

An Accident

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Hari thought, how much is five thousand rupees? Five thousand! Stuff a large pot with it and you'd probably still have some left over; you might need a huge iron trunk for it. And with a cord of grass he tied up the bundle of soft leaves he had collected of the wild plant he called *kukraundha*, an extraction of which he believed helped heal wounds.

How much is five thousand rupees? And if he were to get it, where could he keep it? Where does one safely keep so much money?

A few years ago Kishanchand's house had been robbed. The thieves dragged a huge iron trunk out of the house, and their hatchets needed three hours to break it open. But in it they found twenty thousand rupees in jewelry and money. For five thousand rupees you wouldn't need such a large trunk. A quarter of that size would do. But you would need an iron trunk, and a lock on it. And if you have a lock, you would need a key, too.

And that's not all. To keep the trunk safe you'll need a fairly strong door. And that would need a lock. Sometimes thieves forced their way in through the thatch.

So you'll need a proper roof.

That's all possible. With five thousand rupees you could buy a trunk, door and lock. You'd have to.

But will all this be so easy? To attach a lock, you'd need a door with an iron staple and chain. The keys would have to be kept safe. If they were lost, then what a problem. To keep them safe you'd need a kurta with an inside pocket.

It was all very complicated. Hari felt quite uneasy, although he did not know how to express it. This sensation of being able to accumulate something was totally foreign and to some extent terrifying.

Contentment and happiness along with accumulated wealth was unknown to him.

Who knows how many generations back Hari's ancestry goes. None of them ever knew what accumulated wealth was. They never even owned their own cooking pots or hearths. The world in which Hari lived was clearly divided into two parts, one in which people owned things — home, pots and pans, clothes, door, well, fields, animals — and the other in which people's needs had shrunk to no more than what was beneath their skin. They never knew that the small dirty cloth they used to cover themselves was not theirs. Who knows when the desire to gather wealth or to make something of themselves had died, and now every new individual born in this part of Hari's world came into being without any such inclination.

Ill at ease, Hari looked at the acacia trees whose thorns glittered sharp and white like the teeth of demons. They had already lost their leaves, and on the

light brown sky their branches were stamped like black, withered blood vessels.

The acacia tree is so ungainly. From its roots to its thinnest twigs, not one part of it has any grace. On its terribly rough, black and ugly trunk resin oozes out and dries, like a wound that has become septic.

He looked at the bundle of leaves in his hand and headed home slowly.

Partially covered with musty old clothes, Challi lay moaning on the floor. People at the hospital had bound her head and both shoulders with gleaming white bandages. A cast that was just as white had been plastered on her right leg, from her hip to her ankle. When all that was fresh, its whiteness had a particular sheen and brilliance to it. In merely a few days, though, dirt and spots of grime took all that sheen and whiteness away. Yesterday Challi's wounds were very painful. A sticky liquid oozed out and glistened on the bandages.

To apply his own more trusted medicine, Hari unwrapped the bandages. Since the ooze of the wounds had dried out, the folds of the bandages, too, had dried out.

Despite Challi's screams, Hari had washed out her wounds with neem water, in which he had soaked many leaves, and then he rebound the bandages. Not rebinding them exactly as they had come off, the spots on the bandages spread all over. Any whiteness left on those spot-covered bandages the dirt and dirty green neem water completely destroyed, so to an extent the bandages themselves looked disgusting.

Today her situation had become even worse and Challi either quickly fell asleep or lost consciousness. Worried, Hari had gone out in search of *kukraundha*

leaves, which would be more effective.

In fact, Hari actually knew neither life nor death, having no real connection with either, but the thought that Challi might die he could not allow himself to consider. He had a strong expectation she would survive. After all, the very fact that she had come this far after such an accident was something few had been capable of. It was amazing Challi had survived at all.

That night they were returning from the fair. Not for fun, they had gone there to get work. To set up the fair there were many opportunities for casual laborers.

This time they had been particularly fortunate. First, they unloaded an oxcart full of equipment for two halwais, and helped them set up.

The halwais had brought what they needed to make fresh sweets, and they had brought sweets they had already prepared.

“Watch out there, don’t let anything fall. You let it fall, it’ll get dirty.” In the process of unloading, Hari was showing too much attentiveness, giving orders to Challi and the other workers. When they completed the unloading, he constructed an oven of bricks and dirt. After the work was done, a little bowing and scraping and wheedling got him five-and-a-half rupees and some jaggery. No sooner was that work finished than they were employed by a man who had set up in a small gabled tent many odd mirrors in which a man looked fat or thin, et cetera. While they set up those mirrors, Hari saw Challi in incredibly odd shapes and sizes, and he laughed without restraint.

But he had the most fun setting up the ferris wheel. If one were not careful enough, the part of the wheel on which one attached the last swing could carry

one up and around. Challi was once confused and got off just in time. Hari had a huge laugh at her expense.

When they finished all their work, they ate the jaggery and drank water from the canal. They washed up and took a stroll through the half-ready fair. Then, for the walk home they bought some roasted chickpeas and tied them in a little bundle.

Many other people like Hari must have come and were returning home with the fall of night because when Hari looked back at the fair's dust and the receding lights of the gas lanterns, hundreds of people like him seemed to be coming along swimming through the fog.

A crowd like that is an odd one. There is almost nothing of any substance that holds them together, no topic worthy of conversation. They walk along like a meek herd of sheep.

Then someone began to sing. The *bidesiya*, sung in a thin and rather mournful voice, dissolved their loneliness but accompanied them as if it were the only thing they owned.

Most of the night was still ahead of them. On top of the dense darkness an impenetrable film of fog covered everything, despite which the railroad tracks, fast to the ground, shone brightly. There was likely more than the one pair they could see.

To the right stood the high wall of a cold, lifeless freight train. They themselves numbered between two hundred fifty and three hundred souls. Past the station they still had many miles of track to follow. Most of them would not reach

their own villages until morning. Almost all were exhausted, and they looked like so many misshapen boulders wrapped in dirty, ripped sheets making their way through the deep, dark fog.

The bag of chickpeas Hari had slung over his shoulder he secured under his arm. He turned around and looked back. In that dense fog and darkness it was not easy at all to recognize someone's face. In the crowd that was tumbling along three shapes, female, appeared in the middle of the tracks. One of them would be Challi.

In order to break up this journey's boring monotony Hari set his feet on one of the bright, narrow tracks and tried to walk it.

Right then the sharp whistle of a train sounded.

Someone shouted, "Abé, a train's coming, ré!"

Hari replied, "You stupid woman! This is what's whistling, the freight train."

"Go! Move! Aré, get a move on!" Some people walking right next to the freight cars enjoyed provoking that huge, dumb, lifeless mass of metal.

The sound of just that one whistle had brought some life into their boring trip.

Someone came up from behind and pierced the darkness. "Abé, push it! Give it a push!"

Those walking right up against the freight train did indeed start straining against it. "Harder, bhaiya!"

"One, two, three — push!"

Keeping track of their own bundles, they tried to get the train to move. Others joined in the fun.

A few folks lost hope, banged against the car, and yelled, “Shame on you!”

“He’s a stubborn jackass, isn’t he? Drive him on, drive him!” someone said and began hitting the car with his walking stick. The crass sound of wood against metal reverberated in the darkness.

Right along with that sound, then, could be heard the piercing cries of many people.

The people stopped hitting and straining against the freight car and listened. Then they thought the people ahead of them in the fog and darkness had begun themselves to push against the unmoving freight train, so they jumped to it again and strained with all their might, chanting, “One, two, three — push!”

In the middle of their fun a huge black shadow, making so much noise it pulverized the deadening darkness, screamed like the insane, and before anyone realized what was happening, the rags worn by those walking on the tracks were scattered all over, and the shadow proceeded on its way.

It was a single locomotive. No cars had been coupled behind it. The accident unfolded before the engineer’s eyes, but other than blowing his whistle as much and as loudly as possible, there was nothing else he could do.

In that darkness no one could quickly find out who and how many the engine had suddenly crushed, but the survivors immediately realized a terrible accident had occurred. They all screamed, as if with one voice, and they kept on screaming. They screamed until they lost their voices.

The station was not very far away. The people’s screams could be heard there, but no one understood their significance. Many thought it was merely the joyful

shouts of people returning from the fair. They were busy and continued their work.

After a long interval, and bit by bit, news of the accident reached the station. The Assistant Station Master, taking with him a policeman and two railroadmen with lanterns, elbowed his way through the fog. When he reached the site, he could not believe his eyes.

Calling out the names of those who were with them, the crowd of survivors was scrambling around on the tracks yelling and crying. In the darkness and in the middle of that crowd it was not easy to put together the events of the accident.

The Assistant Station Master turned to someone in the crowd and asked in a slightly loud voice, “Aré bhai, what happened here?” Just then his foot fell on something soft, something certainly unusual for the middle of train tracks. Despite having moved on a couple paces, he turned around and said to one of the railroadmen, “Look at what that is over there.”

The railroadman lowered his lantern back down toward the tracks. On the gravel between the tracks lay a hand separated from a child’s wrist. There was no blood in it whatsoever. It was as if some wizard had used his secret powers to fashion a hand and plop it down right there all on its own. Fresh blood, however, was sprinkled all over the nearby pile of rags stuck to the tracks. It’s disgusting pair of eyes stared intently at the Assistant Station Master, as if trying to recognize him. The ASM’s face was suddenly bathed in sweat, his jaws clenched, and he vomited. Like an ill man, he tottered on.

The policeman waved his flashlight back and forth and then stated loudly,

“This looks like Doomsday.”

The policeman continued on, waiting neither for the ASM’s response nor to find out how he was. Cutting the beam of his flashlight through the fog as if through a dense mass of bushes, he continued on alongside the tracks.

Ahead, both on the tracks and near them, was an immense amount of blood. As they searched for their friends and family members, the survivors stumbled over body parts spread all over as if a machine had cut them up and tossed them around.

By the light of the policeman’s flashlight, in the middle of the tracks, Hari recognized Challi’s still body.

“Aré, bhaiya, aré oh!” Hari tried to stop the policeman. He wanted him to keep the light on her a little longer so he could see if anything had happened to her.

The policeman was in no mood to listen to anyone. Waving the flashlight back and forth, he continued on his way.

The light gone, the darkness was even deeper than before. Hari shook Challi, softly at first, then harder. No sign of life. Something slippery and wet stuck to his hand. Then Hari cried out at the top of his voice and shook Challi, “Aré Challi ré!”

Everyone near Hari was also screaming insanely. Hari realized that in this situation he could expect no help from anyone else.

In that heavy, thick darkness the noise and the frightening screams of the people produced a gut-wrenching terror. Beside himself, Hari repeatedly shook

Challi. He had seen an indistinct form of the locomotive. But if it hadn't been for the sharp sound of the steam he still might not have been able to figure out what had happened. He inferred that the locomotive had killed or injured a large number of people. Challi had been in the middle of the tracks. To confirm his hope that the locomotive had not cut her up, he felt all over her body.

When he finished, he was pleased that she still had all her body parts. For some reason, though, he needed to reassure himself. This time he felt her all over more carefully. When he felt down past her right knee, he lost his breath. He didn't have the courage to put his hand down there again and leave it longer. It felt as if a thick, pointed peg had been attached to her calf. But of course it wasn't a peg. Her ankle was broken, and a bone protruded through the skin.

Agitated, Hari looked around in vain for help, then he himself somehow picked up Challi's still body and put her down on the other side of the tracks.

The policeman with the flashlight came back the way he had gone. Although he had the flashlight on, he kept looking straight ahead, never down. He was walking as if returning from completing a task that had required a supreme effort, and he could barely place one foot ahead of the other.

The Assistant Station Master returned to his office and lay flat on his back on the bench against the wall.

One railroadman put his lantern on the desk and barked at the other railroadman, "Abé, water! Now!"

The second man ran out. Meanwhile, a few other workers arrived and then asked, "What's happened to babu?"

The ASM tried to cough a little. Then a spasm took hold of his gut. He quickly hung his head over the bench's seat and threw up. The second railroadman came with the water.

The worker asked, "He's taken ill?"

While wiping off the Assistant Station Master's face, the railroadman said, "Aré babu, can't you see? The heart can't help but break seeing it. Doomsday's come. Doomsday."

"But what happened?"

"There's been an accident! Accident!" He started helping the Assistant Station Master out of his coat.

"An accident? Which train?"

The railroadman did not respond. He concentrated on helping the Assistant Station Master with his coat.

"Abé, aren't you gonna tell me? Which train had an accident?"

"It has nothing to do with a train. Go look for yourself. If they're not dead, they wish they were." Then he told the janitor to clean up the floor and left the office.

The news spread fast throughout the station. People from all over came out and ran to the accident site.

By the time emergency crews arrived from the nearest hospital, the sun was fully up and the fog had almost burned off, as if a fire had burned down and the only smoke left came from the glowing coals.

Very few of the corpses and the injured could be lifted up whole. Gathering

the scattered body parts was a particularly gruesome task.

Although fully engaged in their work, the members of the emergency medical teams couldn't help hear the renewed screams of the people there. Hugging the bodies of their loved ones, they cried again uncontrollably.

In the ambulances there was not enough room for the dead, the injured, and their friends and family members. So when the ambulances set off, the survivors let out another high-pitched wail, and accompanied by a team of police officers they departed together for the city.

Hari hadn't gone very far when he remembered his little bundle of chickpeas. Where was it? The accident had occurred so quickly and unexpectedly that he had totally lost track of it. And besides, the night had been pitch black. It would be impossible to find where the bundle had fallen. Wherever it was, it would be near the cars of the freight train. Should he go back and get it?

That thought caused him to feel a little ashamed. It seemed wrong to abandon Challi now.

But after walking along a little further, he thought, "There's no harm in trying to find that bundle of chickpeas. After all, Challi was on her way to the hospital. She'll be admitted there. The chickpeas will come in handy."

Hari turned around and headed back. No one walking with him took any notice.

He crossed to the far side of the station where he figured the freight train should be. It wasn't there. How could it have been moved so quickly? Without the freight train there he couldn't get his bearings. The fog had lifted off the

ground, and near the vast maze of tracks that spread out far and wide, trees, their crowns still covered in fog as if by a huge, dirty quilt, stood up tall.

Fortunately, he found the accident site. It was on the other side of the station. A significant crowd had gathered there, and using their lathis policemen were trying to keep people away. Hari, however, had no problem merging into the crowd. He figured he would start from one end when in the distance he recognized his bundle of chickpeas.

Emerging from the crowd and slipping past two police officers, he advanced toward his bundle when a few police officers yelled in unison, “Hey! where do you think you’re going?”

“Yes, sir!” He replied, stopped, and turned around.

“Abé, get away from there!” They said, threatening him with their lathis.

“That . . . that . . . ”

Hari wanted to explain that he had merely come to get his bundle of chickpeas, but the officers’ aggressiveness was frightening, so he stepped back.

His trip home from the hospital had been rather pleasant. Every patient dismissed from the hospital was transported in such a large automobile that there was room for the friends and relatives, too. And he did not have to pay.

Challi was in a lot of pain, but now she could speak. She could sit up. With some help she could even walk a little. The pills the hospital had given him he set aside and first of all gave her alum to drink. Then he recalled his own long tradition and began nursing her accordingly, whereby though death was in the hands of God, there was always hope for recovery.

For a few days Challi was okay, then the pain became even worse than before, and she developed such a high fever that she barely remained conscious.

Even though he would have liked to, Hari did not give her the hospital's medicine. He had heard that allopathic medicine made the body hot. Besides, for it to work the patient had to have a real, nutritious diet. She had to eat grapes, apples, pomegranates, oranges, and butter. So the best thing to do was to keep drinking tulsi-leaf tea and applying *kukraundha* extract.

The day the Chief Minister came to the village to condole with the families of the dead Challi's fever had rendered her unconscious; otherwise, he would have taken her to see him. Sanwaldas had suffered a broken wrist. When he came to meet him, the Chief Minister took off his own garland, put it on Sanwaldas, and had a photo taken with him. Nohri, too, had been with Hari in that accident. The little finger on his left hand had been broken. With his finger wrapped so much it looked like a package, Nohri was all smiles to have his photo taken with the Chief Minister.

A day or two later Challi's condition became even worse. Hari sat by her side and didn't leave for a long time. He even whispered to her lovingly. Only once was she able to moan in reply, uncertainly. Hari was beside himself. Perhaps she wouldn't survive. The village watchman came to fetch him. He, too, was supposed to come out for the Chief Minister's visit. Helpless and heartbroken, he arrived just as they were setting up to take a group photo. Hari watched Nohri hold up his broken finger and wave it like a flag. He edged his way off to the side.

The Headman scolded him and ordered him to get back in the group. He

then explained to the old hakim standing nearby that Hari's wife had been badly injured.

Someone else, accusingly, asked Hari why he hadn't brought Challi.

Hari mumbled.

Everyone tightened up the group for the photograph.

"You, too, Hari!" shouted the Headman.

Having no choice, Hari joined the group, but without anyone noticing, he crouched down in the back so that his face wouldn't appear in the photo. The fact that his trick went unnoticed deepened his sadness.

After the photograph had been taken, it was announced then and there that the Government had decided to give five thousand rupees cash to the family of everyone killed in the accident.

To the dead! Hari's face creased in anger. He saw Nohri waving his finger approach a policeman and ask, "What is the Government giving to the injured?"

"Poison! Get out of the way!"

Inconspicuously, Hari left the group and set out to find more *kukraundha*. Challi's condition won't improve quickly. He'll have to change the bandages often.

When he returned with a bunch of tender *kukraundha* leaves, very green and with a slight smell, Challi was moaning and trying to switch sides.

"Challi, how are you feeling, ré?" Hari set the bunch of leaves on the ground and sat near her head.

She responded with a moan, an attempt to say something. Restlessness, pity

and grief stuck in his throat like phlegm. He swallowed. He saw Challi try again to change sides. Her face suddenly went ash-white and she clenched her teeth so hard that a tremor went all the way from her eyes to her throat. It looked like her body would twist in two. From the corners of her squeezed eyes tears rolled down into her ears.

“There’s a lot of pain, Challi? Where’s the pain?” asked Hari, leaning over her even more.

Challi did not speak. Hari continued, “I’ve brought *kukraundha*. Many times during the day I’ll boil it up and extract the juice and you’ll get better quickly and the pain will go away.”

Stealing his nerves, he began to undo the bandages on Challi’s shoulder. Challi merely clenched her teeth; she did not scream. Maybe she no longer had the strength to scream. The last layer of the gauze bandage, with the cotton that was below it, was firmly stuck to the wound. As Hari carefully try to peel it away, Challi’s pain made her twist and turn uncontrollably.

Hari stopped. He waited a little for the pain to pass. Then he steeled himself again and ripped the bandage off. The sound it made was like that of an animal’s hide being stripped off. Challi seemed to feel immense pain because her body practically rose up off the bed and thrashed around like a fish. Hari wanted to support her tenderly and comfort her, but just then he noticed blood welling up out of her open wound and dripping steadily below. He froze with fear, staring at that murderous flow of blood, knowing that if it wasn’t stopped, she would bleed to death.

The sheet of unconsciousness once again covered Challi. Her blood kept flowing unimpeded.

Challi won't survive. No one can save her if this blood doesn't stop. She'll die. Hari felt restless and anxious and a nauseating sense of remorse. Toward her wound he stretched out the bandage in his hand to try to stop the blood, but he then became so frightened that he stood up trembling, came out of his house and ran off.

He ran as fast as possible and as far as possible. Quickly, he left the village behind, then the surrounding fields, then even the wasteland beyond.

As soon as he reached an area of thorn bushes, where the soil had been rutted by the rains, he ran out of breath and stumbled. He simply couldn't go any farther. The sun had set fully below the horizon, and the gloom of night had already begun to thicken. Where he stumbled and fell, the twisted roots of an acacia tree looked like so many dried out snakes all gathered together in a valley of death.

Gasping for breath, he turned and looked behind him. The village was far away. The blood-soaked bandage was still fixed in his hand.

Challi? Now? What could he possibly do now? Hari stared at the dirty bandage in his hand. He was astonished he wasn't weeping. And just then his chest broke open and the tears flowed freely. Crying uncontrollably, he stared at the leafless trees, their branches printed against the sky like black arteries of dried blood.