

The Thief  
by KK Mohapatra

## THE THIEF

(I)

The headmaster wrote furiously until he had covered a whole sheet. His pen dipped into the ink pot from time to time and scratched on the paper. To Sasank the sound was familiar – like Mother’s muttering under her breath when she was annoyed with Father.

When the headmaster had finished the letter, he pulled the drawer so vigorously that it came out and thudded onto his lap. Sasank smiled to himself; it must have hurt the old fellow a good deal. He stood there with the same drooping face as before, his back to the wall. School was over and the children had all left.

The headmaster rummaged in the drawer, found an empty envelope, folded the letter, slipped it in and sealed the envelope. Presently he looked up at Sasank. His face was ugly from anger. From the way he was pounding the envelope with his fist, Sasank knew how much the headmaster longed to spank him. Poor headmaster! As the son of the top government officer in the town Sasank often escaped beatings at school, this despite his parents’ exhortations to the headmaster whenever they met: ‘Cane him by all means; don’t hesitate to if he’s up to any mischief.’

In a high pitched voice the headmaster called Neelamani, the peon entrusted to shepherd Sasank to and from the school, as if the fellow was in another country. Neelamani was behind the door, his baggy khaki pants visible.

‘Give this letter to your memsahib,’ the headmaster said. ‘Not to anyone else, mind you. And let me know tomorrow what the memsahib has to tell me. Right?’

Neelamani nodded vigorously as though he had understood the full import of the headmaster’s words. ‘Yes sir. This letter will go only into the memsahib’s hands. Do you think I don’t care about my job?’

Pointing at Sasank, the headmaster said, ‘And deposit your illustrious little master with the memsahib. Now that he knows about the letter he might vanish, and good god, all the blame would be put on me. Hold him by the hand – right?’

‘Yes sir,’ Neelamani said enthusiastically.

‘Now are you sure you know what you’ve got to do?’ The headmaster sighed. ‘God alone knows who can trust you!’

‘No sir!’ Neelamani protested feebly.

‘No what? Now tell me what you’re to say?’

(2)

On the way home Sasank tried to cajole Neelamani. 'Neeli, I don't feel like going home so early. Mother must be asleep. Carry on home if you want to; I'll get there in an hour or so. There's a fair near the Gadachandi temple which started yesterday. Have you been to it?'

'Little master,' Neelamani said. 'So many letters are being sent home, but you don't seem to mend your ways.'

'What do you mean? What's the matter with you, old man? Tell me – are you a friend or an enemy?'

'Enemy? My dear little master, how could you think of me as your enemy? I'm sure you've been up to some terrible mischief at school. Please, please let me hear about it.'

'Let's drop in at the fair, I say.'

Neelamani hesitated. 'Little master, I've got to go to the market after handing over the letter to the memsahib. There's nothing at home for the pot to boil.'

Sasank rummaged in his pocket. 'Pinch something from our house on the sly – I'm sure that's not a big problem for you. Let's see if the grocery peddlers are around. I've a fifty-paisa coin and two twenty-five-paisas on me. With that you can manage a bit of shopping, can't you?'

Sasank and Neelamani headed towards the Gadachandi temple. No one was selling groceries, only fancy goods and snacks, and one lone man was surreptitiously selling toddy from a clay pot.

'Neeli, how about a drop or two?' Sasank asked.

'No, my little master.' Neelamani protested weakly.

His mild remonstrations gave Sasank some hope. He knew he could make Neelamani do what he wanted, as usual.

'Come, come,' Sasank said. 'Just a small glass!' He pulled Neelamani towards the liquor seller. 'No one will know.'

'I'll be fired, little master,' Neelamani protested again.

'Come, come, why are you such a joker?' Sasank faked a laugh.

'I'm doomed if the headmaster learns about this; doomed too if the memsahib finds out!'

'That's only if anyone is the wiser! Let's see what that baldie chappal-thief of a headmaster has written in the letter. Give it to me, I won't eat it.' Sasank dipped his index finger into Neelamani's tumbler and tasted the drink. 'Tastes good. You want another small glass?'

(3)

Neelamani smiled watching Sasank piss on the roadside and smear the wet mud on his forehead.

'You know, little master, you don't have a knack for stealing. You'll do well to keep away from it.'

'Shut up!' Sasank bellowed.

'It's an art. Not everyone has it in him.' Neelamani laughed and took a crooked cigarette from his shirt pocket.

'You've gone and pinched Father's cigarettes again!'

'But who taught me that art?' Neelamani croaked. 'The day the sahib gets wind of it I'll be fired. I'm doomed.'

Sasank kept quiet.

Lighting the cigarette, Neelamani continued, 'As I said – it's an art. Do you know how I filch washing powder from your house?' He broke into a broad grin. 'I pour a good quantity of powder into a paper funnel and rush into the bathroom; half I put into the bucket for your clothes, and the other half I roll into a bundle and tuck it into my dhoti. Then, after pottering about for a while, I rush into my quarters on the pretext of finding out what my poor wife is up to. My day's made when I pour the powder into the sari-ends of Chima's mother. You know, little master, my Chima wets his bed and floods the thin mattress every night. And his clothes stink if washed only in water. Little master, I've bared my soul to you, don't go and tell the memsahib! You tell her and I'm doomed! My family would be your responsibility then. Tell me, do I steal washing powder just for fun?'

'Chima's quite a roly-poly lad, I say,' Sasank said. 'Just like a tomato, eh?'

'Heh, heh. A tomato!'

'Neeli, why, aren't you already a little unsteady?'

'Not at all, little master. My legs are quite steady!'

'That Chima boy is still sucking at his mother's breasts?'

'He's not even seven months old, sir! Let him have all the mother's milk he can get for two more years.'

As they walked along, Neelamani gave a sudden start.

'Little master, we're almost home. Go ahead, I'll follow you. If memsahib sniffs the booze, I'll be doomed.' He crouched down by the roadside to pee.

Sasank stopped.

'Go ahead, I say,' Neelamani entreated. 'Little master, my dear little master, walk on ahead. I promise I won't give the memsahib the letter. Is that alright with you?'

Sasank toyed with the idea that after reaching home he'd sneak into Neelamani's quarters and tell his wife that something had fallen into his eye and could she please bare her breast and squirt some milk into it. Nothing like human milk for cleansing the eye!

(4)

Sasank's mother was very worried and was pacing up and down the verandah.

'Why are you so late?' she asked, when she saw Sasank. 'All the other children came home ages ago. I was wondering whether my illustrious one had forgotten his way and forayed into some tribal village sucking his mean little thumb.'

'Fine! Keep reminding me about it, when I've almost given it up!'

'Come in and see who's turned up.'

'Who?'

'Come inside and see.'

'Ma,' Sasank said. 'One thing, Ma.'

'What?'

'No, nothing.'

'Come on, tell me.' She looked at him closely.

'Well, no, nothing.'

'I hope you haven't sullied your name at school!' His mother's voice was suddenly filled with anxiety.

'Why should I sully my name?'

'If you've any good sense, you'll tell me rightaway what mischief you've been up to. Come on now, confess. Oh, I wish I were dead. I'm tired of your doings!'

'Honestly, Ma, I haven't done a thing.' Sasank hugged her. 'Believe me – see, I swear by my eyes.'

'A curse on my fate. How I wish I were dead!' she muttered, as she walked away to the kitchen.

(5)

Grandfather, Sasank's mother's father, was taking a walk in the garden between the flowerbeds.

He was visibly happy to see Sasank. 'Hello smartie, how're you?' he asked cheerily.

'Grandpa, why didn't you bring Grandma along?'

The old man smiled, revealing his toothless gums. 'Why should I? What if somebody stole her! There're thieves around, I'm told.'

Sasank could sense that his mother and grandfather had been discussing his deeds. Unfazed, he said, 'Come, I'll show you the local market.'

'Forget the market, show me the temple. I'm told you've an important shrine here.'

'I've just come from the temple. Let's go to the market. There's a shop where you can get very good dosas.'

'Where will we get money to buy dosas, my dear?'

'I have some.'

'How much? Where did you get it?'

Just then Mother came out from the kitchen. 'Sasank, tonight Grandpa will sleep in your room.'

'That's all right,' Sasank said, and then turned to the old man. 'Tell me, Grandpa. What do you know better – ghost stories or detective stories? You'll have to tell me one at bedtime.'

They crossed the garden and reached the gate.

'Grandpa, take a good look at the rose bush on your left.'

Casting a glance at the plant, Grandpa asked, 'Why?'

'There's a secret about it!'

'What's the secret?'

'Tell you later. Don't forget to remind me about it in five or ten minutes.'

'All right.'

'Take note of this tree too,' Sasank said, pointing at the sprawling banyan tree spreading its canopy over the compound wall. 'Its trunk is hollow. No one knows about it. Can you guess what's inside?'

'A bird?'

'Wrong. Guess again'

'A snake?'

'No. Something else. Wait, I'll ask you a riddle first. Try to give me the right answer. Here it is: name the one thing people all over the world die for.'

'Food.'

'Wrong. I'll give you another chance. Think hard before you answer. I can give you a clue. The thing can be either metal or paper.'

'Let me think about it; meanwhile you answer my question. If one egg takes five minutes to boil, how many hours will seven hundred and eighty nine eggs take?'

'What kind of a riddle is that?' Sasank grunted. 'Wait, I'll do some quick mental arithmetic. Just you wait.'

Grandfather laughed and took a snuff box from his vest pocket. A crumpled two-rupee note fell out with it.

'Grandpa, tonight you'll sleep in my room, won't you?'

(6)

When Grandfather said he would rather go home alone after the evening prayers at the temple, Sasank returned to find his mother sitting on his bed weeping. His elder sister -- back from her dance-school -- held her hand, trying to console her.

Before Sasank could retrace his steps and escape, his sister spotted him and shouted, 'Here he comes! Here comes the moon of the family!'

Mother continued to weep. Amid sobs, she lamented, 'Why am I not dead? What an illustrious son I carried in my womb! What sin did I commit in my last life to deserve this boy?'

His sister grasped Sasank's hands pulling him closer. 'Ma, go ahead and break the hands that steal! That'll cure him.'

Wiping her nose and eyes with the end of her sari, Mother looked at Sasank in anger. 'Not even a week has passed, and you've done it again. You swore by touching me. How I wish I were dead!'

'That headmaster's a swine!' Sasank muttered, freeing himself from his sister's grip. 'Am I to blame for whatever happens at school? I'm accused of everything!'

Running her hand on his head, his sister piped up sarcastically: 'Yes, indeed! There's lot of glue here. No wonder the accusations stick!'

'Is it written in the book you've stolen that stealing is wonderful?' his mother asked. 'You know, Gautam Buddha never ever stole anything in any of his avatars? Do you know that?'

'I do,' mumbled Sasank.

'You do?' Mother's voice choked. 'Then why do *you* steal? I can't understand you. Just pick up a kitchen knife and cut me into pieces, and then go and steal to your heart's content!'

That night, when Sasank and his sister were having dinner, Father came back from the office. Noticing his wife's sombre face, he asked, 'What's happened?'

'Have your dinner first,' she said. 'Afterwards you can hear about the great deeds of your illustrious son!'

'What deeds?'

'Go have a wash. Don't wait for my father; he hasn't got back from the temple yet.'

'I went to the market to look for some hilsa fish for your father, but didn't find any.'

'It's good you didn't. It's sankranti today.'

Sasank hurried through his dinner and tried to get up quickly.

'Why are you wolfing down your food instead of chewing it?' Father said. 'Don't you know man can't chew his cud like cattle can. See how nicely your sister's eating!'

'Sasank, rinse out your mouth and come and sit here,' Mother said. 'Let's discuss the matter in your father's presence.'

'What's happened?' Father asked, as he took off his shirt. 'Out with it.'

'The headmaster has sent another letter,' Sasank's sister chipped in.

'Shut up,' Mother snapped at her. 'If you've finished eating, then get up and go to your room.'

'Has the little fellow been up to some mischief again?' And before he could get an answer from his wife, he pulled Sasank by his ears and hollered, 'Spill it out, boy, before I tear off your ears.'

'I haven't done a thing,' protested Sasank.

Father gave him a stinging slap. 'You haven't?'

Sasank was taken aback. Father hadn't struck him for a long time. He started to sob.

'This boy's heading for jail!' Father despaired. 'A watermelon today, a pumpkin tomorrow, and then maybe something big the day after! Tell me, what have you stolen from the school this time?'

'A book,' whispered Sasank.

'What book?'

'*The Jataka Tales.*'

'Only one book?'

'A whole pile.'

'A whole pile!' Father broke into a chuckle.

Sasank couldn't help but smile. Father always liked people who laughed along with him. He often guffawed, and, when he was alone, Sasank mimicked Father's boisterous laughter.

Another slap and Sasank's head spun around.

'How many books all told?'

'I haven't counted,' replied Sasank. A string of snot ran down his nose. He struggled to sniff it back up.

'See, see, the little sahib doesn't even bother to count!' Father suddenly began to speak with a theatrical flourish, as if addressing an invisible audience. 'Did you steal the key or break open the almirah?'

'Neither!'

'Then how did you remove the books?'

'I slipped my hand between the doors.'

'But why did you steal them?'

'To read them.'

'You could've asked the headmaster.'

'The headmaster has said the library books won't be lent out.'

'And so you stole!'

'I would've put them back.'

'You enjoy stealing, don't you?'

'No!'

'You hate it?'

'Yes.'

'Then why do you steal?' Father gave him a hard kick on his behind. Sasank keeled forward, his face barely missing the plates. He burst out crying.

'Leave him alone,' Mother intervened. 'Don't trouble yourself anymore. Go have a wash.'

'Find out the price of the books from the headmaster and send him the money first thing tomorrow morning,' Father said. 'God, this thief will clean out my house!'

Grandfather returned home just then. 'Who's going to clean out your house?'

(7)

Sasank's mother carried him to his room. 'Come, my dear,' she said with a hug. 'Let me tell you something.'

Sasank wriggled out of her grasp. 'Keep your fake love to yourself. Aren't you the one who got me a beating?'

'Why did you get the beating -- don't you ever think about, ever wonder about, these things?'

'That's because you got Father excited!'

'I? How did I do that?'

'You mentioned the headmaster's letter.'

'But why did the headmaster send the letter in the first place?'

'It's all because I needed to read some good story books.'

'Don't sidetrack the issue! The headmaster complained about my darling because he stole the books.' She patted his cheek.

'That baldie chappal-thief has made up stories to malign me.'

'But that's because you gave him a chance to do that.'

'He makes a mountain out of a mole hill!'

'Is stealing something nice?'

'No.'

'What happens to you when you steal?'

'Punishment.'

'What else?'

'Shame.'

'And for the parents?'

'Humiliation.'

'People will gossip that so and so officer's son is a thief; beware of him, don't ever let him into your house.'

'They'll say that.'

'And what else?'

'They'll wonder how his parents can stand him!'

'And how will we feel?'

'Mortified!'

'And what else?'

'You'll hang your heads in shame.'

Sasank had all the answers. Whenever the catechism began he felt his home was school and his mother, a teacher. He cheered up a little because Mother looked happy with his answers.

His sister hung back to listen. 'Ma, ask him where thieves go when they grow up.'

Without waiting for Mother to repeat the question, Sasank took off with a perverse flourish: 'They go to jail, hand-cuffed; their limbs are broken by the police; they're made to do hard labour; they weave carpets; their teeth break from eating rice mixed with stones; and when they're released, everybody avoids them.'

'You can rattle off all that in one breath, can't you?'

Sasank made a face at his sister. 'Drop dead. Tonight.'

'You're a thief, you'd better drop dead,' retorted his sister. 'Mother and Father will then heave a sigh of relief.'

'You don't have to worry your head about your parents!' Mother snarled at her daughter, as she made Sasank's bed.

(8)

Father and Grandfather sat down to dinner and Mother served them. Sasank rolled in the bed, from end to end, and tried to count how many times Father had thrashed him. He seldom spanked, but when he did, he did a good job; and that's why his beatings hurt more. Mother's routine slaps had become a joke.

Sasank tried to eavesdrop.

'Let him go with Father to the village and study there,' Mother said. 'Not only will he have to pay more attention to his studies, maybe he will stop stealing.'

'Thrash him from time to time and he'll be all right,' said Father

'God knows my hands are sore from beating him.' Mother sighed. 'It doesn't have any effect on him.'

'The trouble is one minute you blow hot and the next you blow cold. I'm not surprised he's hardened. If you want to thrash him, do it so that he takes to his bed for two or three days. Don't give him a look of pity. Only then will you know what a good beating can do! But with you it's a gentle slap now and five minutes later all syrupy fussing!'

'I can't be so heartless and cruel.'

'If you can't handle him, don't talk about it.'

Mother appealed to Grandfather. 'Did you hear! That's his way -- I'm to blame for everything!'

Grandfather had finished his meal. 'Let Sasank come with me. He'll soon mend his ways in the village.'

'But he's still a child!' Father said. 'He can't manage in the village.'

'He's already almost ten years old!' Grandfather said curtly.

Sasank beat his head against the pillow.

'Our village school is good enough,' Grandfather continued. 'Every year more than half a dozen of our students write the scholarship exams.'

'Forget the scholarship,' Mother said. 'Let him only give up stealing. That'll be more than enough. Did I tell you what the little devil did last gamhapurnima?'

Father, who had got up to wash his hands, stopped in his tracks. 'What did he do? You never told me! If nothing is brought to my notice, what cure can I prescribe? The treatment has to be timely!'

Sasank felt breathless. His mouth dried up. Oh God, he groaned. Let Mother not come out with *that!* Anything but that! May words fail her. May a wasp sting her!

On the morning of gamhapurnima the postmistress came and invited me for lunch,' Mother began.

'Oh, you've a postmistress here, do you?' Grandfather remarked.

'No, no. The postmaster is such a quiet mouse that his virago of a wife calls the shots; so everyone around here refers to her as the postmistress. Gamhapurnima is a big festival for them. I'd failed to turn up at her house last year and for months she'd put on a long face. So this time I thought I'd make up with her. Around eleven in the morning, after sending Neelamani with two seers of sweets and a basket of fruit, as I was getting ready to leave for their place, our illustrious son materialized out of nowhere. For quite some time I'd been scared to take him along with me to anyone's house. Who knew he wouldn't lift something there? So I told him -- darling boy, you'd better stay home, I'll be back in half an hour. But he was determined to accompany me. Helpless, I made him swear he wouldn't touch a thing at the postmistress's house.'

Sasank recalled the incident. For one thing, he hadn't really touched Mother when he'd given his word, but only the end of her sari; for another, after saying aloud, 'Ma, I won't touch anything at the postmistress's house', he had added in silence without pausing for breath, 'Heck, I'm not swearing anything'. So that day Sasank was as free from scruples as Mother was from worries.

Mother went on with her account; Father and Grandfather made comments now and then. In the next room, his sister turned on the radio and listened to songs, perhaps jotting them down. She and Pranab, an older boy at school, periodically exchanged their song books. Smothered by Pranab's steady supply of chocolates, Sasank had not tattled to Mother about it.

Sasank plugged his ears with his fingers. A little later, he took them out, and then shoved them right back in again. Mother's voice sounded like the muffled roar of a distant ocean. He felt numb.

Unplugging his ears, he strained to hear. 'Just two rooms,' Mother was saying, 'A bedroom, and a sitting room.'

Sasank grew impatient. Mother had a knack of going into every little detail. Same with Father. A story was not just one story, it was many; if it concerned an individual, there'd be the inevitable details about his father, his uncle, his aunt-in-law's sister-in-law's father-in-law, and so on and so forth. Sasank closed his ears again, and recalled the fateful afternoon he had spent at the postmistress's house.

(9)

Mother was being treated lavishly by the postmistress. All the other ladies sat huddled around her. Mother was laughing and talking very animatedly for a long time. Sasank felt very happy. Mother rarely laughed; she always worried, always laboured away at something; always feared that her children, particularly Sasank, would tarnish the family's good name. Every day, when Sasank returned home from school, she would invariably ask him, 'Boy, have you done anything today to shame us?' She lived on the edge of morbid fear. Watching her now, Sasank decided he wouldn't look at a thing in the postmistress's house, let alone steal anything.

Standing on the verandah, he dredged up gobs of phlegm and spat them as far as he could. Despite repeated attempts he failed to clear the beautiful *siju* bush in front of the house. When his mouth was dry from spitting, he began to count the shoes collected on the doorstep. Eleven pairs. He tried to guess the owners. He didn't think Mother's pair was the costliest. Her left chappal was more worn out at the heel than the right one. Someone had come with a brand new pair; the price hadn't even been removed.

Bored with counting the shoes, he went into the house and found the postmistress doubled up in laughter. Mother too was laughing hard. The postmistress's maidservant was serving them hot steamcakes. 'Serve the boy first,' the postmistress told her.

Sasank drank in the aroma of roasted turmeric leaves; he longed to devour a few stuffed cakes. But he was too restless to eat.

'Ma, let's go home,' he said.

'Didn't I tell you?' Mother said, not looking at Sasank. 'If Ma has a good time, it's too much for my children. Oh, what lovely children I have!'

'I want to go to the bathroom, Ma.'

'Well, if you want to go to the bathroom,' the postmistress said, 'you can use our's. Your mother has come to our place after such a long time, we won't let her leave so soon.' She took him through the bedroom to the courtyard and pointed out the toilet.

Because of what he had said, Sasank was forced to go into their stinking toilet. He stood there, first counting to a hundred, and, in case that was too little, again to two hundred. While he was doing that he broke up a wasp hive on the wall. He dipped his left hand into the water of the old tin bucket and left the toilet.

Okra and chilli plants fringed the postmistress' courtyard. The okra was young and tender. Finding no one around, Sasank plucked one and ate it. No sooner had he entered the bedroom than he heard laughter and high-pitched discussion. He felt too shy to go into the gathering because Mother would immediately ask, without batting an eyelid: 'Did you have loose motions?' In their house, there had been a joke about loose motions ever since Sasank had messed his bed.

He stopped in the middle of the bedroom. There was a cot pushed against the wall on the right. From a clothesline above the head board hung a variety of clothes. But the left side of the room seemed like a different world: there was a small table and on it an electric lamp, a stack of books and a bunch of pens in a glass tumbler. Sasank's eyes fixed onto the pens. His heart rose and sank.

He went closer to the table. Whose pens are these? he wondered. The postmaster's, or his son's? He picked up a Plato and slowly unscrewed the cap. The nib was worn out and the ink had dried. He put it back in place and picked up another -- a red Teko. It was filled with red ink and Sasank drew two lines on his palm and put the pen back. There was a blue Writer, but Sasank didn't even touch it. He had never considered a Writer a worthwhile pen -- it was cheap, squat, and didn't contain much ink; it leaked if you ran about with it in your shirt pocket; the nib never became as smooth as you liked. A Writer had once been bought for Sasank, but within a couple of days he had broken the nib, dented the cap with his teeth and thrown it away. Another pen, slender as his little finger, stood like a dwarf beside the Writer. And at the very end, towering over the lot,

was an unparalleled beauty, in all its elegance, which Sasank had purposely kept outside his field of vision. His eyes gleamed at the sight of it -- a flaming red pen with a golden cap and a dainty clip, but a little fatter and tougher than any he had seen. Sasank picked it up; he held it in front of him and read: Parker.

So this was a Parker! Sasank drooled. Mother often said Father had been given a Parker as a wedding present and that someone in his office had borrowed and never returned it. A Parker was the costliest pen in the world, its nib made of gold; when the nib broke people took it to the goldsmith and melted it down, and with the gold made themselves rings. The pen didn't need ink to be poured into it; a few squeezes of the rubber tube inside the steel container and it filled up.

Sasank brought the pen close to his nose and sniffed. It gave off an aroma of paan zarda mixed with sweat. He flared his nostrils and took a deep breath. His hands were wet. He felt the pen slipping out of his hands.

From the sitting room came the clink of cups and saucers.

(10)

Sasank took his fingers out of his ears. He was curious to know how far Mother had got.

'I was surprised that the headmaster should come to call on *me*,' she was saying. 'What could have made him do that?'

She was preparing paan, and there was the sound of betelnuts being shredded by a nutcracker. Sasank felt irritated that Mother should go into all those useless details. She could never tell a story straight.

'The poor headmaster, he was so apologetic. 'Memsahib, the matter shouldn't reach the sahib's ears!' What was it that would bring the world crashing down, if it reached the sahib's ears I wondered. The headmaster stood on the verandah, scratching behind his ears as if he had committed a grave sin. He wouldn't listen to my repeated requests to take a chair and remained standing. He bit his tongue when I asked him if he would like a cup of tea. I was amused by his behaviour. Why was he so tense, what could be the reason?'

Sasank pulled out the pillow from under his head and pressed it over his face. Mother's voice was now hardly audible. It had never crossed Sasank's mind that the baldie chappal-thief of a headmaster could so easily do him in.

## (II)

Sasank was in no mood for school on the day following gamhapurnima. The whole of the previous night he had dreamt of pens. In his dreams the pens had grown wings and flown around like birds. Sasank had tried to catch them, but they always remained just out of his grasp. He had slept fitfully and every time he got up he had felt for the Parker under his pillow. He decided that instead of going to school he would hide in the garage and scribble five or ten pages with the pen.

But Mother had packed him off to school: 'Oh, you're beginning to shy away from your studies too? Oh, how did you come into my womb? Who are you? An imp? Must you always misbehave?'

Had it been some other day Sasank would have pretended to go to the school and instead headed for a tribal village up in the hills, where as the sahib's son he commanded a lot of respect and where in the past he had asked the buxom tribal girls to dance and sing for him. But today all he wanted was to be left alone in the garage with the new pen.

But Father's jeep had broken down and the mechanic was expected anytime. Sasank decided to go to school. He took the pen from under the pillow and put it in his schoolbag.

He didn't say the prayers at the school Assembly. While others sang *Ahey Dayamaya Vishwa Vihari*, Sasank ogled Labanya, the daughter of one of his father's subordinates. Labanya was saying her prayers with her eyes closed, her breasts rising and falling, and the curls near her ears swaying gently in the breeze.

'An important announcement!' the headmaster said, after the prayers were over. 'There'll be a pen competition today. The student whose pen is judged the best will receive a prize.'

The school was agog with excitement. Never before had a competition like this been held: it was always a handwriting competition, or games, or body-building, or exams. Sasank had never won a prize in any of these.

'The competition will be held after recess,' the headmaster continued. 'Those of you who want to take part should write their name and number on a piece of paper, clamp it to the clip of their pen and hand them in at my office. You can enter more than one pen. There won't be any classes in the last two periods and the results of the competition will be announced then.'

The little interest Sasank had for his studies evaporated when he heard the announcement. The image of the Parker danced before his eyes. The pen flew around like a golden oriole; it strutted about like a crane on spindly legs. The backdrop changed from blue skies to grassy fields. It was like his dream the night before.

Suddenly the arithmetic teacher asked Sasank a question and his reply made the students in the class burst into laughter. Sasank couldn't fathom why.

'Your head's full of cow dung!' the teacher commented.

The bell rang for the tiffin break. All those who had only their tawdry little Writers or ink-spewing old Platos -- very few had a smart-looking Wilson, or a sleek Pilot, which had hit the market only recently -- wrote out their name, number and class on a small slip of paper and, after placing their pens on the headmaster's table, slipped out to the nearby pond to take potshots at frogs. They asked Sasank to join them, but he refused. He opened his tiffin box. Mother had sent suji instead of paratha and potato chips, which he loved. He didn't eat.

Labanya came over, full of love. Sasank didn't attempt to nibble her cheeks as he did every time he had a chance. The two rupees he had filched from Father's pocket a week ago had now dwindled to four annas.

'Would you like to have a dosa?' he asked her.

Labanya nodded. 'How many pens are you entering in the competition? You've two lovely pens, haven't you? I'm sure your pink Pilot will get the first prize.'

'Is a Pilot still considered a good pen?' Sasank said. 'The best pen in the world is a Parker. Then there are Shaeffers, then Heros, then . . .'

Labanya began to sulk for no reason. 'I won't love you any longer, nor will I marry you when I grow up. Off with you!'

'Father gave me a Parker yesterday.'

'Show me!'

'Why should I show it to you for free?'

'Come on, show it to me. Please, just once. Or else we won't be friends anymore!'

'First show me your . . .!' Sasank looked around and planted a wet kiss on her right cheek.

Sasank took the pillow off his face to find out where Mother was.

'As if it were a competition,' she was saying, 'the headmaster had a good look at all the pens and found the one the postmaster had described. And on the slip of paper stuck to the clip was the name of our illustrious son.'

'A capital idea!' Grandfather laughed aloud, as though it was a humorous tale. 'How the hell did he hit upon such a bright idea!'

Mother broke into a laugh. 'It takes a thief to catch a thief! You know what's been the rumour at the school for the past month? It seems the headmaster was caught stealing shoes! He'd gone out

and left his tattered chappals behind; he walked away with someone else's new pair! Since then this boy of ours has been chanting: the baldie's a chappal-thief! Whether it's true or false, only Mother Ganga knows.'

'Like teacher like taught!' Grandfather observed, and they laughed aloud.

After catching his breath, Grandfather reminded Mother, 'What happened after that? You said the postmaster's pen was retrieved. Then?'

Sasank felt that they were laughing not so much at his theft as at his ineptitude. He kicked the pillow in anger and covered his head with the bed sheet.

Mother's voice was still audible.

(12)

In the last period but one Sasank was summoned to the headmaster's room. The headmaster stood, resting his enormous scrotum on the edge of the table, the pens in disarray before him. It suddenly dawned on Sasank that the competition was all a hoax. He cursed himself. How had he failed to see through such a simple ruse?

But he wasn't one to give up easily.

'Do you know the postmaster has beaten his son black and blue?' the headmaster ranted. 'No, why should you! The poor boy has taken to bed. Had the postmistress not intervened the postmaster would have beaten the boy to death. And all because of you.'

'Sir,' Sasank said. 'This pen is not the postmaster's, it's my father's. I brought it from home on the sly to enter it in the competition.'

'How did you know there'd be a competition?'

'I didn't. After your announcement I went home during recess to get it.'

'But the school peon saw you and Labanya in the classroom during recess! Shall I call him over and ask him?'

'But this pen is my father's. He'll beat me to a pulp if he doesn't find it tomorrow.'

'Let him! The trouble with you is that you haven't been spanked enough. Being the darling son of an important officer, you have had a cushy time of it in school too.'

'If my father looks for the pen, I'll tell him you've taken it away. At least I'll not be the one to blame.'

The headmaster looked a shade uncomfortable.

(13)

Feeling too warm under the bed sheet, Sasank tossed it aside. Now he didn't have to strain his ears to listen to the conversation. Father was speaking in his big booming voice: 'Well, well, well. Only now do I understand why the headmaster rushed over to my office, panting and puffing.'

'Did he?' Mother enquired. 'Why did he do that? You didn't tell me about that.'

'How could I know the fellow had come to conduct an investigation into my worthy son's pen-stealing? He kept fumbling and scratching behind his ears; and when I asked what had brought him to my office at that late hour, he said: Sir, you haven't visited the school in a long time, please visit whenever it's convenient; the fences are broken down and stray cows have eaten the few trees and plants; please give us a grant to mend the fence. And he asked for a character reference for his son who's going to apply for a job in the railways. I called the stenographer over and told him to type out a testimonial that such and such a person, son of so and so, whom I've known for so many years and so many months, is a hardworking, devoted young man, and has a good moral character. The headmaster was very restless. He sat on the edge of the chair, and beads of sweat dotted his bald pate. Then suddenly he started babbling: 'Sir, you've so many pens, but you must have a Parker. It's the king among pens.' I was a little surprised. The man's behaviour was certainly very odd -- why did he suddenly mention pens? I thought of giving him a stern look, but then I thought why hurt the poor fellow. So I said, 'A Parker's prohibitive. Besides, you can get it only on the black market.' The typed character certificate was brought in, and as I was about to sign it with my pen, he fished out a lovely pen out of his shirt pocket, unscrewed the cap, fixed it on the bottom, and ceremoniously held it out to me. 'Sir, please sign it with this pen.' I took the pen and signed. What else could I have done -- told him that he'd better keep his bloody pen? It was a lovely pen, indeed. Pushing the certificate and the pen towards him, I remarked, 'Don't forget to tell me when your son gets the job.' And with profuse thanks he left.'

'But the headmaster didn't breath a word of it to me!' Mother was surprised. 'All he told me was -- madam, it's a secret, only you and I know about it. What about the postmaster and postmistress? I asked. He said they didn't have to know. It was enough that they got back the pen, they should be happy with that.'

'By then I was overcome with shame. While leaving, he even added -- madam, please forgive me for saying this, but please do keep an eye on Sasank, he's turning out to be an incorrigible

thief.' Mother choked. 'How did such a demon come into my womb? What ghost or spirit was fluttering around when I conceived him! Father, when you get back to the village, please consult a good astrologer and see if there's any hope for him.'

It had never crossed Sasank's mind that his fate would be decided so quickly. He heard Father tell Grandfather: 'Let him go with you to the village tomorrow. With the blessings of God he might give up stealing. If he doesn't change, he'll go to jail when he grows up. He'll be the one to suffer, what does it matter to me? I'll promptly disown him.'

Sasank took the pillow from near his feet and buried his face in it. A cold wave of banishment crept over him and he shuddered.

'Pack a few of his clothes in my suitcase,' Grandfather said. 'Nothing much. Whatever else he needs can be bought in the village.'

Sasank cried out in anguish.

(14)

Father set out on tour the next morning; his bedroll and suitcase were already in the jeep. The peon accompanying him had come dressed in a white uniform.

Father called Sasank over before getting into the jeep. He held him close. 'Now you realize! Because you wouldn't quit stealing you're being packed off to your grandpa's place. Parents don't love children who steal. Promise me you'll try and be a good boy.'

'I promise,' said Sasank.

'You won't ever steal again?'

'Never.'

'If I hear you've given up stealing, then next year I'll bring you back. You like the school here, don't you?'

'Yes.'

Sasank wished Father would leave early, so that he could travel at least twenty or twenty-five miles before the sun became hot enough to make his eyes water.

Father bent down and touched Grandfather's feet and got into the jeep. Turning to Mother, he said, 'Don't worry if I'm not back in three days.' Then running his hands over Sasank's head, he added, 'Obey Grandpa and Grandma. Be a good boy, right?'

Without any provocation, Mother suddenly piped up, 'If only your son had heeded such advice, he wouldn't be being sent away.'

Two hours after Father left, the bus came and stopped in front of their bungalow. They all came out of the house.

'Grandpa,' Sasank's elder sister said. 'Warn Grandma that she should be careful. This boy can steal the kohl from her eyes.'

Sasank made a face at her. 'Drop dead, sister.'

'I hope you haven't stolen anything of mine? I just can't trust you. Mother, have you checked his bag?'

Mother was in tears. Wiping her eyes with the end of her sari, she hissed: 'Don't tease the child. You know he's being packed off because of a bad habit.'

Grandfather gave a snort of a laughter. 'Daughter, the way you talk it sounds as if he's going to jail, not to his grandfather's place.'

'Grandpa!' his sister chimed in again. 'Don't they beat thieves black and blue in the village? Aren't their faces tarred? Aren't they made to sit on a donkey and be paraded around?'

'Shut up or else...!' Mother screamed. 'As if *your* achievements are any more noteworthy!'

Mother bowed down by the wicket gate of the garden to touch Grandfather's feet. She held Sasank in her arms and kissed him copiously. Sasank tried to wriggle away. Grandfather's suitcase was lifted to the roof of the bus. The driver honked once briefly, as though his hand had accidentally touched the horn.

As they boarded the bus, Sasank's sister tucked a bar of chocolate into his hands.

(15)

Two seats in the front row had been reserved for them. Sasank sat near the window. The bus moved. He waved. Mother and Sister waved back. The bus gathered speed. Their bungalow slipped out of sight.

After some time they left the town behind. Hours went by and the day grew hot. A woman craned her neck out of the window and vomited. People seated behind her grumbled and shouted. A small child started bawling. The bus sped on.

Sasank saw tears rolling down Grandfather's eyes.

'What is it, Grandpa?' Sasank said. 'Are you missing Ma? You love her, don't you?'

Grandfather smiled. 'It's the hot air that makes my eyes water.'

'Why didn't you tell me earlier? I've got just the thing for you.'

'What?' Grandfather took out his snuff box from his vest pocket. It was a beautifully carved silver box. Sasank suddenly longed for it. Grandfather took a snort of snuff.

Sasank sneezed. He produced a pair of dark glasses from inside his shirt.

'Yours?' Grandfather was surprised.

'Put them on, you'll feel better instantly.'

'But whose are they?'

'They'll soothe your eyes.'

'Tell me the truth: whose are they -- Father's?'

Sasank didn't answer. He dipped his hand again into his shirt and took out his sister's song book. The pink cover was wet with perspiration. Sasank said, 'Sister has copied down some lovely songs from the radio. We'll keep singing them throughout the journey. Sister once said this notebook was dearer to her than her soul!'