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Relations

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Narayani was baking loaves and her son Mitrasen sat eating his meal near the hearth. Suddenly the hut door opened and Padmsen came running towards her with a delighted smile on his face. He knelt down to touch her feet before sitting beside her. “Mother, you’ve lived a very hard life in this village,” he said to her, his face now turned solemn. “I know how often you and father have come close to starvation and faced severe weather conditions under the thatched roof. Both of you have worked as farm labourers in order to raise and educate me and Mitrasen. You have subjugated yourselves to our needs. But, ma, cheer up, your sacrifices have paid dividends today. Your son has been selected as an engineer and he dedicates his achievement to your pious feet. Mama, there’s none as dear in this world to your son as you are.” Padmsen then leaned forward and kissed his mother on the cheek. Tears brimmed in Narayani’s eyes – tears of love, tears of joy. She embraced Padmsen warmly.

Mitrasen’s face lit up too. He left the meal. “Bhaiya, what a good news!” he exclaimed in delight. “I’m really proud of you!”

“Mom,” continued Padmsen, “one day you’ll have a beautiful town house in Lucknow. You’ll be your own mistress; and no longer will they call you a housemaid. You’ll also have a piece of agricultural land here with a beautiful house on it. They will treat my father as a farmer, rather than as a farmhand. I’ll provide my younger brother with sufficient money to pursue a medical career. You and pa will live a life of ease, making pilgrimages.”

“Yes, mama,” said Mitrasen, “we’ll earn a lot of money and do our best to make your old age joyous.”

The news of Padmsen’s achievement spread from village to village. It was a complete surprise for anyone who heard it. His father Yagyasen was working on a farm. When he received the news, his eyes shone with delight. He soon left work and hurried back home. The villagers who used to look down on the family now started congratulating them.

A few weeks passed and the day drew near when Padmsen was scheduled to join the office. Yagyasen asked Narayani whether she had some money for Padmsen to pay for fare and his board and lodging for the initial period until the date of salary payment. His mother had only one ornament left. It was Mangalsutra, the last relic that remained as a token of her marriage. She went in and came back with it. "Take it and sell it," she said to her husband with no sign of grudge on her face.

It was a fine morning in mid-April. The air was still cool. Padmsen packed his belongings in a bag and was ready to set off for Lucknow. But before leaving, he went up to his parents and bowed down to touch their feet. They in response put their hands on his head one by one to say the blessing. Then, as he waved goodbye to them, he felt excitement and sadness in equal degree, and his mother's eyes prickled with tears. Mitrasen took the bag and walked out to accompany him to the bus stop.

Yagyasen went to work on the farm as usual next morning; and Narayani, to a farmer's house to do the cooking and the cleaning. Mitrasen's college was closed on account of summer vacation, so he stayed at home studying.

As the month of July drew near, Mitrasen was more excited about living with his brother in Lucknow. One afternoon, it looked as though the sultry weather would put a full stop at the end of every sentence of life. People stayed up late because the heat and humidity was insufferable. But late at night, an east wind came to inform people of a huge dance party. Dark clouds gathered; lightning flashed; thunder boomed; and a storm arose. The rain ultimately started beating against the walls. Nature behaved as if he was drunk. Trees danced rhythmically, swaying their heads to the peals of thunder and to the music played by the rain. Heaven flashed lights on them every now and again.

All three members of the family lay wakeful all night because water was splashing from holes in the thatched roof. But when the rain stopped and the trees rustled gently in the breeze, it was time to get up in the morning.

Yagyasen and Narayani got out of their beds to get ready to go to work. Mitrasen was still asleep. Suddenly there was a knock at the door. Narayani went to answer it. She saw Padmsen on the doorstep. The hut filled with a happy atmosphere as he came in.

The father and son sat down on a terrace and were immediately deep in conversation. The mother soon started making breakfast. Meanwhile, Mitrasen woke up. He hurried to get washed and then to join them.

“Pa, you and ma both will stop going to work from today on,” said Padmsen. “Now you need rest and therefore leave everything to me. Whenever I come here, I’ll leave sufficient money for you to meet your needs. By the way, I’m on leave this week. I think we should organize a Ramayan-reading followed by a feast.”

“All right,” concurred his father amiably. “It has always been my dream but I never got it together.”

“I’ll try to fulfil all your dreams, dad. After my holidays are over, I shall take Mitrasen with me to Lucknow and get him admitted to a college there. Once he too gets a job....”

Mitrasen interrupted him by saying, “How exciting it’ll be to live in Lucknow. How proud I’d feel to go to college by bike with my friends and to go to sports club on Sundays!”

“You’d better take your mother with you, too,” suggested Yagyasen. “I don’t think you’ll have time to do the cooking.”

Padmsen thought for a while and said, “You’ll have the same problem, then.”

“Don’t worry about me – there are people here to help me with the cooking.”

By then Narayani had prepared the breakfast. She served fried potatoes, loaves and tea to them. Her heart was brimming over with happiness.

Padmsen spent a blissful week with his parents, organising Ramayan Path and going round to his friends and relatives’ houses. Then according to plan, he left for Lucknow with his younger brother and mother.

Now the two brothers and their mother began to live in one of the officers’ quarters happily. Padmsen would go to the office at 9 in the morning and Mitrasen to his college at 9.30. Their mother did all the cooking and the housework.

One day Padmsen’s sister, Vaishali, came with her husband, Agnivatsa, and her young son,

Shyam, to visit them. The arrival of these close relatives broke the monotony of their everyday life. Everybody was overjoyed. Padmsen took two days off to take them on an excursion. They stayed there for a week and on the day they were to return Vaishali asked Padmsen whether he would keep Shyam and afford an education for him. Padmsen soon agreed.

Now a young member was added to the family. Every morning Narayani would prepare the little boy for school and Mitrasen would take him to the school bus and bring him back.

Padmsen's relations began to come round to his house very often and stayed there one or two days, sometimes a week. The family that was always in great spirits welcomed every guest and tried their best to entertain them but, as time passed, so their enthusiasm dampened.

One evening the three members of the family were sitting in the drawing room. Mitrasen looked at Padmsen and said, "Bhaiya, relatives see a lot of us and stay here for long. My studies are often encumbered by their presence. Now I don't like anybody visiting us."

"You're right," replied Padmsen. "Yes, I wouldn't mind if they came with a useful purpose and returned soon after it is fulfilled. What is annoying is that they come here for fun and amusement. However, I don't know how to stop them."

Narayani was incensed at what they were talking. "I perceive a change in the behaviour of you two," she responded. "After all, they're none other than your sister, your brother-in-law, your maternal uncle and aunt, your auntie and so forth. Don't you enjoy their company?"

"Oh mamma, we like to be with them," Padmsen replied with a smile, "but we don't have time to spend with them. You must have seen how often we are compelled to waste our precious time on them."

"Why don't you say you have no money to spend on their meals," she rejoined impatiently. "One day you'll say I'm an unnecessary burden to you."

Padmsen walked up to his mother and kissed her. "You mean the world to me! You're my life, the pillar of my strength – how can you expect me to think like that?" he said in an amiable tone of voice. "Look, Mitrasen has to make his career. If he spends all his time on other activities, how can you be sure of his success? My job entails an awful lot of work so I'm always pressed

for time.”

Suddenly a ring at the door interrupted the conversation. Mitrasen went to open it. Agnivatsa with a man and a woman entered.

“Hello, brother,” said Padmsen with a feigned smile and stood up. “Welcome back.”

Agnivatsa thanked him, then pointing to the man and woman, he asked, “Do you know them?”

Padmsen shook his head listlessly.

“Well, let me introduce you to them. He is my maternal brother Vedmitra and she’s his wife Mandavi, who has been ill for a year and no doctor could cure her there. Padmsen, you’re acquainted with a few famous doctors. Make an appointment for her to see one of them whom you think suitable.”

The next day Padmsen took Mandavi to a doctor’s. The doctor prescribed some medicine and asked her to come back after three days. When they went to see the doctor again after three days, he prescribed medicine for two weeks and told her to visit him fortnightly. This way, one more couple joined the group of his regular guests.

Hardly two days had passed, after their departure, when Padmsen’s maternal uncle Prasonjit and his daughter Sasya arrived. Padmsen hid his true feeling behind a smile when he received them. “I’m going back home in the morning – I have to sow a field with sugar cane,” said Prasonjit, sitting down on the sofa. “Your sister’s exam centre is Government Girls Inter College, Lucknow. She will stay here till her exams are over.”

Padmsen would get up early on the day of her exam and take her to the college on his motorcycle. Then before going to the office, he would go again to bring her back.

Narayani loved her niece and grandson dearly, so she always cared for them very much. She asked Padmsen to buy them new clothes; and often she gave them different sorts of delicious things to eat.

Sasya stayed there for one month. During this period a line of her relatives continued to descend on Padmsen’s house. The house had become a holiday inn. Most of his salary got swallowed up

by the household expenses.

Two years thus passed. The heady month of April came once again. The trees were laden with fresh leaves. Young leaves of mangoes orange pink started to change dark green. Slowly flowers came out on the terminal panicles and the air filled with their sweet fragrance. It was not very hot not cold but fairly pleasant.

Padmsen was getting awfully weary of guests. He began to feel like he should be all alone. One Sunday afternoon, he took his bike and rode to Lucknow Zoo. He bought a ticket and walked in with a view to spending a few hours sitting alone on a grassy ground. He continued with his head bent until he reached a garden full of flowers where he saw a group of kids playing with a ball. As he stopped to watch them, he felt his anxiety reducing. Slowly he joined them in their games and it did not take much time for him to get chummy with them. He began to make them laugh by catching the ball in funny ways. Sometimes he would throw the ball into the air and catch it on the end of his toes, on his chest and over his shoulder; sometimes he lobbed it over their heads so as to make them run for it; and sometimes he would dribble past them. Everyone's eyes were fixed on him. After the game was over he sat on the ground. The children had become so familiar with him that they too sat round him. He asked them to listen and repeat each line of a poem after him.

While he was thus teaching the kids, a young woman of about twenty four came and stood behind him. "Hello, Mr jolly little sir," she said in a lilting voice. "Could you help me learn a poem, too?" Padmsen turned his head and went all shy. When there came no reply, the girl sat close to him and began to recite a poem to the children. He drew himself aside trying to put distance between himself and her. Then he glanced at her sidelong and was hypnotized by her beauty and charm. She spoke in a gorgeously warm voice; her smile was alluring; her face was a joy to behold; she had lovely eyelashes, beautiful hands, lush lips, smooth, clear skin, large, shining eyes. She was a real stunner. A short time later she turned to look at him and added playfully, "What's your good name, Mr Sportsman?" "I'm Padmsen." "And those who love me call me Sarika," she quipped. Then they fastened their gaze on each other's faces. Children waited for their attention but when they did not turn to them, they rose one by one and went back to their parents.

It was getting dark. People started to leave the park. Suddenly Padmsen glanced at his watch and found he had spent about two hours sitting there. They soon got up and walked back together, talking all the while.

Padmsen used to be very jovial, but now he had gone to the opposite extreme. He stopped to spend time with anybody in the house. He usually preferred to sit alone with his legs crossed and his chin rested on one fist, lost in deep thought.

Narayani was worried to observe his son having a sudden change in behaviour. She deliberately sat opposite him on the sofa. “What worries you, my son,” she asked him politely.

“Nothing, mom,” replied Padmsen. “It’s nothing.”

“You’re trying to hide something – tell me clearly what is troubling you.”

“Well, I don’t know how to get rid of unwanted visitors,” he said, trying to distract her.

“Yes, some distant relatives have started to come with some problem and stay here all quite too frequently, but an effort to keep them away might cause us to lose our near relatives as well.”

The chance encounter with Sarika lived on in Padmsen’s memory. When alone, he would start picturing those wonderful moments. He rode to the zoo at the same time the following Sunday and reached the same place where he had played with the children. He sat under a tree, waiting for Sarika to arrive. An hour passed and nobody showed up. His heart sank. “I’ll die if she doesn’t come,” he said to himself and walked to a bench on which he lay down, utterly bereft. A gentle breeze cooled his face and he fell asleep.

All of a sudden a delicate touch on his forehead woke him from an amazing dream. He opened his eyes and saw his enchantress looking at his face. She bent down, cupped his face in her hands and placed a gentle kiss on his lips. Her dark flowing locks fell in curls over his face. Now he felt as though he was not on the earth but in the air accompanied by a divine angel. He then got up and sat her facing him.

“Why do you love me, Sarika?” asked Padmsen.

“Why do you love me?” she echoed.

He held her in a warm embrace. “Because I fell in....”

“But I love you because I love you.”

“Oh yes, you didn’t tell me about your line of career,” he said, feasting his eyes on her face.

“I’m a medical graduate,” she answered, wiping her palm across his cheeks. “What are you?” she added, after a pause.

“I’m an engineer.”

“Suppose I propose to you...?” said Sarika, now running her fingers through his hair.

“Since I first saw you, I have loved you in my heart. But then again, I think we need to consult with your parents.”

“And your parents, you are certain they will agree to it?”

“Yes I am,” Padmsen asserted, “for they seldom reject my plans.”

“Well, would you like to come over to my house next Sunday? My parents are professors at the Medical College. We live on campus – meet you at nine in the morning at Gate 4.”

“One more thing. My parents are uneducated – would you feel comfortable with them?”

“Then they’re innocent people,” she said with a winning smile.

“OK, I’ll come around to see you,” he agreed.

They took out their mobile phones and saved each other’s number. Then they got up and walked along towards the zoo gate arm in arm, talking to each other. Finally they got onto their motor bikes but before riding off, they exchanged a glance once again.

Now Padmsen was busily engaged chatting on the phone to Sarika. All he did was go to the office or sit in his room with the mobile phone in his hand, sending messages and photos to her.

“You looked strangely familiar when I first met you and the moment we kissed, it felt as though our souls had known each other for ages.” He typed on WhatsApp and sent it to her.

A few minutes later the reply came: “As I looked into your eyes I had a strong sense of déjà vu, too, and was soon overwhelmed by a sensation that made me feel possessive about you.”

He read the message and became lost in his own fantasy world. It took a few minutes for him to be in transports of delight. After that he sent an animated picture with a caption on it that said: “The beats of my heart have learnt to sing sweet songs since I saw the best work of art by nature in the form of you.”

He sat waiting for a reply. But when his mobile did not buzz for an hour, he became restive. But shortly after the message tone rang out. It sounded like a temple bell. He opened the Facebook messenger curiously and was thrilled to bits to see a beautiful picture of his sweetheart with the message: “Want to see you’re an angel on the earth? Now look yourself through my eyes.”

“I cannot remember whether you touched me, but the delicacy of your touch on my soul will be imprinted on my mind forever,” he texted again and soon received a reply saying, “Love was a simple word to me until I first saw you. Now I see my love in every piece of text he sends.”

“Look, I am alone even without my own company,” Sarika continued to write to Padmsen but their conversation this time stopped. She thought he could have become busy or his phone could have run out of battery. But when she went the whole day without hearing from him, she became worried. She finally phoned him and it turned out he had sent a GIF and a picture which had not gone through her phone due to some network problem and he was upset not to receive a reply from her.

Hardly had she finished talking than her phone beeped. There was a message from Padmsen saying, “Breathe my last breath I’d just as soon as bear the thought of being without my Moon.”

She wasted no time texting back: “You should have realized how distressing it must have been for me to spend the whole day checking up the phone. O my sweet love, I had never experienced the sweetest pain before I fell in love with you.”

“If I try I can do anything but it is quite impossible for me to stop thinking of you,” Padmsen answered fondly. “I check my phone every half an hour hoping there’s a message from you, believe you me.”

Then using different messaging apps they would send and receive texts decorated with various

smileys, stickers and emoticons every so often.

Padmsen's mother was still puzzled as to why he was behaving so strangely. She asked Mitrasen if he had any idea what was wrong with him.

"Ma, don't you disturb Bhaiya!" he warned. "I guess he's dating a young woman. It seems you'll soon have a beautiful daughter-in-law."

She went into raptures. "So that's what he's busy with!" she said and walked slowly towards the kitchen, imagining Padmsen marrying a lovely girl.

Padmsen was looking forward to Sunday. When it finally arrived, he got up early in the morning, performed his ablutions and prayers, then decked himself out in his finery and walked out into the garage without letting anyone know. He got into his car, reversed slowly out of the garage and drove off. His brother and mother stood staring at him in amazement but did not dare to ask where he was going. When he reached gate no. 4, he found Sarika already waiting for him. She led him to her house. Her mother Suchitra opened the door, eager and excited. "Hello Padmsen," she said with a smile.

"Good morning, auntie!"

"You look familiar, perhaps because Sarika has already told me so much about you."

Padmsen smiled briefly and said nothing. Suchitra led him through the sitting room straight into the dining room where they sat down and continued talking to each other. Sarika made her way to the kitchen. After a few moments, she came back with coffee, toast and savoury pancakes.

Padmsen was dazzled by the well maintained house with luxuriously furnished rooms. "My family members are not much urbane and the house is often a disgrace with so many maladroit relatives visiting it – Sarika won't feel comfortable there," he said to himself. "What to do? If they visited my house, they would certainly reject me and I won't be living without her."

"You feel a little awkward, Padmsen?" asked Dr Suchitra, reading the expression on his face.

"No, no auntie, I feel quite at home here," Padmsen replied, taking a sip of his coffee.

"Well, you know, we count you among our family members and want you to come and visit us

every Sunday. Sarika does not like cooking – I’m amazed she has made an exception today. Exception.... I didn’t believe all that she said about you as good look and good brain never go hand in hand but you are really an exception.”

A hot blush of embarrassment crept up Padmsen’s face, but he could not help looking at Sarika fondly. Sarika sat silently cogitating on the image of Padmsen in her mind. Meanwhile, the doorbell echoed through the house. She hurried hoping that her father would be standing there. Then the door to the dining room creaked open again and Dr Devdutta appeared. “Hello Padmsen!” he said. “Nice to meet you.”

“Thank you, uncle,” he replied, pushing his chair back and standing up. “Same here.”

“Sarika gave us a picturesque description of you but we know very little about your family,” so saying he sat down on a chair.

“My parents are uneducated but they are very nice and loving,” Padmsen said as he sat back. “I have a younger brother and a married sister.”

“Your parents and brother live with you?”

“My father lives in our house in a village of Faizabad district.”

“But you look like you come from an urban family background.”

“I was studying in this city.”

“Your father is a rich farmer then?”

“No, he was earning a living as a farm worker.”

“You’re an engineer – I wonder how they could afford an expensive education for you.”

“I supplemented the money I got from my parents with part-time tutoring but never compromised on my concerted effort to find a good job.”

“What you say is true?” said Dr Devdutta in amazement.

Padmsen simply gave a smile?

“I have nothing but admiration for the way your hard work culminated in you getting a tremendous job.”

“Poverty is awful but at the same time it’s a great source of inspiration.”

“You’re indeed a brave boy.”

“So your parents had been labourers,” intervened Dr Suchitra.

“But they have ever been scrupulous, truthful and caring,” replied Padmsen. She might reject me, he thought. Perhaps she does not like people with low social status. “Auntie, yours is a busy family. How do you manage to entertain your relatives?” he added, trying to divert her attention.

“We do not entertain much. Yes, a few of our close relations call on us mostly on holidays. By the way, your relatives? Apparently the poor and uneducated have a tradition of seeing a lot of each other.”

Padmsen felt a little affronted. “You’re right auntie; I too hate them descending on us,” he answered indirectly, trying again to steer the conversation away. He, however, could not evade giving a clear answer as Dr Devdutta put the same question to him.

“Do you have some relatives who do so and cause you a lot of work?” he asked.

“Yes, there’re but I’m trying to find some way to keep them away.”

“The city slickers invite guests on social occasions but in their daily life they prefer to enjoy company when they are out. I guess most of your relatives come from villages. They must be stopping off at your house while visiting the city to receive medical treatment or to appear in court. Well, one entertains such a person at great personal cost and ends up sending a long-term relationship up in flames.”

Padmsen felt slighted and got so upset that he decided to leave.

“Padmsen, what’s the matter?” Dr Suchitra said. “You don’t seem happy. You mustn’t take it personally. Generally, relatives take you for granted.”

“I do believe you’re right,” he said in a neutral tone of voice, as he stood up. “I’m afraid I have

some urgent business to attend to. “If it’s all right by you, I’d like to leave now. Good-bye, uncle. Good-bye, auntie.”

“Come and see us soon,” cried Dr Devdutta, as he shut the door behind him.

Sarika was disgusted at the way her parents treated Padmsen. She rose from her chair abruptly and hurried down the hallways to her room.

“What’s your opinion about Padmsen?” asked Dr Suchitra.

“He’s unquestionably good-looking and well-built young man,” said Dr Devdutta, taking his chair. “Another thing is he is polite and straightforward. But he comes from a labouring-class background so his family members must be accustomed to the rural way of life and culture. Sarika is captivated by his outward appearance, as is the way with young people. She doesn’t know she will never get used to their social morals and manners and it’ll be hard for her to settle down in the house that is often thronged with unsophisticated visitors. Besides, his younger brother lives with him with whom she won’t like to keep patience.”

“I agree with you. Initially I was enthusiastic about him but to know he is of humble origins makes me feel bad about forming a relationship with him. But, you know, Sarika is too stubborn to become convinced.”

“I think you’d better go and get her back. We need to discuss it with her before we reach to a decision.”

Suchitra went to her daughter’s room and knocked at the door but she did not answer. The door opened only after she pleaded with her repeatedly. “Your father wants you soon,” she said. “Sarika, my child, you are still....”

She could not finish the sentence.

“Mama, don’t you ask me for my opinion,” Sarika rejoined. “Do what you think is best.”

“Oh, come on we won’t do anything unless we have listened to you carefully.”

The mother and daughter walked back to the dining room and sat down in their places.

“Dad, did you like Padmsen or not?” asked Sarika rather brusquely.

“Padmsen is good, but there are certain other things that you won’t like,” her father replied thoughtfully.

“Then it’s rare to find a life partner who is perfect in every respect,” she responded resentfully.

“Well, let’s choose a man of high social class and it turns out that he is choleric, or fickle, or a drunkard, would you like us to bicker with each other? Often an ordinary man has a strong hope of moving to a higher social status, but a wealthy lout never changes his ways. A glamorous life style may be a shining package of a troubled relationship but in an atmosphere of warmth and geniality life blooms. Shake off your ego, daddy, and judge what is good or bad. He’s a wide-eyed youngster, warm-hearted, candid and intelligent. Such qualities are rare in young men today. As for his relatives, they’ll call upon us for as long as we have time for them. We can fund a separate lodging for his brother. Yes, we can’t ignore his parents, but they are innocent and affectionate people so will always be good to us. That’s all I have to say, the rest is up to you.”

Dr Devdutta now went over the various points in his mind. “Seems you’re right,” he said, opening his eyes. “You’re our only daughter and our main aim is to keep you happy. The boy is good and that’s all. But then again, we need to wait and consider all the pros and cons before making a final decision.”

By now Padmsen had reached home. He was already vexed, but as he entered the living room, he found his brother-in-law, Agnivatsa, sitting in a chair, his face twisted in anger. “Hello brother, how are you?” he said to him, masking his displeasure with a smile.

When he didn’t reply, he added, “What’s the matter?”

“You’ve become a man of wealth and status,” Agnivatsa growled sarcastically.

“But what happened here?”

“What happened you ask!” snorted Agnivatsa. “Don’t you know you and your brother have been treating Shyam harshly? He was near to tears when he told me how he was frequently scolded for nothing.”

Padmsen was shocked to hear it. “One can give one’s own son a slap but not a word of warning

to someone else's son, for behaving badly," he murmured to himself. Agnivatsa rose from his chair, incandescent with fury, and walked out with his son, Shyam.

Padmsen began to live on his nerves. But one day he received a phone call and his face suddenly became animated. "Hello, this is Padmsen," he answered.

"Hi Padmsen, it's Sarika," said the voice at the other end. "I'm so glad to make a call to you again after a short time and extremely pleased to tell you that my parents have finally consented to our marriage." There then followed a flow of texting and picture messaging between them once again.

When Sarika's parents arrived at Padmsen's house, they were greeted with warmth. Padmsen sent for a pundit who named the dates for the wedding ceremonies. Both the families busied themselves with the preparations, and finally the posh wedding became an occasion of festivity.

Sarika was in her new house now. Her husband had a wide circle of acquaintances. They began to come and see her, each with a gift for her. At first she showed her willingness to receive them enthusiastically but she soon became bored with them as she could not mix much.

Everything went smoothly until Padmsen's maternal uncle, Prasonjit, and his daughter, Sasya, arrived. As usual, a few of their friends and acquaintances would come to them and make the mess of the house every day until they stayed there. A week later, after they had left, a new couple, Vedmitra and his wife Mandavi, arrived to stay there. Sarika's patience wore thin now. She took Padmsen's arm and hurried him upstairs so that they wouldn't be overheard.

"You're taking me to my house tomorrow," she said to him.

"I know you don't feel comfortable in the presence of so many people," Padmsen sighed, nodding.

"You'd better tell your relatives outright that you enjoy their company but for a couple of hours? Mind you, only your mother is all right here." He didn't reply and his silence forced her to answer herself. "Don't get me wrong," she continued. "I know you'll do it one day, but by then you will have spoiled the most colourful part of your life as well. Relatives expect you to help but do not thank you for it; and as you refuse it, they will start badmouthing you. I hope you

don't mind me."

"No, no I value your advice. God is up there and it is His responsibility to look after each one of us. One should help others but not at the cost of putting oneself to trouble."

Padmsen dropped Sarika off at her parent's house on the way to work next morning. But he had been on his mind all day. When he returned home from office in the evening, he went straight to bed. Narayani, who was proud of her beautiful and loving daughter-in-law, sensed that something was wrong. She went to him and asked what was worrying him. He sat up and said, "Ma, do you love those who have made my house a hostel, a cafeteria or your daughter-in-law?"

"No daughter can be as caring as my Sarika," she mused. "I cannot live without her."

The night passed. In the morning, after breakfast, Narayani told Vedmitra that Padmsen was not well enough to take Mandavi to the doctor's and that they should find some other place to stay.

After the two guests had gone, Mitrasen drew his chair up closer to his mother's and said, "Mama, you have done a very good job today. Perhaps bhabi preferred to be back because she had begun to feel awkward in a group of people from a different background."

"You told me yesterday that Prasonjit is coming here again next week," inquired Narayani.

"Yes, he is. He phoned me."

"Can you just ring him and tell him that Padmsen is married now and the couple do not feel comfortable in the house regularly frequented by guests?"

Mitrasen punched out his maternal uncle's number and told him what his mother had asked him to. Then he went to the drawing room where his elder brother was sitting on the sofa, lost in thought.

"Bhaiya, I can imagine the dilemma you're facing," he said gravely. "But don't worry. I have phoned everybody to tell them not to visit us quite frequently. Moreover, I have been offered a part-time teaching job and hope I'll be able to earn my living. I have also decided to live separately in a rented house. You know that I'm not good at cooking so it will be necessary for me to take mom with me. Don't take it seriously! I've made this decision out of love for you two

because I don't want to spoil your wedded bliss by playing gooseberry. You don't think I will stop visiting you. Ma and I will be here when you need us." He brushed his fingertips across his eyelids as he felt his eyes well up with tears.

Padmsen began to breathe heavily, his lower lip trembled and tears instantly appeared in his eyes. "If I had known this would happen, I'd have married a country girl," he sobbed.