

Rais Bhai. Your mustard oil is pure. It is so strong that it burns my eyes the moment I even touch it."

Rais said, "Idiot, putting onion juice onto oil can also bring tears to the eyes!"

"I know that. Do you add onion juice to your oil?"

"No, brother. I don't run a dishonest business."

"You speak the whole truth, Rais Bhai. Dishonesty is not good. It's a sin. Committing a sin is not the right thing to do."

"Even though I'm a trader I try my best to walk the straight path, Baset. I don't cheat people in terms of weight, nor do I give them shoddy or spoilt goods."

"That is precisely why I like you so much, Rais Bhai."

Baset paid for the groceries and took them home. The solitary room was illuminated by light from an oil lamp. He got up to the verandah and called in a high voice, "Where are my sweethearts? I'm back with the shopping!"

The two girls age five and six pushed open the hanging thatch-door and came out to hug their father. Baset lowered the groceries on the floor, picked up each child under either arm and stood up.

Kajoli, the elder daughter, said, "You are late today, Bajan. We're hungry."

Baset kissed her and said in an affectionate tone, "Yes, my dear. I did indeed come back a bit late today. Please forgive me. Where's your mother?"

"She's lying down," Kajoli said, arms around her father's neck.

"Is she ill?"

"I don't know."

Baset entered the room carrying the girls. Ramisa was lying down. Baset leaned over her and asked, "Are you ailing?"

"Why would I be ailing?" Ramisa retorted. "I just don't feel up to it, so I'm lying down."

"I've brought food. You'd better set it to cook. The girls are very hungry."

"I don't feel like getting up. You go ahead and cook and feed them. Leave some food for me if you want."

"Why are you so angry, Ramisa? Am I this late every day?"

"Let her be. Let us all go and cook together," Kajoli decided.

"That sounds good. Once we're done, we can call your mother to join us to eat."

The trio went out to the verandah. Kajoli and Kajori clambered down from their father's lap and took hold of the bazaar bag.

The kitchen was a thatched hut next to the bedroom. A jute rope was always kept smouldering to provide fire whenever needed. They found an oil lamp, lit it from the rope and entered the kitchen.

Taking the bags from the girls and unpacking them, Baset said, "Dear daughters, please bring the rice and lentil bags."

The girls did as told. Scouring the insides of the bags with his hands, Baset said, "One of you please get the cooking cauldron and the pot for measuring rice."

Kajoli brought them. As he filled the measuring pot with rice, Baset asked, "Kajoli ma, how many pots of rice do we need for tonight?"

"Three would be enough, Baba. Put in some potatoes and chilies they can boil with the rice," said Kajoli.

"You are right, ma. You're quite clever."

Kajori hugged her father and said affectionately, "So am I, Bajan."

"I know, my little one. You are cleverer than the rest of us. Now show us some of that cleverness."

"You still haven't brought in the basket of potatoes and chilies, Bajan" Kajori observed.

"That's right! You really are very clever. Please go

and bring it, my little one."

Kajori let go of her father to run off in search of the basket. Retrieving it, she coiled her arms around Baset's neck as he arranged the potatoes and chilies on the basket with Kajoli.

Wrapping a dirty sari around her waist, Ramisa entered the kitchen and said, "That's it. You people don't have to cook any more. I'll do the cooking. Didn't bring any fish, did you?"

Baset sighed, "What would I bring fish with, Ramisa? Where is the money?"

Kajoli said, "We haven't had any fish in a long while, Bajan."

"I feel like having rice with fish," declared Kajori.

"Shut up!" exclaimed Ramisa, looking at Kajori. "Your father is the king of laziness. Once he's made enough money for a day, he stays home and sleeps all day instead of going to work. If he had the will he could have gone fishing in the swamp."

Baset said, "The landlords don't let us fish there anymore. They say they have leased it from the government."

"Then go to the river or the canal."

"All right Ramisa. Tomorrow I shall. My two girls have wanted to eat fish, and so they will. My dears, let us go to the verandah. Let your mother finish cooking. Then we can all eat together. Nothing compares to the joy of eating together with the family."

When serving the piping hot food an hour later, there was no trace of exhaustion left on Ramisa's face. This was her family, Baset was the apple of her eye. Together they ate until they were full. The moment Kajoli and Kajori became droopy with sleep, their parents took them to bed. The girls fell asleep in the arms of their parents. But the latter had other things in their minds, and sleep was far from it they waited, one for the other to beckon first.

"Ramisa!" Baset whispered. She didn't respond. "Ramisa! Have you fallen asleep?" he persisted.

"Ummm..." Ramisa managed to mumble.

"Let's go to the verandah."

"Why there?"

"Don't you know why?"

"The girls are growing up. Give up all this."

"What are you saying! How can life go on without 'all this'? I am going to the verandah with the leaf-mat. Come along with a blanket."

In the morning Ramisa woke up, washed herself and went into the kitchen. Today she felt like eating *kebhuri*. There were two eggs in the house, they would go well with it.

The girls woke up during cooking and came into the kitchen. Both were excited at the smell of the food. They walked up to the stove.

"Ma, are you cooking *kebhuri*?" Kajoli asked, barely managing to keep her excitement in check.

"Yes, dear," came the reply as Ramisa stirred the food. Kajori circled her arms around her mother's neck and said, "We will really enjoy eating it, Ma."

"Did you two brush your teeth and wash your face?"

"No."

"After you wake up in the morning you should shit, piss, brush your teeth and wash your face. My sweeties, now go. And listen, don't forget to wash your hands properly with ash when you're done in the latrine, all right?"

The girls obediently went off to follow the instructions, then came back as soon as they were done. Ramisa chuckled and held them close. When the *kebhuri* was done she set the eggs and potatoes to cook together in an egg curry.

When the cooking was done, she asked the girls, "My dears, do you each want one potato?"

"Yes ma!" they said in unison, gulping.

Ramisa chuckled as she placed two potatoes on two small bowls with some gravy. The sisters began blowing on them to cool them, then ate away with the gravy. This made them hungrier.

"I'm hungry, Ma. Serve the *kebhuri*," Kajori said.

"Wake your father up. We shall eat together, I'm about to serve."

Kajoli and Kajori ran to the bedroom. Baset was fast asleep. They jumped on top of him, constantly calling, "Wake up, Baba, wake up!"

In the end Baset had to give in and awaken. Sitting up on the bed, he sat the girls on his lap and inquired, "What seems to be the matter, kids? Why did you wake me up with such a storm? What's wrong?"

Kajoli said, "Ma has cooked *kebhuri* and eggs with potatoes."

"I'm very hungry, Bajan," Kajori piped in.

"Let's go, then. I'm quite hungry myself."

"Won't you go to the outhouse, brush your teeth?"

"You girls go to the kitchen. I'm coming after doing those things."

All four sat down on the kitchen floor to eat. The two eggs were cut up into four pieces. Everyone ate to their hearts' content. Chewing with a full mouth, Baset said, "It's a good thing you kept chickens, Ramisa. Now we can have eggs every so often."

"It's good to eat eggs, Bajan," Kajoli observed.

"That's right, ma."

Kajori had finished her egg too fast, and was now sitting there, not touching anything. Baset looked at her and asked, "Why isn't my little girl eating?"

"What shall I eat it with? There's no more egg left!" Kajori made a long face.

"Why did you finish the egg before having the *kebhuri*?" yelled Ramisa. "Now finish it without any eggs!"

"Don't scold my little girl," said Baset. "How can she eat without any eggs? Here, ma, have your food with mine."

After breakfast Baset sat on the verandah with the children. Ramisa was still in the kitchen. She raised her voice and said, "Can't you go catch some fish instead of just sitting there? The kids want to eat fish every day."

"You're right. I'm on my way. Kajoli, get me the fish basket."

Baset set off for the small swamp near the house. He tied the light basket around his waist and stepped into the water, catching two *koi* fish with his hands in quick succession. He soon caught another fish and was about to put it into the basket when he heard someone yelling and scolding furiously at him. No sooner had Baset straightened up to stand than the man had reached the bank of the swamp.

Baset said, "Just caught some fishes, Jalil Bhai. Why did you run up like that?"

"Don't you know that I leased this swamp? To hell with your fishing, get out now! Get out, I say!" Jalil's face had contorted viciously.

Baset had to get off the swamp. Jalil took the fish out and returned them to the water.

Baset asked with indignation, "If you people keep leasing the swamp year after year, enjoying all the fish by yourselves, where will we catch any fish?"

"Poor people don't need to eat fish or meat. Have lentils. Lentils are the protein for the poor."

Baset said, "Thanks to you sacrificing a cow every year on Eid, we get to eat meat at least once. Can't you sacrifice fish the way you sacrifice cattle? That way we could eat fish as well."