can fall in love with, spending time with people who are considerate, having someone to care about, to share your life with.”

His sudden emotion laden eloquence surprised me. It startled him as well, I think. This was the first time he had spoken with any feeling. For the first time I felt like he was not in total control of the narrative he was telling me, he had let go for a second, and now he regretted it. As I looked at him now, tired and broken, barely able to keep himself up, I started to get a distinct feeling that he knew a lot more than he was letting on.

“Why then,” I asked, “are the police looking for him now—was he not able to find her and build a new life?”

Manohar kept quiet, shrugged his shoulders, and rolled over. He wouldn't divulge what he knew, wouldn't be weak this time. He had kept his secrets from the police, what worse could I do?

Aditya Johri is an engineering professor and a writer. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from George Mason University. His short fiction has appeared in *OffCourse Literary Journal*. He received an Honorable Mention in Glimmer Train's Short Story Award for New Writers, 2019, and was the winner of the 2018-2019 Alan Cheuse Fiction Award, George Mason University.