

The Wrestling Match

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Every evening, at exactly this time, standing against the back window has become an habitual act.

The tea on the little stool in the back needs time to cool. Sometimes he overestimates the time needed, so he pours it back in, to warm it up a little. His teeth had become so sensitive once that anything cold or hot gave him an unbearable jolt of pain. From then on he stopped drinking hot tea.

The water flowing beneath the window this time of year is like the stream of oil coming out of an old tanker as it goes along the dry blacktop road, sometimes wider, sometimes narrower, sometimes broken, sometimes not there at all.

He has never liked that water, but he has grown to accept it. Just like his wife. He doesn't know whether he loves her or not, but he does know she is his.

For some people an agreement is made on many levels. They would never live in a house like this, for example, or on the bank of a river or the shore of a lake. His head-of-department, however, lives in Riverbank Colony. The river on which his colony was built is the one this nala flows into. It's called a nala

because it is wide enough and deep enough that during the monsoon it can turn into a full-fledged river. Nevertheless, it's still called a nala because for the rest of the year it's no more than a fat, awkward line of sharp, acidic, smelly water wide enough to look like a row of pigs lying in an oppressive black swamp.

Both sides of that wide and deep nala bed are reinforced with brick, and on both sides are houses, some right up against the retaining wall, others set back a little, some roofed with tin, some with thatch, some with real roofs, and some with nothing more than strips of plastic.

In the back wall of every house is a simple window or vent, and below is a hole through which dirt and rubbish pour down into the nala, spewing out the street's dirt. It is as if every home has been squatting there a long time clearing out its intestines. Without change the nala flows far into the distance where it splits the sky and enters into it. Here is where the rain clouds originate, and there is where they gather and assume a pleasing look. When they advance and engulf the houses, a sort of shivering occurs that is rawer than the fresh darkness. In the evening when the clouds sometimes become colorful, they are reflected on that spread-out ray of the nala's water, whose acidic smell is then not noticed.

All that isn't really so bad, and he thinks that the river visible from Dayal saheb's house in Riverbank Colony can't be much better. It has a little more water, and it's a little wider. But how could the evening colors of the clouds be any brighter than this!

True, up on the roof a different scene presents itself. The sky is exactly the same. The junk-covered roofs far into the distance look the same. But from up

here the nala below engenders a peculiar fear. Once, he read the travels of Sinbad the Sailor. In one tale Sinbad arrives at the edge of the Valley of Death. He doesn't remember how it was described, but from the roof the nala appears very cold, like death, rotting like hell thousands of years old.

But how is the river in Riverbank Colony any less frightening? Stand on the bridge and it will knot up your innards.

He carefully drew together the brownish curtain on the window he had looked out of. Whenever he does that his entire home undergoes a major transformation. It slips away from the nala's bank and settles in the middle of the city.

He looked around the room. He'd have to move the chairs and things back a little. No, he'd have to remove them. There's not enough space. But the table covered with an embroidered tablecloth can be pushed to the side. That would provide for enough room, especially for just a little exercise. There's certainly no need for a lot of it. His body still has its strength. Muscles have their tone. And quickness. He hasn't forgotten the holds and moves. But more than that what's needed is endurance and mental toughness. And he has both. All he'll have to do is increase his lung power.

Defeating Dayal in a wrestling match will not be difficult. His hair is more white than black. If you watch him closely, he seems to lose his breath after climbing only one flight of stairs. Though perhaps not too much. If his office were on the second or third floor, then you'd really see him lose his breath. Put him in a stress hold for even a short while, and he won't be able to breathe. Then he can be pinned down.

But is this really going to happen? There's really going to be a wrestling match? Is it really possible that a wrestling match between the typist-cum-clerk Satish Bahadur and the head-of-department Dayal will occur in the department itself and in front of all the co-workers?

That day the director mahoday had been conducting an inspection of the department, of every office and of every worker. He came up to the third-floor. With him was his vice director and the head-of-department.

Satish Bahadur had stood up and looked at him closely. With the director, Dayal looked a little odd. While his power had increased, his body had diminished. He did not look as if he were with his superior; he looked as if he was accompanied by a whip, but that whip was so heavy he was unable to crack it. All he could do was drag it along behind him.

Satish Bahadur spoke up. "Sir, this typewriter . . ."

"Typewriter? What typewriter?" responded Dayal immediately and harshly, dragging his whip around to face Satish. The director merely smiled, with a slightly inquisitive look.

"In this one, sir, the j is broken and the long a hits in the wrong place. The space . . ."

Gently, so that no one would be hurt, but firmly enough to address the problem the director said, "What do you want me to do about it? Sit down here and fix it myself with a screwdriver? But it should work correctly. Why hasn't it been fixed?"

Dayal said, "He should have written it up, sir. You know, when someone

wants to avoid work, a broken typewriter is a perfect excuse.”

“But I did write it up, sir.”

Obviously with a little pleasure the director said, “He did write it up. So then?”

“A complete lie. Not one sheet of paper ever stays on my desk,” replied Dayal, all the while staring hard at Satish Bahadur.

Smiling the director said, “Not one sheet of paper ever stays on Dayal saheb’s desk. Maybe you put it in a drawer?”

Everybody smiled, politely. Then Satish Bahadur said, “Sir, after that I wrote up my complaint twice more. The last one, sir, I gave only yesterday.”

Really enjoying the game now, the director said, “That won’t be on his desk either. So where did it go, Dayal saheb?”

Dayal’s temples were bulging with pressure. “Don’t lie. If there’s one thing I really hate it’s a lie.”

This time, in excellent English and with his former seriousness the director said, “Clearly, hating the lie is a sign of ethical purity . . .”

Satish Bahadur became even more concerned. He felt if he weren’t able to prove his point, then things could immediately get frighteningly worse. Firmly but with even more respect he said, “Yesterday I gave a report about this typewriter — you even read it. You must be remembering, saheb. And then, saheb, it was on that report that you put the peanuts you were eating. Two peanuts even slipped down off . . .”

Scolding him with a light touch Dayal said, “What kind of nonsense is this?”

Smiling as before the director said, “But why did you eat peanuts on it? You could have eaten almonds, or even cashews, or there’s the spiced fruit dish available downstairs. That’s food for the brain, and fruit has a lot of vitamins. You don’t eat fruit? Or greens?”

“Yes sir, I do, sir; but I know this guy very well. He simply doesn’t want to work . . .”

“So, aren’t we in a pretty pickle. Satish Bahadur saheb doesn’t want to do his work, and no piece of paper ever remains on Dayal saheb’s desk.” Exaggerating a pose of deep thought he continued, “This is a problem. How can it be resolved? Ideas?”

The director turned his fistful of curiosity toward the rest of the workers standing in the room, all politeness and smiles. No one said a word.

“There is one way, Mr. Dayal; used to wrestle, didn’t you?”

“Yes, sir, I did.”

This was Dayal’s most favorite topic. Describing what wrestling move should be done when, he would often slap his own thigh as he regaled his audience about his impressive past. Sometimes he would even issue an underling a challenge. Real proud of our youth, aren’t we. Come on, grip hands . . .

Smiling even more, the director said, “Pick up Mr. Satish Bahadur and throw him out the window.”

“I would indeed like to do that, saheb.”

“But it looks as if Satish saheb, too, keeps himself in good shape. Will you be able to lift him up?”

“My wrestling teacher, sir, was Birju ustad. I was able to confuse and defeat even much bigger opponents!”

“So it’s settled.”

“Sir?”

“A wrestling match!”

With happy excitement the others in the room said, “An excellent idea, sir.” Dayal saheb was taken aback and then gave a rather sharp look around at all his underlings, but that did not change their eager desire a bit.

“So it’s settled; should we do it right now?”

Dayal was able to refrain from saying what first came to mind and then said, “You don’t really want me to throw him down for the count, do you?”

“That sounds like you’re backing out, Dayal saheb.” The director was getting a lot of pleasure out of this. Once it got going, one joy had led to another. Though at first merely upset, Dayal now looked helpless. Realizing he had only a thread of it left to work with, Dayal still hoped this all would end up as a harmless joke or someone in the room would try to save him and get this match postponed.

But everyone in the room was decidedly against the head-of-department, and they looked forward eagerly to the excitement of the match. Maybe Dayal will win, but merely the opportunity the typist-cum-clerk Satish Bahadur will have to fight him aroused feelings of revenge in the hearts of all. As they stood there, they could all remember one or more abuses Dayal had thrown at them.

Dayal said, “Look, sir, I can fight him certainly, and I’ll pin him down very well, but please give me a full month to practice. For years all I’ve been doing

here is pushing files around.”

“A month’s worth of practice is appropriate. So it’s set, Dayal saheb! Today is the seventh. The wrestling match will take place next month on the sixth. Agreed?” The director looked around at all present. They were very happy.

Then Dayal glared at them. This time his eyes were filled with a scary resentment. If what Urdu poets say is true, that eyes can do the work of a dagger or an arrow, then at that moment Dayal seriously wounded many of his underlings.

For the next few days that amazing incident was all they could talk about. No one missed how flustered Dayal had become. Merely having witnessed that kept people happy for days, and then all was forgotten. Dayal’s office tyranny returned. He used the same foibles against his underlings as he had before. Sometimes, though, the only thing he could scold someone for was having forgotten a comma. Having to resort to something as miniscule as that intensified Dayal’s anger. Then he launched into a criticism of the current educational standards followed by how dull-witted and lazy everyone in the younger generation was. Then he kept on scolding them just to be scolding them. Throughout that tirade, of course, everyone had to stand and listen quietly. Sometimes it even reached the point where Dayal would scream, “Stop being a pain in the neck!”

Hearing that, one or more workers would try to slink away. Then Dayal would scream even louder, “Where do you think you’re going?!”

Everybody had already become accustomed to all that, so the department gradually returned to normal.

Meanwhile, the idea of the wrestling match came to the fore again. What

happened was the director, whom one hardly ever saw, met with the entire apartment again. He had two reasons for doing so. One, it was the new year, and two, the department had very successfully completed an important project. For these two reasons he summoned the entire department staff to his rather large office. He wished everyone a happy and prosperous new year, congratulated them on a job well done, addressed some miscellaneous issues facing the department, and then paused and fixed his gaze on Satish Bahadur. Hiding a mischievous smile behind his lips he asked in a very serious tone, “Satish Bahadur ji, is the long a on your typewriter still hitting in the wrong place?”

Innocently Satish Bahadur said, “No, sir, the mechanic fixed that. Now the problem is the ribbon doesn’t move.”

“Hmmm.” the director turned toward Dayal and said, “Dayal saheb ...!” Dayal saheb was chewing on his lower lip. Then the director suddenly blurted out, “Oh, how forgetful I’ve become. You are preparing for the wrestling match, aren’t you. When will it be?”

Some of the workers said, “On the sixth, sir.” Everyone’s face beamed with excitement.

Angered Dayal said, “If this one had spoken rudely to you, I would have straightened him out here and now.”

“Not at all, bhai,” said the director. “The wrestling match will be held according to all the rules and regulations, and it will indeed happen on the sixth.”

He ordered the caretaker to set up mats in the recreation room, and he hired two certified referees and made sure there was a whistle. He even appointed two

office workers to serve as official eyewitnesses, and he held the storekeeper responsible for making sure a tape recorder and a camera were there.

So Dayal realized things were really getting serious. He himself went to try to fix Satish Bahadur's typewriter. Fixing his eyes directly on him he said with a growl, "It's not just the ribbon, it's your people's minds I have to fix. And you — don't you get the idea that after this spectacle of a wrestling match everything will be all over. I've put up with a lot from you. Shirking work is rooted in your blood! You're going to wrestle! Well I'll slam you down so hard they'll never find all your bones. And don't think that just because I'm older you're going to win."

He went on and on in that vein for quite a while. Actually, he had a covert reason for going to Satish Bahadur and yelling at him — he needed to analyze his body more closely. Satish Bahadur was still young, no doubt about it, and he still had his health. His muscles were still strong and in good tone because in college he had participated in a number of sports. Dayal came to the conclusion that if Satish Bahadur had not suffered injustice and had not agreed to marry while still in school, then he could have become a good professional.

After scolding him and having subtly taken an idea of his physical prowess, Dayal left. Satish sat down overcome with despair. It not been easy to get this job, and now all the satisfaction he got from it was being sacrificed on the altar of this typewriter which, from the first day it was placed in front of him, had never worked as it should. Not only was it a troublemaker, it was downright ugly too. From a distance it looked less like a typewriter and more like a half-built

handloom. And he had many more reasons for not wanting to work with this stupid machine.

During his student days, as is the case with every young man, he too was full of grand and pleasing dreams. He sometimes thought he would become a high-level bureaucrat, at other times he would become a famous professor. But after he graduated, he had had to go over one hurdle after another merely to obtain the pleasure of sitting next to this typewriter. Meanwhile, he had also become a father. His most difficult time, however, was when he was transferred to this city. He had had to search two months for decent accommodations until he finally settled for these two tiny rooms on the upper storey of this house on the bank of the nala. The first few days living there were frightening. Night and day the nala gave off its sharp, acidic smell, and by late morning another stench combined with the first. Gradually, however, he grew accustomed to the smells, especially when that sharp, acidic air would blow away and be replaced by a gust of fresh air — that was particularly pleasant. Imagine a man who had eaten very bitter food and who then tasted plain bread and declared it was sweet as honey. As a way of accepting their situation he therefore came up with what he thought was a pretty good rationalization. Over tea he would often remind his wife that if stench did not exist, then how would we ever sense the full fragrance of perfumes. Putrified mud always filled that nala. Satish Bahadur always reminded her that even lotuses grow in mud, although that was merely a proverbial phrase and a lie. Lotuses bloom in very clear water; it's only their roots that are in the mud. And that mud, too, isn't polluted like the mud in this nala. The truth,

however, is that Satish Bahadur has never even seen a lotus.

After Dayal left, Satish always became depressed despite everything he did to fight it off. Then the filing clerk sitting across from him spoke up. This always happened, as if there were an automatic connection between Dayal's coming and going and the mechanism that opened that man's mouth. He said, "Arrogant bastard. But Satish, there's no reason for you to be afraid of him at all. The bastard's lost his strength, and he's getting old. After you came up, throw him down with a little emphasis."

The dispatch clerk joined in. "That's true. He brags a lot; now we'll find out. But Satish, you'll have to be a little careful. The men can be real mean. He'd go so low as to scuttle your report. The year's ended, right? So..."

"Report?" The filing clerk said no more because his annual report would have to be written up too.

Angrily Satish said, "Let him foul up my report. I don't care. If I don't pick him up and throw him down, my name isn't Satish Bahadur."

Showing his empathy the dispatch clerk said, "But remember you're on probation. Be careful. Otherwise, discuss it with the director saheb. If he's on your side, then not only Dayal, even Dayal's father will be helpless to do anything."

Satish Bahadur sat for a long time weighing his options. Slowly he came to the conclusion that he would be ready for the match no matter what. He would wrestle and pin Dayal to the mat.

He pushed the table out of the center of the room and began exercising

regularly. He no longer smelled the stench coming from the back window, and he kept exercising until he was bathed in sweat.

Finally, it was the sixth. He made sure he arrived at the office a little early. He was pleased to see that practically everyone was there waiting for this unprecedented event. Colleagues whose desks were nearby came over to greet him, and they showed him an unusually profound amount of respect. Then Dayal entered. Amazingly no one was in the least concerned.

“What’s going on here?” he said in his usual domineering way.

“Nothing, sir; today’s the wrestling match, right?”

“Don’t be so theatrical. Just because there’s a wrestling match doesn’t mean there’s no work to be done. You people will use any excuse to avoid work.” His anger grew and he glared at them even more intensely. “Remember. I’ll do a repair job on each and every one of you if I have to. And remember this too — it’s time to write up your annual reports. I’ll be giving each one my full attention and discernment. Got it?”

He left. Satish Bahadur felt that the director had made that remark about the annual reports specifically for him.

In the afternoon everything was ready for the match to begin. The director set down a chair himself and sat on it. Satish Bahadur vowed to himself that no matter what, he would pin Dayal to the mat.

Dayal was very serious.

Finally, the whistle sounded. Instead of putting out his hands to him, Dayal stared harshly at Satish. The director then reminded Dayal that he had to join

hands. No sooner did he do that than he made his move against him just like a professional wrestler. The spectators made a lot of noise to encourage Satish, which made Dayal that much angrier. If Satish Bahadur had made even a little error here, he would have been brought down, but he quickly got out of Dayal's hold. He heard the encouragement of the spectators, and bending over slightly he encircled Dayal at the waist and lifted him up off the mat. Dayal floundered and gave him a kidney punch. The director blew his whistle and announced, "Punching not allowed."

As Dayal was lifted up off the mat, the noise of the crowd increased, and they looked forward eagerly for Dayal to be thrown down. Then they saw Satish Bahadur's knees buckle. He let Dayal back down just as he had lifted him up, and then Satish Bahadur himself came down on the mat and rolled over. Excited, Dayal then mercilessly pressed both his shoulders into the mat and scored his victory. Angrily, the crowd hurled curses at Satish Bahadur. Dayal was very pleased. Satish Bahadur quickly got up and disappeared in the crowd.

Today when he returned to work Satish Bahadur was satisfied that he had saved his annual report from looming disaster. Waiting for his tea at home in the evening he pulled back the curtain from the back window. He looked down for a bit and then pulled the curtain to again. The nala is extremely filthy, he thought, and the stench absolutely unbearable.