

My son, Rehman, was not well for several weeks recently. Everything had been going so nicely before that. He had a good job, he was happy and active. Rehman had even been talking about buying a flat and car but then he suddenly changed, as if a switch had been turned off somewhere. He seemed to lose interest in everything. He gave up his work, started sleeping late, staying unshaven and snapping back at everything his father said. He lost interest in food and his cheeks became sunken and his eyes started looking as big as saucers in his face. Naturally, I was very worried and could not understand why all this was happening. During this time, Pari was a great help, talking to him, coaxing Rehman out of the bedroom and forcing him to play with her son, Vasu, and take him out for tuitions and games. Despite so much sadness in her own life, she also kept my spirits up. Every time I look at her, I wonder why God puts so much trouble in good people's lives.

When it becomes cloudy and starts raining, the weather people on TV say that it is because of a depression in the Bay of Bengal. Rehman's mood was exactly as if there was a depression in his mind. My oldest sister said that somebody must have been jealous at our happiness and cast a nazar, an evil eye, on us. My husband, as expected, just dismissed her suggestion out of hand. But that evening, I prayed to God and vowed that when my son got better, I would go to the dargah, the saint's tomb, at the top of the hill by the sea and gift a blanket to cover his grave.

Just as storms pass and the sun comes out from behind the clouds, Rehman's mood slowly lifted. He started taking more interest in his dress and surroundings. He did not spend long hours in a dark room anymore. He started reading the newspaper again. One day he woke up early, took a bath, shaved and put on clean clothes without being prompted. He ate a good breakfast asking for more dosas than I had originally made. He told me that he would go to Vasu's village and look for some documents. Pari and Vasu came in just then and Rehman lifted Vasu up in the air and swung him round. Vasu screamed in delight and wriggled out of his grasp and ran into the living room. Rehman chased after

him. Pari looked at me, her eyes asking a silent question. I shrugged my shoulders. I was not sure what had happened, but I was not going to question good luck, however it happened.

That was last week and Rehman just got better and better. Yesterday he left for the village and so I decided to complete my vow and go to the saint's tomb this afternoon. Pari agreed to come with me, the good girl.

Water

Of all the things that trouble almost any woman in India, probably the most common is water. A woman can run a house with almost nothing, but without water for drinking, cooking and washing how can a woman do her job? Men don't know and don't care how much trouble women have to take to put hot food in front of the family three times every day. In villages, women spend hours every day collecting water from distant wells and rivers for their households. In the towns, people generally depend on pipes for their supply but luckily we have a well in our house and we do not rely on the municipality.

Devout Muslims organise their life around the five daily prayer times and migrating birds live according to the seasons but most families in Vizag, and other towns that I have been to, arrange their lives around the water supply times. The municipality releases water in the taps for an hour or so at a fixed time every day depending on the locality. It can be in the middle of the day or at odd times like five in the morning or after ten in the night. In my sister's house, for example, the time recently changed and the water now comes at three in the afternoon. She is complaining that he can no longer have an afternoon nap.

Most houses have buckets that hold water for washing and round-bottomed bronze or stainless steel pots for drinking water. Just before the time comes for the flow to start, all these pots and pans are lined up in front of the tap like people who queue up in front of a politician's house each morning for

favours like a widow's pension or a job in a government office. Some of the pots will be empty but others won't be. The housewife keeps looking anxiously at the tap with as much devotion as a priest in front of an idol until the water actually starts flowing. I was in my sister's house the other day and we were talking about Rehman's condition but I could tell that more than half her attention was on the tap. I was a bit annoyed but understood her concern. If she did not collect the precious liquid, she would have to tell her family to be extra-careful with the drinking water until the next afternoon and manage on half the water for cooking. Obviously, no clothes would be washed at all and only the essential dishes would be cleaned. She waited and waited for the tap to start running, gave up after almost an hour and I helped her put the pots and pans away.

Just as we were sitting down for another chat, we heard the sound of water hitting the metal bucket with a ringing sound. We rushed to the kitchen like young girls running to a doll-shop and took all the vessels back to the tap. My sister moved the half-filled bucket that is always under the tap, just in case, and started collecting water for drinking as a first priority.

There are rumours that the government will lay a pipeline from the great river Godavari and bring round-the-clock water to the city. They are talking about having meters to measure how much water each family is using and charge them based on that. People are worried about the cost of fitting working taps on pipes and also pay more every month for the water. 'What if there is a leak and water flows like money down the drain?' my sister says.

Personally, I think that would be a nice problem to have.

Servants

That morning I cooked a quick breakfast with Bulgur Wheat. It didn't take long because Rehman was away and there were only the two of us. The trip to the Dargah was hours away, but I was anxious because I had to buy the shroud for the saint's grave, and sweets for the offering, before I got there.

One of my nieces recently came from London for a visit and we had a long chat. She said that she did all the housework herself with some help from her husband as they do not have any servants. 'Why do you stay in London if you are so poor? Come back to India and you can have a better life.' I said.

She laughed and said that it was not a question of being poor. She said that they have a very good life. They had a washing machine and something called a Hoover to clean the house. 'What about the dishes?' I said.

'We have a dishwasher,' she replied. I tried to imagine how a machine can scrub pots and clean inside glasses. Whoever invented it must have been very clever

I don't think such things will ever become popular here. Leela, our servant maid, is our own dishwasher and more. She comes in the morning by seven and takes the breakfast and previous night's dishes out of the kitchen. To avoid using too much water, she scrubs them with a bunch of wet coconut coir and a little bit of cleaning powder. If the dishes are particularly dirty, she will use a little bit of soil with the coir to scour them. The cleaning powder is too rough for my hands so I keep a small bottle of more expensive washing-up soap by the kitchen sink that only I use. After washing the dishes, she takes a broom and sweeps the house. Once a week, she mops the floor too. I have another woman to come in and wash the clothes and then take them away for her husband to press using a heavy coal-fired iron. They are from the washer people caste, so they are very good at those tasks. I would not trust Leela to wash my saris.

Hanging on to servants is an art in itself. It is not just a matter of paying more, though obviously that helps. Years ago, it didn't matter how you treated them; they had no choice but to stay on. Things have changed these days. They can earn more money in construction work or by running a small roadside stall to sell tea or vegetables, so they don't have to stay as domestic servants. The trick is to remember that they are people too, and they have desires and self-respect just like any person who lives in a solid house. So you cannot be too rude to servants or shout at them if they make a mistake. But at the same time, you should not be too easy either. If you are, they will start taking time off or not sweeping the corners properly. It is a delicate balance.

All the maids I employed have been honest. Of course, we do our bit by not leaving any cash or jewellery out in the open. As my husband says, they are poor people, they have many needs that we don't appreciate and it would be cruel to expose them to unnecessary temptation. Of course, handling servants is a woman's job and my husband, quite properly, doesn't get involved in it. But he is right. It is not right to entice people and then blame them for doing wrong.

Leela is late today, which is annoying because I wanted her to mop the house before I left for the Dargah. I think all servants somehow sense when there will be extra work. They only take time off when guests have landed from out of town or you are thinking of taking down the big vessels from the attic in preparation for a festival. How do they know?

Banks

Our bank is not far away from the house. It is on the road parallel to ours and is a ten-minute walk. A few months ago, another bank opened a branch even closer, almost opposite our house. We did not move our account even though a sales person visited us and asked us to. He said that they had an ATM –

one of those machines you can take out money from. 'You can get money even at night or on Sundays,' he said.

All those cards and pin numbers sounded very fiddly to me. And why would we need money in the middle of the night? I always keep a couple of thousand rupees in cash at home for emergencies, anyway. That's enough to jump on a train and go to any of our relatives' houses if we hear bad news. After a lifetime of scrimping and saving, we can't suddenly start spending money at our age even if we wanted to. Anyway, there are more branches of banks nowadays than in a forest of trees. We can't keep changing accounts every time another one opens. I read in the newspaper recently that people in England are more likely to divorce than they are to change their bank. I cannot understand why marriages are so fragile over there, but I can definitely sympathise with being faithful to one's bank.

Normally, my husband deals with all the bank work but he was busy, so I went to there with Pari. I am always surprised by how busy these places are. We stood in a queue to see a clerk by the counter. Until last year they did not have computers in the bank and used big, heavy ledgers with one page for each customer. Our account numbers used to be small, just four or five digits, but after they put in the computers, the account numbers have become so long that no human being can hope to remember them. Technology is supposed to make our lives easier but somehow it always seems to make things more complicated.

The clerk took my passbook and entered the number into the computer. Suddenly, the lights flickered in the room and went off. The fans stopped rotating and people's voices seemed suddenly louder. All the computer screens went dark. There was a power cut. People in the queue behind us started grumbling. When the clerks used those heavy ledgers, it didn't matter whether the bank had power or not. They carried on making entries and giving out cash. 'How much time will it be?' I asked. If

it was going to take more than a few minutes, we could go back home and use my emergency stash to buy the shroud.

‘Not long,’ the clerk said. ‘They will start the generator soon.’

Soon, there was the noise of a loud motor and the screens came back to life. The clerk re-entered my number into the computer. She typed some more details and gave me a heavy steel token with the number 42 engraved in it. As we stepped away from the queue, Vishy, one of the men sitting behind the clerks lifted his head and saw us. ‘Hello, madam. What are you doing here? Is sir all right?’ he said.

‘He is busy so I came myself. By the way, I am going to the dargah and I need coins,’ I said.

He smiled and nodded. Vishy is the son-in-law of the people who live in the third floor flat in the building next door. Such a nice boy – never fails to greet and talk, even though he is a busy Deputy Manager (Cash). This is not the first time I’ve asked him for some special request – coins or, for Eid, brand new notes to give to all the kids who come to our house.

The electronic sign on the far wall showed 35. We waited until it moved slowly to 42, then made our way to the little glass cubicle in the corner. I gave my token to the cashier through a small hole in the glass wall. He took it silently and turned to his computer. ‘How much are you withdrawing?’ he asked.

‘Five hundred rupees,’ I said. ‘Can I have it in ten rupee notes? And also, I need fifty of those rupees in coins.’

The clerk looked doubtful. ‘I spoke to Vishy,’ I said before he could say no. These clerks are all the same. Once they say something, they will make it some sort of prestige-issue to stick to their words, even if it doesn’t make sense any more. Actually, it is not just clerks. All men are like that.

I pointed towards my neighbour's son-in-law. The cashier looked over and Vishy raised his palm in acknowledgement. The cashier nodded and counted out forty nine ten-rupee notes and then put them into a counting machine. The machine whirred loudly into action and quickly re-counted them. Satisfied, the clerk handed them over and gave me a previously counted bag of one rupee coins.

We waved to Vishy on the way out. There is nothing like having people you know wherever you go, something banks should not forget.

A typical high street

About ten years ago, our street was not very busy. Good-sized plots with detached houses surrounded by gardens lined both sides of the road. Some like ours, were subdivided into smaller plots, but they still had one or two-storey houses and not big buildings. There used to be a street market selling vegetables further down the road. Land prices then started increasing to such a level that individuals could not afford it anymore. Buildings with shops on the ground floor and flats above started cropping up like anthills after the monsoon rains.

Since that there are so many more families living here, traffic has increased enormously. I like the fact that our house is on a busy road. Who wants to live in a graveyard when I can have the world on my doorstep? In the evenings, I stand by our gate and watch the people walking past. There are many regulars like the young working mother walking her child home when it is almost dark – where does the child stay after school until so late? Then there is the old man who goes past every day with just one tomato, one onion and one brinjal, potato or some such vegetable. Does he live on his own? Does some vendor take pity on him and give him the few vegetables? I once saw a thin but pretty, well-dressed woman striding down the street. Her hair was in disarray and she looked furious. A burly man with a

thick moustache, who looked as if he was normally the dominant one in the relationship, was trying to stop her. He was saying, 'Please come back, Rani. I didn't mean anything.'

She just ignored him, her face was set and she kept on walking fast.

We have a television but I don't use it much. I don't need to.

There is a pharmacy less than hundred yards from our house. I go there regularly for my blood pressure and arthritis tablets. The bald, middle-aged owner is always smiling and if ever he doesn't have the required medicines, he sends the shop-boy to another pharmacy to get it for me. I always thought the owner was a happy man, contented with his shop and its business. Last month when I went to collect my tablets, his daughter was helping him and I complimented him on how well he had trained her.

'What can I say, madam?' he said. 'I am trying to train my son too but he has no concentration while she picks everything up so quickly. She will get married soon and leave us whereas my son hasn't done well in his studies and I want him to take over this shop and its income when I retire.'

I could only sympathise with him. Some people, especially youngsters, don't agree with this. They would say that since his girl has the interest and talent, she should get the shop. I am sure that the TV journalist, Usha, would call this man old fashioned and out of touch with the modern world. But one has to be practical. The pharmacist's daughter will eventually have a husband to look after her, but how can the man's son survive if he doesn't have a living?

There are so many shops just on this road and there must be some story like this behind each one of them - and, not just the pukka shops. Along the road, hundreds of small vendors sell vegetables and other small items from handcarts and baskets to earn a precarious living. These pedlars probably

have even more heartbreaking tales to tell, ranging from alcoholic, abusive husbands to lives pawned over to loan sharks.

Today, I went past the pharmacy and the fancy shop next to it that sells ladies items like hairbands, ribbons, artificial earrings, mascara and other make-up articles. I also passed the kirana store selling basic items like rice, wheat and oil. I had no interest in the hardware shop or the document writers who prepare legal agreements or the well-lit mobile phone shop with its picture of a young woman in a short skirt to make it look 'modern'. I was looking for a particular clothes shop, run by a widow in a small room attached to the wall of the Muslim graveyard which the committee had leased out to her on a reduced rent so she could feed her two girls. Apart from cheap clothes for women and children, she also sells items like rosaries and booklets of chapters of the Quran. I bought a thin, green sheet with a shiny border and a packet of incense sticks from the widow. On the way back home, I went into a halwai for a packet of sweets and bought a bunch of bananas and a dozen roses from roadside vendors.

I now had everything for my visit to the dargah.

Why do you take so long?

My husband and I were both on the verandah. He was typing a letter and I was just relaxing. 'Pari will be coming soon. I'll close the back door,' I said.

My husband nodded, continuing his work.

Our house is long and narrow with the kitchen at the rear. The door leading from there into the backyard is very strong and made from the wood of a mango tree. Apart from a bolt, there is also an iron bar that can be braced flat against the door so that it cannot be broken into.

Just as I was about to shut the door, I noticed that the mortar and pestle were still drying out in the sun. I stepped outside to pick them up and saw that the light in the bathroom was on. My husband is so careless. I've told him many times over the years but he still hasn't changed his habit of not switching off lights and fans when he leaves rooms. Now he has a new excuse. He says that he is too old a dog to learn new tricks.

In the bathroom, I found that a wet towel was bunched up in a corner and I sighed. I took the towel and switched off the light. I went to the side alley and spread the towel out on the line, so it would dry properly. I reached for the basket of pegs and it slipped through my fingers and it fell to the ground. Three dozen wooden clips scattered round my feet. I smacked my forehead in annoyance and slowly bent down to collect them. As I picked up one that had fallen near side wall, I saw that a chicken bone was obstructing the gutter that takes away the washing-up water. Neither our maid nor I would be so careless as to wash an object like this down the drain. It must have been dropped there by a crow. Are there any creatures that are as irritating as crows?

I picked up the bone with my fingers, washed my hands and then came back to collect all the pegs. I fastened two of them on the towel so it wouldn't fly away and then put the basket away. The sun had moved and it was shining down on some of the clothes that had been hung to dry out in the morning. When I checked, they were all dry, so I took them down. My hands were now full, so I went back into the house and put the clothes away in the bedroom wardrobe. I then got the mortar and pestle and put it away.

In the kitchen, I found the answer to my question. Ants. They are more irritating than crows. There are millions of them and they are so small that they can find their way to anything. And now they had made their way to the sugar bowl. I brushed them off and moved the bowl to the top of the fridge.

I looked around. Was there anything else? Everything seemed to be in order. Thank God. I was thirsty by now, so I opened the fridge. The bottle was almost empty, so I finished it off and then refilled it, so there would be cool water for later. Finally, I closed the kitchen door, braced it with the iron bar and walked through to the verandah.

‘Hi, Pari. When did you come?’ I asked, noticing her there, chatting to my husband.

He answered. ‘She’s been here quite a while now. Can I have my tea?’

I think I was wrong earlier. Husbands are even more maddening creatures than crows and ants. ‘No,’ I said. ‘Pari and I are in a hurry to leave.’

‘What were you doing for so long anyway?’ he asked.

‘I was closing the door,’ I said.

Auto-Rickshaws

There are hundreds of auto-rickshaws always zooming about but you never see one when you actually need it. Pari and I stood by the gate, trying to flag an auto but they all either had passengers or they didn’t want to go all the way to the old town.

Finally, Pari waved at one that was going the wrong way and it made a sharp U-turn to stop in front of us. It is scary how they seem to be able to change direction faster than politicians change their minds. I think it is because these vehicles have just three wheels and the one in the front is connected to a handle like a motorcycle rather than to a steering wheel like in a car. But what do I know? Rehman is the engineer in the family.

‘Will you take us to the dargah mountain?’ said Pari.

The driver said, ‘I don’t want to go that part of the town. It will be difficult to get a fare back from there.’

I said, ‘Why do you guys always do this? You are supposed to take passengers wherever they want to go.’

After a moment, to my surprise, he said, ‘All right, get in.’

He was a young man and he must have seen Pari’s disappointed face. Men are so predictable.

Pari moved forward and started getting in but I held back.

One should never get in to an auto-rickshaw without first fixing the fare. ‘How much?’ I said.

‘Fifty rupees,’ he said.

‘What?’ I said loudly and signalled to Pari. She took her hand off the auto. I said, ‘That’s too much. We’ll pay by meter.’

‘Petrol prices have gone up, madam. I can’t afford to go by meter. Meter plus five rupees.’

I shook my head. ‘Meter plus two.’

The driver hummed and hawed but finally agreed. Pari and I both got in.

The auto rushed through the traffic dodging buses, cars, cyclists and pedestrians. It turned on to a busier road and made a heart-stopping halt just before it crashed into a scooter ridden by an elderly gentleman. Our driver started shouting at the poor man on the two-wheeler for getting in the way. I was sure it was our fault but Pari and I kept silent and the poor gentleman slunk away, ashamed at his temerity of using the public roads and coming in the way of another driver with a louder mouth.

'It was your fault,' Pari said to the driver, after we had started moving again.

'You don't understand, madam. In this world, it doesn't matter if you are right or wrong. You just need to carry a big stick and talk fast. When America invaded Iraq, they claimed that they were saving the Iraqis from sanctions. But who imposed the sanctions in the first place?'

Pari and I looked at each other.

'Are you surprised that a man like me knows about international matters?' continued the driver. 'I read the papers too. What else is there to do in between jobs?'

The driver then started giving us the benefit of his thoughts on the tax system, the police, the traffic and how to control global warming. We soon reached the narrow lanes of the old town and the auto-rickshaw weaved its way among the people, half-filled potholes and construction debris.

'You know so much,' said Pari. 'You should go to London and drive a taxi there. Apparently, they have a test called 'The Knowledge' there which all cabbies have to take.'

'My whole family is here. Why would I want to go to a faraway place like that, madam,' he said, as he pulled up at our destination.

'You are a clever man,' I said. 'You know what is important in life.'

Pari reached inside her purse but I waved her down. The meter read twenty eight, so I gave him thirty rupees. 'You probably won't survive long in London, anyway. I am sure that in places like that taxi drivers have to follow certain rules and regulations. They cannot ask for any amount that comes to their tongue.'

He laughed cheekily. 'Madam, I may have to charge by the meter but I've read that even in London, cabbies refuse to take fares south of the river.'

Epilogue

The Dargah is the tomb of the saint Ishaq Madina and is over a hundred years old. I don't know much about the saint but he is reputed to have made several prophecies which came true. It is a long-standing tradition among the women of our family to visit the Dargah and offer thanks here, whenever anything good happens or when something bad has been overcome.

The tomb is a white-washed, domed building at the top of the hill and one has to climb several hundred steps to get there. With my arthritic knees, I don't think I will be coming here many more times after this. May be just when Rehman finally gets engaged, and when he gets married, of course. If I am lucky enough to see my grandchildren and definitely, if they study well, then... No, I won't be visiting here many more times.

Two bearded priests prayed with us at the tomb. They spread the shroud over the grave for us and spread the petals of the roses over it. They kept half the bananas and sweets for their efforts. Pari and I walked outside, with our heads still covered by the edges of our saris, and sat on the broad ledge that encircled the open yard around the building. Below us, a large ship was being pulled from the harbour into the open sea by a much smaller boat. Further away, there was the mountain with the Hindu temple and the other mountain with the big church. The people on the one road that could be seen from this holy place up here seemed small and insignificant.

I turned to Pari and said, 'Tell me what's happening with Rehman.'

Pari quickly said, 'I don't...'

She then looked away, unable to meet my eyes. I waited patiently until she turned back to me. 'I cannot lie in front of a saint's tomb,' she said. 'It all started...'

As Pari finished telling Rehman's tale, a loud wailing horn made me shiver. The ship had escaped the harbour and cut its line to the tug. It would now move under its own power.

'Thank you for letting me know all this. Little boys tell their mothers everything. Then they grow up,' I said.

'Love isn't static,' said Pari. 'It keeps changing, testing...'

I sighed. 'Love has many conditions, it seems.'